

# Solidarity Care

How to Take Care of Each Other in Times of Struggle



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## Abstract

Being aware of social injustices can cause existential and mental pain; comes with a burden; and may impede a flourishing life. However, I shall argue that this is not a reason to despair or to choose to be willfully ignorant. Rather, it's a reason to conclude that being conscious is not enough. Rather, during times of oppression, resisters must also prioritize well-being. One way to do this is by extending what I refer to as solidarity care. I begin by providing an account of solidarity care. I then offer pragmatic ways in which one can extend solidarity care to others. I conclude by responding to two possible worries.

*Without community there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression.*

—Audre Lorde (2007)

## 1. The Problem of Awareness

The epistemic state known colloquially in the United States as “Being Woke” has become a pop-culture phenomenon. A pop song commanding listeners in a falsetto to “stay woke” is the first tune we hear in the 2017 hit movie *Get Out*, a film that reveals in horrific and thought-provoking ways the scary reality that some white liberals may not be as woke as many assume. Although a slang term indeed, “woke” proved its pop-culture dominance when it appeared in the dictionary in 2017. *Merriam-Webster* now defines it as being “aware of and actively attentive to important facts and issues (especially issues of racial and social justice).” Writing about the concept, blogger Raven Cras claims:

The phenomenon of being woke is a cultural push to challenge problematic norms, systemic injustices and the overall status quo through complete awareness. Being woke refers to a person being aware of the theoretical ins and outs of the world they inhabit. Becoming woke, or staying woke, is the acknowledgment that everything we've been taught is a lie . . . Woke(ness) provides us with a basic understanding of the why and how come aspects of societies' social and systemic functions. The phrase itself is an encouragement for people to wake up and question dogmatic social norms. It requires an active

process of deprogramming social conditionings, focusing on consistent efforts to challenge the universal infractions we are all subjected to. However, in order for one to stay woke, one must first, *be woke*.<sup>1</sup>

The term is not recent but is said to go back to a 1962 *New York Times* article “If You're Woke You Dig It,” by William Melvin Kelley.<sup>2</sup> Some might even recall similar reiterations of the term expressed in late '80s and early '90s rap music by artists who would eventually become known as “conscious” rappers because they were aware of how social structures function, and they challenged—through rhyme—such structures. Essayist and novelist James Baldwin uses this latter term in *The Fire Next Time* to describe aware citizens—referring to them as “relatively conscious whites and relatively conscious blacks.”<sup>3</sup> Consciousness, like wokeness, referred to a state of being aware of injustices, sharing that knowledge and even decrying manifestations of injustice.

If ignorance is bliss, as some claim, one might wonder about the advantage of having such

1. Raven Cras, “What Does It Mean to be Woke,” *Blavity News*, September 26, 2015, [blavity.com/what-does-it-mean-to-be-woke/what-does-it-mean-to-be-woke?category=opinion](https://blavity.com/what-does-it-mean-to-be-woke/what-does-it-mean-to-be-woke?category=opinion).

2. Some even claim that it goes back to the 1940s.

3. James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Vintage International, 1993), 105.

an awareness. More specifically, given the seduction and comfort that comes from being willfully ignorant of suffering and injustice (as well as their sources), why then would anyone choose to be woke, conscious, or aware. It is, I claim, because there are benefits.

The first is an epistemic benefit. By being woke, one is able to see and perhaps understand the world for what it is: a world that is filled with wonder and beauty but also a world, particularly this American part of the world, filled with inequality, oppression, social exploitation, and social exclusion. This epistemic benefit is the red pill from *The Matrix* (1999). While the metaphorical blue pill may give you security, it will also make you ignorant. On the other hand, while the red pill may give you unpleasant knowledge and expose you to cruel truths, it still gives you knowledge and truth nonetheless. This truth is valuable within itself.<sup>4</sup> There is also a utility benefit to being woke: for one can only challenge systemic injustices after she is first able to see that injustices exist. As legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw eloquently puts it, “When you can’t see a problem, you can’t solve it.”<sup>5</sup>

