

Mutual Aid During COVID-19 in Brooklyn, New York: A Cross-Class, Interracial Collective
Mobilization During Rising Inequality and Ongoing Crises

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Abstract

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This research examines Mutual Aid (MA) during COVID-19 in Brooklyn, New York as a case study of a cross-class and interracial collective mobilization. MA generally refers to collective care for collective power (Spade, 2020). Unlike traditional forms of MA that organize around a collective identity of surviving and resisting an institutional injustice (Nelson, 2011; Hartman, 2018), the MA groups in this study organized around a call to support your “neighbors,” a contested term in gentrifying Brooklyn. Drawing on fieldwork from November 2020 through June 2021, this study examines MA groups that formed since the onset of the pandemic with a focus on neighborhood-based grocery operations. It explores the potential for, and inherent challenges of, organizing collective action across socioeconomic and racial lines, particularly during ongoing, intersecting crises – the pandemic, economic fall-out, racist state violence, and democratic decay – where inequalities are increasingly acute and apparent. Through reflexive participant observation, interviews, and archival research, and using movement framing (Benford and Snow, 2000) as a theoretical lens, this research finds that while MA serves as a platform for

collective dreaming and future planning for a more equitable, democratic world, MA groups also confront and grapple with the structural inequities they aim to address within their own organizing and operations. While these tensions and contradictions ultimately constrain MA's prefigurative politics and practice for a more just world, MA groups nevertheless cultivate organizational and knowledge repertoires that members view as essential quotidian resistance to institutional injustice.

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So, one of my neighbors says to me, and she's like, 'Girl,' she's like, 'there are white people who are bringing food.' And I was like, 'What?' She's like, 'You call this number, there's some white people from Jersey and they bring you food.' And I was like, 'Oh, like a mutual aid project.' ... And so what's beautiful is that ... mutual aid networks and projects are expanding ... [but] whether we're talking about transformative justice, abolition, mutual aid, we have to talk about housing, and we have to talk about displacement, and we have to talk about gentrification.

- Ejeris Dixon, Founding Director of Vision Change Win; webinar conversation with Mariame Kaba and Dean Spade, “We Keep Each Other Safe: Mutual Aid for Survival and Solidarity,” hosted by the Barnard Center for Research on Women; November 12, 2020.

INTRODUCTION

This research examines Mutual Aid (MA) during COVID-19 in Brooklyn, New York as a case study of a cross-class and interracial collective mobilization. MA generally refers to “collective coordination to meet each other’s needs ... from an awareness that the systems we have in place are not going to meet them” (Spade, 2020). MA has roots in indigenous practices, and has long been a tool of collective care and resistance by traditionally marginalized communities (Nelson, 2011; Hartman, 2018; Cházaro, Reddy, and Spade, 2020). While MA can take many forms, during the pandemic, it has expanded as grocery delivery for the elderly and immuno-compromised, rent pools for people out of work or facing eviction, and bail funds for people in jail. Alongside last summer’s uprisings against racial injustice and ahead of the 2020 elections, MA networks have also been sites of political discourse.

Drawing on fieldwork from November 2020 through June 2021, this study examines several MA groups that formed since the onset of the pandemic with a focus on neighborhood-based grocery operations. Unlike traditional forms of MA that organize around a collective identity of surviving and resisting an institutional injustice, the MA groups in this study organized around their shared geographic location, a fraught issue in gentrifying Brooklyn.

This research explores the potential for, and inherent challenges of, organizing collective action across socioeconomic and racial lines, particularly during ongoing, intersecting crises – the pandemic, economic fall-out, racist state violence, and democratic decay – where inequalities are increasingly acute and apparent. Through reflexive participant observation, interviews, and archival research, I examine how cross-class collective actions take shape in an era of rising inequality. More specifically, I explore three main research questions: (1) How and why do people participate in MA, and what meaning do they ascribe to their participation? (2) How do MA groups frame their strategies and aims to address structural inequities, and how do they navigate inequalities that emerge within their organizing and operations? (3) How do potential disputes and tensions around structural inequities shape MA’s narratives, repertoires, and impact?

While aiming to address basic sustenance needs left unmet by the social safety net, MA groups also seek to raise collective consciousness around the roots of the structural inequities that the pandemic laid bare and to activate individual and collective agency to ameliorate these inequities. The means and meaning of these aims, however, are less clear during a time of rising inequality and in a space of ongoing displacement than in more traditional settings where MA takes place. Traditional MA practices typically (1) are part of a larger social movement addressing an issue of injustice; (2) are organized by people directly impacted by that injustice; and (3) cultivate a collective identity around surviving and resisting that injustice. MA groups in this study, by contrast, are oriented around neighborhood-based collective care to address food security. They are not part of a broader social movement, and they are organized by people across class lines with varying levels of food security. In addition, they issue a call to support your “neighbors,” a contested term in a space of ongoing gentrification and displacement.

Through original empirical analysis and using movement framing (Benford and Snow, 2000) as a theoretical lens, this research finds that while MA serves as a platform for collective dreaming and future planning for a more equitable, democratic world, MA groups also confront and grapple with the structural inequities they aim to address within their own organizing and operations. While these tensions and contradictions ultimately constrain MA's prefigurative politics and practice for a more just world, MA groups nevertheless cultivate organizational and knowledge repertoires that members view as essential quotidian resistance to institutional injustice.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, I review the literature on MA as well as collective action and social movements. I then provide more details about the case I examine, namely MA during the pandemic in Brooklyn, and describe the methods I employed to collect and analyze data. Finally, I describe my findings and conclude with a discussion about the implications of this research. MA as a case study of a cross-class collective mobilization during a period of rising inequality has broader implications for our political era, defined by ongoing crises and mistrust in institutions, about how and why people take collective action, what future they envision, and how they aim to get there.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Mutual Aid

Mutual aid (MA) became an increasingly popular term in common lexicon during 2020 as local groups emerged or evolved to address the urgent needs of residents during COVID-19 –

groceries, medicine, and financial support.¹ MA as a practice of collective resilience and resistance, however, has ancient roots. Throughout history, MA has emerged in times of crisis and stark oppression: it is present in prisons (Davis, 2003; Kaba, 2021), in concentration camps (Dunin-Wąsowicz, 1982; Maher, 2010), in “the slave ship, the plantation, and the ghetto” (Hartman, 2018, p. 471). People directly affected by these crises – which scholars cite as having roots in racial capitalism (Robinson, 1983; Fanon, 1961; Jenkins and Leroy, 2021) – often come to MA to address the trauma these crises inflict. While receiving care through collective networks, individuals also learn about the structural roots of the harm they have endured. Those who practice MA clarify that poverty is not due to individual failures, but to economic structures that require inequity; incarceration is not due to individual “crimes,” but to the criminalization dominant society imposes on oppressed people in order to sustain this inequity (Gilmore, 2017). In this way, MA can activate healing by destigmatizing the experience of structural inequities, placing the blame of this experience on inherently unjust systems rather than individual failings.

Traditionally, MA has been a constitutive component of larger justice-focused social movements, as care is a necessity when surviving and combating issues of injustice. Historic examples of MA cited in the sociology literature include that practiced by Jewish people in concentration camps during World War II (Dunin-Wąsowicz, 1982; Maher, 2010), incarcerated people in the U.S. (Gilmore, 2017), and microfinance programs in India (Sanyal, 2009), to name just a few. The Black Panther Party’s (“Party’s”) Survival Programs, which emerged in Oakland in the 1960s and spread across the country through local Party chapters and partners over several decades, represent a classic example of MA (Nelson, 2011; Bassett, 2016; Hill Collins, 2010).

¹ From March 15, 2020 through March 14, 2021 the *New York Times* ran 163 stories with keywords “mutual aid,” compared with zero stories from March 15, 2019 through March 14, 2020, according to a Lexis Nexis search.

The Survival Programs included dozens of initiatives, ranging from cooperative housing and food support, to free legal aid and transportation to visit loved ones in prison, employment and education programs, and an intercommunal news service. Through the Survival Programs, the Party built networks of collective care and collective education, designed to activate collective consciousness and collective power. The Party's Free Medical Clinics, for instance, provided care to Black people and low-income communities, while also promoting an interrogation of why access to health care was limited and an understanding of and resistance to the structural forces, including medical discrimination, underlying health disparities (Nelson, 2011; Basset, 2016). This work included recruiting and "re-educating" doctors, many of whom came from elite backgrounds, around the root causes of health disparities and their role in addressing it. The Party's political education programs for doctors and communities more broadly taught writings from radical thinkers – including Frantz Fanon, Malcolm X, and Che Guevara – alongside lessons on the U.S. Constitution and know-your-rights trainings (Nelson, 2011).² The Party extended its community clinics and education programs beyond Black neighborhoods into other low-income communities, developing an intersectional analysis and liberation agenda. The Party even revised its original 1966 Ten Point Program in 1972 to include health and an intersectional lens, entitling the sixth point: "We Want Completely Free Health Care for All Black and Oppressed People" (Bassett, 2016). The Party's intersectional framework and strategies cultivated solidarity with "the civil rights and women's movements in the United States, and liberation movements in Africa and Asia," developing power in numbers and an understanding

² I am currently drafting another paper that considers this empirical data on MA today alongside the history and legacy of the Black Panther Party and Frantz Fanon.

that liberation requires care for and freedom of all oppressed people (Bassett, 2016, p. 1741; see also UCLA Office of Information Technology Disabilities & Computing Program, 2020).

While cultivating collective consciousness around medical discrimination through their clinics, the Party activated a similar reckoning around food insecurity through their Free Breakfast Program. Cited by FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover as “the greatest threat” the Party posed (Spade, 2020, p. 10), the Party’s breakfast program was soon used as a model for the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Free and Reduced Meals in schools. Dean Spade, whose book on MA recently helped to popularize the concept, discusses how this marked a co-optation on the part of the government intended to weaken the power of the Party. However, this example also reveals the complex relationship between MA and the state: MA exists to reveal state failings and gaps in the social safety net, provide mutual care for all affected by these failings, and foster collective action for reform. Thus, the USDA’s co-optation of the Party’s Free Breakfast Program had the effect of expanding food security for millions of children, even if its aims were at least in part to weaken the Party’s power. MA organizers emphasize that communities should celebrate expansions of the state safety net as wins led by sustained community organizing – rather than as state generosity – while continuing to organize for further change and caring for each other along the way (Spade and Hu, 2020; Cházaro, Reddy, and Spade, 2020).

The importance of this MA strategy was evident in Spring 2020, as the limitations of USDA’s free breakfast program became acutely apparent. As schools shuttered due to COVID-19, teachers feared for their students’ safety from the pandemic and from food insecurity. As they have done throughout history, MA networks expanded across the country over the last year to address communities’ urgent survival needs. Contemporary MA groups

operate within the ongoing, intersecting crises of the pandemic, state violence, economic collapse, and democratic decay, each of which disproportionately impact Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC). While aiming to address basic sustenance needs left unmet by the social safety net, MA groups also seek to raise collective consciousness around the roots of the structural inequities that the pandemic laid bare and to activate individual and collective agency to ameliorate these inequities.

The means and meaning of these aims, however, are less clear within a cross-class and interracial collective mobilization, particularly when members were subject to physical distancing mandates, than in more traditional settings where MA takes place. Traditional MA practices typically (1) are part of a larger social movement addressing an issue of injustice; (2) are organized by people directly impacted by that injustice; and (3) cultivate a collective identity around surviving and resisting that injustice. MA groups in this study, by contrast, are oriented around neighborhood-based collective care to address food security. They are not part of a broader social movement, and are organized by people across class lines with varying levels of food security. In addition, they are aiming to cultivate a collective identity around their shared geographic location – a fraught issue in rapidly gentrifying Brooklyn. Moreover, while many groups' call to action in the early days of the pandemic was to strengthen local food security through highly efficient, volunteer-run grocery operations, the political dynamics of the past year – including the uprisings for racial justice and evidence of democratic decay – have pushed broader issues of institutional injustice to the forefront of discourse across the country and within MA groups. In this context, MA groups have grappled with their framing techniques and calls to action, while constantly contending with amorphous participants – “neighbors” – across diverse

political persuasions and backgrounds. Thus, this research examines how a cross-class collective mobilization that aims to address structural inequities also confronts and grapples with structural inequities within its own organizing and operations. The literature on collective action and social movements offer a useful framework for examining these questions.

Collective Action and Social Movements

Like MA, social movements tend to emerge in times of crisis, as “old structures are challenged and new ones envisaged and proved feasible” (della Porta and Pavan, 2017, p. 297; see also Roy, 2020). Indeed, “heightened conflict” is the first of five core features of what Tarrow (1993) defines as “protest waves,” the cyclical nature with which mass mobilizations emerge, as disruptions in social sectors and institutions lead to collective discontent and gradually collective action, ranging from widespread protest, to strikes, sit-ins, and armed conflict. According to Tarrow, cycles of protest are “the crucibles in which moments of madness are tempered into the permanent tools of a society’s repertoire of contention” (1993, p. 284). Some propose that we are now in a global protest wave that emerged initially following the economic recession of 2008 – as evident in the subsequent rise of the Occupy Movement, Arab Spring, Tea Party, and Movement for Black Lives, to name just a few – and reached a crescendo in 2020. According to Mampilly (2021), these movements emerged in response to declining trust in government and “[f]issures in the social contract,” of which the “mishandling of Covid is just the latest offense.” Following the murder of George Floyd by police officers in May 2020, uprisings in support of the Movement for Black Lives spread across the country and the globe during and immediately following government-mandated lockdowns and physical distancing

related to the pandemic. These protests were met with violent backlash in the form of police brutality and armed vigilantism.

While the specifics and intersection of each of these events is beyond the scope of this study, this thesis sees MA as one form of collective action emerging in response to a time of ongoing, intersecting crises, which the interview data reveal are front of mind for MA members. Moreover, this study examines the ways in which MA helps participants make meaning of these crises' root causes, and their role within and power to address these crises (Kurzman, 2008; della Porta and Pavan, 2017; Emirbayer and Mische, 1998).

A principal way that MA fosters this meaning-making is through the framing process (Benford and Snow, 2000). Framing generally involves three phrases: “diagnostic framing,” or identifying the problem to be addressed; “prognostic framing,” that is, proposing potential solutions; and “motivational framing,” issuing the call to action – what Gamson (1995) refers to as the “agency” component of collective action. There is significant variability that could influence a frame’s success, including “problem identification and direction or locus of attribution; flexibility and rigidity; inclusivity and exclusivity; interpretive scope and influence; and degree of resonance” (Benford and Snow, 2000, p. 618). Frames are developed, generated, and elaborated through discursive processes in which disparate experiences are weaved together into a common reality. Frames are also developed through strategic processes that bridge, amplify, expand, and transform them. Through these processes, problems are linked, claims are associated with existing values and beliefs, social movement goals are extended, and former understandings about a problem are transformed. Social movement framing processes are inherently contested, as they seek to upend traditionally held beliefs or the “meaning of some

aspect of reality” (Benford, 1993, p. 680). Social movement organizations (SMOs)³ must strategically navigate political opportunities, cultivate collective identities, and outline specific objectives in order to mobilize towards and accomplish their aims. As detailed below, MA’s framing evolved alongside changing macro-structural dynamics.

