Mutual Aid as a Praxis for Critical Environmental Justice: Lessons from W.E.B. Du Bois, Critical Theoretical Perspectives, and Mobilising Collective Care in Disasters

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Abstract: We build on the critical environmental justice (CEJ) framework by exploring mutual aid as a means of practising and realising transformative environmental justice that allows activists to build environmentally resilient and just communities beyond the state. We draw on the work of W.E.B. Du Bois, the Black Radical Tradition, and other critical approaches to demonstrate how mutual aid offers a meaningful point of conjunction for uniting ideological approaches to environmental justice that are often understood as being at odds with one another. To demonstrate this in action, we provide brief examples on the proliferation and longevity of mutual aid in times of disaster, including the 1927 Mississippi floods, Hurricane Katrina, the Nashville tornados, and the Texas power outages. Through these accounts, we seek to demonstrate how environmental justice organisations can and have advanced collective liberation using mutual aid as a critical orientation rooted in community based care and empowerment.

Keywords: critical environmental justice, mutual aid, the Black Radical Tradition, W.E.B. DuBois, disasters

Introduction

In this era of intersecting social, political, economic, and ecological crises, we are witnessing a noteworthy rise in the awareness and practice of mutual aid (Springer 2020). The state's *absence* as an agent of care has become exceedingly clear, particularly in poor, BIPOC, queer, trans, and disabled communities. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing social problems, resulting in millions of people experiencing challenges to accessing basic needs, including food and nutrition, healthcare, education, and affordable housing. Inequalities

resulting from market-based, neoliberal approaches to social challenges indicate that when the state *is present*, it routinely exacerbates violent inequities. Relatedly, we have seen a concerning rise in authoritarian, fascist political formations, suggesting to many scholars that the "undoing of the demos" is a continuing threat (Brown 2017). This trend in anti-democratic state formation, and the accompanying policies and inaction that engender precarity, signal a need for alternative forms of critical infrastructure and care organised and provided beyond the state. This is especially true as we face the impacts of climate change, which pose significant threats to the social and ecological relations that allow humans and non-human animals to live and flourish. Importantly, these ongoing disasters, while catastrophic, are rarely "natural"; instead, they are a result of subjecting global ecosystems, inclusive of minoritised populations, to logics of domination rooted in colonialism, imperialism and perpetuated by the (capitalist) state (Alagraa 2021; Ferdinand 2022; Murphy et al. 2021; Pulido and De Lara 2018; Wright 2021).

Systems of domination and violence linked to anthropogenic climate change alter the ways in which humans relate to each other and to the more-than-human world (Taylor 2017, 2019; Whyte 2018, 2020). Mutual aid, defined as beliefs and practices of cooperative and socio-political sustainable care for one's community in a manner that strives to overturn material oppression, serves as a longstanding grassroots response to these realities. Mutual aid is not charity, but rather a way of facilitating relational changes rooted in mutuality and collective responsibility to social and natural ecosystems (hooks 2018; Reese and Johnson 2022; Spade 2020). Prior to COVID-19, "mutual aid" was not a prevalent term in academic discourse beyond anarchist scholarship (see, for exceptions, Sovacool and Dunlap 2022). According to Google Trends, the week of 15 March 2020—the week following the declaration that COVID-19 constituted a pandemic—the term was searched more often than at any other point in the previous half decade. Faced with the market's creation of material inequalities and the state's reinforcement of those disparities, minoritised communities have long embraced the practice of mutual aid through networks of care dedicated to the exchange of skills, medicines, housing, and cash assistance. Public interest in mutual aid provides an opportunity for scholarship to explore how this practice can be, and has been, leveraged in response to myriad disasters stemming from Western socio-economic development processes and the anthropogenic environmental change they are productive of—crises that can also be slow and silent in their unfolding (Nixon 2011).

Critical environmental justice (CEJ) forges a new path for analysing and addressing socio-ecological violence through the lens of indispensability—acknowledging that minoritised peoples, more-than-human animals, and ecosystems are interdependent (Pellow 2018). CEJ expands the field of environmental justice by incorporating critical approaches to social problems from the Black Radical Tradition (BRT), racial capitalism, Black ecologies, post-colonial thought, and critical disability studies, among others (Ferdinand 2022; Murphy et al. 2021; Pulido and De Lara 2018; Roane and Hosbey 2019). Furthermore, this framework acknowledges that while state-based solutions to climate change

should not be abandoned, our movements should seek, and have often sought, change through radical practices that "rely less on the state to achieve their goals" (Pellow 2018:23) of building a community power that is equitable, democratic, and efficacious. Following the calls of CEJ, the goal of this paper is to explore mutual aid as a critical orientation and practice that generates and reinforces the social relationships imperative for ensuring community resilience, and increasing adaptive capacity. Mutual aid acknowledges the inequitable and violent mechanisms used to determine who is worthy of care by the state and the charity-based institutions that comprise the "shadow state" (Spade 2020; Wolch 1990). Although this approach may seem naïve to some, we argue mutual aid networks have, historically, been used by minoritised communities to address environmental justice concerns, including unsafe housing, securing food and water, healthcare, and providing support in times of disaster. Just as environmental inequality has been present in every period of contemporary socio-economic development (Taylor 2016), so too have mutual aid approaches to environmental justice.

