

## REVIEW ESSAY

### Graphic Histories of Solidarity, in Solidarity

Janet Biehl, *Their Blood Got Mixed: Revolutionary Rojava and the War on ISIS* (New York: PM Press, 2022), 256pp., ISBN: 9781629639444

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#### Abstract

Revolutionary experiments require building revolutionary relationships. This praxis of material and social creativity to reorganise power dynamics and weave connections across weaponised divides, are evident in the content, the form and the backstory woven into Janet Biehl's *Their Blood Got Mixed: Revolutionary Rojava and the War on ISIS*. Written and illustrated by Janet Biehl, it is a graphic memoir that can be read as both an historical narrative and a blueprint of a contemporary revolutionary experiment that combines political theory and graphic art to tell the story of how ISIS has been driven back in Northern Syria by people fighting for a society based on principles of direct democracy, political secularism, gender equality, and ecological sustainability. Whereas in the past, after the liberation of Rojava in 2012, Biehl spent time interviewing leadership, this book relays her interviews with women across the region and across the various projects of reorganising and defending social, political, cultural and economic life in 2019 after four years of warfare against ISIS and the Turkish state. Reflecting on the relationships that make revolutionary history, and that produce artistic histories of revolutionary experiments, this review article considers the history *in* this book and *of* this book, in conversation with recently published graphic non-fiction, and draws on engaged scholarship concerned with the politics of collective knowledge production in and for movements of solidarity urgently needed in the face of the imploding crisis of colonial borders.

## **Keywords**

Janet Biehl, women, Rojava, Islamic State, ISIS, graphic non-fiction, comics, feminist history, solidarity, Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, C. L. R. James, marronage

Revolutionary experiments require building revolutionary relationships. This praxis of material and social creativity to reorganise power dynamics and weave connections across weaponised divides, is evident in the content, the form and the backstory woven into Janet Biehl's *Their Blood Got Mixed: Revolutionary Rojava and the War on ISIS*. This is a graphic memoir that can be read as both an historical narrative and a blueprint of a contemporary revolutionary experiment that combines political theory and graphic art to tell the story of how ISIS has been driven back in Northern Syria by people fighting for a society based on principles of direct democracy, political secularism, gender equality and ecological sustainability. In 2012, in the midst of the Syrian civil war, the Kurds and their Arab and Assyrian allies established a multi-ethnic, democratic, self-governing polity in North–Eastern Syria commonly known as Rojava. Its official name is now the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), where they are building a much broader coalition known as the Syrian Democratic Force (SDF) in an ongoing struggle for freedom. Since Rojava was created in July 2012 it has been under attack by Turkey and in 2014 this liberated zone was invaded by the Islamic State (IS or ISIS, known in the region as Daesh) which had attacked neighbouring Iraq and Syria, imposing a theocratic, hyper-authoritarian and femicidal rule. In Rojava, a people's militia of male and of women-only defence units (the People's Protection Units, YPG, and the Women's Protection Units, YPJ), backed by an international coalition, supporting and led by women, resisted, liberating villages and in 2019, at great cost, defeated ISIS.<sup>1</sup>

*Their Blood Got Mixed: Revolutionary Rojava and the War on ISIS* is an insightful primer for the world outside of Rojava on the history and ongoing building, defence and expansion of this democratic confederalist feminist experiment because of the ways that it is able to be clear and complex, general and personal, and local and international, at the same time. This is in part due to the long direct and indirect connection that the author and illustrator, Janet Biehl has had to this struggle that enabled her to speak directly to such a wide range of people on the frontlines rebuilding after a four-year war with ISIS, and in part due to the graphic form of the book. This review is therefore interested in the long and intersecting histories of relationships that culminated in this book and how they have impacted both its content and its format, as will be shown is often the case with graphic histories of solidarity that seek to expose and challenge divisions weaponised for the purposes of material and discursive control. Reflecting on the relationships that make revolutionary history, and that produce histories of revolutionary experiments, this review article considers *Their Blood Got Mixed* in conversation with a range of recently published graphic non-fiction, and with engaged scholarship concerned with the politics of knowledge production in and for movements of solidarity.

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1 The book includes maps, for example of the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. By 2017, after the SDF liberation of cities and villages including Raqqa, onetime seat of the IS caliphate, replaced with a civil council established on the basis of democracy and equality, the semiautonomous enclave controlled one third of Syria, a region rich in oil, farmland and water. J. Biehl, *Their Blood Got Mixed: Revolutionary Rojava and the War on ISIS* (New York: PM Press, 2022), 29.

# *Their Blood Got Mixed*



## **Revolutionary Rojava and the War on ISIS**

Written and Illustrated by Janet Biehl

Figure 1: Janet Biehl, *Their Blood Got Mixed: Revolutionary Rojava and the War on ISIS*. shared with permission of the author and publisher.

## Conversations through text that feed (creative) intervention

In 2019 Janet Biehl, an independent American scholar and artist, was invited to return to Rojava with filmmakers, and spent a month interviewing people about the way that the war on ISIS was impacting the revolutionary experiment in the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria<sup>2</sup>. This was Janet Biehl's third visit in a twenty year long history of connection with the ideas and practices of self-governance based on citizens' assemblies and popular participation made through her collaboration with her late partner, Murray Bookchin.<sup>3</sup> Bookchin's ideas are credited as central to the ideological transformation of the Kurdish freedom movement away from Marxism and statism towards grassroots democracy and ecology through his writings and his correspondence with Abdullah Öcalan,<sup>4</sup> chief ideologist and strategist of the Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan, the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) since its founding in 1978.<sup>5</sup> Öcalan has been incarcerated by the Turkish regime for the last 25 years. In 1998 he was on his way to South Africa where he was invited to seek refuge by Mandela, but was abducted in Kenya by the Turkish Intelligence Agency with the help of the US's Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), arrested on charges of treason and given a life sentence on Imrali Island Prison. His confinement since then has been mostly solitary with no communication with the outside world in the past three years. He has written over 12 books from prison, some of which draw on the writings of Bookchin which had been translated into Turkish.

