Solidarity, Not Charity:
Applied Mutual Aid in Natural Disaster Relief

A PROSPECTUS SUBMITTED BY
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Introduction

This thesis will explore Mutual Aid Disaster Relief (MADR), "a grassroots network whose mission is to provide disaster relief based on the principles of solidarity, mutual aid, and autonomous direct action" (The Action Network 2018). Through participant-observation of a series of workshops and semi-structured interviews with activists and organizers, I seek to answer *why* **it is that individuals are motivated to act within this grassroots network, as opposed to participating in other forms of volunteer or activist work in response to natural disasters**. Through an exploration of MADR's collaborative approach to disaster relief and their focus on the social implications of climate chaos, as well as an analysis of their guiding principles and organizational structure, **I intend to highlight the ways in which state, federal, and industrial non-profit assistance often fall short in meeting the needs of marginalized individuals and communities, and then speak to how these gaps might be filled in ways that would reduce vulnerability while building longitudinal resiliency**.

MADR is a fascinating subject for sociological analysis because it is, at once, a radical relief organization and a social movement. From an organizational standpoint, it can be viewed in stark contrast to other relief organizations, such as larger non-profits (i.e. Red Cross, Salvation Army) and state-sanctioned relief management (i.e. FEMA), both of which utilize "top-down" approaches to disaster relief and present challenges in terms of access for vulnerable groups, such as the undocumented, those with questionable legal status, those with accessibility concerns, the poor, people of color, and those with social anxieties rooted in histories of oppression from the state. MADR consists of a national network of activists, a steering committee of roughly twelve members, and semi-autonomous working groups throughout the

United States (MADR 2017a). MADR is modeled on decentralization and horizontalism and state on their website that "everyone who shares the mutual aid disaster relief vision and principles is welcome to join, and can choose 'Mutual Aid Disaster Relief' or any other name for the independent efforts that inspire them" (MADR 2017b).

According to Dean Spade (2015), social movements "have shown that the United States has always had laws that arrange people through categories of indigeneity, race, gender, ability, and national origin to produce populations with different levels of vulnerability to economic exploitation, violence and poverty" (2). These arrangements and vulnerabilities are rendered visible through through the outreach efforts of MADR which illustrate how those marginalized by the state on such bases face exceptional challenges in the wake of natural disasters. As a social movement, MADR grounds their localized actions in the practices of "asking, listening, and responding, while embodying in our current actions the future society we want to create" (MADR 2017b).

MADR follows the Zapatista principle "*mandar obeciendo*" ("leadership from below") in encouraging a shift away from reliance on capitalism, the state, and the industrial non-profit sector and toward the principles of mutual aid. Born out of an organization called Common Ground, which responded to the needs of the New Orleans community in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, MADR has developed over the years through participation in the Occupy Movement and in response to "Superstorm" Sandy in 2012. More recently, they have mobilized in response to the Baton Rouge flooding of 2016, hurricanes Harvey, Irma and Maria in Texas, the southeast and Puerto Rico 2017, and Hurricane Florence along the coastlines of the Carolinas in 2018. Their focus on direct action with the intention to build networks illustrates the intention to

provide more than just disaster relief, but to nurture sustainable resiliency and social change. With an emphasis on coalition-building, MADR aligns itself philosophically and materially with nearly 60 organizations, listed on its website as "co-conspirators," including Black Lives Matters, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, Appalachian Medical Solidarity, Islamic Relief, and the Indigenous Environmental Network.

MADR acknowledges that natural disasters can present "shocks" to affected communities. This presents the opportunity for the rapid and undemocratic implementation of neoliberal economic policies, also known as "disaster capitalism," in which there are "opportunities for the rich and powerful to consolidate power and to take advantage of shocks in order to institute economic reforms that further reinforce their privileged status" (MADR 2017b). MADR's horizontal structure and community-oriented efforts are intended to mitigate the imposition of responses that are profit-motivated and out-of-touch which the unique needs of each community, especially vulnerable populations.