Central to the framing process, and of particular relevance to this study, is the ways in which SMOs cultivate a collective identity. Polletta and Jasper (2001, p. 291, 298-299) define collective identity as:

imagined as well as concrete communities, involv[ing] an act of perception and construction as well as the discovery of preexisting bonds, interests, and boundaries. It is fluid and relational, emerging out of interactions with a number of different audiences ... It provides categories by which individuals divide up and make sense of the social world ... movements promote new identities as a way to gain power as well as transform selves ... Since mobilization does not always require preexisting collective identities, activists’ efforts to strategically ‘frame’ identities are critical in recruiting participants. ‘Frames’ are the interpretive packages that activists develop to mobilize potential adherents and constituents ... When successful, frames make a compelling case for the ‘injustice’ of the condition and the likely effectiveness of collective ‘agency’ in changing that condition.

Collective identities are one of the ways in which movements transform individuals, situating participants within a cause larger than themselves and, as noted above, helping to activate individual and collective agency to work towards this cause. During crises, in particular, people may be susceptible to emerging collective identities, as Polletta and Jasper (2001) write, “actions driven by identity rather than calculations of interests are especially likely when political, economic, or social change has destabilized prior identities. During such formative moments, one acts ... in order to reassert who one is” (p. 299; Ringmar, 1996). While some studies assume the presence of a collective identity within a social movement, scholars increasingly point to the role of movements in *creating* a collective identity (Jasper, 2004). For instance, Ghaziani and

³ It is worth noting that some movement scholars and activists might contest the term SMO and resist the transition from movement to formal organization (see, e.g., Piven and Cloward, 1979; Spade, 2020).

Baldassarri (2011, p. 183) argue that the “empirical unity of social movements is an outcome that requires explanation rather than a starting point to be taken for granted (Melucci, 1988).” This research meets this call, investigating how MA groups cultivate a collective identity, including navigating tensions that emerge around this identity.

As movements aim to cultivate collective identities and frame the strategies and goals of the movement more generally, debates emerge. Frame disputes *within* movement organizations are an important and understudied feature of social movements. As Benford (1993, p. 698) writes:

frame disputes are ... a crucial, if not essential, feature of the everyday life of movements. These disputes indicate that movements are seldom monolithic entities ... and SMOs do not develop a single collective identity, but rather within any movement several collective identities are typically constructed and may vie for legitimacy ... frame disputes help shape a movement.

In his study of LGBTQ marches in Washington, DC, Ghaziani (2008, p. 285) emphasizes that frame disputes or “[i]nfighting also enables identity work,” shaping the aims, means, and “strategic choices” (Jasper, 2004, p. 4) of movements. Through MA, I follow Benford’s (1993, p. 698) suggestion to examine “the conditions under which [frame disputes] influence social movement structures, affect constituent mobilization, and facilitate or impede a movement’s chances of success.”

Frame disputes can both be reflected in and lead to repertoires of contention, defined by Tilly (1986, p. 2) as the “whole set of means [a group] has for making claims of different types on different individuals.” While Tilly situated contentious repertoires specifically within protests, the term has been adopted and adapted in other forms of collective action. For instance, in her analysis of the women’s movement in the United States from the late 19 through early 20th

centuries, Clemens (1993) reveals the ways in which disenfranchised populations engage in non-traditional political methods to drive institutional change. More specifically, Clemens describes how women's movements of this era practiced "organizational repertoires" that aligned with their principles – such as minimal internal hierarchy to promote equity – and advanced their aims, such as lobbying to advocate for their interests in the absence of the vote. This case study demonstrates how "organizational innovations" (Clemens, 1993, p. 782) that marginalized groups adopt out of necessity gradually become a part of the mainstream, revealing one of the unanticipated and underappreciated outcomes of social movements.

In addition to innovating organizational forms, social movements are also sites of knowledge production. According to della Porta and Pavan (2017), "repertoires of knowledge practices ... are supported by rational and strategic practices to produce a collective self, determine action strategies, contribute to policy alternatives as well as to spread alternative imaginaries to challenge and reform the status quo" (p. 309). As "laboratories of democratic innovation" (della Porta and Pavan, 2017, p. 298), social movements help to not only challenge the status quo, but also the presumed understanding on which the status quo rests. Cox (2014) emphasizes that movements are "developmental," providing a platform for participants to construct "a way of thinking more adequate to their experience, a way of being which is more adequate to their daily struggles and needs" (p. 53, 48-49; della Porta and Pavan, 2017). In this way, movements practice "prefigurative" politics to reflect, practice, and strive towards a world for which SMOs are advocating (Polletta, 2014; Boggs, 1977; Price, Nonini, and Fox Tree, 2008; Mische, 2009).

In MA groups, members articulate the ways in which MA exists to address the world's injustices, and to provide a platform to dream of and build a more just "world anew" (Roy, 2020). MA groups use frames and develop repertoires that cultivate collective resilience in the face of and collective resistance to structural inequities, while practicing prefigurative politics to reimagine and build a more equitable, democratic future. At the same time, MA groups confront the current political realities and existing structural inequities within their ongoing organizing and operations, as particularly apparent within their efforts to cultivate a collective identity around "neighbors," a fraught term in gentrifying Brooklyn. This research investigates "the dynamics of micromobilization, especially reality negotiation and construction processes, to identify patterns concerning the forms, underlying conditions, and consequences of frame disputes" (Benford 1993, p. 683), with a particular focus on how to address structural inequities in a time of rising inequality and ongoing crises.

CASE CONTEXT

This research draws on fieldwork with MA groups in Brooklyn, New York from November 2020 through June 2021. I collected data via participant observation and interviews. I provide more details on these methods below. First, however, I provide a concise overview of components of MA groups that are most relevant to this study, including: (1) the context within which they operate, namely contemporary Brooklyn during the pandemic; (2) the logistics of neighborhood-based grocery operations; and (3) the organizational structure of MA groups, including decision-making. Each of these components not only provides important descriptive information, but also sheds light into the culture of these organizations.

Brooklyn during the Pandemic

As is well-documented in social science literature, Brooklyn, New York is a borough of robust diversity and significant inequalities (see, e.g., Donnelly, 2018; Lees, 2003; Gould and Lewis, 2018). While the rich history and nuanced diversity of Brooklyn are beyond the scope of this paper, I briefly elevate key demographic dynamics relevant to this research.

“Table 1” and “Table 2” in the appendix reveal neighborhood-level demographic data, compiled from New York University's Furman Center, which conducts research on housing, neighborhoods, and urban policy. Overall, the data reveals that nearly all neighborhoods in Brooklyn have become wealthier and whiter over the last two decades.⁴ Throughout the borough from 2000 to 2019, median rents increased 45 percent in real dollars and there has been a 10.9 percent rise in the share of renter households that are “severely rent burdened.”⁵ Moreover, the number of “units issued new certificates of occupancy,”⁶ an indicator of new developments or renovations, grew from 1,611 in 2000 to 10,264 in 2019. The Urban Displacement Project (2019) reports that within the broader New York City region:

[O]ver one-third of low-income households ... live in low-income neighborhoods already experiencing displacement and/or gentrification pressures ... Over 12% of neighborhoods ... are gentrifying or in an advanced stage of gentrification ... 71 [super-gentrified or exclusive neighborhoods] transitioned between 1990 and 2016 from low-income areas to areas where the median household income, at \$140,000, was greater than 200% of the regional median in 2016.

⁴ The few neighborhoods that have had the percentage of their white population decline are those closer to the south and southeastern coast of Brooklyn, traditionally a home of recent migrants from Eastern Europe.

⁵ NYU's Furman Center defines “severely rent-burdened households” as “the share of renter households whose gross rent made up at least 50 percent of their monthly pre-tax income.”

⁶ According to NYU's Furman Center, “Units issued new certificates of occupancy” is defined as “The number of residential units in buildings issued new certificates of occupancy issued by the DOB [New York City's Department of Buildings] each year.”

This study draws on this data to contextualize the setting where MA groups in this study operate, and how MA members make sense of the on-the-ground realities of these data. It is also worth noting that MA groups, while organized around neighborhoods, do not map directly onto Census tracts, the way in which most governmental data is collected and reported.⁷ Moreover, I do not name the neighborhoods where MA groups take place and interviewees live in order to maintain confidentiality. Rather, I cite key features of their neighborhoods, including the local historic racial and ethnic populations and level of gentrification, that are relevant to this analysis. Thus, the data in Tables 1 and 2 are not intended to provide a roadmap to specific groups' operations or approach to structural inequities, but rather to contextualize how broader trends of inequality manifest in Brooklyn.

The economic and, relatedly, health disparities within Brooklyn became increasingly acute and apparent during COVID-19 (see, e.g., Schwartz and Cook, 2020). Pandemic-related hospitalizations and deaths were concentrated in African-American and Latinx communities, reflecting environmental determinants of health and health disparities well-documented in social science and public health research (see, e.g., Dalsania et al., 2021).⁸ Moreover, as the pandemic forced the closure of traditional sources of food for low-income people – including food banks and schools – the level of food insecurity rose significantly. Indeed, New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio delayed his decision to close public schools for fear that “hundreds of thousands” of students who receive USDA’s Free and Reduced Meals Program⁹ would go hungry (Neumeister and Villeneuve, 2020). MA groups emerged to address these gaps and meet urgent needs.

⁷ One MA organizer noted that in constructing his group’s “neighborhood” and thereby delineating boundaries for grocery operations, they drew on various main streets and landmarks.

⁸ These are the same health disparities that the Black Panther Party’s Free Clinics aimed to address fifty years ago.

⁹ An innovation of earlier MA led by the Black Panther Party.

MA Grocery Operations

While an entire study could be conducted on the origins and operations of MA groups during the pandemic, I review below only the aspects of MA groups' operations that are most relevant for this research. Moreover, while the history of MA within Brooklyn is worthy of further research, this study confines its scope to MA groups that emerged since the onset of COVID-19 and focus on neighborhood-based grocery operations.

The vast majority of the MA groups in this study emerged in Spring 2020, implementing simple and “nimble”¹⁰ grocery operations immediately prior to or following New York's initial shelter-in-place order on March 20, 2020 (Plitt, 2020). Several early founders of MA groups had experience with community organizing. The origin stories vary across groups. Some began outreach with flyers throughout the neighborhood; others by coordinating with existing networks, such as the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA); and others worked in collaboration with churches or local nonprofits to launch food distribution.¹¹ MA groups initially planned to deliver groceries to neighbors particularly vulnerable to COVID-19, including elderly and immuno-compromised people. Soon after the lockdown, however, it became increasingly apparent that many neighbors needed grocery support due to financial constraints, revealing local food insecurity that existed prior to and was exacerbated by the pandemic.

MA groups' neighborhood-based grocery operations consisted of residents shopping for or packing groceries to be delivered to other residents. Early in the pandemic, this operation took place largely ad-hoc using a shared Google Voice number and Slack. The founder of one of the

¹⁰ Interview with MA organizer, December 28, 2020.

¹¹ Because fieldwork for this study began in Fall 2020, it was not able to capture the emergence and organizing of MA during the early months of the pandemic, but garnered these details via interviews and online archives.

largest and earliest MA groups in Brooklyn describes advertising the centralized phone number for people to request groceries and a Slack channel for people to help distribute: “within the first day, not even 24 hours had passed, and 30 people joined and then 60 people joined ... within three weeks there were 2,000 people on the Slack.”¹² Slack quickly became a place for residents to offer their time and labor to shop for and deliver groceries to neighbors.

In the early days of the pandemic, it was unclear how long lock-downs would last or what the precise threats of COVID-19 were. As the death toll rose, lock-downs were extended, and economic precarity became increasingly acute and apparent, MA groups created more formal operations. Several groups created bulk or mass distribution once a week, where they delivered groceries to dozens (sometimes over 100) households. Several MA groups organized bulk distribution in ways that reflected their values (Clemens, 1993; Jasper, 2004) – for instance, by purchasing groceries from Black-owned food co-ops or local farms – although not without “frame disputes” (Benford, 1993) along the way. Most groups also relied on, at least in part, one-to-one deliveries, which took place throughout the week and were generally smaller grocery requests so that neighbors without cars could deliver by foot or bike. These operations were generally coordinated via a “trio” of online platforms – Google Voice, Slack, and Airtable¹³ – a component of MA organizing that allowed for highly efficient volunteer-run grocery operations, but also comprised a “digital divide” between residents.¹⁴ In general, MA groups were initially funded primarily by small donations, including via mobile phone applications like Venmo and CashApp. As groups operations’ became more formalized, several took a fiscal sponsor, such as ioby or Open Collective. Several MA organizers emphasized the transparency with which they

¹² Interview with MA organizer, March 31, 2021.

¹³ Interview with MA organizer, January 15, 2021.

¹⁴ Interview with MA organizer, March 2, 2021.

raised and distributed funds – publishing these in their newsletters, for instance – and noted this as a counter to the “charity” model (Spade, 2020).¹⁵

Alongside grocery operations, MA groups supported neighbors with COVID vaccine appointments, rent assistance, and air conditioners or heaters. Several MA groups also ran free stores or community fridges, and hosted political education programs. During physical distancing, programs include online book clubs, socially distanced street clean ups, masked voter registration drives and poll support, and anti-oppression trainings over Zoom. Several of these initiatives were coordinated with longer-standing advocacy groups. Below, I discuss further details and implications of these efforts and grocery operations, which several groups paused in Summer 2021 due to limited bandwidth.

MA Organizational Structure

Social movements advance change not only through explicit articulation of their strategies and goals, but also through the ways in which they are structured internally, as “[m]odels of organization comprise both templates for arranging relationships within an organization and sets of scripts for action culturally associated with that type of organization” (Clemens, 1993, p. 758). Relevant “organizational repertoires” (Clemens, 1993) of MA groups include that they were organized horizontally, with minimal hierarchy or executive leadership; used participatory, consensus-based decision-making processes; and aimed to make operations as transparent as possible, publishing their organizing principles and financial statements online. While there are variations with how each group practiced these three principles, and several

¹⁵ Interview with MA organizers, April 16, 2021.

groups incorporated other intentional organizational structures to reflect MA principles, interviewees generally shared that they felt these core components of MA reflected the world in which they sought to live – a more democratic, egalitarian, principled future. However, as described throughout this study, the potential for neighbors of different backgrounds to participate in these participatory processes were limited for those who experienced barriers to internet access, technology literacy, or other levels of “privilege,” discussed throughout the findings section. Thus, groups reckoned with who had the power to develop these horizontal structures, and if and how they advanced MA’s aims of addressing structural inequities.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODS

This research examines how cross-class collective mobilizations take shape in an era of rising inequality, including (1) How and why do people participate in MA, and what meaning do they ascribe to their participation? (2) How do MA groups frame their strategies and aims to address structural inequities, and how do they navigate inequalities that emerge within their organizing and operations? and (3) How do potential disputes and tensions around structural inequities shape MA’s narratives, repertoires, and impact?

