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'Failure in the air': activist narratives, in-group story-telling, and keeping political possibility alive in Lebanon

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Failure is often taken as an endpoint: anathema to political organizing and the death knell of social movements. To the degree that radical movements themselves dwell on failure, participants often consider the focus pathological. This article explores how, in the aftermath of the falling apart of long-term initiatives, Lebanese political activists were able to maintain their capacity to engage in transformative action. At a time when activists felt 'failure in the air', narrating prior political experiences communally, in formal and informal contexts, became crucial to (re)imagining one another as activists. Such stories narrated failure to compel collective action in the future, making failure itself a political resource; not the end, but a beginning. Throughout, this article engages in an affirmative anthropology that keeps alive the costs of failure even as it shows how radical political actors generate their capacity to act and their potential to imagine otherwise.

'Our protests don't really matter to those in charge – the police just leave us to it'. It was December 2013, and I was sitting with David[1] in the run-down garden behind Captain's Cabin, a cheaper bar in the west Beirut neighbourhood of Hamra where we both lived, and an area that acted as a home space in the city for left-wing and independent activism. It had been a quiet few months for my interlocutors. I asked David whether the recent spate of car bombs, one of the many ways that the conflict in Syria had made itself felt in neighbouring Lebanon, had deterred public protest. Though the bombings had mostly been concentrated in Beirut's southern suburbs, a car bomb had recently exploded in Downtown, and there had been police controls of suspicious parked cars in Hamra itself for the last few weeks. 'Of course not', David replied. 'That's not why. We would never be the targets, because those who do the bombings don't see us as a threat'. I nursed my beer as he lit up another cigarette. 'Protesters blocking the roads are like vegetable sellers. People walk around'.

In this article, I explore how political activists maintain the capacity to engage in transformative action in a context where the potential for demobilization and despair engendered by failure is pervasive. The opening dialogue offers a sense of the 'failure' through which activists in Lebanon persevered. The past ten years have seen an uneven

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rise in independent activism – forms of political action distinct from the twin hegemonic forms of 'doing politics' in Lebanon: institutionalized political parties and NGOs. So far, each iteration of this activism has fallen short, often in ways that might appear terminal from the outside. And yet between every protest cycle a sizeable number of people maintained their engagement and were able to build towards future political opportunities. In what follows, I address two questions in particular: what is the nature of the (activist) experience of failure? And what do activists do to stave off demobilization and despair?

Over fourteen months in Beirut between 2013 and 2014, and month-long follow-up visits in late 2015 and mid-2016, I spent time with activists in their various social and leisure spaces across the city, attended political meetings, took part in reading groups and consciousness-raising activities, and participated in protests and direct actions. The period immediately preceding my entering the field in September 2013 had seen an impressive uptick in activism in Lebanon, both in terms of pure numbers and in terms of the intensity and multiplicity of forms of political engagement. The catalyst for this surge had been the impending parliamentary elections, which, even for those advocating non-participation, offered a focal point for political work. Indeed, my original intention had been to become involved with one particular movement, Take Back Parliament (TBP), whose aim had been to get people elected to parliament from beyond the ranks of traditional political elites. These parliamentary elections were summarily postponed in June 2013, and the period that followed was one of retrenchment and little high-profile political engagement. Activists wrestled with their own feelings of burnout from an intense eighteen months of organizing, alongside questions of what might even constitute viable political action with parliamentary and constitutional life at a standstill and the conflict in Syria continuing to make itself felt. In this atmosphere, when a few months into fieldwork I began to suggest (only half-)jokingly to friends that I was doomed to write an 'ethnography of failure', not one disagreed; a few hoped that it might provide some suggestion of how that failure came about or what to do next.

More than chewing over the bones of how failure arose – important as such a discussion might be – it was the persistence of activist attachments that caught my attention. It raised a question: why bother? If nothing seems possible and your best ideas have gone up in smoke, why continue at all? Though a good number of those active before did fall out of activism, many more did not. Even during this downturn political work continued, albeit at a lower level. How?

