

Living in Dark Mode

 [nytimes.com/2019/11/26/opinion/sunday/hong-kong-protest-elections.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/26/opinion/sunday/hong-kong-protest-elections.html)

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The lights in my room are off, and the autumn air is trickling in through the window. It is my favorite season in Hong Kong, finally cool enough to get by without air-conditioning. I'm listening to meditation music a friend sent me to ease my persistent insomnia. My partner is staying up late, hunched over his desk with a tall can of beer, tweeting updates for a local media outlet.

Outside, a revolution is raging.

I check my phone to see whether my ex-flatmate, who has gone out to pick up protesters in his car, has responded to my messages; I haven't heard from him in two hours. I turned off notifications on my phone a few weeks ago after the news alerts started seeping into my dreams. In one of them, I was on the train heading to a rally when a voice announced that the next stop was China.

This was Nov. 17, when the police rounded up students at Hong Kong Polytechnic University and threatened to use lethal force if protesters occupying the campus refused to leave. But it could have been any other night. Some protesters are stranded on the streets, trying to

find a way home and avoid arrest after a long day out. The rest of us wrestle with anxiety. We hold our breaths, praying this won't turn into a brutal crackdown. Months ago, if anyone had said this, I would have laughed at them for being melodramatic.

Now these are the headlines we wake up to:

"Hong Kong university student dies following fall near police operation"

"Hong Kong police shoot protester amid clashes"

"Hong Kong riot police fire tear gas near university campus"

Image



Protesters and the riot police clashing outside Hong Kong Polytechnic University on Nov. 17Credit...Lam Yik Fei for The New York Times

Sometimes my phone buzzes and it's a friend telling me he had been injured while covering the protests. Sometimes I find out a high school classmate was arrested the night before. Sometimes you learn that a 22-year-old has passed away.

When there is good news, no one knows how to react. One friend, an artist, is having a magical solo exhibition at a flower shop, with the proceeds going to a fund for arrested protesters. She is apologetic, ashamed at what she calls a "selfish achievement." My partner is lining up career opportunities for when he finishes law school. Close friends are planning

their wedding (guests who bring up politics on the day will be thrown out, the groom tells me). I am proud, happy, and I say congratulations, but the word feels wrong. I find it difficult to laugh without feeling guilt; celebrating feels obscene.

We sneak in moments of quiet in between the clashes on the streets. Sometimes we go to the movies and order too much popcorn. Sometimes we have dinner with friends who understand, and we don't post photos of our food. When we accidentally manage to spend a day without feeling overwhelmed, it feels stolen. What is the point of doing anything when you don't know whether your city has a future. I try writing, and words feel inadequate.

Still, life goes on. It is a reluctant but sometimes welcome distraction from being glued to Twitter and the news 24/7, like the possessed. From living in some dark-timeline version of Hong Kong: students trapped inside a besieged university, sending notes to their loved ones in case they die at the scene; lawmakers attacked in broad daylight; shops shuttered and the air acrid and burned.

People often characterize depression as a lack of hope or vitality, but I associate it more with a restlessness, an inability to feel at peace. You're on the couch watching Netflix in furry pajamas, clutching a mug of hot tea, and you think, maybe the problem is that you aren't getting out of the house enough. You throw on jeans and head down to the bar, but after half a drink you want to run home. You repeat this routine a couple of times before you realize the problem isn't where you are.

I look at my friends, and I wonder whether we're all depressed. I look at Hong Kong, and I wonder whether this is what the end of the world feels like.

To be depressed feels like a small price to pay. For so many arrested and injured protesters, the end of the world has already arrived. Over these past few months I've spoken to some people who were so nonchalant about the certainty of arrest that they spoke of it as though it was only a matter of time. Others were moved by the initial marches in June and then decided, once the protests turned "violent," that it wasn't their fight after all and went straight back to the junk parties. I am neither. Not brave enough to dedicate my life to this movement, not detached enough to not care. All I can do is hope I won't see my friends getting bashed up or pinned to a wall on some live feed.

I don't know how to keep watching, but I know we can't look away.