In order to investigate these questions, I conducted reflexive participant observation and interviews, and employed archival research to supplement this original data. Data collection was iterative, largely in response to dynamics of the crises taking place during the time of fieldwork. Data analysis included thematic coding and inductive analysis. Below I describe data collection and analysis procedures, as well as my positionality and potential limitations of this study.

Data collection

I conducted participant observation primarily through grocery operations, supporting a local free store, and participating in political education programs. Participating in MA provided an important sense of the organizing, operations, and culture of MA groups. However, due to COVID-19 physical distancing mandates, building relationships with and observing interactions amongst common “characters” (Jerolmack and Khan, 2017; Small, 2009a) was difficult. Moreover, given that this fieldwork took place during ongoing, intersecting crises, I did not want this research to somehow interrupt or delay MA participants’ work to provide urgent survival needs (for instance, by occupying organizers’ time and attention). Thus, participant observation offered a better way to both understand and contribute to MA. Most of the insight from participant observation in this study draws on, and adapts, reflexive ethnography (Hoang, 2015; Luttrell, 2019). That is, I consider the research site in terms of (1) my relationship with it, (2) theory I bring to it, (3) internal processes while there, and (4) external forces shaping it (Burawoy, 2003). For instance, while delivering groceries, I took note of a heavier police presence further east in Brooklyn and outside of New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) houses. I was also conscious of my positionality as a young, white, middle-class gentrifier, and ongoing internal debates, such as whether to call an uber when delivering groceries in a food desert on a below freezing day. Such considerations took account of my position within the field, as well as the structural inequities I sought to examine.

Participant observation not only generated ethnographic data on MA, but also helped to inform and contextualize interviews. Combined, these methods help to triangulate findings and portray a “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) of MA during the pandemic. I connected with

interviewees primarily through MA participation, snowball sampling, and general outreach. Ultimately, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 34 individuals, 22 of whom considered themselves an MA founder or organizer, 9 of whom considered themselves an MA participant, and three others who organize with distinct advocacy groups that collaborate with MA groups (see interviewee demographics in “Table 3” in the appendix).¹⁶ At the suggestion of an interviewee, I also held a group call with MA organizers I interviewed in June 2021 to present and discuss preliminary collective findings.¹⁷ Given the outreach methods available during the pandemic, interviewees tend to be those highly engaged with MA. While these interviews are, therefore, limited in that they do not reach others potentially less engaged with or more critical of MA, they do reflect those most directly engaged in MA’s framing process, a core focus of this research. Furthermore, interview questions explicitly probed challenges and shortcomings of MA, tasking those deeply involved to assess these questions.

Mutual Aid NYC (MANYC), an umbrella organization that formed during the pandemic to provide resources and coordination to those engaged with MA listed groups conducting MA by borough. At the time of fieldwork, MANYC listed 16 groups in Brooklyn that fit my research focus (formed since the onset of COVID-19, neighborhood-based, focused on grocery operations). I reached out to each of these groups, and connected with and interviewed individuals from 11. It is worth noting that over the course of my fieldwork, the number of active

¹⁶ Much dialogue around MA today contrasts it with the “charity model” (Spade, 2020). Therefore, groups consciously try to avoid the word “volunteer,” though occasionally interviewees used this language. Nevertheless, to reflect the intentionality and common ethos of MA groups, this research adopts their terminology: I use the term “participants” to reflect individuals who are involved with MA on a regular basis, but do not engage in more of the high-level and time-consuming planning or administrative aspects of MA, as opposed to “organizers” who are more intimately involved in these ways. I use “members” to refer to those involved with MA generally speaking, and “neighbors” when speaking more broadly about residents within an MA group’s geographic region.

¹⁷ During this call, MA organizers discussed membership “attrition” as the pandemic spanned more than a year, vaccination rates rose, and “[capitalism] forces us back into the wheels and grinds us out.”

MA groups ebbed and flowed, as several groups consolidated efforts and several others ceased operations. For instance, three interviewees from different MA groups each separately noted that one group shut down shortly before my interviews began over internal conflict – including but not limited to gentrification.¹⁸ Two of these groups were now supporting households who requested food in this area – at least a 30-40 minute drive from where these groups’ grocery operations typically took place – while also considering what those conflicts implicated for their own groups’ collective identity. Other groups joined forces to better match people delivering groceries with those requesting groceries, a local misalignment that reflected how food insecurity is geographically distributed across Brooklyn. Additionally, one group responded that they “don’t have the capacity” to participate in a research inquiry. Thus, this study potentially misses groups at both ends of the spectrum – those deeply engaged with their communities, in a way that they do not have time for research inquiries, and those whose MA operations were disrupted or terminated due to stark framing disputes and internal conflict. The insight from interviewees about the coordination between and ebb and flow of MA groups helps to ameliorate some of this limitation. Moreover, the compilation of data from mixed-methods portray a robust picture of MA groups’ framing process. As Benford (1993) notes in his discussion of research methods examining framing disputes within the nuclear disarmament movement, this research “is not to test any formal hypotheses, but rather to illuminate the dynamics of micromobilization, especially reality negotiation and construction processes, and to identify patterns concerning the forms, underlying conditions, and consequences of frame disputes.”

¹⁸ Interviews with MA organizers, January 16, January 22, and March 1, 2021.

Original data collection was also supplemented with archival research. In order to capture MA operations during the early days of COVID-19, prior to fieldwork, and to assess the ways in which MA evolved over the course of the pandemic, I reviewed archives from MANYC and Brooklyn Public Library (BPL). These included an oral history project conducted by BPL in Spring 2020 with MA organizers; documents that guided the formation and operations of MA groups as well as call notes across MA groups, coordinated and publicly curated by MANYC; and media stories and webinars that covered MA (see, e.g., Cházaro, Reddy, and Spade, 2020; Spade, Kaba, and Dixon, 2020). Rather than conduct a systematic analysis of these sources, I used them to fill in the gaps of information that fieldwork could not attain, including details of the origins and operations of MA groups, and the broader structural dynamics in which they emerged.

Data Analysis

Data analysis generally followed “flexible coding” (Deterding and Water, 2021), an updated approach to grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) that draws on the benefits of coding software (ATLAS.ti, in this case). Based on this approach, I first indexed each interview according to the broad questions initially guiding my research: (1) How and why do people participate in MA? (2) What learnings do members take away from MA? and (3) What, if any, impact does MA have? During this first round of coding, I noted preliminary answers to these questions and key themes, or “frames” (Benford and Snow, 2000), that emerged. I drafted memos based on this first round of coding, which revealed a relatively cohesive origin story – MA groups in this study emerged to respond to state failures during the pandemic, and

interviewees responded to the call to provide collective care for their “neighbors.” This story closely resembled the framework that arose alongside Spade’s (2020) book on MA. I carefully considered this observation in order to better understand if people were merely reciting an emerging popular concept, or if they were engaging with its nuances and complexities on-the-ground.

In order to further probe this frame and potential variations or inconsistencies within it, I then coded for MA’s strengths and challenges, while also considering interviewees’ demographics – namely age, race, gender, tenure in their neighborhood, and MA group. During this second round of coding, I also documented “aha” moments and insightful quotes (Deterding and Water, 2021). I considered this second round of coding alongside my fieldnotes from participant observation (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, 2011). This analysis helped to reveal potential consistencies or discrepancies between how interviewees described their experiences with MA and my own observations (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). While drafting memos based on this second round of coding, I continued researching the history of and studies on MA, as well as demographics of Brooklyn. These combined data sources and analyses led to four core, “fine-grained” (Deterding and Water, 2021) themes to further examine: “politics,” “future,” “neighborhood,” and “mutuality.” I paid particular attention to “frame disputes” (Benford, 1993) that emerged within each of these themes, and continued drafting memos that ultimately led to my core findings, discussed below.

FINDINGS

Through the data collection and analysis described above, I ultimately find that MA groups use frames and develop repertoires that cultivate collective resilience and collective resistance to structural inequities. These frames and repertoires reflect and advance “prefigurative” politics to reimagine and build a more just future. At the same time, MA groups confront the current political realities and existing structural inequities within their ongoing organizing and operations, as particularly apparent within their efforts to cultivate a collective identity around “neighbors,” a fraught term in gentrifying Brooklyn. These findings are discussed in further detail below.

Part I. Mutual Aid as a Platform for Collective Dreaming to Build a More Just World

First, I examine MA groups’ collective action frames during the pandemic. I draw on Benford and Snow’s (2000) framing process to assess the ways in which MA groups frame the (1) call to action to “support your neighbors” through grocery operations in order to (2) address ongoing crises and state failures, and (3) practice “prefigurative” politics to imagine and build a more just future (Polletta, 2014; della Porta and Pavan, 2017; Mische, 2009; Roy, 2020), as depicted in “Figure 1” below. I assess the ways in which MA members make meaning of these frames and navigate “frame disputes” (Benford, 1993), including around MA’s diagnosis of the problem – failures of the state. This section reveals the motivations that draw people into MA, and that MA helps to activate – namely, individual and collective agency to address ongoing crises and structural inequities. It also points to the subsequent discussion: the ways in which

these frames, including the collective identity around “neighbors,” are complicated by existing political dynamics and structural inequities, including gentrification.

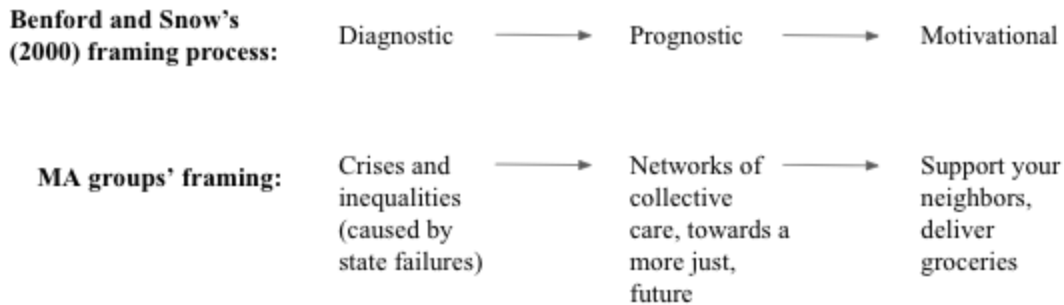


Figure 1. Mutual Aid Groups’ Framing Process

Call to Action: “Support Your Neighbors”

When I asked how and why interviewees became involved with MA, there was a general consensus that they wanted to meet MA groups’ calls to “support your neighbors.” They also appreciated the tangible and feasible ask that MA groups made: to support grocery operations by calling back neighbors who left voicemails requesting groceries (“grocery intake”) or to shop for and deliver groceries. In meeting this ask, many reflected on their “privilege,” including around race, socioeconomic status, age, and health. For instance, a white woman in her mid-20s who moved in 2019 to her current neighborhood, a traditionally African-American, rapidly gentrifying area, shared:

I guess I started volunteering with [MA group]¹⁹ in April ... In the early pandemic, it's funny to even go back to that head space because it was so different than anything any of us have ever experienced, of course, before ... Just in a way of like how do we put our bodies in service of our community? For me, it was very clear people need to eat and if anyone should be going to the grocery store right now, it's me. If anyone should be risking, I actually am very privileged and fortunate and healthy so, for me, it was very much like a bodily, I can risk getting COVID, basically.

¹⁹ For confidentiality, I do not provide the specific names of MA groups or neighborhoods, but instead reference relevant features, including neighborhood demographics and levels of gentrification.

Another MA organizer, a Southeast Asian American man in his early-20s who moved in 2019 to his current neighborhood, another, but distinct, historically African-American, rapidly gentrifying area, shared:

My office had imposed an indefinite work from home period. That was when I started to realize shit is hitting the fan. ... Cases were exploding in New York. People I knew pretty well were starting to lose some of their freelance jobs and stuff. ... it just really saddened me. I consider myself extremely lucky to have held onto my job throughout all this ... I was like, "I'm here. I'm still spending my days working, but I'm not doing anything else. I'm just staying home because I have no idea what's going on." So that's when I started to look online for just basic volunteer opportunities ... I saw the Facebook group for [my neighborhood's MA], and then I joined.

The above quote also points to another theme that frequently emerged amongst MA members: isolation and ontological insecurity (Giddens, 1991). During the early days of the pandemic, when the number of COVID-19 cases and rate of unemployment both grew with startling celerity, and there were mandates to avoid social interactions, many people struggled to find a general grounding. Several interviewees shared that MA offered a way to structure their days and contribute to their communities in a “meaningful” way.²⁰ Relatedly, several MA members introduced death and violence into the conversation, a reflection of the ongoing crises that took place during this fieldwork, and the role of MA in preparing for and addressing these current and potential catastrophes (Arcaya, Raker, and Waters, 2020; Spade, 2020). For instance, an African-American man in his early-30s who moved in 2019 to his current neighborhood, a largely Latinx and East Asian immigrant community beginning to gentrify, shared that:

I also think about, is there a possibility that a mutual aid organization and the relationships that it helps people create, can it act as ... This is going to sound a little crazy ... But I remember one day I was looking at [an MA organizer's] Twitter, and she was tweeting about this action that she had attended where they were stopping people from being evicted. Right? And I don't think it was connected to the [MA] organization, but she is leading it, we have a mutual aid organization. And she was helping people who

²⁰ Interviews with MA members January 14 and January 16, 2021.

*were protecting others, in a sense. ... And so as... God, as these tensions continue to rise, will there be need for some kind of mutual protection of some kind in that way? Whether it's from evictions or from violent white supremacists? I don't know.*²¹

Diagnosis: State Failures

The man quoted above went on, reflecting another core theme that emerged throughout interviews – the failure of the state to keep people safe from COVID-19, the economic fall-out, and violence:

[I got involved with MA] sort of around the same time of the George Floyd protests ... And so, the protests started, and I went to a few of them really early on, and from that point forward, it was clear to me that isolating and that trying to stay safe and just trying to hunker down through the pandemic was not enough ... it also didn't feel like a productive way to use my time, use my privilege, or the fact that I had the flexibility of working from home, able-bodied. I'm young, I'm healthy, knock on wood. I just felt like I need do something. ... I felt like going to protest was a bare minimum. Donating to organizations, that was another thing to do. But then I also wanted to just engage with people in person, and feel like I was actually helping out in Brooklyn, and helping out people who really need it right now because the government isn't holding up its end of the bargain. ... on top of that, I was growing really unhappy from the isolation, and this feeling that the world was collapsing and I was just powerless.

Whether the “government [was] holding up its end of the bargain,” and if and how MA can activate individual and collective agency to address the state’s gaps, and violence, was a prominent theme throughout interviews. For instance, a white man in his early 30s who moved in 2017 to his current neighborhood, a predominantly white and relatively affluent area, shared:

I think one of the things that's really driven home for me is how little the government dedicates to helping people in comparison to what it spends on for example, war and security state, right? ... I think there are different ways about thinking about what the role [of] mutual aid should be in an ideal world. But I think one thing that everyone or I think most people at least agree on is the way that we work ... is a testament to the failure of the system. People should not need ad hoc groups of neighbors to come together to make sure that they have enough groceries. ... It certainly cast the uprising this year, last year rather in pretty stark relief ... You're working every day with people who are trying to get food, are trying to get air conditioners, and the city and the state are spending billions of dollars on militarized SWAT teams so they can beat the shit out of protesters.

