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Revolutionary Ethics and Carceral Abolitionism:  
Ambivalences in Chicago Mutual Aid

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## Abstract

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic and to rampant anti-Black police violence, informal mutual aid networks have sprouted up around the world to help where the state and capitalism failed: providing aid to those most in need and building solidarity between all kinds of people in a local area. This article examines ambivalence in Chicago mutual aid practices through a collaborative ethnographic lens. In the first section of this article, I explore the ideals of Chicago mutual aid networks, which involve an abolitionist, intersectional, and prefigurative ethos aimed at creating "solidarity, not charity." Unfortunately, the mutual aid networks in Chicago have had difficulty living out this ethos fully. In the second section, I discuss three factors which prevent the networks from living out their ideals: 1) "Good Politics" lead to a culture of burnout, 2) capitalist space and gentrification condition who is welcome in the group, 3) technology and social practices alienate those unfamiliar with them. In the conclusion, I discuss parallels to Savannah Shange's "carceral progressivism" and outline some potential solutions.

## Introduction

In early May 2022, I attended a food distribution held by the Edgewater Mutual Aid Network (EMAN). Expecting a traditional church, I was surprised when I arrived at a towering complex in the middle of the Edgewater neighborhood's "downtown" in northern Chicago, near the lake. A hot, sunny May morning, this was my first in-person interaction with members of EMAN. Sarah and Giana met me cheerily at the front door of the church-complex, nearly done hauling in the boxes of dried goods and produce procured from the food rescue. I offered to help, but they indicated they had already brought the last of the food inside. The interior was cool and looked more like a high school after-hours than a church, with long, snaking hallways and table-filled side-rooms. I followed Sarah and Giana into the storage room where EMAN kept less-perishable food. It was filled with stacks of food, piles of fliers, and a few home-printed copies of Angela Davis' influential abolitionist essay, "Are Prisons Obsolete?" Here I met Helen, an energetic older woman, and one of a handful of people who were both recipients of food and volunteers. Helen and Giana had what seemed like a long-standing friendly rapport. While sorting out spoiled produce and carrying out boxes to display on our plastic folding table, just outside a side-entrance to the church, we were joined by Miguel, a young resident of the church complex building, eager to pick up a few mangos and to chat with other volunteers. Another volunteer, Mike, (one of the first Black members of EMAN I had met) was taciturn but friendly. Unsure what we ought to be doing, he and I stood somewhat awkwardly near an upright piano in the side atrium while the more seasoned volunteers prepared our free food display. Like Miguel, Mike was among those volunteers who both assisted and received food.

During the hours we stood outside by the food table, a few dozen neighbors came by to pick up food. Some knew of the program and came prepared with bags and suggestions for

future offerings. Others were simply drifting by and were drawn in by the hand-drawn sign announcing “Free Groceries!” One woman nervously approached the table and tilted her head skeptically, asking what she needed to qualify for this food. We reassured her that the food was totally free, and she could take as much as she wanted. Her skepticism was not uncommon. People often only took a very small amount of food and commented on the usual expense of the bell peppers we were giving away, despite our insistence that we had far too many peppers and did not want them to go to waste.

Throughout the afternoon, I was struck by the invisible divide between the EMAN volunteers and the neighbors picking up food. The divide was not that the EMAN members did not pick up food, as we all took home a few peppers and other produce. Rather, conversation between the volunteers and the non-volunteers was brief, and primarily concerned identifying produce (“Those are turnips!”) or noting items for the next distribution, while the conversations between the members of EMAN and between the neighbors tended to be more personal and substantive. The physical space of the pickup zone also emphasized a divide. The EMAN volunteers and I stood behind the cornucopia of food and necessities, and transactions over the table included procuring bags for neighbors or rearranging the produce for easy access. The food - the literal medium of the relationship between the neighbors and EMAN, and the link which marks these neighbors’ inclusion into the network - marked instead a dividing line of status between the giver and the receiver. By no means were the interactions less-than-positive; everyone I spoke to was overwhelmingly grateful and, for those new to the food “distro,” somewhat stunned that it was free - no-strings-attached. One man even wandered over while on a video call with a family member in Africa to show her “that Americans can be good people.” However, it also became clear that the “mutual aid” practiced by EMAN at this distribution was

not entirely *mutual* but was characterized instead by particular social divides between the givers and recipients. As the neighbors and volunteers dispersed, I was left puzzled as to what *mutual aid* truly meant, and why the divide I perceived exists.

Mutual aid has taken on many forms throughout history and is arguably one of the most fundamental contributors to the survival of society (Kropotkin 1972). Today, mutual aid is experiencing a renaissance. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic and to rampant anti-Black police violence, informal networks have sprouted up around the world to help where the state and capitalism cannot or will not: providing aid to those most in need and building solidarity between all kinds of people in a local area. Modern practices of mutual aid are often collective efforts aimed at building community and addressing inequality, particularly as a form of radical resistance to state and societal failures in the face of disaster (see Moraes et al. 2020, Sitrin and Collectiva Sembrar 2020, Solnit 2009, Spade 2020a, 2020b). Although some have written about this recent resurgence of mutual aid (e.g. Tolentino 2020), comparatively little academic work has been done to understand the particular forms that this modern wave of mutual aid activism takes and their specific challenges. As a result, these mutual aid groups offer a unique opportunity to understand the dynamics of modern forms of anti-capitalist resistance and anarchic activism.

I joined my neighborhood's mutual aid network near the end of 2020. Over the next year, I was inspired by the work our group did, yet remained puzzled by our trouble connecting with and including neighbors outside of the core organizing group. The latter was comprised of about a dozen, primarily white, middle-class activists, who met weekly to respond to aid requests, coordinate events, and make decisions on ongoing projects. Everyone in the group espoused radical, abolitionist beliefs, and seemed to genuinely care about building solidarity in the

neighborhood. No one wanted to be “another charity or NGO.” Why, then, despite our best efforts at solidarity and abolition, was the group so homogeneous?

In this paper, I examine disparities between the political ideals of mutual aid networks in Chicago and their lived practices. I begin with a brief summary of the literature on mutual aid practices. Next, drawing on interviews and fieldwork conducted primarily with EMAN, I outline three key features of mutual aid ethics: solidarity, prefiguration, and intersectionality. I then analyze potential causes of the divide between activists and neighbors: “good politics” leading to burnout culture, embracing the racialized urban structure of Chicago, and overusing corporate digital platforms. Due to their origins and operations in capitalist and racialized space, mutual aid networks like EMAN may unintentionally create exclusionary spaces. I conclude by drawing parallels to “carceral progressivism” and by discussing some potential solutions to this dilemma.

### **Methodology**

To investigate ambivalence in the contemporary mutual aid movement, I conducted ethnographic work in several mutual aid networks around Chicago over the course of several months, from November 2021 to July 2022. To begin my research, I used the Chicago Community Kitchen’s “Mutual Aid Map” to reach out by email to every listed mutual aid network in the city (“Chicagoland”). Of those that responded, I interviewed seven members of three groups across the city and sat in on weekly meetings of the Edgewater Mutual Aid Network (EMAN) from January to June 2022. All names used here are pseudonyms.

Though I began by working with several networks around the city, some shifted their focus away from broad mutual aid organizing early on in my fieldwork – a trend caused by burnout and pragmatic consolidation of time and resources toward immediate needs like food

security. It quickly became clear that EMAN represented an example of one of the more robust networks to come out of this resurgence in mutual aid organizing, weathering the storm of burnout in the midst of a transition period from ad-hoc disaster response group to long-term community mutual aid network. The portrait that follows shows the group in a period of self-analysis and transformation, a transformation which this work aims to assist.