Disaster Relief Studies

Disaster studies explore the concepts of risk, vulnerability, and resiliency in populations by examining a range of disasters and their eco-socio-cultural impacts. Risk, vulnerability, and resiliency are related concepts, each of which ties into the other, and are tools for understanding the ways in which various groups and individuals experience disaster and relief. In socio-ecological literature, resiliency is defined as "the ability of social entities […] to absorb the impacts of external and internal system shocks without losing the ability to function, and failing that, to cope, adapt, and recover from those shocks" (Tierney 2014, 6). Vulnerability

"conceptualized as a function of exposure to risk and as an ability to adapt to the effects" speaks to the ways in which populations have limited abilities to cope with disaster situations (Molnar 2010, 6). Many contemporary disaster relief studies point to the sociopolitical disaster of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 to illustrate the increased vulnerability certain communities face in the experience and aftermath of disaster (Baharmand, et al. 2016; Paton 2006; Solnit 2009; Steinberg 2006; Tierney 2014). Vulnerability and resiliency can be considered in terms of various social, economic, and political forces, which in turn create matrices of risk that disproportionally affect some groups over others. Risk, however, does not always imply solely negative outcomes. Douglas Paton (2006) critiques the static association of risk with loss within disaster relief studies, calling for "a return to the original conceptualization of the risk concept, as the probability of an event occurring combined with an accounting for the *gains and the losses* that an event could present" (306). In this sense, risk indicates the potential latent within a moment of intervention to normalcy, a moment in which the potential for adaptation and growth exists alongside the potential for devastation and loss.

Expanding upon the concept of socio-ecological resiliency, Folke, et al. (2010) define this concept's three key components: persistence, adaptability, and transformability (3). Among these facets of resiliency, *transformability* is perhaps the most aligned with the principles of mutual aid, in which social change beyond the immediate scope of the disaster context is the ultimate goal. As Folke et al. indicate, "transformational change often involves shifts in perception and meaning, social network configurations, patterns of interactions among actors including leadership and political and power relations, and associated organizational and institutional arrangements" (6). The transformative potential for disaster relief rooted in socio-ecological

resiliency speaks to the positive potential for mutual aid, not only as a way of doing relief work, but as a means of generating lasting social change.

As Baharmand, et al. (2016) note, while there is a significant amount of literature addressing the importance of resiliency in disaster relief, "adequate insight into how response organizations try to foster and approach community level resilience in the aftermath of a disaster is still largely absent from the academic debate" (3). Through my research, I intend to highlight how one such organization approaches the issue of resiliency at the community level through autonomous, community-driven direct action rooted in the principles of mutual aid.

Theoretical Frameworks

Queer theory

Queer theory provides a lens for critically examining the distribution of power in society, particularly as it intersects with bodies, the state, and temporality. Queer theory's emphasis on social justice and coalition-building are pertinent to the horizontal, localized, autonomous efforts of MADR. Vulnerable communities — communities of color, socioeconomically disadvantaged communities, the elderly, the disabled, the energy-dependent, and the undocumented (among others) — are disproportionately affected by disasters (Paton 2006; Marcelin, J. et al 2016). Queer theory's focus on justice for marginalized communities provides an intersectional theoretical lens for considering the imbalances of power that shape the experiences of groups and individuals in various social locations.

Other concepts developed within the framework of queer theory — namely queer futurity, queer kinship, and necropolitics — provide insights for radically rethinking community-

based responses to disasters. The notion of queer futurity allows for re-imagining the future, as well as critical interrogations of whose bodies and rights are centered in mainstream discourse and political action that is oriented around the notion of time. Jack Halberstam (2010) explores the concept of queer time by locating "strange temporalities," such as the early days of the AIDS crisis in which "the queer time of the epidemic deflects attention away from the future altogether, attending only to this moment, finding urgency in the present" (Kafer 2013: 35). Through their disruption of "normal" life and time, disasters create a strange temporality of sorts, in which normative orientations toward the future and capitalist productivity are interrupted and replaced with an urgent focus on survival. Exploring the ways in which individuals act and interact in this non-normative temporality is central to my research.

Similarly, I will be looking at non-normative social arrangements that develop through the shared experience of disaster. In relief efforts, coalitions and connections are forged in unlikely ways and spaces — individuals open their homes to strangers, share resources, and rely on one another in ways that may not manifest or appear readily accessible in the normalcy of day-to-day life under capitalism. In response to disaster, the nuclear family and paternalistic nation-state are often dislocated as the central institutions around which social ties are forged. Likewise, queer theory challenges the centrality of these institutions, highlighting their often-oppressive weaknesses and locating radical potentialities for queer kinship — bonds created outside of normative social frameworks, often for the sake of recognition and survival.

Drawing on the Foucauldian theory of bipower, Achille Mbembe (2003) proposes a theory of necropolitics, arguing that "the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die" (11). Within

this necropolitical framework, the state plays a crucial role in the maldistribution of life chances among marginalized groups. Queer legal scholar Dean Spade (2017) discusses the concept of administrative violence, linked to the necropolitical in that it implicates the state in reifying marginalization and vulnerability through administrative practices that rely on normative assumptions around identity. This concept is pertinent to disaster relief as witnessed in countless studies of the administrative failures of organizations such as FEMA, which disproportionally affect vulnerable members of society who are exposed to natural disasters, at times resulting in lethality.