Although there are benefits to being woke, I have a worry. I wonder if the public’s obsession with being woke, and the discourse around it, have come at the cost of neglecting another phenomenon: being well. This is not to say that there are no other important worries associated with the concept. Some liberal and conservative critics have provided arguments for why the term needs to be, in their words, “put to sleep.” Pointing to a utility disadvantage, conservative journalist David Brooks claims that “the problem with wokeness is that it doesn’t inspire action; it freezes it. To be woke is first and foremost to put yourself on display. To make a problem seem massively intractable is to inspire separation—building a wall between

you and the problem—not a solution.”<sup>6</sup> Pointing to an epistemic disadvantage, NPR’s Sam Sanders claims that the problem is that “we’ve made woke a rigid state of being instead of a process of continual growth. For that reason . . . let’s put woke to sleep.”<sup>7</sup> I think these claims are tenable. However, these worries are related more to the misuse of wokeness rather than its uses. I take it for granted that those who are “growing in their wokeness” and are inspired towards action given their understanding of oppression are more vulnerable to threats to their well-being and are likely to neglect it as they pursue social and political solutions. Therefore, it is worrisome that the discourse deemphasizes well-being.

I find the neglect interesting because there is a connection between being woke and being well. The connection is this: being woke can impede being well. If this relationship is neglected, then those who are trying to understand oppression and engage in productive action to end it, will eventually be consciously awake but perhaps psychologically, emotionally, and even physically asleep. I do not take this claim to be controversial or even novel. Scholars, writers, activists, and those in the medical profession mostly agree with me on this point. However, I will offer—if only briefly—three premises to support the view.

First, being woke, with all its benefits, can cause existential pain. W.E.B. Du Bois in 1903 rhetorically engages the wokeness dilemma in the form of a depressing question when he asks “How does it feel to be a problem?” in the first chapter of *The Souls of Black Folks*. He goes on to argue that the second sight that Black Americans have “yields him no true consciousness . . . this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.”<sup>8</sup> This is the constant task of being aware

4. According to the metaphor, there is extrinsic value as well. Having this knowledge represents true freedom. On the other hand, while the blue pill provides a beautiful prison, it is still a prison nonetheless.

5. Kimberlé Crenshaw, “The Urgency of Intersectionality,” *TED*, December 7, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=akOe5-UsQ2o>.

6. David Brooks, “The Problem with Wokeness,” *New York Times*, June 7, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/07/opinion/wokeness-racism-progressivism-social-justice.html>.

7. Sam Sanders, “Opinion: It’s Time To Put ‘Woke’ To Sleep,” *NPR*, December 30, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/transcripts/680899262>.

8. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Vintage International, 1989), 3.

of how others see you or will see you in your identity. This task does not only strip you of the existential freedom and pleasure to see yourself through your own eyes alone, but it limits your being to a subject (often a despised, inferior, or suspicious one) of constant gaze and investigation. How can one truly be oneself or think of oneself as such, when they have this consciousness? This is existential pain.

Second, being woke to one's own oppression can also lead to mental pain. Take, for example, racial oppression. In an in-depth study, Robert Carter argues that racism can be a source of stress, trauma, and emotional injury.<sup>9</sup> This race-based traumatic stress is defined as "emotional injury . . . racially motivated stressor that overwhelms . . . racially motivated, interpersonal severe stressor that causes bodily harm . . . that can cause fear, helplessness, or horror."<sup>10</sup> Thompson-Miller and Feagin in their interviews with elderly blacks found that the blacks' memories of racist interactions produced responses that indicated race-based traumatic stress.<sup>11</sup> They concluded that racial discrimination and other racial oppression can have a psychological impact that can last a lifetime. Janssen and colleagues found that in the UK and the Netherlands, people with high rates of psychosis are chronically exposed to discrimination.<sup>12</sup> Feagin and Sikes also recognize how dealing with racism saps energy from subjects. Sighting a prominent black clinical psychologist they write:

Now a black person also has one

9. R. T. Carter, "Racism and Psychological and Emotional Injury: Recognizing and Assessing Race-Based Traumatic Stress," *The Counseling Psychologist* 35, no. 1 (2007): 13-105.

10. Thema Bryant-Davis, "Healing Requires Recognition: The Case for Race-Based Traumatic Stress," *The Counseling Psychologist* 35, no. 1 (2007): 135-43, 135.

11. Ruth Thompson-Miller and Joe R. Feagin, "The Reality and Impact of Legal Segregation in the United States," in *Handbooks of the Sociology of Racial and Ethnic Relations*, edited by Pinar Batur and Joe R. Feagin (Boston: Springer, 2007).

