

Spring 2021

## Opening the Fridge: An Exploration of Mutual Aid and Community Care in Queens, New York

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### Recommended Citation

Hamilton, Caitlin, "Opening the Fridge: An Exploration of Mutual Aid and Community Care in Queens, New York" (2021). *Senior Projects Spring 2021*. 244.

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Opening the Fridge:

An Exploration of Mutual Aid and Community Care in Queens, New York

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Social Studies  
of Bard College

by  
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2021



## Acknowledgements

This project was made possible by an immense amount of support from the people in my life. I would like to thank them for their help and dedicate this project to them.

To Yuka Suzuki, my advisor, who sparked my passion for anthropology the first semester of my freshman year and has been re-igniting it ever since. Your enthusiasm, insight, and patience have kept this project afloat and brightened each of my Thursday afternoons.

To my mom, who instilled in me a love of learning. You went to my fieldsite when I couldn't, and your insight helped me to think about this project in new ways. Your endless generosity, with me and with your community, never ceases to amaze me.

To my dad, who taught me to cultivate the tenaciousness of a writer. Your advice has helped me through the highs and lows in this creating this project.

To my board members. Sophia Stamatopoulou-Robbins, you created an incredibly enriching and relevant class, Gig Life, last semester in the midst of a pandemic. Without that class this project would not have been born. Helen Epstein, you taught me nearly everything I know about public health and I couldn't have asked for a better teacher. Learning from you has inspired me to pursue a future in public health. Gregory Duff-Morton, your zeal for the pursuit of knowledge has been contagious. You taught me to write and think in completely new ways.

To my grandparents, whose stories have breathed life into this project and who have had unwavering faith in me since day one.

To my former English teacher, Justin Lander, who encouraged my earliest explorations as a reader and writer. Now that I have this thesis written, I can finally get around to finishing that copy of Infinite Jest.

To my wonderful friends, who patiently listened to me talk in circles about this project.

To my siblings, Isabel and Jamie, who bring sunshine to my life. I look forward to spending more time with the two of you once I'm done with, as Jamie calls it, "Col-ledge."

To the community in Queens that raised me, and to my neighbor Barbara, who has been a cornerstone of that community.

To Queens Mutual Aid Network and Corona Comunidad, community organizations who have been endlessly inspiring to me. Your generosity in sharing your stories with me has made this project possible.



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## **Introduction: Building by Building, Block by Block**

My block is silent and my room is largely dark, other than the electric glow of my laptop screen and the yellow cast of my decades-old table lamp. It is only around 8pm but the evening's stillness makes it feel as though it could be any hour of the night. Sitting at the desk in the corner of my room, snacking on salt and vinegar chips, I look through the course page for a class on the gig economy that I have recently started and come across a link posted there to a mutual aid group in Kingston, New York. Intrigued, I open the link and am led to the group's Facebook page; at the top is a header image that reads, in all caps:

BE A NEIGHBOURHOOD HERO  
LOOK TO JOIN #MUTUAL AID GROUPS IN YOUR AREA!  
MUTUAL AID IS THE VOLUNTARY RECIPROCAL EXCHANGE OF  
RESOURCES AND SERVICES FOR MUTUAL BENEFIT.  
HELP YOUR NEIGHBOURS TODAY, SO THEY CAN HELP YOU  
TOMORROW.

Next to the text is a drawing of a Rosie the Riveter-style woman wearing a face mask and carrying a paper bag of vegetables. I am curious about what it means to be a “neighborhood hero” and the implications of using a Rosie the Riveter-like figure in this context, but I put these trains of thought aside because I am now quite curious about, as the image put it, mutual aid groups in my area. By “my area,” I do not think of where I reside at the moment in Tivoli, New York, but rather I think of Queens, where I grew up and had just spent months in quarantine.

I start off local, looking up “Little Neck Mutual Aid.” Little Neck is the small neighborhood where I grew up, and unsurprisingly, no results come up; I would have to think on a larger scale. So I look up “Queens Mutual Aid,” and find a Facebook group with nearly 2,000



members. One of my childhood friends is a member, and there are plenty of other members with whom I have mutual Facebook friends. Scrolling through posts in the group, I see many familiar neighborhoods where groups are hosting events and offering resources; one that comes up a few times is Corona.

I remember the last time I was in Corona – it must have been about 5 years ago now. I used to go there on weekends to visit my friend Denise; I would take the Q18 bus to Flushing, then transfer to the 7 Express line to Junction Boulevard. I would sit on the 7, listening to pop music on my pink plastic headphones, and feel a certain tranquility watching Queens pass by the window. On the 7 it is usually possible to see far into the distance, over to the water and the towering buildings of Manhattan, but I preferred to watch the apartment balconies and old warehouses in immediate view. Then, when I emerged from the train and descended onto the street below, I would be met with a gust of wind and a rush of people swarming the sidewalk, hurrying up the station steps to buy a metrocard before the next train departs, buying food from street vendors, dipping in and out of the small clothing, home goods, and convenience stores that always seemed to be open.

Now I suspect that Corona looks very different. People cannot still form such crowds without the nagging feeling that they could be risking their lives. Even if they could, where is there to go? Unemployment has been soaring in Queens for months, and many small businesses have had to shut down. The very name of the neighborhood used to simply mean “crown,” which some believe is because it was thought to be the “crown of Queens County” when it was being named. Now, when hearing the name Corona, one cannot help but be reminded of the deadly virus that has swept across the world, hitting Queens particularly hard. The financial and social

impact of this virus is impossible to measure, but it now permeates every aspect of life in Queens.

This is the situation out of which Queens Mutual Aid Network was born. Discovering the group fills me with a sense of curiosity and something like hope about the possibilities for the community coming together to address this crisis. I continue to scroll through the posts, and see a number of people requesting help, sharing stories, and informing one another of resource distribution events. While I scroll the page in solitude, over a hundred miles away from Queens, I feel a connection to the people there.

### **Who is Queens Mutual Aid Network?**

Queens Mutual Aid Network, or QMAN, was started at the beginning of the COVID-19 Pandemic in March. In our interview, Nadia, who is one of the head organizers of QMAN, emphasized that the network is distinctly different from a nonprofit, and instead described it as a group of “efforts that are done floor to floor, building by building, block by block.” She elaborated that it’s about seeing what the community needs and what it has, and how those assets can be “traded.” QMAN functions as something of a vehicle to connect those who want to serve their community with those who are in need. While QMAN is more than just a platform, all of their funds generally come from small donors in the extended Queens community, as do most of their volunteers, and all those resources are funneled back into the Queens community; one of the main ways that QMAN functions is as a medium for community-based wealth and resource redistribution. Nadia described to me how they try to keep their efforts local within the network, so ideally volunteers from, for example, the neighborhood of Jackson Heights would help people

who were requesting help in Jackson Heights. Volunteers and aid recipients are encouraged to stay in contact and build relationships with one another.

While there have been a few iterations of how the network has functioned throughout its year of existence, the way that it was run during the height of the pandemic was that visitors to the Facebook page would fill out one of two forms: one was marked for those who “need help” and the other is for those who “would like to volunteer.” Each form contained questions asking the person filling it out about what neighborhood they lived in and what they needed or had to give. They were then eventually “matched” based on need and availability. QMAN ran this program for a few months, and helped provide aid to over a thousand people, before handing over the project to smaller, more localized aid groups. It seems that the program was never intended to be run long-term, but was rather designed as an immediate solution to a pressing need. After learning more about the organizers, it seems that this network was one of many projects that they have done and will do. The volunteer form is still up, and they may start taking volunteers again in the near future, but right now they are using their donation money towards a rent relief program specifically focused on undocumented people living in Queens. However, other local groups and organizations use the Facebook page to notify those in need and potential volunteers/donors about resource distribution events happening in the community. One recent post on the page advertises a clothing and personal protective equipment distribution event, while another advertises a food distribution event at a local Senior Center. So not only does QMAN itself provide aid services, but it also creates a space on Facebook for the Queens community to distribute information and resources to one another.

One of these localized projects that ended up becoming a large focus in my research was the community fridges that were opened in response to the COVID crisis. These are free, public fridges that have been set up on the street in many neighborhoods around the city. They are a recurring point of discussion on the QMAN page; there are consistent posts encouraging people to donate to them, asking for volunteers to help maintain them, and notifying members when major food drop-offs would occur. They are generally run by small community organizations. I chose to focus on the Corona community fridge in particular because it seemed to be one of the most-discussed fridges, and it was in an area with a lot of need. It was also one of the closest ones to my home.

## **Methods**

As part of my research, I conducted four remote interviews and visited two community fridges in Queens. I used the volunteer form on QMAN's page to try to sign up to volunteer with the network, but their volunteer program has been on pause for the duration of the time I've been studying the group. The first person that I interviewed was Nadia, one of the founding members of QMAN; I also did a written interview with the organizers behind the Corona community fridge. I interviewed my grandmother, Barbara, as she grew up in Queens and had unique insight into how community has existed over time in the borough, and I interviewed my mother after she had made two trips to a community fridge in Queens and offered to have a discussion about her experiences. I visited the community fridges in January of 2021, when I was home in Queens for winter break; I visited both in one day, and donated food to each. I visited one fridge in Corona and one fridge in Jamaica; I found both through the QMAN Facebook page. I would have liked

to make more visits to the community fridge, but unfortunately a few days after my visit I had to enter a quarantine period for the rest of break, as my father had tested positive for COVID-19. Fortunately, at the age of 68 he overcame the virus without any complications, and a few weeks later my mother (who does not live with him and had not been exposed) decided to make the trips in my absence. Her vivid descriptions of these visits not only helped me to gain a fuller image of what the environment of the community fridge is like, but also allowed me to hear her perspective as a Queens resident with unique insights about her experiences at the fridge.