Öcalan and Bookchin had an email exchange in 2004, and in 2005 the movement adopted the Declaration of Democratic Confederalism. When Bookchin died in 2006 the PKK made a vow to become the first society to establish a tangible democratic confederalism, stating: 'Bookchin has not died, he will live through his work and through the work of others.'<sup>6</sup> By 2010 a mass movement had been built across four countries. By this time, their stated aim was not for a Kurdish nation state, but to build a counter power to replace capitalism and the state. Self-governing neighbourhood councils were linked and coordinated across Turkey, Syria, Iran, and Iraq through the Kurdish Communities Union (KCU), which included older parties such as the PKK as part of the broader Kurdish liberation struggle.<sup>7</sup> It was these formations, and practices of the ideas and structures consolidated and penned by Öcalan, that were ready to resist in what became known as Rojava in 2012.

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2 R. Domoney and D. Mitchell (directors), *Road to Rojava* (forthcoming film), <https://indyfilmlibrary.com/2019/10/19/road-to-rojava-co-director-danny-mitchell-on-telling-the-stories-that-matter/>

3 Biehl, *Their Blood Got Mixed*, 77, 109. Or see J. Biehl, *Ecology or Catastrophe: The Life of Murray Bookchin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). This collaboration, explains Biehl, included 'writing accurate explainer articles... defending his anti-statist, grassroots-democratic, bottom-up politics against his critics. I edited and compiled *The Murray Bookchin Reader* [1997], and I wrote a primer on his political ideas called *The Politics of Social Ecology* [1998]. I edited everything Murray himself wrote after 1991. We spent a total of about seven years on his four-volume history of revolutions called *The Third Revolution* [1990, 1996–2005]. I edited it and helped research it, and by the later volumes I was writing parts of it'. See I. Thomas, "'I Felt A Responsibility To Share My Experience': Janet Biehl On *Their Blood Got Mixed*", *The Comics Journal*, 9 September 2022, <https://www.tcj.com/i-felt-a-responsibility-to-share-my-experience-janet-biehl-on-their-blood-got-mixed/>.

4 Biehl, *Their Blood Got Mixed*, 186.

5 *Ibid.*, 189.

6 *Ibid.*, 189.

7 For more on this pre-2012 history, see International Labour Research and Information Group, 'The Rojava Revolution: What Does it Mean for South Africa?', January 2020, 34.

Biehl explains that Öcalan had expanded and improved on Bookchin's outline for face-to-face workings of democracy in citizens' assemblies and confederal councils grounded in systems that cement local autonomy by adding the commune council system to centre the liberation of women which he argued was the determinant of freedom and equality of all sections of society.<sup>8</sup> She quotes Öcalan's texts: "The extent to which society can be thoroughly transformed is determined by the extent of the transformation attained by women. Similarly, the level of women's freedom and equality determines the freedom and equality of all sections of society."<sup>9</sup> She shows us how these ideas were debated in mountain camps in the early 2000s and implemented in Rojava in 2012.

*Their Blood Got Mixed* depicts how Biehl had facilitated conversations between Öcalan and bedridden Bookchin in 2004–5. In interviews she elaborates that while she had worked closely with Bookchin on ideas on assembly democracy, anti-statism, grassroots-democratic and bottom-up politics for nineteen years, she only got involved with the Kurdish freedom movement after his death in 2011, when she was invited by Ercan Ayboga from the Mesopotamian Ecology Movement to participate in a conference in Diyarbakir (Amed), the largest Kurdish city in southeastern Turkey. She was taken with the explanations and applications of Bookchin's social ecology theories across a wide range of grassroots democratic institutions and shocked at the levels of Turkish violation of Kurds. 'I realized I was in a position to help.'<sup>10</sup> The form this took was to translate the work of the German-based Kurdish solidarity campaign TATORT Kurdistan (Crime Scene Kurdistan), since there was little writing on the struggle in English at that time. In 2013 she published *Democratic Autonomy in North Kurdistan: The Council Movement, Gender Liberation, and Ecology*<sup>11</sup>. In 2014 she was invited by other European Kurdish solidarity activists to participate in delegations to meet with leaders of the 2012 revolution, including leaders of the revolutionary organisation TEV-DEM (*Tevgera Civaka Demokratîk*). Her mandate was to 'witness firsthand the new society that was under construction and report back on it', which she did.<sup>12</sup> In 2016 she translated *Revolution in Rojava: Democratic Autonomy and Women's Liberation in Syrian Kurdistan*.<sup>13</sup> But as she notes in *Their Blood Got Mixed*, she had an ongoing 'regret not being able to talk to ordinary citizens about the revolution, since I don't know Kurdish or Arabic'.<sup>14</sup> The 2019 film invite in Rojava was an opportunity to have these conversations directly.

These are not just issues of practicalities or timing, but political questions about how the links in relationships of solidarity develop, the role of writing and translation, questions of whose histories can be heard and penned – not questions of voice

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8 Biehl, *Their Blood Got Mixed*, 182–187.

9 Ibid., 187. Also see A. Öcalan, *Liberating Life: Woman's Revolution* (Germany: International Initiative Edition with Mesopotamian Publishers, 2013).

10 Thomas, 'I Felt A Responsibility To Share My Experience'.

11 TATORT Kurdistan (author) and J. Biehl (translator), *Democratic Autonomy in North Kurdistan: The Council Movement, Gender Liberation, and Ecology* (Norway: New Compass Press, 2013). Campaign TATORT Kurdistan translates to Crime Scene Kurdistan and seeks to raise awareness of the historic plight of the Kurds.

12 Thomas, 'I Felt A Responsibility To Share My Experience'.

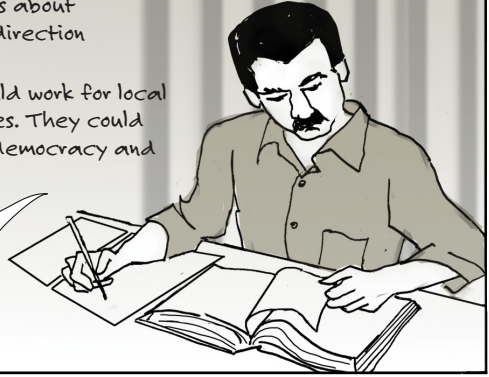
13 M. Knapp, A. Flach and E. Ayboga, *Revolution in Rojava: Democratic Autonomy and Women's Liberation in Syrian Kurdistan*, J. Biehl (translator), D. Graeber (foreword), A. Abdullah (afterward) (Pluto Press, 2016).