12. I. Janssen, M. Hanssen, M. Bak, et al., "Discrimination and Delusional Ideation," *British Journal of Psychiatry* 182, no. 1 (2003): 71-76, <https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.182.1.71>.

hundred ergs; he uses 50 percent the same way a white man does, dealing with what the white man has [to deal with], so he has 50 percent left. But he uses 25 percent fighting being black, [with] all the problems being black and what it means.<sup>13</sup>

This energy that is sapped by dealing with a hostile world, is energy that could be used for family interactions and creative projects. This has material consequences. If being woke to sexist, homophobic, or classist oppression can sap energy then a person loses precious energy that she needs to live a flourishing life.

Third, the complete awareness found in being woke that Cras alludes to also comes with a burden. Baldwin urges folks he describes as "relatively conscious whites" and "relatively conscious blacks" to insist on and create the consciousness of others. And he says that we have a duty to do so. "For if we do not," says Baldwin, "like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of others—do not falter in our duty. . . . If we do not dare everything . . . the fulfillment of that prophecy . . . is upon us . . . the fire next time."<sup>14</sup> Now this is not just a warning to others who are resistant to having this awakening of consciousness. Moreover, it is also a weight—a weight placed on the shoulders of those who are already awake. This turns Du Bois's question upside down: How does it feel to be the answer to a problem?

In addition, having the above burden of awakening and challenging others is not just the activity of bringing them to account but it also consists of having some form of faith in humanity that the person will change. And it's this faith that leaves one vulnerable to certain losses, such as the pain of disappointment. Also the best efforts to persuade people to act morally can fail and in turn make one's life go worse. This can leave a person at the risk of being mistreated, again. As Ryan Preston-Roeder writes:

Someone who has faith in humanity is vulnerable in certain respects

13. Joe R. Feagin and Melvin Sikes. *Living with Racism: The Black Middle-Class Experience* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), 295-96.

14. James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Vintage International, 1993), 105-06.

to losses she will incur if people in whom she has faith turn out to be base, or if they have acted, or will act, wrongly . . . She may suffer the pain of disappointment when people in whom she had faith, and whose behavior is salient to her, commit serious wrongs. And if she makes personal sacrifices in order to encourage people to act rightly, but these people act wrongly instead, the fact that her efforts fail can, by itself, make her life go worse, quite apart from any emotional pain it causes her.<sup>15</sup>

Lastly, the aforementioned act of challenging, which consciously aware folks engage in, requires certain virtues. However, these virtues may not lead to a flourishing life. Lisa Tessman argues that certain virtues that the oppressed take on such as courage are virtues in the context of injustice. They enable survival in the midst of oppression. But they also come at a moral cost. They are “burdened virtues” in that they interfere with our ability to achieve moral goodness and they can distract from our well-being. On her view, courage, for example, may be a burden for those who are woke in that “courageously accepting the many possible risks and sacrifices in the life of a committed political resister, puts a burden on the self” and it may lead to a painful, self-sacrificial life.<sup>16</sup>

Being woke does not just affect those who are the direct victims of injustice and oppression. Woke allies can also bear a cost. Baldwin makes this point above by noting the burden of both black and white conscious ones. And I think Tessman would also agree that not only the oppressed but those in solidarity with them may take on burdened virtues as they fight against injustice. However, although a person can be in solidarity with those who are the direct victims of an injustice, this does not mean that she experiences the same threats to her well-being. Threats do vary in kind and degree. But the point that I want to highlight for our purposes is that being woke has no respect of persons when it comes to compromising being well.

15. Ryan Preston-Roedder, “Faith in Humanity,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 87, no. 3 (2013): 664-87, 669.

16. Lisa Tessman, *The Burdened Virtues* (New York: Oxford UP, 2005), 127.

Although being woke can cause existential and mental pain; comes with a burden; and may impede a flourishing life, these should not be reasons to descend back into Plato’s cave—a metaphorical place in which one prefers to live a life in which the shadows of illusions are their new reality; a place where they think they live in a world in which inequalities are a thing of the past—in order to dodge these harms. Instead, I think this provides reasons to conclude that being woke is not enough. Perhaps one must not only beware of injustices but be aware of each other. Perhaps one should not only resist injustice but restore, repair, and reaffirm each other. One must make being well a priority, too.

