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Root networks of radical care: Mutual aid in Minneapolis' abolitionist movement

Adele Welch

Lake Street 2020

Temporarily quiet from the pandemic, Lake Street in Minneapolis was bursting in June 2020, its seams the cracks in the sidewalk expanding in the early summer heat. Donated food in paper bags lined every block, and masked volunteers rushed to sort and redistribute supplies to families almost as quickly as they were dropped off. Neighbors gathered to witness the smoking ashes of the third police precinct and the spray-painted protest art, tough like ivy, growing on its concrete walls. Suited up with our mother's gardening gloves, my sister and I picked up the empty military-grade tear gas canisters on the ground. Their skeletal remains were fresh wounds from the night before, when law enforcement fearfully hurled them into the crowd of community members who gathered in solidarity to protest the murder of George Floyd, a Black man who had supposedly used a counterfeit bill at a corner store, by a white Minneapolis Police Officer named Derek Chauvin.

In between all of us who gathered day after day that summer on the Southside to give and take, abolish and mend, remember and leave behind, was a call for change. One thing was clear: the "re-" in our messages of rebuild, repair, and reconstruct was not a call to recreate the unjust conditions of colonialism, neoliberal capitalism, and

heteropatriarchy that brought us here. In our own intimate ways—from the police murder of George Floyd to the state's abandonment of those struggling hardest through the COVID-19 pandemic—we witnessed how the government and its institutions wielded these oppressive ideologies as answers to the very problems they started, attacking the lives of Black and Indigenous people, people of color, poor people, disabled people, queer and trans people, immigrants and displaced people in the process. Instead, the "re" beckoned a collective question: what will it take to reorient our relationships to one other so we will never lose a life to this again? Many of us turned to our belief in collective care using the growing language of "mutual aid" as an answer.

Mutual aid refers to the belief and practice of caring for each other alongside and in service of overturning oppression (Spade 2020). It differs from Western and capitalist notions of charity because "help" is understood within a framework of horizontality, interdependence, and abundance. Horizontality implies the inherent worth of each individual, interdependence recognizes our need to rely on each other, and abundance theorizes that we are enough and have enough when we share the gifts of the earth. Mutual aid locates the root causes of human suffering in highly individualistic, hierarchical, and competitive ideologies, such

as white supremacy and neoliberalism, and works to destigmatize the need for care under these unfair dominant conditions in the U.S. and much of the world. Under these principles, mutual aid projects build long-term relationships of solidarity between and across people positioned as “helper” and “helped,” which simultaneously mitigate the harm from and transform oppressive structures.

Mutual aid played an important role in the Minneapolis 2020 uprising for police and prison abolition because both are about presence, not absence, as abolitionist Ruth Wilson Gilmore theorized (Kushner and Wilson Gilmore 2019). Those who biked packages of home-cooked food across the city to historically looted communities, the young people who converted a bus into a medical supply trailer to support protesters, and the neighbors who took over a vacant hotel to house people experiencing houselessness were all regular people who organized grassroots ways to meet the needs of those made most vulnerable by structural oppression.¹ “By 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,” writes mutual aid scholar Dean Spade (2020, 17). These community members will be remembered for their imaginative action that

¹ The referenced organizations are, in order, Bikes & Bites MPLS (<https://www.instagram.com/bikesandbitesmpls/>), People’s Protection Coalition (<https://www.peoplesprotectioncoalition.org/>) and the Minneapolis Sanctuary Movement (<https://minneapolis-sanctuary.org/>).

built root networks of radical care throughout the city, shaking the city government’s illusion of “progressive” politics from the ground up.

Solidarity not charity!: Historical pictures of collective care

Racial capitalism as a system of hierarchical labor has disrupted and deformed our imagination for interdependent care as soon as the first European colonizers arrived on Turtle Island and Abya Yala (also known as North and South America). In order to claim power, Europeans lied, killed, and stole the labor and resources of Indigenous and African peoples without making any attempt towards reciprocity. Once in a position to create the United States government, white people continued to create conditions of scarcity for the very same people they hoarded wealth from- only throwing Black and Indigenous communities a bone when it further dehumanized them or when the threat of their rebellion necessitated a softening of unjust conditions (Piven and Cloward 1993). This pattern has been well-documented by those who have experienced the conditional help of Christian charities and the welfare system.