From the beginning, I framed the project as a collaborative investigation into our practices of mutual aid, which the members of these networks met with enthusiasm. Drawing on anthropologist Savannah Shange, and by extension Charlie Hale, I see this work as a form of activist anthropology (Shange 2019, 10), inspired and influenced by contemporary attempts to “decolonize” ethnographic methods and anthropology as a discipline (e.g. Bejarano et al. 2019, Jobson 2019). In order to study modern practices of mutual aid through a decolonial lens, I engaged with the members of mutual aid groups as *subjects in* the research rather than the *subject of* research. As such the line between interview, research discussion, and meeting was blurred. Many of the themes and research questions in this work were sparked or shaped by conversations with my collaborators, and the article was workshopped with EMAN to hone its accuracy and practical utility. Consequently, this work is only partially an academic endeavor. I want to understand and critique the mutual aid movement from the inside with care and attention to the movement’s theoretical frameworks and self-understanding. My interlocuters are my peers, comrades, and friends, and any criticism comes from my belief in the value of their mission and from an intention to root out the insidious ways that oppressive systems seep into even the most vocally radical spaces. The goal is to clarify patterns in the diversity of mutual aid practice and thought as it is practiced in Chicago, and to uncover roadblocks to the full embodiment of these goals, with the aim of mutually benefitting from these findings.

## Theoretical and Emic Definitions of Mutual Aid

As it is discussed in theory, mutual aid tends to include several core features. First, mutual aid is a collective effort (Spade 2020a: 7): the *village* shares crops; the *commune* provides services; the *neighborhood* organizes relief efforts. Second, collectives which practice mutual aid share their resources. This could be as simple as buying groceries for a vulnerable neighbor, or as complex as organizing local systems of wealth redistribution or collective ownership. Through sharing resources, such collectives work to actively redress systemic inequality. Third, groups practicing mutual aid commonly combat inequality through mutual and reciprocal education. Those with useful or interesting skills teach others those skills. Those with tactics, knowledge, or tools of analysis share what they know with their community. Education is informal, non-hierarchical, and community driven. Lastly, and most abstractly, mutual aid groups work collectively to build power and solidarity, particularly among those who would not have power or a community typically. Marginalized people, like medieval peasants, people of color, or the “99 percent”, can have their voices heard and their ideas and decisions valued through practices of mutual aid.

Mutual aid practices are not a monolith, though. The particularities of mutual aid look different for each group and even each participant. Since what mutual aid means can vary from person to person and group to group, I asked several members of EMAN to describe what “mutual aid” meant to them. Sarah, the activist I worked with in the aforementioned food distro, explained that “mutual aid” is a practice, which does not need to be tied to any organization:

“It’s a bit more of a way of existing in the world - of viewing yourself as a part of your community and viewing the problems of people around you as part of your responsibility. And trying to offer help, but also recognizing that you can go to your community for help

and ask other people for help. That can be done through an organization, but I don't think that it needs to be. I think it's more of like the concept that humans are not inherently self-interested, evil cretins who would murder each other at the first possibility if the state wasn't here to keep us from doing that. And more that we are capable of community and care - and in fact have done that throughout history, even in opposition to large systems attempting to stop us from doing it."

Denise, another core member of EMAN, also shared her thoughts:

"I think this idea of this give and take as a community - what do we have to share with each other, what do we want to share with each other, and how can we fill these needs? And with the overall emotions not being about - I like that it's not about the exchange of goods - it's not about any kind of power dynamic of exchange, but it's really about that relationship as neighbors. It's very neutral to who has and doesn't have resources, and the main component of it is just this ethos of community care and wellbeing."

Denise's sentiment reflects similar views of mutual aid I have heard in conversations or in meetings. Mutual aid is reciprocal and not about power. *It's not about the exchange of goods; it's really about that relationship as neighbors.* As such, the aim is community-building, and a leveling of power disparities. Kris, a longer-term EMAN volunteer, explained that the intentional "horizontalism" (Sitrin 2006) in EMAN is one factor which initially drew her in:

"It's not a perfect organization, but folks are super intentional in that way. ... these structures of domination and hierarchy just get reproduced without any second thought... So for me, this is on my mind a lot and it's really been inspiring to watch how people are reorganizing themselves around more egalitarian processes."

Horizontalism, or intentional equitable distribution of power, is a defining factor which sets mutual aid apart from social work or charity.

Simply put, mutual aid in Chicago is about “solidarity, not charity.” This slogan is the guiding philosophy of Chicago mutual aid networks, inspired by activist and scholar Dean Spade, whose work and ideas are frequently mentioned in meetings and whose talks and workshops are enthusiastically attended by activists (see Spade 2020a, 2020b). Charity involves strict roles of donor and recipient and reinforces the idea of the donor as a virtuous, generous benefactor who can “fix” the recipient’s social problems using their resources. Moreover, charity typically involves barriers to entry for the recipient: organizations often require sobriety tests, curfews, and even restrictions based on immigration status, denying aid to the most vulnerable populations (Spade 2020: 22). Unlike charity, mutual aid is not meant to be a bandage on social ills, or worse, a way to perpetuate systemic inequality while glorifying the “generosity” of wealthy philanthropists. Rather, practitioners of mutual aid strive for a form of aid which offers an alternative to the so-called “non-profit industrial complex” (Rodríguez 2007; Beam, 2018).

According to abolitionist scholar Dylan Rodríguez, the non-profit industrial complex (NPIC) is “a set of symbiotic relationships that link together political and financial technologies of state and owning-class proctorship and surveillance over public intercourse, including and especially emergent progressive and leftist movements, since about the mid-1970s” (2007, 21-22). Due to the history and political structure of the non-profit system, non-profits serve to contain radical movements and slow or redirect efforts to alter the status-quo. The government- or foundation-dependent nature of non-profits makes them in practice “a vehicle for the expansion, rather than retraction, of state power” (ibid., 25). Rodríguez argues that “even small, politically radical grassroots organizations, are implicated in this web of state power, corporate

wealth, and the discipling function of charity” if they acquire non-profit status and the concessions that that status entails (ibid., 34). Consequently, if mutual aid networks were to comply with the non-profit system, they would become “*radical in form but liberal in content*” (ibid., emphasis original). Being aware of the NPIC, many members of EMAN, like Sarah, are actively against working with businesses, the government, or nonprofits at all. Kris described how local non-profits “send their clients to us instead of taking responsibility for the fact that they’re not able to meet the needs of certain clients.” Though EMAN attempts to help these people when possible, they also recognize the dangers of becoming essentially free labor for overburdened non-profits.

It is tempting, though, to accept funding from larger or more institutional donors, or to engage with nonprofits. As Sarah explained, “it’d be easier if we positioned ourselves in a way that more businesses wanted to partner with us. But what would that mean for how we were positioning ourselves in being less openly anti-police or something?” She acknowledges the difficulty of refusing resources and finances which could be used to help the community. Other members, like Kris, don’t believe that mutual aid networks can stand alone in providing a community’s needs without collaborating with non-profits or the government, though she too is opposed to the NPIC and sees this collaboration as a bridge to “mutual transformation” away from charity models of aid. On the whole, though, EMAN avoids collaboration with the government and local non-profit organizations whenever possible, aiming to build solidarity with their neighbors instead.

While charity allows a relationship-less trickle-down of resources from the beneficent rich to certain poor people deemed deserving, “solidarity [is] a way of *sticking together* while *standing one’s own ground*...mutual responsibility, or even shared liability.” (Li 2021, 11,

emphasis original). Solidarity “requires brutally honest assessments of where and how one stands in diverse forms of relation to others” and therefore involves a critical analysis of positionality in giving aid (ibid., 12). Solidarity also involves relationship-building and therefore long-term commitment, and requires mutual recognition, the belief, according to Denise, that “my neighbor is a human being who is worthy of everything that I experience and have, and I as a privileged person just fundamentally as part of my existence believe in sharing my resources with them” (hooks 2015, 67). Denise’s ethos calls back to Kropotkin’s famous passage from *Mutual Aid*:

“[I]t is not love and not even sympathy upon which society is based in mankind. It is the conscience – be it only at the state of an instinct – of human solidarity. It is the unconscious recognition of the force that is borrowed by each man from the practice of mutual aid; of the close dependency of everyone’s happiness upon the happiness of all; and of the sense of justice, or equity, which brings the individual to consider the rights of every other individual as equal to his own” (1972, 22).