14 Thomas, 'I Felt A Responsibility To Share My Experience'.

Included were Bookchin's writings in Turkish translation. As Öcalan read, Murray's ideas about democracy and ecology suggested a new direction for the Kurdish movement.

Kurds in Turkey, Syria, Iran, and Iraq could work for local autonomy within existing state boundaries. They could govern themselves through an assembly democracy and confederations.

Decision-making processes lie with the communities. Higher levels serve only to coordinate and implement the will of the communities.



Öcalan made a major improvement in Bookchin's program: he affirmed the supreme importance of the liberation of women.

The extent to which society can be thoroughly transformed is determined by the extent of the transformation attained by women. Similarly, the level of woman's freedom and equality determines the freedom and equality of all sections of society.



Öcalan called this ideology democratic confederalism and recommended it to the PKK. They debated it among themselves in their mountain camps.

But how can we give up our dream of a Kurdish state?

The only thing states do to Kurds is persecute us!



Figure 2: Abdullah Öcalan and Democratic Confederalism debated in PKK camps, shared with permission of the author and publisher.<sup>15</sup>

15 Biehl, *Their Blood Got Mixed*, 187.

or voicelessness, but questions of relationality, intentionality, power, positionality, audibility, traction, translation and trust.<sup>16</sup> The representation of Bookchin and Öcalan, in this history of Rojava, raise questions of divisions of political labour and intimacies, authorship critical of leadership, and questions of analysing and representing relationship dynamics within organisations in general and within revolutionary movements in particular. The dilemma of depicting leaders and leadership dynamics in movements that seek to challenge power and hierarchy is one that C. L. R. James, for example, grapples with in writing the history of the Haitian Revolution. His 1938 seminal text, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* is famously prefaced with praise to the remarkable leader of the revolution followed by the following caveat: 'Yet Toussaint did not make the revolution, the revolution made Toussaint. And even that is not the whole truth.'<sup>17</sup>

How does one depict this truth when writing histories of collectives?<sup>18</sup> The case of Toussaint is raised again in *Toussaint Louverture: The Story of the Only Successful Slave Revolt in History*, a recently released graphic novel adaptation of a long-lost script of a play about the Haitian Revolution written by C. L. R. James in 1934 before he wrote *Black Jacobins*.<sup>19</sup> The theatrical performance opened in London's Westminster Theatre in 1936 – the leading role of the revolutionary leader was played by Paul Robeson. This was an important historic event in and of itself as this was the first time that a black actor appeared on the British stage in a work by a black playwright. Artists Nic Watts and Sakina Karimjee have drawn images to go with James's script which had not been seen for almost seventy years (other than one scene published in a literary magazine), until a draft copy was found by Christian Høgsbjerg, while doing PhD research in the archives of the University of Hull where he was going through the papers of Jock Haston, one of James's comrades from British Trotskyist circles in the 1930s. *Toussaint Louverture: The Story of the Only Successful Slave Revolt in History. A Play in Three Acts* (edited by Christian Høgsbjerg), was then published in 2012,<sup>20</sup> just as Watts and Karimjee were looking for a historian to write the text for a graphic rendition of *Black Jacobins*.

C. L. R. James likewise deliberated on where to carefully place or how to portray individual leaders or actors involved in urgently needed but neglected writings of histories of struggle. The play was written in London at the time of the 100-year anniversary of the British abolition of slavery and Høgsbjerg tracks the archival traces of James's decisions through drafts of his script:

James was... acutely conscious of the need to challenge the mythological British nationalist narrative of abolition, one that glorified the role played by

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16 K. Srigley, S. Zembrzycki and F. Iacovetta (eds), *Beyond Women's Words: Feminisms and the Practices of Oral History in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Routledge, 2018).

17 C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1938).

18 K. Benson, *Crossroads: I Live Where I Like*, A. Trantraal, N. Trantraal and A. Marais (illustrators), R. D. G. Kelley (forward) (California: PM Press, 2021), 2.

19 C. L. R. James, and S. Karimjee and N. Watts (illustrators), *Toussaint Louverture: The Story of the Only Successful Slave Revolt in History* (Verso, 2023).

20 C. L. R. James, *Toussaint Louverture: The Story of the Only Successful Slave Revolt in History. A Play in Three Acts*, C. Høgsbjerg (ed) and L. DuBois (foreword) (Duke University Press, 2012).



British parliamentarians such as Wilberforce. Indeed, in the original version of the playscript C. L. R. James mentioned Wilberforce himself in passing, but then later in a handwritten revision (one that I have respected) decided to remove the explicit mention of the abolitionist Tory MP... to help bring home the essential truth about abolition – that it was the enslaved who abolished slavery themselves – to a British audience who would almost certainly be hearing such a truth for the first time.<sup>21</sup>

In the graphic novel adaptation, Watts and Karimjee have grappled with the politics of portrayal.<sup>22</sup> Like James, they aimed in their decision making to show Toussaint's incredible leadership and innovations, while also not oversimplifying 'generic masses', or Toussaint, his history, and his role. He is the main character, but the ability to use placements decisions as well as choices around size and scale and detail in the illustrations, are important both artistically and politically to depict the relationships not just between Toussaint and the enslaved people he represented, but also to dramatise the nature of shifting tensions and allegiances in the unfolding of the Haitian Revolution – this was more than a decade of complicated dynamics and contradiction comparable with the geopolitical and social dynamics unfolding in an equally intense decade of revolutionary struggle in northeast Syria.

There are parallels here with the way that Biehl's artwork enables complexity and clarity to coexist, and the way that her book honours and tracks the ideas of Bookchin and Öcalan, but also delicately de-centres them. It does this by focusing on women and men on the frontlines living through a war to defend the spaces they have created to live out the radical experiments of democratic confederalism, while also explaining their contributions and roles (including in her own relationship to Rojava) up front and in coming back to reflect on them again in the last quarter of the book. In terms of historiography of graphic non-fiction or similar genre-crossing experiments that focus on revolutionary movements written by politically involved historians or people who end up producing histories, these dilemmas of portraying leadership while maintaining a critique of power, for James and Biehl and others alike, are instructive.