Prior to, during, and what we can insist to be after the conquering lie that is colonialism (Alfred 2004, 90), Indigenous people across the continents as well as Africa, Asia, the world’s islands, and even Europe sustained traditions of interdependent care for centuries. For Indigenous people in the Andes, the collective work tradition of *mingas*

is a way to ensure that everyone in the community is not only fed, housed, and healthy, but responsible for their fellow neighbor in a self-tending cycle. Despite generations of European intrusion, Kichwa-heritage people continue to participate in *mingas* such as coming together to make wellness baskets of community grown produce for their neighbors during the COVID-19 pandemic.² Many people come to mutual aid with a desire to reclaim or reimagine marginalized ancestral traditions of community care (Coronado and Mendoza 2020). While the term “mutual aid” itself comes from anarchism (Adler-Bolton, Vierkant, and Spade 2020), its philosophy intersects with other diverse philosophies of horizontality, interdependence, and abundance that have existed far longer than racial capitalism.

The Zapatistas are one example of a community that practices mutual aid as an ancestral, imaginative, and exilic process in the Lacandón Jungle (Grubačić and O’Hearn 2016). An autonomous society created in solidarity between urban mestizo and rural Indigenous people, the Zapatistas have integrated Maya knowledge with Maoist leftist political thought to a high degree of collective organization outside of and against the colonial government of Mexico. They facilitate a horizontal, rotating, and self-critical decision-making body that intends to “invite and promote rather than order” to support youth-led schools, a healthcare system with

an eye towards women's reproductive health, restorative justice efforts, shared traditional celebrations, and a collectivized economic system (Grubačić and O’Hearn 2016, 128). By conceptualizing Zapatismo as “a bridge” or even “nothing,” the Zapatistas recognize that a constant, generative desire to work in mutually beneficial relationships leads to a stronger community of care than a singular or stagnant political ideology (Grubačić and O’Hearn 2016, 119).

In the United States, Black people have practiced community care as a form of resistance since white people attempted to destroy their social linkages through the institution of slavery. In 1898, sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois wrote about the centrality of the church in continuing African traditions of collective organization: “The Negro Church is the only social institution of the Negroes which started in the African forest and survived slavery; under the leadership of the priest and medicine man, afterward of the Christian pastor, the Church preserved in itself the remnants of African tribal life and became after emancipation the centre of Negro social life” (4). Churches were important spaces of immediate relief for poor Black people, as well as community centers that sustained group social, spiritual, and artistic traditions. Black women played an “extraordinarily strong role” in Black churches as well as in the fraternal organizations popular among many Americans by 1900 (Skocpol and Oser 2004, 411).

Over 6 million men (about 40% of the male population of the U.S. aged 21+) participated in 350 different fraternal or

² This story came to me via friends at the Pachaysana Institute who referenced the collective Pintag Amaru in Pintag, Ecuador.

“mutual benefit” societies at the turn of the 20th century alongside uncared women and gender marginalized people (Skocpol and Oser 2004, 373). Overall, Black American enrolled at higher proportions in mutual benefit societies than white Americans. Some Black-led organizations paralleled white orders, but many were more inclusive and organized to demand Black liberation as well as provide insurance and healthcare benefits to their members. The first Black fraternal society, The Prince Hall Masons, was founded in 1784 in Massachusetts and advocated for the freedom of slaves. In mid-19th century Baltimore, organizer Maggie Lena Walker made sure at least half of the leadership of The Independent Order of St. Luke’s was made up of women, which also supported a people’s-led newspaper. Other orders such as the Knights and Daughters of Tabor funded a dozen or so hospitals in the South by 1950 (Skocpol and Oser 2004). This same focus on simultaneously meeting community needs and fighting political dispossession was true for *sociedades mutualistas* led by Indigenous-heritage people in the Southwest (Rivera 1984). While white-led fraternal orders actively practiced racist and sexist exclusion, Black and Indigenous organizations thought of community support as a tool towards social equality.

