Mutual Aid in the COVID-19 Pandemic: An Exploration of Reciprocity, Education, and Subversiveness

by

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Introduction

Turning off Middletown's Main Street, I pass a neon-painted Jamaican restaurant on the corner, which I've never been inside. I drive under the familiar sneakers hung from a telephone line high above and see people heading in and out of their homes. The street is narrow. One side is lined with newly rebranded five-story apartment units, the other with a series of small, mismatched duplexes in need of painting. Right before I reach the railroad tracks which house a freshly spray-painted old railcar that overlooks the Connecticut River, I pull into a long, crowded driveway between a garden and brick building. The garden is overgrown, with bits of green onion and lettuce popping up between the hastily made garden beds, and the plants need water. There is a shed near the back painted in bright colors which reads "Ferry St. Community Garden." At the front of the garden, where Wesleyan students once tried to plant a pear tree, there is a chalkboard. Faded by the rain, it reads, "Community Fridge! Free Food," with a smudge of the Spanish translation below.

Opening the door to my 2008 Astra Saturn, my companion, Amy,[1] a fellow Wesleyan student, bustles to the shed. She unlocks it with the code shared in the "Middletown Community Fridge" group chat and pulls out rubber gloves, Clorox wipes, paper towels, and a big broom before heading back to the car. Meanwhile, I start pulling the donations we got this morning out of the car. The

[1] All names in this thesis are pseudonyms for the organizers' privacy.

Saturn is a hatchback, and since I put the back row of seats down and stacked boxes two or three per row, I fit all 11 boxes that the Stop & Shop in North Haven had to give us.

The fridge is old and grimy, with "Middletown Community Fridge" scrawled in paint, faded by rain and wind. When Amy and I open the fridge, it has some rotten apples, stale bread, and bendable carrots inside. We quickly assume our practiced positions. I start soaking up the condensation from the drawers at the bottom of the fridge with paper towels while Amy grabs a box we had set aside to collect everything that had gone bad. We used to put the rotten goods in the compost at the back of the garden, but it got too full and nobody emptied it, so we now bring it back to school with us to be composted.

While I'm wiping the ever-present grime off the fridge, two regulars show up. Mary, a bespectacled white person in their late-20s, approaches quietly and doesn't draw attention to themself. Only because Lynn, a short, straight-haired elderly Black woman, arrives at the same time and says "Good Morning" do I know anyone has arrived. I smile and say "Good Morning" with my eyes still on the last of the grime on the fridge, knowing if I don't get it off, it will stay there until I clean again next week.

I've only unloaded a few boxes, so I tell Lynn and Mary to take anything they want from the trunk as well. They are hesitant to touch anything inside the car, so I quickly finish cleaning the fridge and unloading the remaining food. Mary calls a friend and quietly explains over the phone to them what is plentiful at the fridge this morning while I ask Lynn how she has been. She and I strike up a

conversation about Boston, where she and I grew up in different decades, for about ten minutes before she's finished collecting what she needs. Her arms are full, and she tells me she has a long walk home, so I offer an empty banana box to help her carry everything, which she accepts. I ask her if there's anything that the fridge never has that she would want because I want her to feel like she has agency over the fridge, even though we only get donations so I have no real say over what I bring. She asks for sweet tea, and I thank her for the advice before she turns to go.

As Lynn walks away, Mary gets off the call with her friend. I initiate conversation, as always, and they tell me that they have been alright. I've never really clicked with them, but because they are a regular and always tell their friends about the fridge, I decide to be bolder than I'm comfortable being, and I tell them that there is a meeting with a bunch of us who help run the fridge over Zoom that evening. I ask them if they'd be interested in joining the meeting, or perhaps one the next week. They don't seem convinced, so I mention that they could also dial in if they don't have Zoom. They say "maybe next week" without making eye contact, and my wariness of pressuring them mixed with the uncertainty of whether there will be a meeting next week keeps me from sharing more information.

Mary walks away and Amy and I start to talk about our plans for the week while finishing organizing the produce in the fridge. From our boxes of donated produce we pick out the only guava. We decide it will be our specialty fruit of the week and give it our prized place in the butter compartment of the fridge. We then

hop back into the car, and drive away from the fridge, just in time for morning classes to begin.

Authors Statement

Mornings like the one described encompassed the majority of my initial experiences with mutual aid. I started participating in mutual aid projects in March of 2020, right after the initial COVID-19 quarantine took place. I was part of an influx of white, middle-class organizers who, despite being new to mutual aid work, began our own collectives. I dove headfirst into co-founding and organizing a mutual aid collective in Middletown, Connecticut, where I was attending college, despite quarantining at my parents' house in Massachusetts. This mainly consisted of virtual meetings and online resources, with occasional trips to Middletown on days we did big distributions of food boxes. Only when I returned to school in the fall did I begin to regularly interact with the people that the Middletown Mutual Aid Collective (MMAC) was aiming to help.

I felt tensions between MMAC's goals of being led by members of the community we were trying to serve, solidarity building, and systemic impact, and its praxis, which felt much closer to charity. Unfortunately, the guidance for how to operate a mutual aid project that I found online didn't map onto MMAC's origin or the demographics of MMAC's organizers, as I will describe in the following chapter. Articles circulated on social media and in the news tended to be written by people from communities who had historically practiced mutual aid, such as Black, Indigenous, queer, and working-class communities. Their suggestions were also premised on the people organizing the mutual aid

endeavors getting their needs met by those same projects, which was not the case for MMAC, despite efforts to involve such populations after its creation.

Because I had difficulty synthesizing the works I was reading online with the experiences I was having with MMAC, I decided to join another mutual aid group with similar organizer demographics to see if the way that they operated could teach me avenues to improve MMAC's work. Instead, I found many of the same problems, despite a different location and group origin.

The mutual aid group I co-founded and many like it across the country are struggling to realize their goals. I have a continued and vested interest in the success of mutual aid efforts, so I want to do what I can to understand why groups like ours are struggling, and in doing so hopefully learn better ways of practicing mutual aid. These struggles led me to the central questions of this thesis: 1) what are the goals of new, white, middle-class-led mutual aid groups, and 2) why are they struggling? I hope that by answering these questions, groups may begin to find a path forward.

This chapter will lay the groundwork for my questions by discussing the historical origins and practices of mutual aid, giving an overview of the origins and focuses of my two mutual aid case studies, what mutual aid looked like during the pandemic, and my argument. In each section I pay particular attention to who was practicing mutual aid, as it is central to my argument. Over the course of this thesis, I will expose the over reliance of what I term to be New, White, Middle-class, Outsider (NWMO) organizers on texts written by Experienced Solidarity Organizers, by which I mean people from minoritized communities

who have been doing mutual aid work for a long time within, and as part of, marginalized communities. Experienced Solidarity Organizers led NWMO organizers to goals they had no roadmap to pursue given their different subject positionality. Therefore, I argue that we must interrogate our capacity specifically as NWMO organizers, and adjust our goals, our praxis, or both accordingly.

Historical Origins and Practices of Mutual Aid

This piece is grounded in professor, activist, and mutual aid scholar Dean Spade's definition of mutual aid:

> Mutual aid is collective coordination to meet each other's needs, usually from an awareness that the systems we have in place are not going to meet them. Those systems, in fact, have often created the crisis, or are making things worse. . . .[Mutual aid projects] directly meet people's survival needs, and are based on a shared understanding that the conditions in which we are made to live are unjust.[2]

Spade's definition centers on analysis of systemic wrongdoing, opposition to those unjust systems, and building just systems through collective coordination. There are two distinct pathways for historical practice to fall within the subversive intent of mutual aid implied by analysis of and opposition to systemic wrongdoing. The first is to directly undermine the rules, interests, and actions of state actors, who impose capitalist and white supremacist norms. The second is to foster the survival and flourishing of communities the state seeks to subdue and/or eradicate. This means that subversiveness is attainable without direct confrontation with the state or thorough analysis when done by communities who

[2]Dean Spade, *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity during This Crisis (and the Next)*. (London: Verso, 2020), 11, ProQuest Ebrary

are in direct peril by the state. Although these practices, which build just systems through collective coordination, are easier to enact when groups have a historical practice of mutual aid, it can also be imagined and enacted in new ways by new groups.

The long tradition of identity-oriented mutual aid efforts has allowed historically marginalized groups in the United States to provide material support to each other while also building community and political power over time.[3] However, the term was coined by Russian anarchist thinker Peter Kropotkin in 1902. Kropotkin used the term "mutual aid" to refer to an instinct of solidarity within human nature that shaped our evolution, which contrasted with his contemporary, Charles Darwin, who believed evolution was based primarily on competition. Kropotkin's answer is "flatly to deny the possibility of unsociability; by definition what gives pleasure to the individual is the community and what gives pain is harming it."[4] He, therefore, did not see mutual aid as a virtue or a tactic, but a principle that guided human interaction.

Kropotkin's conception of mutual aid supported his belief in political anarchism. Political anarchism is most simply defined as the combination of anti-capitalism and anti-statism. Kropotkin believed that because everyone's impulse was to support their community, it was in their interest to serve the needs of

[3] Robert Soden, and Embry Owen, "Dilemmas in Mutual Aid: Lessons for Crisis Informatics from an Emergent Community Response to the Pandemic" in *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 5, no. CSCW2 (Association for Computing Machinery, 2021): 1–19. https://doi.org/10.1145/3479862.
[4]Ruth Kinna, "Kropotkin's Theory of Mutual Aid in Historical Context" in *International Review of Social History* 40, no. 2 (1995): 269. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44583751.

individuals of their community. He believed that impulse would inevitably lead to Communism, which entails “integrating our labour for the production of all riches in common" and the development "towards the fullest freedom of the individual for the prosecution of all aims."[5] He believed that relying on one another was the only way for people to be fully free to do as they wished and to create abundance.[6]

In the United States, the most consistent and documented communities are Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island, which became widely recognized as North America following the colonization and removal of indigenous communities, and Black communities in the United States. Indigenous people in what is now known as North America have been practicing mutual aid since long before Kropotkin coined the term and used it as a foundation of his anarchist theory. For example, the Haudenosaunee nations lived, and continue to live, according to The Great Law that “governed relations between people, animals, and the earth. Lived as a cultural system, in The Great Law of Peace, or the Great Law of the Longhouse (*Kaianere’kó:wa*), mutual aid is a way of life exemplified in all aspects of society, including how people live in proximity to one another and work with each other.”[7] People in these communities join each other in participation, collaboration, and enjoyment of the fruits of the entire group’s work.[8]

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[5] Peter Kropotkin, "Scientific Bases" in *The Eclectic Magazine of Foreign Literature (1844-1898);* (New York: 1887), p. 433

[6]Ruth Kinna, “Kropotkin’s Theory of Mutual Aid in Historical Context” in *International Review of Social History* 40, no. 2 (1995): 274. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44583751.

[7] “Mutual Aid Then and Now: Survival and the Power of the People” *Upping the Anti, a Journal of Theory and Action no. 22* (2021). https://uppingtheanti.org/journal/article/mutual-aid-then-and-now.

[8] Ibid.

These practices became subversive, and therefore support Spade's definition of mutual aid, when colonizers arrived and sought to erode Indigenous lifeways so that they could more easily control Indigenous populations. Indigenous peoples in the Pacific Northwest coastal regions have practiced mass gift-giving ceremonies, called Potlatches, during which the host distributes gifts to guests. In de Loggans' interpretation, this practice "invites community members to take care of one another through shared respect and accompliceship, ending our dependency on waged labour and profit. It ushers in community sufficiency, challenging us to share – rather than hoard – wealth and land."[9] De Loggans' emphasis on the ceremony binding people together is central to its function as mutual aid. While the value of gifts are not equal, and those of the highest status give everything away to demonstrate their status, community members are expected to not give too much so as not to be reciprocated.[10] This enacts a social obligation which bonds people together through the obligation to reciprocate, while also supporting those who otherwise would not have enough.

The practice is recorded soon after first-contact; it was repressed by laws of the US and Canada starting in the mid-nineteenth-century because mutual support between Indigenous people led to group self-sufficiency, which

[9]Regan de Loggans, "The Co-Option of Mutual Aid." (Regina: Briarpatch, 2021) https://briarpatchmagazine.com/articles/view/the-co-option-of-mutual-aid.
[10]Marcel Mauss, "The Gift" (New York: Routledge Classics, 2002) Libcom.Org. https://libcom.org/article/gift-marcel-mauss.

threatened the colonizing state's ability to control Indigenous peoples.[11]

Mississippi-Choctaw organizer, educator and activist Regan de Loggans states,

> The belief that land can be owned is inherently colonial, and a lack of access to the resources of the land is why communities need mutual aid in the first place. In the settler-colonial state's drive to dismantle and destroy Indigenous Peoples' ability to be self-sufficient, the theft of land is its most obvious tactic.[12]

From 1885 until 1951, Indigenous communities of the Pacific Northwest coastal were forbidden from practicing Potlatch; throughout that ban Indigenous communities were punished for their tradition with mandatory jail sentences. This was a blatant effort to assimilate Indigenous people and strip them of anti-capitalist modes of sustaining their community. Many communities continued the tradition secretly, but it became less widespread and therefore these practices could not sustain communities in the same way as they had before. De Loggans proclaims that "It is important for non-Indigenous people to understand that the criminalization of our ceremonies is a tool used by colonizers in our ongoing genocide… It is no coincidence that our inherently anti-capitalist ceremonies are seen as a threat to the colonial status quo: they prove that alternative lifeways are possible."[13] While the Potlatch, which I and my interlocutors consider under the umbrella of mutual aid, helped many Indigenous communities thrive, when

[11]John Lutz, "After the Fur Trade: The Aboriginal Labouring Class of British Columbia, 1849-1890." *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association / Revue de La Société Historique Du Canada* 3, no. 1 (1992): 26.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Regan de Loggans, "The Co-Option of Mutual Aid." (Regina: Briarpatch, 2021) https://briarpatchmagazine.com/articles/view/the-co-option-of-mutual-aid.

colonizers arrived its role in the survival of both Indigenous people and their lifeways led mutual aid practices to subvert the state's intention of domination.

