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Authors

Ayivi, Simone Dede
Sandberg, Michael

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Together

by Simone Dede Ayivi

TRANSIT Your Homeland is Our Nightmare

Translated by Michael Sandberg

Ever since I've been able to think, I've been writing shitlists: *Capitalism* is on there. *Racism, sexism*. But also *no champagne after premieres, drunk people on the subway, bachelor parties, bike lanes that suddenly disappear, and writing applications*.

More shit: the overall state of society: Rape culture and swings to the political right are also shit. Nazi marches, police violence, climate change, and dead people in the Mediterranean Sea. It's all shitty. Just like rightwing terrorism, racial profiling, rent increases, catcalling, and an hourly wage I don't even want to try to calculate.

They're all topics that burn. Injustices that infuriate. Living conditions that wear us down—the length of this list alone makes me feel powerless, helpless. No checkmarks. Nothing ever gets crossed off. Most of it just keeps escalating. A sense of accomplishment is rare, fleeting and small. It's all bad. Everything's shit? Only a change in circumstance might help.

There's a kind of German depression. A reaction to the cold, both climatic and interpersonal. Marginalization and encounters with violence, precarious work, pressure to achieve and insecurity all contribute to the feeling. Being accosted on the bus, insulting online comments, being shadowed by in-store security—it's exhausting and disheartening.

Especially when no one reacts. When it bothers no one except the individual concerned. Those who no longer can or want to engage, often come to the same result: a return to oneself. Dissociation and self-care, retreat into privacy. Self-love, self-optimization. Distance. The most commonly proposed solution is: We're living through hard times—so first take care of yourself. I don't buy it.

The activist burnout, the feminist burnout, both are real—for those who don't accept injustice lightly. Especially when you yourself are personally the target of discrimination: volunteers don't clock their overtime. There's more than enough to do these days. Whether we're engaged in neighborhood initiatives or environmental protection, whether we do feminist or anti-fascist work: the shitlists are long these days, and those who understand them as to-do lists are quickly overwhelmed.

I myself don't often know what I should do first. I'm scared to have not committed myself enough or to have overseen something. I take every Nazi demonstration and every neighborhood rent increase personally. Which protest did I miss, which unwritten text allowed these things to occur? Am I being egocentric? A little. But it's my fantasies of saving the world that get me out of my bed each morning, in a hostile world, with my fear and my German depression.

My fantasies of saving the world—and all of you!

Because the opposite of shit is being with you.

Self-optimization, too, has its limits in the activist community. I know well the need to read EVERYTHING, to follow every debate, to be sharp on both social networks and the

street. But there is a limited number of battles you can fight: You can't always be the best friend, sister or comrade. Activist work is work. Too much work exhausts, demoralizes. Doubtlessly very many engaged people have had this experience in recent years, which is why we've written and spoken about it so often. Still, meaningful work also gives strength, empowers, and puts you in a good mood.

However real activist burnout may be—it's only one side of the coin. For me: the side we've talked about enough. Because there is something that's stronger. You and me! To not have to struggle alone doesn't only mean: a burden shared is a burden halved. Not having to struggle alone can strengthen. And yield something new.

I'm standing in front of a supermarket. Two police officers are detaining someone. Talking down at her, behaving coarsely and arrogantly, and waving her papers around in her face. As she tries to grab them back, one of the officers yells: "Hey! Something like that might fly back home in Afghanistan, but not here in Germany."

In these moments, my head and stomach come into conflict, at the end of which it is never clear which one has actually won out: My stomach sends out an impulse through my body to immediately react. To help—somehow!—or at least to show that I'm there and witnessing the situation. Should I film the scene? Yell something? What?

My head tries to call my attention to the dangers. As soon as I react, negative consequences are possible—so before I intervene in whatever form, my head urges me to think through at least the beginnings of a strategy.

Those who can efficiently decide this fight in themselves are quick on their feet. It wavers for me: I think I needed about four seconds for something to form in my mouth. I no longer remember what it was even supposed to be.

Because before I could speak, the following happened:

Person behind me: "What did you just say?"

Person with a stroller next to me: "That's racist!"

Person on the bike: "Saying something like that might fly back home in Saxony, but not here in Kreuzberg."

That was the moment that I decided to move to Kreuzberg. Not because I thought there wasn't racism here: I had just witnessed it, after all. Also not because the person on the bike had led me to believe that it was a general standard in the neighborhood here to not tolerate such utterances or let them go unchallenged.

Sometimes it's just a feeling. Or a flux of feelings: I experience an injustice. Become furious. And must decide: What will become of my rage?