Material and posthuman feminism(s)

As with queer theory, material and posthuman feminist critiques provide theoretical lenses for thinking through difference and conceptualizing the power dynamics that shape societies. Posthumanist feminist interventions allow for understandings of the body in relation to the environment (which is no longer separable from humanity and its influence, just as humanity is inseparable from environmental impacts). Material feminist critiques allow for analyses rooted in the lived, material realities and economies of socially constructed subjects within a matrix of power relations.

Drawing from neo-Marxist theory, material feminist theorist Ariel Salleh (2017) claims that "unless radical politics is grounded in the experience of this global labour majority constituted by women, peasants, and indigenous peoples, it will too readily reinforce the dominant instrumental culture that treats the Earth and its people as an endless economic resource" (1). Material feminism argues that capitalism relies on social constructions of gender

to perpetuate the subordination of women (as it does with social constructions of race, ethnicity, culture, and so on to subjugate other groups) and, therefore, feminist and labor issues are central to eradicating systems of oppression rooted in capitalism. The idea of feminist eco-socialism argues that "good ideas are not good enough: a shift in the economic organization of society is crucial" (Salleh 25). This critical orientation speaks to the anti-capitalist emphasis of MADR's underlying philosophy and broader vision for social change rooted in a more equitable distribution of resources. The communitarian sociopolitical tendency of this perspective is echoed by Salleh, who argues that "sociologically, people located at an appropriate place in the system form an aggregate of actors who by carrying out their socially inscribed interests come to constitute a political force. It is actions, not words and ideas, that make change" (25).

In this vein of feminist political critique, Donna Haraway (2016) urges that "in the spirit of feminist communitarian anarchism" [...] decisions must take place somehow in the presence of those who will bear their consequences," a concept chemist and feminist philosopher Isabelle Stengers refers to as "cosmopolitics" (12). What it means to take place "in the presence" of this undefined population in this context is left unclear here. However, it seems easy to argue that any effort to engage in a feminist decision-making process regarding the environment and those who occupy its most immediately threatened localities must not take place merely "in the presence" of said occupants, but under their agential discretion. This belief is central to MADR's bottom-up approach to disaster relief, in which organizational resources are allocated according to the self-articulated needs of affected communities.

Posthuman feminist Rosi Braidotti discusses the turn toward antihumanism/radical neohumanism engaged in by various social movements, feminists, antiracists, postcolonial

theorists, and environmental activists. These critiques call into question Self-Other dialectics and

the notion of hierarchical difference that contributed to the Western projects of humanism and

modernity. Eurocentric humanism is seen as the basis for epistemic violence against women,

colonized peoples, and the environment. Posthumanism challenges the notion of Anthropos (and,

by extension, the popular concept of the Anthropocene) because that which is defined as "Man"

can no longer be understood on a humanist basis, as "Others" (human and non-human) are

inextricably implicated in two key issues: climate change and the global proliferation of

information technologies. Conceptions of nature and life are shifting under advanced capitalism

and posthumanism, generating implications for identity and the environment. The tenuous

contemporary relationship between the environment and the body is reflected in the experience

of disaster and in the implications of climate change, both central to my research here.

Social constructionism

Berger and Luckmann (1966) argue that "reality is socially constructed and that the

sociology of knowledge must analyze the processes in which this occurs" (1). Reality, in this

sense, includes all phenomena which can be known. The ways in which this knowledge is

constituted rely on the symbolic nature of language, interaction, and processes of socialization

through which society is internalized as subjective reality. The nature of the social construction

of reality, according to the authors, relies on the idea that "to be in society is to participate in its

dialectic" (129). This dialectical nature implies a permeability through which social change can

occur, and by extension positioning social movements as meaningful constituents of actors

through which the social construction of reality and knowledge can be reoriented in critical ways.

As they are known phenomena, and especially as they have profound impacts on societies, disasters can and ought to be understood through the lens of social constructionism. Berger and Luckmann argue that through language "an entire world can be actualized at any moment" (Berger and Luckmann 39). How do the words we choose to speak about the experiences of disaster and relief efforts shape our knowledge on these subjects? For example, in her discussion of the social disaster of Hurricane Katrina, Rebecca Solnit (2009) critiques the use of the highly racialized term "looting" in popular discourse, arguing that it is "an inflammatory, inexact word that might best be excised from the English language" (237). Thinking critically through the sociology of knowledge allows for theoretical insights into the social construction of disasters, the language we use to discuss them, and the ways in which they interface with social structure and reflect power dynamics in society. As Tierney (2014) argues, "disasters and their impacts are socially produced, and the forces driving the production of disaster are embedded in the social order itself" (4-5).

