

Mutual Aid as Decolonial Praxis: A Reflection on Practice and a Call to Action

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Mutual aid is a practice of collective care that has been given increasing scholarly attention since the COVID-19 pandemic began in 2020. However, the decolonial potential of mutual aid has still received limited recognition. Authored by grassroots activists, this paper will argue for the role of mutual aid in “unsettling” (Tuck and Yang, 2012) the material conditions of colonialism, and more broadly disrupting the power of the colonial carceral system. Here, members of our mutual aid affinity group speak to the key elements of mutual aid that can be harnessed for decolonial praxis. We engage with our experiences organising mutual aid via wealth redistribution for First Nations people across the continent of so-called “Australia”, Palestinians in Gaza, Sudanese and Congolese People experiencing imperial and colonial violence to illustrate the integral role of mutual aid in the struggle for decolonisation.

Mutual aid is a practice of collective care that has been given increasing scholarly attention since the COVID-19 pandemic began in 2020. However, the decolonial potential of mutual aid has still received limited recognition. Authored by grassroots activists, this paper will argue for the role of mutual aid in “unsettling” (Tuck & Yang, 2012) the material conditions of colonialism, and more broadly disrupting the power of the colonial carceral system. This will be presented through a synthesis of one of our own facilitated discussions on mutual aid and decolonisation, international examples, and theoretical perspectives on mutual aid. Here, members of our affinity group speak to the key elements of mutual aid that can be harnessed for decolonial praxis. Praxis is the manifestation of political theory through engaging in theoretically informed, practice-based action (Atallah et al., 2021/2019). Affinity groups are anti-hierarchical, autonomous groups that work together for a specific cause (Dupuis-Deri, 2010). In our case, we have been organising mutual aid via wealth redistribution for First Nations people across the continent of so-called “Australia”, Palestinians in Gaza, Sudanese and Congolese people experiencing imperial and colonial violence.

Due to its independence from the state, mutual aid lends itself to the distribution of resources and building of communities without state intervention, challenging paternalistic colonial approaches to “welfare”, as well as the state surveillance that accompanies state support. It also has the potential to challenge poverty resulting from colonisation and support the

autonomy and self-determination of Indigenous people. Given the liberatory potential of mutual aid, this paper also serves as a call to action for scholars to participate in mutual aid as a way of contributing to the movement for decolonisation.¹ Smith (2012, p. 38) defines decolonisation as “a process which engages with imperialism and colonialism at multiple levels”, whereby Indigenous sovereignty is centred. Similarly, Sefa Dei (2019, p. vii) notes that “decolonization is a process of working to bring change by foremost helping to rid ourselves of the complexes of subordination and acquiescence.” In our context, we consider the role of wealth redistribution in challenging imperialist and colonial monopolies on resources, as well as the individualistic logics of racial capitalism.

Background

This paper was conceptualised during an intense period of organising direct and mutual aid for colonised people in so-called Australia and in Palestine. At the time of drafting, discussants in the paper had worked within a broader affinity group to raise over AU\$180,000² since October 2024, which was redistributed to families experiencing colonial oppression. The following conversation is a synthesis of discussion between Indigenous and settler organisers. Originally, one author was invited to write for this special issue but opted to ensure that the paper was as collaborative as possible, as a means of academic activism and acknowledging the rich expertise that exists beyond the academy. We opted for this form for the article to ensure that the expertise and lived experience of the authors could be presented and articulated in an accessible, organic way. The paper is intended to generate reflection on the role of mutual aid as a decolonial praxis. Through demonstrating the value of mutual aid, we also seek to encourage academics that claim to be engaged in decolonial or anti-oppression work to participate in mutual aid as a matter of principle, both through financial support and pedagogical engagement.

The authors of this paper are from colonised and forcibly displaced ancestries, with some living on our ancestral land and others living in the diaspora as descendants of refugees and migrant-settlers. These positionalities have shaped our engagement with mutual aid practices. Romey is a Blak Sardinian, Huda is a first-generation Somali with refugee background and Vasiliki (Kiki) is of refugee (1st generation Salvadoran) and migrant-settler (2nd generation Greek) descent.