If I just watch, don't intervene, my rage turns into helplessness, resignation. Then shame over my inaction. But whenever I react and direct that rage towards its rightful object—towards that which makes me outraged—the stress lingers in my body: the feeling of needing to be hypervigilant because you can only ever depend on yourself.

Only then, when someone else besides me reacts, is it different.

Then, the rage and stress are followed by relaxation and assurance. Because someone shares my view, stands next to me. Consciously and deliberately or not: As soon as a second person, an outside force, comes to help, intervenes—be it only with a word, the balance of power shifts. An imbalance that suppresses me becomes destabilized. Because it's about the question: What is normal?

When people are targeted by racist speech or some other abuse and no one protests, then it doesn't appear to disturb anyone and establishes itself as the norm. Those who remain silent, assent. The targeted person just has to put up with it. "That's life. Not much you can do." Suddenly we think we have to accept and tolerate such imbalances.

I believe we carry these experiences with us to the next similar situation—and then we lack all the more the courage to step in and intervene. A positive experience can also awaken the power and courage to engage next time. Even if I was only a silent observer: To see that there are people who spontaneously defend themselves or others in their vicinity, who step in, who don't simply look away, demonstrates social responsibility. It's important to show solidarity in everyday life. To concentrate not on your own peace, but on the people around you. It's about how we want to live together. How we want to be with each other. To show solidarity in everyday life means to assume responsibility. Simply because I am at this particular moment in this particular place and am converging here with other people.

Everyday racism, for example, can be best confronted through everyday solidarity.

Will we accept living in a society in which we and our fellow beings are harassed and intimidated? Do we desire for all people to be able to move freely: without fear and without being insulted, spat on, and devalued? Living in a community in which the majority decides for the latter puts you in an astonishingly good mood.

I need these small moments of everyday solidarity. Moments along our daily routes in Germany in which someone unexpectedly does something better than one had feared, or just better than usual. And in so doing shows that it really isn't normal when people, neighbors, are attacked.

Of course, a bystander's spontaneous intervention does not undo an indignity. Nor is it neutralized. But as soon as someone takes a stand unsolicited, recognizes an injustice and doesn't shy away, but steps *in*—then the balance changes. Suddenly it is not the victim who is pushed into a corner, but rather the person responsible for causing shit. Frightening, how rare and special that is. The experience of it gives strength. Erases the doubt that something is wrong with *you*.

Because that's the insidiousness of this way of experiencing racism, sexism, and marginalization: Against your better judgment, you wonder how guilty you are for your own debasement. How could you have been calmer, nicer, less conspicuous in order to avoid that situation? Such questions are simultaneously self-defense and self-hatred. They demonstrate the degree to which we've internalized the idea that something is "wrong" with us. And they reveal our desire to be able to control the ways we're treated.

But with all the stress that arises through the experience and open identification of discrimination, as soon as you out yourself as someone against racism, you don't merely, yourself, become vulnerable to attack. You become visible, as well. Only visibility makes possible that others can recognize you and your positions.

When your professor says something racist and you raise your hand to object, you also notice all the others who, at the same moment, do the same. After the seminar, you will all probably stand around together for a bit. If you're lucky, these are the people who will become friends and have your back throughout your studies.

It is immediately strengthening and sustaining to be connected with people who not only help you to calibrate reality and say openly: "It's not you, it's this world we live in." But also with those who have already grappled theoretically with that world: those who

can give you reading tips and Youtube links, keyword searches, a language that renders discrimination intelligible and identifiable. People who show you where you can find other likeminded people, who invite you to events—events that actually help, events you hadn't even known about before because you weren't in that Facebook group; because you didn't even know those groups exist. You experience solidarity with people who see and understand you. With whom you can, most importantly, have fun—and share doubts, frustration, and subversive plans.

As someone who grew up in a predominantly white family, it was important for me to find a black community. Because the fact that experiences of racism aren't isolated instances—that it really doesn't matter how nice and considerate I was or how much I had tried to remain inconspicuous—because all that only became clear to me when I recognized that other black people were also insulted and abused for no reason. And it was important to learn about and experience the fact that there are also other people who fight back. The first step in fighting back: identifying and addressing experiences. Making injustice and pain public.

I thought it was in my hands: Eventually I'd find the right, correct conduct that would shield me from these incidents. Interactions with other people who had similar stories first helped me to challenge this false assumption. Because only when you discover that it's exactly the same for others, is your problem no longer an individual one. It's no longer *your problem*, but rather *THE* problem.

Finding comrades, people who share both your good and your bad experiences, stops you from asking the question: What is wrong with me?

