KEEP AUSTIN SAFE: STUDYING MUTUAL AID ORGANIZING

FOLLOWING THE 2021 TEXAS ENERGY CRISIS

An Undergraduate Research Scholars Thesis

by

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This project did not require approval from the Texas A&M University Research Compliance & Biosafety office.

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis investigates mutual aid organizing in the Austin Texas area by examining an

extensive literature review on the history and methodology of mutual aid as well as the dilemmas

that might arise with it. The literature review discusses mutual aid strategy throughout the

coronavirus pandemic and in response to various natural disasters as an alternative to formal

disaster responders like charities or other non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Mutual aid is

applied to Austin Texas and its history of gentrification, addressing how gentrified

neighborhoods and communities disproportionately suffered during the February 2021 electric

outage in Texas. The analysis of this thesis suggests that an emergency preparedness strategy can

be an effective method for mutual aid organizations to strategize according to Austin's history of

gentrification and environmental racism. A guiding philosophy of transformative justice can

guide how the community strategizes and targets their action toward protecting every community

member, including and most especially the ones most likely to be impacted by structural

violence and discrimination.

DEDICATION

To all organizers in the state of Texas and the southern United States who work tirelessly to

create a better, safer world for all people.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Contributors

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NOMENCLATURE

NGO   non-governmental organization

SES   socio-economic status

BIPOC   Black, indigenous, people of color

INTRODUCTION

In the beginning of the 2000s and well into the early 2020s, a compounding need for democratized aid efforts has become more readily apparent as natural disasters have unfolded both internationally and particularly in regions of the country most neglected by adequate aid response from national and local government. One of the earliest of natural disasters of the 21st century to be inextricably linked to the issue of aid response, at least within the academic community studying the link between natural disasters and climate change, was the Hurricane Katrina disaster in New Orleans Louisiana in 2005. In the failure of governmental and non-governmental relief efforts to more readily access communities whose residential homes were most locationally compromised to fatal conditions in Hurricane Katrina, experts studied the racialized disparity in rescue and recovery efforts of historically black and brown neighborhoods of New Orleans that were most locationally concentrated in New Orleans' most vulnerable environments, historically attributable to the reduced importance of the Mississippi River in trade, contributing to race and class divisions in New Orleans to go relatively unchallenged by in-migration for decades (Elliott 297). The long term impact on minorities post-Katrina showed that black residents were seven times more likely to have lost their job than white residents (Elliott 317). Since Hurricane Katrina, the frequency with which climate-induced natural disasters has devastated communities has increased dramatically to becoming a semi-regular occurrence exacerbating both the inequitable distribution of aid from a logistical standpoint from top-down aid organizations, as well as devastating infrastructure of regional localities for which infrastructure predating the acceleration of climate change was not designed to accommodate extreme weather events. Prime examples of this infrastructural devastation include the heatwaves

of 2021 that melted local infrastructure and necessitated shelter in community centers in the

Pacific Northwest, as well as and most notably the near collapse of the state-wide electric grid in

Texas in February of 2021.

Top-down organizations like charities are molded by a "slow-moving, institutional, and

self-interested model" (Klein 2). Generally, these organizations suffer from issues particular to

their bureaucratic nature. These issues include centralized decision making, ignoring external

information, as well as escalating ineffective tactics (Takeda 401-406). Many of the issues

shared by NGOs and charities is also shared by governmental disaster response such as FEMA,

the disaster response division of the Department of Homeland Security. Unique to NGOs and

charities is the need to cater their strategy and efforts towards donors on which they rely for

funding. This is especially problematic when donors don't prioritize those most in need, thus

resulting in an inequitable distribution of resources; a problem that contributes to a

preoccupation with reaction but not long term preparedness (Gajewski et al. 391).

What most top-down aid organizations were likely least prepared for, compounded with

crumbling infrastructure nationwide as well as increased frequency and intensity of climate-

induced natural disasters, was the global coronavirus pandemic that had massive consequences

not only for the daily lives of everyone globally for which no component of life was unimpacted,

but also the strategy and safety of aid distribution in the event of a public health crisis occurring

simultaneously with regionalized climate disasters. The global pandemic exacerbated political

polarization concerning social mores about public health etiquette concerning mask and

vaccination status as well as blatant misinformation rampant on social media platforms regarding

the development of the COVID-19 vaccine and subsequent boosters. The intersection of

misinformation and a highly agitated political climate has done no favor to the intersecting crisis

of public health where it concerns populations most likely to be negatively impacted by the environmental racism inherent in the United States climate change response. The pandemic exacerbated existing injustice and social inequality (Bell, 411). A primary example of this is the racialized correlation between those most likely to suffer from immunocompromised health status and more likely on average to benefit from a comprehensive social welfare approach to a public health crisis (Arani 658). Intersecting marginalization has proven to compromise black and brown populations the most during the coronavirus pandemic, in particular black and brown immunocompromised and disabled populations, a racialized neglect not unprecedented as demonstrated in the public health crisis of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s and early 1990s (Lofton 119). While the rollout of the coronavirus vaccine has for some created a new sense of normalcy, political and social tension regarding both masking and vaccination has loosened the tension with which a collective population copes with a reality impacted by the virus, as more people begin, both vaccinated and unvaccinated, to normalize less regular mask wearing and large crowd gatherings at festivals, concerts, and in workplace and university classrooms.

With these conditions in mind, how do aid organizations and networks anticipate a new challenge to accommodating the health and welfare of both aid organizers and their recipients? As new variants of the coronavirus indefinitely tear through the population causing new surges in cases and deaths on a daily basis for the foreseeable future, aid efforts have a needed hypervigilant strategy in organizing with anticipation for more fatal and contagious COVID variants and other viruses to come (Lofton 119). The public health crisis exacerbates compounding crises already in the way of reaching compromised populations most at risk historically to suffer from the coronavirus. This is including but not limited to environmental racism in housing, means-tested welfare and social services, food and housing insecurity,

increasing privatization of and deregulation of public services and utilities, medical racism, ableism and eugenicist rhetoric in political discourse, and misogynoir (Arani 658).

The top-down strategy of government aid and vertically structured efforts of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) may prove to be inadequate in the long term at addressing simultaneous crises of racialized neglect (Klein 2). In the wake of the coronavirus pandemic and in response to this systemic dysfunction was a resurgence in mutual aid networks. Mutual aid networks historically can be defined as horizontally structured aid and resource distribution funded and organized by and for local community members in the absence of, or despite, vertically structured and/or means-tested NGOs and charities (Bell 413). Strategically what many of these mutual aid networks have in common is a grassroots fundraising strategy and an informal approach to identifying commonly cited needs for addressing food insecurity and resources for survival in response to natural disasters. While many individuals in the fallout of natural disasters rely upon personal networks for support, mutual aid attempts to expand the personal support network to the community at large. This is especially important when social networks greatly contribute to disaster recovery for individuals, especially when poor individuals are less likely to have expansive social networks (Hurlbert 617).