## **Overview**

In chapter one, I discuss my time visiting and learning about the community fridges. In collecting donations and going grocery shopping for the fridge, I realized how much decision-making power I held as the person in control of what foods would end up at the fridges that day. I grappled with dilemmas about what kinds of foods to buy, and in the process gained new insights about my role as a privileged person providing aid to those who have less secure access to food. When doing work around food assistance, the issue of quantity is often centered - in the name of efficiency, people want to know how many mouths can get fed for every dollar that is invested. But in doing this work and in having discussions about food provision in my interviews, it became clear that quality is just as, if not more, important as quantity. Giving quality food - like fresh vegetables, fruits, eggs, and milk - to people in need not only better nourishes them than canned food, but it also better respects their humanity. I also examine the differences between food pantries, welfare food programs, and community fridges, and discuss some of the controversies surrounding community fridges. Examining posts from the QMAN

Facebook page, it becomes clear that the site of the community fridge is loaded with symbolic meaning for the communities in which they exist.

In chapter two, I examine the theoretical roots of mutual aid. I search in historical and contemporary sources for a definition of mutual aid, and ask how Queens Mutual Aid Network fits into - and breaks away from - the ways that mutual aid has been understood by theorists over time. I explore how Peter Kropotkin, the Russian biologist, writer, and revolutionary who pioneered the theory of mutual aid over a century ago, defined the theory. I then put him in conversation with Jeff Shantz, an anarchist sociologist who discusses what mutual aid praxis looks like in the context of community, and Angela Wigger, a political economist who makes the argument for a more mutual aid-centric economic system. The ways that the concept of mutual aid has been interpreted over time have varied greatly, and understanding this variation provides a rich context for how we can understand mutual aid networks today. Unlike traditional mutual aid theory, QMAN does not approach mutual aid from an anarchist perspective. The network is invested in holding the government accountable, and in ensuring that quality non-state aid programs are available to the community, as the government has not always been a reliable source of support during the COVID pandemic. QMAN's stance is government-critical, but not anti-government, and this rift provides an interesting opportunity to dissect what mutual aid means.

In chapter three, I embark on an exploration of what community means in the context of Queens Mutual Aid Network. The way that the network functions depends on a certain pre-existing notion of Queens as a community, and in the work that it does it actively shapes the way that the Queens community relates to itself. Using tales of various experiences and

interpretations of community in Queens, I investigate different frameworks for understanding community, both from a historical perspective and in the context of QMAN - from historian Benedict Anderson's "imagined community," to social policy theorist Robert Chaskin's theory of "communal connection," to my Queens-raised grandmother's recollections of her immigrant-populated community. This discussion brings into focus the ways in which people relate to - and experience distance from - one another. Ultimately, it becomes clear that while there are a number of ways to understand what it means to be part of a community, to try to define the term is inherently reductionist; instead, it makes more sense to embrace the complexity of the concept.

## I

### Taking to the Streets

Coming home to Queens for winter break, I saw that my downstairs neighbor, a lovely older woman who lives alone, had a hand-written note on her door that read: “Pls. don’t deliver any more free food - Been canceled Long time ago. Thank you.” I wondered how she had come about to receive these free food deliveries; knowing that she had adult daughters and sons in the area, it had never occurred to me that she might need help with food. I wondered if she had ever considered asking my mom and I for help procuring food, and if she had, why she’d decided against it. I considered the foods that had been exchanged between our households in the past; when travel was possible, every year she used to go visit family in the Philippines and would sometimes bring back flavored butterscotch candies for us. Some years we had given her Christmas cookies that we made from a family recipe. The foods that had been exchanged between our homes were always given out of neighborly generosity, as opposed to any real need for food, and were always sweet as opposed to substantial. I wondered – why did it feel normal to exchange sweets, but somehow different to offer her a meal if she needed it?

Every morning over break, I would make myself coffee and scroll through the Queens Mutual Aid Network Facebook page. Doing this, I noticed that one consistent point of discussion on the page was the community fridges that have become a cornerstone of food distribution during the COVID-19 pandemic. They seem to be largely operated by small community organizations and fueled through food donations from both individuals and said organizations; the fridges themselves are either donated or purchased second hand using fundraiser donations. The electricity to run the fridges is donated by local businesses. Early in January, one woman



made a post on the Facebook page asking: “Does anyone know of a community fridge in Flushing, or Corona where I can drop off pint size milk cartons like the ones given at school? I might also be able to drop off sandwiches and fruits sometimes.” One commenter gave her the address of a community fridge in Corona, while another posted a link to a user-created map of every community fridge in New York City. I opened the map and found it to be impressively organized; it was accompanied by a list of how many fridges there are in each borough, the exact coordinates and address of each fridge, and additional fridges in New Jersey and upstate New York. It also indicated locations where there are fridges “coming soon.” I used this map to locate the fridges closest to me; one was in Corona, and the other was in Jamaica, both of which are about 15 minutes away from my neighborhood by car.

I took inspiration from this post and decided to put together my own community fridge donation. Using red acrylic paint and an old cardboard box, I created a “food donation point” to put out in my apartment complex. I put a note on the side of the box that explained that this food was going to be donated to community fridges in the area, and included a list of the foods that were acceptable to donate (I found this information on Google). I signed it with my first name and apartment number and started off the box with my own donation, a can of organic baked beans. I left the box out for a few days, and was excited to find that eventually a number of donations had been left in it. They included brown rice, boxes of pasta, cans of beans and soup, and lunchbox portions of Ritz crackers.

I loaded all of the food into reusable grocery bags and carried them to my trunk; I then headed over to Stop + Shop, my local grocery store, to pick up some more food to donate. I had left a comment on the aforementioned Facebook post asking what the most needed items at the

Corona community fridge were, but I hadn't gotten any response, so I turned to Google, where I read an article about community fridges and learned that staples like eggs, bread, milk, and fresh produce were often desired by those who frequent the fridges. Buying in multiples and looking out for sales, I ended up getting bread, eggs, milk, beans, pasta, tortillas, plantains, mandarin oranges, onions, garlic, and potatoes.

It felt a bit strange to grocery shop for strangers; I know that people tend to want eggs, but what kind of eggs do they want? Do I get many cartons of cheaper eggs, or fewer cartons of organic eggs? This decision-making process resulted with me using my personal knowledge of food to make decisions regarding what to buy. I almost always buy organic eggs, and additionally a neighbor of mine had recently told me that eating non-organic eggs could cause hormonal imbalances in young women, so my conscience wouldn't let me get the cheap ones. What would it have meant for me to purchase lower-quality goods for the fridge than I would for myself? That felt like an ethical issue; if I was going to use my privilege to help others, I would have to do it in a way that honors the humanity of the recipients of that help. Buying lower-quality food for others than I would for myself would express a lack of respect for them, so I bought for the fridge what I would buy in a normal grocery shop. Potatoes, as opposed to eggs, felt fine to buy in non-organic bulk, as I never purchase organic potatoes. Despite my attempts to shop with others in mind, I was still making decisions based off of what I would want; there was essentially no way for me to know what the patrons of the fridge would have wanted me to buy.

The first fridge I visited was in Corona. This is a fridge that tends to get a lot of attention on the Facebook group, and while I can't definitively say why that is, a look at the statistics of

the area can help to provide a better view of the need that exists there. A series of maps of New York City from the New School's Urban Systems Lab shows that as of 2017, the zone including Corona was in the second-lowest income bracket out of five groups (36k-57k annual income) and it has the highest percentage of people of color out of five groups (over 94% of the population). There is also a very high population density in the area, rent costs take up a high percentage of household income, and COVID-19 infection rates are very high (Urban Systems Lab 2021). Additionally, a map from the Gotham Gazette shows that the neighborhood, along with multiple neighborhoods directly surrounding it, has among the highest "uninsured noncitizen" populations in the city (14%-37%), meaning that there is a high density of undocumented immigrants without health insurance in the area (Betancourt 2015).

Given these factors, it makes sense why Corona is one of the most-discussed neighborhoods in the QMAN Facebook group. There are many people there who are in financial need, live in densely populated housing, and are undocumented. One of the reasons that the fridges are so popular in Queens is because of their accessibility to those who are undocumented; these populations are not eligible for food stamps or unemployment, on top of being among the hardest-hit by the pandemic. The fridges provide food in a way that allows the recipients to remain anonymous, usually does not require them to interact with anyone, and does not have a religious or financial agenda. The lack of any institutional presence makes the fridge more comfortable to use; one does not even need to leave the public street to peruse what the day's offerings are. The fridge is meant to belong to the community, not to any group, so ideally the community can treat it as such.