We explore the value of mutual aid as a transformative framework and approach to environmental justice by drawing on critical theories and lesser-known writings of W.E.B. Du Bois that speak to racialisation's role in the disproportionate impact of environmental disasters, as well as the reliance on communal care in response to government failure. We propose that this work offers a meaningful point of articulation for joining ideological approaches to social-historical change that are often understood as inharmonious—and does so in ways that resonate meaningfully with the epistemic flexibility of the BRT (Rabaka 2008; Robinson 2000). Such a move also offers a path to extend more recent work in the fields of sociology and anthropology engaging the radical interdisciplinarity (Besek et al. 2020; Robinson 2000), geographic historicity (Wilson 2002), and meta-methodological insights and contributions (Hackworth 2021; Morris 2015) of what is more and more being termed a Du Boisian framework. Subsequently, we draw upon secondary accounts and primary documents, including unpublished essays, correspondence, and notes viewed between 2017 and 2022 at the Fisk University "Du Bois, William Edward Burghardt Collection, 1832–1963" archive, the University of Massachusetts at Amherst "W.E.B Du Bois Papers, 1803–1999" archive, and the collection of *The Crisis* that was edited by Du Bois to inform brief chronicles of emergent networks of reciprocity and care during disasters, including the 1927 Mississippi floods, Hurricane Katrina, the 2020 Nashville tornadoes, and the 2021 Texas power outages. As noted, we locate these documents within the larger discussion of Du Boisian approaches to critical social sciences, with particular attention being paid to developments in the theoretical spaces of critical environmental justice, political economy, and Black Radicalism. In doing so we aim to demonstrate both the longevity and ongoing salience of mutual aid as a critical practice in the quest for US environmental justice. We suggest that by addressing emergent community needs, mutual aid has expanded networks of revolutionary politics and created larger movements that aim to enact structural change (Spade 2020).

Critical Environmental Justice: Challenging State Based Solutions as the Only Solutions

Definitions of both environmental justice and environmental racism reference the state's role in simultaneously creating environmental injustices and achieving environmental justice. For example, Bullard ([1996](#):493) defined environmental justice as the principle that "all people and communities are entitled to *equal protection of environmental and public health laws and regulations*". Furthermore, the response to state and industry's involvement in perpetuating and ignoring environmental injustice has largely centred upon policy solutions that maintain extant governance and decision-making structures. However, Pellow ([2018](#):23) notes, "studies have demonstrated consistently and conclusively, the track record of state-based regulation and enforcement of environmental and civil rights legislation in communities of color has not been promising". Environmental justice scholars have identified multiple causes of these failures, including movement co-optation and neoliberal quiescence (Harrison [2015](#)), resistance from regulatory agencies (Harrison [2019](#)), and the illusory distinctions and indelible ties between industry and the state (Ashwood [2018](#); Pulido et al. [2016](#); Taylor [2016](#)). Identifying and elaborating upon four key analytic "pillars", CEJ seeks to highlight the historic, social-structural drivers of environmental inequality. To this end, CEJ argues for the importance of incorporating intersectional (pillar one), temporally and spatially mutli-scalar (pillar two), expansively inclusive (pillar four) analyses that are rooted in perspectives that take a critically cautious approach to engaging with powerful allies such as the state or private corporations (Pellow [2018](#)). In doing so, the CEJ framework encourages scholars, activists, and decision-makers to reassess the assumed reliance, across social movements, on state engagement by acknowledging the state's role in "authoritarian, coercive, racist, patriarchal, exclusionary, militaristic, and anti-ecological" practices (Pellow [2018](#):23).

These critiques raise an important question: *what are the alternatives to relying on the state?* To answer this question, we must interrogate what falls under the purview of "the state". We define the (capitalist) state as a complex set of political actors and institutions following logics that are aligned and deeply intertwined with, yet qualitatively distinct from, those of capitalist firms. In an effort to secure the conditions necessary for markets to function and expand in a capitalist economy, states maintain monopolies over the legitimate use of violence (Weber [1978](#)) —or, more aptly, the legitimate resort to lawlessness (Mézáros [2022](#))—and exercise power over non-profit or voluntary sectors, structuring their operational logics. In contemporary social schema the state is near omnipresent, providing funding for social and physical infrastructure whose construction, maintenance, and operation are often outsourced to private organisations and corporations. State actors and action also centre upon gathering and incentivising the extension of technologies of surveillance, behavioural manipulation, and accumulation, while simultaneously both regulating and enabling the market actors that often instigate or exacerbate socio-environmental inequalities. In other words, a key characteristic of the varied constellations of institutions and agents that compose contemporary state-forms is their control over socio-technical systems of violence and information (Graeber and Wengrow [2021](#)), and the use of those systems to

develop and stabilise various modes of social control (e.g. processes of racialisation) such that they maintain the social and ecological conditions that optimise exponential expansion of material accumulation, and the hierarchical distribution of both accumulated materials and their less desirable by-products in a given geographic, historical context.

As scholars of racial capitalism have pointed out, racial exploitation and capital accumulation reinforce each other (Robinson 2000). Gilmore (2022:228) dissects the emergence of conservative, reactionary "anti-state state actors", defining them as "people and parties who gain state power by denouncing state power" and "insist that the withdrawal of the state from certain areas of social welfare provision will enhance rather than destroy the lives of those abandoned". As such, the state turns to the "market" and the non-profit or voluntary sector, what Jennifer Wolch (1990) terms the "shadow state", to provide direct social services. Gilmore (2022:232) notes that "the shadow state, then, is real, but without political clout, forbidden by law to advocate for systemic change, and bound by public rules and nonprofit charters". Moreover, corporations are ill-prepared to provide social services or address the consequences of environmental injustices. In this process, the state still maintains its monopoly on mass punishment and control, with violent and deadly consequences for minoritised, or "surplus" populations (Mbembe 2019).