A city for which these principal issues are most exacerbated in the state of Texas is the state capital Austin. The city of Austin has been consistently among one of the most economically expanding cities in the United States, a rate at which the local city infrastructure has struggled to keep up as Austin has become one of the fastest growing cities in the United states (O'Donnell, 2021). This has led to a rise in the cost of living in the city and an expansion of new housing, often at the expense of local residents whose communities long predate the population influx to Austin (BBC, 2014). While local populations have adapted to the

increasingly precarious living conditions for poor populations, such as with the establishment of community land trust networks to combat housing costs in East Austin neighborhoods, gentrification and carceral approaches to the homeless population of Austin plague the city's long-residing black and brown populations. Combine this population influx exacerbating the racial implications of housing and welfare policies of the city and state, a public health crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic adds another barrier to outreach for already overlooked and disproportionately impacted communities during a weather disaster like the winter storm of February 2021 (Doss-Gollin 6). An unprecedented frequency and intensity of climate disaster events historically has already proven a barrier in transportation both to aid recipients in need and also for recipients to travel to community centers or nonprofit locations distributing aid resources.

The benefit mutual aid organizations potentially pose to underserved communities is inherent in their structure as horizontal and community led; potentially with a better sense of connection with local residents and their immediate needs and vulnerabilities that nonprofits and other aid NGOs may not be able to provide due to their vertical structure and legal confines (Bell 413). The internal logic and altruism of mutual aid organizing to take on potentially dangerous volunteer work is one that is antithetical to the logic of self-interest and competition (Jun 365).

This research thesis will investigate what the future of mutual aid organizing might look like following the February 2021 winter freeze in Austin Texas. More specifically, this thesis will identify strategies and issues worth addressing in mutual aid and Austin to create longer, more effective mutual aid organizing. The literature review discussing mutual aid will come in contrast to the historical shortcomings of charities and NGOs during earlier regional disasters such as Hurricane Katrina as discussed in this introduction. Furthermore, this thesis will

investigate what similarly enables mutual aid organizations effective outreach and fundraising, while investigating strategies of governance and justice philosophy to combat internal organizing cultural issues such as burnout and cooperation in the face of compounding natural disasters and health crises. As part of this thesis, I will research and analyze the impact of the winter freeze on Austin Texas, Austin's history of gentrification, how mutual aid organizing responded to the coronavirus pandemic, as well as transformative justice as a principle.

1.1   Personal Observations and Experience with Mutual Aid Networks

In the summer of 2020, I was remotely a part of a mutual aid collective in the local Bryan-College Station Texas area that oversaw a fundraising system designed to distribute groceries to local immunocompromised residents free of charge to them. This aid effort was based on a no-questions asked policy, meaning means testing was not a part of recipients qualifying for aid funded by and provided by local volunteers. Local volunteers and organizers dedicated their time and efforts by administering contact outreach and connecting recipients to other local welfare services based on their needs and particular circumstances related to factors such as employment and housing. Among other services was drive sharing to purchase and drop off groceries to recipients and online fundraising.

Not all of our mutual aid efforts were exclusively defined by this system. Some of our aid funds additionally went to a bail fund for protestors during the George Floyd protests of summer 2020. This direct experience did show to me that there are struggles unique to mutual aid networks that vertically structured charities and NGOs do not share in the same way, thanks to their particular legal and financial protections. The longevity and sustainability of mutual aid networks, even when organized by local community members, can struggle with a number of factors discussed.

1.2   Intracommunity Culture and Governance

Mutual aid principles historically define a principle of exchange and reciprocity concerning aid and wealth distribution, but cannot adequately alone create an all-encompassing philosophy of organizing sustainability. Pivotal to mutual aid principles are an understanding of social justice principles concerning dynamics of race and gender in a diverse, cooperative effort. Black and feminist theories of transformative justice and accountability can help foster an environment based on mutual respect that can prevent an alienating organizing culture. This can create an environment more conducive to widespread education and technical expertise not confined to or contingent upon one or more members. This can in turn foster an environment that is true to a horizontal structure of both aid distribution and internal culture preventative of a vertical social hierarchy. This is especially true when social hierarchies and conflicts amongst organizers can exacerbate or recreate discriminatory dynamics across race and gender.

A comprehensive theory of governance in organizing strategy is essential to the longevity of mutual aid cooperatives dealing with tangible goods. This is relevant to the volume of work, ensuring that workload is equitable amongst volunteers, and in preventing a recreation of workplace sexism and racism in regard to accountability, credibility, reliability, and recognition.

1.3   Adequate Legal / Financial Protections and Skill Education

A robust approach to understanding the legal and financial protections afforded to mutual aid efforts should underly the internal governance of organizing culture such that education is continual and widespread to dissuade internal dysfunction from lack of knowledge. This can at least inform the approach organizers choose to adopt in their relationship with the legal protections afforded to nonprofits and NGOs that, while providing some official procedural function with regard to legal and financial aspects of fundraising and distribution. This may

prove to answer underlying questions regarding the collective philosophy of aid organizing. Some legal and financial protections, such as classification under a 501c4 or as operating under a larger national network, can protect organizers from antagonistic actors. Similarly, skillsharing and expertise sharing, including but not limited to financial or legal education, can contribute to a sustainable organizing culture that prevents social hierarchies based on skillsets.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Mutual Aid and the COVID-19 Pandemic

Mutual aid is a flexible definition in so far as it is descriptive of a common set of attributes revolving around community cooperation of resources. Mutual aid is the decentralized cooperation of resources and support created by building bonds and communication within a community. Mutual aid more specifically reinforces mutual demand and expectation without strict enforcement to meet a quota or productivity end (Shulman 56). I use the term 'flexible', as pre-existing literature categorizes mutual aid into several typologies. Different purposes regarding *what* resources and *what community* is being serviced ultimately determine what outcomes define a type of mutual aid organization, as these two variables have fluid conceptions of practicing abstract ideals indelible to mutual aid; namely resilience, self-determination, and solidarity. Though not exhaustive and certainly not mutually exclusive, three categories of mutual aid organizing are identified in the research of Harrington and Cole:

- <u>Institutional mutual aid networks</u>: characterized primarily by disaster response and some hierarchical structure concerning infrastructure and equipment

- <u>Group organization and process of support</u>: characterized by organizing on informal experiential knowledge of peers in similar circumstances, such as trauma recovery

- <u>Social movement networks of mutual aid:</u> characterized by support from community in a mutual struggle or experience, but markedly geared toward promoting stronger responses to the future and ongoing care

The latter two of these categories are primarily motivated by community resilience in the face of adversity, while the former is markedly reactive and concerned with immediate impact in the

short term. In all three categories, Harrington and Cole identify an indelible role of social capital in community building of resources, experience, and skill, such that those with more skills or experience acquire more social capital within the organizing community (Harrington and Cole 4).