It is past midnight on a Saturday, and somewhere in my quiet neighborhood a group of non-Chinese speakers have spilled out onto the streets, talking and laughing. I feel a stab of resentment: Don't they know there is a revolution out there? I can't call the cops; no one except the Hong Kong elite trusts the police enough to seek them out anymore. My partner

sticks his head out the window and yells out what I think is profanity, in French. He's out of practice but remembers some phrases from high school. It works: The noise dies down almost immediately.

We often joke that this neighborhood, Sheung Wan, is a French concession zone, given the large number of expats who live here. I'm suddenly possessed by a desire to learn French, so that we could have a third language to converse in. The notion is ridiculous, I know. Friends of mine have been attending self-defense classes to protect themselves from thugs and the police, and I want to learn *French*?

Weeks ago, in a Facebook post that attracted more than a thousand comments, Hong Kongers pondered what they would do when this is over, if Hong Kong is "liberated." Some said they would open a yum cha place. A friend said she wanted to be a teacher. A prominent student leader said she'll represent Hong Kong in international courts and write "Hong Kong" in the column asking for her nationality. I want to learn French.

That day may never come. An American journalist once asked me, what if this went on for 30 years? But that isn't the most terrifying outcome. It is the world that we would live in if we stopped resisting.

How is it already November? The events of the past months have all blended in my head into a pile of poisonous goop. Back in May, I took a trauma writing class. I've written about my codependent relationships, my family, my mental health. But none of it made any sense on paper. I read Lidia Yuknavitch's "The Chronology of Water," Melissa Febos, T Kira Madden and an essay about Agent Orange, by a writer with birth defects caused by the dioxin in chemicals used during the Vietnam War. I had never heard of dioxin, but now everyone in Hong Kong has, because a local reporter who has been livestreaming the protests developed chloracne, possibly after prolonged exposure to tear gas. The police have fired thousands of canisters, and there are chemical residues in the air and water, with unknown health consequences. Trauma that once seemed so remote is now shared and on our doorsteps.

My writing instructor asks why I haven't been able to finish my essays. I think it's because I'm trying to pretend there is a coherent narrative. Because I can only give these pieces an ending if I've attained closure, but these issues still haunt me. She shows me braided essays, disjointed pieces that still come together even without chronology or completeness. The trauma doesn't have to be over to put a period on the story. It doesn't even have to make sense.

And so, half a year after it began, I write about this trauma that is far from over.

In October, I was at a march after the government invoked emergency laws and placed a ban on face masks, which it said was to prevent protesters from avoiding detection. It was raining, and my feet were pruning inside my Adidas. I stood on the streets of Wan Chai, alone except for a few fellow marchers who skittered every few minutes to avoid the riot police. I wanted to go home, but I stayed, to pretend I'm not useless to the movement. Journalists have been living on rice balls and three hours of sleep; protesters have sacrificed their relationships, their health, their futures. And I — the sight of a police officer is enough to send my heart rate off the charts.

I duck into an art bookstore and sit down, surrounded by crates of vinyl records and expensive photography books. When I head out again, the girl in the shop tells me to stay safe. She thinks I'm brave, but I don't deserve it. I've been limiting my presence at demonstrations because I have a hip deformity, and an hour of walking is enough to leave me incapacitated for days. If there is a clash with the police, I know I can't run. That's what I tell myself, but maybe I'm just a coward. Worse: a coward who can't own up to being one. Most days I'm merely a keyboard warrior, but I want to pretend I'm still fighting. All of us are somewhere on the spectrum of cowardice. Some of us admit it. None of us knows how to deal with the guilt.

A protester I interviewed tells me that during the Umbrella Movement in 2014, she nearly went broke from buying water for fellow demonstrators. Now that she's financially independent, she can afford to do more. She has so little to lose compared with the students who are protesting. When more frontliners were arrested, she saw it as her duty to step forward. She doesn't want to leave Hong Kong; she's worried how the city would fare in the hands of apolitical "Hong Kong pigs." At times she's scared; she has been repeatedly saved from the riot police by people she calls the "real" braves. I don't know. She sounds real brave to me.

"Do you think you'll ever reach a point where you'll have done enough to not feel guilty anymore?" I ask.

She hesitates for a second. "No."