Amongst other strategies and behaviours, telling stories about prior political experiences surfaced as one vital way in which activists (re)produced and (re)imagined themselves as activists in this period. I witnessed activists reflecting constantly on past moments of intense protest: during planning meetings, between old-timers over a coffee, as asides whilst driving by where protests had taken place. In the absence of abiding institutional structures, such as those of political parties or organizations, it was through such interpersonal work that a base level of participatory identification was maintained. The lessons activists learnt from previous political engagements were made meaningful to them through the stories they told. Mostly, those previous engagements had been agonistic confrontations with political and institutional opponents: politicians' bodyguards, supporters of establishment political parties, members of the security forces. Amongst activists, stories about these events continue to circulate even now. Their afterlife is telling, and in what follows I explore what we can learn from both their

content and how they circulate. Ultimately, these stories narrate failure in a way that motivates collective action in the future. In so doing, they render failure not an endpoint, but a beginning. Through story-telling, activists make failure a political resource.

Alongside a broader interdisciplinary literature on story-telling and political subjectivity (Polletta 2006; Portelli 1997; Selbin 2010), in showing the generative force of narrativizing failure I am in conversation with those anthropologists who have emphasized the importance of story-telling to the business of living and making sense of the world (Gilsenan 1996; Jackson 2002; McGranahan 2015). What is particularly compelling about ethnographic approaches to narrative and story-telling is our ability to discuss the content *and* circulation of stories together. As the stories reproduced below show, meaning is intersubjective and the product of myriad moments of communal (re)production. Such banal moments serve both to produce the single activist subject and to maintain the capacity to imagine a collective political subject able to act effectively in the future.

Narrating the past is hardly the preserve of activists alone. Past events hang heavy over the recent anthropology of Lebanon, in particular the civil war of 1975-90 and, more recently, the 2006 Israeli war on the country. So, too, do the ways that the past is narrated or not in the present: political elites hijack commemoration processes to maintain their own positions (Volk 2008); contemporary 'memory cultures' rely on generally agreed upon omissions from the public narration of those times (Haugbolle 2010); and recollections of violence inform present political engagements 'in the meantime' between past wars and those yet to come (Hermez 2017). This article contributes to such attempts to understand the role of the Lebanese past in the present by suggesting that, at least for activists, it is to the particular stories of our interlocutors' previous political engagements that we should look if we are interested in understanding how they remain motivated to act in the future, particularly when we might expect them to be downbeat or cynical about the current political reality in Lebanon (Hermez 2015) and the wider region (el Houri 2018; Frangie 2016).

That activists could feel this way is also a factor of the country's sectarian order, which anthropologists of Lebanon have tracked at every level of state and society: the legal code (Mikdashi 2014), the allocation of contracts and services (Salloukh, Barakat, Al-Habbal, Khattab & Mikaelian 2015), the (re)production of the built environment (Nucho 2017), even in civil society initiatives ostensibly opposed to the sectarian order (Clark & Salloukh 2013).[2] As with elsewhere in the region (Allen 2013; Altan-Olcay & Icduygu 2012) and the world (Stubbs 2012), the capacity of civil society organizations and NGOs to enable political transformation has come under critical scrutiny, and this is itself a reflection of critiques of the NGO-ization of politics that happen on the ground (Kerbage 2016). Recently work on activism in Lebanon has begun to trace the contours of both dissatisfaction with NGO forms of engagement and the difficulties of opposing the sectarian political order (AbiYaghi, Catusse & Younes 2017; Hermez 2011). Rather than underplay the ways in which current activism falls short (which my interlocutors would certainly not deny), here I show how activists have made use of these notionally negative experiences to continue feeling able to act.