An important observation to make here is that this does not necessarily correlate with social capital that is necessarily effective in the long term when concerning social dynamics in organizing or aid circles. Bin observes that social capital can be understood in charities as "primarily a social structural variable" (Bin 601). Bin furthermore notes that social capital as an asset is not necessarily a cost-benefit analysis but also a direct consequence of the rational behavior to maximize utility (Bin 602). This same behavior is observed in businesses and enterprises that donate to relief following a natural disaster (Bin 605). Simply; skills or even social implicit biases can contribute to one's social capital in group cultures, including organizing cultures. Reputation building skills serve as assets to one's own positionality within an aid organization that, while itself not an existential threat to the democratic ideals of mutual aid, may not correlate with longevity for the aid organization in the long term. This can hypothetically come from a myriad of causes, such as using activist and organizing spaces as a starting point for career opportunism and taking those skills, leaving a leadership vacuum in its wake. Reputation building skills can be monopolized in protecting one's own social capital rather than democratizing the skills essential to effective organizing in the long term. This type of conflict-of-interest overlaps with social psychology concerning the type of mutual aid organization at hand; self-interest in protecting one's own social capital can manifest itself differently based on the organization type. While this thesis does not seek to identify typologies of self interest and social capital, this thesis does attempt to investigate how principles of justice

can prevent dynamics of racism and sexism being incorporated into the organizing culture and practice with recipients of aid, where social capital may result in a blind spot or bias in organizing culture and recipient outreach. Dynamics of discrimination can and often do underly interpersonal conflicts and biases, and this can be potentially dire in the case of mutual aid organizations. Social justice education is often commonplace to such an extent that it may already be an asset of those entering and forming mutual aid networks. However, a lack interpersonal skills or conflict resolution can often undermine social justice circles in an abstract sense regarding philosophy of the organization, conflict management, and community accountability (Spade 68).

Mutual aid as a theory is cluckily somewhat resilient to these issues. As a practice in and of itself it is not contingent upon hierarchy or vertical organization; antithetical even. Mutual aid organizing seeks to build new social ties within and for a community by way of resource sharing to change political conditions that are perpetually *reinforced* by discrimination. However, mutual aid as a practice is not immune to recreations of workplace inequities or the similar blindspots of NGOs and charities in their outreach of disaster. Vulnerability assessment in mutual aid, as Harrington and Cole point out, "considers complex social structures and community assets" rather than just solely demographic information (Harrington and Cole 7). So just as equally as vulnerability assessment can be impacted to motivate equitable aid and organizing work, it can be reasoned that complex social structures can reinforce dynamics of privilege and bias related to a person's social capital *as* a community asset.

One instance of this may be men in an organizing circle overlooking women's issues in outreach efforts, for example, if and when men more readily establish credibility with the community over the women due to their positionality as a man thanks to societal gender biases.

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Women in the aid organization may feel they need to deny a feeling of being discredited or victim of gendered hostility, for the sake of the aid effort. This could in the long-term result in less women involving themselves in a particular mutual aid effort or community that strays from social justice principles in practice even if they subscribe to them in name. In turn this contributes to a trend of overlooking women's issues and needs in organizing spaces as well as overlooking recipients of aid, which can include single mothers of children, women seeking abortion, trans women seeking hormonal therapy, etc.

One might reason in response to this that the cause of mutual aid is inexplicably impactful for mental health, as mutual aid has been demonstrated to have a positive impact on mental health, outside of internal struggles (Seebohm 397). Even when the explicit cause of mutual aid organizing is concerned with material conditions, the mental health wellbeing effort may not be an explicit endeavor but rather a tacit one by virtue of existing *as* a mutual aid endeavor. For this reason, the wellbeing of recipients and organizers of mutual aid efforts cannot be overlooked, as to do so would undermine mutual aid itself.

With a more demographically diverse country than ever before, an accentuated awareness to different cultures and ways of handling problems may be a byproduct of the coronavirus pandemic and its political cultural reckoning, comparable to the impact of World War II on mutual aid organizing of the 1970s (Zola 181). Thus when new crises or shifts in national daily life occur, new moments of cultural reckoning may arise that drive more people than ever to practices like mutual aid for the first time; but with them they may bring biases that might distort or undermine efforts rooted in justice, particularly where it concerns implicit biases that result in marginalized members of that very community being overlooked in aid outreach, as well as community accountability amongst aid organizers.

This is where the concept of *by and for* the community can become complicated along the nuances of identity; where identity intersects and where it markedly does not. Community is not defined exclusively by a shared metropolitan area; Austin Texas being a shining example of this in the way of gentrification. There is undoubtedly a justified and admirable sense of community in a shared experience tied to location. This however cannot equate all experiences to be the same within that shared locality. A houseless person in Austin Texas did not experience the winter energy crisis the same way an upper middle class family may have with more rolling outages (Lee 8). So what happens when affluent members of a community identify themselves to be in common struggle with people in their local community whose experiences are wildly different from theirs, attributable to race, gender, and other factors?

Firstly, solidarity across different identity groups, marginalized or otherwise, is unequivocally an asset to any community. This is especially true when that solidarity is rooted in recognition of social inequities that reinforce that very marginalization. To choose *not* to identify oneself with the most downtrodden in circumstances of community and support and/or systemic discrimination is to reinforce a notion of othering; in white supremacy, in misogyny, etc. However, this is not synonymous with suggesting the somewhat self-evident fact (across some lines) that material conditions are not universal in a capitalist society, most apparently across socio economic status (SES) lines.

Secondly, the socializations of the diverse populations in Austin Texas are impacted by marginalizing and intersecting identities. Community support and connection to those most immediate ties, such as family and local friends or peers, may have different causes related to where this community or familial support may be lacking. This is applicable to a myriad of issues that impact the family unit, for instance. The impact of white supremacy, homophobia,

transphobia, etc. all have the potential to impact family members access to family members who *would* otherwise act as support. But this support depends on if the family dynamic is not transactionalized based on adhering to a white cishetero model of the nuclear family. When a frequent cause of homelessness among LGBT youth is estrangement from family (Villa 3), the mental health and or physical impact of this estrangement may not be readily apparent in evaluating a community member's self-sufficiency that might nonetheless be materially impactful in the long term. Hence why mutual aid is antithetical to means testing, but ultimately seeks to promote a diversity of communities united in *some* common struggle in late-stage capitalism and bureaucratic ineptitude in compounding crises of the climate and national infrastructure.

It is nonetheless relevant that socialization across intersecting privileges and marginalization of a diverse population in common struggle will nonetheless watch these differences manifest. Justice frameworks educate how communities interact and understand both themselves and communities they are not themselves a part of, helping community members to understand their positionality relative to others of different genders, races, and religions. These frameworks can be employed to address the present concerns and debates within mutual aid organizing surrounding methodology and political values that may be shaped by community members that come in common struggle from different or entirely opposing ends of a systemic race or gender relation.