Mutual aid requires a deep recognition of our shared humanity. As such, mutual aid is not simply a practice or set of behaviors but is always also an ethical stance; in fact, according to Kropotkin, it is the *origin* of ethics and morality in general (ibid., 251). Mutual aid is more than revolutionary solidarity – it is a revolutionary ethic.

### **Prefiguration in Mutual Aid Ethics**

At the heart of mutual aid’s revolutionary ethic is prefiguration. Anarchist politics are often associated with the idea of “prefiguration” – that the work being done in anarchism gestures toward a new world to come. Mutual aid, as a facet of anarchist practice, is necessarily about challenging the status quo and working to build a new and better future. James, another EMAN member, expressed this belief during one of our conversations, pointing out that “we

built this thing, we can build something new. We can reject the old.” Activists just need an awareness of their actions in the present to imagine our future. Most often, this takes the form of an insistence on the unity of means and ends. Anarchist Emma Goldman posited that means and ends are inseparable because “[t]he means employed become, through individual habit and social practice, part and parcel of the final purpose; they influence it, modify it, and presently the aims and means become identical” (qtd. in Gordon 2018, 530). Since anarchist insistence on the unity of means and ends only has practical import in the imagined, prefigured future, this unity is at its heart an ethical conviction (Gordon 2018, 530).

Anarchist prefiguration “embraces radical open-endedness in the generation of new social visions and practices” which can be “playful as well as dangerous” (ibid.). There can be joy and creativity in the rejection of the old and embrace of the new, but there are also threats of cooptation into the dominant oppressive modes of thought. To be truly revolutionary one would need to eliminate old, oppressive modes of thought through a process of self-evaluation and self-awareness. Mutual aid ethics, then, literally involves *self*-management – that is, management of one’s own patterns of behavior and thought. Anarchist theorist Murray Bookchin argues that anarchism requires self-education and the shedding of values and practices to create a new “revolutionary self” appropriate for creating revolutionary change (qtd. in Gordon 2018, 531). Self-critique and analysis must be constant and must re-evaluate even anarchist strategy. As a result, the prefigured future can change as values change and tactics evolve, lending “a measure of indeterminacy to any notion of future ‘accomplishment’” (ibid.). It is difficult to say at any point whether anarchists have succeeded, or what success might even look like.

A century ago, prior to the Russian Revolution, the young Emma Goldman wrote with optimism about what she felt was the near certainty of an anarchist future (1934). Today, though,

a century of disaster, war, and a receding left has undermined this optimism. Anarchists now look at the future with anxiety - if they look at all. In fact, uncritical use of the idea of prefiguration perpetuates the denial of the very real possibility of total failure of the anarchist project (Gordon 2018, 533). Anarchist Uri Gordon argues that the term “prefiguration” conflates “expressions of intrinsic value” with “desired future situations”, which may elide uncomfortable uncertainty in the future of anarchist politics (ibid., 522). Activists, especially those working in 2022, need to grapple with the uncertainty of their future; simply ignoring the problem by focusing exclusively on the present risks losing revolutionary impact, and devolving into a mere counterculture (ibid., 532). Instead of naïve optimism or ineffectual “lifestyle” presentism, Gordon suggests that anarchism today ought to double down on its hope for the future – even if that hope takes “anxious” or “catastrophic” forms (ibid., 534). Activists may be aware of the possibility or even inevitability of disaster and collapse yet hold on to the hope that their actions in the present still can affect and define the world of the future (ibid., 534). Activists can be hopeful and still realistic about the grim future and the reality that our social, cultural, and physical infrastructure limits the space of possibilities for revolutionary action (ibid., 535).

Mutual aid activists in Chicago cling precisely to this kind of anxious hope. In fact, it is seen as a requirement to stay motivated and committed to the cause, and therefore part of the revolutionary ethic. My conversation with Denise typifies the anxious hope common to mutual aid activists:

Denise: Maybe I sound kind of insane, but it's more productive to be like, disaster will come upon us and we know that, and so what can we do to make that a time of joy and connection, and coming together? And how can we already be joyful, connected, and

together, so when it hits, we are already mobilized? It's not an unusual circumstance. Maybe a little optimistic, but that's kind of the vision I have.

Connor: I feel like we need a bit of optimism, especially nowadays, you know?

Denise: Well, it's like a vision that can happen, right? We all need to have visions for our community if we care about supporting our community. We need to know where we're going with that and I am one human being in one body, but that's one vision, those are my goals.

Disaster, both current and imminent, is on the minds of many mutual aid activists. The apparent inevitability of disaster only heightens the need for proper ethics. Anxiety can be turned into motivation for action – a sort of urgency for the imminence of disaster rather than the imminence of liberation and revolution. As James explained,

“I don't know what things will be like in 2024, but [laughing] I know that every single day things are getting worse and worse and worse, and much more divided and much more divided and it does not seem like it's getting better. Mutual aid for me in Andersonville is kinda like a foundation for having pieces there so that if there is some specific, really urgent issue related to fascism, climate change, all this stuff, I would like to have a network and institutions already here so that they can be mobilized. 'Cause that's one thing that I think is a big problem of our democratic system. There's not a lot of power at the base.”

James is not alone in his belief that mutual aid must build “power at the base.” Other EMAN members often shared in his urgency. For example, Sarah mused that many leftists “fall into pits of despair” due to the slim possibilities of revolutionary change. Yet, without building the world of the future today, achieving the imagined future is unlikely. She outlined her anxious hope:

“We’ve been taught to rely on systems that we want to destroy, and if you destroy those without relearning those skills, you’re just gonna recreate those systems. You’re just gonna have, you know, a Lenin take over... [Other leftists] are kinda like, “we’re gonna lose, we’re gonna die, climate change is gonna kill us all!” And, like, I guess, maybe? But I feel like [laughs] even if it’s going to, we have to spend the entire time caring for the people that are here, and caring for each other and receiving care and building that community, and maybe it won’t? I don’t know. but either way we have to do that.”

When asked about the future of the network, Kris envisioned “a stronger network of care that is able to respond to crises more readily, ‘cause [sic] these relationships and interconnections have already been laid as the groundwork for that work.” Denise insisted that mutual aid can provide, and even *ought to* provide “disaster resilience for the coming century” necessary for survival.

There are disagreements about precisely what resilience means; some members want to create self-defense forces or even to arm the neighborhood, while others like Sarah are vehemently against remilitarization, claiming it just makes anarchists the new cops. Nonetheless, this diversity in philosophy contributes to the feeling of anxious hope: no matter what comes, *someone* will be prepared to face it. For instance, despite hating violence, Denise did not mind leaving that possibility to the other members of EMAN “because I know they're taking care of it.” She is happy to “just focus on gardening.” She continued:

“There’s a place for both members and perspectives. In my mind, we want to have our community be in a place where if there’s a crisis that’s directly impacting us or our city in a way that significantly disrupts our lives, that we are able to pull through and continue. And I know that in the face of disaster - which includes the pandemic - in the face of disaster we will come together.”

Through the prefigurative politics of mutual aid, activists see disaster as an opportunity, and thus can find hope even in the face of wave after wave of devastation, building the groundwork for solidarity in the face of disaster. The imminence of disaster creates a sense of urgency, but also a hope that radical breaks in the seemingly overpowering system may occur soon. Prefiguration, and the resultant revolutionary ethic of anxious hope, can hone tactical creativity and keep activists vigilant for the encroachment of practices of oppression into activism.

### **Intersectionality in Mutual Aid Ethics**

Despite the anxieties inherent in Chicago mutual aid's peculiar form of hope, activists' revolutionary ethic is similar in many ways to classical anarchism, involving opposition to hierarchy and power disparities of all kinds and an unwillingness to compromise the vision or to cooperate with state authorities and capitalists. Unlike 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century anarchism, though, modern mutual aid activists also incorporate Black radicalism and intersectional politics into their tactics, everyday practices, and visions of the future much more often than the writings of Kropotkin, Goldman, or Proudhon. Kris, for instance, does not consider herself an anarchist, but aligns strongly with abolitionist and antiracist theorists. On the other hand, though self-avowedly an anarcho-communist inspired by Kropotkin, Sarah insists that the focus on theory and especially on particular authors in leftist circles tends to be alienating. Instead, she pointed out that "plenty of people have said what Kropotkin has said, in different ways in different communities... the principles of non-hierarchy, the principles of solidarity are throughout [history] and it's not just hundred-plus-year-old white philosophers who've had these ideas." Sarah thinks that though the group does not need to be explicitly anarchist, it should be clear on its core principles to avoid being commandeered by others, particularly leftists with more established dogmas and rigid ideological orthodoxy.