The third pillar of CEJ envisions a praxis that deepens direct democracy through participation in networks and institutions beyond those controlled by the state or capitalist interests, inclusive of the "shadow state". This framework acknowledges the current hegemony of the state and recognises that in many situations, completely avoiding interaction with the state is neither desirable nor feasible. However, CEJ encourages researchers and decision makers to reckon with the reality that many social movements and activist organisations are already successfully using tactics that do not always engage with the state to achieve their goals.

A point of tension in recent environmental justice studies has been voiced by Purucker (2021) and Harrison (2022), who argue that the critically cautious approach to state engagement that is encouraged by CEJ is detrimental to urgent environmental justice struggles globally. Yet, centuries-long histories of organising and thought by queer, disabled, and BIPOC communities, especially with respect to abolition, present us with radical alternatives to an assumed dichotomy of state versus non-state engagement (Gilmore 2021, 2022; Kaba 2021; Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018). Mutual aid groups are often born out of material oppressions rooted in identity-based ostracism from decision-making mechanisms of the state —one component of what Patterson (2018) refers to as "social death"—and have already built a vision of social change that is less dependent on the state. These organisations foreground something critical by simply posing a question of foundational significance: *how can a state that was never built to serve their interests in the first place truly help them achieve their social justice goals?* CEJ takes this question seriously and opens a space to better understand how movement actors may make the elements of the state they do opt to work with more robustly democratic as a result.

When confronted with decades of scholarship on the failures of the state, many scholars ask: *can we reform the state to meet our needs or is the state insufficient to meet those needs—even with reform?* This question was most directly addressed in the debates in *New Left Review* between Ralph Miliband and Nicos Poulantzas concerning the relationship between the state and capital. Miliband (1969) argued that the state has been, from its inception, captured by the bourgeoisie, leaving open the possibility that the working classes could exercise agency over the state to serve their own interests. Poulantzas (1978) disagreed, noting that seizing state power as the sole means of achieving socialism was overly simplistic given the state's longstanding history of promoting the interests of the capitalist class. The debate is relevant for weighing strategies for managing the state and its role in addressing environmental inequality, and for illustrating the multidimensional nature of contemporary states. Regardless of where one falls in this debate, it is ultimately insufficient in two respects. First, it fails to acknowledge the relationship between white supremacy and capitalism, and how the goals of each are upheld and championed by the (racial) state (Pulido et al. 2016). Second, it provides us with no real solution for tackling the oppressions productive of environmental injustice in the present. Although recent Marxian inquiries into the historicity of state formation make strides on the first point (e.g. Jenkins and Leroy 2021), the second remains largely unaddressed. Filling such gaps by investigating other theoretical schools is critical, because assuring more just means of social reproduction is not just a philosophical problem for marginalised populations; it is a tangible one.

Here we make no claim as to whether the state can or will be "captured" and reformed. Nor do we reject all forms of state engagement in the quest for environmental justice. Regardless of whether one believes the state can ultimately meet the needs of those it has marginalised, legacies of violence and dispossession have inculcated a deep distrust of centralised power (Ashwood 2018). Further, working with the state can have disastrous consequences for those whose subjugation is required for maintaining the punitive excess of the state and the relationships it has formed with capitalists and non-profit and voluntary institutions. We explore the concept of mutual aid as a framework for developing liberatory spaces for environmental justice work in the present that can exist beyond the command-and-control approach of the state apparatus. In our view, mutual aid serves as a longstanding example of the third pillar of CEJ, demonstrating the ways in which minoritised communities address the state's absence as an agent of care.

The Mutual Aid Framework

Although the socio-ecological ties between oppressive forms of social organisation and ecological transformation have been most frequently explored through pivotal works of Marx (e.g. Foster 1999), it would be disingenuous to say that this connection has been ignored in other theoretical traditions. Lucy Parsons, a leading Black anarchist at the turn of the 20th century, noted how theories of anarchism break socio-ecological barriers generated by vertical organising: "But

anarchism is the usher of science—the master of ceremonies to all forms of truth. It would remove all barriers between the human being and natural development. From the natural resources of the earth, all artificial restrictions, that the body might be nurtured, and from universal truth, all bars of prejudice and superstition, that the mind may develop harmoniously" (Parsons 1887:171). Parsons (1887:172) goes even further, noting that the government's monopolistic grasp on the use of force "invades the personal liberty of man [sic], seizes upon the natural elements, and intervenes between man and natural laws".

Such discussions not only highlight how state violence stunts human progress in both individual and social dimensions of life, but also offer a simple solution rooted in a reliance on solidarity and collective care: *mutual aid*. The term was popularised by Peter Kropotkin's (1902) publication of *Mutual Aid: A Factor in Evolution*, a work partially conceived in response to the application of Darwin's ideas to naturalistic arguments upholding rugged individualism in capitalist systems. Kropotkin emphasised the importance of decentralised organisation and local production to eliminate the need for central government and promote self-sufficiency. While forms of social reproduction that are unmediated by decision making processes centralised within a state may remind one of libertarianism, libertarian thought (including its expressions in anarcho-capitalism, right-libertarians, or free market anarchism) represents the social Darwinism that Kropotkin and Marx were both so vehemently opposed to, as it promotes a society based on "survival of the fittest" instead of one based on collective care and reciprocity (Springer et al. 2012).