Mutual aid in some form or fashion can be found in almost all human culture; a definition for the act of reciprocal exchange of resources for the sake of support and sustainability at the community level. Mutual aid is particularly impactful as a practice among those marginalized communities that are excluded from services and infrastructure. This is particularly true for

Black Americans from the 18th century into the 21st century. Mutual aid as an alternative gave

Black Americans new and better ways of adapting to exclusion by innovating access to

healthcare, education, and other services particular to the needs of Black Americans. One such

example was the Black Panthers Party's free breakfast program (Spade 10). When addressing

identities of marginalized communities, *by and for* these communities, not only can serious

issues of food insecurity, housing insecurity, and other issues be addressed, but the long-term

impact is that politically disenfranchised communities have more semblance of collective power

when united by a mutual effort rooted in altruism.

Much can be commended about the capacities of mutual aid networks during the

coronavirus pandemic both in the United States and globally. In Puerto Rico, residents

organized care packages with personal protective equipment at the beginning of the pandemic

and created community phone trees to collectively monitor everyone's symptoms and needs

(Soto 307). In New Mexico, the *Los Jardines* Institute used crowdsourcing to establish a

community farm that distributed freshly grown goods to schools and hospitals for free (Villa 4).

Mutual aid networks in Chicago like Food Not Bombs and the Love Fridge Chicago posed a vital

alternative to the traditional food system by creating cooperative agreements with local farmers

and producers to address food insecurity (Lofton 120). The rise of mutual aid networks and

people organizing these projects for the first time even led to congresswoman Alexandria

Ocasio-Cortez using her social media influence to provide educational resources to her following

on how to successfully run a mutual aid project. This sparked some criticism that the sudden

uptick in mutual aid organizing could lead to the misunderstanding that mutual aid can be

reduced to a 'trend' or limited to the coronavirus response, when in fact these initiatives long

predate the pandemic. Mutual aid in a new modern context like the pandemic and the rise of

social media exposed some new dilemmas about how mutual aid can be effectively organized and sustained.

Dilemmas in mutual aid arise out of adaptations to new realities in which the status quo of income inequality and systemic disenfranchisement are markedly exposed during a crisis or crises. During the coronavirus pandemic, the shift to mutual aid organizing relying on digital videoconferencing tools like Zoom and community platforms like Discord proved to bring about the issue of who is included in mutual aid work (Soden 6). Those without access to videoconferencing tools or who did not understand how to use them are consequently excluded from this kind of organizing. Other constraints on who becomes involved in organizing mutual aid and who receives ultimately becomes impacted by factors such as time availability and language barriers. Those without tech savvy or non-English speakers may be excluded from participating or receiving needs without outreach explicitly accommodating them (Soden 8). This can prove problematic when tech savvy populations may be "more highly professionalized and skew whiter" (Soden 8).

This tends to expose yet another dilemma in Soden's research that burnout of volunteers can be exacerbated by political divide on the philosophy of mutual aid as reactive versus addressing long term inequities that predate disaster events or pandemics. The long term capacities of mutual aid organizing may be constrained by the very systemic issues they attempt to address. While mutual aid does functionally unite a community in a common struggle, it cannot ameliorate the legal constraints forced upon or against those that may attempt to vouch for higher, livable wages, through unionization for example. Additionally, when crises necessitate specialization that is not readily accessible, how can the expertise skewing whiter and more professional affect who receives aid, as well as proximity to formal responders and the

government? This might be a more notable phenomenon during and following the coronavirus pandemic, as more white and non-Black people enter organizing spaces than ever before as mutual aid gains more widespread awareness than ever before (Arani 655). This makes mutual aid organizing at risk to falling "prey to the same dynamics of exceptionalism" as formal disaster responses and charities (Arani 656). It's important to contextualize the issue of race and expertise as social capital in US cities that overlook their marginalized residents in the events of climate disasters.

2.2   Texas February Crisis and Austin, Texas

Austin Texas, the capital city of the Lone Star State, is one of the fastest growing cities in the United States (US Census, 2014). Austin is a unique case study in observing mutual aid in action for several reasons that are relevant to this thesis:

1) Austin is a landlocked city in central Texas. Disaster preparedness is most stark in coastal cities of Texas like Houston or Corpus Christi that have hurricane response action baked into local governance due to geographical proximity to water (flooding, hurricanes, tsunamis, etc.). Austin as a landlocked city is an example of a city with no local compromising weather concerns related to geographical proximity to land faults or major gulfs or oceans; with the exception of the Colorado River. While this observation of Austin does not attempt to downplay the magnitude of weather events like hurricanes that are more volatile due to climate change (Fountain, 2021), this makes Austin an interesting city to study for climate response because the local infrastructure is not designed for disaster preparedness the same way coastal Texas cities like Houston are.

2) Austin has a unique network of mutual aid organizations as of 2022. Mutual aid organizations in the Austin area can easily be found and identified based on specialization of identity and targeted groups. Some mutual aid organizations target sex workers, trans individuals, and other demographic groups based on their needs.

3) Austin has been dubbed the next Silicon Valley, leading to greater development in the Austin area for this new population influx of industry professionals and businesses (Hegde 810). Green design of Austin encourages an active lifestyle and interaction with the outdoors, attractive to young professionals (Hegde 812). Because of Austin's consistent ranking as one of the fasting growing cities in the country, this requires constant expansion of infrastructure and housing in the Austin-Round Rock metropolitan area to accommodate new residents, even if that means long established residents are displaced.

4) Austin's legacy of de facto racial segregation impacts how black and Latinx neighborhoods are impacted by a rise in cost of living (Hegde 811). These communities frequently receive little to none of the improvements and services granted to other parts of Austin dominated by industry professionals and businesses (Hegde 811). This impact comes hand in hand with gentrification of East Austin, an area dominated by black and Latinx neighborhoods, as well as hostile housing policies towards the homeless (Cardone, 2021).

Austin Texas's population influx feeds into gentrification when the city's development plans prioritize young incoming professionals in the hopes of providing more benefits to the community at large. By failing to prioritize black and Latinx long term residents, Austin's gentrification problem makes the benefits reaped from development more inaccessible to long

term residents. This is because the rising cost of living displaces long term residents, creating

distance and separating friends and families which would otherwise empower their communities

in the face of segregation (Largent and Quimby 53). Gentrification indelibly comes with not only

a statistical shift in income of residents but also a shift in racial and ethnic makeup of

neighborhoods, radically changing and erasing the identities of entire communities. With that

shift in community identity comes long term residents grieving a loss of cultural resources,

overpolicing, and increased property taxes (Largent and Quimby 61, 64).