I find out that Keanu Reeves is dating. He and his silver-haired partner pose for red carpet photos hand in hand, and it warms my barely beating heart. If Keanu is no longer Sad, surely there must be hope for the rest of us? I turn to my colleague next to me and I'm about to tell her this when I see her frowning at the computer screen. She's reading the news. I swivel back to my desk. Everything is too trivial in the face of a revolution.

It is easy to find the words to mourn the loss of a person: We miss their idiosyncrasies, we tell funny stories about them, we anguish over how we'll never get another call from them. Losing a city is much more intangible. I don't know where to find the language to describe the grief I feel when I see Festival Walk — the mall where I spent lazy afternoons in high

school — being stormed by the riot police. Or when barricades go up at my alma mater, the University of Hong Kong. It hasn't been a major battleground the way other universities have, but seeing it transformed into a fortress is like being on the set of a film. I tiptoe my way through the maze of bricks laid on Pokfulam Road as roadblocks. I slither past the blockaded East Gate and marvel at the graffiti and protest art. The Starbucks where I bought an unspeakable number of caramel lattes is wrecked. The booths that once advertised student activities have been turned into shrines for those who died.

When I was there, the university was a place where everything felt possible. Now students can't go to class, foreign students are being evacuated from the city, graduation ceremonies have been canceled. And people still blame protesters for this. Everything that they do, they do while risking their lives and arrest. A Molotov cocktail thrown: 10 years. And the police? Impunity.

What would history say about this? I think about the names it might give to the events this year. The battle of Polytechnic University? The gang attack of Yuen Long? "Breaking Dawn Operations"?

Even though the two protests are not comparable, I wonder how those who lived through the 1967 riots look back on that time. I suppose the question isn't what history will think of us. If the Communist Party remains in power and erases our history, the question is whether we'll have a history at all.

In May, before all of this began, I took a trip to the Isle of Skye. I read books and downed many, many pints of beer. Sometimes, as a mental exercise, I try to pretend I'm still there, sitting in a bed-and-breakfast overlooking the undulating hills of Scotland, and ask myself how I would feel if I saw on the news what's happening in Hong Kong today.

Tear-gassing was once considered an unreasonable use of force; now it is barely worth a retweet. We make tear-gas jokes, play tear-gas canister bingo, checking off a district whenever the police fire canisters at a new location. We map out a safe route before making plans to meet for hotpot. We check Telegram for protest updates before a date. A banker books a plane ticket to get to work, to take the airport train when the roads to her office are blocked. We have all weaved the certainty of violence into our routines.

I am sitting at the park near my flat with my friend A. Newly sober, he refuses my offer to pour him some wine. I have just come from a vigil for the 22-year-old who died. A. is from Pakistan, but he has lived all over the world. I tell him I don't know how I'm still functional. He says that in Pakistan, a bomb once exploded in the shop next to him and he barely noticed. "You get used to it," he says.

But I don't want to get used to it. On the bad days, usually after a particularly ruthless police clearance operation, I can't sit or eat. Sometimes I throw up, and sometimes I can't breathe. I consume copious amounts of alcohol. I feel like a phony, talking about the movement on social media but putting in nowhere the hours or the risk that others do. After a couple of days, I find the strength to make dinner, the peace of mind to read and write, the desire to exercise and take care of myself. I'm terrified at my body's ability to cope, but more terrified of what would happen if the coping mechanism stops working.

Everyone wants to know how this is going to end, but no one has an answer. I know this: We are going to be living with the consequences of trauma for years. They can scrub the walls clean of the graffiti, but the horrific images will continue to eat away at us: a protester shot at point-blank range; a tear-gas canister erupting onto someone's back, burning the flesh blue-black; a man pressed to the ground, bleeding profusely and teeth knocked out; a pair of punctured eye goggles. The trials for those who participated in the 79-day Umbrella Movement in 2014 have only just ended. We will spend the next couple of years watching the government throw hundreds, if not thousands, in jail.

Brian Leung, an activist who took off his mask and addressed the crowd occupying the legislature in July, said in an interview that what defined and united Hong Kongers was pain. I think we are now a generation defined and united by trauma. We hang on and let life bring us slivers of peace. When we're done coping, we look again. We owe it to Hong Kong.

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