Following these beliefs, the missions of mutual aid networks are defined in opposition not only to the state and capitalism, but also sexism, racism, and colonialism. For example, the EMAN website outlines an intersectional ethic similar to that of most groups in Chicago:

“We believe mutual aid to be one strategy that works within a larger movement to dismantle capitalism, white supremacy, and heteropatriarchy. Our mutual aid efforts attempt to address the multiple crises that those in our community suffer from, doing what the government cannot or will not.

We acknowledge the Anishinaabeg, Niswi-Mishkodewin (Council of the Three Fires): Ojibwe, Odawa & the Potawatami and dozens of other tribes as the original stewards of this land who were engaged in mutual aid practices and molded and cultivated this land that we now reside on.” (“About Us”)

Groups like EMAN see their practices as building upon Black, indigenous, and intersectional ideas of mutual aid. Moreover, they tend to see mutual aid as an *abolitionist* practice. According to anthropologist Savannah Shange, “[a]bolition is a messy breakup with the state – rending, not reparation” (2019, 4). This is the logic of the EMAN mission statement, and the logic professed by the members I spoke with. The goal, according to James, is for mutual aid to be “a piece of circular economies, solidarity economies, [and] post-capital.” It is a part of the abolition of the dominant system.

Intersectional analysis is at the forefront of theoretical discussions in meetings; some activists directly cited bell hooks multiple times while discussing the visions for what mutual aid practice ought to be. James described how his ethics are informed by intersectional and abolitionist theory:

“I study and read a lot of Black radical and indigenous anarchist stuff ... I've been recently reading *Anarchism and the Black Revolution* by Lorenzo Irvin, and I'm just trying to really listen to what he's saying about what the Black community is going through ... White leftist groups historically have been kind of racist. ... I don't want to reproduce all these things that he has called out, and I want to be aware of them because a lot of it is subconscious.”

He went on to express his concern about how often the struggles of indigenous and Black women are left out of dominant narratives, a sentiment shared with other activists I've spoken to. As such, modern mutual aid activism takes on a distinctly anti-racist tenor, unlike historical anarchism.

Following figures like bell hooks, mutual aid activists see racism and capitalism as intimately connected, and the struggle for socialism as one and the same with the struggle for abolition and an end to racism (hooks 2015, 3). Though hooks herself was not an anarchist, mutual aid activists see her thought as deeply resonant with abolitionist anarchism. hook's feminism calls for “a struggle to eradicate the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture on various levels, as well as a commitment to reorganizing society so that the self-development of people can take precedence over imperialism, economic expansion, and material desires,” sentiments strongly reminiscent of the anti-racist, abolitionist ethic found in mutual aid activism (ibid., 26). It is not enough to simply challenge capitalism or the state; so long as the ideological structures and behaviors of domination persist, even revolutionary change cannot last (ibid., 33). Mutual aid activists' revolutionary ethic develops upon classical anarchism, extending the opposition to hierarchy and power disparity to *all* forms of oppression.

### **Lines of Flight and Reterritorialization**

As acephalous, partially unbounded networks, mutual aid groups can best be understood as assemblages: complex systems which are unalienable from their milieu yet operate under particular logics and through particular practices (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). Assemblages contain an axis of content and expression, and an axis between stable territory and mutable processes of deterritorialization (ibid., 88). The assemblage of a mutual aid network is not merely the people in the network but also the actions, habitus, and ethics of those in the group, however diverse. It also includes stable, territorial elements like its neighborhood identity and mutable, deterritorializing elements like evolving systems of group practice. Additionally, mutual aid networks interact with the state apparatus, the physical environment of their neighborhoods, digital technology like Zoom, people in allied or opposed groups, and other residents of the neighborhood, forming intersecting and nested assemblages as well.

The experimental, abolitionist, and radically creative aspects of mutual aid can, then, be understood as forming a deterritorializing “line of flight” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 508). Such practices attempt to escape the norms and practices of the Chicago assemblage. There is a direction, inherent in the aggregation of various philosophical and practical outlooks held by the members of the group, but there is no set destination. Unfortunately, lines of flight, beginning from the orthodox, rigid regime of signs, tend to be reterritorialized. For mutual aid, then, the revolutionary ethic expounded by EMAN and likeminded groups is reterritorialized in the structure of charity, or worse – in structures which perpetuate oppression. “Leftist organizations” like mutual aid networks “will not be the last to secrete microfascisms,” argue Deleuze and Guattari: “It’s too easy to be antifascist on the molar level, and not even see the fascist inside you, the fascist you yourself sustain and nourish and cherish with molecules both personal and

collective” (1987, 215). Fascism, or more mildly and generally, the oppressive State, arises not from determinations on high, but by the instillation of “organs of power” in the thoughts and practices of people (ibid., 357).

Despite the radical ethics of mutual aid, the EMAN assemblage falls prey to reterritorialization. Chicago mutual aid activists are predominantly white and middle class, and struggle to connect with people outside that demographic in their neighborhoods despite their efforts. Though I felt the tangibility of the divide between activists and neighbors in EMAN at the food distro, I was not alone in my discomfort. Sarah also expressed qualms with the narrow demographics of her group:

“I think a lot of mutual aid groups have focused a lot of their work on the most vulnerable members of their community - unhoused people, people who are food insecure. I would say a majority of the people participating in the group, or donating to the group, are not in quite those vulnerable of positions, typically... We had a lot of conversations about that, and I know Uptown Mutual Aid disbanded because they didn’t feel like it was mutual enough. They didn’t feel like the diversity of the neighborhood was represented in the group, and kind of felt that they were failing because of that.”

Moreover, Kris noted that mere lack of diversity is not the only issue. “If we just tried to become more diverse,” she explained, “I don’t think that would erase the problems that we have as bunches of white people trying to move towards these goals without that intentionality.” That is, artificially increasing diversity without understanding *why* the group may lack diversity will not recover the radical, deterritorializing power of mutual aid.

Without addressing the root causes of exclusivity, mutual aid networks like EMAN unintentionally reproduce the logic of racist capitalism in their patterns of behavior. This occurs

through three main channels, which I will discuss in turn: 1) “Good Politics” lead to a culture of burnout, 2) capitalist space and gentrification condition who is welcome in the group, 3) technology and social practices alienate those unfamiliar with them.

### **“Good Politics” and Burnout**

In some ways, Chicago mutual aid networks avoid a common pitfall of leftist groups: a form of performative righteousness that anthropologist Erica Lagalisse calls “good politics” (2016). In such groups, “good politics” can be mobilized to exclude people from participation in leftist activism. Lagalisse argues that Bourdieu’s “social capital” theory of elite networking also functions in anarchist circles (ibid., 151). Like the social capital of business elites and socialites, connection, involvement, and frequent presence in a non-hierarchical group can still centralize power (ibid., 161). Inclusion or exclusion from core circles of organizing can be predicated on having “a proper relationship to the self” (ibid., 278). The very ethic that drives leftist activists and, in their eyes, sets them apart from mere reformers can also be a signifier of a particular social status, one which derives from a calculus of oppression (weighing privilege vs oppressed identities) and a calculus of commitment (are they truly dedicated to the cause?) This calculus replicates statist, legalistic thinking, paradoxically making anarchist ethics quite hierarchical and status-based (ibid., 357). Those who have not undergone the proper self-criticism, a process which often includes reading dense theoretical texts, may not be trusted to take on significant tasks, consolidating power in the hands of the educated elites.