I shall argue for the rest of this paper that this can only happen when those who are aware of injustice and are committed to addressing it take care of those who are similarly woke in this respect. (I expand, more specifically, on who these agents are in section 3). In section 2, I claim that the ways in which care can be extended is through what I call solidarity care. After providing an account of solidarity care, I provide, in section 3, pragmatic ways in which one can extend solidarity care to others. I conclude in section 4 by responding to two possible worries.

## 2. Solidarity Care

What exactly is Solidarity Care? Let’s begin first by looking at solidarity. Simply speaking, solidarity is unity or mutual support and recognition. There are five core normative requirements for solidarity according to Tommie Shelby, and robust group solidarity exists where these five characteristics are exhibited: 1) Members identify with each other to the point of treating fellow members as extensions of each other; 2) There is special concern and thus a disposition to assist and comfort members; 3) There are shared values and goals between members that can take the form of social visions, ideals, or policies; 4) Members have loyalty to each other and faithfulness to the group’s values; and lastly 5) There is mutual trust between members.

But any form of solidarity will also have content. For Shelby, this content is defined by the goals the group embrace as being a member

of the group. For example, the content of black solidarity, on Shelby's account, is unfair social disadvantage because of blackness. Solidarity with the group then is about "identifying, correcting, and ultimately eliminating race-based injustices."<sup>17</sup> I have argued elsewhere for vulnerable solidarity; a solidarity whose content is unfair targeting, social death, and incarceration of social groups who are always vulnerable to being next in line for such treatment. It's a solidarity that is about correcting and eliminating such treatment.<sup>18</sup>

As I see it, the content of solidarity and its aboutness seem to traditionally show that solidarity by itself has as its primary focus the issue and in correcting it. Members' loyalty to each other is based on the ideals of the group; special concern is to assist members in the work of the group; trust is in order to contribute to the values of the group. But what about the members? What are our obligations to them not as fellow fighters but as humans? Their individual needs are worth responding to—not as a means to accomplish a grand objective—but because they are worthy of our care. Now this is not to say that Shelby's account is not concerned with members. However, I think my account makes caring more central.

While care has been neglected in liberal theory, feminist philosophy has recognized its moral significance. Care ethics is in some ways the opposite of liberal theory. The liberal tradition asserts the importance of the individual and views the individual as a self-made person in need of their rights being respected without interference from others. The feminist care tradition, on the other hand, recognizes that we are dependent on one another to survive although this level of dependence varies. Our lives being better or worse depends on how we respond to and interact with each other. It is our relationships that shape us and also have life-altering effects. These relationships call us to be atten-

tive to each other.<sup>19</sup> Care ethics reminds us of the importance of caring for and caring about each other. As Maureen Sander-Staudt writes, "care ethics involves maintaining the world of, and meeting the needs of, ourselves and others. It builds on the motivation to care for those who are dependent and vulnerable."<sup>20</sup>

Taking all of this together, solidarity care, then, prioritizes not issues but caring for and about each other with the goal of making members be and stay well—given the reality of the issue (i.e., social injustice). It is not a replacement for existing solidarity. It is an essential and even necessary complement to other kinds of group solidarity. It's Shelby's normative requirement number two (special concern) on steroids but informed by different motivations.

Who are the targets of solidarity care? The phrase "member of a group" should not be taken to only refer to members of institutional or racial groups, for example. A person can be in solidarity with another person and this solidarity need not be rooted in any affiliation at all. Marco can be in solidarity with Femi based on an unjust incident in which Femi was victim to (e.g., Femi suffered abuse by his boss). Marco need not be in solidarity with everyone who suffers like Femi. As long as Femi and Marco fulfill the normative requirements that Shelby describes, they are targets of solidarity care. In this way, we can get rid of the term "group" and replace "members" with Marco and Femi. Is it possible to be in solidarity with those who are either ignorant of your solidarity or who reject it? This is too big a question to answer in this paper. However, I do not have to answer it fully to make my argument. My argument for solidarity care and how to extend it presupposes that the relationship between parties is such that there is mutual awareness of members' solidaristic commitments (although this awareness can vary in degree) and members do not reject the solidarity, instead, they have certain expectations (and justifiably so) of it. In addition, Marco need not be in solidarity with

17. Tommie Shelby, *We Who Are Dark: The Philosophical Foundations of Black Solidarity* (Massachusetts: Harvard UP, 2017), 151.