Similarly, Black communities in the US have been practicing mutual aid for generations. As early as the 1780s, free Black communities pooled resources to provide life insurance, care for sick neighbors, funds for funerals, support of widows and orphans, and education for school-aged children. These were necessary because of the exclusion of Black people from the white infrastructure. Mariame Kaba, a prison abolitionist and community organizer, traces the origins of mutual aid in Black communities to the Committees of Vigilance, which "offered sanctuary and support to Black people who fled slavery to the northern United States in the nineteenth century. These Committees engaged in 'practical abolition,' including self-defense for Black people as they protected themselves from slave-catchers."[14] However, even for formerly enslaved people who arrived in the first free Black communities of the early 19th century, legal freedom didn't equate to social political or economic equality, so mutual relief and mutual aid societies were necessary.[15] These practices continued on through the Jim Crow era, when Black people and businesses relied on mutual aid-style organizations to uphold their livelihoods, and provide a community and safety net based on reciprocity.[16] All of these mutual aid practices sustained Black communities under

[14]Robert Soden, and Embry Owen, "Dilemmas in Mutual Aid: Lessons for Crisis Informatics from an Emergent Community Response to the Pandemic" in *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 5, no. CSCW2 (Association for Computing Machinery, 2021): 1–19.
[15]Amanda Schupak, "Behind America's Mutual Aid Boom Lies A Long History Of Government Neglect." (HuffPost, 2020). https://www.huffpost.com/entry/america-history-mutual-aid-government-neglect_n_5ef4e189c5b643f5b230f482.
[16] "Mutual Aid Then and Now: Survival and the Power of the People" *Upping the Anti, a Journal of Theory and Action no. 22* (2021) https://uppingtheanti.org/journal/article/mutual-aid-then-and-now.

conditions which were designed to make them dependent upon white settler society.

Mutual aid in Black communities is also used in movements against white supremacy and capitalism. Most notably, the Black Panther Party for Self Defense (BPP) provided free breakfast to school-aged children, free sickle cell anemia clinics, clothing drives and other forms of mutual aid. These programs brought people into the struggle for liberation by meeting people's basic needs while building a shared analysis about the causes of the conditions they were facing. Panthers forged a space where "[i]nstead of feeling ashamed about not being able to feed their kids in a culture that blames poor people, especially poor Black people, for their poverty, people attending the Panthers' free breakfast program got food and a chance to build shared analysis about Black poverty."[17] Additionally, by meeting Black people's basic needs, Panther leader Huey P. Newton believed that the people they were serving would have more time and energy to learn about the BPP, and contribute to their mission. Through these programs, the BPP demonstrated methods of developing community-controlled institutions, which were not premised on police surveillance or white supremacy.[18]

BPP organizers' challenge to the United States' system of capitalism and white supremacy was central to their practice of mutual aid, and the government

[17] Dean Spade, *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity during This Crisis (and the Next)*. (London: Verso, 2020), 13, ProQuest Ebrary.
[18] Kim Kit Holder, "The History of the Black Panther Party 1966-1972: A Curriculum Tool for Afrikan-American Studies" (Ph.D. Diss., University of Massachusetts, 1990), 78.

repressed their programs accordingly. In an oft-quoted memo, FBI director J. Edgar Hoover states:

> The Breakfast for Children Program (BCP) has been instituted by the BPP in several cities to provide a stable breakfast for ghetto children… The program has met with some success and has resulted in considerable favorable publicity for the BPP... The resulting publicity tends to portray the BPP in a favorable light and clouds the violent nature of the group and its ultimate aim of insurrection. The BCP promotes at least tacit support for the BPP among naive individuals ... and, what is more distressing, provides the BPP with a ready audience composed of highly impressionable youths… consequently, the BCP represents the best and most influential activity going for the BPP and, as such, is potentially the greatest threat to efforts by authorities… to neutralize the BPP and destroy what it stands for.[19]

Hoover's analysis recognized the power of providing alternative sources of sustenance, and the impact of mutual aid on building joint analysis against a state which is failing to meet the needs of its people. Due to the perceived power and impact of the program, the government proceeded to co-opt the program by providing free breakfasts for children at public schools, eradicating the immediate need for the BPP program and weakening their ability to organize community members. The government also demonized the BPP in the media, surveilled and incarcerated BPP members, and created tensions and mistrust within the BPP through infiltration.

Both Black and Indigenous groups have a vested interest in using mutual aid to prove that the ways of living that the state enforces through capitalism are both inadequate and unstable. By showing alternative lifeways, they challenge the stability of the U.S. state, which is founded on settler colonialism, racism and

[19]Clare Howard, "FBI: Breakfast Program Threatened Nation" (The Community Word, 2016). http://thecommunityword.com/online/blog/2016/08/31/fbi-breakfast-program-threatened-nation/.

capitalism. Knowledge that one's group's survival is inherently subversive to the state fosters a particular motivation for mutual aid within marginalized communities who have been practicing mutual aid for a long time. This motivation is not always present in new practices of mutual aid, particularly when the survival of the people practicing it is not as deeply tied to state oppression.

Mutual Aid in the COVID-19 Pandemic

NWMO organizers historically have only participated in mutual aid in response to short-term, sudden disasters, such as hurricanes or fires.[20] These projects were not a long-term principled stance on what people deserve, or how communities should support their members, but a momentary belief that disasters led worthy people to disparate circumstances. The COVID-19 pandemic increased people's consciousness of their interconnectedness and needs they could not meet alone, which brought NWMO organizers into mutual aid.

While NWMO organizers are doing longer-term work during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic than in previous disaster responses, their praxis does not always follow that of the communities who have been practicing mutual aid consistently for a long time. According to social-movement scholar Natalie Kouri-Towe, 21st century mutual aid

> looks quite different from the model outlined over a century ago. Today, a few months into the COVID-19 pandemic, mutual aid has been mobilized to mean everything from models for social organization in domestic survival clusters (pods, bubbles, affinity groups, care circles, containers, homes, chosen families, etc.) to wide networks of exchange on social networking groups,

[20]Dean Spade, *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity during This Crisis (and the Next)*. (London: Verso, 2020), 34, ProQuest Ebrary.

where strangers are invited to post needs and offers for aid and assistance during the pandemic.[21]

While Experienced Solidarity Organizers maintain similar mutual aid groups to before the pandemic, the range of practices of NWMOs reflects the newness of the organizers, and their divergence from historical praxis.

Jia Tolentino further examines mutual aid praxis by NWMO organizers in her *New Yorker* article, "What Mutual Aid Can Do During a Pandemic," in which she contrasts the experience of working with a mutual aid non-profit called Invisible Hands in Brooklyn, organized by young white college students, with the vision of mutual aid espoused by Experienced Solidarity Organizers. Invisible Hands is one of a significant proportion of NWMO-led groups which create non-profit platforms that brand themselves as mutual aid, but are not tied to the subversive history of mutual aid practiced in marginalized communities.[22] That practice of mutual aid contrasts starkly with Black Experienced Solidarity Organizer Miriame Kaba's assertion that mutual aid cannot be divorced from activism or political education. Kaba states bluntly that to be doing mutual aid one must "build the relationships that are needed to push back on the state" through meeting material needs.[23] The NWMO-led organizations studied in this thesis tended to support many individuals in one-off interactions, which overwhelmingly did not lead to sustained relationships organized around political resistance, or

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[21] Natalie Kouri-Towe, "Solidarity at a Time of Risk: Vulnerability and the Turn to Mutual Aid." *TOPIA: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies* 41 (December 2020): 190–98. https://doi.org/10.3138/topia-023.

[22] Jia Tolentino, "What Mutual Aid Can Do during a Pandemic." *The New Yorker*, May 11, 2020. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/05/18/ what-mutual-aid-can-do-during-a-pandemic.

[23] Ibid.

otherwise. This tension and the weakened analytical framework within mutual aid praxis during the COVID-19 pandemic has caused turmoil in new mutual aid organizations.[24]

NWMO organizers have begun practicing mutual aid in unprecedented ways and are yet feeling responsible for the direction of their individual groups. Many are attempting to distance themselves from charity-oriented "mutual aid" groups by doing their best to adhere to the vision of Experienced Solidarity Organizers, who these groups do not always have direct access to. To address the gap in praxis between Experienced Solidarity Organizers and NWMOs, Dean Spade led a series of 4 lectures on how to organize mutual aid groups over YouTube in fall of 2021. These lectures were focused on, and attended by, mutual aid organizers who were new to mutual aid. In an online poll of attendees, 198 out of 288, or 69%, had been doing mutual aid for less than two years. Because the poll was taken in October of 2021, this indicates that over two thirds of viewers began doing mutual aid work since the pandemic began. The questions and struggles they mentioned during the talk, through online polls and the chat, highlighted how different their circumstances and difficulties are from their predecessors. 71 out of 288 people in attendance said they did most of their work online, meaning that a quarter of people doing mutual aid work were spending most of their time on things besides delivering tangible goods. These online meeting spaces don't facilitate easy sidebars, interaction outside of meeting times,

[24] Ibid.

or hands-on participation to the same extent that traditional face-to-face meetings do. Additionally, many people responded to a later question saying that they felt that their group did not talk about values enough, indicating that their online time was spent talking about logistics. This suggests that organizers spent most of their time talking with other organizers about how to do work, rather than building analysis or delivering tangible goods to people in need.

Mutual aid work as done by predominantly NWMO organizers who fail to build solidarity is a distinct experience from any mutual aid organizing done before the COVID-19 pandemic. While they did not poll for demographics, today's demographics of mutual aid organizers are distinct from Experienced Solidarity Organizers, with most current articles noting that "we're definitely seeing a class and race divide in who's giving and receiving aid."[25] The newcomers are primarily NWMOs, and the combination of their newness, relative privilege, lack of historical traditions to draw on, outsider status to the communities they aimed to help, and lack of analysis all contributed to their praxis deviating from that of Experienced Solidarity Organizers.

These factors all reflect a similar group dynamic to the one that I experienced while organizing with the Middletown Mutual Aid Collective (MMAC). We spent the majority of our time talking only to other organizers, who were primarily NWMOs. Our failure to bring BIPOC and low-income community members into our mutual aid organizing frustrated us because many of us were

[25]Robert Soden, and Embry Owen, "Dilemmas in Mutual Aid: Lessons for Crisis Informatics from an Emergent Community Response to the Pandemic" in *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 5, no. CSCW2 (Association for Computing Machinery, 2021): 1–19. https://doi.org/10.1145/3479862.

reading the perspectives of Experienced Solidarity Organizers who conveyed the importance of people who received mutual aid also participating in its organization. However, we did not have, nor could we easily access, guidance on how to transform our group, given that the emergence of groups like ours doing long-term work was very recent.

Case Studies

I chose the following two case studies of new mutual aid groups in the COVID-19 pandemic because I worked with them each for a substantial amount of time. These two groups give us lessons that will hopefully translate beyond their particular circumstances to illuminate the reasons NWMO-led mutual aid groups have been struggling in general. In the following section, I will describe the two groups studied, including their location, size, origin, and main projects. I note people involved at the group's founding because they had a deep impact on what the group's goals were, what practices they chose to pursue those goals, who joined in their vision, and what struggles they faced in achieving their goals.

The Middletown Mutual Aid Collective (MMAC) is a collective in Middletown Connecticut, a city of 62,000 people. At its height, MMAC had twenty-five active members, over 90 percent of whom were white. MMAC was initiated by a group of college students and advisory board members from the North End Action Team (NEAT), a grassroots community-empowerment non-profit focused on elevating the concerns of people in the North End, the lowest income, highest density area of the city, which is led by residents of the North End and some Wesleyan students. The people who founded MMAC, including

NEAT board members, are primarily non-working class. MMAC began operating less than a month into the pandemic to support community members who were struggling economically, with the intention of continuing to do mutual aid work after the pandemic as well. We started with a Direct Cash Assistance (DCA) program, and eventually put up a community fridge. Community fridges are accessible refrigerators operated by and for the public that people can give and receive from with no means testing or barriers to access. The group has dwindled in numbers, but still meets occasionally over Zoom and maintains a group chat over Signal.

Abolition Eats (AE) was a collective in New York City, a city of over 8.5 million people. Abolition Eats was formed by a group of organizers from Abolition Park (AP). AP comprised Black Lives Matter and abolitionist organizers, who occupied City Hall Park in the wake of the George Floyd uprising of summer 2020. They were self-proclaimed to be Black-led, and were significantly multi-racial. Over 80 people joined the encampment, and hundreds participated in protests with AP. The group held dozens of protest marches, but their main project was the occupation of City Hall Park, in which they pressured city hall officials to cut the police budget while creating a space of prefiguration. Prefiguration is a tactic for social change in which people manifest the way they want their community to be structured in hopes of convincing other people that such a way of being is possible, and to build solidarity and power in opposition to the current systems at play. AE contributed to AP's prefiguration by focusing on food distribution within the occupation. When AP disbanded after the summer of

2020, AE continued their work to feed the community. They initially continued to feed AP occupiers and houseless people from the surrounding area, but transitioned to grocery deliveries when the weather got colder. They ultimately transitioned to feeding protestors who were part of aligned movements. When I joined in the summer of 2021, there were approximately twenty active members, who were primarily young, white, and from middle-class families.

Overview

Over the course of the next three chapters, I will provide a literature review of authors whose widely circulated articles/books shaped the goals of the two groups studied, and how each of my two cases studied, pursued, and struggled to meet those goals. Based on my research, I have found that NWMO-led mutual aid groups are struggling because their demographics and circumstance differentiate them significantly from historical practice, and they do not have access to well-thought-out alternatives because their widespread existence is unprecedented. They therefore must interrogate what they have the capacity to do instead of trying to copy the work of the people who have been practicing mutual aid for a long time, who by and large are not white, middle-class, or doing mutual aid work outside of their own communities.

Chapter One: Literature Review

This thesis focuses on two questions: First, what are the goals of new, white, middle-class-led mutual aid groups? Second, why are they struggling? This chapter is oriented toward answering the first question: what are their goals? Based on my conversations with mutual aid organizers from the Middletown Mutual Aid Collective (MMAC) and Abolition Eats (AE), there were four primary contemporary mutual aid theorists from whom they gleaned information on mutual aid: Dean Spade, Regan de Loggans, Eshe Kiama Zuri, and Josie Sparrow. For each I note the major elements of their positionality, including race, gender, class status (if known) and other markers of oppression. This is important because of MMAC and AE's conviction that they must center those most impacted, consistent with standpoint epistemology, which contends that knowledge is socially situated, and therefore, that marginalized people have some positional advantages in gaining some forms of knowledge. These authors each come from and currently work within a marginalized community of their own, which is not true of the white middle-class organizers who are reading their work to understand what mutual aid should be, making them Experienced Solidarity Organizers. This means that the writers have access to cultural and social knowledge that the NWMO-led groups don't usually have.