²¹ It is worth emphasizing that this interview took place on January 14, 2021, eight days after the January 6th Insurrection at the Capitol.

The role of the state has been a significant focus of recent MA literature, webinars, and media. Historically, MA was used to resist violence from the state and other sources of oppression, and to pressure the state to do more to protect communities (Bassett, 2016; Nelson, 2011; Hartman, 2018). The common definition of MA today – “collective coordination to meet each other’s needs ... from an awareness that the systems we have in place are not going to meet them” (Spade, 2020) – continues this ethos. As is well-documented in social science research, the police are a “face” of the state (see, e.g., Soss and Weaver, 2017). The police are also particularly relevant in this research given the uprisings in support of the Movement for Black Lives (BLM), which coincided with MA and served as an entry point to MA for several members, as noted above.²² Several interviewees shared that they had an “awakening”²³ this summer around abolition and racial justice, with many citing the murder of George Floyd as an impetus. As one MA organizer, a white woman in her mid-20s in a historically African-American, rapidly gentrifying neighborhood, phrased it, “I consider myself to have had a very strong abolitionist political awakening this summer so just seeing my work in mutual aid as part of the revolution and thinking that the revolution will happen, I think mutual aid is a revolution.” While not all saw mutual aid and abolition as inherently related, others stated that the relationality of MA – getting to know one’s neighbor through networks of collective care – was an abolitionist tool in itself. The below quote is from a white man in his late-20s who moved in 2017 to his neighborhood, a historically Eastern European and Latinx immigrant community that has rapidly gentrified over the last two decades:

²² Abolitionist scholars and advocates have also cited MA as a tool to both survive and resist the criminal legal system, particularly for low-income people and people of color who are disproportionately over-criminalized and under-protected by the state to care for one another (Davis, 2003; Gilmore, 2017; Kaba, 2021).

²³ Interview with MA organizer, December 28, 2020.

I think I've always been someone who liked learning people's names and forming community and saying hi to people that you pass in the street and recognize ... I think I previously thought that that was just a nice thing, it was just a nice, optional thing that I enjoyed doing. And this summer, and my work with [MA and abolitionist groups] really changed my thinking about it ... the way I feel about community building now is that it's actually one of the most radically anti-authoritarian actions the average person can put into practice in their daily life, because actively engaging with your community and actively being someone who knows people's names, is in touch with what's going on, not just in their apartment, but in the apartment upstairs and downstairs and to the left and right, someone who is recognizable and people know that they can count on is trustworthy and will be there to deescalate, that is effectively an action of divestment from the police state.

This was a common, although not universal, view amongst MA members. Although the vast majority of MA members articulated that MA emerged in response to the state's failure to respond to the pandemic, there were a wide range of views on the police. For instance, a person in their late-20s of Southeast Asian descent who moved in 2018 to their current neighborhood, a historically African-American, rapidly gentrifying community – who throughout the course of their interview said, “Fuck the government ... fuck all of them [cops]” – shared that they went to a community-police meeting organized by their block association, run by longer-standing primarily African-American residents, to listen to the priorities of their neighbors. A Latino man in his early-20s who moved in 2019 to his current neighborhood, a rapidly gentrifying Latinx community, shared the complexities around a fundraiser his MA group held that sold “Defund the Police” merchandise:

It sucks to say but I don't necessarily think that the issues of the uprising are issues that [our MA group] at the moment decides to focus its energy on ... the people buying the merch are usually more affluent, non-POC people so they can snap up all they want to de-funding the police. But sure, that'll go towards helping people, but at the end of the day, people they're helping out probably don't agree with that at all. ... So yeah, de-funding the police was not our thing, but food security is universal ... regardless of race and political affiliation. Your whitest coal miner or your undocumented immigrant.

While data would likely counter this statement – food insecurity, especially in Brooklyn, does in fact fall along racial lines, disproportionately impacting Black and Latinx residents (Platkin, 2021) – the statement nevertheless reflects diverse perspectives of the police, including amongst longer-standing residents. This quote also reflects a theme central to this study, that there are discrepancies between the people delivering groceries, and the “people they’re helping,” discussed further in the subsequent section. Another MA organizer, an African-American man in his early 30s who was born and raised in his primarily African-American neighborhood with very early signs of gentrification, shared the following:

Our first delivery drivers, believe it or not, were some police officers from the NYPD, one of our local precincts ... When we couldn't find anyone else in our community to deliver, they were the ones who stepped up and delivered all of our groceries at the beginning. ... they were delivering to all of our families every day for about a month. ... We reached out to everyone in our neighborhood and they were the first ones that came to our rescue.

Interviewer: *Okay. And are they still involved?*

Interviewee: *They support us. We've recently had to take a pause from allowing them to volunteer in uniform because of the climate across the nation and it made some of our folks and our volunteers and our neighbors a little uncomfortable to see the uniform. ... The NYPD, especially in [our] community, is very heavily involved in the community. They're unlike a lot of the other ones that I see. They host events, they're on the street, they know that the folks in the communities... There's nothing bad that I can say, as far as that. ... The commanding officer of the precinct is from the community. All of the officers below him are from the community. Our streets are not being policed by folks that are outsiders. They're being policed by folks that were born here, that grew up here, that know the folks here in the community and how the community operates. And that's why the relationship is so much [better] than in other places. Very important.*

This quote also reflects a complexity discussed further below – who is “from the community,” who is “outsiders,” and what are the roles of each in advancing safety and care.

In addition to views on the police, interviewees’ political backgrounds also ranged. The most common political orientation that emerged in interviews is radical left-wing politics,

including anarchism and communism. Within this orientation, there were varying views on the appropriate level of engagement with the state – some proclaimed to not vote,²⁴ while others were actively engaged with local elections, including the campaigns of MA organizers running for office.²⁵ Others, still, noted that meeting urgent survival needs during ongoing crises took precedence over ideology. For instance, a white woman in her mid-20s who has lived in a rapidly gentrifying primarily Latinx neighborhood since 2018, shared:

I think government versus mutual aid has been a huge question. I see with a lot of food groups, should we take the USDA boxes [bulk grocery supplies provided by the U.S. Department of Agriculture] that are not culturally appropriate ... Often not fresh food but what if we don't have resources elsewhere? ... I don't have an answer to it but the thing that the pandemic made me realize is that given the world that we live in, we need the government and we need them to give us aid ... There's all these problems working with USDA boxes. The boxes had half the amount of food that we thought they were going to have, the food wasn't good quality. I work in government and I was like, "Oh my God ... Of course it's like that." ... I think my ultimate vision for the world would be one that looks more like anarchism. ... [But] it makes more sense to spend political energy advocating for something that looks more like socialism. ... logistic stuff takes up so many hours in a week that we've even had moments in [MA] that I see where we have a community gathering and try to get into some more theory ... and everyone's just too tired ... and it's like, "Yeah, let's just hang out instead of talking about [the revolution]."

This MA organizer, who notes her anarchist views as well as her government job, is considering the implications of MA groups using food donations from USDA.²⁶ Several MA groups accepted the USDA boxes in an effort to optimize the volume of groceries they could deliver to neighbors.

²⁷ Even setting aside frustrations with the state, however, this coordination included several complex dynamics. For instance, several interviewees reported that they spent hours pulling out fliers from the Trump Administration that were in each USDA box (see also Evich, 2020). This

²⁴ Interview with MA participant, June 4, 2021.

²⁵ Interview with MA organizer, April 16, 2021.

²⁶ A pandemic innovation of MA groups and a government adaptation that could be compared to the co-optation of the Black Panther Party's Free Breakfast Program.

²⁷ This is in contrast to other strategies by some groups who aimed to get supplies from Black-owned food co-ops or from local farms through Community Supported Agriculture.

felt particularly important to MA members leading up to the 2020 election. In addition to removing the Trump “propaganda,” several groups also added voter registration forms into food delivery boxes.²⁸ While careful not to advocate for any particular candidate, and while navigating different perspectives of the state within their own groups, several MA groups also coordinated poll support, passing out snacks and masks to people waiting in line to vote.

Two interviewees, both white women in their late thirties in a heavily gentrified, primarily white community that was formerly the home of Latinx and Eastern European immigrants, suggested that they want MA to be “big tent”²⁹ politics so that all can engage. Three others, all white people in their early 40s who have lived in their neighborhoods for about a decade, shared that for them they did not consider MA to be explicitly political, although upon further reflection, noted that “everything that you do every minute is political.”³⁰ Others saw MA as a map for the state to do more to address institutional inequities. For instance, the man who shared that the police helped to deliver groceries in his neighborhood also reported that through MA, he and other organizers helped the Mayor’s Office draft its first 10-year food policy plan. He shared that this is important corrective action after the state’s failure in the early days of the pandemic: “These Mutual Aid groups, these CBOs, the folks that took action when the government was still trying to figure shit out, those are the folks that are going to shape the future of our communities, and I’m excited to be a part of that.” A white woman in her late-20s who moved in 2020 to her current neighborhood, a historically Black and white middle-class area that is rapidly gentrifying, shared similar sentiments:

²⁸ Interviews with MA members, December 28, 2020, and January 14, 2021.

²⁹ Interview with MA organizer, May 25, 2021; similar sentiments in interview with MA participant May 5, 2021.

³⁰ Interview with MA participant, May 27, 2021; similar sentiments in interviews with MA organizers, February 12, and March 1, 2021.

I don't trust politics [or] the government as much as I used to, to do the right thing or to get really anything done ever. I think I probably didn't have as much mistrust until [Donald Trump's election in] 2016. ... I don't necessarily subscribe to let's just burn it all down. I'm not an anarchist. ... [But] I feel a lot of the structures that are in place are just set up to create the least amount of change as possible. ... So that's where I see mutual aid [filling] in the cracks. ... if it's a proving ground for [the] future, then politicians should be watching it, and should be getting ideas, and maybe enacting broader structural change that is inspired by the findings and learnings of those groups.

Prognostic: Prefigurative Politics

While the quotes above reveal significant diversity amongst the political leanings of MA interviewees and “frame disputes” (Benford, 1993) around the relationship between MA and the state, they also point towards an important similarity: people engaged in MA see it as a way to build a more just “future,” as the woman quoted above pragmatically explains. She goes on to talk about how MA has shaped her sense of the future:³¹

[My job hosted a talk with] Angela Davis [and] Rachel Cargle ... [They emphasized the] importance of dreaming about the future and what it could be. Something that Rachel Cargle said was, someone asked, "What do you do for self care?" And she was like, "I make time to daydream." And I was like, "That's so beautiful." And, yeah, I don't do that, really. I don't think about the future in a positive way. Then Angela Davis, separately, and earlier in the conversation was talking about, when the call is to abolish something, you have to think about what replaces it or what could this system be? What could work here that would replace what is clearly broken? The movement can't just be about getting rid of what's bad. It has to be about building something that's good. ... And I feel that's something that I see, the little spring bud I have with mutual aid is imagining [when] really the system that we have isn't working, what could we build that might work?

This was a common ethos, and a core finding, within MA interviews: that we live in an unjust world, as exemplified in the current crises and stark inequalities they laid bare, but that through MA, people can come together to collectively imagine and build a more just world. One

³¹ The last question I asked most interviewees was if and how MA has shaped their sense of the future. This was intended to be an open-ended question and chance for reflection on MA and our conversation, and was inspired by Mische's (2009) article on future planning in social movements.

interviewee succinctly summarized what many MA members shared: that “shit is really bad” but that MA provides “hope” for the future.³²

According to Mische (2009), imagining the future is one of the most potent forms of agency that social movements activate, and is a “mobilizing ... dynamic force undergirding social change” (p. 695; see also Emirbayer and Mische, 1998). Polletta (2014), too, describes the power of movements to cultivate “prefigurative” politics, a term that one MA organizer, a white man in his 40s who is an academic and is formerly incarcerated, used in his interview to describe MA. Indeed, there was a sense amongst interviewees that MA provides a platform for collective dreaming of a more just future, and to reflect, “practice,”³³ and strive towards a more participatory and egalitarian future (see also della Porta and Pavan, 2017; Cox, 2014; Kurzman, 2008; Price, Nonini, and Fox Tree, 2008). This collective dreaming and collective action towards a “world anew” (Roy, 2020) felt particularly important during ongoing, intersecting crises – the pandemic, racist state violence, economic fall-out, and democratic decay – where interviewees felt “powerless”³⁴ over the acute inequalities, violence, and despair emerging.

This finding may help explain why MA has become a common political orientation during our current era: As crises erode trust in government and social institutions (Mampilly, 2021) and contribute to a sense of powerlessness, local networks of collective care such as MA provide members with security that they can lean on each other through these crises and cultivate collective power to build a safer future. MA’s collective action frame, thus, “suggest[s] that an opportunity to affect social change exists, and that people are ‘potential agents of their own

³² This interviewee, an MA participant of East Asian descent in her early 40s who who has lived for ten years in her neighborhood, a gentrified formerly Latinx and now mostly white area, also noted that her family suggested that she leave Brooklyn at the start of the pandemic for fear that chaos would ensue. Instead, she noted, MA emerged.

³³ Interview with MA organizer, April 15, 2021.

³⁴ Interview with MA participant, January 14, 2021.

history” (Benford and Snow, 2000; citing Gamson and Meyer, 1996, p. 285). As one MA organizer, an African-American in their early 30s who has lived in their historically African-American, rapidly gentrifying neighborhood for 14 years, described it:

I think a lot about practice. I am also a lifelong dancer so the way I learn is very kinesthetic. Is very much about you do it again and you do it again and after a while it's in your muscle memory. Mutual aid is practice, it is rehearsal, it is the opportunity to just be in the movement over and over and over and over, and to see what new information arises from the collective body. As it shifts because the same way that an individual body shifts over time a collective body shifts over time. Your knees don't do the same thing they did 10 years ago ... also it's hard right? That's the other thing ... you be tired after rehearsal. You just danced for all them hours, you want some naps. There might be a part that's like, "do I want to keep rehearsing endlessly? Do I?", because the other thing about mutual aid is, there's not a show. There's no singular moment that you get to be like "look at what I did. Tada." It is a life practice ... Knowing that it's hard, knowing that it's exhausting, knowing that we are negotiating these systemic forces that make it more exhausting. In a way, if we were able to support each other it would be fine.

With this compelling conception of “practice” for a better world front of mind, data analysis points towards three ways that MA acts as prefigurative politics through its “organizational repertoires” (Clemens, 1993). These include (1) building networks of collective care to “support neighbors,” primarily through delivering groceries, PPE, and other essential items without conditions or means-testing, (2) implementing this infrastructure of care through collective creativity and self-sufficiency, and (3) instituting non-hierarchical, participatory decision-making processes to guide this infrastructure. For many MA members, each of these features serves as quotidian resistance to systemic oppression – which many name as capitalism or white supremacy, and that scholars tend to refer to as “racial capitalism” (Robinson, 1983; Melamed, 2015; Gilmore, 2002; Leroy and Jenkins, 2021). These features also reflect and serve as “practice” for the world in which MA members want to live, comprising an “infrastructure of

feeling” (Gilmore, 2017, p. 237; Williams, 1954)³⁵ that builds collective care and safety in the present political moment of ongoing, intersecting crises.