Review of Literature

Literature on mutual aid

Mutual aid was first developed by Russian social philosopher Peter Kroptokin in his seminal work *Mutual Aid: A Factor in Evolution* (1902) as a critical reaction to social Darwinism. Refusing the Darwinian notion of "a pitiless inner war for life within each species, and to see in that war a condition of progress," Kropotkin centers the law of mutual aid in the

history and survival of humankind (6). Through historical analysis, Kropotkin argues that, "mutual aid is the primary factor of social life" and that "regardless of its form or the adversity of circumstances in which it operated, it was always present" (Shantz 2013, 64). Mutual aid challenges not only Darwinist social theory at the turn of the 19th century, it complicates the competitive focal point of global capitalism and militarism that permeate societies today.

A contemporary of Kropotkin, German anarcho-socialist theorist Gustav Landauer "theorized the rebirth of community from within the shell of statist and capitalist society," emphasizing the central role of "local, face-to-face associations" in mechanical solidarity ("*gemeinschaft*") and the social change it could generate (Shantz 2013, 52). Both Kropotkin and Landauer rely on this notion of mechanical solidarity in organizing social change oriented toward the just distribution of resources and progress of human societies.

Today, mutual aid is being recuperated as an organizing principle and political philosophy in the face of contemporary challenges on global and local scales. In response to the tensions of late capitalism and the insistence on individualism in Western society, social work educator William Schwartz argues that "people need each other and the social groupings of which they are a part; there is no wholeness or real existence in isolation" (Lee and Swanson 414). This concept is extended by Schwartz beyond social work to group work in a broader sense, wherein "the group is an enterprise in mutual aid, an alliance of individuals who need each other, in varying degrees, to work on common problems" (Schwartz, as quoted in Lee & Swanson 414).

Landauer argues that mutual aid has always existed a factor in social organization. The revolutionary potential of mutual aid, therefore, lies in "the growing discovery of something already present in social relations" (Shantz 52). Andrej Grubačić and Denis O'Hearn (2016) eluci-

date the already-presentness of mutual aid through transnational explorations of resiliency among exilic communities living at "the edges of capitalism," arguing that "mutual aid has been unduly neglected as an explanatory and conceptual tool in historical social sciences" (248). Through three radically different case studies — Don Cossacks in Russia, Zapatistas in Mexico, and prisoners in isolation — Grubačić and O'Hearn explore how communities in such exilic spaces illustrate "geographical expressions of cooperation and concentrated mutual aid that may stand in contrast to the development of capitalism" (5). These cases disrupt the dominant narratives of progress and globalization that center on the merits of individualism and the benign necessity of the capitalist nation-state, pointing instead toward the Kropotkian notion that mutual aid is a naturally-occurring interactionist law of society with potential for social change that transcends time and space.

Literature on neoliberalism

Antithetical to mutual aid are the principles of neoliberalism, the defining characteristics of the age of globalization and the Anthropocene. Dean Spade (2017) defines neoliberalism by its trends toward "privatization, trade liberalization, labor and environmental deregulation, the elimination of health and welfare programs, increased immigration enforcement, and the expansion of imprisonment," enacted on global and domestic scales (13). While mutual aid is fundamentally communitarian, neoliberalism is "radically individualistic" (Ritzer 2010, 292). Historian Ted Steinberg (2006) implicates neoliberal priorities on the federal and corporate levels in the devastation of disasters such as Hurricane Katrina, claiming that hallmarks of neoliberalism such as "deregulation, privatization, and cutbacks in social programs have

combined to produce a dark chapter in American history centered on a new moral imperative of 'personal responsibility'" (210). Currently, domestic neoliberal policies are being enacted by the Trump administration, which recently cut nearly ten million dollars from FEMA's budget, weakening the federal safety net for disaster relief, while inversely increasing funding to ICE (NPR 2018). This reallocation within the federal budget illustrates the "internal contradictions" of the neoliberal state, wherein "its authoritarianism co-exists uncomfortably wit its supposed interests in individual freedom and democracy" (Ritzer 293).