The term may have been popularised by Kropotkin, but mutual aid has been present in practice and theory for hundreds of years, even and especially during times of oppressive state violence. And, importantly, it has been used by marginalised and minoritised groups who do not necessarily concretely tie themselves to the political theory or practice of anarchism. Du Bois' work discussed below is a notable example of this, as he never called himself an "anarchist" but promoted ideas and practices that are nonetheless at the core of anarchism. The central tenets of mutual aid have always been a tradition of many Black, Indigenous, queer, and disabled communities (see Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018, 2022; Whyte 2020; see Kadalie 2022 for discussions of Indigenous notions of kinship, collective care in disabled communities, and intimate direct democracy in Maroon communities in the southern United States). Although mutual aid is far from a new concept, it is one that appears to be in the process of a somewhat organic reinvigoration in the face of the multiple, compounding crises caused by the expropriative and exploitive activity carried out under the unification of capital and state power.

Spade (2020:7) provides a simple, yet powerful definition of mutual aid: "Mutual aid is collective coordination to meet each other's needs, usually from an awareness that the systems we have in place are not going to meet them". Mutual aid networks have demonstrated that we can organise ourselves and build infrastructure when formal institutions fail us and that we can do so pre-emptively—*before* those institutions fail us again. These networks highlight the importance of reciprocity, responsibility, and respect (Whyte 2018), as well as

redundancy, diversity, modularity, and collaboration to ramifying efforts to realise justice for historically marginalised peoples and nonhuman natures. While mutual aid efforts may emerge in times of immediate distress, Reese and Johnson (2022:38) powerfully note, "they also work to transform geographies into liberatory space where people can both have their needs met and practice relationality that is not rooted in extraction". Further, they argue: "Mutual aid strengthens us as we engage in struggles to transform harmful forms of power. As a practice, mutual aid reminds us that the political demands of struggle for a liberated world cannot be met or realized without infrastructures to care for each other in ways that counteract the violence of the state" (ibid.).

Mutual aid stands in contrast to the charitable networks of the shadow state that "makes rich people and corporations look generous while upholding and legitimizing the systems that concentrate wealth" (Spade 2020:36). Charity is incapable of changing material conditions or laying a foundation for liberation because it is not rooted in building communal power or realising community self-determination (Reese and Johnson 2022). Charity focuses on individual limitations, failing to acknowledge the role of structural inequality in producing the need for charity to exist in the first place (Spade 2020). In contrast, mutual aid seeks to decentralise community care, relying on the exchange of skills and resources to create "alternative forms of relationality to each other and the earth" (Reese and Johnson 2022:28). The practice of mutual aid requires communities to make a long-term commitment to the disruption of oppressive systems. Unfortunately, many of the mutual aid groups that have surfaced in the wake of COVID-19 failed to challenge charity models of care (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2022). Mutual aid efforts risk co-optation by the non-profit sector and charity-based organisations. Unincorporated grassroots groups that attempt to leverage a mutual aid framework may feel pressure to formalise their efforts to attain non-profit sponsorship. Gilmore (2022:234) refers to this process as working "in the shadow of the shadow state". This process highlights the inherent messiness of attempting radical practices within neoliberal systems (Shostak 2021).

Creating an infrastructure of mutual aid, a concept that resembles Klinenberg (2018)'s "social infrastructures", equips communities to navigate the more frequent and forceful disasters that will occur as global anthropogenic climate change unfolds. Although the framework of mutual aid does not come with a blueprint for revolutionary change, it does provide a means of engaging in prefigurative politics that allows people to practice the world they want to live in (Springer 2020). As Reese and Johnson (2022:39) note, "As a prefigurative praxis, mutual aid demands reimagining care such that people's needs are met and their humanity is not weighted against arbitrary measures of deservedness". Scholars may be critical of the logic of mutual aid due to its ties to anarchism, or the incommensurable structure of revolutionary theory centred on the appropriation of decision-making apparatuses that guide social reproduction (e.g. socialism and some communisms), and theories that argue, instead, for the immediate and complete disarticulation of such machinery (e.g. anarchism and some communisms). Regardless of ideological loyalties, in practice, those seeking a tangible pathway to social justice can, and often do, utilise concepts from multiple,

seemingly disparate political philosophies. Few social movements gain success by looking to the scholarship of just one theoretical tradition, and it is often social movements that provide the creative impetus underlying scholarly synthesis and innovation. To explore this assertion, we draw on the work of Du Bois and others belonging to the broad school of thought identified as the Black Radical Tradition (BRT).

Mutual Aid: Du Bois, the BRT, and Other Critical Perspectives

From a theoretical perspective the BRT is amorphous and transient, existing prior to and outside of dominant schools of thought that locate themselves within the liberal and radical paradigms of the Western world. What sets contributors to the BRT and their work apart from others in the West is its extension beyond Marxism, anarchism, liberalism, and other ideo-theoretical approaches to social origins, reproduction, and transformation by refusing to ignore the history of racism in theoretical development. Many scholars have relied on frameworks in the BRT to develop Black ecological thought, critical environmental justice, and to deepen our understanding of the connection between anti-Blackness, colonialism, and the domination of the natural world (McGee and Greiner 2020; Murphy 2021; Murphy et al. 2021; Pellow 2018; Ramanujam 2023) by drawing on the work of Cedric Robinson, Sylvia Wynter, and W.E.B Du Bois, to name a few. It is in this spirit that we engage the work of Du Bois to explore mutual aid as an opportunity to consider how communities can, and have, worked in ways that rely less on the state—and more on collective resources and resilience—to achieve social change.