## **The pantry and the fridge**

To enter a food pantry is to enter another person or organization's property, and therefore to be subject to their rules and requests. This is likely a deterrent for some people - particularly if they are undocumented or going through the immigration process, a food pantry may be a daunting environment to enter. In an ABC News article titled "Food banks see impact of Trump's immigration policies," a case worker says that often, immigrant mothers don't enroll for food benefits because they are "afraid their information will be shared with Immigration and Customs Enforcement, and that they could be separated from their children who were born in the U.S." The article elaborates that harsh immigration policies enacted by former president Donald Trump made many immigrants, documented or not, fearful of applying for food assistance because they worried that it would impact their immigration status. This applied even to food pantries that were not connected to the government; the article continues on to describe how one woman called a food bank to remove her mother's name from their database because "she was afraid her mother would be deported because she accepted free food from the food pantry, even though it isn't connected to government programs." The fear surrounding food assistance is not always based on accurate information, but it's also not entirely unfounded - the article goes on to quote a former immigration officer, who describes how a person might be denied a green card if they are receiving "every program on the books," and that they would need to demonstrate that their situation was going to improve before being given green card access (Ebbs 2018). There is a lack of clarity surrounding where the line is in terms of how much government assistance will impact one's immigration status. This lack of clarity could understandably deter some people from

wanting to receive any non-anonymous assistance, particularly if they are already in a situation where they cannot afford to be deported.

To simply consider the more practical side of things, food pantries and government assistance programs can be confusing, bureaucratic systems to navigate. On Google Maps, the top search result for “Queens food pantry” is a place called St. Nicholas of Tolentine R.C. Food Pantry, located in Jamaica. The Maps listing is accompanied by a number of questions posted by Google users, seven of them asking when the food pantry is open and two of them asking where it is located. Only one of the questions has a reply with the hours, and it is from another Google user, not the organization itself. Given these factors, it is understandable why a community fridge may be a more accessible method of getting food to those who need it.

When considering this context for the way that food assistance is handled in our communities, it is easier to comprehend the argument that QMAN makes, which is that the government owes us better aid infrastructure. The lack of clarity surrounding what impact receiving aid will have on one’s immigration status to the lack of clarity surrounding how to access help from food banks all point to a larger issue that Queens Mutual Aid Network aims to address. Nadia described that QMAN functions as “kind of reflecting a mirror to the government, right? Which is that you can do this with quality and dignity, and you choose not to.” Not only do mutual efforts help build stronger communities with direct services, but they also hold the government accountable for how it fails to meet the needs of its residents. She didn’t want to say that mutual aid “fills the gaps” of government aid; she sees it as more a relationship in which they are advocating for people to the government as opposed to compensating for its failings.

## **Deliverance**

Driving through Corona to get to the fridge, I felt a sense of comfort seeing the familiar three-story brick buildings and two-family townhouses that seem to appear in nearly every Queens neighborhood. Washed in the sunlight of late afternoon, people milled about on the streets - despite the presence of many people, there is often a certain quiet to the streets that always surprises me whenever I come back to the city. I've noticed it on side streets in the West Village, in Brooklyn subway stations - the city can be bustling, but there is also a quiet symbiosis that New York neighborhoods, especially residential ones, seem to achieve. I got to the fridge and had to double-park in order to drop off the food, turning on my emergency lights and being careful not to block the one-way street. I then realized that I had three bags of food in my car and hadn't planned out which foods should go to which fridge - how was I to decide which communities would want which foods? Similar to the grocery store ordeal, I felt uncomfortable with the amount of power I held in this situation and had to make decisions based on the limited knowledge that I had of the community. I decided to bring the bag with most of the produce, like oranges and plantains, and half of the pantry goods, like canned beans and pasta. I left the potatoes, onions, garlic, half of the egg cartons, and the donations from my community for the next fridge.

When I approached the fridge there were a couple of older women standing by, one with a stroller that had a young child sleeping in it. I tried to approach respectfully with a smile without initiating conversation - I assumed that if they wanted to speak to me, they would. One of the women was talking on the phone, but briefly paused her conversation to point to the eggs that I was putting in the fridge and hold her bag out for me to bag them up for her. It was a small

gesture, but I was glad that she requested this of me, as it felt like it balanced out the power dynamic between us a bit. It simply felt as if she was treating me as someone who is younger than her and therefore fair to request this small act of, as opposed to someone who is giving her food, which blurred the lines of “owing” me something. I didn’t want to feel as if I was showing up as a liberal arts student helping those who have less secure access to resources than I do, but as a community member giving back in a small way to the place that has raised me. While this may be an unrealistic hope to have, and a difficult (if not impossible) distinction to draw, I do believe that it is important for me to reflect on the role that I played in this situation and I was grateful for how this woman helped me to do so.

As I continued to carry the bags from my car to the fridge, more people gathered and took the food that I was bringing, most of it not even making its way into the fridge itself. I noticed that the produce, milk and eggs were the first to go, while the cans and pantry foods garnered little interest – there were actually already a number of untouched cans in the pantry adjacent to the fridge. It made me think about the foods that I normally would think of as “donation” food versus what I tend to eat on a daily basis. Cooking for myself and family, I use maybe three cans of food a week, but the rest of what I eat is fresh produce or refrigerated ingredients. However, it seems that the go-to food for food drives is always canned - canned beans, soup, peaches - and never fresh. When I was in high school, a club I was in organized a food drive that raised over 200 pounds of canned food, a feat that felt really exciting at the time, but in retrospect I wonder why it only occurred to us that canned food was worth collecting. I always thought of this as an issue of practicality, as cans are easily transported, shelf-stable, and last for long periods of time, but what if instead of 200 pounds of cans, we collected 100 pounds of fresh produce? It

would've been slightly more difficult and less practical, but how much more helpful would it have been to the communities we were feeding? This question reflects my qualm with the eggs - quantity versus quality is tough to negotiate when there is so much need for food, but when you consider the humanity of the people receiving the food the stakes become more clear. Getting people fed is one thing, but getting people's nutritional needs fulfilled is another. Perhaps the fact that there were people waiting at the fridge for a fresh delivery rather than taking from the abundant stock of cans demonstrates that even a want for food does not inspire a desire for canned food.

Food quality is one of the things that Nadia emphasized to me in our interview. She described a food distribution program that occurred during Ramadan, a holy month in which healthy adult Muslims fast from dawn to dusk and encourage prayer, reading the Quran, and doing charity work (Al Jazeera 2020). In April 2020, about a month into the COVID-19 pandemic, New York City mayor Bill de Blasio and Food Czar Kathryn Garcia announced a city-wide plan to distribute 500,000 halal meals to Muslim families in need through community-based organizations (Hanania 2020). The Food Czar is an appointed official whose job it is to fight food insecurity within their jurisdiction. Nadia's assessment of this program was grim: "One thing that we were able to do, through mutual aid, is that I actually ordered some of those meals" she described to me, "I was able to do a review of the meal they were giving, and it smelled, looked disgusting." Through further research, she discovered that these were "ration meals" that were contracted from a military ration company in Illinois. QMAN reached out to the Food Czar about how the quality of the meals was below basic standards, and suggested how these meals could have been done differently: "we were able to question the mayor, or the Food



Czar at that time was I think Kathryn Garcia, to say like, small businesses are drowning. Like, it doesn't cost a lot to make Biryani for Muslim people, and Muslim people love Biryani, you know?" The network was able to get this controversy publicised through an article in Middle East Eye, an online news platform focused on Middle Eastern affairs. The article discussed the poor quality of the meals, how the meals were contracted through a military company, and how this situation shows that better representation of all people is needed in the city government. In doing this advocacy work, QMAN was advocating for the provision of culturally sensitive, high-quality food. Nadia's message was clear - while ensuring quality may take a few extra steps, New York is one of the richest cities in the world. Our resources are not so limited that we must provide flavorless, nutritionless food to those in need. There should not have to be a choice between quality and quantity - there should be aid available that recognizes its recipients' humanity.

When I was done unloading all of the food, I loitered for a minute to take a couple of pictures of the fridge and pantry, careful to get a shot that did not include any people. One woman, who had been at the fridge when I got there and had expressed gratitude to me as I was unloading the food, approached me and stood by my side with a box of instant hot chocolate, smiling and showing it to me. There was a bit of a language barrier between us, and she pointed to it and said "coffee," so I tried to be friendly and sort of agreed with her, unsure of what was happening. I thought that maybe she was trying to offer me a packet of the hot chocolate, but the box was closed and she was holding it with both hands, so it felt more as if the box was being displayed to me. After we had parted, I realized that perhaps she was offering me the whole box as a gift in return for dropping off the food. I regretted my awkwardness and failure to accept

what I probably should have taken. While the hot chocolate was not of the same literal value as the food that I had dropped off, if I had taken it it would've made my trip to the fridge an exchange as opposed to a donation. This interaction breathed new life into the term "mutual aid," as I was giving food and getting offered food in return.

The next fridge I went to was in Jamaica, located on a street with less foot traffic, and the only person around was a man waiting nearby at a bus stop. The fridge was painted black, and on it read "Free Food," "Give Some," and "TAKE SOME." There was already a drawerful of carrots and another of onions, making me question my decision to leave most of my onions for this fridge. Similar to the last fridge, there was an abundance of cans but no eggs, milk or fruit. I dropped the food off and left without interacting with anyone, but as I was driving away I saw a man opening the fridge and leaning in to take some food. I wondered if it was a coincidence that he showed up just as I was leaving, or if he'd waited for me to leave to take food.