Through the enactment of neoliberal policies, governments engage in a population-management modality of power. This understanding of neoliberal power dynamics "is not primarily operating through prohibition or permission but rather through the arrangement and distribution of security and insecurity" (Spade 57). In this way, life chances are maldistributed by power enacted through the state (and its significant corporate influencers). Here, again, we see the necropolitical framework through which vulnerability is exacerbated to a potentially lethal degree through mechanisms of population-management and biopower.

Seminal among critiques of neoliberalism is Naomi Klein's (2007) work elucidating what she refers to as "the shock doctrine" of disaster capitalism. Klein explores historical sites in which the theater of the shock doctrine — a defining facet of disaster capitalism rooted in the free market and the history of American imperialism and intervention — have played out. Klein's critique of neoliberalism on a global scale involves two examples of natural disasters: the devastating tsunami in Southeast Asia and Hurricane Katrina, the aftermaths of which involved intense applications of disaster capitalism which radically reshaped the social, economic, and political landscapes of the affected areas.

Published within the year after Hurricane Maria devastated Puerto Rico, Naomi Klein's

The Battle for Paradise (2018) applies similar critiques of neoliberalism to the manifestations of

disaster capitalism that shocked the island territory in the aftermath of the storm. Klein highlights

a number of steps rapidly taken by politicians, relief organizations, and opportunistic capitalists

following the storm, noting that "central to a shock doctrine strategy is speed — pushing a flurry

of radical changes through so quickly it's impossible to keep up" (45). Klein compares some of

these changes to those enacted in the wake of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, such as the

privatization of the school system, highlighting neoliberal patterns of insidious socioeconomic

manipulation that have become increasingly common in times of crisis.

Literature on natural disasters, disaster relief, and climate change

In recent decades, a substantial body of work has emerged around official responses to

natural disasters, including a fair deal of critical interrogation around the shortcomings and

failures of "top-down" approaches to relief. Rojas Blanco (2006) argues that local adaptation

strategies are necessary alternatives to top-down approaches, as the latter "have become

inadequate, due to their inability to create appropriate solutions for local communities" (140).

Illustrating one site of inadequacy within top-down approaches, Liboiron and Wachsmuth (2013)

discuss how the comprehensive planning efforts of the Office of Emergency Management and

Regional Catastrophic Planning Team in New York City were largely ineffective in response to

Hurricane Sandy in 2012. The authors invoke Lee Clarke's argument that disaster plans are

"fantasy documents" that often provide minimal effectiveness in the face of natural disasters'

material realities. The case is made for "action without plans," in which "networks, rather than

plans, provide aid more quickly than 'the official response'" (5). Clarke emphasizes the "fundamentally rhetorical" nature of so-called "fantasy documents," disaster plans implemented by business and governments, which are rarely utilized, but rather function to virtue-signal security and preparedness. The conclusion is drawn that such plans do little to secure safety and that the public would be better off (and more prone to developing meaningful alternatives) if large institutions were not to assume and insist on the effectiveness of such fantasy documents.

Alongside criticisms of top-down relief, many scholars have noted the potentials of "bottom-up" approaches, also known as community-based or grassroots approaches. Francis Odehmero (2014) emphasizes the unmatched value of local knowledge regarding floodwater management in the urban environment of Warri, Nigeria, indicating the strength of community adaptation in combating the effects of climate change and natural disasters. Similarly, Christina Goulding, et al. (2018) explore community-based interventions following the 2011 Tohuku earthquake and tsunami in Japan, examining "how this community in crisis draws upon social networks, traditions, cultural practices, and collective action to rebuild from within" (887). Goulding, et al. argue that three phases of community-based disaster relief are central to full recovery, involving engagement pre-disaster, immediately after the disaster, and planning for the future, highlighting the various and interlocking temporal focal points of localized relief organizing (899).

Rebecca Solnit (2009) discusses the emergence of "disaster communities," a phenomena in which social groups coalesce organically, rapidly, and effectively in response to crises. Discussing a range of disaster communities throughout the 20th century, Solnit argues that "these remarkable societies suggest that, just as many machines reset themselves to their original

settings after a power outage, so human beings reset themselves to something altruistic, communitarian, resourceful and imaginative after a disaster" (18). The existence of such disaster communities challenges the notion that communities are not capable of organizing in response to crises and that, therefore, the state and industrial non-profit sector must intervene in their best interest. Contrary to this narrative, "disaster sociologists' studies demonstrate not only that panic in the face of disaster 'is rare,' but that people in such situations are more inclined to engage in acts of mutual assistance, community solidarity, and altruism" (Miller 112).