Sarah complained about the tendency of some members of other leftist groups to “get on theoretical tangents.” She initially felt intimidated by the name dropping and was concerned that “people know so much more about theory than I do.” However, after discussing the *content* of the topics she realized that these members were “just saying stuff.” This sort of theoretical

elitism, whether or not it is intentional, can drive those less well versed in theory away from engaging in activist spaces. Notably, the majority of core EMAN members are college educated, and some have or are working on post-graduate degrees. Despite this, in the meetings I sat in on those with theoretical backgrounds ceded space for others' thoughts, and never let theory enter into the decision-making process any more than as a touchstone. Compared to other leftist groups, in mutual aid, says Sarah, "there's a little bit less space for pontification" since so much emphasis is placed on concrete, immediate and local direct action rather than theory.

That said, EMAN's mutual aid ethic does harbor a form of "good politics." Though the networks avoid the political posturing described above, "good politics" in mutual aid often involves commitment to aid to the point of burnout. As James explained, this burnout can counteract the motivating force of anxious hope:

"There's a lot of days where I lose so much motivation and hope. There's so many times where I'm like, *what?* This is a nightmare, this is impossible. I don't know if it's just my personal anxiety, but a lot of times it feels like everything is just gonna collapse, like, next week or something. And so, despair and depression for people is probably [a barrier]."

James is not alone. Burnout is one of the most common concerns of activists in Chicago mutual aid. The stringency and rigor of the revolutionary ethic can be its own undoing. Ideally, as Kris put it, "we would want our organizing to be as livable as the neighborhood we want to build." Unfortunately, she went on to discuss how burnout in EMAN has historically caused internal conflict. The group has formed a restorative justice circle to attend to issues like this, but she still feels that the group needs "to keep working to have a culture where people can tap out when they are too maxxed out. I still see people having guilt about missing a meeting, even if nobody's

yelling at them or punishing them. It just seems like the overwork is a tendency.” Groups like EMAN, especially groups built on dedicated activists, often have a culture of overwork. Kris expressed concern that the emphasis on urgency “could fall into white saviorism, just like this idea that *I* have to be the person to save the day.” In a largely white group where those receiving aid could be seen as “other[s]” to be rescued, this is a real possibility. Adherence to an ethic of mutual aid, then, can both guide the activists toward a better imagined future and can function as a barrier for those who might be less willing or able to commit to the “good” amount of dedication to mutual aid.

### **Capitalist Space conditions Practice**

Mutual aid practitioners’ thoughts and ethics are not the only things conditioned by their environment. According to Marxist urban theorist Henri Lefebvre, “(Social) space is a (social) product” (1991, 26). Space itself is not merely physical and does not simply *exist*; it is produced by the dominant society. Through the interplay of the intentional mapping and overdetermination of space, the bespoke and organic use of that space, and the semiotics and mental understandings of space, a certain social space is produced. This occurs in variegated levels: the global capital space, the space of the city, the space of the neighborhood, the space of the network. These spaces are superimposed, and all affect one another – the space and conditions of capital in general set a rhythm and order which flows through the city and its neighborhoods, which in turn alter capitalist space (ibid., 87). This interplay serves to perpetuate capital, as space is “a product to be used, to be consumed” as well as “a *means of production*” (emphasis original, ibid., 85).

In the abstract space of modern capitalism, (social) space is continuously laden with rules, mandates, and prohibitions. It is governed by conversations about value, exchange, and production. In all of these, though rarely explicit, lies a violence – a violence that determines that

some are privy to the means of production and its benefits, and others must be exploited or excluded (ibid., 57). In this way, the city is “composed” by productive forces and flows of capital (ibid., 74). Though space may appear to be natural and value-neutral, that simply shows that the process of its production has also hidden its produced nature. Naturalization of a given space makes it easier for the user of that space to acquiesce to the rules and conditions of that space (ibid., 94). The history of a space and its social activities leaves traces on the space itself, conditioning it and all who operate within it (ibid., 110).

In the case of Chicago mutual aid networks, the radical ethics of mutual aid are conditioned by capitalist social space through two key channels. First, uncritical identification with the neighborhood structure of Chicago reproduces segregation and anti-Black patterns of gentrification. Second, reliance on corporate digital platforms tends to make groups gravitate toward capitalist or hierarchical modes of organizing and may alienate those who are not well versed in their use. In the following sections, I will discuss each in turn.

### **Mutual Aid in Racialized Urban Space**

The history of Chicago is a history of intentional and continual deprivation of resources from Black and Latinx citizens, and the continual segregation of these populations from white citizens. Modern Chicago is overlaid and undergirded with a racialized representation of space dating back to the Richard J. Daley era - a vision of a white, wealthy city which attracts major international business, where poor and non-white residents are hidden conveniently behind walls of high rises, across interstate freeways, and away from public transit (Diamond, 2017). Daley’s plans for a corporation-dominated city are reflected in the structure of the highways and transit lines, which facilitate travel to and from the Loop and serve as barriers between the primarily white and wealthy areas of the north to northwest side, and the largely non-white and

impoverished south and west sides. From the 1960s until the 1980s, corporate interests, along with city governance, demolished factories, decreased investment in poorer ex-industrial neighborhoods on the south and west sides, and consolidated jobs and funding in the Loop (Diamond, 2017). Low income or minority neighborhoods were left as isolated enclaves, attached to transit lines that the white wealthy residents of the north and northwest sides never used, if transit existed at all. (ibid.). Though citizens and activists fought against Daley's racist policy, particularly groups like the Black Panthers, in the aftermath of a violent Daley-propagated campaign against Black and Latinx solidarity in the late 1960s, ties between neighborhoods and efforts to mobilize against rampant segregation were suppressed (ibid.).

The effects of the Daley era segregation still drive segregation in the city today, though in perhaps less overt ways. Anti-Black policies, policing, and decades of resource deprivation have created "hyperghettos" (Wacquant 2016, 1079). Compared to other forms of ghettos, hyperghettos are far more vulnerable to exploitation by "the neoliberal Leviathan" yet also the least able to respond to it due to stigmatized social isolation (ibid., 1085). Daley and decades of racist city policy may have created the conditions for the hyperghetto, but capitalism is the engine that drives the process. The capitalism-driven patterns of urban renewal in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century worked to solidify corporate interests downtown and to purge non-white areas near the infrastructure which upholds the apparatus of Loop capitalism (Wacquant 1995, 429). The space of the hyperghetto is itself tainted with territorial stigmatization, which perpetuates a downward spiral of disinvestment, prejudicial policing, and isolation, creating a dispossessed city within a city.

The impact of the hyperghetto can be read in patterns of gentrification across Chicago. In their study of neighborhood improvements in Chicago, Hwang and Sampson demonstrate that

gentrification has avoided and continues to avoid poor Black and Latinx neighborhoods, primarily due to racial stigma (2014, 746). Gentrification occurs more often in neighborhoods with over 35% white residents, and significantly less in neighborhoods with over 40% Black residents (ibid., 745-6), a product of racialized territorial stigmatization. Even among gentrifying populations explicitly in favor of diversity, like progressively-minded young professionals, Hwang and Sampson found that gentrification still tends to avoid predominantly Black or Latinx neighborhoods, due to cultural associations with poverty and danger (ibid., 745). Gentrification is an aspect of the production of urban space in Chicago, coding spaces of safety and danger, whiteness and Blackness, and wealth and poverty, into the very fabric of the city.

Notably, mutual aid exists and has existed in non-white, impoverished neighborhoods in the form of block clubs, informal kin and neighbor networks, and churches. However, the profound predominance of white activists in this latest wave of Chicago mutual aid networks is unwittingly the product of the city's racialized urban space and segregated patterns of gentrification. These Chicago mutual aid groups take for granted the neighborhood structure of the city. This is partially strategic – citizens of Chicago already divide themselves territorially based on neighborhoods. It is also an artifact of the way that mutual aid movement formed in Chicago in the beginning of the pandemic. The latest wave of mutual aid in Chicago began shortly after the March 2020 COVID lockdown. Concerned about the wellbeing of the city's most vulnerable, prominent organizer Kelly Hayes, a Menominee woman and advocate for abolitionism, created a mutual aid spreadsheet including around 4000 volunteers across the city (Hayes 2021). Through her coordination, along with other organizers, volunteers to the fledgling mutual aid movement split up the city into “pods”– subunits of the broader Chicago-wide mutual aid network – to better respond to the crisis. Pods were location-based, and for convenience took

on neighborhood names and boundaries: Edgewater Mutual Aid, McKinley Park Mutual Aid, Logan Square Mutual Aid, and so on. When neighborhoods had too few volunteers, or requests and resources existed in adjacent neighborhoods, nearby mutual aid networks occasionally merged, resulting in groups like the now-defunct Uptown-Buena Park, or Ravenswood-Lincoln Square mutual aid networks.