The gentrification of East Austin can furthermore be studied as a sustainability issue. East

Austin was designated for housing for people of color and low income residents, while also

being designated for industries that emitted hazardous waste (Tretter 356). This is a blatant

example of environmental racism. As population influx to Austin has changed, leading to

gentrification of East Austin, green space development has been prioritized in this part of the

city. Land tax for green space development has proven to be a disproportionate load for lower

income residents of East Austin even if this new green space provides more land for outdoor

lifestyles (Tretter 1). A contradiction between green space development and gentrification

denotes the conflicting interests of sustainability advocates in Austin. This conflicting interest

comes from a limitation of climate justice when not considering racial justice, namely

environmental racism, at the forefront of climate change issues.

None of the new development of East Austin attempts to explicitly address or counter a

legacy of racial segregation in Austin or the environmental racism in any substantive way past

what caters towards new residents that drive up the cost of living. After a series of failed urban

renewal programs in the 1970s, a spike in poverty and poor housing conditions plagued East

Austin during the 1980s (Tretter 357). A legacy of poverty and poor housing conditions, as well

as disproportionate industrial-zoned land use near local residences and communities, is not

solved by the displacement of the populations that had to shoulder the burden of environmental

racism.

Some might suggest that the green development projects of the city of Austin is a more

effective response against suburbanization and the social isolation associated with it. However, a

contradiction of pursuing more climate friendly development is the increase in property value

associated with it. This alienates long term residents from their social connections in their home

city (Rice 145). This is especially concerning when social isolation is found to increase

perceptions of disaster disturbance, as studied following Hurricane Katrina (Forgette 31). While

on its face this may seem to nonetheless offset the carbon footprint of major cities, by attracting

more affluent residents, this development actually drives up consumption and carbon footprint

(Rice 145).

Contextualizing this issue with mutual aid during a climate crisis, we can observe that

where populations are not outright displaced completely out of Austin, they are subject to

housing and land with a legacy of environmental racism and inequal access to the benefits of

modern development. Gentrification can potentially make it harder for community members of

Austin to identify residents most in need of aid and community building, especially when

development taskforces explicitly reject these efforts that counter gentrification (Tretter 359).

The issue of gentrification and displacement is similarly relevant during the coronavirus

pandemic and the February 2021 energy crisis. Catering development in the city of Austin

around the interests of incoming young professionals while long term marginalized residents are

displaced only contributes to the precarious condition of Texas' deregulated power market in

February 2021. A higher concentration of high-consumption residents in the Austin area only

comes at the expense of the displaced residents with a lower carbon footprint, and in turn the city's sustainability aspirations (Fox, 2021). This issue is demonstrated by the February energy crisis when Texas consistently neglected energy efficiency requirements for buildings and many residents still live in buildings with poor insulation (Leslie 2). During the energy crisis, low income and racial minority groups suffered the greatest impacts and had the longest recovery time after the winter storm passed (Lee 9). More minority groups experienced severe outages over nonminority groups (Lee 10). Similarly, lower income groups and racial minority groups were more likely to struggle with access to food during the winter storm (Lee 16).

2.3   Sustainable Organizing and Governance Theory

The issues and limitations that arise out of mutual aid organizing can be understood through a transformative justice lens as will be discussed in the next section. However, to better understand the philosophy of governance and organization that underlies mutual aid historically, it would be remiss to not discuss the historical conception of mutual aid in the history of governance theory.

Mutual aid was first conceptualized by Russian philosopher Pyotr Kropotkin. While Kropotkin suggests that mutual aid is not a new or particularly modern phenomena, even dating back to ancient times, Kropotkin advanced the theory of mutual aid as a response to Nietzscheanism and Marxism (Kinna 279). Kropotkin was critical of the individualism and rejection of morality paramount to Nietzschean philosophy of the time, as well as what he considered to be authoritarian tendencies of Marxism (Kinna 267, 281). While there was some agreement with Marxism that human capabilities for technology would surpass scarcity, it was nonetheless essential to Kropotkin that an alternative to Marxism be proposed. He proposed mutual aid as a product of anarchist individualism, where free individuals satisfied individual

needs while simultaneously creating strong bonds in the community (Kinna 267, 274). Instead of the state providing a top-down approach in satisfying individual needs as a byproduct of satisfying production needs, communities would use mutual aid in a way that satisfied societal needs from the bottom-up (Kinna 267). In the grander scope of the history of political philosophy, mutual aid in this school of thought would function as a countercurrent in the popularization of social Darwinism that informed the politics of the time. Furthermore, the anarchist tradition advanced by Kropotkin maintains that attempting to coopt the state to undermine liberal politics or capitalism at large fails to understand that the state itself is the vehicle for authoritarianism (Firth 1).

Support for Kropotkin's theory on the state can be observed in the modern context of disaster relief, which will be applied to Austin Texas in February 2021 in the analysis section of this thesis. Modern mutual aid disaster relief networks became functional testaments for the efficacy of aid with minimal bureaucracy, usually by pulling influence from social movements like Occupy Wall Street. This is particularly true for the Common Ground Collective that arose out of Hurricane Katrina, as well as Occupy Sandy (Soden 475). While these organizations thrived in providing relief where NGOs and federal aid efforts failed, not all mutual aid organizations necessarily identify as anarchist even if their existence serves as a critique of liberal relief efforts (Firth 10).

Whether modern mutual aid organizations functionally identify their politics as anarchist in nature, the act of mutual aid is by definition tied to the anarchist tradition. Kropotkin defines mutual aid in its political significance and its general characteristics. Nonetheless the interpersonal issues that may arise within mutual aid organizations, anarchist or otherwise, is also exacerbated by antagonistic actors and political proximity to the state. Mutual aid

organizations may engage in a radical action of collective empathy and care. However, when it stops short of truly disrupting the state and rather steps in where the state fails to act, this sets up communities to survive entirely on scarce volunteer time, returning a community back to the norm following disasters that often are byproducts of the state's negligence (Firth 12). This begs the question if returning a community to the norm is not simply complicit in the state's negligence of communities. However, when this concerns the safety and survival of families and neighborhoods, it's hard to argue that mutual aid is a nefarious cause.

Scarce volunteer time can arguably be considered a privilege in cities like Austin when lower income communities with less professionalized backgrounds take on more jobs for less pay and thereby less disposable time to take care of themselves let alone their community. This is important to consider when the gentrification of Austin results in whiter, more professionalized residents potentially imposing themselves, albeit often with well intentions, on the very communities they are gentrifying when they partake in mutual aid or other advocacy work. This is especially true if gentrifying, rich, white communities of Austin tend to be the very people that largely compose charities and the donors charities cater to (Spade 23). Because of the historical necessity of mutual aid in marginalized communities, an increase in participation of the very people that compose the charities and industries that demobilize or coopt mutual aid strategies may be cause for wariness from the very marginalized people mutual aid attempts to protect.