1 In this paper, we use the term decolonial rather than anti-colonial, though we note the overlap between the two. This is because we see engaging in decolonial praxis as an act of anti-colonialism, and anti-colonial acts as moving towards decolonisation. For a more rigorous discussion of the distinction between decolonial and anti-colonial, see Sefa Dei (2019).

2 To view our two most successful campaigns, see <https://chuffed.org/project/128290-mutual-aid-mates-ongoing-campaign> and <https://chuffed.org/project/117407-blakfullas-x-palestine>.

Tuck and Yang's (2012) framework of 'unsettling' 'Decolonization is not a Metaphor' resonates closely with the call for scholars to contribute to mutual aid. In their influential work, the authors explicitly outline the role of wealth redistribution as central to decolonisation:

Decolonization in exploitative colonial situations could involve the seizing of imperial wealth by the postcolonial subject. In settler colonial situations, seizing imperial wealth is inextricably tied to settlement and re-invasion. Likewise, the promise of integration and civil rights is predicated on securing a share of a settler-appropriated wealth (as well as expropriated 'third-world' wealth) (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 7).

Here, we reflect on our collective mutual aid organising, and how it demonstrates the operation of theoretical perspectives in practice. Decolonial scholars must acknowledge the expertise of grassroots organisers as leaders of change and engage in these practices themselves if they claim to be working towards decolonisation. By demonstrating the success of our small affinity group, we hope to demonstrate that people have more potential to enact change than they may initially believe.

Klee Benally (2023, p. 199), a Diné activist outlines the organising principle of mutual aid:

Mutual Aid asserts solidarity not charity, which translates to struggling alongside and supporting each other (building and deepening relationships) rather than perpetuating material dependencies (hand-outs etc.) and hierarchies. Superlatively, solidarity is nontransactional.

Mutual aid is a prefigurative practice that asks people to commit to wealth redistribution and the sharing of resources as an ongoing practice, rather than an abstract goal achieved after "revolution." It requires people to divest their resources from the for-profit, highly corporate capitalist system and invest them into community care. In essence, mutual aid is the embodiment of prefigurative politics and engaging in praxis. Boggs (1977, p. 7) describes prefigurative politics as "the embodiment, within the ongoing political practice of a movement, of those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture, and human experience that are the ultimate goal." In the context of mutual aid, Boggs' (1977) conception of prefigurative politics plays out in the material redistribution of resources gained through the privileges of living in a settler-colonial and imperialist state.

Mutual Aid against the Non-Profit Industrial Complex

Here, we emphasise that a key distinction between a mutual aid approach to direct monetary aid and a charity-based approach is the focus on relationships and community building. Whilst charity operates in a professionalised, client-

based model that is limited by conditional funding and a clear client and provider relationship, mutual aid relies on collaboration between mutual aid organisers, recipients of financial mutual aid, and the broader community to meet the needs of communities in an ongoing, sustainable way. This critique has been raised by grassroots organisers for decades and has been documented rigorously in works such as INCITE!'s (2017) “The Revolution Will Not Be Funded”, which focuses on the non-profit industrial complex. Munshi and Wilse (in *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded* 2017, pp. xvi-xvii) note:

With their funding restrictions and a social service model of targeted constituents, non-profits may reproduce categories of deserving and undeserving along lines of legible and illegible identities in the communities on whose behalf the state calls them to speak.

Furthermore, Smith (in INCITE!, 2017) outlines the dangerous entwinement of the state and not-for profit organisations, which results in the surveillance and control of solidarity movements, whilst controlling dissent and depoliticising movements.

In our discussion, Kiki also spoke to the different approaches of mutual aid and charity or NGO in serving the community:

It makes me come back to that whole community building aspect of mutual aid; I think what's really central in what we're trying to do is obviously restoring autonomy by just giving people the resources and letting them do whatever they want. But also treating that person with dignity and care and respect and like a human being. Which I think a lot of state-based welfare or like even NGO/NFP based welfare doesn't do for their clients, they're not just like another person who's experiencing something difficult. They're a client and the responsibility that an organisation has for a person is clearly demarcated as professional and not holistic and community centric.