Dean Spade is an author, activist, organizer and legal scholar. He is a white, trans mutual aid organizer and professor who grew up with little money. His

best-selling book, *Mutual Aid: Buliding Solidarity During This Crisis (and the Next)*, provides a roadmap to mutual aid by describing which elements are key to mutual aid, how mutual aid is different from charity, dangers and pitfalls of mutual aid, and suggestions for combatting common struggles he has seen mutual aid groups face.[1] Regan de Loggans is a Mississippi Choctaw queer activist, community organizer, and educator. Their most widely circulated pieces on mutual aid, "The Co-option of Mutual Aid" and "Let's Talk: Mutual Aid,"[2] both discuss the indigenous origins of mutual aid and its potential avenue of autonomy for people oppressed by the existing state apparatus. Eshe Kiama Zuri is a Black, disabled, non-gendered activist and community organizer who helped start UK mutual aid. They founded UK mutual aid in 2018, and decided to write their piece, "Why We Must Remember the Black Roots of Mutual Aid," about mutual aid's cooptation during the pandemic. They focus on how important centering Black people in mutual aid work is, especially given "new, white, middle-class mutual aid groups launched during the pandemic bulldozing pre-existing networks."[3] Josie Sparrow is a white, working-class writer, artist and philosopher who is the general editor of the *New Socialist*, an independent online socialist magazine based in Britain. Her pieces, "Mutual Aid- An Introduction" and

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[1]Dean Spade, *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis (and the Next)* (London: Verso, 2020) ProQuest Ebrary.
[2]Regan de Loggans, "The Co-Option of Mutual Aid." (Regina: Briarpatch, 2021) https://briarpatchmagazine.com/articles/view/the-co-option-of-mutual-aid. Regan de Loggans, "Let's Talk: Mutual Aid." Accessed January 9, 2022. https://mutualaiddisasterrelief.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/LOGGANS-mutual-aid-zine.pdf.
[3]Eshe K Zuri, "Why We Must Remember the Black Roots of Mutual Aid Groups." *gal-dem*, 2020. https://gal-dem.com/weve-been-organising-like-this-since-day-why-we-must-remember-the-black-roots-of-mutual-aid-groups/.

"Mutual Aid, Incorporated,"[4] focused on mutual aid as a practice of community building and reliance between individual community members. These four authors are not the only, nor objectively the most widely-read mutual aid theorists, but they are representative of the perspectives (and types of articles) new mutual aid organizers are looking at. Each author has their own perspective on the three categories that interviewees homed in on: reciprocity, education, and subversiveness.

The three sections of this literature review revolve around these authors' perspectives on reciprocity, education, and subversiveness. By exploring these authors' perspectives on these three elements of mutual aid, we can define the concepts that MMAC and AE organizers use to ground their work. These authors' opinions on key issues were formed through their experiences being part of marginalized communities. Their perspectives tend to focus on the end goals of mutual aid work, but less on how to achieve them. They also usually do not directly speak to the difficulties that NWMO-led groups face. This made it difficult for NWMO groups to grapple with their praxis, given their desire to adhere to traditional praxis. These authors neglecting to or purposefully not addressing the difficulties NWMO-led groups face foreshadows NWMO-led groups' struggles to meet their goals, as explored in the case studies in the following two chapters.

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[4]Josie Sparrow, "Mutual Aid-An Introduction," (2020), 13. https://mutualaiddisasterrelief.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/MutualAid-AnIntroduction.pdf, Josie Sparrow "Mutual Aid, Incorporated." *New Socialist*. Accessed February 7, 2022. http://newsocialist.org.uk/mutual-aid-incorporated/.

Reciprocity

Reciprocity is often the first element of mutual aid cited by its participants and onlookers alike. Referencing the "mutual" in mutual aid, reciprocity is a guiding principle of how to understand the work as a community process rather than as unidirectional from the wealthy to the poor, as charity has traditionally been understood. Reciprocity in this thesis refers to mutual aid work's capacity to break down the binary between givers and receivers through widespread consensual contributions, and the acknowledgment of the interdependence of community members.

Different mutual aid theorists discuss reciprocity in ways that provide support and nuance to one another, and sometimes contradict. These authors discuss how reciprocity relates to charity and the savior model, redistribution, and building community. Each provides a different access point to reciprocity, and each is difficult for NWMO-led groups to achieve.

Spade and de Loggans explain reciprocity through its contrast with charity and saviorism, arguing that mutual aid must put agency in the hands of those who most need help, instead of creating a one-way valve of giving from people who have access to resources to those who do not.[5] Spade states that when nonprofits and charitable organizations discuss their missions, "populations facing crisis are

[5] Dean Spade, *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis (and the Next)* (London: Verso, 2020), ProQuest Ebrary. Regan de Loggans, "Let's Talk: Mutual Aid." Accessed January 9, 2022. https://mutualaiddisasterrelief.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/LOGGANS-mutual-aid-zine.pdf

cast as in need of saving, and their saviors are encouraged to use their presumed superiority to make over these people and places, replacing old, dysfunctional ways of being with smarter, more profitable, and more moral ones."[6] This implies that mutual aid does the opposite, acknowledging that the people facing crisis are not at fault, do not need saving, and are already functional. Their struggles are symptoms of the oppressive systems they live under, not factors of their personal practices.

Additionally, Spade describes how mutual aid organizers must view themselves. While "Charity, aid, relief, and social services are terms that usually refer to rich people or the government making decisions about the provision of some kind of support to poor people—that is, rich people or the government deciding who gets the help, what the limits are to that help, and what strings are attached," mutual aid should be the opposite.[7] In other words, mutual aid empowers people to make decisions of how they can and should get support themselves. This autonomy would indicate that people with more means are not more likely to make moral or tactical decisions than the people they are aiding. De Loggans argues that short term help by "saviors" during a crisis is not mutual aid, and the people who are most likely to call that type of work mutual aid should be held "accountable for not exercising Mutual Aid beyond an emergency situation."[8] This is a condemnation of organizing only when it suits the privileged

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[6] Dean Spade, *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis (and the Next)* (London: Verso, 2020), 39, ProQuest Ebrary.
[7] Ibid, 21.
[8]Regan de Loggans, "Let's Talk: Mutual Aid." Accessed January 9, 2022. https://mutualaiddisasterrelief.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/LOGGANS-mutual-aid-zine.pdf.

person, or only when they are forced to see oppression due to publicized, catastrophic crisis outside the normal crises low-income, Black and indigenous people face under normal circumstances. However, Spade does not describe how to enact an alternative in a situation in which wealthy people initiate and direct the group. This is most likely because historically white wealthy people did not initiate or compose the majority of such groups.

Zuri and de Loggens tell priveleged organizers to redistribute their resources, in seeming contradiction with reciprocal relations. De Loggans implores privileged people to "use their time, money, capital, and privilege to educate others on how and why Mutual Aid is community commitment" in the long term if they want to truly practice mutual aid.[9] Zuri similarly writes about how UK mutual aid centered reparations and redistribution in their work, saying that "Separating money from mutual aid is classist, racist and oppressive."[10] They argue that redistribution is a necessary part of mutual aid because it prioritizes the most impacted people. In UK mutual aid, they have determined that cisgender, heterosexual, white men and women are only allowed into the group to donate, to ensure that marginalized people, who have less access to state resources, are prioritized. However, if, as some authors argue, mutual aid can only be done when organizers build relationships of reciprocity and commit to mutual aid as a way of life, which (some contend) is only possible when all parties have shared

[9] Regan de Loggans, "The Co-Option of Mutual Aid." (Regina: Briarpatch, 2021) https://briarpatchmagazine.com/articles/view/the-co-option-of-mutual-aid.
[10]Eshe K Zuri, "Why We Must Remember the Black Roots of Mutual Aid Groups." *gal-dem*, 2020. https://gal-dem.com/weve-been-organising-like-this-since-day-why-we-must-remember-the-black-roots-of-mutual-aid-groups/.

needs, NWMO-led mutual aid organizations seem to face an irresolvable challenge.

However, de Loggans' synthesizes this contradiction by describing reciprocity to mean that each person gives according to their ability and receives according to their need. In their vision, breaking the binary of the "haves and have nots" means re-allocating resources so that everyone gets their needs met. Redistribution is necessary to break that binary which only exists because some people hoard resources. Logically this also means that some people won't have the capacity to contribute equally to those who enter with many resources. De Loggans states that "No one is expected to 'pay' for anything, and there will be many unequal knowledge shares that are practiced, AND THAT'S OK. Stop viewing all actions as transactions or as tit for tat."[11] This indicates that for them, not expecting or requiring an exchange for resources is actually more emblematic of mutual aid because it accounts for the differentials in contributory ability and problematizes the requirement of compensation for goods in all cases.

Spade and Sparrow argue that organizers must build relationships founded upon reciprocity and commit to mutual aid as a way of life, which Spade believes is most likely to take place when all parties have shared needs. Spade envisions that:

> At our best, social movements create vibrant social networks in which we not only do work in a group, but also have friendships, make art, have sex, mentor and parent kids, feed ourselves and each other, build radical land and housing experiments, and inspire each other about how we can cultivate liberation in all aspects of our lives. Activism and mutual aid shouldn't feel like volunteering or like a hobby—it should feel like living

[11] Regan de Loggans, "Let's Talk: Mutual Aid." Accessed January 9, 2022. https://mutualaiddisasterrelief.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/LOGGANS-mutual-aid-zine.pdf.

> in alignment with our hopes for the world and with our passions. It should enliven us.[12]

Such relationships of trust and respect are only possible through immersing in a community of shared aid, not as an outsider attempting to help. It is "[t]hrough engaging with one another as people, rather than stereotypes or through a helper/helped relationship, we can dissolve this isolation and alienation, and build strong community friendships that will support us not only in times of crisis, but at all times."[13] Sparrow emphasizes the need for everyone to be receiving from the collective: "Mutual aid is *us,* doing things *with and for each other*, in a way that is unselfish, and that recognizes that we all depend on one another in various ways."[14] This means that people must conceptualize themselves within a web of needs, rather than only giving or receiving.

This perspective can be interpreted as prohibitive of wealthy people solely giving in a mutual aid context, which directly contradicts with Zuri and de Loggans' vision of redistribution. As a result, new mutual aid organizers have a hard time understanding how these different visions of redistribution and reciprocity can coexist. Within this literature, NWMO organizers are both implored to invest their own money, capital and time into the work in a redistributive fashion, and told that their work is not mutual aid if it is unidirectional. NWMO organizers who solely give and don't receive might easily revert back to a charity-framework. The authors listed do not describe how to deal

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[12]Dean Spade, *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis (and the Next)* (London: Verso, 2020), 25, ProQuest Ebrary.
[13] Josie Sparrow, "Mutual Aid-An Introduction," (2020), 10. https://mutualaiddisasterrelief.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/MutualAid-AnIntroduction.pdf.
[14] Ibid., 13.

with these tensions because the groups that they came from were predominantly composed of people who both organized and received mutual aid, which meant that they could invest their time, money, and capital into mutual aid projects long term without reverting to a charity mindset. Organizers have thus taken on two different ideals which are in direct juxtaposition. Consequently, organizers who were not already part of a community which faced great need were unsure how to proceed.

Education

Mutual aid usually entails discussing the systemic reasons people do not have what they need. Simultaneously, the mutual aid that people receive allows them to become politically active, because "it's very difficult to organize when you are also struggling to survive."[15] Education in this context refers to the work mutual aid groups do to build shared analysis of the root causes of oppression while destabilizing those oppressive systems and reifying alternatives through putting them into action, as well as the building of practical skills among the organizers.

Authors discussing education in the context of mutual aid largely discuss skills sharing, analysis building, deconstructing internalized classism and statism, and prefiguration. This section will explore how different authors orient towards those four methods of education and illuminate why new groups generally struggled to enact them.

[15] Dean Spade, *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis (and the Next)* (London: Verso, 2020), 15, ProQuest Ebrary.

Through sharing skills, Spade explains, people both learn practical abilities and learn about community practices which are useful beyond the immediate need they entered the group to meet. Spade contends that mutual aid projects:

> help people develop skills for collaboration, participation, and decision-making. For example, people engaged in a project to help one another through housing court proceedings will learn the details of how the system harms people and how to fight it, but they will also learn about meeting facilitation, working across differences, retaining volunteers, addressing conflict, giving and receiving feedback, following through, and coordinating schedules and transportation. [16]

This indicates that mutual aid work supplements immediate needs with education on practices that will be useful beyond that specific crisis. Therefore, mutual aid onboards people into a community by meeting their immediate needs, and then provides education to support them in attaining future goals, hopefully without other crises occurring.

De Loggans believes that centering skills-sharing also changes people's notions of what valuable contributions are, because people learn that they, too, have things to share that help people. While they affirm that people do not have to share if they do not want to, "we should not assume that people do not have things to share."[17] By including all skills as a contribution, participants can more easily begin "seeing one another as meaningful and able to share with one another," which further breaks down the binary between people giving and receiving.[18]

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[16]Dean Spade, *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis (and the Next)* (London: Verso, 2020) 18, ProQuest Ebrary.
[17] Regan de Loggans, "Let's Talk: Mutual Aid." Accessed January 9, 2022. https://mutualaiddisasterrelief.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/LOGGANS-mutual-aid-zine.pdf.
[18] Ibid.

Spade's vision of bringing people into mutual aid work through meeting their immediate needs and then helping them learn new lifeways and skills relies on new people feeling safe and connected to the people already in the group. Because NWMO-led groups are predominantly not from the same demographic as the people they are attempting to aid, the assumption of new people's comfortability in the space is usually incorrect. This inhibits the education of newcomers.

Zuri, de Loggans and Spade all implore groups to build joint analysis of the causes of crises they are trying to help people through. Spade explains that a fundamental component of mutual aid is that while people are working to meet one another's survival needs they are also building a mutual understanding about why they don't yet have what they need. This is necessary both from an anti-savior perspective to forward the necessity of self-determination for people in crisis and to help funnel energy against root causes rather than directing anger at surface-level actions. Spade further elaborates the Black Panther Party for Self Defense (BPP) analyzed root causes this way while organizing its free breakfast program in the 1960s.[19] By discussing root causes and politicizing the work that people do in the name of mutual aid, Spade argues that "Instead of feeling ashamed about not being able to feed their kids in a culture that blames poor people, especially poor Black people, for their poverty, people attending the Panthers' free breakfast program got food and a chance to build shared analysis about Black poverty."[20] This educational practice is useful for people giving and

[19]Dean Spade, *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis (and the Next)* (London: Verso, 2020) 13, ProQuest Ebrary.
[20] Ibid.

receiving aid, and ensures everyone is thinking through how the group can best prevent future crises.