As such, this article constitutes a contribution to the interdisciplinary literature on political activism by highlighting the importance of both meaning and experience to our understanding of how contentious political forms are sustained, particularly when the overt evidence for continuity disappears (as when, for example, a mobilization cycle falls to pieces). In recent years, anthropologists of radical political forms[3] have

shown the importance of, variously, the 'subjective' (Razsa 2015), the radical political imagination (Khasnabish & Haiven 2014), possibility (Alexandrakis 2016; Rethmann 2013), and structure and process (Juris 2008; Maeckelbergh 2009; Razsa & Kurnik 2012). In the aftermath of exceptional political transformations wrought by revolutions and uprisings, they have also shown how differing historical vantage points on these transformations produce distinct generations within activist milieus (Greenberg 2014; 2016; Scott 2014; Stubbs 2012). Often, this literature engages in what Maple Razsa has called an 'affirmative anthropology', one that 'move[s] beyond the critique of neoliberalism and toward the affirmation of political alternatives' (2015: 27). Speaking more broadly, Sherry Ortner has described the anthropologies of 'critique, resistance and activism' as themselves a kind of 'anthropology of the good', capable of describing alternative ways of being without ignoring broader structures of power and inequality: 'for what is the point of opposing neoliberalism if we cannot imagine better ways of living and better futures?' (2016: 60). In the context of life after the Arab uprisings, the need to keep political possibility alive in the aftermath of failure becomes all the more pressing.

Even as we keep in mind the imperative to describe the emergent, the positive, and the possible, we must not lose sight of the ethnographic fact that the vast majority of radical political movements, the vast majority of the time, do not taste success on their own terms or those of others. The feeling of failure, its presence for activists, is hardly a fiction – at times it may even be cultivated. Rather, radical and intentional political communities do things that allow for a delinking of 'failure' from 'movement death'; they make failure generative of political possibility in the future. To say this is not to underplay the pain and turmoil that can arise in the form of burnout, or through repression, incarceration, and worse; whether a group of people is able to make failure actionable in the future does not diminish its burden on their psyches or their bodies. In exploring how activist story-telling makes failure into a political resource, then, this article engages in an affirmative anthropology that keeps alive the costs of failure even as it shows how radical political actors generate their capacity to act and their potential to imagine otherwise through it.

I begin by exploring what the atmosphere of failure felt like for activists in Beirut. Out of specific setbacks in the past arose the 'failure in the air' quoted in this article's title: a feeling that existed very much in the present. Though activists fretted over the negative dispositions that such an atmosphere might engender, they also engaged in political initiatives that made 'failure' actionable by allowing space to narrate it in the service of future political action. I describe one such initiative, the 'political circle' (*al-halaqa al-siyāsiyya*), to highlight the ways in which narrating failure can lead to a radically altered temporal and political disposition. Beyond such formal initiatives, though, activists constantly recounted shared political experiences – and these banal story-telling moments were foundational in maintaining political engagement. I reproduce two narratives from many to show how recollections of political experiences were turned into meaningful stories. The first narrative relates to a protest at the Syrian embassy in 2011 in opposition to the Syrian regime's repression of dissent across the border. The protesters were ambushed by members of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, or SSNP, and the Syrian Ba'th Party, who attacked them with striking brutality. Only months before, both sides had been organizing together as part of the Lebanese chapter of the Arab uprisings of 2010-11, 'Bring down the sectarian system!' (*isqāt al-nizām al-tā'ifī*). The second narrative relates to the protests against the first parliamentary

extension, in June and July 2013. On the first day, security forces beat the front lines with truncheons and the butts of their assault rifles. Meanwhile, a substantial section of the protest behind refused to help, and began getting into fights with other protesters. These two sides split quite neatly between independent activists on the front line and NGO organizers behind them. In closing, I show how the morals of these stories – what is communicated through them – act as a powerful buffer against melting away from activism and provide the capacity to imagine the possibility of transformative political engagements in the future.

The atmosphere of failure

Failure in the air

Having arrived to begin fieldwork, it did not take long for me to realize that the moment of intense political engagement I had wanted to research was over. During my first weeks in Beirut, the emails I sent to TBP addresses garnered no reply. So, too, messages to various activist gatekeepers. In that early period, there were very few events, protests, or organizing meetings to be found. When I did begin to meet activists and broach my research interests to them, I received bemused responses: 'Why do you want to do research on that?'; 'Nothing is happening now, anyway'; 'If only you'd been here last year'.