Solidarity also means making oneself assailable and vulnerable—in order to show where one stands. Only then can others understand your position. And show you that they're on your side. I've met the most important people in my life because we were furious about something at the same time or we supported the same thing. As a matter of fact, I've found good friends in the comment sections of Facebook. Yes, that really did happen.

Of course, I hope that eventually there won't be any more of these “incidents”: “incidents” ranging from the N-word at the supermarket checkout to arson attacks and mob violence. I want it to stop. But I don't believe it will. (Some things are unimaginable because they're unfamiliar.)

Maybe someday we won't be buried under all this shit. But it will always stink somewhere. And then it makes a big difference whether you go it alone and others pretend to smell nothing—or whether there are people who say loud and clear: “This stinks! It cannot go on this way.”

I often have to admit: I can't go it alone.

But I can with all of you.

The good thing about bad times is the way they bring us closer together.

Sounds cheesy—it is. Nevertheless, it's true: I get much more from the big and small moments of connection and cohesion than from every yoga course, every withdrawal and every hot chocolate (though hot chocolate is always tempting).

Becoming active is demanding. But it is also and most importantly a beautiful thing—to not idly watch. Because wherever people live together, they have to solve problems together, as well. Racism, sexism, poor working conditions, and oppressive rent are not things against which one can stand alone without going crazy—no matter how much we have internalized the idea that all success is the result of personal achievement.

Today we have to be proactive together and speak loudly of the hatred and threats that confront those who stand for feminism and against racism, who advocate both against inequality and for participation. But we must also speak of the big and the small achievements. Love and solidarity.

I've written so many texts about discrimination in the workplace, racism in children's books, racism in universities, classism in universities, racism in everyday life, racism in the theater, sexism in the theater. Here, I would like to finally say thank you for:

Exchange. Commiseration. The community events. The smart articles and interjections. Our chants. Blocking Nazi demonstrations. All the critical questions! The people who shared their experiences in #metoo and #metwo and showed me that I'm not alone. 242,000 demonstrators at the *Unteilbar* protest in Berlin.ⁱ Thank you to all the people who voluntarily support refugees, thank you to all the Soliparty organizers,ⁱⁱ banner painters, public demonstrators, the people who bake cakes for work meetings; to the neighbors who help carry groceries up, who write emails complaining about sexist advertising, who operate feminist sex shops. Thank you to the emergency workers rescuing at sea, the tree sitters, the street fighters, and the Facebook group admins.

So many things can only be borne in a community.

The state of politics and the overall situation are a problem.

Many are not doing well. But many are also coming together.

Before the house in which I lived was sold and broken up into condos, I didn't know my neighbors. We could have met each other in other ways: learned more about each other while taking out the trash and picking up packages. But that's not how everyday life works in the city.

In my neighborhood, more and more people are now getting to know each other. In the struggle against rent increases and displacement, neighbors become comrades in solidarity, and ultimately friends. I like this feeling of cohesion. The feeling of standing up for something with others: together. Friendship and collaboration get me through each German winter.

Many struggles are now becoming visible. And many self-motivated people motivate me, in turn, to address problems. Unpaid activist work is a double burden. The work is exhausting and looking the imbalances one sees squarely in the eye is demanding. But unpaid activist work also has its own compensation. It helps me to escape powerlessness. Swallowing something down certainly avoids the immediate fury—but it leaves me helpless and alone, and I really just can't with that.

It's necessary to connect many different struggles. Because then it's suddenly about a better life for everyone. There's always something to do. This is overwhelming. But there are also always people with whom one can do it together. And that empowers!

One can wonder what a demonstration really does—regardless of whether it's for or against something. Is it about bringing demands to the street? Giving issues more presence in the media? Is it about showing that #wirsindmehr?ⁱⁱⁱ For me, as someone who does most of her political work from a desk, demonstrations are an opportunity to see my fellow fighters. To be together in joy or rage. To be aware that I'm not alone. And to see precisely who is standing by my side.

We should all see each other much more often.

I don't believe in one homeland [*Heimat*]. I believe in homelands. Those can be special places to which we feel forever connected, regardless of how far away we are and how

long it's been since we were there. But most of the time, it's people who provide this familiarity and in whom we place this trust.

Home is where all of you are.

ⁱ *Unteilbar* [literally: indivisible] was a demonstration against racism and xenophobia on October 13th, 2018.

ⁱⁱ *Soliparty* is short for *Solidaritätsparty* [solidarity party] and is a designation for grassroots activism organized around charity work or fundraising in solidarity with a given person or cause.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Wir sind mehr* [we are more] began as the name of a free open-air solidarity concert held in Chemnitz on September 3, 2018, following the instances of rightwing violence there.