Although the authors' share a general ideological perspective, they differ on whether an anticapitalist perspective is always necessary, whether to adhere to historical praxis, or to focus on the desires and convictions of the members of the specific community mutual aid is being practiced in. De Loggans argues that there is a specific underlying ideology of anticapitalism and indigenous empowerment inherent to mutual aid. De Loggans states that "Capitalists cannot practice mutual aid; they can practice temporary reallocation (i.e. philanthropy) which is not the same as an anti-capitalist commitment to community thrivance."[21] De Loggans believes that anti-capitalism is so foundational to mutual aid work that anyone who believes in capitalism cannot be practicing mutual aid. This belief significantly differs from Zuri's, who argues that mutual aid groups should follow the lead of people and communities who have been practicing mutual aid the longest. Zuri argues that white people need to "step back, listen and learn."[22] They note that during the pandemic, new mutual aid organizers have steamrolled existing mutual aid groups which were organized by more marginalized people. NWMO organizers need to take a step back and learn about historical practice and follow that example. Sparrow argues that, instead of mandating anti-capitalism or focusing on historical mutual aid praxis, organizers should be listening to the

[21] Regan de Loggans, "Let's Talk: Mutual Aid." Accessed January 9, 2022. https://mutualaiddisasterrelief.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/LOGGANS-mutual-aid-zine.pdf.
[22]Eshe K Zuri, "Why We Must Remember the Black Roots of Mutual Aid Groups." *gal-dem*, 2020. https://gal-dem.com/weve-been-organising-like-this-since-day-why-we-must-remember-the-black-roots-of-mutual-aid-groups/.

people receiving aid and from that deriving a joint analysis of state and capitalist oppression. She states, "We are the experts on our own lives. Through mutual aid, we support and empower one another to create the lives we want to live and the world we want to see, right now."[23] She believes it is only through listening to knowledge from the specific community that organizers are in can they accurately understand what it is they are fighting against and what direction people need the group to take in combating sources of oppression. Especially when the people at the center of mutual aid organizing are not from marginalized backgrounds and communities, groups may easily struggle to determine whether to default to anti-capitalist rhetoric about the people that joined or received from the group, choose a community that historically practiced mutual aid and follow their lead as best they could, or attempt to learn from the most marginalized in their community

Beyond the education of public, Zuri and Sparrow call for the people doing mutual aid work to focus on deconstructing their own ingrained classist and statist thought patterns. Zuri argues that mutual aid should not soothe wealthy people's conscience, because giving to those we deem less fortunate "allows people to not have to think about reasons why they don't want to give money, which are deeply rooted in racism, stereotyping, classism, victim-blaming and a lack of access for "undesirable" vulnerable people."[24] In contrast, people doing mutual aid must be working to change the balance of power, which means they must unlearn logics

[23]Josie Sparrow, "Mutual Aid-An Introduction," (2020), 5. https://mutualaiddisasterrelief.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/MutualAid-AnIntroduction.pdf.
[24] Eshe K Zuri, "Why We Must Remember the Black Roots of Mutual Aid Groups." *gal-dem*, 2020. https://gal-dem.com/weve-been-organising-like-this-since-day-why-we-must-remember-the-black-roots-of-mutual-aid-groups/.

that indicate that privilege is a result of virtue. Sparrow elaborates that learning about other people's experiences assists in this process because "[t]hat 'benefits cheat' may actually be somebody who struggles with poverty and loneliness, and who treasures the rare days when they can make it out of doors without their mobility aid."[25] Therefore by attempting to change the balance of power and by engaging with the people who need aid, mutual aid organizers learn to question their saviorism, classist, and statist notions. However, none of these authors offer methods of doing so, or suggestions for having conversations to ensure that all organizers are engaged in this internal work.

This analysis is foundational to determining what "prefigurative praxis" would be. Spade and de Loggans discuss how enacting the relations organizers want to see in the future elevates people's understanding of how those relations would work. Spade directly states that "[b]y participating in groups in new ways and practicing new ways of being together, we are both building the world we want and becoming the kind of people who could live in such a world together."[26] Spade gives the example of Mutual Aid Disaster Relief, a group that was formed in the wake of the Hurricane Katrina in 2005, which asserts that "by taking bold actions together, we can imagine new ways of interacting with the world."[27] This format of learning through enacting the lifeways organizers hope to see in the future is widespread among mutual aid organizations and theorists. However,

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[25] Josie Sparrow, "Mutual Aid-An Introduction," (2020), 10. https://mutualaiddisasterrelief.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/MutualAid-AnIntroduction.pdf.
[26] Dean Spade, *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis (and the Next)* (London: Verso, 2020), 18, ProQuest Ebrary.
[27] Ibid., 19.

groups must first determine what future they want to prefigure, which often is skewed by the perspectives of the people who form the group.

Spade draws on horizontal decision-making as a core prefigurative element of mutual aid work he has done. Horizontal decision-making is a system of coming to consensus among all members of a group rather than depending on a leader or a majority to determine the outcome of a disagreement. He argues that movements grow when new people feel co-stewardship of the work, and they drift away when they do not. Therefore, teaching new people how to participate in decision making processes is imperative both to build and retain group members, and particularly important in contexts where groups are attempting to bring in people who are more system-impacted.

Education in the context of mutual aid means sharing skills and building collective analysis of the root causes of oppression while destabilizing those oppressive systems by putting alternatives into action prefiguratively. All of these avenues of education are contingent on the people within the mutual aid group, which meant that NWMO-led groups struggled to enact them.

Subversiveness

The definition of subversiveness in this piece draws directly on Dean Spade's definition of mutual aid, which highlights that mutual aid is done "from an awareness that the systems we have in place are not going to meet [our needs]. Those systems, in fact, have often created the crisis, or are making things worse. . . . [Mutual aid projects] directly meet people's survival needs, and are based on a

shared understanding that the conditions in which we are made to live are unjust."[28] He emphasizes that the systems we live under will never lead us toward liberation, so we must not rely on them to liberate us. Additionally, it indicates that because the systems will not lead us to liberation, they will inevitably have to be dismantled. Many groups fold the dismantling of current systems into their mutual aid praxis. This focus on how their mutual aid projects work against current systems, both tangibly and ideologically, is what participants identify as "subversiveness." Groups engaging the state in subversive ways that undermine both its effectiveness and authority significantly distinguishes mutual aid from other aid-related work. With respect to subversiveness, the authors largely agree that mutual aid groups serve two functions: address root causes of poverty and violence and build autonomous systems that allow people to divest from ones that are harming them.

Spade, Zuri, and Sparrow all argue that mutual aid must deconstruct the ideological and physical manifestations of the root causes of poverty and violence. Spade illustrates this by contrasting mutual aid's foundations with charity's foundations. He begins by stating that charity "makes rich people and corporations look generous while upholding and legitimizing the systems that concentrate wealth" and encourages "reforms premised on the assumption that the systems we seek to dismantle are fundamentally fair and fixable."[29] Zuri concurs that charity without challenging capitalism is counterproductive because it

[28] Dean Spade, *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis* (and the Next) (London: Verso, 2020), 11, ProQuest Ebrary.
[29] Ibid., 31.

soothes the consciences of people who are complicit in the oppression of marginalized people.[30] Charity frameworks stabilize current hierarchies and systems of oppression by portraying them as salvageable. Mutual aid does the opposite, problematizing and delegitimizing systems which concentrate wealth. Spade states explicitly that "We have to refuse to limit our visions to the concessions they want to give—what we want is a radically different world that eliminates the systems that put our lives under their control."[31] This means that mutual aid organizers must directly confront systems of oppression and work to undo them rather than reform them. Groups who have historically practiced mutual aid use long-held traditions of cooperation, rather than capitalism, to thrive. Reinvigorating those lifeways destabilizes capitalism and state-control. Unfortunately, new groups found the direction to address root causes unspecific, which meant that many groups did not know how to follow through in ways that truly challenged state authority, instead focusing on specific roadblocks, as seen in chapters two and three.

Sparrow, de Loggans and Spade all contend that building autonomous systems of care is one of the most effective and common methods of subversiveness that mutual aid groups use. Sparrow argues that by "keeping our survival contingent on our relation to waged work (or our ability to navigate the Universal Credit system), the Government sidesteps the emergent questions of interdependence and

[30] Eshe K Zuri, "Why We Must Remember the Black Roots of Mutual Aid Groups." *gal-dem*, 2020. https://gal-dem.com/weve-been-organising-like-this-since-day-why-we-must-remember-the-black-roots-of-mutual-aid-groups/.
[31] Dean Spade, *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis (and the Next)* (London: Verso, 2020), 32, ProQuest Ebrary.

non-capitalist ways of being."[32] Therefore by creating alternative sources of care and sustenance, people see that other avenues of survival exist and are able to divest from the systems which keep them in a state of subservience to survive.

Spade illustrates the generative power of prefiguration by pointing to the work that GenerationFIVE, the Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective, Philly Stands Up and For Crying Out Loud do to create transformative justice processes to address abuse and violence. Instead of relying on punitive measures as the state does, these groups support survivors, and confront harm-doers, "working with them to figure out what they need to never inflict the harm again."[33] In addition to their work to adequately respond to harm, they make sure to "assess how community norms can change to decrease the likelihood of harm in general."[34] This includes looking at societal expectations, mental health, housing insecurity, lack of substance abuse treatment, and other foundational elements that lead people to do harm. This addresses root causes of harm while advocating for a non-punitive method of accountability.

De Loggans similarly sees mutual aid as a form of decentralized community care that allows people to free themselves from capitalism and colonial authority and specifically describes how Black and Indigenous people have used this tool to assert their autonomy. De Loggans argues:

> Above all else, settler colonialism and capitalism require our complacency in the face of continued theft of land, mass incarceration, and exploitation of labour in order to extract resources and build empires of profit… It is no

[32] Josie Sparrow, "Mutual Aid, Incorporated." *New Socialist*. Accessed February 7, 2022. http://newsocialist.org.uk/mutual-aid-incorporated/.
[33] Dean Spade, *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis (and the Next)* (London: Verso, 2020), 45, ProQuest Ebrary.
[34] Ibid.

> coincidence that our inherently anti-capitalist ceremonies are seen as a threat to the colonial status quo: they prove that alternative lifeways are possible.[35]

Spade supports this through exposing how much repression mutual aid projects have faced from the government. He cites police attacks on BPP free breakfast programs and Trump administration raids on No More Deaths medical camps (which offer support to migrants at the southern US border) to expose that "when mutual aid efforts truly build and legitimize coordinated action and autonomy against existing systems, governments typically crack down on them."[36] Governments assert their authority most violently when they are threatened, so the force of their response to mutual aid efforts indicates that they feel their interests and legitimacy are threatened by autonomous systems of care that mutual aid creates, as highlighted in the introduction to this thesis.

Spade also argues that creating alternatives emboldens people to defy illegitimate authority, which creates a self-perpetuating cycle between the direct resistance to oppressive systems and creation of autonomous alternatives. He explains that "taking risks with a group for a shared purpose can be a reparative experience when we have been trained to follow rules."[37] People who do mutual aid work learn that they can depend on one another to provide for their basic needs and keep each other safe, and are therefore able to unlearn the insecurity, approval seeking and individualism that society ingrains in us. Spade's statement

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[35] Regan de Loggans, "The Co-Option of Mutual Aid." (Regina: Briarpatch, 2021) https://briarpatchmagazine.com/articles/view/the-co-option-of-mutual-aid.
[36]Dean Spade, *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis (and the Next)* (London: Verso, 2020), 29, ProQuest Ebrary.
[37] Ibid., 19.

that "mutual aid directly confronts unjust systems and offer alternatives"[38] clearly articulates the two components of subversiveness that are identified by these authors: Ending poverty and violence through addressing the root causes of poverty and oppression while providing avenues of divestment through autonomous community-based systems of support.

Conclusion

These authors' understandings of mutual aid led NWMO organizers to understand reciprocity, education, and subversiveness as the key components of mutual aid. However, by and large, the authors did not directly speak to the struggles that NWMO-led mutual aid groups faced in trying to achieve said goals. When discussing reciprocity the authors all describe how solidarity, redistribution, and community building factor into mutual aid. As chapters two and three will illustrate, this was difficult for NWMO organizers because they did not have preexisting relationships with the people that they wanted to help, and therefore struggled to form a solidarity-oriented group space everyone was comfortable and co-creative in. The authors also emphasize skills sharing, prefiguration, and analysis building as core to education, but NWMO-led mutual aid groups struggled with how to build analysis and prefigurative praxis because they did not usually have perspectives from more system-impacted people present in their space**.** The authors all discuss mutual aid as necessarily opposing and deconstructing current oppressive systems and emphasize both the importance of

[38] Ibid., 29.

creating alternative systems and direct action against root causes of the crises they are trying to help people through with mutual aid. This subversiveness was difficult for NWMO-led groups because they often struggled to build community, which meant they were operating on a very small scale, and consequently could not create an adequate alternative source of care and sustenance for people.

While the authors each have their own perspective on all three elements of mutual aid, the descriptors the authors give are consistently oriented against the way that saviors, non-profits, and charities operate, which leaves room to interpret how mutual aid *should* operate. This lack of concrete directions may be tactical due to the importance of local knowledge and site specificity of different practices. While these authors provided useful and necessary perspectives, mutual aid groups had significant room to interpret each facet's importance, and how it was to be implemented in their cases. In the following two chapters I will describe the challenges that MMAC and AE faced while striving toward a praxis which centered these three facets of mutual aid.

Chapter Two: The Middletown Mutual Aid Collective

This chapter will delve into the three themes of mutual aid derived from the literature in previous chapters and how the Middletown Mutual Aid Collective (MMAC) struggled toward the praxis of these themes. As already suggested, however, the information in the literature review did not adequately map onto the circumstances and demographics of MMAC. Over the course of this chapter, I will discuss how reciprocity is difficult to attain for a group with a sharp differential of privilege and resources between organizers and the people they are trying to help. I will also interrogate why MMAC neglects internal education, is uncomfortable with educating more marginalized community members, and struggles with prefiguration. Finally, I will explore why we do not prioritize subversiveness and how each avenue of subversiveness we attempted was largely unsuccessful. These struggles all make sense given that MMAC is predominantly composed of, and was founded by, NWMO organizers.