At the same time, a more appropriate parallel to draw in terms of the history of Haiti and of Rojava would be a history of marronage and fugitivity, given the state-centric focus of much of the framing of the Haitian Revolution which privileges a vision of victory as one of being recognised as a state, and does not take into consideration the many maroon communities that existed below and above state level creating a range of alternative forms of social inclusion/self-governance. The question of creative beyond-words forms of telling these subversive histories is raised by Quincy

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21 S. McLemee, 'Revolution on Stage,' *Inside Higher Education*, 19 February 2013, <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2013/02/20/review-clr-james-toussaint-louverture-story-only-successful-slave-revolt-history>.

22 "A Radical Reimagining of Life" – On the Haitian Revolution and Adapting C.L.R. James' Toussaint Louverture With Sakina Karimjee and Nic Watts; Millennials Are Killing Capitalism Podcast, 21 August 2023, <https://millennialsarekillingcapitalism.libsyn.com/a-radical-reimagining-of-life-on-the-haitian-revolution-and-adapting-clr-james-toussaint-louverture-with-sakina-karimjee-and-nic-watts>.

Saul in *Maroon Comix Origins and Destinies*, a collaborative collection of powerful comics about maroon histories which interestingly includes amongst its listed authorship, selections from the writings of both C. L. R. James and Öcalan.<sup>23</sup> In ‘a vision quest/manifesto’ that concludes the inspirational collection, Saul writes:

The first words about maroons were in the languages and books of their enemies. So the memory of their truth and their beauty survived in spite of the printed page... Historians try to tell the true stories of maroons. They search the diaries and account books of their captors and assassins for clues about their lives. Yet maroon memory is alive because like maroons it stayed hidden. And so to tell maroon history is a paradox... to honour this paradox... we propose *Maroon Comix*. *Maroon Comix* are stories insurgent against singular History, armed with art. Not a chronology but a collage; a pattern and a program that reflects maroon realities... just like the first maroons raided plantations for tools and supplies, so we raid the Image and the Word. In the autonomous zone of *Maroon Comix*, where freedom from converges with freedom to, the Image may help the Word escape from the West, and the Word may help the Image escape from the Screen. A Vision Quest to escape the Society of the Spectacle! This is *Maroon Comix*: the kindling of a quilombo in our hearts and minds, and fresh water from the roots of an old garden, where freedom still blossoms, where wild words wander among implacable images.<sup>24</sup>

## Conversations with women on the frontlines of the revolution

The bulk of *Their Blood Got Mixed: Revolutionary Rojava and the War on ISIS* is not about either Bookchin nor Öcalan but dedicated to sharing what Biehl heard moving across the liberated zone of Rojava with translators in 2019 asking, after four years of war and under constant ongoing attack, how democratic principles are being applied, not according to leaders or theoreticians but to ordinary members. She wanted to know about the actual workings of implementing popular participation, gender relations and alliances between deeply divided ethnic and religious groups. What were the effects of four years of brutal war against ISIS on the democratic experiment?

The book is organised into fifteen short chapters: the Islamic State; Why I’m Here; Links in a Chain; A Place of Refugees; The Revolution of 2012; Women’s Protection Units (YPJ); Women and Men; Qamislo Scenes; Economics; Kobane Plus Four Years; Afrin; Security; Social Ecology; Democracy; and Self-Administration. Some of the conversations depicted in these chapters include interviews at the YPJ Academy in

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23 The book’s authorship is tributed as: ‘Conceived, Compiled, and coordinated by Quincy Saul, illustrated by Songe Riddle, Mac McGill, Seth Tobocman, Hannah Allen, Emmy Kepler, and Mikaela Gonzalez, with selections primarily from the writings of Russell Maroon Shoatz, and citations from Gaanman Joachim-Joseph Adochini, James Koehnline, Herbert Aptheker, Mavis Campbell, Wade Davis, Dan Hancox, C.L.R. James, Sabu Kohson, butch Lee, Julius Nyerere, Abdullah Öcalan, Richard Price, Juan Manuel Sánchez Gordillo, and more...’

24 Q. Saul (ed), *Maroon Comix: Origins and Destinies* (New York: PM Press, 2018), 58–59.

Hasakah which provides military and ideological training for women soldiers;<sup>25</sup> at Yekitiya/Kongreya Star, an umbrella organising committee for the women's assembly of North and East Syria. These snapshots of interviews make real the ways that the Women's Protection Units (Kurdish, Yekîneyên Parastina Jinê; YPJ) and women in the women's military wing of the PKK, Yekîneyên Jinên Azad ên Star (YJA-Star), have challenged traditional gender roles and contributed to the idea of 'democratic confederalism', as a conscious move away from patriarchal nationalism.<sup>26</sup> Biehl depicts examples of the debates over conference principles, rules and procedures,<sup>27</sup> and includes interviews from Jinwar, an all women village near Amude,<sup>28</sup> and from the Jineoloji Research Center uncovering Kurdish and Arab women's historical contributions in the far past and in the current struggle and aiming to open academies for women across North-Eastern Syria.<sup>29</sup> Although not directly explained in the book, the name of the centre and the underlying principles behind these organisations is the movement's concept of Jineology, which asserts that without the freedom of women within society and without a real consciousness surrounding women no society can call itself free.<sup>30</sup> The short but very specific insights from key organisations building these practices on the ground show us what work is going into the idea of popular participation in citizens' assemblies that insist that women participate in all social and political roles, including democratic institutions and the defence forces.