David, introduced above, and Lamia would become two of my closest friends. Their early reactions to my research project were particularly telling. Walking back up to Hamra from the seafront on a warm end-of-year afternoon, I laid out to David my initial impressions about activism in Beirut. I already knew that he had been involved in many projects over the previous few years, from student politics opposing tuition increases, to the broad coalition 'Bring down the sectarian system!' movement, to joining Lebanon's resident Trotskyist party, the Socialist Forum (*al-muntadā al-ishtirākī*). I told him about my interest in historical memory, and in what kind of political actions can be done and where, and of how important being 'secular' seemed to be to everyone. I then lamented how things seemed to have wound down. David consoled me, stating that he thought it was better to be doing research during a lull. 'Do you really think so?', I asked, hoping for some crumb of optimism. 'Yes. Because if you came and only saw last year then you would give a very wrong impression of activism here. It's not like that at all'. This was not, suffice to say, quite the answer that I had hoped for. A few days later, I met Lamia for a drink. During our conversation, as with so many of my conversations with activists early on, she lamented the lack of political activity. I mentioned to her David's thoughts, that this was a better time to do research. She snorted derisively: 'How can you research activism when there isn't any?' If this sense of failure was initially disappointing for me as a researcher, it was far more so for those who had actually gone through the process of having tried and 'failed'.

Even as political engagements picked up, for many the overarching feeling of failure remained. During the first half of 2014, a number of Lebanese universities saw campaigns against rising tuition fees, the largest taking place at the American University of Beirut (AUB). During the campaign, there was actually very little sense of despair amongst students. Those who had been involved in TBP returned to campuses in the new year invigorated rather than drained by the experience. They turned their minds to organizing. The slightly older generation of activists, however, found themselves in a tricky position. In their late twenties and early thirties, many had been involved in the previous protest wave against tuition increases at AUB in 2008, and had seen the protest

torn apart by pressure from the administration, by the betrayal of student members of establishment political parties, and by threats to participants' bursaries (all of which would play out this time around, too). This made some derisive towards the new protests – I had many conversations with ex-student activists who stated categorically that these protests would fail, because they had already tried it and it had not worked then. But there was also another view. Owing to my participation in the protests, I became a go-between of sorts, informing those from the older generation who had lost touch with university activists about what was going on and discussing with those others who were still involved what the protesters could or should be doing.[4] It was during such a conversation with Fadia – who had been involved in every activist engagement in recent memory – that she confided that she felt herself becoming 'that old person who says "No, no, no, it won't work, we tried it five years ago". And I don't want to do that'. There was a desire not to shut down the newly politicized, but also not to transfer the feeling of failure felt by many of the more experienced activists.

What to do about failure

A feeling of failure, then, was ubiquitous among those who had been involved in previous periods of activism. For some, the newer generation needed to be made aware of what had led to that feeling so they would not make the same mistakes. For others, the younger generation needed to be shielded from it. That feeling's circulation (or not) through narrations of past events became the locus of much anxiety for established activists, precisely because such narratives were potentially generative of negative dispositions as much or more than positive dispositions. But what sort of a thing was this failure?

Hirokazu Miyazaki and Annelise Riles have spoken of 'failure as an endpoint': 'a moment at which a project is apprehended retrospectively as complete, closed, and in the past' (2005: 325). Epistemologically speaking, failure presents itself as the end of knowledge. That way of doing things is done. Amongst Lebanese activists, there had already been a number of failures-as-endpoints in the recent past. For those who had experienced the acrimonious dissolution of 'Bring down the sectarian system!', or the falling apart of TBP, the possibility of working with political parties or NGOs was dead: complete, closed, and in the past. But while the idea of doing those things might die, the people who hold those ideas do not: they must continue to try to find ways to muddle along. In the Lebanese case, they did so with the weight of failure impinging on the present. Here, 'failure' is really the sensation brought about by this end of knowledge, broadly construed. There were specific things that failed at the end of TBP's life: decision-making failure, as its heterodox consensus system came to inadequately represent people's desires; ideological failure, as it became clear that some participants held troubling political positions; organizational failure, as candidates began to come forward who just wanted to become powerful; and kinetic failure, as exhaustion and frustration set in. Internal failings became moot, in any case, once parliament extended itself and TBP did not even get a chance to fail on its own terms.