Regarding the first feature, networks of collective care, interviewees marveled at the ways in which neighbors convened to rapidly respond to the unfolding crises and meet each others’ needs. Several MA groups operated bulk distribution once a week, delivering groceries to about 100 households through a highly efficient, volunteer-run operation. While the longer-term impact of MA remains to be seen, and is a topic of inquiry considered in this study, the immediate effect of MA’s grocery operations and local networks of collective care is profound. One MA group in a neighborhood with particularly high levels of both gentrification and food insecurity reported serving about one in four neighbors over the course of the pandemic’s first year.³⁶

As described previously, many of these groups emerged in March 2020, immediately prior to or following the City’s lockdown, a time when going to the grocery store posed a significant risk, and when traditional sources of food for low-income people – such as schools and food banks – were closing. Indeed, New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio delayed his decision to close public schools for fear that “hundreds of thousands” of students who receive USDA’s Free and Reduced Meals Program would go hungry (Neumeister and Villeneuve, 2020).

MA groups emerged to address these gaps and meet urgent needs. Many MA organizers also contrasted the “charity” or “welfare state” model with MA’s grocery operations, an emphasis of Spade’s (2020) book on MA. For instance, while government aid or charity might come with means-testing or conditions, such as work or sobriety requirements (see e.g., Gustafson, 2011),

³⁵ This relates to MA’s relationality as resistance to racial capitalism’s “antirelationality” (Gilmore, 2002; see also Melamed, 2015).

³⁶ Interview with MA organizer, March 5, 2021.

MA maintains a commitment that food is a “basic right.”³⁷ The person cited above who works in academia and described MA as prefigurative politics expands on this point:

[We try to] make sure that the way that the group runs and the things that we do are aligned with our ideas about how our work is organized in a way that is associated with solidarity rather than charity. ... [for example,] we offer unconditional aid ... Because we want to not engage with, and in fact, kind of challenge and ultimately resist the kind of power dynamics that are associated [with] like charitable giving, where there is one powerful well-resourced person or group or organization who through, and with that power establishes that kind of relationship of coercion or control [or judgement] with a marginalized individual ... that act as gatekeepers to the things that everyone needs to survive and thrive.

Thus, for many engaged in MA, supporting local food security was not only urgent, but was also a way to demonstrate that it can be done without further marginalizing people experiencing food insecurity. This connects with the second feature of MA’s prefigurative orientation: that this infrastructure emerged through collective creativity and self-sufficiency. For instance, for one of the people who noted that MA was not necessarily political for her – she said she was drawn to it more because it resembled the “punk, hippy maker-based community” of which she has long been a part (as her MA co-founder phrased it) – she nevertheless provided a stark example of one of the ways in which her neighborhood’s MA group responded creatively and quickly to a state failing:

[The neighbors who request support are] mainly elderly, it's mainly NYCHA [that is, living in New York City Housing Authority's subsidized housing] ... So the first one, the [local NYCHA] houses ... have been completely under construction during all of COVID. And it's [Hurricane] Sandy construction, which is ironic.³⁸ But they removed over 450 trees, there's no common green space. There's three story piles of dirt everywhere, and chain link fence. It's so inhumane and messed up, especially during COVID ... And because of the construction, they'll hit a gas line or have to turn off the water for a series of buildings. And they did that on a 90 degree day³⁹ ... So we delivered water that first

³⁷ Interview with MA participant, January 7, 2021.

³⁸ See details on MA that emerged in response to Hurricane Sandy, and the government’s failure to respond, in Spade, 2020.

³⁹ This construction and the failure of the city to provide air conditioning in NYCHA houses was also cited by two other MA organizers. See also Ramirez, 2020.

*time ... And then the second one was because NYCHA had this [air conditioner] initiative. And we helped people apply for it, and they just weren't delivered. And very few of them got ACs, it was so hot this summer; they can't go outside because of COVID. So we delivered, we did two rounds or maybe three rounds of AC deliveries.*⁴⁰

This ultimately reflects one of MA's core ethos: that communities are self-sufficient and do not need to rely on the state, corporations, or other external entities – which many interviewees define as oppressive – to take care of them.⁴¹ This idea was reflected in the below statement by the MA organizer previously quoted who was born and raised in Brooklyn and discussed the police delivering groceries in his neighborhood:

Being a part of [MA] has allowed for a pathway to do that, specifically in the communities that we live in, the Black and Brown communities that haven't had this type of access or these type of advocates in the form of a Mutual Aid group to go out and say, "We're going to do everything that we can to make sure that everyone is taken care of and provided with the resources because we have the skills, we have the talent, we have the abilities. They're here, they're in our neighborhoods. We don't need to rely on the government to do things for us because we can do them ourselves. We have enough that we need. We're enough, and that's something that we've learned, that I've learned.

Others focused on MA's grocery operations and the potential for “food sovereignty.”⁴²

For instance, the interviewee who shared, “Fuck the government ... Fuck them all [cops]” and also attended their block association's community-police meeting contrasted food commodification and distribution with community gardens:

I think a big thing that a lot of people have gotten involved with is getting food for their neighbors. Because that's a really easy thing for most people to do. ... and then, I think I was learning how distribution... early in the pandemic, there was... They were talking about how there's all these potatoes from the midwest that were just being thrown out

⁴⁰ This organizer also shared that some of this work was funded from a donation from Netflix, which was filming on her street during the pandemic and from whom she requested a donation to MA in exchange for the inconvenience. While governments appear to cut taxes for corporations and the wealthy, MA groups leverage local power to “redistribute” wealth, a theme centered in the subsequent section. This also reflects how power is diffuse – across governments, corporations, and others – making it more difficult to resist. For several organizers, MA serves as a way to consolidate local power to resist diverse sources of oppression.

⁴¹ This ethos is also reflected in the abolitionist slogan, “Who keeps us safe? We keep us safe?” which many MA groups cite in online communications and meetings. As discussed below however, the “we,” or collective identity (Polletta and Jasper, 2001), in this and other MA calls to action is complex in gentrifying Brooklyn.

⁴² Interview with MA organizer, March 5, 2021.

because everything had kind of stalled in terms of distribution. And I was just like, "Yeah, distribution is the number one reason that people don't get food. ... I just realized so much of dependence on this capitalistic society is because our basic needs are not just being met. ... When so many people ... are struggling to make ends meet so they can just feed their children ... We shouldn't be dependent on something thousands of miles away most of the time for potatoes or something. Like you can do that in your backyard [or a community garden]. You can make tomatoes in your balcony. ... it would be a huge relief for so many people [to] just know that there's food right there.

This reflection is also interesting because this MA participant recently quit their job as a software developer when their company was acquired by Amazon. How can we consider their vision of neighbors feeding each other with vegetables from their balconies, in contrast to the Amazon Prime membership required to enjoy sales at Whole Foods?

Questions over food distribution and self-sufficiency were apparent throughout MA operations. Groups consistently discussed, devised, and revised their grocery operations in an effort to “keep that money in [the community]”⁴³ and to align resources, investments, and values. For instance, while considering the implications of using USDA boxes, or relying on corporate bulk suppliers,⁴⁴ groups also considered if and how they could partner with local food producers. Two MA groups in this study partnered with a Black-owned food co-op. Other groups partnered with local farms’ community supported agriculture programs (CSAs).

A central facet of the collective power driving these highly effective and creative operations stems from the third core feature of MA’s prefigurative position: non-hierarchical and participatory decision-making processes. Studies on collective action reveal that social movements advance change not only through explicit articulation of their strategies and goals, but also through the ways in which they are structured internally (Clemens, 1993; Polletta, 2014). According to interviewees, MA groups’ participatory decision-making structures

⁴³ Interview with MA participant, January 14, 2021.

⁴⁴ Interview with MA organizer, January 15, 2021.

provided a platform to practice a more democratic, egalitarian world in which they want to live. For instance, one woman in her early 30s who is from Canada and is biracial (Black and white) noted that she likes that MA practices collective self-sufficiency and is not waiting for “someone [to] save us.” MA serves as a proving ground that hierarchy is not needed for efficiency:

I like that it's not a pyramid, hierarchical, and it's very decentralized. And I've always liked this idea of decentralization of power. ... [as] I started getting invested and I was like, wow, this [MA group] feels super decentralized. I know what I have to do. I received the training. But I don't know who started this. It feels super fluid. I feel like I can tap in, tap out. But the instructions are clear. It's not like because it's fluid, it's unclear and messy. It has a strength of being super clear and forward thinking without being messy.

The “tap in, tap out” aspect was also frequently referenced throughout interviews and refers to the collective power of labor dispersed amongst neighbors. This was cited as a contrast to dominant capitalist modes of labor, where breaks are penalized and individual worth is tied to output and productivity.⁴⁵

Moreover, MA members emphasized that horizontal structures provide space for members to problem solve and innovate.⁴⁶ For instance, one white man in his early 40s who has been in Brooklyn for 20 years and moved in 2012 to his current neighborhood, a formerly industrial working-class African-American and white neighborhood that has recently seen rapid gentrification, described the “consensus-driven decision-making” that his group uses:

A lot of times I encounter problems that could be approached two to three different ways. ... I'll write up something with three or four options and present it to the other people in my group ... And then we decide together. ... I think we do that for a lot of our bigger projects. ... It's like checks and balances, but I think it helps distribute the responsibility and it's just transparent. There's a lot of transparency which I think is really important. I think there's issues of saviorism and it sort of takes all of that. ... just making that process transparent can alleviate those other misgivings about the work ... what's become most important to me ... has been the concept of accountability, both on a personal level but also at the group level. I mean, accountability is a big practice within [our MA group] ...

⁴⁵ This was also reflected in several MA groups’ announcements when they paused grocery operations in Summer 2021 and said breaks are natural and essential, and it is only because of capitalism that we think otherwise.

⁴⁶ This has also been intentionally reflected in BLM and the Occupy Movements (see, e.g., Milkman, 2017).

and that [is] mostly around the concept [that] if you have conflict with somebody in another [MA] group or ... in [this group], there's a place where it can be reported and conflict resolution can be gone through in a safe way immediately. And that's unique.

For this person, participatory, horizontal decision-making structures not only contribute to consensus, but also ensure “checks and balances” for transparency, accountability, and safety. Several groups practiced this in explicit ways, including providing transparency around their funds – where they were coming from and where they were going – with opportunities for members to ask questions and vote on their use via town halls and other open forums.⁴⁷

From the above data, then, we can generally conceptualize MA groups’ frames and motivations according to the following:

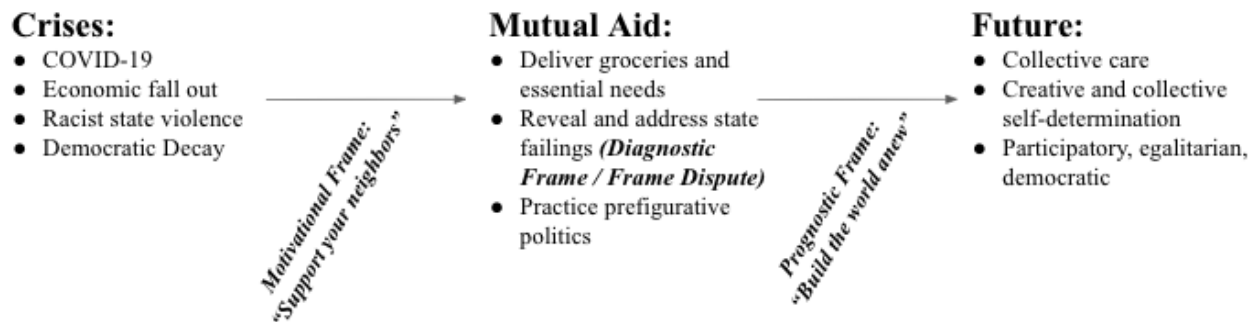


Figure 2. Mutual Aid Groups’ Frames and Motivations

However, as referenced above and analyzed in more detail throughout the following section, who is able to participate in these horizontal structures is a key question with which MA groups must contend. For instance, the organizer above notes concerns over “saviorism.” Another organizer, the person who discussed the complexities around his group’s “Defund the Police” merchandise fundraiser also asked:

[There is] a balancing act between representing who you're serving and representing yourself who's doing the serving. ... I guess it's just another fundamental question about

⁴⁷ Interviews with MA organizers, April 11 and April 16, 2021.

... What is mutual aid? Is what we're doing even mutual aid or is it resembling charity or non-profit work? That's an existential question we ask ourselves.

This question was echoed throughout fieldwork, and ultimately reflects an uncomfortable facet of MA with which many groups are consciously grappling: As MA groups aim to address the structural inequities that the pandemic laid bare, they also must confront the ways in which these inequities emerge within their own organizing and operations. The following section discusses one of these inequities, gentrification, in further detail.

Part II. Current Structural Inequities as Constraints on Mutual Aid's Collective Dreaming

In their effort to cultivate a call to action and collective identity (Polletta and Jasper, 2001) around “neighbors,” how do MA groups navigate the ongoing gentrification and displacement in the neighborhoods in which they work? Particularly when many, if not most, of their members are recent and often transient residents, delivering groceries to neighbors who are, generally speaking, disproportionately at risk of displacement? These are fraught though incredibly common questions that emerged throughout the course of fieldwork. For instance, as one MA organizer, a white woman in her early 30s who moved in 2015 to her current neighborhood, a rapidly gentrifying historically African-American neighborhood, shared:

The year has been an invitation to really sit with my role as a gentrifier. ... One of the things that I think we've only recently been able to bring voice and language to, which is ... [a concept] new to me, is the basic concept of mutuality ... I think there was a natural dynamic that occurred with [our MA group] that was not dissimilar from gentrification dynamics, in that we were organizing largely on Slack and that led to unintentional, but inevitable divide being created between people who are organizing, utilizing certain technologies and who for the most part were distributing help. And people who were outside that technology who were for the most part receiving help. ... It was a breakdown of the principle [mutuality] that we thought we were actively world-building towards.

Here, this organizer references the “world-building,”⁴⁸ prefigurative nature of MA, while also emphasizing the limits of MA’s prefigurative orientation in a time of rising inequality and a space of ongoing displacement. This person also discusses key dynamics that limit the potential for “mutuality” amongst MA groups in this study – such as the ways in which “privilege” affects participation, including but not limited to access to technology, or the “digital divide.”⁴⁹

Thus, the frames outlined in the previous section – the call to action to “support your neighbors,” as a way to deal with the diagnosed problem of state failures and to envision and build a more just world – are complicated. Below, I consider what the call to “support your neighbors” means when “neighborhood” is a fraught term in gentrifying Brooklyn; how MA members diagnose and grapple with the problem of gentrification; and how, if at all, MA groups aim to address this apparent structural inequity. I begin with the complex dynamics of “mutuality” in MA during the pandemic. I then consider ways that MA groups and members make meaning of these dynamics, including frame disputes over the relationship between MA and gentrification. Finally, I consider strategies, or repertoires, that MA groups actively employ to reconcile this potential dissonance and advance their aims towards a more equitable future.

Call to Action: How to “support your neighbors” when gentrification is displacing neighbors?