Reciprocity

There is a clear divide between the people who frequent MMAC's community fridge and the people who, like me, bring food to the fridge. This separation makes the path toward reciprocity unclear. People receiving food do not participate in attaining or distributing food. Only four of the sixteen organizers, meaning people who routinely came to meetings at MMAC's peak,

identified as low-income, and only two of those members ever acknowledged taking food from the community fridge.

We organizers are most likely to bring in people who have similar backgrounds to us, both because of proximity and ease. When MMAC was first founded and looking for more organizers, my first impulse was to ask people from the Democratic Town Committee, the local branch of the Democratic party, to help support MMAC programs, because that was a community I was a part of at the time. Similarly, another co-founder, Emma, immediately thought of the North End Action Team (NEAT) because it was a group they were a part of. However, NEAT was dealing with both burnout and internal tensions, so there were few active members. This led MMAC to be overly reliant on Emma and one other NEAT member who was a middle-aged white man and was not low income, to represent the interests of the North End community. Additionally, because the central MMAC group chat is littered with unanswered requests for help, I have brought in Wesleyan students to do the many tasks I can't do alone. I know students who are easily accessible through mutual friends or Wesleyan channels, and I do not know nearly as many people from Middletown. At one point, there were seven students routinely stocking or cleaning the fridge while no full-time Middletown residents were involved on a regular basis. This directly conflicts with MMAC's, and my, intentions for how the fridge should operate, but was the only avenue I could think of after MMAC organizers did not respond to my messages.

Organizers are scarce and often unengaged in part because we only did outreach to people in the area after the project was launched. This means we now use a framework of inclusion in our project, rather than taking initial direction from those who need food. MMAC organizers tried to manifest our own vision of what a community space centered on reciprocity would look like but had not included the thoughts of those we hoped would be the primary users of the space. This aligned with the malignant logic that we who are not struggling with our basic needs know best how those who are struggling can meet their basic needs. Because we failed to consult the people we were hoping to aid to find out what type of space would be most conducive to mutual aid for them, residents of Ferry Street do not understand that the community fridge is intended to be a site of mutual aid. It is housed by the Community Health Center (CHC), and I repeatedly hear CHC staff refer to the community fridge as "our own little food pantry." Many people therefore interpret the community fridge as a more accessible version of the main food pantry in town, instead of a space they can contribute to. This is furthered by people who get food from the fridge not having proximity to the people organizing the fridge. Without access to our organizing space, which is virtual and therefore inaccessible to those who do not have internet access or phones, people's ability to significantly shape what the space looks like and what it offers is incredibly limited. Because MMAC organizers predominantly have more class and race privilege than the people they are attempting to help, and because we did not discuss with community members beforehand to determine

what a space of reciprocity would look like, the avenues of participation are limited.

MMAC struggles to build projects which significantly deviate from the uni-directionality of charity models. Our first program, Direct Cash Assistance (DCA), was essentially fundraising from predominantly wealthy college students to send a $200 check to any Middletown resident who applied. While MMAC organizers thought the lack of means-testing was an important distinction from charity work, the program was unidirectional redistribution and did not create community between the people giving and receiving. This meant that while people's donations were useful, they did not forge new solidarity and were not reciprocal. The fridge, in contrast, is a physical space where people can bring or take anything they can use, which gives people more freedom to find ways to be useful and puts people in each other's vicinity. At times, people do drop off unexpected clothing items, toys, and homemade meals, which are enjoyed thoroughly. However, the majority of the goods brought to the fridge are brought by me and the college students I recruit to bring food from outside of Middletown, and we rarely see more than two or three people when we deliver donations.

Additionally, even when people from the community join the group, they are rarely listened to because the group grants leadership to people doing the most labor. Prioritizing those who contribute the most excludes people who don't have the capacity to contribute time or labor in the way expected of those who were given the most authority over projects. Historically, people with the least means

have done the most mutual aid work within their own communities. However, asking those who have the least to contribute to NWMO-led projects in order to have a say is exclusionary and unjust because NWMOs have more time and resources to contribute, regardless of their commitment to the group. This means that more privileged members of the group are likely to have more say because they have more time and resources to dedicate. This is not a good metric for whether the group should heed their suggestions.

For example, when the community fridge first opened, we would send someone to the grocery store to shop for food with donated money whenever it was empty. I was fundraising with my personal Venmo, coordinating drivers to do the grocery shopping and delivery, and reimbursing them. Because I was the only one with direct access to the funds, I set a limit of $75 to spend on groceries each day, without consulting the group. Another member, Emma, thought the limit was too low, because it didn't allow people to buy enough to fill the fridge. When they brought this up at a weekly community fridge meeting, I argued that spending more than $75 would be unsustainable; I couldn't raise enough money to reimburse more than that. I was treated with authority because I had the most knowledge of how the shopping had been going and how much was raised. Upon reflection, I realized that nobody was able to question me because I hadn't been sharing information about how much was being raised or how much people were spending. Furthermore, I was proud that I had authority because I saw it as a signal that I was contributing adequately to the group. However, my actions and positionality silenced Emma, who was a low-income student who knew the

community much better than I did. My goal was to have more of a say because of my heightened knowledge instead of to share knowledge which could easily be spread. Therefore my perspective overpowered Emma's, despite their perspective was founded upon knowledge from their lived experience, which is much more difficult to share with other members. This illustrates how groups that prioritize those who do the most for the group diminish their capacity because fewer voices are heard.

By giving those who put more time and energy into the project more of a voice, the culture of the group has become toxic, with organizers essentializing themselves so they can make more decisions. In the case of the community fridge Venmo, I actively tried to do more work than I had the capacity for in order to feel that I could have a say in the future of the project. I have experienced other group members do the same thing; they do a lot of work for a project and then use their work to indicate that they should have a say over the future of the project. Doing more work on a certain project in MMAC gives people more airtime in meetings and more say in the decision-making process. This is institutionalized through the way that meetings were run. In every meeting-notes Google document, there are columns for the topic of discussion, how long an agenda item should take to discuss, who will be presenting it, notes on the discussion, and action items. The column dictating who will present on a topic always named the person most involved with the project, and the person usually shared what had happened and what they thought the group should do. This privileged their voice over the voice of others, without regard for other people's lived experiences.

The division between people giving and receiving from the fridge led the group to question whether there was any true reciprocity in the project. The goal of reciprocity in MMAC was understood as individuated. The quote "Give What You Can, Take What You Need" sprawled across the front of the community fridge was an attempt by organizers to indicate that everyone, including those taking from the fridge, had things to contribute. We discussed that while not everyone would have extra food to give, some people might have time to clean the fridge, tell us what they needed from the fridge which would help it function, or call friends to spread information when it was full. This ambition of all people having avenues to contribute in different ways was central to why we formed the fridge.

Additionally, we hoped that the proximity to one another resulting from the establishment of the fridge would be useful in forging solidarity bonds, which aids reciprocity. Solidarity is "the recognition that you and the people you are helping are equals. The problems you are addressing are there because of an unfair and unjust system, not because the people are 'less fortunate' or at a deficit."[1] Instead of seeing needs as failures, this framework gives organizers tools to express that people all have different needs and that we should not relegate our perception of need to only include monetary survival needs. However, without building sustained relationships with the people we attempt to aid at the fridge, we have less opportunity to recognize people who take food from the fridge as equals

[1]"Summary, Part 1 | Mutual Aid | Study Guide." *Radical in Progress*. Accessed January 12, 2022. https://www.radicalinprogress.org/spade-2020-summary-part-1.

and learn from their stories. The sharp divide in wealth privilege makes it more difficult for organizers to reconceptualize.

Despite its flaws, MMAC organizers do not want to give up the ambition of the community fridge being a site of reciprocity, which led us to discuss knowledge as a form of reciprocity. We clearly do not have as much knowledge about Ferry Street and what is needed in the surrounding community as those who live there, and our work would become much more useful if we learned what would be most helpful. Because MMAC organizers want engagement with the people living on or near Ferry Street, we began to tokenize the few members who were low income or related to the people receiving food from the fridge. One member of the collective, Jamie, routinely got food from the fridge. He had supported the idea of starting a fridge from the beginning, but his input did not impact where the fridge was located nor how it was run. The organizers were very excited to say that we had people, like Jaime, receiving from the fridge and also organizing with us, but we did not add his concerns to the agenda or seek out the foods he recommended for the fridge. This gap indicates that while MMAC members profess a desire for reciprocity, we do not actually listen to the knowledge that is given unless it validates what we are already doing.

In response to this some members called a discussion on whether viewing knowledge production and community insight as a form of reciprocity would be appropriate. The majority of MMAC organizers argued it was not appropriate, because when sharing localized information is an avenue to fulfill a mandated contribution in the name of reciprocity, sustenance becomes dependent on sharing

information about the community. This means that people sharing information are beholden to those with less knowledge, rather than the reverse. Additionally, by framing knowledge as a contribution by marginalized people from the community, mutual aid collectives can gain knowledge to "improve" their group without fundamentally changing it to empower those they are learning from to make the core decisions. Therefore, while knowledge and lived experience should be considered valuable contributions, manufactured reciprocity through "gaining insight" can be harmful, especially when that reciprocity is mandated by those with more means.

Since most of the people organizing with MMAC were significantly wealthier than the people they were attempting to aid, redistributive work was contentious because it felt unidirectional rather than centered in reciprocity. However, to create abundance in under-resourced spaces, organizers must take from places where resources are overabundant. Abundance is defined here as a situation in which there is more than enough to satisfy what people need and often everything they want. While in-community mutual aid is the historical norm, it is unjust to not increase resources in communities which do not have enough for the purpose of avoiding redistribution's pitfalls. Redistribution is necessary in many cases to create cultures of abundance in communities of manufactured scarcity, but relationships with the givers of those funds are corrosive and easily lead to cooptation. The food that I bring to the fridge every Wednesday morning was from North Haven's Stop and Shop, a chain store in a city about twenty-five minutes away. They were not giving to help their community, and the community

receiving food did not know where it was coming from. This did not foster solidarity on either end. While the food from this source helped procure weekly moments of abundance, it also caused organizers to accept a charity model of getting food to the fridge because of the ease and abundance it provided.

In response to these struggles with reciprocity we decided to focus on making the community fridge more communal and end all of our other programs. Our DCA program facilitated redistribution with no agency in the hands of people receiving, which we decided did not align with our values. Simultaneously, at multiple meetings a white college student named Red brought up that they thought we should find more and better ways for people receiving aid from the fridge to contribute. They suggested that we should advertise that we needed people to clean the fridge, give us suggestions for what to buy, and throw out old food when it went bad (without requiring that people do any of those things). I agreed, thinking that people having agency over the project would bolster their commitment to it and make it less of a one-way-valve, while maintaining access for all. However, the group continued to struggle to forge adequate relationships with people using the community fridge, and therefore the intentions we set were not carried to fruition.

Education

Middletown Mutual Aid organizers have been committed to bringing new people into organizing from MMAC's beginning. The three college students who generated the initial idea of Middletown Mutual Aid recognize that we do not

reflect the community and so in creating the group we wanted more leadership from the North End because that is where the most system-impacted people live. After reaching out to the North End Action Team (NEAT), the assembled group of college students and NEAT organizers worked together to form MMAC with the ambition of expanding to incorporate and educate people throughout Middletown to meet the enormous needs of people during the pandemic.

Because we do mutual aid work together, many of us initially assumed that everyone had the same intentions, which meant that education of those within the collective was largely neglected. We validated our lack of internal education using Dean Spade's assertion that people learn the values of mutual aid through doing mutual aid work.[2] However, because most of the initiators of MMAC were middle-to-upper-class white college kids, much of the work that we titled mutual aid had significant overlap with charity work. Because of the lack of discussion, people engage in the work MMAC set out to do using charity frameworks, an anarchist frameworks, and the many options in between. While we briefly discussed why we felt certain elements of the work we were doing were important in meetings, we did not critically engage with our group definition of mutual aid nor did we have organizational discussions of the ethics and intentions we as a group wanted to engage with.

Our predominantly similar backgrounds do not preclude many different ideological standpoints among the organizers. Denny, a white man in his late 20s, is a member of the Socialist Rifle Association, who found the group through

[2]Dean Spade, *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis (and the Next)*. (London: Verso, 2020), ProQuest Ebrary.

Ryan, a college student from Hong Kong, because they are both part of Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). Marianne, a white woman in her 30s, is a secretary at Wesleyan, and joined MMAC after seeing advertisements by students. Russ, a white nonbinary person in their late 20s, joined MMAC while looking for a way to connect and give back to the community after stumbling upon the Facebook page and coming to a meeting. Anu, a south Asian woman in her 30s, found MMAC online, and offered to help because she was already involved in food rescue in her area through a food pantry. While all the people are interested and at least moderately comfortable in MMAC's meeting spaces, we do not automatically have the same idea of what mutual aid means.

Organizers did not initially discuss the values they associated with mutual aid work, which inhibited education and growth. Arguments were instead deliberated through logistics even though they were tied to values we did not discuss explicitly. One meeting we discussed what to do about a community member who was routinely spreading bad foods and sauces on the fridge and calling the health department to say that it was not clean and should be taken down. Some members of the group, who had a history with her, were advocating for a restraining order so she could no longer visit the fridge. Others argued that the fridge must be accessible to everyone and that getting a restraining order would worsen our relationship with the community. However, we later found that the people on the two different sides of this discussion were deeply divided by their belief in police and prison abolition. While the primary advocate of getting a restraining order was very interested in reform, those that were against her being restrained were

primarily people who do not believe that police helped our communities and thought they should be abolished. Therefore, the argument was one of values and once the organizers realized this, we were able to articulate our positions based on our beliefs about abolition. This made it much easier for us to make future decisions.