But these are not quite what I am getting at. Independent activists spoke of 'failure' as something that had emerged out of these past setbacks but was distinct from them. Crucially, it existed in their present: there was 'failure in the air', as Lamia put it to me in those initial months. Rather than describing the relative success of an aspect of the recent activist past, failure here becomes a thing in the world; not failure-as-setback, but rather failure-as-'atmosphere', in the sense outlined by geographer Ben Anderson (2009). Exerting 'a force on those that are surrounded by it', in this period

failure permeated thinking on the politically possible (2009: 78).[5] To think in these terms shifts our attention from epistemological break – no longer knowing the world – to phenomenological continuity – living with one's failure to know the world. For activists in Lebanon, failure was experienced as something beyond themselves. It had a certain phenomenological object-quality. Whilst a feeling of failure may emanate from particular bodies, it is experienced as an exteriority that impinges upon the person from beyond them. This was why activists like Fadia or Lamia were able to speak of failure as a reified thing, and why they were genuinely worried about passing that failure on to others, about making them aware of its truth when they were oblivious to it. All this, unsurprisingly perhaps, made failure difficult to deal with.

What to do, then? The atmosphere of failure exerted considerable force on activists. Yet it would be wrong to see in this atmosphere only the potential for negative dispositions. Amidst attempts in this period to bolster analytic thinking through reading groups and consciousness-raising, and maintain the activist infrastructure of material spaces and still-extant organizations, one activity in particular caught my interest precisely because it was not parsed by those involved as a form of retrenchment. From around December 2013, I began being told that some ex-members of TBP were discussing founding a new political grouping, based on a different mode of organizing. Rather than announcing the group and coming to a political consensus among whoever answered the call – which was how TBP had begun – it would begin in private and on an invite-only basis. Though it had no name as such, it was normally referred to as the *halaqa siyāsiyya*, or political circle. In this formative period, those involved would hash out the basic political problems that had plagued all groups over the previous five years: what position to take on the conflict in Syria; how to view various forms of military intervention in the region; the role of the resistance against Israel in the south and Hizballah; and how to position themselves between the interests of the two parliamentary blocs in the country.

Where other engagements were animated by failure to maintain what infrastructure of activism, material or organizational, was still in place, the political circle was animated by failure but looked forward: it attempted to work through the deadlocks that had produced setbacks in the past and organize from a position of certainty that had not been true at the beginning of TBP. It did so not by guarding the circulation of failure narratives, as above, but instead by actively engaging in the production of such narratives, communally and towards a specific political goal. The political circle was an attempt to set up a structure that had been absent from contemporary independent activism, but which had a strong presence in the leftist history of the country – a radical political party, one with no immediate interest in parliamentary forms of engagement, interested instead in building from the bottom up, organically, to fight a war of position in the future. To do so required, in contrast to the engagement that had immediately preceded it, TBP, a careful selection of initial participants, an attempt to come up with substantive political positions on all important questions, and only then going public as a fait accompli. This required attention to what had produced the despair that had motivated the project in the first place, a concerted look back in order to plan effectively for the future. As such, the political circle was an impressively rounded project insofar as it brought together and attempted to mediate questions of political subjectivity, affect, and temporality. In doing so, it narratively reproduced 'failure' in a way that could animate future political work rather than compel demobilization.

Telling stories, producing political morals

A project such as the political circle, which made sense of the atmosphere of failure by narrating it and in so doing making failure actionable moving forwards, had a value beyond mere maintenance. In the aftermath of the Arab uprisings, many anthropologists of the Middle East have turned to analysing their interlocutors' temporal orientations: whether discussing the role played by future-oriented 'middle-class aspirations' in both enabling (Schielke 2015: 191-215) and delimiting (Winegar 2012; 2016) the appeal of revolutionary subjectivity in Egypt; detailing how the move through different phases of uprising, armed insurrection, and civil war has altered Syrians' political and temporal horizons (Proudfoot 2016); or discussing how martyrdom commemorations foreclose possible futures (Mittermaier 2015). Such interventions are made, much like those of the political circle, in the aftermath of setback, and are attempting to make sense of past engagements with an at least implicit view to the future possibility of political transformation.[6] The time period of such engagements is the 'hiatus', in Khasnabish and Haiven's phrasing: 'a collective moment caught between success and failure'. Importantly, this time is 'not the anomaly [but] the norm': 'All too often ... social movements (and those who study them) inherit and reproduce conventional and unquestioned notions of victory and defeat, notions that ... set up a pattern of unrealized expectations and pessimism' (2014: 91).