Given the well documented role of NGOs/NFPS in maintaining dominant ideologies and reinforcing racial hierarchies (Rodriguez in INCITE! *Women of Colour Against Violence*, 2017), their usefulness in supporting the personhood and autonomy of people using their services similarly remains limited. As such, mutual aid is an important intervention which can help to restore and rehumanise a person needing support.

Mutual Aid, Decolonisation and Sovereignty

Ultimately, one of the core benefits of mutual aid is how it can provide people with the resources they need to move through the world with greater autonomy, and less intervention from the systems that cause them harm.

In defining decoloniality, a careful distinction should be made between “reconciliation” and genuine decolonial practise, where the former does not aim to unsettle the settler-coloniser but instead provides settlers with “an alibi against the claims ... made by Blackfullas” of their perpetuation of coloniality (Watego, 2021, p. 58). In failing to reckon with coloniality, insidious processes of settler-colonialism aim to uproot the ancient methods of mutual aid, problem-solving, and community care that are central to Indigenous methodologies and life philosophies. It is through violent invasion and dispossession that coloniality ensures the “history, culture and genealogy” of Indigenous peoples, is forced into “oblivion” (Bulhan, 1985, p. 189), so that intra-Indigenous liberation solutions are unable to survive without external support from settler allies. Through this, the autobiography of tens of thousands of years of Indigenous ways of being is replaced with a white authored biography that only details the much shorter, colonial history, alienating Indigenous peoples from traditional methodologies which prioritise kinship and cultural protocols that disallow one mob to speak for another.

The coloniality of “reconciliation” in faux mutual aid practice, pushes Indigenous folk to the periphery of their own affairs and demands a restoration of friendly affairs between Indigenous peoples and settlers that never existed in the first place (Cohen-Hunter & Stewart Assheton, 2024). This phenomenon is a result of centuries of invasion and colonialism, where the western form of knowledge production on Indigenous topics aims to represent “us as problems and them as solutions” (Watego, 2021, p. 60) so that liberation can only be found in settler allyship. The colonial production of deficit discourses has justified this invasion of Indigenous spaces to *learn about* colonialism rather than *engaging in* decolonisation (Swadener & Mutua, 2008, p. 33).

The centrality of Land Back and principled decolonial mutual aid seek to problematise the coloniality of settler aid to Indigenous peoples. To say Land Back means to support the autonomy and sovereignty of Indigenous, colonised people in evading surveillance and actively challenging the state. As Benally (2023, p. 203) argues “Without material backing and meaningful relationships... proclamations of solidarity are hollow”. Similarly, Tuck and Yang (2012) criticise the metaphorisation of the term “decolonisation” and emphasise that “unsettling” in both a material and ideological sense is intrinsic to decolonial praxis.

In our discussion, Romey articulated the importance of material unsettling with reference to members of their own community:

Basically Blak people are so oppressed by these systems and are affected so much more that like every single day we can't actually organize and work on Land Back because we're trying to keep like child protection off our backs we're trying to

keep a fucking house we're trying to whatever. I find it so frustrating that people can't understand that supporting a Blak mum who needs to go to her son's funeral is actually engaging in Land Back; because if these people, if we're okay we can organize. I literally can't organize with my cousins because my cousin because my family are constantly fighting violence, fighting poverty, exhausted, have multiple mental health issues and trauma that means they can't get it together. So, I feel like Blak mutual aid like on this continent is such a fundamental way and a really, really easy way for settlers to engage in Land Back and people are refusing to and it's really frustrating.