The logics behind the range of grounded institutions being built are shared through illustrated interviews, for example, with: Hesên Elî a translator in Kobane who sketches the Autonomous Administration and the confederal structure;<sup>31</sup> with Mona Abdul Salaam, a spokesperson for SARA, a civil society organisation started in 2013 to promote women's rights, to counter violence against women, and to support women facing domestic violence which chose its name as one that is relevant to Kurds, Christians, and Arabs;<sup>32</sup> with Massoud Mohammad, the University of Rojava's deputy chairperson; with visiting teachers at University of Kobane, and at the Akademiya Mesopotamia in Qamiso; with men along the road about all of these changes and the shifts in forms of masculinity; with Ruken a worker at a restaurant, given space by the self-administration to run in a municipal owned building, making low cost meals out of local ingredients, where they got training and where they rotate

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25 The Rojava revolution is defended by the volunteer democratic militias – the general militia, the People's Protection Units (YPG) and the women-only Women's Protection Units (YPJ) which was established in 2013 to defend the 2012 revolution. In 2015 the YPG founded the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) which conscripted people for setting up check points behind the front lines, but only volunteers in the militia do the fighting. Biehl, *Their Blood Got Mixed*, 70–84.

26 For more on the underlying principle behind these organisations, see M. Düzgün, 'Jineology', *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, 12, 2, July 2016, 284–287.

27 Ibid., 90.

28 Ibid., 97.

29 Ibid., 104.

30 Z. Diyar in Düzgün, 'Jineology', 285.

31 Under the 2016 social contract, there are well defined citizen's assemblies, and in the North-East there are communes. Each commune encompasses ten streets of about 300 households which meet every week or two. From the bottom up, the links in the chain of this structure goes from communes to neighbourhood councils, to city councils to district councils to regional councils to the executive, legislative and judicial councils. At each level there are committees that focus on: peace, security, education, economy, culture, women, health, infrastructure, social affairs and diplomacy. At every level there are two leaders, a man and a woman; these are co-head delegates who are elected. They also use this system in the refugee camps. Biehl, *Their Blood Got Mixed*, 194–196, 219.

32 Ibid., 94.

## YPJ Academy, Hasakah



Figure 3: YPJ Academy, Hasakah, the election and education of women and men's defence force voluntary recruits, shared with permission of the author and publisher.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Biehl, *Their Blood Got Mixed*, 73.

He draws a chart showing the structure of communes and councils, their power flowing upward, ultimately to the self-administration. The ten committees run upward in parallel vertical lines.

## Autonomous administration: Executive, legislative, and judicial councils

Bodies: (1) Peace (2) Security (3) Education (4) Economy (5) Culture  
(6) Women (7) Health (8) Infrastructure (9) Social affairs (10) Diplomacy



### Regional council

Committees: (1) Peace (2) Security (3) Education (4) Economy (5) Culture  
(6) Women (7) Health (8) Infrastructure (9) Social affairs (10) Diplomacy



### Cantonal council

Committees: (1) Peace (2) Security (3) Education (4) Economy (5) Culture  
(6) Women (7) Health (8) Infrastructure (9) Social affairs (10) Diplomacy



### District council

Committees: (1) Peace (2) Security (3) Education (4) Economy (5) Culture  
(6) Women (7) Health (8) Infrastructure (9) Social affairs (10) Diplomacy



### City council

Committees: (1) Peace (2) Security (3) Education (4) Economy (5) Culture  
(6) Women (7) Health (8) Infrastructure (9) Social affairs (10) Diplomacy



### Neighborhood council

Committees: (1) Peace (2) Security (3) Education (4) Economy (5) Culture  
(6) Women (7) Health (8) Infrastructure (9) Social affairs (10) Diplomacy



### Commune

Committees: (1) Peace (2) Security (3) Education (4) Economy (5) Culture  
(6) Women (7) Health (8) Infrastructure (9) Social affairs (10) Diplomacy

Figure 4: Hesén Eli's sketch of the levels of the democratic system, shared with permission of the author and publisher.<sup>34</sup>

34 Biehl, *Their Blood Got Mixed*, 196.

jobs run as a non-profit, where they report the income to the municipality each week and 80 per cent of the proceeds go to the women running it and 10 per cent back into the operation and 10 per cent to the self-administration.<sup>35</sup> These small snapshots of insights help to answer how such radical ideas are being implemented on the ground.

Biehl also includes her own observations of rebuilding physical and social infrastructure. She visits Kobane four years after the US led coalition where the YPG and YPJ drove IS out in 2015. At that time, IS had destroyed all the hospitals, fuel stations, water supplies and bakeries, and she saw how they had rebuilt the city and the self-administration, and reorganised the self-defence units of each commune after a brutal siege and massacres, implementing new night patrols and check points. She illustrates the day-to-day ecological practices and challenges; of processes of assessing the social benefits of economic project proposals;<sup>36</sup> of meetings at agricultural co-ops which include the Cooperative Contract issued in 2016 outlining the principle of collective work, solidarity, self-governance and ecological compatibility designed to run democratically and with rules that counter sexist divisions of labour.<sup>37</sup> In this way, she shows us the answers she finds to her questions of how such alternatives to capitalism, patriarchy and dictatorship are being practised.

While Biehl is clearly impressed with what she sees and hears, and argues that the war reinforced social solidarity and welded together the multi-ethnic, gender-liberated society, she also includes the hardships and ongoing dire, unresolved, challenges. In this book, this includes questions of pollution, economics, lack of investment and plummeting currency, cultural contradictions, and ongoing attacks. There is but a brief mention of the contradictions and unsustainability of the 2015 tactical decision to ally with the US in a militia coalition against ISIS and to defend the borders against Turkey but which has not yielded official political recognition of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria or much support when Turkish troops with Jihadist mercenaries committed war crimes and atrocities in Afrin in 2018.<sup>38</sup> As Berivan Hesên, whose sister, along with 11,000 others, have been murdered said: 'Kobane was liberated by my family's blood. My family, like all the others, wanted freedom, and freedom is expensive.'<sup>39</sup>

What will the SDF do with over 5,000 IS captives and their 70,000 family members being held in detainment camps? They are 'providing them with shelter, food, and medicine as best it can. It lacks the resources to meet all the needs of this huge population.'<sup>40</sup> Women of YPJ are trying to help women captives psychologically to end cycles of revenge,<sup>41</sup> but as women explain in the book, without international aid or international recognition of North and East Syria that can push for an end for the embargoes of international trade, a lasting resolution remains over the horizon. Likewise, and perhaps beyond the timeframe but absolutely within the book's key

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35 Ibid., 128–129.