As previously discussed, the majority of MA organizing took place online, using the “trio” of Slack, Airtable, and Google Voice.⁵⁰ This was largely due to the physical distancing mandates during COVID-19 that prevented in-person convenings for public health reasons, but also reflects broader trends in social movements over recent years (see, e.g., Polletta, 2014;

⁴⁸ Ruth Wilson Gilmore discusses the “world-making” power of abolition geographies (2017, p. 231).

⁴⁹ Interview with MA organizer, March 2, 2021.

⁵⁰ Interview with MA organizer, January 15, 2021.

Milkman, 2017). While praising the fact that online organizing made MA possible during a time of mandated physical distancing, several interviewees also expressed concerns over the “corporatization”⁵¹ of these online tools. In addition to data concerns about if and how these corporations were using neighbors’ personal information, there was also a more prevalent concern over the accessibility of these platforms. Who had access to computers and wifi? Who had the technological capacity to navigate these systems? While some MA groups worked to advance community-owned and run wifi in public places as a collective good and a way to resist the commodification of information,⁵² the online nature of MA organizing nevertheless limited the involvement for many neighbors who were elderly, low-income, or faced other barriers to online systems. This necessarily hindered the mutuality of MA groups, as many interviewees shared that most of the neighbors requesting support were elderly and/or low-income. Those most able to navigate these systems, on the other hand, are those with varying levels of “privilege,” including those quoted above who explained that they wanted to use their privilege to serve their communities.

Groups aimed to overcome the digital divide through a range of strategies. While neighborhoods with particularly high levels of food insecurity relied primarily on bulk operations, other groups used a range of strategies for grocery deliveries, including “pods,”⁵³ where the same MA member delivered food to the same group of neighbors each time. Many groups used a central phone line to conduct grocery intake, and some encouraged members conducting intake to invite people requesting groceries for their insight or suggestions, and to

⁵¹ Interview with MA organizer, March 1, 2021.

⁵² Interview with MA organizer, March 5, 2021. This person noted their public wifi effort was part of MA’s mission to democratize information and to resist “hoard[ing] knowledge.”

⁵³ Interviews with MA organizer January 22, 2021

participate in upcoming community meetings or town halls. These MA open forums usually took place on Zoom, but were gradually held in public parks as vaccines became available in Spring 2021. MA groups that operated free stores and community fridges – which tend to be located near NYCHA houses, popular bodegas or parks, or public collective spaces⁵⁴ – used these sites to engage with neighbors more broadly. For instance, one MA organizer, a white woman in her late 20s who moved in 2018 to her current neighborhood, a rapidly gentrifying formerly industrial area with a significant proportion of NYCHA houses that include mostly Black and Latinx residents, noted: “We have a lot of folks who [help] to organize and maintain [our free store], who are not tapped into our digital ecosystem. So meeting at the free store, for example, and having an informal, just meeting to get on the same page ... just coming together and just sharing info.”

While these strategies helped to overcome the digital divide in many ways, there were nevertheless enduring tensions around who was able to participate in MA’s decision-making processes. During one MA group’s anti-racism training over Zoom, for which I conducted participant observation, neighbors grappled over basic language to discuss local inequalities. For instance, when a white member suggested that the mutual aspect of MA should not create a time burden for neighbors, another member who was a person of color responded that it is condescending to presume some residents are short on time.⁵⁵

The MA organizer previously quoted that he felt “lucky” to keep his job during the pandemic, also noted, “I feel like some people confuse the concept of mutual aid with

⁵⁴ One MA participant described free stores as recreating “third spaces” that had been lost during the pandemic. Others described free stores’ and community fridges’ locations and function as a public, collective good.

⁵⁵ On this call, there were about 12 white people, 11 of whom were female, with a diverse age range, and there were about 4 people of color on the call, including one African-American who lived in NYCHA houses, and one male.

transactional arrangements.” He also felt like the idea of “participatory” decision making was perhaps a less critical facet of MA during ongoing crises than the basic call to meet neighbors’ needs (similar to the organizer cited earlier who felt that the impact of government aid superseded her anarchist beliefs). He went on:

Something I really noticed was that our Black members, our Black volunteers, they do a ton of work. They organize big shopping trips. They know so many families in the neighborhood and just automatically help take care of them. They informally express all sorts of great ideas for what we can do for recruitment strategies and other things going forward. But they don't come to meetings. ... They rarely ever come to these long-ass Zoom meetings. ... So yeah, we all want to respect their ability to do that, especially some of them are parents. None of us is ever going to tell her, "Hey, turn away from your kids so you can talk on a two-hour Zoom call about the history of the Bronx or something." A lot of the families I talk to, one thing that's really, really, really been wonderful about this group, though I absolutely wish the circumstances that birthed it had never come to pass... [but] it just connected me with so many of my neighbors ... [and] in some cases, genuine friendships. ... We'll text each other holiday wishes or stuff like that. And yeah, it's mostly older Black and Latino people who've been longtime residents here. And a lot of them, they're very grateful for the organization. They want to give back in whatever way they can. They're already doing so much. One of my neighbors, she's helping house an undocumented immigrant, which is amazing especially as ICE raids were such a thing in New York not that long ago. There are others who take it upon themselves. They already have these existing relationships with neighbors, and they're actually like, "I'm going to buy extra here so I can give this to my friend who lives that-a-way."⁵⁶

This person, thus, emphasizes that many long-standing residents have long practiced MA as a form of collective resilience and collective resistance, in a way that is true to the historical roots of MA and in a way that is distinct from groups in this study.

Diagnostic: What is gentrification, and what is the role of MA in addressing it?

Throughout the conversation, this organizer, who is of Southeast Asian descent, raised several questions around local evidence and effects of institutional racism, and how MA tries to

⁵⁶ In addition to local ICE Raids, the person quoted above, who is of Southeast Asian descent, also noted that he witnessed xenophobia in his neighborhood during the pandemic, including against the owners of local Chinese food restaurants that he frequented.

grapple with it. In the context of gentrification, he shared that his MA group conducted a survey to gauge if and how they were practicing mutuality. The survey found that 70 percent of survey respondents were white (which also aligns with this study's sample, see "Table 3" in the appendix), which he defines as "an issue," but also one that neglects the full picture:

There was the demographics, which showed us as mostly White, mostly financially well off whether through solo incomes or family income. Generally hadn't been in [this neighborhood] forever or even in New York for all that long ... the point that this is what we look like, and representing a neighborhood that is majority Black. There's a whole section of [this neighborhood] that's orthodox Jews. There's little to no representation of that group at all ... The 70% White thing, it's definitely an issue. It's definitely something I feel, for sure, as a person of color myself. But it was presented in a way that made it seem like this group was almost entirely White gentrifiers, which again, definitely is not the case. I think also when you throw the term gentrify around a lot without actually thinking of what gentrification means in actual practice, I would think that you would want to be more careful with how you use it. Okay, what is actually gentrification? It's not useful at all to call a lower means person of color who moved here from the Midwest as a gentrifier. That sort of thing. That doesn't describe me, by the way. ... I'm very, very privileged.

The quote above illuminates the core frame dispute this study revealed: "Okay, what is actually gentrification?" and how can MA groups navigate and address it? There were generally three core frames that members cited when grappling with these questions: (1) *Interpersonal Relationships* – Gentrification is an unfortunate reality of New York City, and MA is a way to build relationships between newer and longer-standing residents; (2) *Investment in Neighborhoods* – As a gentrifier taking up space in this community, MA is a way to "give back";⁵⁷ and (3) *Infrastructure of Redistribution* – MA is a way to address gentrification, another state failure, through "ad hoc income redistribution."⁵⁸ These frames exist on a continuum and are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but they do reveal distinctions in how people make meaning of their participation in MA during a time of rising inequality and a space of ongoing displacement.

⁵⁷ Interview with MA participant, January 14, 2021.

⁵⁸ Interview with MA organizer, January 16, 2021.

There are also potential patterns across MA members' backgrounds, tenure in the neighborhood, and political leanings, and with which frames they align. It is worth noting that no interviewee denied the presence of gentrification or considered it a good thing, as has been found in other studies on gentrification (see, e.g., Donnelly, 2018). Rather, these frames reveal the ways in which MA members grapple with the reality of gentrification and their role within it. These frames reflect that, for some, MA is deeply personal, founded on individual relationships, while for others, MA is a political act of resistance to institutional injustice, as depicted below:

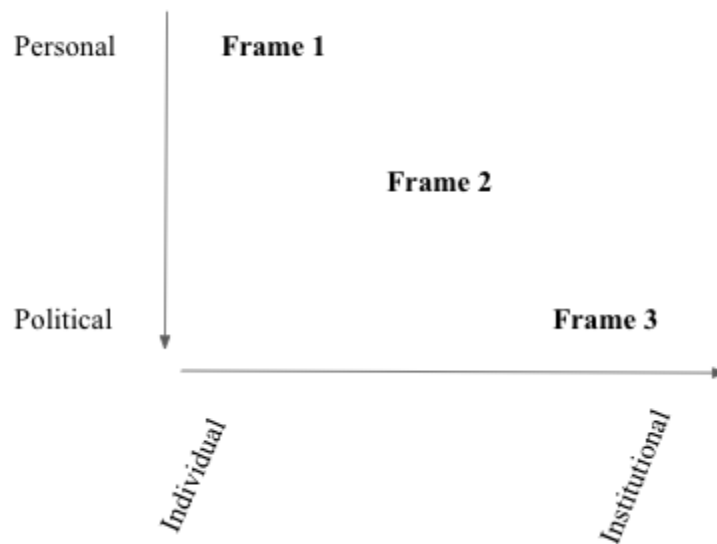


Figure 3. Mutual Aid and Gentrification Frames

The first frame, which I refer to as the “interpersonal relationships frame” generally asserts that gentrification unfortunately exists but that MA can be seen as “an opportunity to build bridges between different groups [of residents] who I think represent a false binary,” according to the MA organizer who, in an earlier quote, said she was sitting in her “role as a gentrifier.” As noted, this person is particularly concerned about gentrification’s potential disruptions to the participatory, prefigurative and “world-building” nature of MA – but, she

seems to contend that relationships between newer- and longer-standing residents, developed through MA, can help to alleviate at least some of this tension. The majority of interviewees cited relationships with their neighbors, including and especially longer-standing residents, as a significant take-away from MA. How people made meaning of these relationships, however, varies. Another white woman in her early 30s who moved in 2020 to her neighborhood – a historically African-American, rapidly gentrifying area – said she considered her participation in MA and the relationships she’s built through it as more “individual” than “institutional.” She clarified this distinction when discussing why she prioritizes Black-owned businesses:

I think even the action of choosing to support a Black-owned coffee shop, for example, is so simple, but I do think it means a lot ... Even though it's a small action, I think by supporting someone in that capacity, it's like I can't go and get coffee from [the Black cafe owner I'm friends with] then be like actually, I don't care about the rights of Black people. There's such a disconnect there ... I'm say[ing] hey, I support your livelihood, but I'm also supporting your family's livelihood and your community's livelihood and I want you to know that I'm here for you ... I don't really think about it on an institutional level as much. I just think about it on the individual impact and I really believe that all of our actions do impact other people, and I think the biggest mistake is thinking that they don't. ... it does make a huge difference when I'm supporting a business here, and that's even different in the pandemic, because normally I would be supporting a coffee shop in FiDi [Manhattan's Financial District] where my office is ... that is something that has fundamentally shifted in me, because even if I do go back to the office, I think I will continue to get my coffee here because I just believe in my neighborhood more.

Although some MA participants might critique the above statement as reflecting a “savior”⁵⁹ mentality that MA seeks to counter, fieldwork revealed that this is a relatively common portrayal of how some participants make meaning of MA. Moreover, this quote suggests one way that “neighborhood” became a source of collective identity – during the pandemic, people were largely confined to within a few blocks of their homes. While previously one’s job, including office location, might have figured more prominently in a person’s identity, being a “neighbor”

⁵⁹ Interviews with MA participants January 7, and March 1, 2021.

became particularly salient during these crises and people came to “believe in [their] neighborhood[s] more.” This finding also aligns with previous research on collective identity, that “actions driven by identity ... are especially likely when political, economic, or social change has destabilized prior identities. During such formative moments, one acts ... in order to assert who one is” (Polletta and Jasper, 2001, p. 299; Ringmar, 1996).

Other residents who cited this first “interpersonal relationships frame” note that the relationships gained through MA helped to quell their own discontent with gentrification. This was particularly apparent amongst white women in their late thirties and early forties who have lived in Brooklyn for about a decade, and, in some ways, feel a greater sense of ownership of their neighborhoods than newer residents, even if they are also, by many definitions, gentrifiers (Donnelly, 2018). For instance, one woman who noted that she is not “overtly political” shared:

I started to feel like this wasn't our neighborhood anymore ... All the buildings that have gone up, all the people of wealth, all the people with parents paying their rent ... And then all the people walking around were like bros and basic, weird people. And I'm like, "If I wanted that, I would live anywhere else!" ... it's just people who aren't interesting and who like are bringing nothing but like, you know, consumption to the table. ... And gentrification ... Businesses going up and you know, the smaller businesses that were regularly supported can't be support[ed] ... [So my partner and I were like] I don't know how much longer we're going to be here ... So I felt like it wasn't even our neighborhood anymore and truly getting involved with the Free Store and then by extension meeting other people and the overall Mutual Aid, it has felt like my neighborhood again.

Another woman in the same neighborhood who said she believed that MA should be inclusive politically reflected a similar sentiment: “I've seen the buildings coming in, I've seen these crazy expensive supermarkets ... Like in our old building, for example, there's a Pure Barre [workout studio] downstairs now. And like before it was like a scrappy bodega or something, so it's just very changed. ... it's changed. I mean, it's changed like most of New York, it's been gentrified.”

The people cited in the quotes above share a sense that they are outsiders in their neighborhoods due to gentrification, and that MA has helped them feel more connected. However, the first two people cited are younger and newer to their neighborhoods, and feel that as gentrifiers in a historically African-American neighborhood, they have a responsibility to get to know longer-standing residents, and MA helps them do this. On the other hand, the two people quoted later in this section feel like their communities and the businesses they frequent have been displaced due to gentrification, and MA helps them connect with like-minded neighbors. These women are older, have lived in Brooklyn longer, and are in neighborhoods that were formerly the home of Eastern European and Latinx immigrants. Both groups of women who align with this frame generally do not cite MA as a political act or one that advances “institutional” change.

Those who identified more strongly with the second frame, what I refer to as the “investment in neighborhoods” frame, generally share the ethos, “I know I'm gentrifying the neighborhood whether I like it or not. So I think my way of not increasing that gentrification is giving back to the neighborhood.” This quote is from the woman quoted earlier who emphasized the appeal of the “decentralization of power” in MA. She expands, “And I'll say this, I do love that it's a predominantly Black neighborhood, like a working class and middle-class Black neighborhood. So there's wealth between them. And I love it. And I do want to support Black-owned businesses in my own neighborhood, because I know I'm a transplant. I'm very aware of my little function here.” While the white woman cited earlier emphasized the “individual” relationship with the Black cafe owner as opposed to the “institutional”

implications, this MA participant explicitly reflected on her desire to support Black wealth and institutions in the neighborhood.