18. Myisha Cherry, "State Racism, State Violence, and Vulnerable Solidarity" in Naomi Zack's (ed) *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

19. Lori Gruen, *Entangled Empathy* (New York: Lantern Books, 2015).

20. Maureen Sander-Staudt, "Care Ethics," *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, December 27, 2019, <https://www.iep.utm.edu/>.

Femi on every issue. He may be in solidarity with Femi around the unjust incident, but not in solidarity with him around a wrongdoing that Femi perpetrated. However, as I will argue in what follows, since Marco is in solidarity with Femi in other areas, he can still extend solidarity care. So what does solidarity care look like in practice? In other words, how might we care about and care for others who are also awake, actively deprogramming themselves, and challenging oppressive systems?

### 3. Extending Care

In what follows, I offer up three ways in which relatively conscious folks can extend solidarity care to others; however, these suggestions are in no way exhaustive.

The first way that members can extend solidarity care is by figuring out how they are each other's problems and then stop being a problem. No matter how committed a person might be in her solidarity, there is always the possibility that ego, privilege, bias, and other "isms" can rear their ugly heads at any time. These things are difficult to let go of and they do not disappear because a person makes a decision to be in solidarity with others. However, if a person cares for and cares about those she is in solidarity with, she should not only focus on making sure outsiders are not inflicting pain on them. She should also make sure that she is not repeating the same actions and reproducing the same harms as oppressive others.

In her critiques of second wave feminism, black feminist scholar Audre Lorde was constantly concerned about this "being a problem" phenomenon. Lorde recognized that although white feminists at the time championed feminism, they paid little to no attention to the experiences of poor women, women of color, or lesbian women. Lorde noticed that white women were engaging in the same exclusionary and inequitable actions of the patriarchy they were criticizing. She argues:

Women of today are still being called upon to stretch across the gap of male ignorance and to educate men as to our existence and our needs. This is an old and primary tool of all oppressors to keep the oppressed

occupied with the master's concerns. Now we hear that it is the task of women of Color to educate white women—in the face of tremendous resistance—as to our existence, our differences, our relative roles in our joint survival. This is a diversion of energies and a tragic repetition of racist patriarchal thought.<sup>21</sup>

It is a mistake to think that because a person is "consciously aware" of race and its problems that they are, by definition, also aware and awake to homophobia or classism. A woke person's ability to understand one issue does not equate to their epistemic or moral mastery of the other. Recall that this rigidity is what grounds Sander's critique of what I have described as a misuse of the concept "woke." We see examples of this lack of epistemic or moral mastery when we look at past and present social justice movements. Today, as in the past, there are, for example, members of the LGBTQI community who are in solidarity with other members but are also transphobic. We see this in the way that trans activists Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson are often erased as key leaders in the history of LGBTQI liberation. We can also see this in the way in which marriage equality is often hailed as the pinnacle of LGBTQI rights while legislation that addresses the vulnerability of trans folks is seldomly advocated. And we also see this in the explicit transphobic actions that gays and lesbians engage in. This shows that "You too may be someone else's problem."

Lorde recommends that white feminists who perpetuate racism "touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives there. See whose face it wears." She suggests that only then "the personal as the political can begin to illuminate all our choices."<sup>22</sup> Similarly, wherever your hate, intolerance, disgust, or indifference resides inside of you for those you say you are in solidarity with, face it and try to overcome it. Lorde is right, the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. And this means that members cannot do what oppressors do if they want liberating results. I will also add that the master's tools will never create a home, a

21. Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007), 113.

22. *Ibid.*

home where all solidaristic fellows are cared about and cared for.

The second way that one can provide solidarity care is by reciprocating care. Reciprocity is mutual responsiveness. This does not mean that one ought to care for others in the exact ways, at the same time, or to the same degree that others care for them. I do not think this is always possible. One reason is due to the fact that people are in different positions of power and privilege and thus have access to different levels of resources to share. However, although reciprocity can never be exact, it should still be extended. If members are in solidarity with each other, care should not be one-sided. When there is mutual responsiveness, a person does not feel taken advantage of. Instead, he feels appreciated. He feels that his concerns matter, that he is loved, that he has support. This feeling helps create security and a much needed healthy sense of importance.