Additionally, we did not have a person or process designated for recruiting people to join our organizing work, nor did we have a program for educating the public more broadly. This was needed because MMAC organizers were unsure of how to educate outsiders while recruiting them to join us in mutual aid projects. Organizers consistently mentioned not wanting to put up barriers to entry. The backbone of our argument for not having upfront political education was the Black Panther Party for Self Defense (BPP). One of their most popular programs was their daily free breakfast program, where they provided a free morning meal to school aged children. This program proliferated throughout chapters of BPP nationwide. Responding to specific needs relationally is core to mutual aid, and "the Panthers met these needs to ensure the survival of Black life which continues to be left out of the design of social and legislative care."[3] This was part of their theory of providing "survival pending revolution."[4] The BPP programs were a huge success, convincing many families of the goodwill and necessity of the group. Additionally, these programs were a tactic to radicalize the people who showed up. Eshe Kiama Zuri relayed that parents consistently showing up at the

[3] Ruth Gebreyesus, "When Corporations Attempt Mutual Aid." *KQED*, Oct. 5, 2020, www.kqed.org/bayareabites/139183/when-corporations-attempt-mutual-aid.
[4] Ibid.

breakfast program led to natural conversations about how frustrating it was to need free breakfast, and the many systems of oppression that led Black people to poverty.[5] This provided an on-ramp to BPP organizing and led to meaningful connections between BPP and the communities they organized in.

For MMAC, however, the rationale of not wanting to put up a barrier is colored by our anxiety about imposing beliefs on people with less privilege than we. Mutual aid organizers' hesitance to politicize survival work to individuals from a community that we are outsiders to is well founded, given the elitist implication of people with more privilege trying to spread knowledge about conditions we have less experience with. Furthermore, unlike the BPP, we are not trusted in their community. Therefore, instead of making radicalism more accessible through a slow, action-based immersion in community projects, the people who are core organizers do not have a solid sense of our shared goal, and there is not significant group-learning outside the occasional onboarding, close friendship, or chance encounter. Because of our subject positionally, we struggle to believe we can have the side conversations where we discuss systems of oppression and politicize the work that we are doing in order to bring the people we give food to into a movement for larger change.

Additionally, conflict was rampant and largely unaddressed for the first year of MMAC's existence, which hindered the prefiguration it intended to enact. There were relationship issues, struggles with classism and transphobia, issues

[5] Eshe Zuri, "Why We Must Remember the Black Roots of Mutual Aid Groups," *Gal-dem*. June 5, 2020. https://gal-dem.com/weve-been-organising-like-this-since-day-why-we-must-remember-the-black-roots-of-mutual-aid-groups/.

determining leadership structure, and many more frustrations. However, none of these tensions were addressed by the group. When the community fridge was set up in November of 2020, conflicts began to happen in person, which heightened the harm that occurred. An elderly man named Jared became obsessed with me, and after two months of emotional manipulation and group disruption I decided to ask MMAC to help me while supporting him in changing his behaviors, adhering to transformative justice, which encourages us to seek healing for all parties rather than retribution.

My vision of a prefigurative conflict process was largely undermined in our first attempt at an accountability process. I wanted to find people from the group who could support Jared, since he appeared to have very few support systems in place. I sent a text message to the MMAC group chat asking for the men in the group to volunteer to support him, since I didn't want him to transfer his aggression toward me to someone else who was more likely to be harmed by him. This led to a series of phone calls with Michael, the white NEAT board member in his 40s. As soon as I mentioned that Jared had made sexual comments to me, Michael started arguing we needed to remove Jared immediately. I repeatedly said that I did not want to cut him off entirely and wanted to find a way to support him, but Michael was not interested in that. We called a group meeting with everyone except for Jared, where three young white non-binary people and I explained to the group why Jared's actions were harmful and that we needed support. I didn't realize until that meeting that two of them had been feeling significant harm. Only two of us were arguing for a restorative approach, and the

group decided to throw him out, without providing the four of us significant support.

Our lack of discussion of how to deal with conflict led to a process which MMAC organizers knew was not prefigurative. In this case, a prefigurative approach would enact how we hoped communities could respond to harm. That is part of why I advocated for Jared to have people designated to support him and why I had hoped that there might be a process by which, if he improved his behavior, he could rejoin the group. In contrast, Michael passionately advocated for Jared's immediate and permanent removal. Similarly, while many in the group argued that they wanted to support the needs of the people harmed, my suggestions and needs were overlooked in preference for the most punitive response of the aggressor. Prefigurative praxis can be extended to all of the above scenarios. Ideally, people would be able to discuss values and ideology in order to best organize mutual aid spaces, and the education they provided would be multidirectional.

Based on this experience, group members decided to start having calls to discuss values internal to the group. Value calls ranged from teachings on trauma to direct discussions of harm individuals had experienced to brainstorms of how to effectively spread political education to people outside of the group. At first, values calls were well attended, with people who were most interested in the chosen topics facilitating and presenting at meetings. We designed a roadmap for how we wanted organizers within the collective to respond to harm. This included suggestions of how to get support, whether you created harm, witnessed harm, or

experienced harm. We also had a "pod mapping" workshop. Pod mapping is a tool of transformative justice in which people map out who they would go to if they had caused harm to get support in their accountability, or alternatively, who they would go to if they received harm to get support in their healing. Mapping out your pods before harm has occurred makes it easier for people to react when they encounter harm.

Relying on community in moments of distress is prefigurative praxis because it decentralizes and gets rid of hierarchical structures that we currently use to react to harm. Before the meetings when we discussed our conflict process, group members had spent very little time engaging with one another outside of the work they were doing in a group setting. Therefore, many of us were not equipped with large circles of people in the group that we felt comfortable with. This meant that there were many relationships of both tension and harm which went unaddressed or were addressed outside of the group in ways that did not ease the tension. Unfortunately, the preexisting system of conflict avoidance was so entrenched that most of the harmful relationships which were established before the pod mapping workshop took place were not addressed by the group. However, having discussed the intention of community support was important so that it could be an aspiration and so that people had avenues of redress going forward.

We also tried to act on our values in determining a new leadership structure for the group. We designated specific roles for "point people" who could routinely do a certain category of tasks, usually focusing on one project, for two-month periods. We then put out a call in the group chat for anyone who wanted to

have any of those roles to nominate themselves. We put all the names up for each position and people could score each person out of 10 for how comfortable they would be with that person having that role. This means that people could support multiple candidates and that we could get a general sense of who the group preferred. We then asked the person who got the most votes to take on that role for the next two months. This was a consensus-based decision-making process that we hoped would not create the same barriers to leadership based solely on who was already doing the work or the charisma of an individual. In practice, it encouraged people who were already involved to get more involved but did not bring new people into leadership.

Another mechanism of prefiguration we discussed was how to be more accessible. Everyone in the group wants mutual aid to have mass participation and thinks it would be most effective as a tool of liberation if people who are the most system-impacted are engaged. Therefore, having practices that do not actively engage low-income and people of color in the decision-making process is counterproductive and not prefigurative. For example, we did not have any in-person meetings for the first year and a half that MMAC was operating. We only used Zoom, which is a software that is only accessible through computers or smartphones. There is a call-in option which is accessible for anyone with a phone. While the phone option made our meetings more accessible to some people, the demographic that we are hoping would engage do not all have phones. Additionally, we did not post the phone number widely and therefore people who may be interested would have to meet one of us individually to be able to attend

the meeting. When people did join our Zoom meetings, we would all do introductions, but I often found myself private messaging people in the zoom chat so that they would know the acronyms we were using. The lack of accessibility meant that most people who joined the meeting who were not in professional careers or in university did not attend more than two times. This is an apt example of why prefiguration of the systems that we want to see in the future is necessary.

We attempted to become more accessible and do initial education of new people through creating an onboarding process. We determined that one of the "point people" should focus on onboarding, and I was selected. I hoped to call people when they joined a meeting and help orient them to the group, using a "guidebook" that the group had compiled. The guidebook included a definition of mutual aid, a glossary of terms we used, what projects MMAC focused on, when our meeting times were and how to access them, and graphics related to the fridge. After going through the guidebook with them I would ask them what they were most interested in and would try to connect them with the organizers who were most involved with the related projects. However, this process hinged on one elected onboarding person, which led to new members having a dependency on that organizer.

Overall, MMAC organizers struggled to do both internal and external education because of their positionality. Those who shared many key demographics either did not think it was necessary to discuss the politicization of our work or were actively choosing not to because of preexisting tensions. As a result, we struggled to have the values conversations that would allow us to

prefigure the liberatory praxis that we hoped mutual aid would be. Additionally, MMAC organizers were conflicted about how best to bring in people who are more marginalized than we are. Therefore, despite attempts to increase educational efforts, this principle of mutual aid was difficult for MMAC to enact successfully.

Subversiveness

Out of the three main categories this thesis examines, MMAC focused on subversiveness the least. Throughout our organizing, we brought up actions that might be more subversive, such as dumpster diving or writing op eds against the city government. We aimed to end dependence on state aid, create solidarity, and reject classist notions of worthiness, particularly as relating to the divide between university students and people from town. However, these avenues were not guided by people receiving aid from MMAC, and they were largely unsuccessful.

The initial way that MMAC intended to be subversive to the neo-liberal state was through providing adequate assistance to people so that they could divest from demeaning forms of aid and oppressive, life-sustaining labor. The current ecosystem is premised on people relying on state aid for assistance and on having no alternatives to working degrading jobs. By providing an alternative, that system can no longer function. Therefore, by proving that an alternative is possible, mutual aid projects disrupt both hegemonic corporate capitalism and the government's seemingly impenetrable authority. This is a subversion to the

complacency which the government cultivates, and therefore makes revolt more likely. However, this alternative must be run by the people being fed, otherwise it replaces one hierarchical system with another.

MMAC organizers feel that by feeding low-income people, those community members won't have to spend as much time doing life-sustaining work within capitalism, and therefore, will be able to spend time organizing with us and getting to know their community. If everyone who was unhappy with capitalist oppression had the time and energy to organize around that, the most system-impacted people could lead and/or join anticapitalist movements. Today, the most system-impacted people are so overburdened that their tangible capacity for community organizing is substantially diminished. While we have had a couple of unemployed and/or homeless people show up to meetings, people working multiple jobs, and especially people with children, routinely tell us that they were too busy and could not attend meetings or regularly help with the fridge or DCA. We believe that if we took care of some of their more urgent needs, they might be able to attend and support our work or shape it to their own liking. This could reorganize the dynamic of wealthy people giving to less wealthy people in the ways we believed were righteous, and instead give the people we were trying to help much more agency. As abolitionist scholar Dylan Rodriguez puts it, "More insidious than the raw structural constraints exerted by the foundation/state/non-profit nexus is the way in which this new [nonprofit] industry grounds an epistemology--literally, a way of knowing social change and

resistance praxis--that is difficult to escape or rupture."[6] This understanding of social change views low-income people as masses in need of services rather than being the rightful creators of systems in which they are no longer oppressed. Because the agency of poor people disrupts the status quo it is therefore subversive to current power structures. However, we have not created or distributed adequate resources to the extent that divestment was possible, even for our very local community.

As described in the reciprocity section, we also did not forge substantial relationships with the people we were attempting to aid, and therefore we were not prefigurative in creating solidarity and forging bonds across class and race lines. While that, on a wide scale, would be destabilizing to the current power structure and segregated status of both our town and our country, we did not successfully incorporate that to our praxis.

We more directly countered the university's intention of hoarding resources for students by taking food reserved only for students and giving it to the local homeless population. At the beginning of the 2020 fall semester, the university was doing "grab-and-go" all-you-can-eat pop up stations. This was for social distancing during the students' initial two-week quarantine. Students could take as much food as they wanted. The discrepancy between our endless supply of food and the food desert that neighbored Wesleyan in the North End was unacceptable, so MMAC organizers who were Wesleyan students started asking

[6] Dylan Rodriguez, "The Political Logic of the Non-Profit Industrial Complex," in *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex*, edited by INCITE! (Duke University Press, 2017 [2007]), 31.

other students to get extra food and leave them at drop-off locations around campus. This predated the community fridge, so organizers would then go to the North End of Main Street and hand out these pre-packaged meals. The university quickly put limits on how many pre-packaged items individuals could take, to tamp down on this redistribution effort. Additionally, this short term redirection of university funds did not substantially shift the ideology or culture around hunger and worthiness of Middletown residents.

Conclusion

MMAC has shrunk significantly in size since November 2020, but it still maintains the Community Fridge and has occasional messages in the group chat. The shrinkage was due to general burnout, conflict among members, and concerns about the group's praxis. All three can be tied to organizers' attempts to live up to the three ideals which they garnered from internet articles, talks by contemporary mutual aid theorists, and each other. The burnout many organizers are facing is tied to the lack of onboarding. Conflict among group members is tied both to a lack of discussion of values among existing members and a lack of prefigurative praxis surrounding accountability for harm. The concerns surrounding praxis are derived from all three: in MMAC's three most recent meetings, we discussed how we had not lived up to our goals, mentioning aspects of all three categories: reciprocity, education and subversiveness.

The Middletown Mutual Aid Collective's work is a testament to the people who started the organization and those who joined to organize alongside

us. We struggled substantially with reciprocity because the group was started by people who were not in need of the services we were trying to provide and did not have substantial existing connections to those who did. Therefore, we struggled to understand what reciprocity meant in the context of our sharp division in resources. Our lack of preexisting connection to community members who we thought could most benefit from the mutual aid projects we took on meant that we did not have initial direction from them. We eventually forged a common goal of creating a world where the working class had agency and were trusted to know the best ways to meet their own needs, so this was not prefigurative. Our lack of connection to the people we hoped would lead us also meant that many of us struggled to find how best to politicize our work to community members who were more system-impacted. This made it difficult to onboard them. Finally, people's opinions on how directly subversive to be varied widely. Without a directly subversive element, some members worried that we were simply rebranding charity work, without substantially impacting the systems of power which caused economic insecurity and oppression we were trying to respond to. MMAC has failed to diversify and now must forge a new praxis with the committed organizers we have.

Chapter Three: Abolition Eats

Unlike MMAC, Abolition Eats did not start as a NWMO-led mutual aid group. Abolition Eats (AE) was originally a part of Abolition Park (AP), an encampment outside of NYC city hall which called for the abolition of the police after the murder of George Floyd. AE originated organically from a self-selected group of AP occupiers who focused on feeding themselves and their comrades. AP was Black-led and drew people from many different backgrounds, while AE was almost entirely NWMO organizers. One AP and AE organizer stated that she thought that AE's choice of activity was a reflection of NWMO organizers wanting to put their labor toward the cause without making strategic decisions, and procuring food seemed like a tangible avenue to do so.

