

# Living Through Dark Times... Care by Any Means Necessary



Fires burn in wheat fields in Qamishlo, Northern Syria as seen from the rooftop of Rojava University on Jun. 16, 2019. © Beth LaBerge

Manuel Schwab

»To think about care nowadays is to think about death, it seems.«  
Drawing parallels between the revolutionary Rojavan experiment, the Black Lives Matter movement, and the Covid-19 pandemic, Manuel Schwab argues that this very desire to care is the most appropriate form, to oppose colonial, capital, and liberal forces that obviously intensify brutality and death numbers. »This time,« taking in account a sense of global simultaneity, »it looks like something has changed.«

*Stuttgart, Germany. June 6, 2:15pm.* A young black woman no older than 20 stands in the rain holding a piece of cardboard that explains, simply: »You fucked with the wrong generation.«

She's standing with several thousand others in a park in a German inner city, but save for a few details (architecture, gesture, wealth, the composition of the crowd behind her), she might as well be addressing the entire world from anywhere: Northeastern Syria, Modi's India, the frontlines of United States anti-fascism, the emergency rooms of Brazil, the empty parliament of Budapest. It amounts to the same thing, as the powers she is speaking to have yet again mobilized their forces and proxies to exact revenge (in advance) for their inevitable downfall. Meanwhile, those who police the globe on their behalf redouble their loyalty, like servants willing to convey a chosen master all the way to their death. It is as though this crippled mob of empires is falling prey to their armed executors, and committing suicide by cop.

In their frenzy, they have put our capacity to care for one another under siege. To think about care nowadays is to think about death, it seems. Every political confrontation of our generation is a matter of life and death. But this siege has been on for generations, and its urgency, while real, threatens to draw us away from its deeper time, whether historical or geological. Beleaguered by the paroxysms of brute force, by the ritualized executions in which domination rejuvenates itself, by carnal vulnerability that primitive strings of viral DNA introduce into every breath and touch, it is easy to forget that all these are artifacts of deep human time. Pursuing a version of our species we have crafted vulnerabilities into our bodies, scrubbed the world at least once over of people who were there before, thrust the instruments of our proliferation into the very

crust of the earth. And now it all suddenly feels so urgent, though no one can seriously believe that white supremacy took on new form with the killing of George Floyd, any more than that our shared vulnerability emerged at the end of 2019 into global view. Instead, the tributaries feeding this flood run through colonial, capital, and liberal histories alike, through a virtually geological epoch of slowly intensifying brutality organized along lines of both race and species.

That's easier to see when we face the brutal fact that we weaponized the climate in ways our parents could barely imagine. But it's true of the whole body of the crisis we're in. Things are so entangled that, from the current vantage point, the very whiteness of power itself feels more geological than a virus recombining itself from the genetic material we've shared for some four billion years. And those of us who are trying, belatedly, to survive together are being made painfully aware that the siege is meant to beset our very capacity to care for ourselves and others. But this time it looks like something has changed. People are listening to stories they felt entitled to ignore for far too long, from the frontlines of the AIDS pandemic to the half-millennium of white supremacy consolidating itself. And they're listening because they are terrified. We can only hope that their terror is strong enough that they continue to listen. But for now, there's a small hope in it all: as they (the ones who have made a life strategy out of other people's dying) lay siege to our collective care, they have driven us into the world, and in that, they have inadvertently produced for us a moment of optimism to be held onto at all costs.

Of course, this is a moment of inordinate brutality, but it is also a moment of opportunity. In fact, in significant ways, we are actually winning. To sustain ourselves for the long and violent transition out of the present, we need to learn to listen deeply to our proximate others (the stranger wiping tear gas off your face, the grandmothers and children of communities to which most of us will have shown up too late). If there is something global about this moment (surely there is) it seems to be that our faculties of care – the very desire to care – are targeted virtually everywhere, as the crust of the earth fractures into a crenellated mesh of frontlines. In a reversal of history, it is in the US cities that the simple demand »stop killing us, let us take care of ourselves« has developed into something much more trenchant, crystalizing the ethos of a world struggling to get through this historical conjuncture.

Taking a cue from the woman standing in the park in Stuttgart, we might realize that we can start virtually anywhere, provided that we follow the syncopated rhythms of our here and now with fidelity to the details we once relegated to the background.

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*Summer 2019, Rojava. Northern Syria.* It's mid-afternoon, the wheat fields have been burning since early summer, and we're talking abstinence over green rice and chicken. A woman by the name of H. is explaining why free erotics (sociality with sex) are not as yet part of »the experiment« of Rojavan autonomism.

We hevalan made a decision: so many of our intimate relationships were so mixed up with our oppression, we had to take a step back and stop and learn them again. You might think that's very conservative, but we just took what we learned from the struggle in the mountains, where abstinence was practical, and have applied it to our struggle for building the life we need now.