This is an invaluable political insight, one that helps shift our analytic perspective towards both a more affirmative and, conversely, a more realistic engagement with attempts to change the world. It leads Khasnabish and Haiven to a strategy of 'convocation', of speaking *with* research participants and of leveraging the privileges accrued to them by being movement participants with a foot in the door of the academy and with, therefore, the relative autonomy to reflect and critically but affirmatively assess the recent activist past (2014: 20-3). Their Radical Imagination Project constituted what, in their estimation, 'activists and movements rarely create for themselves: an intentional and non-sectarian space and process capable of summoning into being the radical imagination' (2014: 71). The utility of an activist anthropology, then, is that it can offer the space and, particularly, time for movement participants to reflect back upon the past years of activism. Lebanese activists, however, created such spaces themselves; the similarities between the authors' initiative in Halifax, Canada, and the political circle in Beirut, Lebanon, are striking. Where Khasnabish and Haiven emphasize their own intentional efforts to 'catalyze a public dialogue between activists and organizers based on the recognition that the radical imagination is a dialogic process' (2014: 71), in what follows I unpack the everyday and relatively banal dialogic processes that mitigate the capacity for failure to lead to movement death. Indeed, the virtues of initiatives like the Radical Imagination Project or the political circle build upon a powerful technique for compelling endurance through feelings of failure, and of keeping the radical imagination itself limber and actionable: story-telling.

In formalized contexts like the political circle, activists were able to tell each other narratives of their own previous political engagements, including narratives of their failures and those of others. Through telling these stories, they reaffirmed and represented the necessity of doing political things. Indeed, the act of passing judgement and of producing causal arguments through narrative did much explanatory work for maintaining an activist political subjectivity. Narratives also, through the affective work of being in a story together and being brought together by its moral, reaffirmed a sense of us-ness to all those involved in the story-telling act. Spaces like the political

circle harnessed some of this affective and didactic power instrumentally towards a specific goal – forming a political party – but narrativization and story-telling occurred constantly at the informal level of conversation in social and consumption spaces. A network of possible activists, constituting a social group, was maintained even in moments when the feeling of failure seemed overpowering and the possibilities for political action appeared limited. A reserve army of people knew the same things in the same way, then, and felt that they were on the same side. It was this broader, diffuse, and spontaneous story-telling that made intentional and motivated initiatives, like the political circle, possible. I turn now to the retelling of two events: the Syrian embassy fight and the parliamentary extension protest. In both, the act of retelling reaffirmed everyone's involvement in the story, kept it alive in the present, and, further, kept alive the moral of the story – the affective experience of the event and the causality inherent in its narrativization.

The Syrian embassy fight

It was late March 2014, and Lamia wanted me to meet Antoine properly. He had been a core member of TBP and had been politicized through it. I also knew that he had been one of those arrested after a violent altercation with a politician's private bodyguards, for which he was still technically under secret trial in a closed military court. Majid, whom I had met a few months earlier when he had given a talk about the state of the labour struggle in Lebanon, arranged to meet us at a bar in Hamra. We came round to discussing a film screening that I, Lamia, and Majid had recently attended. Held under the auspices of the Syrian Association for Citizenship, the screenings always revolved around politically salient films. As the majority of attendees were Syrian exiles, invariably discussion afterwards would turn to how the films related to the situation across the border. I commented that I had never heard anyone discuss which side they were on in the conflict. Lamia responded that they didn't need to – they were all against the regime.