### **Understanding the mission**

While my visits to the fridges did not give me a comprehensive understanding of the complexities of mutual aid, it did give me a glimpse into what being an active member of Queens Mutual Aid Network might look like. Ideally, I would like to have kept the donation box out in my neighborhood and collected food to use for regular deliveries. However, I don't know if people would continue to donate, or if the box would be allowed to stay - I left it out after collecting the donations, hoping to do a second round of deliveries before heading back up to school, but it was gone within two days. I don't know if it was removed by an annoyed neighbor or if it blew away in the winter wind, but I suppose it did have a bit of a transient look to it, being

handmade and constructed of cardboard. It made me wonder about the future of the fridges - will they stay when the COVID-19 pandemic is over? Hunger is an issue that predated the pandemic and will continue to exist beyond it, but the pandemic brought into clearer focus the vast inequalities in food security that exist in New York, and gave activists the time to focus on building solutions to it.

Using the QMAN Facebook page, I did some more research on how community fridges tend to come into existence. One poster asked if a permit was required to open a fridge, and commenters informed him that it isn't, though it is recommended. One commenter posted a link to a page called "Freedge Yourself!", a simple website with information on how to create a community fridge. It featured a YouTube video in which an animated talking carrot provided information about how to find a location for your fridge, what type of refrigerator to use, how to prevent fridges from getting stolen, what general costs are, and how to source food to stock the fridge. It claimed that the community fridge "aims to reduce food waste and build a stronger community," but made no commentary that read as overtly political. The site also contained legal information for each state regarding community fridge regulations.

The video contained no faces or names of the people involved in the Freedge project, was made using a simple animation program, and the instructional voiceover sounded like it was done using a recording program that conceals the identity of the speaker. Because of this unexplained anonymity, the site and video had a bit of an off-putting quality to it. It made me think about the way that the fridges I visited also felt a bit anonymous in terms of who was running them; there was a phone number and email address to contact the group that runs the fridge, but there were no names or faces involved. It could be run by one person out of their

home in Corona, or by a group of people based in Manhattan. I wondered how intentional the anonymity behind the Freedged site and community fridge is, if perhaps the organizers want to conceal their identities for legal reasons. This led me to consider the ways that this facelessness may actually foster community – if the fridge was run by a distinct group of people, whose names and faces were clearly visible on or near the fridge, people might feel as if they are taking from these organizers and it would feel less like a community-owned project. Additionally, knowing the identities of the organizers might be alienating for some. If the organizers names or photos were visible, potential differences in age, race, or gender expression between the organizers and community members could lead to a hesitancy among some to participate in the functioning of the fridge. To leave the fridge's organizers anonymous maintains the feeling of the fridge belonging to the community as a whole.

This post in the QMAN page also sparked a discussion of controversies regarding previous fridges; apparently, some had been poorly maintained and there was some discussion about whether one politician had used funds raised for community fridges for her own campaign office. One QMAN member commented her grievances about this politician's failure to properly run the fridge:

That fridge she received the first time was taken from another community that had reserved it. 2nd- she never maintained the fridge. People always stopped by and said it was always empty and never culturally appropriate and it smelled. When the fridge was vandalized she raised 35k. She had no plans to redistribute those funds back into the community until the fridge community reached out to her. She failed her community. And she must be held accountable.

This comment tells us a few things about the standards for community fridges. The first is that they must be used for the community that they are intended to serve – this may sound obvious,

but when considered in the context of the ideology that the fridge represents it is essential to remember this point. The fridges are intended to provide for the people of Queens in a way that the government has failed to do, so to move them around neighborhoods for political reasons is directly antithetical to this mission. Another point that the commenter makes is that the fridge was poorly maintained and lacked food that was culturally appropriate. This tells us that the fridge must be a clean space that caters to the population of the neighborhood that it is located in. It is not sufficient to provide food that is of acceptable quality – the food must also acknowledge the needs of the community that it serves.

This concept was reflected in my previously-mentioned conversation with Nadia, in which she emphasized that quality aid does not merely provide food to people, but provides food that is culturally aware of its recipients – she discussed this in the context of free halal lunches for Muslim students in NYC. She explained how “many of us went to the school to check out what they were giving, and their halal option was PB+J or hummus,” which she found to be a poor representation of halal food. After this, she went on to question the mayor, asking “is this what you think halal is?” and advocating for better halal options. This condition that the fridges hold culturally appropriate food has both functional and symbolic implications, the functional being that the people of each neighborhood are more likely to make use of culturally appropriate ingredients and the symbolic being that the fridge acknowledges the importance of the needs of its community. By incorporating foods that are culturally attuned to the community, the fridge provides food that goes beyond the bare minimum and instead embraces the full humanity of its community members, meaning that they are not simply mouths to feed, but that they are people who come from diverse backgrounds and deserve food that they know and enjoy. This also

requires that the fridge receives contributions from people who are aware of the community's demographics, and ideally are community members themselves. Having a high standard for the aid that the fridge provides means that there is more effort required of the organizers, such as doing research about the people who are in the community and what foods they are most likely to make use of.

The fridge fundraising controversy also tells us about the ways that community fridges can go wrong. When there is poor organization surrounding the fridges, or the people running the fridges have ulterior motives (such as political gain), the fridges go from a symbol for community care to a symbol of neglect. The stakes of success are higher for the fridges than they are for government programs like welfare because the fridges are not just a means of getting food to people, but are meant to message to the community that their needs matter. A sign on the Corona fridge, written in both English and Spanish and titled "What's Our Mission?" reads:

We are a grassroots project providing free, fresh food to locals as a form of mutual aid. Our mission is to show solidarity, not charity. We hope to remind the community that we can take care of each other.

Our community isn't going hungry because of personal failures. We are going hungry because of this socio-economic system designed to only benefit the few vs the many.

This fridge is an act of LOVE and an act of SOLIDARITY.

This sign clearly lays out the ideology behind the fridge; it is a project that is meant to empower the community to meet the needs of its members, despite existing in a system designed against them. They specifically mention mutual aid in the mission statement, and it seems as though this concept of exchange, not charity, is emphasized.

I do wonder if the way that food goes in and out of the fridge is consistently exchange-based, meaning that the people who donate are the same ones who take food. It is

impossible to know this for certain without doing further research, but the poster does say that the organization is “providing” food to the community, implying that the organization is not getting food in return. I know that in my experience, I did not feel comfortable taking food from the fridge as someone who had enough resources to donate to the fridge, but perhaps if I was a member of the Corona community I would have seen it differently. However, it is also possible that instead of thinking of this in a literal, individualized way – such as asking if the same exact people who are taking food are also donating to the fridge– it may be more productive to view the community as a unit in itself. It seems that generally speaking, the food in the fridge is coming from the community and going back into the community. This way of thinking helps to clarify the mutual aid aspect of the fridge; while those donating to the fridge are not necessarily getting food in return, they are helping to build a healthier community. In this light, it is easier to understand the mission statement’s claim that the fridge is there to “remind the community that we can take care of each other.” So while the donation system may involve different proportions of giving and receiving between different people and organizations, it balances out in its own way, making the entire community stronger and better-able to withstand hardship.

### **Finding intimacy in anonymity**

One thing that I didn’t anticipate before my visit to the fridges was how uncanny it feels to see a working fridge on a public sidewalk. A fridge could be understood as a marker of intimacy in relationships - if you’ve seen someone’s fridge, it means that you’ve entered their home and been granted access to their kitchen. Even then, it would be impolite to interact with their fridge unless you’re considered family or very close friends. It is where we keep our meals,

where we store that which nourishes us. Non-private fridges are relatively rare - the only ones I have encountered were at work in food service, which usually meant giant walk-in fridges that more resembled metallic rooms than traditional refrigerators, and the battered fridges in campus dorms, which were shared by dozens of students and were usually a no-man's-land of old juice cartons and cheap snacks.

The community fridges were different from these previous fridges. They were the size of non-commercial fridges, but they were better-maintained than most private fridges I've encountered. The Corona fridge featured a shiny glass door and was surrounded by a pantry colorfully hand-painted with flowers and polka dots. Clearly it was regularly maintained by an organized group of people, but it still remained open to the general public for free use. A posting on the fridge titled "Want to help?" and listed a number of chores that people can do to help maintain the fridge, including things like sanitizing the handle and rearranging the food items. Printed on the sign was a logo that simply read "Corona community fridge," so I assumed that this is the organization that operates the fridge - later, when I interviewed the organizers of the fridge, I found out that the group is called Corona Comunidad. This list of suggestions further blurs the lines of ownership of the fridge; while it is not required for anyone to help clean the fridge, the fact that people are encouraged to do so indicates a level of collective responsibility for the fridge's well-being. The fridge seems to operate in a liminal space between public and private ownership. However, the feeling of intimacy that comes with opening a fridge, leaning down to gaze at its contents, choosing what to take to nourish oneself, still remains. It makes me wonder if the mere presence of the community fridge, as long as it is well-maintained and use-able, can build a certain sense of community where it is located.