Oil fields on the drive from the Rojava/Iraqi Kurdistan border  
to Qamishlo on Jun. 9, 2019. © Beth LaBerge

This was before the invasion of October 2019, the latest installment in 30 years of Turkish campaigns against the region. The experiment in what Rojavans called Democratic Confederalism was still in full swing, and it seemed that the politics of autonomous self-governance had become, well, an endless meeting. In the spirit of these seemingly interminable conversations, we were taking the time, talking sex and love and care of the self and other by any means necessary. It strikes me now as almost careless; after all, the wheat fields were burning through the entire meal. How can anyone take this much time thinking about sex and intimacies (even those that sustain us) in the midst of a full-blown siege, in the wake of a brutal war to defeat Da'esh, on the brink of an impending reinvasion that was only a matter of time? Or perhaps that's the wrong question. Perhaps we should ask ourselves (especially ourselves) *how could anyone not?*

Later that day we headed to Martyrs' Hall, a place where people go to offer acts of grieving to photographic portraits of the dead. Given the state the world finds itself in now, it is worth remembering that the possibility with which Rojava is charged is nourished as much by future-oriented hopes as by a profound sense of mourning. Martyrs' posters are installed on official billboards at major intersections; they are plastered on the perimeters of factory compounds and through the involuted markets. Rojavans I met never tired of pointing out traces of loss in the landscape, their grief mixed with admiration, focused on what was lost on the way to now.

Focused there; but also on the giant portraits of Abdullah Öcalan, the leader who writes tracts on social ecology and feminism, and who has a checkered past of brutal atrocity. On marches, one will hear chants of »without leader, there is no life.« In those moments, it is hard not to worry where all this potential will lead. That profound ambivalence, that inextricable double edge of political attachments, riles the place. It is in the ideas that weave a public imagination together. It's in the concrete arrangement of the world.

A few days before, a silo split on the side like a gutted udder, its grains long rotted and cleaned away, were narrated by an acquaintance as an example of Rojavan infrastructures of self-reliance. »We always had enough to withstand a siege,« she explained.

When Da'esh came, they destroyed this one. But we survived them too. Now Turkey burns our fields. The military pays for young men to cross the borders and throw their cigarettes into the wheat. They know that this year was going to be a plentiful crop.

Optimism in Rojava is tied up with the fragile material that sustains and enables life as much as it is tied up with troubled histories of how we got here. For better or for worse, this is the stuff the future is made of, concrete in all its manifestations, save perhaps for the portraits of the leader, more like objects stranded from a bygone time when nationalist imaginaries were the only recognized currency of desires for liberation. It flourished in the ruins and the possibilities afforded by a bombed-out world. One found it in the dancing students in front of the university cafeterias, in the study centers dedicated to community-oriented medicine, in the furious reconstruction of city quarters fueled by the largest cement plant in northern Syria, the formidable complex churning out tons of concrete, diminutive diesel generators sputtering light gray air at the feet of elephantine mixing tubs. These are not exactly the pastoral grounds of optimism, narrowly conceived, and therein lies their singular importance. They

comprise another genre of optimism and care, one that can only be brought to our disposal through careful, attentive, sustained solidarity across what amounts to a global siege. Perhaps most importantly, they provoke us to divest ourselves of the notion that practices of solidarity require allies who are flawless, virtuous, uncompromised.

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How quickly time moves, and how slowly all at once. Four months on, in the wake of Donald Trump's withdrawal of US troops from the region, Turkey's »Operation Peace Spring« descended upon these places with all the brutality reserved for recalcitrant geographies of self-reliance. Ask any native people living under occupation, from Gaza to the American Four Corners, to those squatting informal neighborhoods of Argentina, and they will tell you of ubiquitous variations on this theme. In the face of such brutality, Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces were compelled to strike a deal with the Bashar al-Assad government, a capitulation as inevitable as it was unacceptable. Nine months on, as Covid-19 lifted itself up and shook off the particularities of place, people, and origin, we would all seem to be asking ourselves whether *humanity* as a whole had enough to withstand a siege. That quality of grief and possibility and foreboding all mixed up in Rojava had become generalized. By March, Hungary had declared rule by decree, and New York was arranging to bury the casualties of the pandemic in mass graves. Eleven months on, and we were yet again reminded in the 8'46" we watched George Floyd lynched by police, that Black lives have had to be forged and sustained under siege virtually everywhere.