As one of the earliest contributors to what might be considered a formally intellectual BRT, we believe that Du Bois offers many lessons about the means and benefits of gathering and synthesis from different theoretical traditions. As Rabaka (2008) and others (e.g. Lewis 2000) have noted, one of Du Bois' most distinguished characteristics is his penchant for exploring the usefulness of ideas and theories across dominant political perspectives and scientific disciplines of his day. Du Bois not only engaged a range of sciences to better understand and dismantle systematic oppression, but also "creatively connected and used" myriad social science frameworks to develop a "multifarious and ever evolving social theory" (Rabaka 2008:4). Furthermore, the recognised resistance to acknowledging Du Bois' intellectual and political role in establishing a wide range of fields has been "grounded on deeper reservations ... that his work has origins independent of Western liberal and radical thought" (Robinson 2000:186). This epistemic openness and intellectual curiosity led Du Bois through many literatures during his lifetime, and while he ultimately ended his life an expatriated communist, he was not averse to exploring and employing concepts such as mutual aid alongside many others in the Black community of the early and mid 20th century United States.

Notably, Du Bois' scholarship spans decades and his longevity allowed for significant shifts in his intellectual thought. Although Du Bois' early work advocated for the "talented tenth", an elite group of Black leaders to lift the bottom 90% of

the Black population from oppression, he later amended his views, acknowledging the importance of grassroots efforts (Rabaka 2018). An advocate of community self-determination and polycentric governance, Du Bois was interested in the ability of mutual aid groups to function as tools of "racial uplift" for the Black community. In the Atlanta University report entitled "Some Efforts of American Negroes for Their Own Social Betterment", which Du Bois edited, the structural organisation and financial practices of 21 society groups and three mutual aid associations—with a total membership of over 21,000 Black individuals throughout the US southeast—were lauded for their liberatory potential (Du Bois 1898). The report provides recommendations to the Black community on how mutual aid groups can stabilise communities experiencing oppression during disasters and suggested that networks remain small and composed of local, well-vetted members. This suggestion was prescient, as following the 1905 Disaster Relief Act, the Red Cross was made a de jure arm of the state—joining the US Army and Navy disaster management efforts (Mizelle 2014). Spade (2020) explains the pitfalls of co-optation as well, noting that this process prioritises the management of vulnerable populations as opposed to spearheading community-led social justice endeavours, thereby lending itself to refining the domination the state and capital mobilise for social control.

Du Bois' interest in mutual aid was far from idle "armchair" theorising; it was a fundamental part of his approach to liberation. Burden-Stelly and Horne (2019:205) note that a central component of Du Bois' praxis and early contributions to the tradition of Black Marxism, or the BRT more broadly, was rooted in a commitment to "mutual comradeship", or the "practice of collaboration, reciprocal care, and learning in community" that "vehemently contests the neoliberal ethos of individualism, selfishness, ruthlessness, and apathy". For Du Bois (1898, 1907) it was clear that mutual aid served as a foundation to support the social uplift of minoritised populations. The first mutual aid networks documented in colonial North America developed via affiliations of enslaved persons seeking to purchase their own freedom. Eventually, these networks became a means whereby free Black Americans could purchase land and build wealth. With still more time, they were formalised into mutual and beneficial assistance societies that provided social insurance and aid to local community members, or a national membership. For Du Bois (1907:26), "the spirit of revolt" that, in the US plantation economy, "tried to co-operate by means of insurrection led to widespread organization for the rescue of fugitive slaves among Negroes themselves", such as through the Underground Railroad, "and developed before the war in the North and during and after the war in the South, into various co-operative efforts toward economic emancipation and land-buying. Gradually these efforts led to co-operative business, building and loan associations and trade unions". It should be unsurprising that Du Bois (1952) once penned, "mutual aid rather than individual initiative holds the solution of our future".

Furthermore, the central tenets of mutual aid, most notably the emphasis on centring the collective over the individual, have long been present in abolitionist and Indigenous anti-colonial projects (e.g. Davis 2020; Whyte 2020). Kaba (2021:12) notes the surveillance of Black people by the state has influenced

Black history such "that considerations of civil liberties are always embedded with concepts of equality and social justice ... by design or necessity, Black people have focused on our collective rights over our civil liberties". Nelson's (2011) work on the Black Panther Party's (BPP) praxis of collective action exemplifies this orientation. The BPP's medical campaign to provide health screenings and administer preventive care was rooted in a tradition of self-reliant community building. This tradition is further exemplified in Reese's (2019) work on Black food geographies in the community of Deanwood in Washington, DC. Prior to the rise of corporate food structures built on logics of racial capitalism, Deanwood activists developed informal economies rooted in trade and barter systems that not only "met individual needs" but also "form[ed] social and cultural capital through which community cohesion was built" (Reese 2019:27).

Indigenous peoples have long faced the reality that their struggles for sovereignty against colonial states require that they protect their traditions of consent and consensus-based decision making—both of which form the foundation of broader movements for mutual aid (Whyte 2021). "Indigenous consent traditions go beyond just human relationships with other humans. They also include the dynamics of the nonhuman world ... In this way, a consent relationship is part of human allyship with the nonhuman world" (Whyte 2021:44). Consent is at the core of the idea and practice of living in "right relationship" to our ecosystems. As Indigenous scholar Robin Wall Kimmerer (2018:27) explains, "the living world is understood, not as a collection of exploitable resources, but as a set of relationships and responsibilities". These consensual relationships do not require state protection; in fact they often require protection *from* states. Indigenous peoples are frequently criminalised by colonial states for practising their cultural traditions, including speaking their languages, accessing sacred sites, and providing food for their families (Palmater 2019).

Relatedly, research in critical disability has uncovered the vast networks of communal care central to crafting both survivable social relations and spaces for disabled people who have been largely neglected by government social programmes, particularly for those with multiple marginalised identities (Arani 2020; Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018, 2022). The proliferation of mutual aid networks during the height of the HIV/AIDS crisis provides a powerful example of how communities that are often ostracised by the privileged and left to die by the government, turn to communal care to survive (Epstein 1996; Fink 2020). Disability studies scholars and activists have developed frameworks for understanding the historic and contemporary linkages between struggles for disability justice, environmental justice, and other movements for transformative change. For example, scholars view climate change and environmental crises as phenomena that can harm and disable humans and nonhumans alike, providing opportunities for framing, coalition building, and action that are deeply intersectional (Jampel 2018; Taylor 2017, 2019).