## II

### **Mutual Aid in Context: Theoretical Roots**

In its name, Queens Mutual Aid Network references a very specific type of community organization: mutual aid. The network could have simply been called “Queens Aid Network,” or something along those lines, but instead the organizers working on this project made the deliberate decision to communicate that this is a mutual aid group. In doing so, they have situated themselves in the history of mutual aid; not only are they merely referencing this theory, which has a long history of contested meaning, but they themselves are shaping what mutual aid means in today’s world. In order to understand what it means to form a mutual aid network, we must first understand the historic roots of mutual aid by looking into how theorists have discussed the concept over time.

Mutual aid is a term coined by Russian theorist Peter Kropotkin in 1902. He used this term to articulate a community-based system of survival that he envisioned as an anarchist ideal, though the way that it is understood today is quite different from Kropotkin’s vision. In June 2020, the search term “mutual aid” reached its highest-ever popularity on Google (data is from 2004-present), with double the amount of searches than it had seen even at its previous peaks. Organizations identifying themselves as “mutual aid networks” have popped up across social media in response to the COVID-19 crisis, including Queens Mutual Aid Network, which was started in March 2020. These networks have their own vision of what mutual aid means, and are not necessarily drawing directly on Kropotkin’s ideas; instead, they appear to take a less

specifically anarchist approach. It is unsurprising that there may be a disjuncture between how Kropotkin visualised mutual aid a century ago and how today's activists may be constructing the concept in their networks, given practical and political considerations, but it also seems to be the case that *within* the field of anarchist texts there is a lack of consensus about this thing called mutual aid. How do theorists define “mutual aid,” and how has that changed over time? Three theorists who discuss mutual aid may help us understand what mutual aid means in practice. One is Kropotkin himself, as he pioneered the concept; another is Jeff Shantz, a community organizer and sociologist who discusses the social and community-oriented aspects of mutual aid, and another is Angela Wigger, a political economist who situates mutual aid in today's world economically. While the theoretical and applied definitions of the concept have taken many forms, one common sentiment seems to be that mutual aid has always existed, and that it is as powerful, if not more powerful, a drive than that of competition for survival.

### **Kropotkin's framework**

Kropotkin doesn't quite lay out a clear definition of mutual aid, but we can understand his conception of it through the ways in which he describes instances of mutual aid. In discussing Louis Böchner's conception of mutual aid, which was oriented around the idea of love, Kropotkin argues:

However, to reduce animal sociability to *love* and *sympathy* means to reduce its generality and its importance [...] It is not love to my neighbour – whom I often do not know at all – which induces me to seize a pail of water and to rush towards his house when I see it on fire; it is a far wider, even though more vague feeling or instinct of human solidarity and sociability which moves me. (Kropotkin 1902, Introduction)

This doesn't necessarily tell us what mutual aid *is*, but it gives us a sense of what it is borne of, namely a certain feeling of interconnectedness and a practical desire for human survival.

Kropotkin goes on to elaborate that this drive is “infinitely wider” than this loosely-defined concept of love, and that it has been developed in all beings through the evolution process. This feeling of interconnectedness is borne of a personal knowledge of one's community and a desire for the collective to survive; love is likely a part of this desire, but in Kropotkin's framework one does not necessarily need to love, much less even like one's neighbor, in order to recognize that their neighbor's survival is beneficial to the community at large. While from a personal standpoint I do not necessarily agree with this dismissal of love as a driving force behind human action, it is helpful to keep in mind that his argument is based in evolutionary biology. He essentially argues that all living beings have had to aid one another throughout time in order for anyone to survive. It is essential for the survival of all species that they do not constantly root against one another in a system of competition, but rather take up some sense of solidarity with one another for both individual and group survival.

In his development of mutual aid theory, Kropotkin is directly in conversation with other biologists of his time, namely Darwin, whose doctrine of “survival of the fittest” was being integrated into the public consciousness first as a law of biology and then of sociology. Darwin's understanding of the natural world centers competition as the driving force behind all evolution, painting an image of nature as a place where all organisms are in constant struggle to survive, brutally fighting one another for scarce resources. Kropotkin proposes that this is a distorted representation of what occurs in nature. He argues that “as soon as we study animals,” we can immediately see that, while there is plenty of warfare and struggle, “there is, at the same time, as

much, or perhaps even more, of mutual support, mutual aid, and mutual defence amidst animals belonging to the same species or, at least, to the same society” (Kropotkin 1902, Ch. 1). To him, mutual aid is not a political dream; it is a lived biological reality. It is also a political reality, which he argues has been occurring in various ways across global cultures and time periods.

To provide an example of what mutual aid-oriented cultures look like in action, Kropotkin conjures up the memory of European medieval times, arguing that in this era, people living in villages had developed systems in which mutual support needs were met while still allowing room for “individual initiative.” He describes how this structure consisted of “a federation of village communities, covered by a network of guilds and fraternities.” The security that this system provided then allowed for prosperity and advancement in “industries, art, science, and commerce” (Kropotkin 1902, Ch. 7). He continues on to detail how this system was then strategically stamped out by increasingly militaristic state structures, which looked to seize direct control of all communities within their domain for political and economic purposes. From this description, we can discern that his image of a mutual aid society is generally uncontrolled by the state, rather relying on union-like structures for social support. He details how, for example, health care was provided in this system in comparison to in a state system: “in the guild – and in medieval times every man belonged to some guild or fraternity – two “brothers” were bound to watch in turns a brother who had fallen ill; it would be sufficient now to give one's neighbour the address of the next paupers' hospital” (Kropotkin 1902, Ch. 7). From this description, we can discern that in mutual aid societies men are tied into a system in which they are guaranteed support by members of their community, in turn providing support to these community members when it is asked of them. Ideologically, it is based on the moral of

responsibility to one's community. This differs ideologically from a state-oriented society, in which people are not bound to one another by community responsibility to the same degree and instead this responsibility is placed onto the state. This is not to say that mutual aid communities are incompatible with governed societies, though these communities may look different from how Kropotkin visualized them.

From Kropotkin's description, this type of mutual aid community sounds utopian; however, it is worth questioning how well this medieval system worked for all members of society, and how well it would work today. We know that slavery existed in medieval Europe, and that the unpaid domestic labor of women was necessary to support the men who worked in these guilds. Additionally, the life expectancy was much shorter then, so there was likely little infrastructure to support people who can no longer work, which would be necessary today. It is also unclear if or how the unemployed would be able to access these support structures.

### **Pivoting to the present**

Kropotkin fails to address how these issues would factor into a modern imagining of mutual aid communities, but rather provides us with the larger notion that, throughout history, there have been societies in which social security comes from people's responsibility towards one another within small communities, as opposed to from the government or other ruling structures.

Modern theory may describe a mutual aid community structure that is better-suited to address the needs of today's world. In his 2013 book *Commonist Tendencies*, anarchist theorist Jeff Shantz argues in favor of what he calls "commonist" cultures, which he describes as "an

aspiration of mutual aid, sharing, and common good, or common wealth collectively determined and arrived at” (Shantz 2013, 2). He breaks commonist efforts down into three categories: ecological, social, and ideational. Ecological commonist efforts include projects like community gardens and indigenous land reclamation; social commonist efforts include projects like childcare networks, food and housing support initiatives, and community cooperatives; ideational commonist efforts include projects like data liberation and open source software. This is not an exhaustive list of efforts, but rather a collection of examples to represent the community that Shantz envisions. The work that Queens Mutual Aid Network does in terms of helping people access unemployment benefits, providing guidance on where to access and support community fridges, and providing rent relief payments, all could fall under the umbrella of Shantz’s theory of “commonist” efforts. A “commonist” community structure is compatible with Kropotkin’s general conception of a mutual aid society; both models center mutual aid, group responsibility, and autonomy as their core values. It is possible to have a community that uses the concept of organized groups, similar to the guild/fraternity model that Kropotkin hearkens back to (though perhaps these groups would look more like community networks than employment-based systems) and also contains infrastructure for childcare, food, and housing security for all people. This would cultivate a more gender and class-equitable model than one that solely relies on employment or “fraternity” based membership.

It is worth noting that these commonist efforts are, in keeping with other mutual aid efforts, designed to reduce the need for competition among people. If there are no paywalls on information, no one would be disadvantaged because of lack of database access; if there is improved housing security, residents of less-privileged areas might not have to compete with

gentrifiers for shelter; if there are quality childcare networks, parents would not have to pay exorbitant amounts of money to ensure that their children have safe and reliable care.

While we speculate about the ideal communist society, Shantz argues that this speculation is not what anarchist theory aims to do - he firmly claims that “commonism is not about the drawing up of social blueprints for the future” (Shantz 2013, 65). Following in Kropotkin’s footsteps, he argues that anarchist theory seeks to find “social trends” that already exist or have existed and create a world in which the structures of state and capital are no longer needed. We see this in his examples of communist practices – all of the things he lists, like data liberation movements, community gardens, and the like, already exist in many places. Shantz emphasizes that “Kropotkin was not, in a utopian manner, trying to suggest how a new society might or should develop. In his view, it was already happening” (Shantz 2013, 65). This claim seems possibly self-contradictory, as the societies that both Kropotkin and Shantz ultimately desire are stateless ones, and yet the communist efforts that Shantz encourages are taking place in a society that is deeply shaped by the presence of an organized state. How can anarchy be “already happening” under a state-controlled society? This only becomes possible when we take the definition of anarchy in a less literal sense of there being a complete absence of a state, and more so understand it as a system in which the state is not the primary apparatus of social support and some form of autonomy is possible.