Leadership was fairly hierarchical to begin with, typically drawing directly from Alinskyite organizing tactics. Career organizers like Kelly operated as the de facto leaders, coordinating with pods on a citywide Slack page. As groups began to pick up momentum with more volunteers, though, they relied less and less on the central Slack channels and on Kelly's leadership. Many groups worked to develop and maintain horizontal structure, and "horizontalism" became a major organizing principle across networks (Sitrin 2006). This meant, though, that networks atomized and drew volunteers from their immediate surroundings rather than on a city-wide basis. Because these activists tend to avoid pricey or conservative "bourgeois" neighborhoods, they also tend to be early gentrifiers. For instance, when Denise arrived in Chicago from small-town Ohio a few years ago, she chose Edgewater because of its diversity "across race and class, and sort of age, and all of these aspects that made this community really appealing as a place where I could build relationships and continue to be challenged by meeting people who were different than me after leaving college." Consequently, neighborhoods which had the strongest collections of activists after the mutual aid diaspora tended to be gentrifying or recently gentrified neighborhoods. This, combined with hyperghettoization of black neighborhoods resulted in mutual aid networks operating nearly-exclusively in neighborhoods which are non-Black and gentrifying.

We can see this pattern most clearly by comparing neighborhoods with mutual aid networks to city tract demographic data. The UC Berkeley-based Urban Displacement Project (UDP), in collaboration with the Strong, Prosperous, and Resilient Communities Challenge (SPARCC), developed a map of Chicago tracts, including income and housing price data over time as well as demographics. Low-income neighborhoods are defined by “a median household income at 80% of the regional median” and are coded light blue (Chapple et. al. 2021). Exclusive neighborhoods, coded deep orange, have rents which are unaffordable for people with incomes at or below 80% of the regional median. Gentrification in Chicago is ongoing and widespread, and rents and housing costs have risen at alarming paces across almost half of the city’s neighborhoods since 2000, especially concentrated around the Loop and the North to Northwest sides (*ibid.*).

Using the UDP displacement map (figure 1) and demographic map (figure 2), I overlaid the locations of all mutual aid networks that were listed on the Chicago Community Kitchen’s “Mutual Aid Map”. Though the boundaries of each network are not strictly defined, I chose to outline the neighborhood or neighborhoods listed on the Mutual Aid Map in red; mutual aid networks are not strictly territorial, but when questions of jurisdiction come up, for instance, weighing between two requests from different areas that cannot both be fulfilled with a group’s given resources, priority is granted to residents of the network’s neighborhood. If the requester lives in the neighborhood “jurisdiction” of the network, they will try to help. If not, they will refer them to other groups closer to their home. In some cases, these borders are fuzzy – McKinley Park Mutual Aid has taken on requests from Englewood, Brighton Park, and Back of the Yards, as none of them have their own aid network.



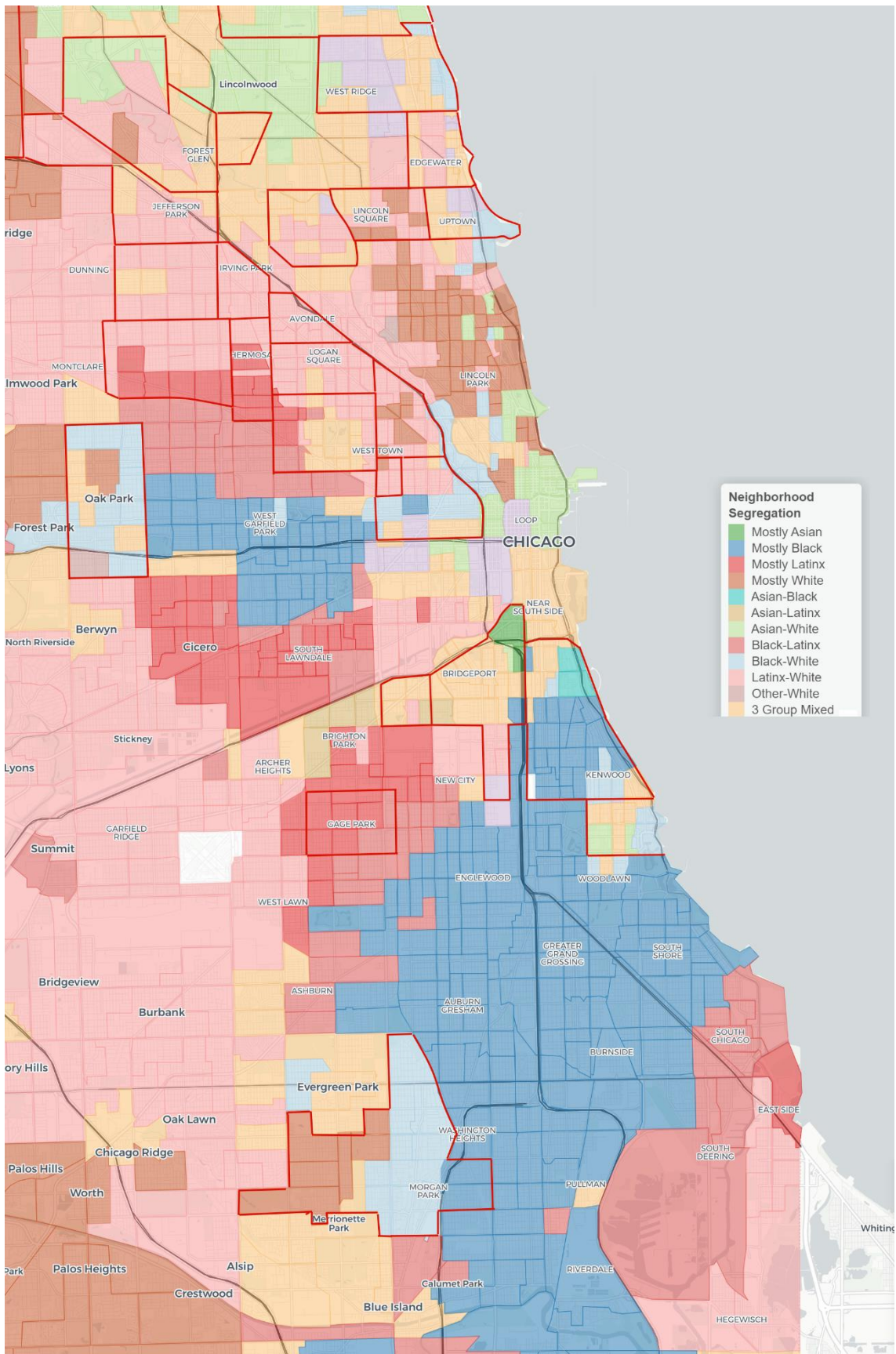


Figure 2: UDP Map showing Chicago segregation, with mutual aid networks outlined in red.

Even though the fuzzy boundaries of mutual aid networks make the strict territorial edges in the figures an abstraction from reality, the pattern that arises is nonetheless clear. As seen in Figure 1, mutual aid networks tend to cover neighborhoods with ongoing or advanced gentrification. Areas which contain or are near to ongoing and advanced gentrification (mid-tone and dark purple), tend to have mutual aid networks, while those that are either stable-exclusive (deep orange) or poor (light blue) tend not to have mutual aid networks listed on the Mutual Aid Map.

Mutual aid networks largely avoid the entrenched exclusive neighborhoods in the near north side, as well as the historically deprived hyperghettos of the south and west sides. Because of rampant redlining and segregation, this means that Black neighborhoods almost never get their own mutual aid network. We can see this demographic isolation of mutual aid in Figure 2. Mutual aid boundaries stop at the deep blue and light red areas in the west and south sides of the city, predominantly impoverished Black neighborhoods like Garfield Park and Englewood. This is a result of the aforementioned history of segregation in the city, and the intensification of spatial stigmatization. Activists may want to live in places where they can feel a part of the “real” city, but they nonetheless tend to avoid the hyperghetto.