At this, Majid began recollecting the Syrian embassy protest. Where we sat, it was possible to see SSNP posters on the corner of the street.[7] The party's office was 50 metres away, the scene of the fight perhaps 100 metres farther than that. Majid talked about being beaten; how the bars and restaurants that activists might otherwise have been spending time in had refused to let in the wounded and fleeing; how he had had his glasses broken, had seen a friend have their hip smashed, and seen someone else get cracked over the head with some blunt instrument and go down hard onto the pavement. He described being beaten again up on Hamra street hard enough for his eye to swell shut; how he had been dragged away to one car, then to another to avoid being followed, and then to hospital. He recounted having gone to the police station to report the attack, though, given that the line-up was conducted with him facing the suspects directly in the same room rather than behind the safety of a one-way mirror, he did not accuse anyone. He was certain that some members of the line-up were police officers he had just seen in the office but now dressed casually. He said as much to one officer afterwards, who denied it but then smiled. He moved on to tell us about the lawyer who had taken on the case but then dropped it as there was no way in which he could have got a conviction. He added that the lawyer doesn't follow through but takes on the human rights and civil liberties cases so he has a lockdown on international funding. Majid ended his narrative by stating that the SSNP run a racket all along the street but that really this is the only area that they have any control over.

Having given the general arc of Majid's narrative, I hasten to add that there had been a number of interruptions to his description of the fight. Lamia cut in to ask about one of the non-Lebanese people who had been on the original protest and who had taken photos of Majid covered in blood through a car window. Another interruption had been for each of us to snort at the attempts of *makhfar hbēsh*, the infamous Hamra police station, to clean up its image through a propaganda drive. (Known as one of the main sites where political prisoners were tortured and interrogated during the civil war, more recently it has been the police station where suspected 'homosexual individuals' are taken after raids on clubs and bathhouses [Wansa 2014].) At each of these we all chipped in, but immediately Majid returned to the story of the fight, one which he clearly wanted to complete and which had its own narrative logic. Here we see how any given narrative of failure from the activist past could quickly become a point of departure for many other such narratives.

There were also a set of meanings attached to the story as a whole. The implicit judgements of corruption and uselessness against the police are in wide circulation in the general population well beyond activist circles. Implicit support for the Syrian uprising was clear too in Majid's segue into his narrative from our previous conversation. One can also make out anxieties about the involvement of expats in independent activist politics and the ways in which activism has become NGO-ized. The two are related in that activists constantly worried about being seen as not part of society and were particularly susceptible to criticism that they were deracinated (Musallam 2017: 85-117). Prominent foreigners at political actions merely made this claim more believable. Majid's assertions about the reasons this lawyer took on certain cases are also tied to similar worries: that things were not being done for the right reasons. The shared meanings and mutual anxieties tying together Majid's narrative show that these recollections of the fight are, clearly, a narrative. They were rehearsed and had been recounted a number of times in the intervening years. Indeed, Majid told me shorter and longer versions of the event on different occasions, and only once at my soliciting. He had made sense of what had happened to him, and integrated it into understandings of how things work in his environment. The narrative, if it is successful, then serves to exemplify those understandings and give evidence for them. The story's narrativization, or the way in which the events in the story connect and follow on from one another, was perfectly persuasive to all of us around the table.

The parliamentary extension protest

Mid-August 2014. Many friends had told me I should talk to Malik, a veteran of a number of student groups. When we finally did sit down for coffee, he spoke about his parents' leftist roots coming from the south of Lebanon, his involvement in student politics, and we exchanged notes on the pre-civil war history of leftist student action at the universities. He ended by complaining about NGOs always coming to the student groups when they needed numbers on a protest, to put them 'on the front line'. In fact, they were going to have a joint meeting with one of the NGOs to discuss the new parliamentary extension, and he said that I should come. A few days later, and here we were in another bar in Hamra: eight students, myself, and two NGO representatives, sat huddled round a table.