In revisiting the community garden example that Shantz uses, we see how this could work. Many community gardens are created as grassroots political responses to food instability, providing free land access and produce to anyone in the community who wants or needs it. It is a community response (starting a free/affordable garden) to a community problem (food

insecurity). The community fridges endorsed by QMAN are a similar example of a community response to food insecurity. The government is not involved. That is not to say that this is uniformly the case with all community gardens and fridges, as some involve some sort of public land/state sponsorship, but they do often occur outside of state involvement. Perhaps this is how we may understand anarchism as “already happening” – people are already organizing to meet community needs without state involvement. It is a version of anarchism in which people in state-controlled societies reject the doctrine of individualism and instead adopt a certain level of responsibility for their community. They create small versions of societies that do not rely on the state or on capital, yet still strive to meet the needs of their members. Perhaps this means creating an anarchist society within a capitalist society; micro-anarchism, in a sense.

That said, the work that QMAN does is not necessarily anarchist in nature. It aims to build communities that are strong in the absence of government support, but does not absolve the government from having to provide the support that its citizens need. Nadia, a QMAN founder, described the network to me as an “informal group of folks that are showing the government what they can do, but also holding them accountable, that whether we are here or not, you are still accountable for doing these things.” By “these things,” she was referring to food and housing support, which is a major focus for the group. So while the group aims to create more mutual aid-centric communities that do not need to depend on the government for support, this is more so because many Queens communities *cannot* depend on the government for support right now due to insufficient state programs. So while anarchist enthusiasts may celebrate the work that groups like QMAN are doing as a testament to the ability of civilians to organize, the



network is still very much oriented around advocating for the involvement of the state in the survival of its citizens.

Dutch political economy theorist Angela Wigger suggests in a 2013 article that mutual aid is the “antithesis to competition.” She elaborates that “mutual aid refers to altruistic and solidary practices aimed at enhancing the welfare of economic entities without the aid provider directly benefiting from it, while cooperation refers to voluntary arrangements between economic entities that focus on joint projects and reaching common goals” (Wigger 2013, 608). This is in the context of a discussion of competition, in which she argues that a competition-oriented capitalist system does not necessarily negate the possibility of mutual aid and cooperation, but it structurally discourages mutual aid. While the ever-increasing competitiveness of today’s market is exalted by some economists as the driving force behind innovation, in reality it often only substantially benefits the “wealthy few,” as opposed to the “working many” (Wigger 2013, 608). So, we can surmise from this that a competition-based economy harms both those who want to help one another in mutual aid efforts and those laborers who are continually pushed to work harder in order to keep prices down, as well as having a multitude of other outcomes that create a less equitable society.

Similarly to Shantz’s argument about open-source intellectual resources, she uses the example of knowledge privatization as an instance in which competition is actually harmful to innovation; when information is paywalled, this is economically advantageous to those who are profiting from it, but it prevents vast numbers of people from being able to access and then build upon it. With more open-access knowledge, we could have more intellectual advancement, leading to more innovation. That said, her argument draws into question the intrinsic value of

innovation itself, especially when so many people's basic needs are going unmet. If the innovation in question is only benefiting those who already have a surplus of capital, is it really worth the harm it often causes?

In response to this issue of a hyper-competitive culture, Wigger argues in favor of “a cultural shift informed by values and principles central to anarchist thought, such as cooperation and mutual aid, as well as equity, solidarity, mutual respect, and environmental sustainability” (Wigger 2013, 620). She envisions a society in which equity is more highly valued than competition, as this would lead to less exploitation of labor and other resources. If goods and services were valued for their quality as opposed to their cost, then there would be less of a culture of hyper-production, poor work conditions, cheaply-made goods, and exploitation of natural resources. In keeping with the other anarchist theorists we've been discussing, the shift that she hopes to see is primarily ideological and grassroots, as opposed to politically revolutionary. She clarifies that anarchist efforts, including hers, center “bottom-up grass-roots struggles that aim at changing micro-relations in everyday life” as the “cutting edge for changing macrostructures” (Wigger 2013, 616). One grassroots change that she proposes is local (as opposed to globalized) production of goods – put simply, she claims that “what can readily be produced locally or regionally should therefore be produced locally or regionally” (Wigger 2013, 621). This is more economically advantageous to local economies and more ecologically sustainable. It would also help create more autonomous communities, in which the needs of the community can be more easily met by the production capacity of the community, as well as cutting back on exploitation of overseas labor.

I would like to once again visit the community garden concept in this framework; in order for a person to obtain a zucchini from a community garden, they must be committed to an involvement in the community garden, purchase or trade for zucchini seeds, and then grow, or at least help to grow the zucchini plant, before picking and taking home the zucchini. In order for this person to obtain a zucchini from a grocery store, they must first obtain money to purchase it, and then travel to the store where it is sold and purchase it, but that is essentially the extent of their involvement in the process. However, in order for that transaction to occur, countless actors have to be mobilized; the zucchini had to be planted, grown, and picked by workers on a farm, then pass FDA regulations, go through the process of being transported, possibly hundreds or thousands of miles across state lines, and sold to the supermarket, before a checkout employee scans and sells the vegetable to the consumer. This process involves numerous political regulations, economic exchanges, and environmental resources. While it is certainly a bit more work for this person to procure a zucchini from a community garden, the difference in impact of doing this as opposed to purchasing the grocery store zucchini actively makes a different type of world possible.

Wigger is not arguing for a complete elimination of competition in the market, as she sees it as a force that does have its benefits when kept in check, but rather claims that “competition nonetheless needs to be limited geographically and to surplus production only” (Wigger 2013, 625). While this would potentially slow down some forms of innovation and drive up the cost of goods, it would be a far more sustainable model than the one we have now, in which environmental resources and human labor are being exploited and wealth gaps are widening.

Like Kropotkin, her argument calls for a cultural shift in ideology, and like Shantz, she argues that this shift must be embodied in small-scale, grassroots efforts.

There is little consensus among theorists as to what mutual aid is, and perhaps this is a good thing; if mutual aid was defined in specific terms, it would necessitate the exclusion of certain efforts from its domain. This would not be beneficial for anyone, really; as the culture and economy around us changes, so too will the efforts that constitute “mutual aid.” The fluidity of the concept creates infinite possibilities for how people may collaborate to meet their needs and the needs of those around them. That said, there are certain common threads in the *types* of efforts that tend to occur in the interest of mutual aid. At the risk of oversimplifying, I can tentatively claim that these include efforts that seek to meet the needs of their communities and reduce the need for competition among people for basic resources, while employing a structure that does not rely on the state in order to function. While the “mutual aid networks” springing up on social media may not be strictly anarchist in the way that Kropotkin envisioned, they do create place-based networks that seek to meet the needs of their communities as best they can without government support. They provide services ranging from hot meals to rent assistance and childcare supplies. In many cases, they are an embodiment of autonomy and grassroots organizing. If we are to believe Kropotkin and those who follow in his footsteps, we can approach the future with the cautious optimism that, despite the strife that the future is always sure to bring, it may also bring collaboration, solidarity, and community.

### III

#### Decoding Community

The project of Queens Mutual Aid Network is predicated on the idea that the entirety of Queens is something of a community in itself, even if it's comprised of many smaller communities. The way that the network functions as a space for Queens residents to help one another in a horizontal, peer-to-peer way creates an image of Queens as a cohesive group in which people are tied to one another by something other than geography. However, Queens Mutual Aid Network and its related projects, like the community fridges, are not merely *encouraging* of the idea that Queens is a community, but are *dependent* on this conception. In order to function, they depend on the existence of a certain level of trust between their actors.

For QMAN's (currently inactive) food delivery program, for example, the network would take community members who signed up to volunteer and pair them with people who had filled out a form indicating that they needed aid. The form to volunteer does not vet the volunteers, or even require them to include their legal name. The network tries to pair volunteers with recipients in the same neighborhood, so there is a slight possibility that the volunteer and recipient will know one another, but considering the sheer number of people living in Queens (2.2 million) this is not exactly likely. An earlier version of the volunteer form consisted of an excel sheet that was open-edit access and merely asked people to write a short blurb about their availability. People generally indicated where they were located, what services they could provide, and what times of day they tended to be available, though the information people chose to include was not always consistent. One entry read:

I'm pregnant so I can't carry much, but not working right now and more than happy to hop on a train and bring up to 2 bags of groceries, medicine, supplies, etc. If you're located in Jackson Heights I can also walk with a push cart and transport more. I'm also very tech savvy and can help you set up various virtual communications and possibly connect you with other resources.

There's a certain sense of intimacy that this entry carries. From this entry, we know that this person is pregnant and that they likely live in Jackson Heights, that they probably lack access to a car (hence the push cart) and they are willing to enter another person's home to provide technology help. We do not, however, know their name, age, or any real identifying information about them. Considering that they are pregnant during a pandemic and willing to help others in this way, we can discern that this person is putting a lot of trust in the network, and in the people who they will get assigned to assist by the network. I would argue that this trust comes from QMAN's ability to create a community-oriented organization.