Two exceptions stand out: Bronzeville-Kenwood just south of the Loop, and Gage Park near Midway airport in the southwest. Both have networks which pre-date the pandemic, and thus do not mimic the racialized pattern of other mutual aid networks. Bronzeville-Kenwood, for instance, has decades of history of Black organizing, and Gage Park has the rather robust Gage Park Latinx Council. Beyond these exceptions, territorial stigmatization conditions the neighborhoods chosen by mutual aid activists, and therefore the neighborhoods with mutual aid networks.

Some activists are aware of this pattern but believe that mutual aid is a countervailing force to gentrification. On learning that the Uptown-Buena Park network disbanded, Denise expressed her frustration with me:

“I think seeing [Uptown-Buena Park] dissolve, especially in a community that is gentrifying - like, a lot of my [laughing] wealthy, white, not-very-culturally savvy coworkers are buying condos in that neighborhood right now. I know they have deep pockets, and I know that there’s a lot of neighbors there who could use those resources, right? I just think that community desperately needs the kind of mutual aid work that happening, and the fact that they disbanded is so disheartening to me.”

Certainly, mutual aid networks provide much-needed assistance to the impoverished, to undocumented immigrants, or to anyone else who would be displaced or actively harmed in the process of gentrification. By the nature of gentrification, these areas include a mix of well-resourced people and many who may be struggling economically, making wealth redistribution through channels like mutual aid networks a natural solution. At the same time, these networks are themselves symptoms of gentrification, and their general whiteness attests to this fact.

### **Digital Technology as Capitalized Space**

Like their reliance on the Chicago neighborhood system, mutual aid networks’ overreliance on digital technology also fosters exclusivity. For EMAN, corporate modes of organizing define basically all practices of activism, drawing especially on digital corporate platforms. Almost everything other than food distribution takes place online – a symptom of the pandemic and informal organization, and a trait shared with many other Chicago mutual aid networks that developed in the early days of the pandemic. Discussions take place on Signal, a

secure messaging app. Small-scale decisions are made on Slack, a service built for corporate team coordination, and committees with delegated labor congregate there to organize. Meetings are conducted on Zoom and use an agenda prepared by volunteer facilitators or the month's "Spokes," rotating facilitators and coordinators. Documents are held in a collective Google Drive. Some groups, including EMAN, run their finances through Open Collective, a finance transparency site often used by tech startups which complicates the ability to redistribute funds no-strings-attached. Others run donations and financial aid through Venmo, a peer-to-peer money sharing app, but this too comes with serious downsides, capping the dollar amount for yearly donations, risking devastating IRS audits, and obscuring monetary flows from the community. Consequently, one has to be well-versed in a multitude of digital platforms and apps to appropriately take part in any democratic decision. While this may be second nature to a white-collar worker, particularly in the context of work-from-home COVID era, it may be quite bewildering or even alienating for anyone else.

Moreover, the very nature of digital spaces conditions and overdetermines action within and mediated through them. Digital platforms like Slack and Zoom are social spaces in a Lefebvrian sense. They are both products to be consumed and used but are also means of corporate production – networks built to exchange energy, information, and knowledge for the purpose of delivering a monetizable product or service. Digital corporate technologies are a form of dominated space – “closed, sterilized, emptied out” (Lefebvre 1991, 165). Non-digital space can be reappropriated, severing it from the rhythms of dominant capitalist modes and using it in new, unintended manners; one cannot graffiti a Facebook wall (*ibid.*, 167).

For those who have spent much of the pandemic on Zoom for class, conference calls, work meeting, “happy hours”, and so on, Zoom has become a lived space with similar cognitive

weight to an office cubicle. Yet, Zoom meetings are almost impossible to reappropriate for other purposes. The default view normalizes a one-speaker-at-a-time meeting style since the active speaker's screen takes up the majority of the Zoom window. The seemingly democratic "gallery mode" places users into little boxes which it slots into a grid of other little boxes containing coworkers, classmates, or even friends. The boxes align in neat rows, all equal in size, but whoever the program deems to be the current speaker gets a little green bar around their window to signify their presence as the leader of the conversation at that moment, once again normalizing one-speaker-at-a-time. Even if this might not be a given member's typical mode of conversation, mutual aid meetings adhere to the Zoom spatial practice almost religiously. Though a lot of consensus-based decision-making practices insist on a "one mic" rule to avoid people shouting each other down regardless of the meeting space, Zoom's spatial form forces a very particular kind of behavior and decorum on meetings. This is not value neutral – Zoom was, according to its website's sales pitch, "built for modern teams" ("Zoom"). It is a tool of corporate capitalism, which seeks increasing efficiency and productivity, even when workers cannot be in the same space, and even in the face of a deadly virus. As such, mutual aid meeting practices mimic those of efficient corporatocracy. As they become woven into the daily practices of mutual aid, each app or platform subtly conditions mutual aid networks to act more corporate. In fact, corporatism extends even to the vocabulary used in meetings and conversations: "advertising" the network, "marketing" fundraisers, solidifying "strategy" and "vision", without which mutual aid is "a tough sell."

The barriers to access posed by tech platforms have already been discussed in EMAN. Sarah expressed her concerns with the practical barriers tech platforms create, citing older volunteers at food distros who may have a harder time adapting to rapidly changing tech and

volunteers for whom English is not a first language. Sarah observed that it seemed like such people “felt a little bit less intimidated in an in-person setting than in a Zoom setting.” According to Kris, this was the impetus behind the weekly EMAN digital newsletter. She explained:

“We try to make it super readable on any kind of a device so that even if you were to go to the library and check your email or whatever you can get to stay connected. ... I mean I didn’t even know what Slack and Signal were before I joined and [laughs] I had plenty of access, so I agree it can be a barrier. ... It was tricky too because of the context of the pandemic, of not being able to meet in person and that kind of thing.”

Nonetheless, the overreliance on technology and digital platforms for organizing creates a pseudo-non-profit space illegible to anyone not well versed in the relevant tech or in the particular culture of middle-class, leftist-activists.

### **“Carceral Abolitionism”**

Despite their best efforts, then, mutual aid groups like EMAN may be falling prey to something similar to “carceral progressivism” as discussed by Savannah Shange (2019). As she notes, “carceral progressives are critical of capitalism, but not its enforcement, and seek redistribution, not reparations” (ibid., 136). Carceral progressivism occurs when the dominant anti-Blackness of the system is not questioned in the process of pursuing progressive solutions to systemic issues, and results in anti-Blackness being re-entrenched in insidious ways. The situation in EMAN is somewhat more subtle than the carceral progressivism in Shange’s Frisco high school. Like many Chicago mutual aid networks, EMAN aims not at reform but at *abolition*, the solution Shange poses to carceral progressivism. Yet, in EMAN the dominant corporatist logic and undercurrents of anti-Blackness unintentionally transforms the radical ambitions of the network into a non-profit space illegible to anyone not well versed in a

particular culture of middle-class, leftist activist, white people. Just like in Shange's supposedly progressive school, white leaders using this sort of language and logic let the "liberal eclipse the liberatory." (ibid., 138). Rather than carceral progressivism, EMAN may operate under carceral *abolitionism*.

To complicate issues further, members of EMAN are aware of this danger, and are concerned by the tendency of the group to slip into this mode. Intersectional analysis is at the forefront of theoretical discussions in meetings, as is abolition. Denise noted her concern with the group's unintentional exclusivity. In our conversation, she acknowledged a disconnect of communication and the disparity of representation in the decision-making core group:

"The group is mostly made up of people who are giving help and not receiving it. It's mostly people with resources who are sharing them who are the core members... I think there are definitely also folks who receive resources who have similar barriers in understanding the ethos of mutual aid, where they're just like, "Oh, I'm just here to receive the resources. This might be what I'm experiencing in other venues of my life, and I don't understand that this group is maybe trying to do this differently because I'm still receiving resources at the end of the day, and that's what I'm seeing as part of the process." I think what I'm really trying to say is that inclusivity toward folks that are more on the end of needing resources and making meetings more accessible to them is probably really key for us."