The Black Panther Party built upon the collective care models of Black churches and aid societies and organized numerous survival programs in Oakland during the height of the Civil Rights Movement. These programs included an Intercommunal Youth Institute with a strong emphasis on creating

community and solidarity between young Black and poor people (“each one help one; each one teach one”), a religiously inclusive temple, free food and transportation services for the elderly, and most famously, a Free Breakfast for Schoolchildren Program that state-sponsored free breakfast programs are modeled after today (Hilliard 2008, 5-6). Black Panther Party activist Huey P. Newton wrote in 1972, “All these programs satisfy the deep needs of the community but they are not solutions to our problems. That is why we call them survival programs, meaning survival pending revolution” (Hilliard 2008, 4). “Survival pending revolution” has been used by many mutual aid groups in the present day to insist that finding immediate ways to extend support to people suffering under oppressive conditions is a key, but partial part of the broader project of liberation.

Disability justice activists complicate the idea of “survival pending revolution” by helping us understand the need for care will never go away, and that relationships of radical love are active practices that must be carried through revolutionary moments (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018, 33). As do all of us, sick, disabled, and neurodivergent people depend on long-term forms of care to survive. Unfortunately, they have often been stripped of their autonomy and personhood as a tradeoff to this “care.” For example, Medicaid keeps people in poverty by capping how much a disabled person can earn and save before losing their insurance (Sale and Wong 2020). Artist-activist Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha described the importance of a culture of “collective access”

that prioritizes the freedom of queer, disabled people of color to work in community to strategize liberatory access together (2018, 47). As many of us are pulled towards mutual aid during moments of emergency and crisis, we have, in Piepzna-Samarasinha's words, "a lot to learn a lot to learn from disability justice models of centering sustainability, slowness, and building for the long haul" (2018, 53).

Beyond the examples suggested here, mutual aid has taken on many more forms to support communities across the globe. Principles of horizontality, interdependence, and abundance are reflected even in the non-human natural world. For example, mushrooms share a cell structure with mycelium, a vast fungi network beneath our feet that forms symbiotic, life-giving relationships with trees, plants, and all other organisms in its environment. When these principles that support coexistent life are threatened by political greed, people consistently rise to protest and extend care to those most deeply affected. Each one of us can ask ourselves where we see the value of interdependence in our lives, our relationships, and our ancestries. As I write this, I smell the fragrant garlic my housemate is cooking in the kitchen of our co-op and am reminded of how much joy and stability I receive from the "give and take" kind of care we practice into our daily routines.

Neoliberalism wants to buy and sell care

Neoliberalism threatens mutual aid's commitment to overturning oppression because it worsens and rationalizes social

injustice. Neoliberalism is not only a capitalist economic system, but a social philosophy that has dominated most of the world since it was popularized by the U.S. and the U.K. in the 1980s (Harvey 2005). It suggests that human wellbeing is achieved through individualism, competition and the accumulation of private property. This concentrates wealth in the hands of white and upper class people who are able to both exploit Black, Indigenous, and poor communities and perceive their suffering as their own personal failure. Neoliberalism can even operate under a thin veil of "multiculturalism" that allows for diversity of faces in power but not diversity of thought. The current state of poor relief tests the limits of mass public resistance by nearly eradicating socialized governmental services and popularizing a new language of "self-care" to take its place (Adler-Bolton, Vierkant and Spade 2020).

Neoliberalism is so hungry for profit that it wants to privatize caring infrastructure itself (Ortiz García, Pérez Lugo, Unenra and Ziegler 2020). Under a neoliberal economy, care work is exploitable and its labor is disproportionately performed by low-income women and gender marginalized people of color. People with wealth can buy acts of "care" for themselves including cooking, cleaning, healing, teaching, caretaking and more, with no expectation of fair compensation, even less reciprocation, to those behind the scenes. Companies often label their products or services as "self-care," turning care into a personal responsibility that is celebrated and aspired to but not achievable for poor people. In fact, many work

for the same companies whose exploitative labor practices actively undermine a world where everyone is cared for.

Neoliberalism might even consume projects that were started in the name of social justice to address oppressive conditions. For example, some organizations of activists seek federally recognized nonprofit 501(c)(3) status in search of economic sustainability. However, this shifts the project's accountability to achieving an image of success in the eyes of rich donors and the government, rather than to the most marginalized members of the public. Nonprofits can prevent mass participation in mutual aid projects by creating bureaucratic barriers to receiving and giving aid, and are ultimately stuck in a position where they are unable to fix the root problems of social injustices they exist to solve. Neoliberalism may try to buy and sell care, but in reality, it is the opposite of care. It hinges upon abusive ideas that suggest we accept widespread human suffering as a natural condition of life—including our own.