But what does it mean to belong to a community? What about Queens makes it a community? While we may try to define communities using heuristics like physical borders, social connections, cultural identity, or historic knowledge, there is no objective way to understand the concept of community. Furthermore, the way that community exists in Queens is not going to be the same as in other places, both because no two communities are the same and because Queens has a unique history. Therefore, in order to gain a fuller, more situated understanding of what community means in Queens, I would like to explore different interpretations and experiences of community, both in the context of QMAN and from a historical perspective.

In “Perspectives on Neighborhood and Community: A Review of the Literature,” Robert Chaskin, a professor of social policy at University of Chicago, discusses what community has meant in various contexts. He states that “in both the local community and the community of interest, it is the existence of some form of communal connection among individuals—whether or not such connection is locality based—that provides for the possibility of group identity and collective action” (Chaskin 1997, 522). In other words, community depends on a connecting factor between its members, regardless of location. This is distinct from the space of the neighborhood, which he defines as a “geographical unit in which residents share proximity and the circumstances that come with it.” The neighborhood may exist as a shared space among people, but that does not necessarily mean that it is a community. So, the community is defined by something bigger than just the physical neighborhood, and a communal connection is necessary for collective action. Therefore, we again see that the collective action that is undertaken by QMAN relies on a shared sense of community beyond just the physical shared space of Queens. Not only does QMAN rely on this presence of community, but it also creates a new form of “communal connection,” as Chaskin puts it. By providing a digital space on Facebook for all Queens residents and those interested in helping them to gather, a new grounds for community is formed.

### **Fused together**

To learn about the Queens community experience before my time, I had a conversation with my grandmother, Barbara. She was born in Astoria, Queens, in 1941,

and spent her childhood in three different Queens neighborhoods: Astoria, East Elmhurst, and Floral Park. I felt that her perspective would be helpful in order to provide a historical context for how Queens communities have looked in the past, as the past inevitably shapes the present. Hearing her stories of the past enriched my understanding of the present; much has changed in Queens since she was growing up, but it seems that even more has remained the same. First she gave me a brief history of how her family came to live in Queens: Her grandfather migrated to Queens from the Hungarian countryside when he was young, intending to make some money to send back home to where he'd eventually return, but soon determined that, as my grandmother put it, "America is the place to be." The opportunities felt more abundant in America, and life was happier, so he brought his wife and son over to Queens with him. They didn't have much money, but he (and then eventually his son) were able to train at Steinway & Sons pianos in Astoria, becoming a chief engineer there, which allowed them to make a living. While the family lacked economic capital, the cultural capital that he had as a talented musician who spoke multiple languages allowed him access to the Steinway organization, and to the Steinways themselves, who would have the family over for dinner at their Queens mansion. His son John - my grandmother's father - met a young woman who had grown up in Appalachia while working for the Civilian Conservation Corps in Virginia, and brought her back to New York to get married. They had my grandmother, along with three other daughters, and lived in various Queens neighborhoods with my grandfather's parents.



My grandmother recalled Queens as being an “interesting” place because it contained so many different immigrant groups living together. Her family was Hungarian-American, but they lived among Italian, German, and Irish people. Despite their cultural differences, these immigrant groups achieved a certain harmony because they had a lot in common - they were all “newcomers”, as she put it. There was a lot of prejudice against these groups, particularly in the context of World War II, when my grandmother was born. She felt that they were “fused together” by their struggle in trying to “make it” in America. Cultural knowledge was shared between groups - her mother, who was from rural Virginia, learned how to make Hungarian recipes from her mother in law and how to make meatballs from her Italian neighbors. My grandmother recalled going to the German deli as a child and always being given a free piece of baloney by the workers, and going to the Italian bakery to get ices as a treat. Food consistently played a central role in connecting people of different origins. She also cited the Depression as a source of solidarity among ethnic groups; while historically speaking the Depression was technically over, she still recalled that “no one had much of anything.” So while these groups were from vastly different places, and had immigrated to America for a variety of different reasons, the shared experience of being immigrants in Queens with limited resources created a sense of community in her neighborhood.

She acknowledged that while there was a mutual understanding between these groups of European immigrants, racial divisions were still strong. She didn’t recall any people of color living in her neighborhood, and supposed that they probably “would not have been welcome” by the community at large. Although she went to a predominantly Black high school in Jamaica, she didn’t recall making friends with many of the Black students because of how racially divided the

student body was. She recalled one incident in which she got reprimanded for speaking during class, but blamed it on a group of Black girls in the room who were speaking more loudly. As a “punishment” for talking back to her teacher, she was escorted between classes by a school faculty member for two weeks, but she says that in retrospect she believes the school was attempting to protect her from the Black students, though these students hadn’t indicated that they had any violent intentions against her. Despite having a racially mixed student body, it seems that the school environment did not cultivate a sense of community among differing groups.

This specific experience of race is particular to my grandmother and the time and place that she lived in, but it feels important to include because it shows that despite being incredibly diverse, and often finding solidarity in this diversity, Queens is not a post-racial utopia. Cultural differences can be looked past, and this was very evident in her stories, but it seems that they are more likely to be overcome when there is something stronger than that difference tying groups of people together. The immigrant experience tied my grandmother’s Hungarian family to their Italian neighbors, but it seems that there was less of a sense of shared experience between the white and Black students at her high school, so a feeling of otherness pervaded between the groups. This recalls Chaskin’s “communal connection” theory - there was not enough shared connection between the groups at that time to make them form a community, not to mention a complex combination of socio-economic, historical and political factors that impacted their experience of race at that place and time.

## **The church and the comunidad**

One thing I was curious about in my conversation with my grandmother is how people with limited resources would access food when she was growing up. This was, of course, long before the community fridges were installed, and based on what she told me it didn't seem like anyone around her was particularly wealthy - so what did people do when they didn't have enough food? She said that there was much less discussion of food insecurity in her time, and much more of a stigma around needing assistance than she observes today. The only place she saw food assistance coming from was the church, as there was little other infrastructure for food provision. In her experience, the church was the center of much community activity - she went every week growing up, despite feeling ambivalent towards the religion itself. The church "sheltered, fed, and gave hope" to those in need. It also hosted girl scout programs, which she attended, and provided services for the elderly, with which her father volunteered to help. This is consistent with Chaskin's community framework, which notes that "the community defined may be more or less formalized through such local institutions as churches or social clubs or such member organizations as professional societies and associations" (Chaskin 1997, 522). In my grandmother's community, the church was as much a social community institution as it was a religious one. However, this does not mean that it had the capacity to help every community member in need; she recalled that her childhood friend Fran, who had an absentee father and many siblings, would often be asked by her mother to go from door to door asking her neighbors for food.

In contrast with her time, the amount of people who belong to a religious institution has been steadily declining for years. In 1937, 73% of Americans belonged to a religious institution,

and in 2021 that percentage is now 47% (Klingore 2021). The temple, church, or mosque is still a fixture in the lives of many, but it's unlikely that they are the center for community in the same way that the church was in my grandmother's time, at least not on the same scale. This shift opens up a need for new, secular ways to organize community - this is the context in which groups like QMAN have come into existence. One of the earlier posts in their Facebook group, shared by an admin, reads:

Hey everyone,  
This group has been set up to help coordinate the need for community support. We hope you use this group to connect people with vulnerabilities with people who are able-bodied and have the resources to help with everyday tasks. We can discuss what needs doing on a neighbourhood level. For right now please share widely. Everyone is welcome. Please invite your friends who live in Queens. There is a citywide group that's similar to this one as well called NYC united against the Corona Virus. Post resources and ideas and relevant things.  
Thank you.

Her language emphasizes that it is not simply an aid provision group, but a community organizing space. She implores the members to invite Queens members, and help connect those in need to those who can provide it. It is a space for community members to take initiative to care for one another. She acknowledges the importance of organizing both on the scale of the individual neighborhood and Queens as a whole.

The way that the QMAN functions is distantly reminiscent of the way that the church functioned as a community institution for my grandmother's community - it is an organized space where people who need help, and people who want to volunteer to help, can connect with people in their local area. However, an essential difference between the two spaces is that the members of the church held face-to-face meetings, and everyone in the church community was more or less familiar with one another. QMAN facilitates face-to-face contact through its various

programs, but the only place in which all of the 2,133 members have access to one another is on the digital Facebook page. The members, for the most part, do not recognize one another. This style of relating is reminiscent of historian Benedict Anderson's concept of the "imagined community": "all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined" (Anderson 1983, 6). The community of QMAN imagines that its members are connected to one another through their relationship to the physical space of Queens. Even that connection, however, is abstract: not all the admins of QMAN are Queens residents, and not all of them even reside in New York City - some of them live in New Jersey. Perhaps the community is imagined, then, by the members' common interest in providing (or receiving, or both) mutual aid to the people of Queens.