However, when the occupation ended, AP disbanded while AE continued to distribute food. The split is significant because AE no longer functioned as part of a collective with people from other demographics. AP had explicitly declared themselves Black-led, so their decision-making structure broke down entirely. Simultaneously, they no longer had a physical space in which AE organizers both gave and received, which returned them to a positionality in which it made sense to give but not always to receive mutual aid. This left AE unsure of how to proceed after the split.

This chapter will explore the three defining themes of mutual aid, and how they were or were not practiced before and after AE's split from AP. I argue that

the information the authors in the literature review provide was much better suited to AP than AE because of the shift in demographics. Before the split, reciprocity was a natural, ingrained part of the group, while afterward organizers no longer knew how to engage in a reciprocal manner. Additionally, AP was incredibly involved in educating both members and people who were not a part of the group, but after the split, AE stopped doing internal education and did not do political education with the people they were distributing to. Finally, I will discuss how, while AP's mission was always to subvert state authority and abolish policing in New York City, after it disbanded AE organizers struggled to find methods of maintaining that subversiveness. These contrasts all stem from the different demographics of the people making decisions for the group before and after the split. AE's positionality made recreating AP's organizing impossible, but their reticence to invoke their own authority stymied adaptation and growth as a NWMO-led group.

Reciprocity

Reciprocity was a natural element of AE organizing while it was a part of AP. As previously stated, AE was formed by and for AP organizers to ensure that everyone who took part in the abolitionist occupation of City Hall Park was fed. The people who procured meals and facilitated food distribution were also fed by the work that they were doing. This meant that reciprocity was a given from the beginning because they were part of the community they were feeding, and the community was one in which many other goods and services were shared. People

focused on food distribution as part of AE received sustenance and care from others, such as haircuts, emotional support, and camping supplies among others. All the work people put into the occupation of Abolition Park was for a common goal, and everyone both gave and received aid in support of that vision.

Additionally, while AE members were charged with finding food for the group, they did not have heightened authority in the group setting based on their food distribution work. AP's leadership was horizontal, with small affinity groups choosing representatives to a larger forum that was called whenever there were decisions to be made. While anyone could voice opinions, the group set the intention of listening to Black voices with reverence. Then the forum made decisions based by consensus, meaning that everyone either had to agree or decide that they would allow a decision they disagreed with to pass for the good of the group as a whole. This meant that while food acquisition and distribution were delegated to AE, that delegation could be changed by the group at large and everyone had a say in how it was run. Additionally, anyone could join AE at any time, which diminished the potential for AE members to have undue decision-making power.

These manifestations of reciprocity were contingent on the group having physical proximity to, and taking leadership from, Experienced Solidarity Organizers. Community building between NWMO organizers and well-versed Black organizers made sense given their shared goals and common interests. NWMO organizers did not have to make tactical decisions without adequate knowledge, and decisions were made by and for people receiving aid. However,

when AE split from AP after the encampment ended, it was left without that leadership or proximity to well-versed, Black mutual aid organizers, and AE's NWMO organizers were thrust into decision-making positions. They then struggled to determine what new direction they could take that would allow them to continue to do mutual aid projects centered in reciprocity.

After their split from AP, AE organizers were no longer a part of a group they could give and receive necessary support from. At first, they attempted to maintain the work they had done at AP, having what they called "community dinners" every night at City Hall Park for over a month after the occupation ended. These dinners brought together local homeless people and organizers that had been a part of AP. However, organizers no longer needed the food because they no longer lived at the park, and they divested from the community dinner model when it got colder out. Organizers not continuing to provide food suggests that the solidarity bonds they built with the homeless community living near the park were not sufficient to continue their work when they no longer benefitted from it and/or when it got more difficult. Their failure to continue to feed the local population illustrates that reciprocity and solidarity are imperative to sustain mutual aid work.

AE organizers then transitioned to doing grocery runs for people who did not have easy access to food from community fridges or food pantries around the city, without building community with the people they were delivering to. Because they did not build community with the recipients of the groceries and did not necessarily have a specific connection to any of those people preceding their

giving groceries to them, this was not significantly different from the charitable work that food pantries were trying to organize. The work was largely NWMO organizers fundraising from people who had no background in mutual aid work to buy groceries and deliver them to people who were low-income that these organizers did not know. They did not receive anything from the people they were delivering to. Eventually they determined that this was both not reciprocal and not sustainable, and they ended the deliveries.

Furthermore, after AE split from AP, AE stopped training new people to fully participate in their group. I was able to access the group because one of my friends from MMAC had been at AP and was friends with a central AE organizer, and quickly found that they had no process or precedent for onboarding new members. The person my friend was able to connect me to, Camille, gave me a hasty background on the group over the phone and invited me to a meeting last minute. When I arrived at the crowded apartment, few people talked to me and I didn't know how, or if, I should contribute to the discussion. The one other new person at the meeting, Samuel, was the only Black person there and primarily spoke Spanish. Despite having multiple Spanish speakers present, they did not provide translation for him which meant that he was not able to contribute or learn about the group fully. He later told me that he was brought into the group because he was already doing food distribution work with one of the AE organizers outside of the group space and was asked by that member to join. Both of us entered through existing connections to AE members and struggled to connect with group members or learn how we could be useful. This precipitated a grim

outlook for any onboarding of community members receiving aid, given that they didn't have prior connections to form community bonds with AE organizers.

Simultaneously, AE struggled to redefine leadership practices with the limited information available. While at the park, their mission to feed people present was clear, so people all contributed the time, money, and energy they could to fulfill the work that was delegated to them by the group as a whole. They felt assured by the leadership of people from communities in which mutual aid has been practiced for a long time and thus had never made substantial decisions outside of logistics and fundraising. However, without direction from other organizers, decisions were made by the people able to contribute the most work, who tended to be the wealthiest organizers. Organizers who worked as nannies for wealthy families or got paid fair wages at local book shops had the time and energy to devote to steering the group, but this did not mean they have the best insight into what was needed, or how individual members could best contribute.

These problems were caused by the privilege and resource differential between AE organizers and the people they were attempting to distribute food to. When the occupation of AP ended, AE organizers largely returned to stable living conditions and were no longer in proximity to the BIPOC community members they had relied on to guide their praxis. While they attempted to build analysis at the park, that analysis of their own positionality had been contingent on being part of a Black-led group in which they had a stake. Without that input, the organizers were at a loss of how to have a reciprocal, respectful practice of mutual aid, and stopped building community.

In response to the lack of reciprocity they saw, AE organizers determined they should focus on food distribution at protests. They stopped grocery runs because they felt it was one-directional and did not build solidarity. In contrast, AE organizers were largely part of other movement spaces in NYC, and thus by feeding protestors they were feeding people who they knew, and they were part of the masses of people who were fed. This was the only form of reciprocal praxis they could find that felt necessary and sustainable without leadership from other more experienced organizers and without sharing space and needs with people from more marginalized backgrounds. However, because AE transitioned to solely supporting other groups with their events and did not onboard any new members, their numbers dwindled and they eventually disbanded. Given the structural change in their organizing, they failed to adapt appropriately because of their conviction that they should follow the lead of Experienced Solidarity Organizers.

Education

AP was intensely focused on education through teach-ins, learning and honoring the perspectives of communities who historically practiced mutual aid through the leadership of Black Experienced Solidarity Organizers and prefiguration. Education was explicitly stated as a method of moving people toward more effective abolitionist work. Over the course of this section, I will describe how the methods of education they used did not translate easily for AE once they split from AP because there was no longer consistent outreach derived

from their physical encampment, and they no longer had leadership from Experienced Solidarity Organizers.

Teach-ins were a major tool AP used to educate new people and ensure AP organizers were interrogating their own perspectives to build a joint analysis of the conditions that led them to occupy the park. A teach-in is a workshop led by a group member that focuses on building skills and analysis, usually among people who are already interested or involved in the content. Teach-ins were regularly held at the park during occupation and were also held during rest periods between segments of AP marches for abolition. During the second 24-hour march AP held, there was a teach-in for all the marchers, including many who, like me, had never marched with AP before. First, a few of AP's Experienced Solidarity Organizers spoke to the group about why abolition mattered to them, and why they were marching with us. We were then told to form groups of 5-10 which immediately forced us to meet new people. We were asked to each share why we believed in abolition and chalk our answers on the ground. Sharing with the whole group why I was there was grounding and invigorating and hearing other people's answers illuminated even more avenues toward abolition, and I tried to take notes of the good points others had made, which I could use to educate the people in my life who did not yet understand either what abolition was or its importance. This both validated each of our individual thoughts as important and eased us into merging our analyses.

The leadership of Black organizers also led people at AP to center the Black radical tradition and learn the history of Black mutual aid in America. Organizers

learned this through hearing stories from Black organizers about how they had experienced mutual aid in their communities growing up, and through discussing the historical use of mutual aid in Black communities from slavery to the present. This meant that organizers saw AP's mutual aid as a continuation of the Black tradition of mutual aid, and were more easily able to see how their practice fit in with historical practice.

The practices AP took up were explicitly prefigurative. They enacted horizontal leadership to help people learn the intricacies of how a community centered on abolitionist principles could logistically operate, beyond the theoretics. This also meant that AP organizers had to interrogate the way they currently operated, which for NWMO organizers were often entangled in saviorist logics. Horizontal leadership is structured around consent-based decision-making. Organizers must either agree with a proposal from the community or decide that despite their disagreement, they will accept the proposal for the good of the group. This meant that there was no coercion among AP organizers because everyone agreed to the decisions that were made. This practice actualizes the non-coercive society that AP organizers hope to build on a larger scale in the future while educating people about the logistical practices and tangible possibilities of abolition in the immediate future.

Additionally, AP engrained an abundance mentality in its organizers through creating a space where resources were not scarce. A mentality of abundance is characterized by a lack of fear that needs will not be met. This allows people to hoard less, share more, and be less suspicious of others. Learning that such a

mentality is possible is incredibly illuminating, as many nay-sayers of abolition argue that it is fundamental to human nature to be territorial and greedy. By creating a space where people could care for one another and share without fear for their own sustenance, AP dramatically impacted the mentality of their organizers going forward.

When AP disbanded, leaving AE without their space or their leadership, AE stopped bringing in new people, ceased internal analysis building, and no longer focused on prefiguration as a part of their group's praxis. As discussed during the preceding section on reciprocity, organizers did not think they could emulate the prefigurative work that AP enacted, nor did they think they could find an alternative way of forging solidarity that matched the bonds organizers had built in the face of police repression. This conviction that they could not replicate what they considered a necessary experience led them to stop building community with new people, and thus they became stagnant.

Simultaneously, they ceased internal education, assuming they could not build firmer analysis in the absence of non-white people. They assumed that they had all built sufficient analysis of current structures in the company of Black organizers at AP and that therefore their further interrogation would be both unnecessary and tainted by their own privileged perspectives. One organizer also argued to me that they learned more from the embodied experiences that they had at the park than they could possibly learn from external sources, so reading theory felt irrelevant. However, the shift in their circumstances made further embodied

learning or learning from Black organizers impossible without more community building. Because they were willing to do neither, the group became stagnant.

The group also lost its emphasis on prefiguration, which organizers argued was because they no longer had a community of their own to live in and treat as a sample. Their focus drifting from prefiguration led to inaccessibility and bad practices. As previously stated, Samuel needed Spanish translation which was not provided despite the resources to do so. Additionally, there were no onboarding practices to welcome newcomers. Both of these practices were contrary to the analysis that AE organizers had built while they were part of AP, which would have directed them to absorb as many people as possible into the movement for abolition while discussing root causes with them. Samuel and I, as the only two organizers to attempt to join AE after its split from AP, did not gain the same embodied analysis as the other AE organizers and were unable to relate to and rely on them the way that they had learned to engage with each other.

As a consequence of the group not focusing on building further analysis or prefiguring a liberated future, the group culture became non-adaptive and draining. They instead clung to the practices that they had engaged with at AP to structure the group, which was inefficient in their smaller group. At the first meeting that I attended with AE, they maintained a meeting style that included a facilitator, note-taker, and predetermined spokespeople for specific issues. It became clear quickly that the spokespeople for different issues were not all present. One said that they were running late, so the group pushed that agenda item to the end even though it was relevant to subsequent meeting items, and even

though others present were able to share the information that person was planning to share. This structure was no longer as effective because in a small group a higher percentage of people were involved with each task, and meetings were less formal so the predetermined spokesperson did not always show up. The group felt tied to a predetermined list of who should share what, which both slowed proceedings and discouraged participation of people who were less involved but had the relevant information.

At that same meeting, one organizer argued that further community and analysis building were necessary, and attempted to form a reading group and initiate an onboarding process, neither of which ever came to fruition. Further, the lack of prefiguration led to burnout among existing organizers. Therefore people did not have the energy to bring on new people or to do readings. Their burnout also led individuals to distance themselves from one another. The social bonds that once animated and brought joy to the mutual aid work they were doing were no longer enough to encourage frequent meetings, and so the group began to dissipate. There was not a critical mass interested in reinvigorating the group, so it withered over the course of the summer I participated with the group.

Subversiveness

AP's initial intention was explicitly subversive; their stated intentions were to end policing in New York City, build a movement for abolition, and end dependence on capitalism for sustenance through self-sufficient, supportive, occupied space. These are all subversive goals because they reduce dependence

on the state while destabilizing statist ideology and actively opposing its physical means of domination. Mutual aid was an essential part of its praxis because it reduced people's dependence on the state for sustenance and brought people into a movement that directly targeted policing and the ideological stability of the state.

During their initial occupation of City Hall Park, AP organizers shut down streets and reached out to protestors to raise their political consciousnesses. Throughout each march that they held, organizers wheat-pasted flyers to subways and walls, shouted to people they passed that they should join both the march and the struggle for abolition, and they designated people to attempt to engage onlookers on the question of abolition. Additionally, people would spray paint sidewalks and bridges with provocative questions and statements in support of abolishing the police as we walked. All of these tactics were designed to force people out of their complacency and submission to the state. This was successful in bringing more people into the cause, which intensified pressure on state actors to make changes to current conditions.

AP also taught invested protestors more about abolition to weaken nihilism regarding the state's wrongdoings. Once protesters entered the space, we heard many speeches and teachings about abolition's past, present, and future, and the hopes that well-versed organizers had for what a society centered in abolition could look like in New York City. AP organizers then encouraged us to share our thoughts and learn with and from other new protesters. Unlike other marches I've attended, their marches included hours of sharing meals and discussing individual

thoughts of abolition with other protesters. This formed solidarity bonds and made each organizer more invested in abolition than when they had entered the space. This was intended to strengthen the movement for abolition, and consequently weaken the state.