Calling into question just how "natural" natural disasters are, Ted Steinberg (2006) explores the role of human intervention, elucidating the economic, political, and sociocultural roots of these events. Likewise, Kathleen Tierney (2014) discusses the human interventions that shape the experience of natural disasters, noting that "studies of disasters of all kinds locate their origins in actions that organizations and groups of organizations have either taken or failed to take […] The origins of risk, harm, and loss are primarily social, not natural or technological" (83). As Solnit notes, "Katrina was a succession of disasters" composed of the storm itself, human error on behalf of the Army Corps of Engineers that resulted in the failure of the levee system, and "the social devastation of the failure or refusal of successive layers of government to supply evacuation and relief, an and the appalling calamity of the way that local and then state and federal authorities decided to regard victims as criminals" (235).

Socioeconomic factors center in the social construction of natural disasters. Liboiron (2015) illustrates that "grassroots data-driven-representations portray Superstorm Sandy not as an extreme weather event, but rather the exacerbation of a chronic crisis of poverty" (144). This research utilizes the concept of the "Second Sandy" to refer to the secondary (read: socio-

political) disaster, composed of a long-term matrix of challenges in the wake of the initial natural disaster. Cohen and Liboiron (2014) develop "the Two Sandys framework" which speaks to both the "disruptive event" that was Hurricane Sandy, and "an exacerbation of systemic inequalities" in the storm's wake. The crisis identified is one that existed before the storm took shape, but subsequently rerouted and intensified "the underlying sources of vulnerability and economic insecurity, namely inadequate housing, precarious employment and inaccessible essential services" (2). The authors advocate that this second type of crisis requires a second type of response, one that is coaltional and geared toward addressing the long-term needs of vulnerable communities. Here, again, the need for resilient communities rooted in autonomous self-reliance is echoed, with Tierney noting that "powerful organizational and institutional actors often drift into unsafe practices, especially when there are no countervailing forces preventing them from doing so" (2014, 83). If social groups are equipped and empowered to fend for themselves and mobilize as disaster communities, resiliency can be developed, vulnerability can be mitigated, and risk can result in the reward of effective, sustainable, community-driven relief.

Finally, it is impossible to speak about natural disasters and their social implications without also discussing climate change. As an October 2018 report from the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change indicates, curbing the most extreme outcomes of climate change "would require rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society" (IPCC 2018). According to this report, human-influenced effects on the environment have already contributed to tangible effects around the world and are on a trajectory for creating significant chaos. In our current era of climate chaos, marked by increased frequency and intensity natural disasters, we must consider disaster relief while also paying attention to our

changing climate and its implications for various communities, especially those facing the most extreme vulnerability (Dodman and Mitlin 2013). As McNamara (2017) points out, as with natural disaster relief, there is increasing criticism around top-down approaches to mitigation of climate change. While "the prevailing focus for climate change adaptation research and policy until more recently has been on techno-centric 'command and control' approaches to reduce the impacts of climate change," this approach has come under "increased scrutiny for its contribution to potential maladaptation, exacerbating vulnerabilities and causing negative externalities" (Mcnamara 444). Here, too, the author points toward a focus on community-based approaches in seeking solutions to the deleterious effects of climate change. Failure to foster participatory community-based adaptation in the face of climate change runs the risk of top-down management that disadvantages economically and socially vulnerable communities. Dodman and Mitlin (2013) make the case for the transformative potential of community-based adaptation, but argue that these approaches must "include tools and methods that enable a more explicit transfer of power to local communities, as otherwise decisions are made by those outside the community who are only partially or not at all accountable to local residents" (655).

In this sense, developing localized resiliency is applicable not only to acute disaster relief, but also to navigating the effects of climate chaos in our daily lives. Indeed, "climate change may be considered a natural disaster evolving in slow motion on a global scale" (Molnar 1). If we are living on the brink of (if not well within the early stages of) climate crisis, climate change must be conceptualized as a disaster itself, and the preventative work we do in building resiliency and seeking out transformative potentialities should be considered ongoing disaster relief work.

Methods

My research will have two primary components: 1) observations and information gathered from two days of Mutual Aid Disaster Relief workshops in Tucson, AZ, and 2) a series of semi-structured interviews with activists and organizers involved in Mutual Aid Disaster Relief.