These arguments are of critical importance because the claim that the most marginalised among us are the ones most in need of state protection largely ignores the harm perpetuated against these groups by the state and ignores the ongoing proliferation of self-reliance and agency within these communities. As

such, Nembhard's history of African American cooperatives is a powerful contemporary companion to W.E.B. Du Bois' *Economic Co-operation Among Negro Americans*—both demonstrate how deep and storied the practice of self-organised mutual support is within some Black communities (Du Bois 1907; Nembhard 2018). With respect to the condition of both Black and Indigenous peoples, Black anarchists Samudzi and Anderson (2018:6, 4) write that "Black Americans are residents of a settler colony, not truly citizens of the United States" and "Indigenous genocide and land expropriation (and enclosure) are intrinsic to American settlement". In other words, they contend that the US is historically anti-Black and anti-Indigenous and that liberation is nigh impossible through reform of the state alone. For Bey (2020:4, 5), "the history of Black radicality is a history of anarchic thought" and "the radical work that queerness and gender nonnormativity do, as expressed in Black queer and trans feminisms, is anarchic par excellence in that the dismantling of racial and gender hierarchies too often overlooked or merely glossed in classical anarchism is a fundamental rebuking of authoritarian rule, hierarchies, determination from without, and injustice". Put another way, living unbounded by the state is a step toward living unbounded by violence.

Mutual Aid in Response to Environmental Disasters

The COVID-19 pandemic, stemming from wholesale destruction of our planet's ecosystems and fuelled by continued use of market-based approaches to address social inequality, underscored failures of the state as an agent of care. The logics of racial capitalism that guide government responses to the pandemic have exacerbated the violence faced by minoritised populations (Pirtle 2020). Disabled and immunocompromised people were pushed to the sidelines, their lives deemed disposable in an effort to protect capitalist systems of production and consumption. The failures of the state in responding to ecological disasters, albeit on a much smaller geographic scale, have been noted by sociologists and scholars of disaster long before the COVID-19 crisis (Tierney 2007). Research has repeatedly demonstrated how these failures happen at the expense of minoritised communities who are already subjected to violence from the same systems that create and exacerbate disasters through the domination of global ecosystems (Bullard and Wright 2012).

Nearly 100 years ago, in *The Crisis* magazine, W.E.B. Du Bois reported the abuses faced by Black refugees in Red Cross camps during the Mississippi flood of 1927 (Barry 1998). That flood—in conjunction with the flood preparedness decisions and regulatory regimes of state actors and private institutions—resulted in the loss of over 200 human lives, just under 100,000 homes, the death of over 165,000 farm animals, and the creation of over 637,000 refugees during its roughly four-month occurrence (McMurchy 2015). National response to the event drew the scrutiny of organisations such as the NAACP because a large portion of these refugees were Black Americans. Serving as the chairman of the Red Cross, Herbert Hoover attempted to paint a picture of racial equality and harmony during the 1927 flood and its subsequent cleanup. However, as exposed in *The Crisis* from January to March 1928, in the days following the flood's onset

Black residents were provided subpar living quarters, forced to work on the rebuild for no pay, and had their rations stolen from them by white landowners (Barry 1998; Mizelle 2014).

Indeed, it was reported that while the all-white refugee camp in Vicksburg, Mississippi—Camp Hayes—provided a private tent for every family and cots for all 1,200 white refugees, Black refugees in Camp Louisiana and Camp Fort Hill were allotted just one tent for as many as nine families and were only given cots for the elderly or extremely ill (Shields 1927). More than iniquitous provisioning, the government-controlled refugee camps exposed Black community members to extreme violence, and labour programmes that were both expropriative and, later, super-exploitative. Members of these camps were regularly forced to perform kitchen duties and physical labour for free and were often beaten and whipped by the National Guard as they carried out these tasks (Mizelle 2014). Reflecting on the event more than a decade later, Du Bois would relay in 1940 that the Red Cross allowed Black Delta refugees to be treated like "slaves and peons" (Du Bois 2007).

In the aftermath of the flood and mistreatment by government officials, Black mutual aid groups mobilised rapidly and in large numbers to support their wider community. Mizelle (2014) reports that coverage of the flood and Red Cross concentration camps in the Black press circuit led writers at periodicals like the *Norfolk Journal and Guide* and the *Baltimore Afro-American*, as early as the spring of 1927, to advise readers to cease giving donations to the American Red Cross, and, instead, to send resources and support to Black churches, fraternal and sororal societies, or the NAACP. Much effort went into raising funds for relief and finding ways to ensure it reached the Black refugees of the Mississippi Delta, and at such scales that it was one of the first documented moments of the Black American community's use of mutual care networks to escape oppression from capital and state.