In direct opposition to mutual aid practices are state welfare policies, which are grounded in paternalistic, colonial, and carceral logics. One example of the many controversial and paternalistic policies which has sought to limit Indigenous autonomy in Australia is the Cashless Debit Card. Introduced in 2016 (Bielefeld, 2024; Klein & Razi, 2019) the cards placed strict limitations on how recipients could use their money. Bielefeld's (2024) interviews with people forced to use the cashless debit cards demonstrated the repressive and isolating impact that this policy had in many aspects of First Nations people's day to day lives, from an inability to participate in community events to difficulties in paying for essential goods and services. Participants in the 2024 study by Bielefeld also explicitly referred to the fear of their data being surveilled by the state, and the ways in which the cashless debit card enabled this to occur with more ease. They outlined the specific threat this raised for their families, given the ongoing and disproportionate forcible removal of Indigenous children (Newton et al., 2024).

Romey provided another vignette which succinctly presents the potential consequences of these kinds of paternalistic policies, whilst speaking to the role of mutual aid in disrupting the harm that they cause:

I feel like especially when talking about mob, mutual aid is also a long-term way to avoid like long-term engagement with police and the justice system. So, it's not just about choosing like yeah autonomy and preventing surveillance but for instance clients of mine who I wanted to do a mutual aid campaign for but can't contact him; basically he's constantly targeted by the police because he's Aboriginal and the reason he's in this situation is poverty; that's literally the only reason. If we were able to get him enough money so he could have stable housing even for a few months that would avoid him being incarcerated so many times because he's picked up by the cops like every single week.

McKane, Grenier and Pellow (2023, p. 582) make a similar argument that “when the state is present, it routinely exacerbates violent inequities.” Given the consistent, targeted and disproportionate criminalisation of First Nations people in so-called Australia (AIHW, 2024), mutual aid can disrupt cycles of criminalisation in a way that supports decolonial goals. As Romey articulated:

I would love for wider society to understand the long-term implications of mutual aid and how much good it can do over “charity” and NGOs. It isn’t only about having autonomy rather than relying on oppressive systems, but it can save our lives.

Mutual aid can prevent these violent cycles of system harm from occurring. It can support people to access housing which in turn can reduce their interaction with police and thus prevent deaths in custody and police violence.

Ultimately, mutual aid allows those criminalised and surveilled by settler colonial penal welfare regimes to access the support they need without the same exclusionary and stringent requirements as policies such as the cashless welfare card. Given that colonialism and criminalisation are intrinsically linked, by changing the conditions that exacerbate criminalisation, decolonial praxis can be achieved.

Mutual Aid as A Return to and Preservation of Cultural Practices of Care

As articulated in Tuck and Yang’s (2012, p. 1) seminal work, “Decolonization brings about the repatriation of Indigenous land and life.” During our discussion, we noted the innate experience of participating in mutual aid in all of our cultures, even when it was not identified or articulated as such explicitly. We also noted how these practices have been systematically disrupted because of colonialism and imperialism.

Huda reflected on her own Somali background, and the role of mutual aid in her upbringing:

The way people are like raised as well like in a lot of cultures like indigenous cultures just like my culture, right? And religion as well; You don’t live on this earth for yourself. Do you know what I mean? Yeah, it’s your life. You can do whatever you want, but you have an obligation and a responsibility to look after the people like in your community and they have to do the same for you. It seems very basic, but a lot of people just don’t understand that.

Prior to our discussion, Huda also reflected on “Saving Circles” in African nations, noting that this ongoing feminised practice has been a feature of multiple African cultures. These economies function external to the state, autonomously pooling community funds which are then redistributed to those in most need in the community. This tradition is also thoroughly documented in Black scholar Caroline Shenaz Hossein’s (2024) research on Black diasporic solidarity economies.

Across many colonised and racialised communities, concepts of community care are a feature. For example, Palestinian Mai Jarrar, a member of the East Jerusalem YMCA outlined the limits of NGO’s in responding appropriately to crisis due to their limited embedding within communities (Carstensen et al., 2021). Additionally, Jarrar highlighted the Islamic principle of “Takaful” as playing a role in practices of mutual aid and solidarity. This cultural principle underpins the community motivation to engage in sustained practices of care. Similarly, Mabovula (2011) argues that the African philosophy of “Ubuntu” is a precolonial, communitarian approach to living. According to Mabovula (2011), three key principles underpin Ubuntu: “humanity” which emphasises compassion, empathy, cooperation and generosity; “tolerance” and “respect.” In practice, ubuntu promotes “the exercise of individual rights by emphasising sharing and co-responsibility and the mutual enjoyment of rights by all. It also promotes good human relationships and enhances human value, trust and dignity” (Mabovula, 2011, p. 40). Sudanese mutual aid organiser Bakri Mah (2025) outlines this conceptualisation of caring in his own culture:

In the West, we’re taught that kindness, generosity and sharing are virtues; they’re the virtue of a good person. In Sudan, we’re raised to feel that these things are not just virtues, but innate natures. Sharing and giving are not things we do to be “good people” but rather they are things we do to be “complete people.”