Participant-observation

The Tucson workshop series are taking place at the beginning of MADR's Fall tour of the western United States (they toured other regions earlier in 2018).The very fact that MADR hosts such informational and training events is a worthy point of analysis — In building a grassroots network of activists, MADR volunteers and organizers have been on the road for months with the intention of mobilizing and informing communities, laying the groundwork for future outreach, and building coalitions with local organizations. These workshops are always free and open to the public, with arrangements for no-cost childcare and food provided to participants. The first workshop of this series is promoted as brief informational session, titled "Protectors v. Profiteers: Communities in Resistance to Disaster Capitalism." Day two consists of a longer (roughly seven hour) "training session," titled "Giving Our Best, Ready For The Worst: Community Organizing as Disaster Preparedness." I will use this weekend as an opportunity to educate myself further on the fundamentals of MADR and to network with affiliates. My hope is that I will be able to exchange contact interview with a number of potential interview subjects.

While conducting participant-observation, it is essential to maintain critical reflexivity regarding one's role as researcher and to provide for effective accounts to accurately extract data

from one's observations. To this extent, I will keep detailed and accurate field notes, engage with other participants openly and honestly from my position as an interested researcher, and make every effort to interpret these accounts from a reflexive standpoint.

Clifford Geertz (1973) develops Gilbert Ryle's notion of "thick description" in ethnography, wherein the qualitative researcher is confronted with "a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures […] which are at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit, which he must contrive somehow first to grasp and then to render" (4). Highlighting the fundamentally interpretive nature of ethnographic or observational research, Geertz notes that "what we call our data are really our own constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to" (4). The reflexive researcher, then, will through analysis engage in a "sorting out of the structures of signification […] and determining their social ground and import" (2). In this sense the researcher engaged in participant-observation is not merely documenting, in a mechanical sense, objective observations in the form of field notes. Rather, any content of observational merit is subject to reflexive analysis that accounts for both the social context of the observed and the positionally of the observer.

Geertz praises participant-observation for its desire to engage with informants "as persons rather than as objects," yet he warns against the potential for the researcher to lose sight of their own "very special, culturally bracketed nature of [their] own role" (9). In this sense, the researcher involved in participant-observation must be critically conscious of their own role when they enter into the space which they intend to derive data from. To this extent, it is central to maintain ethical reflexivity in which "researchers strive to make explicit and scrutinize those value commitments that form part of the taken-for-granted world view of the research

community of which they are a part" (Gewirtz and Cribb 150). The assumption of neutrality on behalf of the researcher is not only naive, it is impossible (Llewelyn 2007). While Gewirtz and Cribb (2006) do *not* see commitment to social or political change as antithetical to rigorous research, they urge grounded and practical research that maintains a necessary level of self-conscious awareness of the values that propel a particular research project and emphasize the necessity of the researcher being able to defend their interpretations from an ethical standpoint.

Interviews

My semi-structured interviews will be conducted in December and January of 2018. I hope to conduct ten to twelve one-hour-long interviews with volunteers, activists, and organizers (these categories are not mutually exclusive) involved with MADR. At the moment, I am in contact with two potential interviewees — one volunteer involved in relief following the Baton Rouge flooding of 2016 and one activist with the Coalition of Immokalee Workers who coordinated relief efforts for migrant farmworkers in Florida alongside MADR following Hurricane Irma in 2017. My goal is to speak with MADR-affiliated individuals involved in a range of efforts, both in terms of the type of efforts they provided (manual labor, resource organizing, communications, education, etc.) and the geographic areas and specific communities with which they worked (MADR works in response to all natural disasters, from wildfires on the West coast, to hurricane relief in the tropics, and beyond).

The questions I develop will explore the nature of the individual's involvement, how they came to work with MADR, if and how they see their identities intersecting with their activism, how they understand the principles of MADR's efforts, how they understand MADR in relation

to state and industrial non-profit relief, what they believe the strengths and/or weaknesses of MADR's efforts have been historically and in the present, what they envision for the future of MADR, how they conceptualize climate chaos, and what they identify as the social aspects of natural disasters (both in terms of acute events and longitudinal impacts).

I intend to synthesize the data collected through my observations and interviews in my analysis, reflecting on what motivates actors to participate with MADR, as well as an exploring the nature of MADR as an alternative to conventional forms of disaster relief, its successes, shortcomings, and potentials as a social movement, and the benefits and obstacles of its organizational structure.

Findings and Analysis

My findings, obtained through engagement with MADR workshops and semi-structured interviews, will be synthesized and analyzed in conversation with one another. Through this analysis and built upon the foundation of my literature review, I hope to develop grounded theory to explore the contemporary phenomena of MADR's efforts in the face of mounting climate chaos.