Crucially, AP created a space of abundance for occupiers through their encampment which allowed people, temporarily, to divest from the state. State-sponsored social welfare programs, which many occupiers utilized, are exclusive to those that the state deems worthy of resources and are deeply insufficient. People who took up residence at Abolition Park were given food and a place to sleep with no means-testing, background check, or other requirements. They were simultaneously thrust into a community that provided other less essential services like haircuts, community gatherings, and artmaking. People who lived at the park were therefore no longer beholden to the state services that they required outside of the park and did not have to work exploitative full-time jobs if they did not want to. This alternative way of life illuminated that the domination and subservience they were accustomed to was not inherent to communities but rather a state of oppression that needed to be overthrown. This destabilized the conception that the state and capitalism are natural formations that are necessary to organize human beings and replaced it with both physical proof and ideological conviction that an alternative can be put in place.

These practices were met with police surveillance, brutality, and suppression. Police added video cameras and consistently surrounded the park to get their best vantage point to see what was going on inside. They followed

protesters leaving the park consistently and often attempted to intimidate them. They also followed all social media accounts of protesters which meant that they knew when upcoming protests were happening and tried to barricade the park when protesters returned. While their surveillance was ineffective at stopping the protesters from continuing their actions, their brutality did cause many people distress. The police would frequently conduct raids of the park, usually in the middle of the night when the fewest protesters were there and when the protesters or sleeping so they could not as easily defend one another. Protesters were physically and/or sexually harmed in the process of their arrest and were also psychologically and economically harmed by repeated jailings.

The police and media effectively conveyed to the public that joining would be risky and harmful. For example, the original leader of AE was a Black woman who decided that the brutality at AP was too much for her, so she switched to doing food-oriented mutual aid near Prospect Park. Besides terrifying protesters so they would stop attending, police did their best to minimize the protesters' successes. Journalists were at times abused and police helicopters flew very close to protests in ways that blocked the view of reporting cameras. These actions also disturbed the protest themselves because it made it very difficult for people to hear what others were saying. Police accounts of protests either minimized them or painted them as dangerous, both of which were inaccurate. This misrepresentation worked directly against AP's aim of drawing new people in and helping them build analysis and join in a vision of a future centered on police abolition, free of state control and oppression.

After the split, AE struggled even more to enact those forms of subversiveness to the state. The only tool they felt comfortable wielding, as a NWMO-led group, was food distribution, which did not pose a direct threat to policing. Food distribution became less useful to their aims of subversiveness because resources dwindled and their numbers declined when they separated from AP. This change was partially because their donations associated with BLM declined along with national trends, partially because student protestors went back to work, and partially because protestors had conflict with one another. Regardless of the cause, AE's lack of sustained resources or community support meant that they could not sustain people outside of state systems. Without sufficient food, the people organizers were trying to help had no pathway to divest from state systems or see a future where they did not depend on state systems as possible. Therefore, one of the most crucial elements of subversiveness to the state was withdrawn immediately after the park disbanded.

AE's demographic makeup led them to be uncomfortable educating new organizers or further educating people involved, which meant that AE did not impact the extent to which its members thought subversively. New members, such as myself, did not participate in any analysis building with old members. At times organizers would discuss how they formed their own analyses in one-on-one conversations but that was generally at my own request. This lack of educating newcomers and themselves meant that they were no longer increasing subversive ideology, but rather maintaining their own ideology within a community of people

who had built some analysis over the preceding summer. This accomplished little in the way of further dismantling complicity in oppression by the state.

Because they their original methods of subverting the state were failing, AE organizers eventually decided that their only remaining avenue of subverting this state was through feeding protesters at marches, mutual aid pop-ups, and organizing meetings. This was subversive because most of these protests, meetings, and pop-ups either supported abolition or a movement that benefited abolition. Feeding protesters at these events was a big draw to more people through bringing in homeless comrades and onlookers and helped protestors remain at protests for longer because they had more stamina after being fed. While the effectiveness of each event varied in subverting the state, the support of these events was clearly with the intent of toppling current systems and providing support to peer organizers. However, as noted above, because they failed to onboard new people, the group disbanded shortly after, halting their progress.

Conclusion

AE had the explicit intent of being a space of reciprocity, education and subversiveness, which it adopted from its predecessor, AP. However, AE struggled to continue in its pursuit of these ideals of mutual aid because of its shift in circumstance and demographics. The learning that AE organizers had done while part of AP was contingent on being part of a community in which there was shared need and in which there was leadership from people who were part of marginal communities that had been practicing mutual aid for much longer. Most

of the information that the authors writing online were giving was aimed at groups like AP which included people from marginalized backgrounds in the organizing apparatus, so AE's NWMO organizers had to determine and forge a new path of what mutual aid would look like going forward. Because they wanted to follow the lead of Experienced Solidarity Organizers, they neglected to forge a new praxis that was tailored to their new circumstances and demographics. Therefore when AE split from AP after the occupation of City Hall park ended, they struggled to create new relationships with reciprocity, education, and subversiveness. AE ceased grocery runs which was its last substantial program in July of 2021, 14 months after AP was formed, and disbanded that fall.

Organizers no longer saw a use for their work within AE as a distinct space but continue to do mutual aid work and join abolitionist spaces as individuals. As my onboarder, Camille, said, "Maybe I'll start abolition cooks or something." AE as an organization was not the most important facet of its members' overall organizing. Rather, the role AE played in the larger movement for abolition was dearest to them. Once AE ceased to achieve reciprocity, education and subversiveness, group members determined their efforts would be better channeled elsewhere, though their intentions remained constant. AE served a purpose in shaping its originating members and provides a cautionary tale for groups that are severed from the population they are trying to learn from and contribute to. While heeding the words of Experienced Solidarity Organizers is useful in shaping ideology and necessary to practice mutual aid respectfully, NWMO organizers must be able to adapt their mutual aid praxis for the

demographics and circumstances of their group. AE was uncomfortable with shifting their praxis without guidance from Experienced Solidarity Organizers and did not bring new organizers in, rendering their organizing unsustainable.

Conclusion

The two groups I've been discussing, MMAC and AE, and many like them across the country, are struggling. Their struggles give us insight into issues New White Middle-class Outsider (NWMO)-led organizations are facing more broadly. NWMOs aren't finding solutions in the literature that map onto their experiences, so they are clinging to experienced solidarity organizers' written perspectives, which lead them to ideals without roadmaps of how to achieve them. Additionally, members of these groups are mostly talking to each other during the day-to-day operations of their mutual aid projects, so they don't have experienced organizers' perspectives in their group to help guide new praxis under their unprecedented circumstances.

NWMO-led orgs like these are dispersing, but organizers from both AE and MMAC are looking for paths forward. While AE members have ceased communications with one another and redistributed their long-term resources such as cooking implements and takeout containers, every organizer that I've talked to is either actively still involved in other mutual aid efforts or taking time to regroup to figure out how they can best engage going forward. MMAC has a handful of committed organizers still actively running the community fridge, but the majority of organizers have moved on to other projects, and are similarly looking for other avenues of doing mutual aid work.

Despite all these frustrations with NWMO-led work, organizers who have worked on mutual aid projects through NWMO-led groups have maintained high hopes for how they can continue their work more effectively through different organizing and organizations. A few have given up on NWMO-led organizations, instead advocating that NWMO's join groups led by experienced solidarity organizers. However, none believe that white and wealthy people should not engage in mutual aid projects.

Many organizers have expressed to me that they understand their mistakes as part of a process toward better praxis in white leftist organizing for social and economic justice. Mutual aid groups aspire to provide a necessary antithesis both to capitalism and charity, and in so doing have brought many people and organizations closer to anticapitalist conceptions of community. By understanding our work as part of a process, we can see these mutual aid groups serving a purpose regardless of whether the organizations themselves persist. This leaves NWMO organizers the project of finding new directions that provide solutions to the struggles we faced while organizing, to shift justice-oriented organizations further toward the praxis we envision will bring us together and liberate us.

Potential Directions for NWMO Organizers and Organizations

Both AE and MMAC were most successful in achieving solidarity-oriented mutual aid organizing when they narrowed their focus to one specific project that gave the organizers natural proximity and long-term connections with the people they were aiding. These projects were most beneficial when they gave

both community members and NWMOs a stake in the work they are doing. In this section, I describe the successes of this strategy in each group and elaborate on the importance of these projects increasing proximity and promoting NWMOs analyzing their own positionality.

AE was more successful in all three of their goals when it was focusing on the occupiers of City Hall Park. These relationships were the bedrock of the solidarity that organizers felt and a worthy avenue for marginalized people to become organizers in accessible ways, leading to reciprocity. Additionally, because the people present had the shared goal of police abolition, any work toward their shared ends was for the good of the group so there was never any fear of unidirectionality. The proximity that organizers had to the people working with or near the occupation lead to natural conversations and continued relationships. These relationships are an absolutely necessary component for education to happen, whether it is education done by organizers to the broader community or education of organizers by community members. Finally, the specificity of the project and relation to marginalized community members helped direct what subversive activity would look like within AE. Their focus on a specific initiative and specific population helped AE thrive in all three capacities.

Similarly, MMAC organizers have recently joined Middletown DSA's project of tenant organizing, which entails canvases of local apartment buildings and organizing teach-ins with tenants, which has been the most effective project to achieve their three goals. Knocking on doors leads to initial conversations with tenants, which are furthered by getting contact information and having follow-up

meetings with groups of interested tenants. This has led to connections with a specific group of people who have a reason for continued engagement, and with whom we have a continual interest in maintaining a relationship. While some of us are tenants and some of us are not, all of us benefit from this endeavor either personally or politically. Our efforts and theirs are toward the same ends, and thus while there is a difference in personal urgency, we each have an important part to play in building tenant power, which lends itself toward reciprocity. Additionally, we enter the apartment buildings eager to learn from the tenants what their struggles are, and how we can best help. They enter meetings with us curious how they can get better living conditions through a process we have learned about and would like to teach them about so they can implement it in their building. This flow of education is natural and mutually beneficial. There are reasons for the questions we ask, which makes the questions we ask one another, while still sometimes uncomfortable, less invasive. Finally, the work itself is subversive because it breaks down barriers between and isolation of tenants, and then uses their collective power to overturn decisions of the more wealthy person in charge. This positively impacts marginalized people immediately, which makes the work slightly more accessible and draws interest even from people who are struggling to make ends meet.

Building direct, longstanding relationships with the people in need of aid, and viewing them as a part of the collective rather than served by the collective, is one of the main components of this praxis which supports all three goals. This inclusion of people from all different economic and social backgrounds as

organizers of aid means that everyone involved would be "part" of the collective, rather than having a collective of people helping others. This structure lends itself to more reciprocal relationships. Additionally, having a common goal like example bringing a neighborhood together, ousting a bad landlord, or dismantling policing bridges social, and often physical, barriers between people of different financial means much more than the broad goal of feeding people. People are not interacting solely to give or receive from one another, but because they share goals in which that dynamic is not the only way they relate.

Working closely with people from different backgrounds helps catalyze the destruction of monolithic notions of what people's stories are, which is a distinct form of education.[1] This move toward solidarity is in sharp contrast with the feelings of guilt and sympathy that MMAC organizers experienced because their view of the people they are aiding does not consist only of their hardships. Josie Sparrow characterizes this type of education as a necessary first step toward recognizing people's deep interconnectedness, and nurturing ways of relating to one another which could "dissolve the transactional attitudes inculcated by capitalism."[2] Getting to know individuals will make it easier and more likely for organizers to have conversations with the people they are aiding, which means that they would be more likely to discuss their politics, as well as be influenced by the people they are discussing those politics with.

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[1]Ann Russo, *Feminist Accountability: Disrupting Violence and Transforming Power*. *(*New York: New York University Press, 2019).
[2]Josie Sparrow, "Mutual Aid, Incorporated." *New Socialist*. Accessed February 7, 2022. http://newsocialist.org.uk/mutual-aid-incorporated/.

Additionally, having leadership from people of many different backgrounds means that the subversive work that NWMOs aspire to do will include less of the ideology entrenched by their white, middle-class upbringing. While NWMOs are committed to uprooting the systems of oppression which lead to mass poverty and systemic incarceration of minoritized communities, we benefit from those same systems of oppression. This means that we do not always see how the ways that we operate are harmful to others, nor do we see the avenues of dismantling those systems.

The other central component that leads to its success is NWMO organizers doing these projects are focused on co-struggling. As coined by Professor Ann Russo, co-struggling requires people with privileges to work on their own internalized prejudices as an avenue of justice.[3] Concretely this can be enacted through teach-ins, discussions with marginalized folks, transformative justice, and accountability spaces for NWMO organizers to discuss their self- analysis. Adequate reflection requires feedback and input from marginalized people, which necessitates proximity, so co-struggling and direct relationships support one another.

However, both of these strategies rely on the emotional labor, and commitments of time and resources of low-income, mostly multiply marginalized people, which is a considerable hurdle. That labor is only reasonable to ask of people when the relationship is reciprocal, meaning that both NWMOs and the people they are working with and learning from are working toward a common

[3]Ann Russo, *Feminist Accountability: Disrupting Violence and Transforming Power*. (New York: New York University Press, 2019).

goal. This means that the bonds they share cannot be solely based on giving and taking, nor learning and working. They must be based in comraderies beyond immediate physical sustenance, as that is a one directional relationship which does not merit time and labor educating and working with more privileged people who are often, at least at first, harmful to the people they are aiming to help. Forging genuine connections based out of common goals and understandings is essential to building mutual aid projects based on reciprocity, education, and subversiveness.

Lasting Hopes

The above suggestions are notably broad, just as the definition of mutual aid that NWMO-led groups emulate is expansive. Broad definitions and advice are necessary given that mutual aid is based on local knowledge and is context-specific. However, it is my hope that these suggestions are more relevant to NWMO organizers and groups, and provide more tangible suggestions, rather than focusing on philosophical ideals.

These thoughts were derived from discussions with organizers. This work can serve as an example for future organizers to learn from our mistakes and move forward with heightened awareness of the challenges of adapting mutual aid praxis based on organizers' privileged positionality. I hope there will be more writing regarding this topic given the surge in NWMO organizers and organizing in radical left spaces during and after the pandemic, as this reflects the struggles

of only two of the thousands of mutual aid networks started during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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