These examples of holistic approaches to community care across multiple cultures align closely with the prefigurative politics of mutual aid practice.

In contrast, approaches such as charity and welfare models which decentre sovereignty do little to restore cultural practices that have been disrupted by colonialism. For example, conditional welfare payments may limit the autonomy of recipients to practice, as is seen in the cashless debit card example. Importantly, Romey has noted earlier the importance of financial mutual aid in providing a lifeline where connection to Country may be fractured because of colonisation. In Puerto Rico and Palestine, practices of mutual aid have explicitly sought to rectify this alienation from ancestral resources, challenging the dependence on the colonial state (Carstensen et al.,

2021; Santiago Ortiz et al., 2022). For example, the creation of community farms has sought to ensure autonomy and achieve food sovereignty for marginalised populations.

As an affinity group, we have seen similar sentiments and practices arising in our own mutual aid practice with Palestinians in Gaza. The use of food as a tool of colonization and simultaneously as a resource for liberation is particularly pertinent in this example and is detailed further in Rotz et al.'s (2024) analysis. A key component of our organising over the past 6 months has been to ensure that we work directly with people working on the ground to distribute resources to their communities. One of our ongoing relationships has been with a Palestinian couple in Deir Al-Balah (referred to as S and I) who have worked tirelessly to provide food, water and clothing to those most harshly impacted by Israeli policies to control and limit access to food, water, and shelter in Gaza. By doing this work, Palestinian community members are disrupting the very real threat of civil upheaval and societal collapse caused by the targeted starvation and genocide of Gaza's population (Rotz et al., 2024). Ensuring the survival needs of fellow community members are met can limit the potential for escalating internal conflicts which place considerable strain on an already oppressed population.

Furthermore, many of the Palestinians that we have built relationships with have emphasised the importance of privacy and dignity in any kind of support that they receive. I and S repeatedly critiqued the way in which aid distribution via international non-government organisations humiliated desperate and starving Palestinians. In their practice, they have worked hard to ensure that the documentation of their distributions maintained the dignity of recipients whilst also remaining transparent and accountable. These tangible examples of mutual aid as a means for maintaining the wellbeing and autonomy of colonised communities indicates its necessity as a tool of decolonial praxis.

A Call to Action

Scholars (in particular, settler scholars) gain privilege, resources and financial wealth through a career in the academy, often at the expense of the colonised who are excluded from these institutions. Whilst it is essential for decolonial scholars to acknowledge the expertise of grassroots organisers and incorporate this as a pedagogical strategy, the “unsettling” of material wealth is also vital. By profiting from abstract conceptualisations of decolonisation, without participating in the material redistribution of wealth as a matter of praxis, the scholarly contribution to decolonisation is limited. In professions that primarily exist due to settler-colonialism, there is a duty to serve the communities that we teach about and research with and about. Given the liberatory potential of mutual aid, rather than taking an extractive and

performative approach to decolonial work, our practice should be a prefigurative one; an approach that ultimately “puts our money where our mouths are” in its simplest sense.

Conclusion

As demonstrated through our discussion of our own experiences participating in mutual aid and the examples presented, the compatibility of mutual aid with decolonisation cannot be understated. Through a sustained and principled practice of mutual aid, the decolonial benefits can be gained, restoring autonomy and dignity to oppressed populations. As such, scholars must take seriously the significant contributions of grassroots organisers in creating practical, decolonial action, and therefore must use their privileges to “unsettle” and contribute to this essential liberatory work.

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