Recognition that “I’m gentrifying the neighborhood whether I like it or not,” was also common amongst interviewees. For instance, the person who said “Fuck the government ... fuck all of them [cops]” and attended a block association meeting with residents and police, also said:

I love my landlord ... I hate landlords ... [But] he’s this old Black guy who’s been here for a long time ... He’s 70 and he’s been here since the ‘70s. He’s [owned] this building since then and this place is kind of [expensive]. It’s like \$2100. Who are they expecting to move in here? ... Being a landlord, you’re also helping with gentrification. But then it’s also like, the taxes have gone up and all these things. It’s very hard. This whole neighborhood has changed. Everything is expensive. All the coffee shops are expensive around here. So it’s really, I don’t know. ... I do feel like I’m taking up space.

In general, those who expressed views consistent with this second frame explicitly named their role “taking up space” as gentrifiers due to structural forces beyond their control (Donnelly, 2018) and their desire to find ways to “giv[e] back.” MA, for these participants, is a way to invest in their neighborhoods.

Several longer-term residents, too, aligned with the second frame and saw MA as a way to cultivate investment in their neighborhoods. For instance, one Latina born and raised in what is now an ethnically diverse, heavily gentrified neighborhood shared the following:

I’ve lived [here] my whole life. I am turning 21 next month ... Prior to that my [whole] family was here 15 years before that. They arrived from Mexico ... I’ve constantly seen change ... whether it’s from new people moving into the area or new businesses opening ... Also just seeing change happen in the people that struggle in the community ... And people not wanting to move and leave their lives here in the neighborhood. And that’s part of the reason that I got involved with Mutual Aid this year ... because I feel everyone I see involved at the [community] fridge, I noticed I feel they’re pretty new to the neighborhood because I don’t know them ... [and] I’ve grown to know and be very close to all the business owners and all the people in the neighborhood. ... So seeing people that weren’t really I felt a part of the community doing something for our community, I felt was really important for people like me, who’ve lived here my whole life, to be involved in as well ... I’ve also realized that the fridge specifically has provided a great source of equality for everyone just to get food ... the fridge has been a great asset to the

community in that aspect ... when I go on Saturdays [to the fridge] I've met someone who she has a disabled son, and I would see her in the neighborhood all the time, I just wouldn't interact with her until I started working with the fridge. And she told me that since the pandemic has started it's just been harder for her to buy groceries and make ends meet. And when the fridge started opening up, she would sit every Saturday in front of the fridge, which has become her weekly routine. Keeping track of what vendors, or what people would donate, would come and see and schedule a time she knew they would be there so now she's from 8:30 in the morning to 1:30 in the afternoon every Saturday. And she has groceries for the whole week when she waits all that time. ... [My family] wish this [MA] had happened a lot sooner.

When asked later in the interview if and how MA intersects with other neighborhood organizations that have existed longer, she sees them as distinct, something that other MA participants who align with the second frame also noted, and view with apprehension. For instance, the MA organizer quoted earlier who praised consensus-driven processes within MA while also expressing reservations over “saviorism” noted:

I've been absolutely not trying to draw any conclusions ... But a part of me has been thinking that the new Mutual Aid ... it seems to me like traditional mutual aid that wasn't called mutual aid. It is being gentrified by [new] mutual aid, that now has really incorporated it ... alternately I think what the mutual aid that call themselves mutual aid, what we're doing is important. I just wonder if it isn't being done [in some way] that demographic[ally] change[s] neighborhoods, I don't know.

In other words, are the MA groups in this study contributing to the gentrification and displacement of the neighbors they aim to support, who may be practicing longer-standing informal forms of mutual aid, in part to resist rising rents and other forms of structural inequities? This question seems to relate to the point noted earlier by an MA organizer who expressed concern over the erasure of the collective care long practiced by BIPOC neighbors. Thus, those who align with the second frame seem to have a diversity of backgrounds and tenures in the neighborhood, but generally express concern around the relationality of inequality (Lawson and Elwood, 2018; Cházaro, Reddy, and Spade, 2020; Tilly, 2001) – that new residents

contribute to the displacement of older residents, and, more broadly speaking, that the economic, political, or social security of one person or group is predicated on the insecurity of another. Thus, MA should, at the least, invest in longer-standing residents, institutions, and organizations.

Those who align with the third frame, which I refer to as the “infrastructure frame,” tend to share this belief, and take it further – MA should serve as an “ad hoc income redistribution model.” This was first articulated to me by the same interviewee who criticized the state for failing to provide a safety net while simultaneously providing the police with weapons to “beat the shit out of protesters.” According to this frame, gentrification is yet another state failure that MA seeks to remedy: the state should institute reparations and ensure affordable housing, but in the absence of such state actions, MA works to fill the gaps. For instance, the organizer cited above who aims to use the free store as a way to connect with neighbors beyond the “digital ecosystem” stated:

In terms of just thinking about the racial disparities in our particular community and the fact that poverty is right up against gentrification and how that is seriously perpetuated, we as a group are trying to see how we can [re]distribute wealth. I think that there is a governmental need for reparations, and that's not something that Mutual Aid is able to necessarily be in place of ... [But many of] these groups are trying to mobilize larger communities to just pool money and pull resources and just redistribute it out ... also right now, we're really focused on how we can help with rent assistance. Thinking about housing rights and how... There are just so many things at play and so many things intertwined, but are consistently contributing to systemic racism. Yeah, there's a lot.

For those aligned with this third frame, grocery operations are merely the foundation for a larger infrastructure of local wealth redistribution. This view was articulated by an MA organizer of East Asian descent who moved in 2020 to his current neighborhood, a historically African-American and now heavily gentrified and ethnically diverse area:

One of the things that we make it very clear ... is that we are focusing not just purely on the idea of delivery of groceries and that sort of stuff, but very focused on redistribution of resources, since we do know that there are so many folks who have the ability to give

... They should, and so we make it very clear that what we're doing here is not just about feeding people. That is very important, but using feeding people as part of the overall mission of redistributing the wealth in the neighborhood so that it helps those who have historically been ... not been given access to resources ... and to create a more equitable, just community as much as possible, if we can. ... While we do still do home deliveries, a lot of our funds are actually distributed without any middle-man doing deliveries to somebody. We distribute funds directly to folks who ask for support.

Through this quote, we can also glean how MA groups' strategies evolved over the course of the pandemic: As the physical threats of COVID-19 became clearer or appeared to subside, and the threat of food insecurity remained, MA groups adapted their operations to ensure that people had groceries but that they were able to access funds and shop for themselves if they wished. This organizer also discussed the participatory mechanisms his MA group instituted to ensure that those "receiving aid" are also those deciding how funds are distributed, a reflection of the divides across "class structure," but also of the ways MA groups seek to confront and bridge this divide, discussed further below.

Those who align with this frame tend to have diverse backgrounds, but are generally newer to their neighborhoods and have prior experience with leftist political organizing. One of the interviewees quoted above cited Marx – "from each according to his ability, to each according to his need." Another MA organizer, a white person in their late-20s grappling with wealth disparities in their neighborhood, noted: "We do live under a capitalistic society in which we have physical currency that we still use. So if people are willing to provide that kind of support, there is definitely a way that money can be involved in mutual aid through wealth redistribution." The theoretical language employed by many of those who articulated the "infrastructure of redistribution frame," thus, reveals not only a pre-established political orientation but also, an educational background that likely reflects a level of privilege.

It is worth reiterating that these frames exist on a continuum and are not mutually exclusive, several MA participants articulated multiple frames, and the general patterns described across each are not without exceptions. That being said, these frame disputes provide insight into how and why people join MA, and what if any meaning they imbue to it – including around how MA shapes their perceptions of structural inequities, and how they make sense of their roles within and power to address these inequities.

Prognostic: How, if at all, can MA address gentrification?

The frames above portray the ways in which MA members constructed narratives about their role within and power to address gentrification, including through MA. As noted, none of the interviewees denied the presence of gentrification or described it as a positive or neutral force – interviewees uniformly consider gentrification to be a destructive force in Brooklyn that creates and exacerbates structural inequities, although one that seems to be beyond the control of individual renters (Donnelly, 2018). Gentrification and the structural inequities on which it rests seem to be particularly destructive to mutuality and participatory organizing, constitutive components of MA. Given these realities, ongoing political dynamics, and structural inequities that exist in Brooklyn today, how do MA groups aim to address this potential dissonance and advance their vision for a more equitable future?

When I asked organizers this question, I received a range of answers. One MA organizer, the person who described “consensus-driven decision-making” noted that many groups emerged in the specific context of the pandemic to address food security, and therefore did not have the capacity to address more enduring and pervasive local inequities. This related to his concern that,

perhaps, the “new mutual aid,” as he called it, was gentrifying and displacing longer-standing residents that have practiced MA informally as community care long before and beyond COVID-19.

While this was one of the blunter concerns about MA during interviews, it echoes a theme present throughout fieldwork about the relationality of inequality – that is, the ways in which one person’s or group’s social, political, and economic security is predicated upon the insecurity of another (Elwood and Lawson, 2018; Cházaro, Reddy, and Spade, 2020; Tilly, 2001). This is particularly apparent when considering gentrification in Brooklyn – as one tenant or family is displaced due to rising rents, another tenant or family moves in, largely in search of more reasonable rents. Gilmore elaborates on the relational aspect of inequality through her description of racial capitalism as “antirelationality” (Gilmore, 2002). Building on Gilmore, Melamed (2015, pp. 78-79) cites the ways in which racial capitalism is:

a system of expropriating violence on collective life itself ... [it is] the production of social separateness—the disjoining or deactivating of relations between human beings (and humans and nature)—needed for capitalist expropriation to work ... [Gilmore] identifies a dialectic in which forms of humanity are separated (made ‘distinct’) so that they may be ‘interconnected’ in terms that feed capital. Gilmore elsewhere names this process ‘partition’ ... which only exists and develops according to its capacity ‘to control who can relate and under what terms.’ ... [Racial capitalist] “processes of spatial and social differentiation that truncate relationality for capital accumulation ... impose a forgetting of interconnections, of viable relations, and of performances of collectivity that might nurture greater social wholeness.

Racial capitalism, according to scholars and activists, permeates every aspect of daily life, but is particularly apparent in studies on private property, which help to “stretch Marxism” (Fanon, 1961; Salem, 2019; Leroy and Jenkins, 2021). For instance, Park (2021) elevates the ways in which “colonists in America introduced novel practices of foreclosure ... in order to expropriate lands held by Native nations ... deviat[ing] from an old English tradition of protecting families

from land loss” (p. 27). Freund (2010) reveals the ways in which racial capitalism continues to shape access to and protection of property and the livelihood that comes with it, and Fields and Raymond (2021) highlight means of housing justice by resisting “financialization.” The racialized nature of “property and personhood [exclusion and domination]” (Roy, 2017) extends from the founding of the country based on “chattel slavery and indigenous dispossession” (Leroy and Jenkins, 2021, p. 19) through foreclosures and dispossession today. In this way, we can theorize gentrification and displacement as a particularly stark and vivid form of racial capitalism, a concept proposed by critical sociologists, historians, and geographers (see, e.g., Danewid, 2019; Rucks-Ahidiana, 2021).

Concerns over this painful reality of gentrification in Brooklyn – including its impact on quality of life and relationships, and its disruption to local networks of mutual care – was apparent throughout fieldwork. For instance, at the beginning of each interview, when I asked when people moved to their neighborhood, many shared that they moved recently (see “Table 3” in the appendix) and cited the cost of rent as a primary consideration when choosing their neighborhood. The MA organizer reflecting on her anarchist beliefs and the benefits of government aid, for example, also shared, “There's always this question of where else do you live? I work for the city, I don't get raises ever. My partner works for a non-profit ... and my roommate works at a café. We're all gentrifiers without salaries to live anywhere else.” This represents a key conundrum of MA today – it is designed to resist racial capitalism, but participants’ lives are ultimately still confined within this system. In this way, I find that while MA offers a powerful practice of local collective care to address state failures – feeding one in four people by some estimates – it is not currently positioned to undo centuries of racist capitalist

violence, which contribute to the gentrification dynamics that seem to be engrained within Brooklyn and cities across the globe (Urban Displacement Project, 2019).

That said, MA members included in this study, as well as those who have long practiced more traditional forms of MA, are not defeated by the existence and persistence of racial capitalism and state violence, but rather exist in order to directly counter these forces and build collective resilience and resistance, an ongoing process. In this way, local social ties cultivate relationality that can counter the antirelationality on which racial capitalism relies (Gilmore, 2002; Melamed, 2015). The MA organizer above who acknowledged her role in and frustration with gentrification quickly followed up with quotidian, “everyday,” practices she uses to resist racial capitalism. Like other interviewees, she cites co-ops and Black-owned businesses as alternative economies towards which MA participants, and others, can strive: “What are also the things you can be doing that is building a different system? Supporting that work around Black-owned business... They're living proof of what a different economy could look like.”

Thus, while MA groups’ prefigurative politics seem to be constrained by current political dynamics and existing structural inequities, their radical expansion during the pandemic helped to build “knowledge repertoires” (della Porta and Pavan, 2017) that could last well beyond their grocery operations. Building on Tilly’s (1986) definition of contentious repertoires, and paralleling Clemens’s (1993) organizational repertoires, discussed above, della Porta and Pavan (2017, p. 297) conceptualize knowledge repertoires as:

the set of practices that foster the coordination of disconnected, local, and highly personal experiences and rationalities within a shared cognitive system able to provide movements and their supporters with a common orientation for making claims and acting collectively to produce social, political, and cultural changes.

MA groups center their action on the basis of collective resistance and resilience in the face of racial capitalism. By naming the roots of the structural inequities they aim to address as racial capitalism, MA groups provide a common orientation for members, and neighbors more broadly, to grapple with manifestations of these inequities, including gentrification, their role within these inequities, and their power to address them. More specifically, MA groups cultivate knowledge repertoires by (1) amplifying direct actions led by local, longer-standing community-based organizations partnerships; (2) coordinating political education programs; and (3) building an infrastructure of care that can emerge in response to future crises, which many interviewees seem to anticipate.

First, several MA groups partnered with longer-standing community-based organizations (CBO) as an entry point to more sustained and explicit political action that can better help to combat the structural inequities that leave survival needs unmet. Several MA groups used their online networks – which are active enough to feed over 100 households a week – to elevate local advocacy events, including eviction defense (as cited by the organizer who considered the threat of white supremacist violence), and door-knocking events to spread the word about the eviction moratorium. These efforts are typically organized by longer-standing community organizing groups specifically dedicated to housing justice and gentrification resistance. Other MA organizers connected with tenants’ rights groups, particularly those organized in NYCHA Houses, to collaborate on outreach and support their ongoing advocacy efforts. Two other MA organizers I spoke with partnered with community organizations led by unhoused individuals to advocate against sweeps, the criminalization of poverty, and inhumane living conditions in shelters.