What can lead one to neglect this form of reciprocity? What is the cause of this “care-gap”—a slit in reciprocity between members of solidaristic groups?<sup>23</sup> A person can widen the care gap when they think that their issues are the most important ones. This is an example of the proverbial Oppression Olympics—a competition where people view their individual pain or struggle as the worse struggle and therefore ordain it as the pressing issue of our time. By doing so, they neglect caring for others who may face different issues. In addition, failure of reciprocity care can indicate, or at the very least, communicate, that they believe only certain lives are worth fighting for. This is not merely neglect. It is lack of care that arises out of a sense of superiority. Recent examples of this can be found in The Movement for Black Lives and in recent criticisms of a lack of feminist solidarity as it relates to black and white women.

The Movement for Black Lives was founded by black lesbian women who wanted to bring attention to the physical and social deaths of

black and brown bodies of all backgrounds—deaths that were at the hands of state actors. However, the police brutality cases that got massive media attention and galvanized people, were cases involving black boys and black men. The deaths of black cis and trans\* women were almost completely ignored by black activists and, not surprisingly, the larger public. What often occurred, unintentionally by the founders, was that the narrative began to center black boys and black men at the exclusion of black cis and trans\* women. This communicated to many that the black lives that really mattered when it came to police violence were boys and men.

But if we consult the recent archive of the movement, we will find that it was black women who started the hashtag and started the organization. It was women who marched against police brutality in protest through cities across the nation. It was women who got behind podiums, case after case, holding back tears as they represented the deceased and unfortunately the black community at press conferences. Women showed up for the movement, but people rarely showed up for them. Reciprocity was lacking, making the care gap quite wide.

In response, black feminist academics and activists started the #SayHerName campaign. It's an initiative that acknowledges that “although black women are routinely killed, raped, and beaten by the police, their experiences are rarely foregrounded in popular understandings of police brutality . . . [the campaign seeks to] respond to increasing calls for attention to police violence against black women by offering a resource to help ensure that black women's stories are integrated into demands for justice, policy responses to police violence, and media representations of victims of police brutality.” Women's default was to engage in this kind of self-care because they did not get the reciprocity care they needed. This should not be when others purport to be in solidarity with them. The #SayHerName campaign was created not as a response to minimize the reality of black male death or to steal attention away from that reality. It was created to say that black women suffer too. It proclaimed: Acknowledge us, like we acknowledge you! Cry for us, like we cry for you! Fight for us, like we fight for you!

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23. In *Black Girls Matter: Pushed Out, Overpoliced, and Underprotected* (New York African American Policy Forum, 2015), Kimberlé Crenshaw refers to it as ‘asymmetrical solidarity.’

There are other examples of this care gap. In January of 2017, women of all backgrounds descended on Washington, D.C. and other places around the world to protest the misogynistic language and actions of the incoming U.S. President. One of the most popular photographs from the event, depicts an image of a black woman, Angela People, with a sign that says: “Don’t forget: White women voted for Trump,” as she stands in front of a group of young white women dressed in all pink.

According to interviews with People, the sign was not meant to sabotage the march, be divisive, or a downer in a moment of feminist affirmation. It was a sign that expressed a lack of reciprocity care. On People’s view, 95 percent of black women fought against the incoming politician in the voting booth. However, white women did not. Maybe it was because they had other interests. But the point was: Black women showed up for themselves and other women, but white women did not show up for them. Reciprocity care was lacking. It is examples like this that give reason to women of color to view white feminists with suspicion, leading journalist Jenna Wortham to write: “while black women show up for white women to advance causes that benefit entire movements, the reciprocity is rarely shown.”<sup>24</sup> This creates distrust—a distrust between two communities whose liberation depends on this solidarity and trust. However, we can learn from this. When people show up for you, you should also show up for them. This is how you care for others.

The third way that one can extend solidarity care is through affirmation and encouragement. In present-day social discourse, valuing how people speak to each other has been termed, pejoratively, as political correctness. And a person who values such things are labeled snowflakes or cupcakes. On the other hand, the ability to say particularly destructive speech is, by some people, hailed as the American right of free speech. It’s the right that tough people exercise.