While QMAN and its related projects (like the fridges) create community in a way that is distinct from the church, they do, in a way that is similar to the church, employ ideology as a motivating and unifying force. The organizers' belief in mutual aid and community support is the driving force behind the work that they do, and they try to impart this ideology onto the community. We see this in the signage around the Corona community fridge proclaiming that it is an "act of LOVE and an act of SOLIDARITY." I asked the organizers of the Corona community fridge, Corona Comunidad, about their experience opening the fridge, and they explained that "firstly, we wanted to build a relationship with our community and our future partners. We wanted to demonstrate that neighbors helping neighbors and mutual aid is the way forward and should always be." Their mission is not only to get food to people, but also to share the principles of mutual aid - of "neighbors helping neighbors" - with the community. They

continued on to tell me that “all of this isn't possible without each person who saw our mission and held us up through it all. Our family and Comunidad.” Even though the fridge was started by only three people, they emphasized the role of their “Comunidad” (the Spanish word for community) in opening the fridge.

They also sent me some photos from the fridge process, included below. The first is a screenshot of an Instagram story picturing donations to the fridge, and a message reading “We got each other / Week after week / We see so much love being poured into our community and all over / Thank you” and a couple of Instagram pages are tagged. I found this message - that “we got each other” - to be quite touching. It rings of a sense of love, of security and of pride in how the community had come together. The second photo is a polaroid of some of the fridge’s organizers and volunteers, masked and posing together proudly near the location of the community fridge. One of the photo’s subjects holds up two peace signs, another holds a baby, and another holds a power drill. The fact that the picture was taken as a polaroid gives it a romantic, almost momentous quality - this event was too important to only be captured on an iPhone, it deserved its own spot on a physical piece of film. The polaroid medium also gives the picture a certain sense of genuity in the absence of digital mediation. It evokes an old family album photo - it is nostalgic for the current moment.





After I made a trip to a couple of community fridges in January, my mother Suzanne decided to make two trips to the fridge in Astoria, the first Queens neighborhood our family lived in nearly a century ago. On her initial trip in February, a number of people showed up to the fridge and immediately accepted most of the food that she'd brought. People were helping one another take food, and one woman said "God bless you and your family" in gratitude to my mom; she said that "There was definitely a feeling of appreciation and warmth that made me feel tearful and grateful to be there, and aware too of my very privileged position to have the means to share what felt to be a small amount of food relative to what felt to be the community need."



Her second trip, however, was less peaceful; as she was unloading the groceries, one middle-aged woman began frantically taking as much food as she could. The woman did give some bread and eggs to a young girl who showed up, but continued to fill up a cart that she'd brought with her. My mother then described that "A tall skinny man who had been working around the corner came up and started yelling at the woman taking most of the food, to leave some for others." The woman did not stop immediately, but when she did leave another woman came by who the man also started talking to - at this point my mother intervened, asking him to let her take some food. He then "suddenly seemed very generous and asked if she wanted eggs and milk, which she said yes to - and he said to follow him because he had put some aside around the corner."

My mom described the experience as draining and frustrating - it had presented her with a number of moral dilemmas that she had not anticipated facing. However, she candidly shared that she still "felt a deep kinship with those who came by, even the ones who really annoyed me with their hoarding." Her experience shows a realistic, messy aspect of mutual aid - even though the fridges were started with the intention of strengthening the community, no community is without conflict. As spaces that are public, unsupervised and largely dependent on unscheduled donations from individuals, the fridges are not the most organized form of aid. They lack the bureaucracy of welfare programs or food pantries; this lack of bureaucracy makes the fridges more accessible, but also has its drawbacks. The mere presence of the fridges cannot make people internalize the ethos of mutual aid and generosity, but they provide a space for people who would like to enact that ethos through donations and volunteer work, and they offer an articulation of this ethos in their signage. The fridges are one step towards building stronger

communities, but they alone cannot provide the structural support needed to create a thriving community.

Throughout time and circumstance, it appears that the people of Queens have consistently found ways to form communities, real or imagined. One way to understand how communities are mediated is by considering their “communal connection,” which indicates an endless array of possibilities for group formation. Some of the communal connections that I’ve encountered in my fieldwork take shape in formalized institutions like the church, while others are mediated by less centralized, face-to-face concepts, like Facebook groups, community fridges, or shared experiences. It is also possible - likely, even - for communities to be linked by multiple communal connections. Just as they are shaped by their communal connection(s), communities are shaped by the cultural and political eras in which they occur. In its group description, QMAN specifies that it was started in response to the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis; during WWII my grandmother recalls the children in her neighborhood gathering to play a game called “war,” where they reenacted the conflict as they imagined it to be occurring overseas. Even though I largely employ Chaskin’s community framework, there is no one way to understand community, and the theory of communal connection is likely not universally applicable; circumstances constantly change and so does social organization. There have also been plenty of ways that the people of Queens have experienced division, like through racial conflict, physical barriers, and a multitude of other factors. However, two people who might be divided by one aspect of their lives, like differences in economic opportunity, for example, might find themselves connected by another, like ethnic identity. This does not mean that the connections cancel out the differences, or vice versa; the ways that people relate to one another is endlessly complex.

## Conclusion

Thinking about how communities function to meet their members' needs made me recall one of my earlier memories of community support, long before I had any conception of what mutual aid meant. For about a decade of my childhood, I lived in an apartment complex on the train tracks - every time the train would go by the building would rumble slightly, rocking me in my twin bed. There were two girls a bit younger than me who lived in the apartment directly below mine with their grandmother, two brightly-colored birds, and a shiba inu dog. Sometimes when I'd forgotten my key and had gotten locked out of my apartment, they'd let me climb up their fire escape to get into my home through the window. I would give the girls the clothes that I had outgrown and the toys that I had gotten too old for, as I had no younger sisters of my own at the time. I remember one afternoon - I must've been about 11 years old - I heard one of the girls in a yelling match with her grandmother; I didn't know what it was about, but I could hear the stress in the girl's voice and wanted to help. Thinking quickly, I threw some of my older clothing into a laundry bag and took it downstairs, pretending to be oblivious to the situation at hand. When I knocked on their door to offer the clothing, the grandmother ushered me into the apartment and asked me to help the girl - she had been struggling with her math homework, which was evidently what the fight had been about. I helped her as best I could, not being a particularly strong math student myself, but I was glad nonetheless that I had done something. I think of the role that the clothing played in that situation; it quickly became an afterthought, but without having a neutral reason to knock on their door I wouldn't have considered it appropriate to check in. By presenting the clothing, I was presenting the grandmother with a choice - she

could have accepted the bag, thanked me, and sent me on my way as if nothing was happening, or she could ask me for help with the situation at hand.

I think of the community exchange of food, medicine, and services (like help signing up for unemployment) as similar in an abstract way to the clothing that I brought over to the girls' home. Yes, it fulfills a real material need in the community, and I don't want to understate that. But in another way, it also fulfills a greater, symbolic need - the need for support, the need that everyone has to feel cared for. I intended for the clothing to send the message that I cared about the physical needs of the girls, but also that I cared about their emotional needs and was available for support if they needed it. In some ways, to donate food or services to the members of one's community who are in need sends a similar message - I care about you, I care that your needs are met. I want you to be fed, I want you to feel supported by your community. This is not necessarily always the case - some people might donate food just because they want to offload surplus cans in their pantry - but this ethos of community care is central to mutual aid efforts.

In this ethnographic exploration, I have discovered more questions than I have answered. If I were to continue doing research, I would want to hear hundreds more stories; stories from people who received food from the community fridge, people who volunteered with QMAN in the early days of the pandemic, people whose relationship to their community was changed over the course of the past year. I am particularly curious about how these community support projects have impacted public health. This could simply mean that a few families were able to eat more nutritious meals one week than they would have had access to otherwise. Or it could mean that someone who received unemployment assistance from QMAN was able to stay home for a few extra days to take care of their COVID-positive partner, helping them to recover more quickly. It

could also mean changes in mental health for people with insecure food access after a community fridge was installed in their neighborhood. This is not to say that these efforts couldn't have also had some negative impacts on public health outcomes; it's impossible to know every detail of the impact that these projects had on their communities.

I think about my grandmother's stories about how her father would drive their disabled neighbor to his doctor appointments, and how her mother would spend hours volunteering for community programs at the church. I think about the pregnant woman who posted on QMAN offering her help to those who needed it, risking exposing herself to COVID-19, and how the Corona community fridge organizers invested hours into the project despite receiving no financial support and little volunteer support. What do these stories reveal about human needs? Kropotkin would probably argue that these people were driven by their investment in the survival of the group, because group survival strengthens the chances of individual survival. But on a certain level I would have to disagree. It's difficult to impose the logic of biology onto situations like this; there is nothing really logical about a pregnant woman risking her health to help strangers, but she still did. The only logical answer I can muster is that, just as people need to get help from one another, people need to give help to one another. This is only one possible explanation among many. And it doesn't mean that people always *can* or *do* help each other. But in doing this ethnography, I have seen the immense amount of time and effort that people are willing to put into the well-being of complete strangers. These strangers might be part of one's community - but they are strangers nonetheless. I have also seen the immense amount of time and effort that people are willing to put towards helping people they know, even peripherally. It seems to me that this instinct to help comes from somewhere deep within.

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*A note on this source: this is a digitized archive of Kropotkin's book, so it lacks page numbers; instead, I used chapter numbers to locate quotations.*

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