How mutual aid organizations operate and allocate workload amongst each other, often on a completely volunteer basis, usually depends on the type of mutual aid organization and what kind of resources and target groups they are composed of. As discussed earlier in this literature review, the three main types of mutual aid organizations serve different purposes and structurally

this can make their work more or less intensive than others. For instance, a mutual aid organization dealing with grief or understanding identity may deal much less with resources like money and essential survival supplies than disaster response organizations would. This likely impacts the formality, or lack thereof, of certain mutual aid organizations, which can lead to difficulties understanding how fluid or structured an organization should be.

Not all mutual aid organizations, especially ones specializing in marginalized identities or professions, will necessarily have the bandwidth to deal with a plurality of issues that might be outside their scope. An abortion aid organization may not focus as closely on the climate crisis as a disaster response organization might. Nonetheless, it might impact how they perceive or understand reproductive rights. What is still true for all types of mutual aid organizations is the dilemma of addressing intersecting issues with limited time, resources, and capabilities. The most common issues for mutual aid organizations are identified by Dean Spade in his book *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity during this crisis and the next.* Spade cites three primary issues for mutual aid organizers culturally: secrecy and hierarchy, elitism and overpromising, and scarcity and competition (Spade 69). Groups might struggle to form clear decision-making tactics which can concentrate power in an individual or sub-group. Groups might prioritize donors as opposed to aid recipients, and overpromise how much they can realistically help a cause. A scarcity of time and resources might invoke competitiveness in group members, contributing to conflict or even harm. This is especially concerning if conflict or harm is exacerbated by unfair racial or gender dynamics that is just as observable in the workplace. Avoiding these internal issues is vital to creating a sustainable organizing culture, especially when compounding crises like gentrification, a global pandemic, and a weather crisis might exacerbate existing conflicts or issues within an organization's culture.

2.4   Transformative Justice

Comparing the positionality of formal disaster respondents like NGOs and other charities relative to how mutual aid seeks to function in a crisis, it is useful to employ two conceptions of justice that markedly expose the root philosophy of both mutual aid and the formal response to disaster and inequality; transformative justice and transitional justice. Invoking the legacy of 19th century philosophy, this dichotomy might be comparable to the rhetorical notion of 'reform versus revolution'. However, both are defined by the contexts in which they are symptomatic of a success or failure in addressing systemic inequality and insecurity. Transitional justice is justice that focuses power and autonomy in the state as the ultimate, decisive actor in accounting justice (Evans 2). The legal means of enacting justice prioritizes carceral solutions to violence that center perpetrators of violence as opposed to contextualizing the structures that enable perpetrators.

There is a fundamental disagreement between advocates of transitional justice and transformative justice in defining violence. Transformative justice advocates adopt an abstract application of how violence might manifest, not as isolated occurrences, but as sets of conditions that facilitate a long-term disenfranchisement of victims of violence. In using this definition to understand violence not as breaks from the status quo but as a component *of* the status quo, transformative justice seeks to remediate "pre-conflict structures" that facilitate the very egregious violence transitional justice is solely preoccupied with (Gready 1). In comparison, transitional justice advocates do not apply their definition of violence to a plurality of contexts and levels at which violence can be perpetuated (i.e economic violence, political violence, etc.).

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This dichotomy embodies what mutual aid attempts to address in advocating for the redistribution of resources and support. Mutual aid is a response to economic and political violence by the state that only expressly condemns oppression in legal terms. The state still does not seek to create sustainable peace as an antithesis to all categories of structural violence. Defining violence exclusively by how much it disrupts the way of daily life rather than by how daily life is limited for marginalized populations, the very definition of what equality and justice mean is heavily distorted; all to prioritize a proximity to comfort and to squash disruption. The implication from the lens of transitional justice is that disruption of the status quo is inherently violent and detrimental, but the status quo itself never can be. Understanding the impact of the winter crisis on gentrified communities of Austin through a transformative justice lens exposes just how violent gentrification is.

Transformative justice is applicable in an interpersonal dynamic within a community seeking to facilitate mutual aid. The political debate on the long-term efficacy of volunteer labor in mutual aid against structural violence set aside, transformative justice is nonetheless a social lens as it also is a political one. Mutual aid as a political action understands that the political history of a community and state manifest in all aspects of present life; the status quo. The political history informs the present as it does the past and the future. Community building is as abstract and intangible as is structural violence that thrives on being masqueraded into the status quo as non-violent itself. It is therefore relevant that the application of transformative justice in the abstract must be practiced interpersonally. In mutual aid organizations, the values of transformative justice must be applied to an understanding of how socializations across different identities and their positionality in a neoliberal, capitalist structure informs how those identity groups impact those of other identity groups. From this, equity is an actionable value. Mutual aid

organizers and recipients can and must build an ethos of community that centers the fact of violent pre-disaster structures into understanding how different socializations across identities impact biases that reinforce oppression and neglect. In the instance of Austin Texas, gentrification and the impact of racial segregation in Texas must be factored into a disaster response. This understanding must come *in conjunction* with an explicitly anti-racist social education for creating sustainable organizing cultures so that black and brown Texans are not alienated. Rather, they would be centered in the efforts that benefit their communities the most directly. This is an essential approach because their communities are often the most direct victims of a racial hegemony in transitional justice (Evans 13).

Through the lens of transformative justice, several different issue-based justices can be actualized and uncompromised based on how they intersect with each other. For instance, environmental justice intersects with racial justice under a transformative framework when the practice of these principles incorporates an analysis of what the legacy of racial segregation in Austin Texas looks like in the present and how this might disproportionately compromise black and brown communities in the event of a climate disaster like the February 2021 winter storm. Justice is understood not in terms of how legitimate community action is to the state, but rather in how the community protects itself and one another in a way that does not suggest that all peoples are impacted equally; rather acknowledges that some communities suffer the blows of injustice more disproportionately than others due to their identity. Pairing this framework to the practice of mutual aid with the interpersonal practice of anti-racist social education can foster sustainable organizing communities.

3. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

By contextualizing all these major concepts to the climate crisis, we can answer the question central to this thesis more directly; how can the 2021 winter crisis impact the future of mutual aid in Austin?

The sudden and unexpected impact of disasters like the winter crisis in Texas is a reminder that climate change is not an abstract, distant phenomenon. It is a scientific development that has real implications in the present day and the very near future. Scientific research shows that an increased frequency and intensity of natural disasters can be expected based on a surge in the last 50 years (United Nations, 2021). At a larger, global scale climate change is expected to influence mass migration patterns as populations flee regions of the earth that will no longer be inhabitable (Rigaud, et al. 2018). Conflicts over essential resources like food, shelter, and water will become more prevalent, particularly in countries victim to a legacy of colonialism (Newburger, 2021). Furthermore, the climate crisis can potentially be expected to be a major factor in a spike in diseases, and yes, pandemics (Cho, 2022). Nonetheless, the prevailing response from the United States' major industries and public leaders is inadequate for addressing the climate crisis with the urgency it needs (Plumer & Popovich). While the United States and major world powers most responsible for the climate crisis may not bear the greatest brunt of the crisis, it nonetheless impacts its citizens in the here and now. For Texans, it impacts how intensely our communities are hit by natural disasters and global events, and how long it takes our communities to recover.