Through a multi-step coding process, I will analyze the semi-structured interviews I conduct in order to extract key themes and questions relevant to the topic of my thesis. While I anticipate, broadly, what some of these themes may entail (for example, the comparisons between MADR efforts and governmental relief and response), I am eager to explore concepts and critiques that I am unaware of and that may not be present in existing research around the subject of natural disaster relief. Through coding these interviews, I hope to highlight four to six

key areas around which to focus my analysis of MADR actors' motivations and goals. This analysis will focus primarily on the direct content of the interviews themselves, but will be augmented with public information shared by MADR (via social media, press releases, and other publications on their website), as well as through public information shared by larger and governmental organizations.

I will also analyze the informational and training materials that I am exposed to in the two days of MADR workshops in Tucson. This may even result in a content analysis in which I enumerate prominent topics, challenges, tactics, and so on, that are discussed by activists and organizers in this setting. Analyzing disaster preparedness literature made public by MADR alongside similarly-intentioned literature from other organizations (FEMA, Red Cross, etc.) may also provide some interesting points of comparative analysis — whose needs are reflected in such information? How are differences in need and/or levels of access either noted or taken for granted? What aspects of urgency and/or aftermath are addressed, and to what extent?

As natural disasters are unpredictable and frequent, I will also analyze responses to any current or future events that fall within the purview of this study (i.e. events involving MADR efforts, FEMA efforts, and the like). For example, on a recent episode of the mainstream cable news program "Meet the Press," FEMA administrator Brock Long declared his appreciation for Trump administration, reacting to critiques that the President received for questioning the number of Hurricane Maria-related deaths in Puerto Rico since 2017. Mr. Long aligned himself with President Trump's critique of The George Washington University's published statistics regarding the death toll following the storm, arguing that the study focused too heavily on "indirect deaths," such as those caused by traffic accidents at intersections with inoperable

stoplights, falling off of roofs during repairs, and heart attacks from stress. Mr. Long went so far as to say that spousal abuse following the crisis may have been included and that, "you can't blame spousal abuse after a disaster on anybody" (Meet the Press 2018). Clearly, there is a lot to unpack in Mr. Long's statement, and analyzing public statements from the government, non-profit organizations, and MADR will add another dimension to my thesis.

Questions and Challenges

At this point, I anticipate the following potential hurdles in achieving the primary goals of this research project:

- Identifying research participants — I would like to conduct interviews with a range of MADR affiliates, in terms of gender, race, age, and work within the group. I will use my current contacts within the organization in attempt to snowball further interviewees, but I realize this may provide a limited pool of participants, as these individuals would only be one degree away from my current contacts. I will attempt to mitigate this by reaching out through new contacts through the workshops in Tucson (where I do not anticipate knowing any attendees personally) and through contacting MADR directly through the internet.

- Forming an analysis around the broad range of work that MADR does — while most of MADR's efforts that are most visible, at least through the lens of my current awareness, primarily through social media exposure, have been based around hurricanes, tropical storms, and their aftermaths, the reality is that MADR (like FEMA, etc.) provide relief efforts to a wider range of natural disasters. How does focusing on the complete range

of these efforts complicate, or even potentially muddy, my focus in this project? Might I potentially focus on hurricane-relief alone, for the sake of standardizing my analysis? Or is the very fact that MADR focuses on the full range of natural disaster relief and preparedness central to their mission and activism, therefore essential for me to discuss in this context?

• Time management — I realize that conducting, transcribing, and coding my interviews over the span of Winter Break will present a challenge in terms of time. If there are opportunities to get a start on an interview or two before this window of time, I may take advantage and do so. For this reason, I will start the IRB approval process as soon as possible. I do not foresee any challenges in obtaining IRB approval, as I will not be working with vulnerable populations or collecting any personally sensitive data. Question: Are there any funding options within the graduate college or department for research assistance for grad students (i.e. funding to offer gift cards in exchange for interview transcription services)?

Committee and Timeline

Chair: Dr. Janine Schipper, Department of Sociology
Member: Dr. Yvonne Luna, Department of Sociology
Member: Dr. Ari Bruford, Department of Women and Gender Studies

I have developed the following timeline with my thesis committee chair, Dr. Schipper:

• November 5, 2018: Prospectus defense
• November 2018: Submission of IRB application
• December 5, 2018: Literature Review chapter due
• Winter Break: Conduct and transcribe interviews

- January 23, 2018: Methods chapter due
- February 20, 2018: Findings and Analysis chapter due
- March 6, 2018: Introduction and Conclusion chapters due
- March 20, 2018: Full draft due to Dr. Schipper
- March 27, 2018: Revised draft due to full committee
- April 10, 2018 (or thereabouts): Thesis defense

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