Does this shared sense of being under siege give ground to our common humanity? Not from the looks of it; we are each too differently exposed. But there is something powerful in our urgency. *Before this we still thought we had time.* Now, something feels like it is missing, like a ring worn all your life and taken off one day to the next. Were we engaged to the illusion that we still had time to work through this knot together? Time to understand how we are to forge monuments of self-reliance out of the concrete ruins of the everyday. I should have asked the woman who spoke of the silo and the wheat a few more questions. Even in Syria, where the burning fields billow at a distance, joining the gas flares that pester the blue early summer sky, there was time to talk abstinence. Even where the pumpjacks extracting oil make fun of all of us on our way to the future, where the portraits of Assad hang at one junction and martyrs' portraits hang at the next, even where everything compels us to ask, »*Can this really be the backdrop against which new ways of living in this world take shape?*« there was still time to dance.

The place is like being punched in the gut by your lover fighting off their nightmare just before dawn. The place is like reaching out right then and saying, »Hush, I've got you.«

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There's an archeological dig in northeastern Syria that contains the partially excavated ruins of Urkesh, an ancient Hurrian city that is thought to date from somewhere around the third millennium B.C.E., and that once contained an entrance to the underworld. At present it looks like a pit wrapped in burlap with a bit of litter collecting at the bottom. The going theory is that this is where the Hurrians went to sacrifice animals, to banish bad spirits, to put away the parts of the world they didn't know what to do with. When did we stop building places like that into our cities?





Along the drive from the Rojava/Iraqi Kurdistan border  
to Qamishlo on Jun. 9, 2019. © Beth LaBerge

I went out of archaeological curiosity, partly, but also because I was interested in getting a sense of a place that became such an unlikely target of another siege. During the fight with Da'esh, the icons of other gods, indeed, the traces of other times, were marked out for destruction like military targets of the highest priority. A Rojavan journalist who visited Urkesh that day wanted to know whether from the perspective of an anthropologist I had an opinion of the failure of UNESCO to fund and support local efforts to take care of and defend the place. Even under de facto siege, she was not asking only on behalf of the living, but also on behalf of the dead. During wars, it seems that the meaningful relationships we forge with death disappear behind the excessive force of martyrdom, a form of grief that leaves little room for other kinds. The desire to protect the dead was, in this case, different. It was about valorizing the long arcs of history; those stories that don't pay the present any obvious tribute. It was about deep, geological time.

*How is it that you expect to help the living if you can't even take care of the dead?*

She was right. While we may be building a necropolitan world one dead city at a time, we tend to drive the memory of the inconvenient dead out of its histories. Funny thing is, they always manage to make their way back. That is something that the current insurrection in the United States has understood with unprecedented ferocity. Take care of the memory of your own dead. But take *their* monuments to *their* dead as seriously as their guns, and if demilitarizing your cities means throwing their monuments into the sea, proceed without hesitation.

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If we can move from the digs of Syria to the streets of Minneapolis to the rivers of Bristol like this, it is because the damages that define us have been so assiduously distributed that they could be narrated from virtually anywhere. I chose Syria as a point of departure because it stands as a fragile and imperfect experiment in political living, and its betrayal as a strategic sacrifice feels emblematic of an acceleration of forces that will kill us faster than the weather. A patchwork of people trying to forge a way of living together are being hunted, embargoed, besieged, drafted as proxies, criminalized, and sacrificed to the maintenance of a long-ago broken world. But therein lies another trouble, the danger of fetishizing it. Perhaps because it struggles to work against all odds, the Rojavan experiment has captured the imagination of so many friends and students in Cairo, where living in the wake of a failed revolution has proven more arduous than the revolution itself. Slathered in projections of itinerant hopes from elsewhere, the place would surely collapse under the weight of the imagination were it not already bearing the brunt of full frontal attack. Consider for a moment whether that's not a permutation of what's happening to some significant other in your more local social milieu. Consider whether to expect them to have been flawless in order to deserve defense. Consider what it might look like to give unconditional care, under siege, because everywhere, it seems, they are fucking with the wrong generation.

The irony of this new sense of global simultaneity is that it seems to have come with a profound inversion in the logic of our solidarities across the boundaries of time and space. For several weeks in March, the going wisdom was that the virus was finally showing us that we constitute a single and collectively vulnerable humanity. Right. A simple armchair excursion into the world gives the lie to that one-dimensionalizing notion. Were we one humanity when the first cases of Covid-19 were reported in places



effectively stateless, or simply unrecognized (Think Gaza, Rojava); when the systematized scarcity and neglect that sanctions and embargoes impose showed its epidemiological outcomes in Iran, or South Sudan? Are we all one humanity when risk factors like diabetes and hypertension follow regimes of austerity with uncanny consistency? Our political geographies have for so long been inscribing these differences into the world that it's not entirely clear what it might mean to imagine an immunological event uniting us all; even our immune systems are consummately social things. Insofar as Covid-19 is something of an air-raid drill in preparation for what promises to be the multigenerational blitz of rapid climate change, it should remind us that appeals to global humanity should start to give way to a more socially situated imagination – one that draws us to the defense of people caught on the front lines.