In times of crises, people often believe others to be much kinder and materially supportive of others. In my experience, this underlying altruism motivates mutual aid organizers

to take their work seriously. In my own experience, my involvement with a local mutual aid organization in Bryan-College Station was in part influenced by my mother's experience raising two children entirely on her own with a very limited salary. The relief mutual aid can provide to communities comprised of mothers like my own can make a resounding impact on the futures of families and entire communities. This is why effective and sustainable mutual aid organizing is more essential than ever. If the coronavirus pandemic is any indication, mutual aid can step in when the next foreseeable crisis (the climate crisis) inevitably becomes more and more prevalent in Texas. It is an indication that mutual aid organizers must adapt to the worst case scenario before it has necessarily occurred. Furthermore, the climate crisis demonstrates that mutual aid organizers must adapt to how already vulnerable and alienated members of their communities will be even more stranded in disasters happening simultaneously (in this case, winter electrical outage and a global pandemic). Simultaneous disasters demand an effective emergency approach that mutual aid organizations can readily adopt. When hard mitigation by the state and its infrastructure fails, it is important to consider not only how to care for community members in the fallout of a climate disaster, but also how to prepare for it in the long term. Mutual aid organizing in the era of climate change demands a strategy that is preemptive, not just reactive.

So how can this conclusion be applied to Austin Texas? What can mutual aid organizing look like post-February 2021? Analyzing the contents of this literature review will help formulate strategies to promote sustainable mutual aid organizing based on transformative justice principles. While the strategies suggested here based on this literature review may not be applied the same in all types of mutual aid organizations, the general principles address issues that might occur across all types and is therefore broadly applicable. The principle of disaster preparedness can also be applied to other disasters not as related to the climate crisis. This can include human

rights disasters such as sudden judicial decisions that may make abortion or gender affirmation surgeries less accessible, for example.

Disaster preparedness, response and recovery is a multifaceted endeavor. In the case of mutual aid organizing, understanding structural violence like environmental racism in Austin means understanding that a reactive response is not only what is essential to empowering communities, but also preparing them for disasters before they occur.

3.1   Transformative Justice in Response to Multiple Disasters

Transformative justice lies at the root of mutual aid organizing and what it serves to accomplish both in the short term and the long term. Transformative justice seeks to understand violence as structural and help communities transcend their oppression. It can be crucially applied to climate action at both the local and international level by addressing existing injustices like racism and how they are reinforced in the modern day through gentrification. Oppressive norms such as gentrification, in a transformative justice framework, *is* violence. The motivating factor of transformative justice is to transition away from structural violence in a way that does not in turn recreate new forms of violence (Gready 1).

Transformative justice is applicable to how communities can understand themselves in relation to the state and even their local government. It is also relevant to how community members and groups interact with each other. Addressing conflict in a way that does not escalate tensions into violence, either in the form of emotional/physical violence or the psychological violence of racism and other bigotry, is transformative justice in action. When structural violence like environmental racism and gentrification contributes to the catastrophes of climate change, communities must respond by practicing transformative justice in both how they prepare and how they rebuild.

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In the case of Austin Texas, it is crucial for mutual aid organizations to apply a transformative justice lens to how organizers understand the structural violence particular to Austin. In the case of the climate crisis, gentrification is a stark example of structural violence making marginalized communities disproportionately harmed by catastrophes in Austin, though it is likely not the only factor. Therefore, establishing proximity to the state by becoming a non-profit or formal NGO is to completely misunderstand that the social goal of mutual aid is empowering communities to transcend vulnerable circumstances. This is one of many risks that may occur as populations of cities like Austin skew whiter and more professionalized. Young professionals with progressive tendencies may apply their professionalized socializations to mutual aid organizing at the expense of the local communities that mutual aid assists. Young white progressives that contribute to the gentrification of Austin will not as readily understand why NGOs and charities fail the populations they intend to serve, especially if they themselves have never experienced issues like environmental racism or poverty. They will not understand from lived experience the history of mutual aid in Black American communities or in colonized countries. Cultural exposure to marginalized members of these community can contribute to better understanding of experiences other than one's own. It is nonetheless critical that these privileged individuals center the experience and needs of these marginalized communities before their own.

The way this can be accomplished is through a transformative justice lens in mutual aid organizing. Privileged communities that are not victimized by racism and white supremacy will not have the same socialization or perspectives on issues that arise in mutual aid organizing. The lived experience and needs of communities impacted by gentrification and environmental racism can be understood among higher-SES organizers as relevant information completely outside of

their socialization yet pivotal to their cause (Takeda 404). This is particularly important because whites generally do not have self-awareness regarding their race in a civilization that favors their skin color versus racial groups whose race is not favored (Brown et al., 2003). These communities may have implicit biases or outright ignorance of issues particular to the communities they share a locality with. A transformative justice approach to mutual aid organizing can prevent these biases from neglecting or overlooking the most vulnerable populations in Austin because structural violence will be understood at the local level. Using this lens mutual aid organizations can better navigate around the issues gentrification poses to accessing and aiding Austinites most vulnerable to climate disasters like the winter freeze.

3.2   Strategies for Sustainable Mutual Aid Organizing in the Climate Crisis

Mutual aid organizing philosophically functions to empower a community to transcend their material conditions. The social component of empowerment during disasters is heavily rooted in social networks, most notably when the most at-risk are often the ones with the weakest social networks due to social isolation (Forgette 42). When gentrification in Austin contributes to this issue, the transformative justice model invigorates mutual aid organizations to directly empower the most at-risk through a democratic, community led fashion that does not recreate structural violence.

Mutual aid organizations regularly rely on a democratic group decision making process. Combining democratic decision making with decentralized knowledge prevents the friction between widespread knowledge yet limited, centralized decision making that is often common in disaster NGOs (Takeda 402). Mutual aid organizations can avert this issue by ensuring that skill sharing and expertise is shared across every organizer, but also ensuring that all decision making is directly democratic, not contingent on a leader or sub-group.

Specific to the climate crisis and how it will continue to impact Austin Texas, it is useful to examine mutual aid organizing in Puerto Rico. Puerto Rico's mutual aid organizing is an excellent example of how mutual aid organizers not only adapted to the collapse of the state following natural disasters, but also the COVID-19 pandemic. Strategies that were deployed in Puerto Rico throughout 2020 can be utilized in Austin Texas should another event like the winter freeze happen again, the pandemic worsen, or both happen simultaneously again. Volunteers and residents of Puerto Rico utilized a census to understand the demographics, damage, and resources needed in Puerto Rico (Soto 305). These mutual aid organizations became semi-permanent fixtures that became more specialized in emergency preparedness training, as well as consulting health specialists for guidance when the coronavirus pandemic first hit (Soto 306).