Lessons from Minneapolis' mutual aid sanctuary movement

Minneapolis is one example of the danger of neoliberalism branded as “socially just.” Because it is led by people who call themselves progressive but actively support capitalist and colonial policies, Minneapolis can be defined as a neoliberal. Growing up white in South Minneapolis, neoliberalism attempted to indoctrinate me into a belief

that we had, more or less, achieved social equality. In reality I lived in a highly racially segregated, middle-class neighborhood where the city's redlining policies cordoned off wealth while many of my classmates of color ate their first and last meals of the day at school. By high school, my passive understanding of social justice had fractured, largely thanks to my Black and queer classmates who organized the student body in protest after the police killings of young Black men Michael Brown and Jamar Clark in 2014 and 2015. The murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer five years later under a Black police chief proved that racial representation did little to change the department's underlying purpose of surveilling and punishing those on the margins of “success” as defined by neoliberalism.

Current mutual aid efforts to support unsheltered people in Minneapolis question the fallacies of neoliberalism and provide an alternative ideology of collective care. Denied access to permanent, affordable, and dignified housing, disproportionately Black and Indigenous people have moved into public parks and unused land to find community and share resources. Neighbors coordinate to bring food and supplies directly to residents per their requests, operating under abolitionist teachings of creating systems of support to replace those of cruelty and vengeance, and with an understanding that we give what we can and take what we need. These encampments continue to grow as the city has not complied with resident calls for short- nor long-term support in the form of

bathrooms, handwashing stations, fire-safety trainings, hotel vouchers, or public housing. Instead, the mayor who proudly proclaimed “housing is a human right” sponsors police-led evictions of camps that vilify residents for being unsheltered, dispossess them of their belongings and social ties, and displace them to, if anywhere, temporary shelters where COVID-19 is easily spread and care is conditional.³ More people have begun to question why a “progressive” local government would fight so hard against housing their unsheltered constituents when government-owned units remain vacant across Minneapolis.⁴

The grassroots care practiced by residents and neighbors in these encampments is a threat to the city because it mobilizes the greater public into an understanding that a practice of horizontality, interdependency, and abundance does not settle for anything less than a complete abolition of oppressive structures, including police, prisons, and the government as we know it. It is particularly powerful as part of the abolition movement because it provides a framework for moving forward along with a critique. When we enact these values, we not only attempt to transform society, but how we relate to ourselves and to each other through a variety of tactics and on a number of interconnected issues. Unhoused community members practiced this when they started a

tenants’ union after living together in an extended stay hotel outside of Minneapolis, and neighbors practiced this when they showed up to early morning evictions to support residents who wanted to stand their ground against the city’s bulldozers.⁵ The relationships we build with each other help us nourish ourselves and each other towards a reality where no one is disposable, which is precisely what mutual aid asks.

As I wrap up this essay, I feel pressure to wrap mutual aid up in a bow myself as an inspirational solution to all the instances of harm we experience and witness in our lives. But I am reminded of community organizer Veralucia Mendoza’s words that “mutual aid does not belong to any one person” (Coronado and Mendoza 2020). If collective care is truly about the collective, it is best understood in practice with other people. The meaning of mutual aid is constantly growing, being challenged, and changing because we as humans do the same as we work alongside one another. Instead of inspiring answers, I hope my writing inspires questions that can be built upon by more people that believe that life is precious (Kushner and Wilson Gilmore 2019) and refuse to let oppression interfere with our capacity for interconnected care.

³ Quoted from an interview with Jacob Frey in the Star Tribune on January 18, 2020: <https://www.startribune.com/a-conversation-with-jacob-frey/566879322/>

⁴ Read more about the privatization of housing in Minneapolis as well as initiatives to keep public housing public through the Defend Glendale Coalition: <https://www.dgphc.org/>

⁵ Read more about the tenants' union via Unicorn Riot: <https://unicornriot.ninja/2020/unhoused-community-forms-tenants-union-constituents-protest-at-politicians-home/>

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