36 Ibid., 127.

37 Ibid., 131.

38 Biehl, *Their Blood Got Mixed*, 174.

39 Ibid., 217.

40 Ibid., 44.

41 Ibid., 46.

themes of building autonomous or liberated zones across divides, there is no discussion on navigating solidarity or lack thereof with recent popular protest movements in Syria.

## Graphic non-fiction and feminist histories produced in solidarity

The form of *Their Blood Got Mixed*, graphic non-fiction, or longform comics narrative, adds more than illustration to the story of revolutionary Rojava. The book includes drawings, quotes, maps, poems, sketches of organisational structures, and images of the joys and pains of this struggle. Biehl describes the book as a memoir, and illustrates herself on this journey, as a self-identified 'democracy nerd' exposing moments of both ease and awkwardness. It follows in the lines of non-fiction graphic novels/comics, like *Persepolis* (about Marjane Satrapi's experiences of growing up during the Islamic Revolution in Iran);<sup>42</sup> *Delhi Calm* (Vishwajyoti Ghosh's re-imagining of the crisis of Indian democracy in the 1970s);<sup>43</sup> and *Paying the Land* (Joe Sacco's journey exploring the history and impact of mining extraction and tourism on indigenous Dene land in Canada told mostly through illustrating first-person interviews).<sup>44</sup> Within this growing historical genre are comics about feminist struggles that seek to challenge both the product and the process of producing new histories about and in solidarity. We live in a time where one can ask if historians, journalists and artists are necessary in the production of graphic histories – for example Al Jazeera now has an 'In Pictures' section that carries a series called History Illustrated, 'a weekly series of insightful perspectives that puts news events and current affairs into historical context using graphics generated with artificial intelligence'. In a July 2023 article, 'Colonialism and the Niger Coup', which gives a primer of background history to the current uprising, the text is written by Danylo Hawaleshka, Mohamed Dris is noted as art direction, and Midjourney AI is credited for the artwork.<sup>45</sup> What is the difference between such AI generated graphic history and a book like Biehl's?

Histories of solidarity, produced in solidarity, often take on a range of creative forms. *Their Blood Got Mixed* falls within this genre of graphic non-fiction focused on feminist solidarity movements, written by women in solidarity. In other words, by researchers in longstanding relationship to the frontline organisers. This often results in the authors' biographical journey and relationship to said struggle, featuring in the book itself. This I would argue comes from an awareness of positionality and a radical feminist understanding of questioning and exposing the hidden hand in everything,<sup>46</sup> including in the production of such artwork/history writing.<sup>47</sup> For example in the case of Rebecca Hall's *Wake: The Hidden History of Women-Led Slave*

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42 M. Satrapi, *Persepolis* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2004).

43 V. Ghosh, *Delhi Calm* (India: Harper Collins, 2010).

44 J. Sacco, *Paying the Land*. (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2020).

45 D. Hawaleshka, 'Colonialism in the Niger Coup', M. Dris (art direction) and Midjourney AI (artwork), *Al Jazeera*, 13 Aug 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/gallery/2023/8/13/history-illustrated-colonialism-the-niger-coup>.

46 C. Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Chicago: Duke University Press, 2003).

47 K. Benson, 'Drawing (on) the Past in Histories of the Present: Dialogues and Drawings of South African Women's Organized Resistance to Forced Removals' in L. Vetinde and J. B. Samou (eds), *African Cultural Production and the Rhetoric of Humanism* (Maryland: Lexington Books, 2020), 127–149.

*Revolts in New York*, we see Hall haunted in the streets of contemporary New York as the remains of the enslaved are unearthed during a 1999 building project which sends her on a journey to the archives to find the voices of her ancestors. We see her, in conversation with her family and the details of researching in the present, as much as we see drawings of the history she is unearthing of the 1700s.<sup>48</sup> In *Mobile Girls Koottam: Working Women Speak*, we see researcher and author Madhumita Dutta in conversation with five young women (Pooja, Abhinaya, Lakshmi, Satya and Kalpana) working in a Nokia factory in India, deciding to turn their discussions into a podcast series (with Sam PC) and then into a graphic non-fiction that features the intimacies of their friendships along with the issues of labour migration, exploitation and organising.<sup>49</sup>

This kind of exposure of personal biographies/positionalities and the relationships built (with people or with archives/materials) that enable this kind of history writing in graphic form, is precisely what AI generated illustrations cannot do. Generating relationships of solidarity is at the heart of both the motivation, the content and the form of the research and illustration involved in *Their Blood Got Mixed*. It speaks to a form of engaged feminist scholarship from the global south that Leigh-Ann Naidoo in South Africa approaches as enmeshed or entailed,<sup>50</sup> and Richa Nagar in India refers to as situated solidarity,<sup>51</sup> and attempts to communicate the layers of these struggles across multiple borders and divides. *Their Blood Got Mixed* presents us with more than just a genre-mixing history of women crossing entrenched ethnic and national boundaries in Rojava, but with an example of ways of crossing the divides between researcher, writer, translator, friend, partner, artist and activist that answer the call for what Ruth Wilson Gilmore proposes as ‘rehearsal’ of alternatives,<sup>52</sup> as a mirror tribute to the border challenging Kurdish freedom movement. Biehl explains how women militia in Rojava refer to each other as *heval*, the Kurdish word for friend. But, as explained by Sarican, Dirik, and Üstündağ, used in the revolutionary context *heval* also means and is intertwined with the idea of comrade: *rêheval*, a ‘friend on the path’, capturing the sense of common political purpose and journey.<sup>53</sup> While not discussed further in the book, there is an important link to be made with ways of mirroring this form of radical friendship in our approaches to researching and writing in solidarity.

*Their Blood Got Mixed* tracks Biehl’s journey as a white American woman working through translators travelling with filmmakers through contemporary Rojava drawing out the history and practices of the revolutionary relationships of defending democracy in practice which stemmed from a longstanding commitment and curios-

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48 R. Hall, and H. Martinez (illustrator), *Wake: The Hidden History of Women-Led Slave Revolts in New York* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2021).

49 M. Dutta, *Mobile Girls Koottam: Working Women Speak* (India: Zubaan Press, 2021).

50 L. Naidoo, ‘Black student intellectuals and the complexity of entailment in the #RhodesMustFall movement’ (PhD thesis, School of Education, University of the Witwatersrand, 2020).