24. Jenna Wortham, “Who Didn’t Go to the Women’s March Matters More than Who Did,” *New York Times*, January 24, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/24/magazine/who-didnt-go-to-the-womens-march-matters-more-than-who-did.html>.

However, if being woke has the mental effects that I claim it does in section 1. (regardless of one’s sensitivity level), then affirmation and encouragement are not luxuries or coddling. Solidarity care is a necessity. The work of psychologists show us that what we believe about ourselves on the subconscious level can have an impact on outcomes. Their work also shows that affirmation and encouragement provide a buffer to stress, particularly the racial and sexual traumatic stress that many experience. It can be stressful to be awake in a world that reminds you and others that you are in solidarity with—through rhetoric, policy, entertainment, and laws—that your life does not matter; that you are cursed, a mistake, a freak, or inferior. However, being presented with counter evidence of this through affirmation, confirmation, and encouragement is both a form of care and resistance against such destructive claims. A person can fight for freedom and still not be free because she can eventually—if not believe these messages—be in such a vulnerable position that the words can beat, defeat, and burden her. Destructive words have harmful mental and physical effects that threatens one’s overall health. However, affirming through counter-speech can help block these effects.

This way of extending care is what made Malcolm X so appealing. Many may disagree with the rhetoric and arguments of the early Malcolm X, but one of the many things that the black community adored about him was his use of language. His words allowed them to feel like they were still human. His words affirmed the black man who was getting beat by the cops on the streets of Harlem. His words sowed a seed of love to the black woman who felt disrespected by life. His defense of blackness made the unemployed young person feel that there was still hope. This is because affirmation has this power. If a person cares for others, she will not only speak words to power but she will also speak words that will empower others.

Consider the affirmation James Baldwin offers to his namesake in a letter to his nephew:

Please try to remember that what they believe, as well as what they do and cause you to endure, does not testify to your inferiority but to their inhumanity and fear . . . [later on he says] this is your home . . . do not be



driven from it . . . it will be hard . . . but you come from sturdy peasants . . . men who picked cotton and damned rivers . . . and in the teeth of the most terrifying odds, achieved . . . a monumental dignity.<sup>25</sup>

Consider the affirmation and encouragement Martin Luther King, Jr. gives to members of SCLC in one of his most radical speeches, “Where Do We Go From Here?”:

And with a spirit straining toward true self-esteem, the Negro must body throw off the manacles of self-abnegation and say to himself and to the world, “I am somebody. I am a person. I am a man with dignity and honor. I have a rich and noble history, however painful or exploited . . . yes, yes we must stand up and say “I am black but I’m black and beautiful. This self-affirmation is the black man’s need, made compelling by the white man’s crimes against him.”<sup>26</sup>

Consider the encouragement of black Congresswoman Maxine Waters spoken in a MSNBC interview after white TV personality Bill O’Reilly demeaned her for her black hair:

And I’d like to say to women out there everywhere: Don’t allow these right-wing talking heads, these dishonorable people, to intimidate you or scare you. Be who you are! Do what you do!<sup>27</sup>

This is why social media hashtags such as #RefugeesWelcome, #TransIsBeautiful, #BlackExcellence, and #BlackGirlMagic are so needed and powerful. They are viral expressions of care. Their users express them in order to affirm and encourage those who may be hearing opposing messages.

While validation and affirmation are important, providing it in response to fragility should

25. James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Vintage International, 1993), 10.

26. Martin Luther King and Cornel West, *The Radical King* (Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 2015), 170-71.

27. Joseph Hinks, “Maxine Waters to Bill O’Reilly: ‘I’m a Strong Black Woman and I Cannot Be Intimidated,’” *Time*, March 29, 2017, <https://time.com/4716111/maxine-waters-bill-oreilly-fox/>.

be avoided. I will use “white fragility” as an example.

Robin DiAngelo describes white fragility as “a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation.”<sup>28</sup> In white fragility, whites seek racial comfort (when they are challenged for example) instead of tolerating racial stress. White fragility can occur when a white person in solidarity with people of color receives feedback that their behavior had a racist impact. In displaying white fragility, they can come to feel guilty or angry thinking that the group now takes them to be racist and they get defensive. DiAngelo suggests that the behavior functions to reinstate white racial equilibrium. They push back to regain their racial position. Their resistance ensures that racism itself will not be faced by means of protecting their moral position while deflecting accountability. This defensiveness is also steeped in a perception of white arrogance, white purity, and racial comfort.