When Austinites cannot rely on capital to rebuild infrastructure or exclusive expertise, consulting specialists on public health and emergency issues can encourage broader education and prevent risk of harm or disease. Generally hard mitigation tools and capacities are in the hands of the state and its control of infrastructure, but soft mitigation skills can easily be a skill shared across the community (Lichterman 263). These types of skills include first aid, search and rescue, and mental health care (Lichterman 264). Deploying data collection skills on residents in the form of a census can also contribute to a more effective emergency preparedness plan. This can be especially effective for understanding what special accommodations or strategies to adopt in the interest of every community member. This is relevant particularly for older populations and identifying the best and most effective way to contact them, making emergency preparedness plans accessible to the disabled, etc.

There are some cautions to heed when adopting emergency preparedness strategies. Part of the sustainability of mutual aid initiatives relies upon a fluid approach that is easily adaptable

to circumstances and dynamics. This is in part attributable to what Takeda describes as the holistic management model, in contrast to the bureaucratic model that is central to formal disaster respondents (Takeda 401). It is important to nonetheless avoid bureaucratizing mutual aid organizations that create climate preparedness plans. While transformative justice provides a lens that can avoid unfair group dynamics and unjust outreach, emergency preparedness must nonetheless rely on the fluidity of mutual aid organizing. This is to avoid highly codified, inflexible planning that may not be applicable in unforeseen circumstances. Skillsharing, for instance, demands coordination of activities and an equal knowledge bank among organizers. Therefore organizing should avoid "clearly stratified division of labor so redundancy and confusion is avoided" (Takeda 400). Otherwise, mutual aid organizations risk recreating the same ineptitude of highly bureaucratic NGOs that rely on outdated models no longer applicable to unforeseen circumstances or multiple disasters at once. To further avoid bureaucratization and the cultural issues that can arise out of it, organizers can also rely upon clear and democratically agreed upon outcomes and objectives (Takeda 409).

While mutual aid organizing when done effectively can contribute to the preparedness and response efforts against the climate crisis, innovating new structural alternatives to local issues may not necessarily fall in the capabilities of organizers. Supporting decentralized, community led efforts not directly led by a mutual aid organization can be an effective way to simultaneously address the issue of gentrification in a way that does not overextend or burnout aid organizers. One such way could be collaborating with and promoting community land trust networks, unions, or local advocacy organizations that have representative power with the city council, the state legislature, etc.

All of the aforementioned attributes should contribute to a emergency preparedness strategy rooted in mutual aid organizing. Other strategies might include resources sharing and networking with other mutual aid organizing, creating broader climate preparedness plans across the network, and so on.

3.3   Limitations and Considerations: What Mutual Aid Cannot Replace

It is important to note some crucial limitations to this thesis. While it would have been beneficial to conduct original research by interviewing aid organizers, surveying their responses or collecting data on what community members they were able to reach during the winter storm, this research was not realistic given time and resources. The conclusion of this thesis relies upon pre-existing research that deals closely with a myriad of topics relevant to Austin Texas. Not all of these findings can always accurately predict how mutual aid organizations may behave in times of crisis or necessarily be able to measure their strategy when circumstances demand a change in outreach tactics. Hopefully this thesis can serve as a basis for research in the future into these questions. Similarly, this thesis may not necessarily be as prescient to mutual aid organizations that experience significant changes in philosophy and typology. Mutual aid organizations that transition into non-profits or other types of NGOs cannot be as easily understood based on the research in this thesis, as these organizations may now be shifting away from transformative justice principles toward transitional justice principles. This transition is outside the scope of this research. The type of crisis this thesis primarily focuses on is how the climate crisis makes marginalized communities more at risk to disaster, and how mutual aid organizations should prepare accordingly.

While the general conclusion of this thesis argues that a more cogent governance guided by transformative justice can alleviate internal conflicts and dysfunction during times of crisis,

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transformative justice cannot prevent dysfunction from happening. Rather, transformative justice is most applicable to addressing conflict when it arises and how to move forward, how to improve cultural dynamics between organizers, how to apply justice at the interpersonal level, how to think deeply about social justice issues and tangibly apply it when addressing social inequality.

It is additionally relevant that much of the decision making relevant to a mutual aid organization and how to approach their work is a case-by-case basis. It is impossible to encapsulate all group cultures simply by how vast the myriad of backgrounds mutual aid organizers often have and how diverse their perspectives are based on these backgrounds. Fluidity and flexibility in some cases may be more effective than a preemptive plan for completely unforeseeable events with unknown impacts. No amount of strategy or preemptive planning can always protect organizers or aid recipients from how unknown the future is in the climate crisis. The best approach, this thesis argues, is to plan preemptively by considering the history of a local community and factor this historical influence into how the community will be impacted during the climate crisis in ways particularly relevant to it. This can include other factors such as geography, legal history, the history of religious communities, etc.

While mutual aid as it exists now cooperates with communities to share resources for survival of individuals, families, and communities, skill sharing cannot necessarily replace expertise that goes into infrastructure and very particular resources. Mutual aid networks as they currently exist, for all the good it has provided throughout the pandemic, often cannot replace crumbling infrastructure that only governmental bureaucracies have a monopoly on. Hard mitigation only accomplishable by the state and construction specialists cannot be compensated for with soft mitigation skills for emergency preparedness.

A final consideration to make is that the political motivations of some mutual aid organizations may be to confront the state or promote political action that does so. Long term political action that seeks to disrupt the state and its role in structural violence (such as police brutality, mass incarceration, etc.) through both non-violent and violent means is not within the scope of this thesis. This political action is often tangential to, but not synonymous with, mutual aid organizing.

4.   CONCLUSION

The proposal that arises out of this thesis is twofold. The way Austin mutual aid organizers can protect their community from the climate crisis where the government and NGOs fail is not only through disaster response but through disaster preparedness. Soft mitigation skills can be trained and promoted throughout the communities of Austin by mutual aid organizers when hard mitigation, such as a winterized electric grid, disproportionately fails people victim to racialized neglect. To avoid recreating the same structural issues that occur in NGOs and other formal agents like charities, applying a transformative justice approach to mutual aid not only protects the organizers but reaches the community members that need the aid the most. Understanding structural violence like systemic racism and directly applying it to how mutual aid organizers assist their communities can counter against the erasure of Austinites caused by gentrification. Similarly, applying transformative justice principles in the internal aid organizer culture can prevent an imbalance of power related to skills and assets, especially as cities like Austin, and consequently their organizers, skew whiter and more professionalized. This can mitigate any potential cultural issues that could arise, such as saviorism or paternalism. Democratizing organizing skills in the form of skillsharing and community training not only can unite Austinites in common struggle, but also empower the city and its culture against the climate crisis.

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