Nonetheless, EMAN remains exclusive. Awareness of the issue is insufficient to escape carceral abolitionism, so long as the practices remain exclusionary.

EMAN may have a kind of solidarity, but this solidarity is delimited by whiteness and extends only to those for whom the group and its practices are legible. The danger of not allowing a solidarity to extend to universalism, encompassing “all of humanity”, is that it may reproduce the in-group/out-group factionalism of identarian separatism or even fascism (Li 2021, 12). Though quite infrequent, I witnessed occasional microaggressions in meetings and conversations that unintentionally though distinctly portrayed non-white areas around the neighborhood as dangerous and undesirable. Fortunately, these comments received pushback from other volunteers and tended to open space to “call in” the instigating members. Nonetheless, the microaggressions reflect the subtle ways that anti-Blackness can condition the thoughts and practices of such groups.

### **Conclusion: Some Successes and Paths Forward**

While this diagnosis may in ways appear harrowing, mutual aid and contemporary anarchism are hardly doomed to failure. I note these critiques and pitfalls not to dismiss the possibility of truly transformative mutual aid organizing, but instead to note the insidiousness of these problems: if even self-reflective, self-avowed abolitionists reproduce racialized capitalism’s divisions and exclusivity despite best efforts, simply calling for more people or organizations to embrace abolitionism is not and will not be sufficient to enact widespread change. In these concluding remarks, I will discuss potential solutions posed by theorists and by activists, some of which are already being tested.

First, the insistence on activist perfection implicit in these sorts of critiques of mutual aid activists may itself be a manifestation of capitalist, state, and white supremacist logic (Lagalis, 184; Jones and Okin, 2001). The mutual aid ethic can help guide anarchist action toward a freer, more equal future. In this attempt, however, groups must guard against becoming hierarchical or

oppressive forces in their own right. Instead of rigid adherence to an ascetic ethic, mutual aid activists could take seriously Marquis Bey's call for "anarcho-Blackness" instead of Black or intersectional anarchism (2020, 18). According to Bey, embracing Anarcho-Blackness means that "we cannot just add in racial and gendered perspectives to an already-functioning anarchism; we cannot, also, simply throw out anarchism on the grounds of these elisions. The task is to mobilize the effect of Black feminism and anarchism colliding in harmoniously complex chaos" Anarcho-Blackness as a feature of universalist abolitionism could offer a solution to carceral abolitionism, incorporating a wider variety of mutual aid strategies to allow space for difference, while understanding that each of these strategies works as part of a general movement of mutual aid and solidarity. Universalist abolitionism would allow "the materiality of such differences" to be understood, valued, and reflected in diverse forms of mutual aid practice (Li 2021, 6). Rather than seeking to fuse Black and Indigenous strategies for abolition into a white mutual aid, universalist abolition could allow different strategies to operate in parallel; Chicago's own Rainbow Coalition could serve as a conceptual touchstone for this sort of polyvocal mutual aid activism. By providing space for difference, experimentation, chaos, and even for mistakes and growth, the revolutionary ethic can become non-coercive and freeing.

Second, as discussed above, the lived practices of mutual aid reflect the habitus of white, young professionals, who are often relatively new to their rapidly gentrifying neighborhoods. Since these exclusionary practices are at least in part conditioned by space, to truly live out their abolitionist visions, mutual aid activists must produce a new social space. According to Lefebvre, "new social relationships call for a new space, and vice versa" (1991, 59). The form of capitalist space that mutual aid groups occupy has been designed to perpetuate a historically particular mode of highly exploitative racialized capitalism, and to *hide* its operation. To truly

revolutionize social relationships, activists would need to create new space – physical, mental, and social. Mere use of such capitalist space, “diverting” it to communist or anarchist use, may only offer “a temporary halt to domination” unless a new social space can be constructed (ibid., 168). Reliance on capitalist space may explain the continual failure of these sorts of radical experiments (ibid.). Truly revolutionary action “must manifest a creative capacity in its effects on daily life, on language and on space” (ibid., 54). All aspects of space, from the plans and ideas, the lived experience, the physical form, must embody and gel with mutual aid principles.

Some mutual aid activists are already thinking about such construction. Denise, for example, complained that in Chicago, “there’s just not the space for creativity and anti-capitalist action.” She and other members of EMAN would like to “generate more shared spaces, more spaces for mutual aid where there’s open access” like gardens and community centers. A “mutual aid neighborhood” would be one “where people know their neighbors.” It would be a “resilient” neighborhood with resources for greening utilities, buildings, and infrastructure to withstand climate crises. It would have open-use community spaces, ones which could be places for connection, for education and skill sharing, and for resource distribution. Whether or not this is a functional vision for a recreation of space remains to be seen. The cost of land and space, though, is currently prohibitive to enact this dream.

In the meantime, network members are considering ways to transform existing urban space into something more aligned with mutual aid principles. According to Sarah, this could include “centering the projects more in the community” similarly to how “the food distro just exists as its own community.” She hopes that the community garden the network began last summer can function as the default meeting space, circumventing some of the exclusivity of digital meetings and digital organizing. Volunteers can “put a plant in the ground or pick a

tomato, or just say hi, and the organizing can happen more organically.” Food sovereignty activism meets a core need for many who are still struggling after the pandemic and offers an easily accessible point of contact to build solidarity and live out the revolutionary ethic of mutual aid. “The first step” to a radical future, Sarah argued, “is learning those skills of community and care and building systems of food sovereignty, of restorative justice, even on the smallest scales possible, because you can’t just jump from nothing to massive scale.”

Even when groups disband, it is not a failure of mutual aid as an ethic; although the official Uptown-Buena Park network disbanded, many of the former members have continued to organize food rescues and distributions, to attend to the needs of the community, to fight for the rights of unhoused neighbors, and generally continue the revolutionary ethic espoused by the more “official” groups. Even in its flawed form, this latest wave of mutual aid can be seen as a transformation in the minds of activists who previously may not have been as self-critical and not considered direct action as an option. In a way, this movement is a transformation of activists, and the way forward may be to see that transformation through, even if the on-the-ground form of activism changes radically.

In my time with Chicago mutual aid networks, I saw countless examples of networks living out their revolutionary ethics and working as best they can to build the world they hope for in a small way in their own communities. Between meetings, activists would check in with each other, help with moves, cover rents to keep people in the neighborhood as the cost of living skyrocketed. I witnessed friendships form, not only between core activists, but also between the core and less-involved members, and between those who care about the network and participate but cannot or do not want to join the core meetings. Additionally, EMAN, like many similar networks across the city, tends to be very inclusive for women and LGBTQ+ people. Notably,

nearly every person I spoke with in the networks I interacted with was not a cisgender, heterosexual man. Kris noted that although EMAN does not reflect the neighborhood's racial diversity, the network has "really great sexual and gender diversity" and that in general "queer people feel really safe in the network."

Throughout the process of researching this paper, I experienced the beauty of community care in my own neighborhood network and through EMAN. After the sudden death of my friend and neighbor in the spring of 2022, my local network offered open homes, tea, listening ears, and support with groceries and other tasks for me and my grieving friends. Despite how close to home my friend's death was, the outpouring of support and love cemented in my mind the value and beauty of my neighborhood. Members of EMAN helped me out with car repairs when I caught COVID, and others helped during a protracted apartment search. Though these moments are small and occasionally mundane, they reflect the often-unseen side of mutual aid, one which cannot be counted or measured in any objective way.

Whether the contemporary movement of mutual aid networks dies out, is coopted into the non-profit sphere, or creates radically new space for true solidarity depends largely on the ability of organizers to set aside their assumptions about how mutual aid ought to be practiced, and to learn from and embody mutual aid practices from other people, in other places and times, and through other technologies. With a stronger, more joyful revolutionary ethic, mutual aid activists can continue to struggle toward their goal of revolutionary solidarity.

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