Second, MA groups launched political education programs several months into their operations. While several interviewees noted that in the early months of the pandemic their bandwidth was fully occupied by grocery requests, they realized during the uprisings in support of BLM that they needed to carve out space to discuss the roots of the structural inequities they sought to address. In many ways, this brought MA groups in this study in closer alignment with more traditional practices of MA. It also addressed critiques that MA was comprised primarily of gentrifiers while neglecting the history of the neighborhood. Thus, many partnered with longer-standing CBOs, residents, and academics to unearth the history of their neighborhoods and the history of MA. Several interviewees described that it was the combination of delivering groceries to their neighbors combined with these political discussions that contributed to a learning and “unlearning”⁶⁰ process that shaped their political orientation. By reclaiming the past, including unearthing the ways in which racial capitalism shaped the founding of the country and limits access to housing today, MA members are better able to make sense of present injustices in order to envision a more just future (see, e.g., Bassett, 2016; Fanon, 1961; Mische, 2009). As della Porta and Pavan (2017, p. 308; citing Crowther and Lucio-Villegas, 2012, p. 66) write of collective mobilizations:

While these communities may not necessarily succeed in transforming the conditions they target nor usually in developing into large-scale movements, they nonetheless gather ‘critical and active agents’ that are less easy to manipulate and control, and have the opportunity to make ‘visible alternative values and visions that can animate people.’

These alternative values are reflected in the local infrastructure of care MA networks built. The rapid response and remarkable reach of MA throughout the first 16 months of the pandemic revealed the collective power of neighbors to support each other by “acting in concert”

⁶⁰ Interviews with MA participants January 14, and June 4, 2021

(Arendt, 1958). The spontaneity with which MA groups emerged during the pandemic, and adapted to myriad crises thereafter – racist state violence, economic fall-out, democratic decay – resists the reactions racial capitalism would predict, and which were amplified in the media: hoarding toilet paper, hand sanitizer, and food. Instead, neighbors combined resources – time, labor, and embodied privilege – to care for each other. While aspects of MA, such as bulk grocery delivery, appear to be slowing down at this juncture in the pandemic, there is hope that the infrastructures of care and the knowledge they produced will sustain beyond current crises, so that they can be activated for the next. In the meantime, several MA groups are considering ways they can address gentrification head on. Below, the organizer who described MA as collective muscle memory, discusses their group’s efforts:

I think there's still very much a survival focus in the ways things are functioning. Seeing how the food is going to keep being distributed, seeing how the resources are going to keep being gathered, seeing how people feel engaged in negotiating Slack and all of that stuff. And then I think very specifically ... a working group [within our MA group] that jumped up ... either the summer or the fall [of 2020] has taken a more direct and intentional approach as it relates to gentrification. They're looking at spaces trying to see about community ownership, talking to community land trusts, trying to figure out how to not have developers buying more empty lots. That group has been dealing directly and grappling directly with gentrification as it relates to space, particularly land and buildings. And then I think the cultural gentrification is still a negotiation.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study explores how people make sense of structural inequities, and if and how they take collective action to address them in a gentrifying urban neighborhood. Mutual aid, a long-standing practice of collective care amongst marginalized communities in times of crisis, has evolved and expanded as an increasingly popular practice during this era of rising inequality, and appears to have been spurred by the pandemic. In Brooklyn and in communities across the

country, MA has taken shape as grocery delivery for elderly, immuno-compromised, and food insecure neighbors. Unlike more traditional MA practices, these efforts are often organized around a geographic neighborhood that has experienced significant gentrification. While the reach of these operations is impressive in sheer scope and speed, MA neighborhood-based groups also raise questions around if and how they can address their broader goals of ameliorating the structural inequities they aim to combat within their own operations.

Through participant observation with MA groups and interviews with MA members, this study revealed the ways in which MA offers a platform for collective dreaming to reimagine and build a more just, equitable future – a particularly resonant vision for many during periods of ontological insecurity and declining trust in social institutions (Mampilly, 2021). At the same time, MA groups have become home to a reckoning for the ways in which structural inequities take shape and are perpetuated, including through gentrification and displacement. While MA members are drawn to the “participatory” decision-making processes of MA as a practice for a more democratic future, questions also emerged around who is able to partake in these horizontal structures, and if and how these structures reproduce inequality. Although there are not – at least not yet – concrete answers to these questions, MA provides a language, or “knowledge repertoires” (della Porta and Pavan, 2017) to further probe them.

In a time when governmental institutions appear incapable of solving – and are arguably responsible for – the crises at hand, and unworthy of collective trust, MA offers a path for local social ties, trust, and collective efficacy (Sampson, Raudenbusch, and Earls, 1997) for people to name and take action to address these crises. MA as a cross-class and interracial collective mobilization during our current political era points towards how people make meaning in times

of crises, and what motivates them to take collective action to address these crises. During a time of rising inequality and heightened polarization nationally, local collective care offers a potent alternative political orientation and platform for collective dreaming. Nevertheless, the current political dynamics and existing structural inequities constrain MA's collective dreaming and prefigurative politics and practice for a more just world. While MA is not currently positioned to undo centuries of racist capitalist violence, members cite MA's organizational and knowledge repertoire as essential practices in resisting racial capitalism.

In addition to contributions to social movement scholarship, this research also has the potential to inform research on organizational sociology, economic sociology, and political theory. Future papers drawing on this data, specifically, consider MA today alongside historical MA, and specifically its potential "knowledge repertoires" to reframe the legacy of Black liberation activists and scholars, including the Black Panther Party and Frantz Fanon. Other potential questions to probe include, what can MA tell us about the role of accounting for "privilege" in recent political movements? How, if at all, do MA's organizational repertoires and economic arrangements influence other local institutions? Does MA participation have any impact on long-term individual- or neighborhood-level political orientations? As MA continues to proliferate across the country during this uncertain time, I look forward to putting this research in conversation with other scholars examining and organizers leading this work.

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APPENDIX

Table 1. Racial and Ethnic Demographics of Neighborhoods in Brooklyn, New York.
Source: NYU’s Furman Center, Core.Data.NYC, accessed December 1, 2021.

Neighborhood	Population			Asian			Black			Hispanic/Latinx			White		
	2000	2019	% change	2000	2019	% change	2000	2019	% change	2000	2019	% change	2000	2019	% change
Greepoint / Williamsburg	142,098	151,308	6.48%	3.90%	6.60%	69%	4%	4.50%	12.50%	34.10%	25%	-26.69%	52.50%	61.30%	16.76%
Fort Greene / Brooklyn Heights	115,106	133,346	15.85%	4.20%	11.30%	169%	41.80%	20.30%	-51.44%	19.30%	12.30%	-36.27%	31.10%	52.10%	67.52%
Bedford Stuyvesant	121,054	144,306	19.21%	0.80%	3.00%	275%	74.90%	45.60%	-39.12%	19.00%	19.50%	2.63%	2.40%	29.40%	1125.00%
Bushwick	120,710	127,550	5.67%	2.80%	4.20%	50%	23.40%	15.30%	-34.62%	67.80%	56.30%	-16.96%	3.10%	20.60%	564.52%
East New York / Starrett City	146,857	180,811	23.12%	3.90%	4%	3%	45.70%	55.40%	21.23%	39.10%	34.90%	-10.74%	6%	4.20%	-30.00%
Park Slope / Carroll Gardens	105,555	114,043	8.04%	4.70%	8.50%	81%	11.20%	8.50%	-24.11%	24.20%	10.50%	-56.61%	56%	67.80%	21.07%
Sunset Park	139,269	130,783	-6.09%	21.80%	34.80%	60%	3.40%	3.90%	14.71%	47.90%	35.60%	-25.68%	23%	22.70%	3.04%
Crown Heights / Prospect Heights	123,117	128,327	4.23%	1.50%	3.20%	113%	78.10%	48.80%	-37.52%	9.80%	14.10%	43.88%	7.40%	30.80%	316.22%
South Crown Heights / Lefferts Gardens	112,670	106,258	-5.69%	0.80%	2.10%	163%	79%	57.20%	-27.59%	8.20%	12.20%	48.78%	8.60%	25.30%	194.19%
Bay Ridge / Dyker Heights	119,871	121,925	1.71%	13.60%	23.60%	74%	1.10%	2.10%	90.91%	10.80%	17.80%	64.81%	69.50%	53.60%	-22.88%
Bensonhurst	171,778	186,959	8.84%	23.10%	41%	77%	0.40%	1.10%	175.00%	8.80%	16%	81.82%	64.70%	38.40%	-40.65%
Borough Park	158,548	153,470	-3.20%	11.20%	12.70%	13%	2.80%	1.50%	-46.43%	10.70%	10.50%	-1.87%	70.80%	72.10%	1.84%
Coney Island	116,138	115,277	-0.74%	9.60%	16.40%	71%	14.40%	11%	-23.61%	15.60%	14.70%	-5.77%	57.10%	53.50%	-6.30%
Flatbush / Midwood	166,315	156,866	-5.68%	8%	9.50%	19%	37.40%	33.60%	-10.16%	12.90%	13.80%	6.98%	37.60%	39.80%	5.85%
Sheepshead Bay	149,351	147,401	-1.31%	12.30%	18.40%	50%	3.10%	3.80%	22.58%	6.30%	6.70%	6.35%	75.80%	67.20%	-11.35%
Brownsville	116,790	128,369	9.91%	0.60%	0.90%	50%	75.90%	68.40%	-9.88%	20.40%	25.60%	25.49%	0.70%	3.80%	442.86%
East Flatbush	145,263	136,009	-6.37%	1%	2.30%	130%	88.70%	85.80%	-3.27%	5.40%	7.60%	40.74%	1.50%	2.50%	66.67%
Flatlands / Canarsie	194,836	196,895	1.06%	3.70%	5.40%	46%	51%	62.50%	22.55%	8.10%	9.10%	12.35%	34.40%	21.40%	-37.79%
Brooklyn	2,465,326	2,559,903	3.84%	7.50%	11.90%	59%	34.40%	29.80%	-13.37%	19.80%	18.90%	-4.55%	34.70%	36.50%	5.19%

Table 2. Economic Indicators of Neighborhoods in Brooklyn, New York.
 Source: NYU’s Furman Center, Core.Data.NYC, accessed December 1, 2021.

Neighborhood	Median Household Income (2020)			Poverty rate			Median Rent (2020)			Severely rent burdened			Units Issued New Certificates of Occupancy		
	2000	2019	% change	2000	2019	% change	2000	2019	% change	2006	2019	% change	2006	2019	% change
Greenpoint / Williamsburg	\$43,160	\$99,960	131.60%	33.80%	20.10%	-40.53%	\$930	\$2,060	121.51%	23.70%	24.30%	2.53%	114	1,985	1641.2580
Fort Greene / Brooklyn Heights	\$65,690	\$113,350	72.55%	24.50%	13.80%	-43.67%	\$1,050	\$2,260	115.24%	18.60%	19.20%	3.23%	86	1,354	1474.4186
Bedford Stuyvesant	\$36,440	\$62,230	70.77%	35.90%	23%	-35.93%	\$830	\$1,460	75.90%	28.80%	27.50%	-4.51%	94	894	851.06382
Bushwick	\$36,760	\$67,410	83.38%	38.20%	20.70%	-45.81%	\$940	\$1,740	85.11%	31.90%	31.90%	0.00%	4	1,198	29850
East New York / Starrett City	\$43,800	\$46,780	6.80%	31.30%	23.30%	-25.56%	\$960	\$1,220	27.08%	27.10%	33.30%	22.88%	485	531	9.4845360
Park Slope / Carroll Gardens	\$84,720	\$157,900	86.38%	14.40%	7.60%	-47.22%	\$1,360	\$2,370	74.26%	18.40%	17.20%	-6.52%	34	67	97.058823
Sunset Park	\$53,070	\$69,030	30.07%	26.30%	18.10%	-31.18%	\$1,100	\$1,570	42.73%	26.40%	30.20%	14.39%	55	84	52.727272
Crown Heights / Prospect Heights	\$47,950	\$75,700	57.87%	28.20%	15.90%	-43.62%	\$930	\$1,580	69.89%	24.70%	26.80%	8.50%	17	288	1594.1176
South Crown Heights / Lefferts Gardens	\$48,430	\$67,840	40.08%	24%	17.90%	-25.42%	\$1,030	\$1,460	41.75%	25.20%	30.30%	20.24%	40	235	487.5
Bay Ridge / Dyker Heights	\$68,730	\$77,880	13.31%	13.90%	14.20%	2.16%	\$1,180	\$1,640	38.98%	21.20%	28.40%	33.96%	90	30	-66.666666
Bensonhurst	\$54,350	\$58,120	6.94%	19.70%	14.60%	-25.89%	\$1,110	\$1,470	32.43%	30.90%	33%	6.80%	86	142	65.116279
Borough Park	\$50,670	\$56,010	10.54%	28.50%	26.80%	-5.96%	\$1,130	\$1,610	42.48%	35%	43.50%	24.29%	47	209	344.68085
Coney Island	\$39,160	\$41,410	5.75%	28.50%	25.60%	-10.18%	\$880	\$1,100	25.00%	29.60%	30.30%	2.36%	39	1,327	3302.5641
Flatbush / Midwood	\$55,940	\$66,720	19.27%	22.80%	12%	-47.37%	\$1,080	\$1,510	39.81%	28.20%	32.50%	15.25%	24	706	2841.6666
Sheepshead Bay	\$60,740	\$76,410	25.80%	16.80%	11.60%	-30.95%	\$1,100	\$1,470	33.64%	28.30%	29.80%	5.30%	88	139	57.954545
Brownsville	\$34,050	\$31,880	-6.37%	42.60%	34.30%	-19.48%	\$780	\$1,130	44.87%	29.60%	37.70%	27.36%	92	112	21.759130
East Flatbush	\$55,940	\$61,940	10.73%	19.40%	9.90%	-48.97%	\$1,070	\$1,450	35.51%	26.10%	31.60%	21.07%	82	938	1043.9024
Flatlands / Canarsie	\$79,920	\$81,850	2.41%	12.20%	10.60%	-13.11%	\$1,210	\$1,480	22.31%	22.90%	25.90%	13.10%	134	25	-81.343283
Brooklyn	\$51,370	\$68,080	32.53%	25.10%	17.70%	-29.48%	\$1,040	\$1,510	45.19%	26.50%	29.40%	10.94%	1,611	10,264	537.11980

Table 3. Demographics of interviewees.

	%	N
Race / Ethnicity		
AAPI	14.71	5
Black	17.65	6
Latinx	5.88	2
Native American	0.00	0
White	61.76	21
<i>Total</i>	<i>100.00</i>	<i>34</i>
Gender		
Male	26.47	9
Female	64.71	22
Non-binary	8.82	3
<i>Total</i>	<i>100.00</i>	<i>34</i>
Age		
< 21	2.94	1
Early/mid 20s	26.47	9
Late 20s/early 30s	38.24	13
Mid/late 30s	14.71	5
Early/mid 40s	17.65	6
<i>Total</i>	<i>100.00</i>	<i>34</i>
Years in Neighborhood		
< 1 year	11.76	4
1-3 years	29.41	10
4-6 years	14.71	5
7-10 years	11.76	4
10-15 years	5.88	2
15-20 years	2.94	1
Born and raised	8.82	3
Unknown	14.71	5
<i>Total</i>	<i>100.00</i>	<i>34</i>

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