Decades later, Du Bois revisited the disproportionate burden that national flood preparedness and response seems to place on Black Americans. Within just a few months of the infamous 1947 flood of Lansing, Michigan, he bemoaned the social decision-making that brought processes of production, reproduction, and ecology together in a manner that rendered "life on or near the riverbanks so uncertain that communities become festering slums where a few people living far beyond the normal standards of life perch for a while between floods in the midst of disease and malaria". All this, Du Bois argued, to ensure the ongoing freedom to "take from the poor that which will make them poverty stricken and to add to the rich that which they do not need and cannot use" (Du Bois 1948). Just over a half century later, in 2005, the federal government was under fire once again. This time for its logistical failures in coordinating disaster relief for Hurricane Katrina.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, government agencies used the media's exaggerated and racist portrayal of Black communities as lawless to exact control over and surveillance of minoritised populations (Bullard and Wright 2009; Tierney et al. 2006). This narrative aimed to cast peoples subjected to both a historic natural disaster and a failed state response into perpetrators of violence. The story

of Hurricane Katrina represents a departure from earlier literature on disasters that emphasised a post-disaster utopic community, and a period of increased camaraderie or solidarity between disparate groups of people in the wake of a disaster (Wolfenstein 1957). Conversely, for disasters that largely impact communities of colour, such as the Great Mississippi Flood and Hurricane Katrina, history shows that structural racism has often trumped any solidarity efforts led by government actors. Nonetheless, grassroots solidarity efforts facilitated by horizontal organising have been able to leverage a mutual aid approach to providing support in times of disaster, one that acknowledges the embeddedness of various social positions in histories of violence and oppression.

Disasters are often characterised as having a clear beginning or end, perhaps making them a difficult case for understanding the longevity of a mutual aid approach to environmental justice. However, Blaikie et al. (1994) argue that seemingly natural events that trigger disaster cycles, such as hurricanes or tornadoes, often have their origins in social conditions and activities that may be far removed from the locale of the disaster—such as environmental degradation or carbon emissions from distant regions of the globe. Erikson's (1976) work on the responsibility of the coal mining industry in causing the Buffalo Creek flood disaster, and subsequently the government's lacklustre response in supporting impoverished Appalachians in West Virginia, exemplifies this point. This reflects what Caniglia and Frank (2016) call "injustices-in-waiting", and parallels Nixon's (2011) "slow violence" and Pellow's (2018) second pillar of CEJ—which invite us to pay closer attention to the importance of scale in the production and resolution of environmental injustices. Mutual aid is intended to be a long-term praxis for communities, so they remain prepared for the ongoing disasters in the age of anthropogenic climate change. Grassroots efforts and social movements do not usually arise from nothing, but rather from established networks and resources. Examples of modern-day mutual aid networks often emerge through the work of previously existing organisations that have leveraged a mutual aid approach to create lasting social infrastructures.

The mutual aid organisation Common Ground came about in the wake of Hurricane Katrina to provide networks of communal care to the overwhelmingly low-wealth and Black residents who suffered disproportionately because of the government's failed response in the aftermath of the disaster. The organisation was founded by people such as Malik Rahim, a leader of the New Orleans BPP in the 1970s, and Robert King, another former Panther and longtime political prisoner of the state. Common Ground budded into an expansive grassroots organisation that delivered supplies, repaired and rebuilt houses, and provided free healthcare to local residents in the Lower Ninth Ward (crow 2014). Rahim's intellectual tradition has been described as adhering to a BRT that underpins the connections between ecological protection and Black freedom movements (Guild and Whetstone 2021)—one that demonstrates how revolutionary movements reflect an ethic of environmental justice because their primary concerns are combating state power, racism, and colonialism, as well as their effect on ecosystems and frontline communities. Rahim credited the success of Common Ground, in the absence of government support, to people's capacity to understand relief

work as part of a common struggle—highlighting how community-based solutions can result in populations exercising democratic control over the land they live on (Rahim 2006).

Since its inception in 2005, Common Ground has expanded in many ways, such as launching a programme to build affordable, energy-efficient housing, and using its expansive network of volunteers to restore and preserve the coastal wetlands of Louisiana. Common Ground has combined its ecological approach with social programmes such as a free health clinic, mobile clinics, a free legal clinic, a women's and family shelter, neighbourhood computer centres, and food pantries (Common Ground 2021). These tactics parallel the community survival and mutual assistance programmes created by the BPP, such as the free breakfast programmes, the free medical and dental care clinics, the free prison busing programmes, and the free ambulance programmes (Nelson 2011). Heynen (2009:407) explains that the BPP "went on to use the Breakfast Program as an engine through which to push revolutionary politics at other scales". These programmes demonstrate how seemingly small actions like providing breakfast and a ride home can generate networks of transformative politics by providing safe spaces to discuss revolutionary ideologies and liberation. It should be noted that just like the BPP, Common Ground has accepted state-controlled financing and aligned itself with non-profit organisations, a situation many grassroots organisations face due to resource scarcity. We highlight this point not to delegitimise the work of an organisation rooted in communal care, but to emphasise the difficulty of carving out radical practices in neoliberal systems—forcing many to work "in the shadow of the shadow state" (Gilmore 2022).

Mutual aid networks can also combat "disaster capitalism", or the process by which developers and public officials prey on deprived communities in a time of duress, to create new policies and developments that facilitate profit accumulation (Klein 2007). This process was evident in Nashville, Tennessee in March of 2020, when an EF3 tornado touched down, devastating the historically Black neighbourhoods of North Nashville. In the early morning, after the storm, volunteers noticed developers handing out business cards to residents with the aim of buying homes at dramatically reduced prices (Capps 2020). Residents, who felt as though more gentrified and whiter areas were prioritised from the disaster's outset, criticised the response from city officials. The community group, Gideon's Army, which primarily addresses police violence, took these criticisms seriously and immediately responded by organising community volunteers to clean debris and distribute food (Wallace 2021). They opened a recovery centre within eight hours of the tornado, and within four days launched a website to help community members find resources and request various forms of assistance. Gideon's Army has since leveraged a solidarity economy in North Nashville, mobilising to address other environmental injustices in the area, including food insecurity, by purchasing a community building to provide hot food and convenience store items, and serve as a community meeting place (Bliss 2020).