However, validation goes wrong when people respond to white fragility by affirming the above behavior. This can occur by telling the white person “it’s not your fault” or “everybody’s a little racist.” This also happens when a person responds by validating or affirming their response of denial and resistance by saying “You are right to feel this way” or “You don’t have to take this.” In this way, the fragile person and the affirmer can engage in the perpetuation of white supremacy. I think the correct response in these moments is not validation or verbal comfort but criticism. In this way, Marco can provide solidary care to Femi when he criticizes Femi’s racist behavior even though he is not in solidarity with Marco in relation to his racist behavior. And this leads me to my next suggestion.

A person can provide care for another’s moral well-being by challenging them to be morally better through criticism. This is because being

28. Robin DiAngelo, “White Fragility,” *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy* 3, no. 3 (2011): 54-70, 57.

well is not just about feeling better. It is about being and doing better.

Baldwin had no problem criticizing America because he knew it was an act of care. He understood that criticism that was grounded in truth and aimed at accountability was essential to care. He writes: "I love America more than any other country in the world, and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually."<sup>29</sup> When people care for you, they tell you the truth about yourself.

The caring criticism that I am concerned with here always aims to be constructive and not (negatively) destructive. A caring critic aims to correct and help change problematic behavior. He does not aim to tear down but to build up anew. There is much debate in the activist community about calling in and calling out, when to do it, and which approach is best in certain circumstances. I do not have time to deal with these debates here but I do want to note that a caring critic is not motivated by things like moral grandstanding. Caring—not attention—is the goal.

## 4. Conclusion

In closing, I want to address two possible worries. Some may be concerned that I have only focused on human beings in this essay at the neglect of nonhuman animals and the environment more generally. And so the thought might be, that the only solidarity that I think truly matters is our solidarity with humans, and this sounds untenable.

However, this is not what I am arguing. I think that we also need to figure out how we are being a problem to other species and stop being a problem. I also believe that the world gives us so much beauty, sustenance, and connection and we need to reciprocate that care as opposed to treating nature like the giving tree—taking and giving nothing in return. The environment is already in solidarity with us. Some of the questions I think we need to ask ourselves before we can tackle the care question in this domain is: Can we acknowledge its

solidarity with us and are we truly willing to be in solidarity with it? (These are questions that I do not think are restricted to this relationship.)

Some might also be concerned that I have neglected self-care. And they may think I have done so because I do not think it's important. And this is unfortunate since self-care is often times the only care option that oppressed people have access to.

However, I think when people use the term self-care, they often use it in the narrow sense of the individual taking responsibility for their own health. In popular usage, it's used to account for the ways a person mentally, spiritually, and physically tends to their own needs—needs that are often sacrificed for others' needs. So self-care is a person following the airplane instructions of first taking care of themselves before they take care of others. The idea is that if you are not well, you cannot help others be well. Audre Lorde believed in the power and need for self-care and she claims that it is not an act of self-indulgence but of "self-preservation and that is an act of political warfare."<sup>30</sup> I also think that self-care is of utmost importance in spite of my non-emphasis above.

However, I do not think that self-care is a sufficient condition of well-being. More importantly, I think that we should view self-care differently than we often tend to. Self-care is never done independently. Someone has to watch the kids as you meditate. Someone teaches the yoga class that relaxes you. Someone gifts you with the book that is changing your life. A therapist or friend listens to your story. A friend shows you how to make the green juice. Self-care takes place in community. Even if and when we decide to take care of ourselves, someone else is always joining in. The challenge that I have hoped to motivate throughout this essay is: Are you willing to provide the same care to others?

Let's return back to the epigraph by Audre Lorde that begins this essay: "Without community there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an

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29. James Baldwin, "Autobiographical Notes," in *Baldwin: Collected Essays* (New York: The Library of America, 1998), 9.

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30. Audre Lorde, *Burst of Light and Other Essays* (New York: Ixia Press, 2017), 130.

individual and her oppression.”<sup>31</sup> Lorde reminds us that freedom is not freedom from others. Without community there is no liberation. But I also think that without caring for others that we are in solidarity with—providing solidarity care—we will never truly be free or well, no matter how woke or aware we think we are.

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