In direct contrast to the superficial sense of human commonality of Covid-19, the refusal of everyday brutality that started in the streets of Minneapolis burgeoned into an insurrection that carries all the seeds of a genuine international solidarity. The killing of George Floyd has triggered an insurrection that is led by people who have been hunted, embargoed, besieged, drafted as proxies into American wars (Civil or otherwise), sacrificed, criminalized and killed with impunity... all by virtue of being Black in the United States. But make no mistake, that movement was consummately global from its very inception.

Even the progressive centrist media of the US are stirred by this intuition. As the national guard sets up camp on the White House lawn, CNN is reporting that »this just isn't something that we're used to seeing in America, we tend to see that in more authoritarian countries.« Right. What CNN is claiming many of us have said for years: that the blowback of US-led military occupations always makes its way back home, whether in the form of surplus military equipment, the metastasizing violence of mass trauma, or the tactics and techniques of occupation carried home. That's an amazing moment. An even more amazing moment is when no one on the street is willing to believe that this analysis will be enough. This is not blowback. It's business as usual.

In the face of these developments, I have never seen American white supremacy, liberal and otherwise, so terrified. Every decade or so in the US, grief and rage congeal into burning buildings, and every time, liberal sentiments are bruised. Their panic makes perfect sense. The violence of states that build themselves around white supremacy unfolds according to certain established patterns, and liberal democracies have never deviated from that script. While being hunted, embargoed, besieged, criminalized, killed, and left to die, it is in and through the people and things that we forge into our own infrastructures of care that violence is meted out. That strategy has been perfectly compatible with liberal commitments because those have always benefited from the confusion of care and policing, of security and self-reliance. This violence, then, has been presented as nothing more than the excesses of an otherwise honorable nation making sure its people are safe.

This time, nobody seems to be willing to see this as a stain on an otherwise righteous soul of a nation. Instead, people on the streets in Minneapolis, Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, led by a powerful Black movement that's been at this for far too long, are articulating in the starkest terms what they have known all along: that they are suffocating because that was the plan all along. This must be terrifying to hear for those used to benefiting from this country's style of dominance, which amounts

to a consolidated genre of how to govern the world, traded back and forth between countries practicing some variation on its theme. The central axiom of that genre (understood by the regimes of Modi, Netanyahu, Bolsonaro, Bashar al-Assad as much as those of Orban and Trump) is simple. Never, under any circumstances, let others take care of themselves.

This is why those who borrow it all expend inordinate time looking for the choke-points of communities that don't look or talk or love or fuck the way they do. Why they orchestrate paranoid imaginations of what it means to be in the world at large with such dogged tenacity. Why, *even when they are not white*, they embrace all the homicidal supremacy we have traditionally reserved for white domination. White power, whether in the form of racial capitalism or race-blind liberalism, works only because it kills people who are not white with regularity. It kills with regularity because the point is to encumber the skeins of care that weave us together in our concrete solidarity with a grief so profound and so persistent that it short circuits all future bonds.

That is what makes this insurrection in the US promising, seen from the perspective of many particular elsewheres the world over – it has understood how the story goes, and refutes it root and branch. In a struggle fought under the banner of an endless procession of our dead given back their proper names (George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, George Brown, Sandra Bland, Trayvon Martin), a generation in the US has taken up a fight on behalf of the globe.

By virtue of their situated refusal, theirs is a fight articulated in common with other places where strategic atrocity has never been entirely replaced by more technocratic solutions. The police they meet on the street truck and barter in tactical gifts, exchanging techniques and technologies of domination (drones, tear gas canisters, small arms, and paramilitary strategies) in elaborate potlatches of war making. And by virtue of that commonality, Minneapolis, articulating in no uncertain terms that they will not be occupied in one fashion or the other, fight a global fight. They know that empire is not the purchase of a single country, but a shared strategy, and it is that strategy, rather than single policies or particular instances of securitizing violence, that they confront.

Say what you will about the optimism that makes this counter-movement emblematic of a moment of global potential. Watching from Cairo, writing this from German cities just recently celebrating the seventy-fifth anniversary of the fall of their fascist regime, I didn't think I'd be writing this about the United States, not before the Third Precinct of Minneapolis burned and people quickly got on to thinking about more thoroughgoing strategies to make sure they reclaim the ground on which to take care of themselves.

But seen from the streets, the whole place is like reaching out from American cities to the world in gestures of solidarity, never mind that we are still in the grip of our own nightmares. The whole place is saying »Hush. I've got you...« The whole place is lashing out with ferocious optimism into the cold light of dawn.

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