Of course, not all disasters leave such obvious destruction in their wake. The Texas power outages of winter 2021 demonstrated the failures of both state and private enterprise to create resilient energy systems in the face of climate change.

They also further illustrate how communities can leverage a mutual aid approach in the wake of disasters using existing grassroots infrastructure. On 10 February 2021, a winter storm formed in the northern Gulf Coast, dropping sleet and ice in cities across Eastern Texas. A series of subsequent storms led the Electric Reliability Council of Texas (ERCOT) to initiate rotating power outages to prevent the electrical grid from being overwhelmed. The government response to the crises was severely lacking. For example, Dallas, a city of 1.3 million people, had opened just one major warming centre capable of accommodating only 500 residents—but without guarantee of beds or food. In cities across Texas, including Austin, Dallas, and Houston, and even in rural areas of Northern Texas, mutual aid groups (including Austin Mutual Aid, DFW Mutual Aid, Mutual Aid Houston, and North Texas Rural Resilience) relied on social media and phone-based apps to offer a host of services, including online lists of warming shelters and food banks, hotel rooms for unhoused populations, healthcare supplies—and the list goes on (Herr 2021; Reese and Johnson 2022). The organisers for North Texas Rural Resilience became involved in mutual aid during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic through the launch of Feed the People Dallas, a Black and brown led organisation that addresses the government's failure to provide food security in the area (Nguyen 2021).

Each of these examples demonstrates how mutual aid has benefited minoritised communities who have continuously been left behind during state-run relief responses to catastrophic events that require coordinated community engagement for survival. In each of these examples mutual aid was not simply a disaster management approach that quickly emerged and dissipated when the crisis abated. Mutual aid, more generally, is not intended as a form of relief provision, but instead is aimed at creating longstanding infrastructure (Spade 2020). Mutual aid networks establish, maintain, and propagate dense, local networks of community engagement, care, support, safety, and justice—a tactic centring community resilience harnessed by minoritised communities for centuries. That is, mutual aid networks call on those enmeshed within them to critically engage with the social conditions that required their construction in the first place, and to engage with each other in ways that provide alternatives to dominant modes of social production and reproduction.

Conclusion: Mutual Aid is Mutual Power

Heeding the calls of critical environmental justice (CEJ), the goal of this paper has been to suggest how the phenomenon of mutual aid can serve as a means of both practising *and* realising a transformative environmental justice that seeks solutions to socio-environmental problems beyond those offered by the state and its juridical and legislative apparatus. We propose that both the ideological framework and historical traditions of praxis undergirding mutual aid serve as examples of the third pillar of critical environmental justice by exploring the generative ways that activists have built—and continue to build—environmentally resilient, just, and sustainable communities before, during, and after times of disaster. To better understand the framework of mutual aid and its connections to

environmental justice, we draw on theoretical frameworks primarily in the Black Radical Tradition (BRT), including the work of Du Bois, as well as related work on mutual aid in critical disability studies, and Indigenous and anti-colonial thought. In our view, mutual aid provides hope of restructuring social relations with each other and larger ecosystems based in mutuality *and* reminds us of the importance of individual and collective agency (Nembhard 2018; Spade 2020). This reframing of socio-environmental relations is vital in a time of increasingly manifest and catastrophic climate change impacts—intensifying wildfires, heatwaves, droughts, flooding, etc. that are already disrupting communities across the globe, generating widespread existential dread.

The examples detailed above—from the 1927 Mississippi flood to the Texas power outages—not only serve as evidence of the past and ongoing failures of the state in providing for minoritised people in crisis, but also underscore that people are resilient in their efforts to collectivise care—a miraculous feat in the face of capitalist, industrial alienation that, by its very function, fetishises the commodity and promotes an illusion wherein unbridled individualism provides resolution to collective action problems. Mobilised appropriately, perspectives proffered by the praxis of mutual aid can challenge us to carefully weigh the pros and cons of state engagement in scenarios where the lives and livelihoods of peoples are at stake, and pushes us to consider how social change can be built and supported in a manner that returns power to the people through formulations of direct democracy and systems of reciprocity that take steps towards recognising them as self-determining community members—as opposed to the all too common vertical organising that seems to trap minoritised communities in cycles of invisibilisation, coercion, hierarchical organisation, and, thereby, evermore mystified modes of marginalisation (INCITE! 2009).

The brief examples we draw on in this paper suggest that hopes of moving beyond the state to achieve environmental justice are not unreasonably naïve, but have already been pursued for centuries by some marginalised communities who never fully relied on a state that was built to manage and contain their existence without truly serving their needs. Although the overarching goal of this paper was to introduce the framework of mutual aid as a new path of exploration in critical environmental justice studies, there is much more empirical work to be done on mutual aid. While this paper draws on brief case studies, empirical work should interrogate these cases further, shedding light on the inherent messiness of radical spaces and the practice of mutual aid beyond the aftermath of disasters. For example, as Reese and Johnson (2022:34) warn, "we may be headed toward to the non-profitization of mutual aid, which in reality is charity under a performatively radical name". This is especially true as ties between corporate actors and the state strengthen, generating resource scarcity that reduces the capacity of these networks to operate. And, as Gilmore (2022) warns, operating completely outside of the state is inherently difficult, forcing some organisations to operate "in the shadow of the shadow state". As such, researchers must also examine how and under what conditions mutual aid networks might exacerbate the very inequalities they seek to redress. This is especially true as mutuality and

collective responsibility become increasingly adopted by those outside of BIPOC, disabled, queer, and trans spaces.

Acknowledgements

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