51 R. Nagar, *Muddying the Waters: Coauthoring Feminisms Across Scholarship and Activism* (University of Illinois Press, 2014).

52 R. Wilson Gilmore, *Abolition Geography: Essays Towards Liberation* (London: Verso, 2022).

53 For more on the radical possibilities of the idea of *hevalti*, see: E. Sarican and D. Dirik, ‘Hevalti- Revolutionary Friendship as Radical Care’ in *Performing Borders (e-journal 2: Rallying the Commons)*, <https://performingborders.live/ejournal/hevalti-revolutionary-friendship-as-radical-care/>; and N. Üstündağ, *The Mother, the Politician, and the Guerrilla: Women’s Political Imagination in the Kurdish Movement* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2023).



ity. However, the specific form the book took was also a culmination of a journey that gives insight into her own relationship to illustration and authorship. Whereas most of her previous work took the form of translation, copyediting and proofreading, here she spent every night during the documentary making, and the subsequent 18 months of the Covid pandemic lockdown, drawing and narrating from her own perspective. She explains that she had always loved to draw but her parents banned it.<sup>54</sup> When Bookchin was dying in 2006 she had promised to write his biography and had considered doing a graphic biography. Once she began, she decided 'I wasn't ready; there were too many technical things I didn't understand about comics production... So I put the comic biography aside and wrote the book... But in the meantime I kept drawing, by now understanding that it has to be a daily practice if you are serious. I took a class on graphic novels... I slowly pieced together a comics education.'<sup>55</sup> *Their Blood Got Mixed* drew inspiration from Joe Sacco's paradigm of using comics as journalism, and by earlier comics on Rojava, including Zerocalcare's *Kobane Calling: Greetings from Northeast Syria*, Marwan Hisham and Molly Crabapple's, *Brothers of the Gun: A Memoir of the Syrian War*, and Sarah Glidden's *Rolling Blackouts: Dispatches from Turkey, Syria, and Iraq*.<sup>56</sup>

Her approach to the politics of translation as an integral part and necessary form of solidarity comes through in the aesthetic choices made in the formulation of the artwork. She chose to illustrate a subjective account of herself interviewing women and men across the region, in part because she was imagining a way of sharing what she was exposed to, to an expanded audience. However, she was not simply extracting and re-presenting or representing the Kurdish struggle, she was equally challenging Americans to consider the stakes of their/her own democracy under threat. She explains that at the time she was invited by the filmmakers to accompany them to Rojava in 2019:

My focus had shifted somewhat back to the US, out of horror at the Donald Trump presidency. Like many Americans, I woke up every day feeling sick, wondering what Trump's wrecking ball would bash that day, appalled by the ethnic hatred that he was unleashing, and dreading that he would ultimately submerge whatever remained of US democracy in a swamp of ethnic hatred, misogyny, and homophobia. Democracy turned out to be more fragile that I had realized - when you have it, I now understood, you have to protect and defend it... But Kurds and their allies in northeastern Syria already knew this... Visiting AANES in 2019, a place that positively affirmed and defended democracy, was refreshing.<sup>57</sup>

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54 Thomas, 'I Felt A Responsibility To Share My Experience.'

55 Ibid..

56 Zerocalcare, *Kobane Calling: Greetings from Northeast Syria* (Milan: Bao Publishing, 2020); M. Hisham and M. Crabapple, *Brothers of the Gun: A Memoir of the Syrian War* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2018); S. Glidden, *Rolling Blackouts: Dispatches from Turkey, Syria, and Iraq* (Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2016).

57 Ibid..

Including herself in the illustrations was one way to account for her own perspective and motivated the multiple interventions the book aims at. In addition to challenging American complacency, she chose the comic medium to attract new readers/supporters to the struggle for Rojava. In aiming to reach new audiences, she had to presuppose a reader who had little prior knowledge. At the same time, because she had written a lot about Rojava in the past, she knew that there would be readers that would expect more than an introduction. Her solution to the challenge of being both introductory and complex was to 'be faithful to the particularities' of her experience: 'I would write about the specific people I encountered, the specific experiences I had, then as I went along fill in whatever seemed to need explaining to newcomers.'<sup>58</sup> To do this, she chose a general layout of three large horizontal panels per page (sometimes subdivided), because she knew there would be a lot of words which would need space to avoid crowding. She also chose to avoid talking heads by including full body figures and different angles. To signal flashbacks and jumps in time in the historical narrative, she chose pale yellow for scenes taking place in the present, and grays and brown for any scenes taking place in the past. These are as much decisions about aesthetics and art practices as they are about the ethics of translating struggles across multiple divides, described by Richa Nagar as 'translational praxis.'<sup>59</sup>

In orienting art towards solidarity, Nic Watts explains that his motivation to create a graphic of *Black Jacobins* was in part because the text is so complicated, and in part because of the ways that it resonates with current pressing questions of Haiti and imperialism. C. L. R. James's recovered script was ideal because a script is dialogue-based, and could become not only the text of the book, but also could provide political clarity. As author of the play, James was not just an acclaimed historian who had done the research, but was, in the 1930s, similarly concerned with speaking to questions of resisting imperialism in his time. Like plays, graphic novels, argues theatre maker and Watt's co-collaborator, Sakina Karimjee, both complicate and simplify. Karimjee says that a play is a simplified distilled version of a story which enables a clear political through line.<sup>60</sup> The challenge of conveying both the tensions and shifting allegiances, the debates amongst leadership, the hardship, the humour, and yet maintaining political clarity, is part of the art of writing revolutionary relationships. It is interesting to note that James's play was followed by plays on Toussaint Louverture by Aimé Césaire (*And The Dogs Were Silent* in 1958) and Édouard Glissant (*Monsieur Toussaint* in 1961).<sup>61</sup> In 'Revolution on Stage', a review article on James's play on Toussaint, Scott McLemee notes that 'historical dramatists always face the challenge of stuffing as much exposition as possible into the characters 'mouths without making them sound like a textbook', and that James's script must be read not only as an

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58 Ibid.

59 R. Nagar, *Hungry Translations: Relearning the World Through Radical Vulnerability* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2019), 31.

60 "A Radical Reimagining of Life" – On the Haitian Revolution and Adapting C. L. R. James' Toussaint Louverture With Sakina Karimjee and Nic Watts, *Millennials Are Killing Capitalism* Podcast.

61 Thank you to the anonymous peer-reviewer who drew my attention to these subsequent plays. A. Césaire (author) and A. Gil (translator), *.....and the Dogs Were Silent!.....Et Les Chiens Se Taisaient* (Duke University Press, 2024); E. Glissant (author) and J. Michael Dash (translator), *Monsieur Toussaint: A Play Paperback* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2005).

artefact of historical, political or biographical significance but also as a work of art.<sup>62</sup> Insisting on humour and beauty as core to humanisation and to appealing to readers was likewise a non-negotiable starting point for Nathan Trantraal in agreeing to illustrate *Crossroads: I Live Where I Like*, the graphic history of women's organised resistance to forced removals in apartheid and post-1994 South Africa.<sup>63</sup>

According to Biehl, one of the main messages that motivated the writing of this book, was Bookchin's insistence that there is no substitute for consciousness – that institutions alone cannot keep democracy going. Consciousness requires relationships and practices, a wide range of which are illustrated in this book. Art has long been seen as a pillar of Rojava's revolution.<sup>64</sup> Sculptor, Bavê Guevera describes the pain of watching young boys beheaded and the pride of YPJ/YPG resistance in Rojava, which he expresses in stone, and asserts: 'To know someone, you must know their history, you get to know them through their sculptures, music, culture, and art.' Art carries history, and the form of this book, albeit of a very different perspective and style, will carry this history to a wide audience, as an act of solidarity with suggested ways to take this struggle forward in the final afterward of the book.

## Counterinsurgency and the imploding crisis of colonial borders

This book speaks to many of the core themes of this *Kronos* special edition on ISIS in Cabo Delgado, particularly the global–local nexus in the insurgency and in the resistance to it, the gendered dimensions of the conflict and, importantly, alternatives to the conventional historical and current representation of dehumanisation, victimhood or heroism. As a history about responding to colonial legacies and the current ISIS attack, *Their Blood Got Mixed* can offer a challenge to the Mozambican search for forms of liberated zones over time, and to the current crisis of extractive industries. It is an interesting experiment to think with in terms of asking the question what constitutes democracy, liberation or a liberated zone? What is the work of working across the exploitation of differences or divide and rule of religion, ethnicity and gender? The book's title comes from an interview with a man named Nabo about the Kobane battle where Arabs and Kurds fought ISIS together, and in the process, he says, 'our blood got mixed'.<sup>65</sup>

Interestingly, despite years of collaboration to support the work of Bookchin, Biehl explains that she was politically unconvinced by anarchism, or the prospects of anti-statist revolution until she saw the practices of democratic confederalism in Rojava years after Bookchin's passing.<sup>66</sup> In telling the story through her own perspective, journeying through her own conviction process, she exposes conversation by

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62 McLemee writes that his 'impression is that James did this with more finesse in some scenes than others, and that the play always improves when Toussaint takes the stage'. S. McLemee, 'Revolution on Stage'.

63 K. Benson, 'Graphic Novel Histories: Women's Organized Resistance to Slum Clearance in Crossroads South Africa, 1975–2015', *African Studies Review*, 59, 1, 2016, 204.

64 D. Xweseri and L. Lotus (directors), 'Art, a pillar of Rojava's revolution', 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iyAfl3fVK2k>.

65 Biehl, *Their Blood Got Mixed*, 148.

66 Thomas, 'I Felt A Responsibility To Share My Experience', <https://www.tcj.com/i-felt-a-responsibility-to-share-my-experience-janet-biehl-on-their-blood-got-mixed/>.

conversation in the words of the wider range of people she spoke to, the practices of building a different social fabric and of defending democratic practice, but also explains to a non-convinced or non-familiar audience, the significance of each example shared. The significance of anarchist theorisation for living experiments of non-sovereign session in practice begs further discussion and comparison with other existing cases of anarchist polities such as the Zapatistas in Chiapas and their navigation of alternatives in the midst of ongoing warfare.

As Biehl asserts, since 2014, IS has carried out or inspired at least 150 attacks in 20 countries.<sup>67</sup> The SDF sees their victories in North-East Syria as a victory for women, for ethnic minorities, and for people around the world being attacked by ISIS.<sup>68</sup> But this territory is far from secure with constant attacks from Turkey and Jihadist mercenaries. The book ends with what people told her when she asked what Syrian Kurds want now. Some said they wanted a separate Kurdish nation state but most spoke of a democratic nation that would replace the Baath dictatorship with decentralised democratic self-administration in all of Syria as per the ideas of Abdullah Öcalan.<sup>69</sup>

In a moment where the same 1920s European map drawing of nation-states that forced the Kurds to live as minorities under ethnonationalist regimes that persecuted them is imploding in occupied Palestine and throwing up questions of weaponising past traumas so that, in the case of Israel, 'colonialism is framed as reparations from genocide',<sup>70</sup> the decision taken by the Kurdish freedom movement to find security and safety not in creating a new state of exclusion, is pathbreaking. Biehl tells us that after decades of having no place in the 2012 moment for self-government, 'instead of creating some kind of vengeful counternationalism, they dared to try something different: they chose to work with their fellow oppressed ethnic and religious minorities and attempted to overcome hatred by affirming social solidarity with them... they boldly set out to create a pluralistic, multi-ethnic democratic society.'<sup>71</sup> These are histories as desperately needed to face complexities in the present and reimagine pathways to the future from Cabo Delgado, to the Middle East, and beyond, because they challenge ideas about justice and repair, but also about the order of things. Do we need to win first and then figure out women's liberation and frontline democratic processes, or are these practices possible and in fact necessary starting points?

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67 Ibid., 30.

68 Ibid., 30.

69 Biehl, *Their Blood Got Mixed*, 180–1.

70 N. Klein, *Doppelgänger: A Trip into the Mirror World* (London: Macmillan, 2023).

71 Biehl, *Their Blood Got Mixed*, 1.