Throughout the ensuing hour of discussion about the new parliamentary extension, the previous year's extension – and the protests opposing it – were invoked constantly. The younger NGO representative, Ghaith, began his proposal for opposing this

new extension by offering background to the last parliamentary extension: that the justification had been the security situation and not being able to control 'mixed' areas of Beirut, and that only one party had not voted for it, the Free Patriotic Movement (for whom Ghaith was known to have been an organizer in the early 2000s). At this, one of the students, Mahmoud, cut him off to state that those parliamentarians had neither joined the protests nor resigned. Nodding gruffly, Ghaith moved to the present moment, stating that they were here to co-ordinate with the students over how to oppose the new extension. He said that they had already started doing things, that they had revived the tomato revolution tactic by sending tomatoes to parliamentarians in the post. At this, Malik scoffed loudly and said that posting them and not throwing them at their convoys was a weakening of the idea. (*Thawrat al-banadūra*, the tomato revolution, was a symbolic protest in the run-up to the first parliamentary extension, in which large photos of parliamentarians had tomatoes thrown at them in public. Later, tomatoes were also thrown at parliamentary convoys.) Ghaith responded that it was not a weakening, but that we could return to it. They had also printed up posters and wanted to know if the students would flypost them around the city.

The students responded. Mahmoud stated that there would need to be an escalation of activity. Ghaith said he had no problem with this, that he had been with them on the front line of the protests the year before. Mahmoud nodded assent, but continued by saying that on the second day the NGOs had not shown up. On the new tomato revolution, Malik repeated that it was weak to just send tomatoes to parliamentarians by mail when last year they were throwing them at their portraits in public: how would receiving a tomato in the post do anything? To much laughter, Mahmoud commented that maybe Fattoush, one of the parliamentarians, could use the tomato to make himself a salad (*fattūsh* is a type of salad). Another student, Lina, continued the criticism by saying that *thawrat al-banadūra* had become folkloric (*sārat fulklūr*) when people talked about it now, and that it should not be diminished in this way. The older NGO representative turned to Lina and shouted that 'Things are not frozen like last year!' Ghaith reiterated that all options were open, including escalation. He said that he wanted as many people as possible, that he did not care if a *quwwātjī* (a member of the Lebanese Forces, a right-wing sectarian Christian party) came as long as he didn't bring party slogans. The students nodded curtly in response. Ghaith introduced the pledge against the parliamentary extension that they were circulating to MPs. At this, there were howls of derision from the students. The older representative shouted, 'What else can they do?' 'Resign!' was Malik's immediate response. The older man then shouted: '*Surnā* unheard, *surnā fūlklūr bas. Bas* intellectuals' ('We've become unheard, we've become only folklore. Only intellectuals').

After this, the discussion calmed down and turned to what could be done. Having arranged another meeting, the NGO representatives left. Immediately the students began discussing how to distance themselves from the NGOs. Mahmoud was worried about being tied to them and their decisions and strategies. As an example, he offered a tactic that the NGOs would not accept, like throwing stink bombs at the police. This immediately bled into mutual recollections about the previous year's protests. One mentioned how they videoed and photographed the police's violent responses and that this had had an effect, that the videos also showed the protest's front line all defending one another. Another student added, 'Yeah, I defend you, you defend him', as he pointed around the table. Malik (re)told, to much laughter, the story (or perhaps

joke) that when, last year, the students had pushed into Parliament Square, the NGOs had shouted at them from the back of the crowd: '*Lā shabāb, lā, mā biddnā nfūt! Hay mish bil*-project proposal *ʿannā!*' ('No guys, no, we don't want to go in! This isn't in our project proposal!').

Unlike the previous example, this recollection occurred within a formalized setting and involved a confrontation between differing narratives of how politics should be done. Each side were drawing on their own understanding of what had come before. Crucially, however, in attempting to solicit student involvement, the NGO side pandered to *their* narrative of the protest ('I was on the front lines with you!'). For the students, meanwhile, the circulation of their own narrativization of the protest was an important bolster for, firstly, why NGOs could not be trusted ('It's not in our project proposal!'), and, secondly, why the students were together. In their rejection of NGO tactics, the younger generation of activists are reflecting broader disappointments with NGOs and rights-based initiatives in the Middle East (Allen 2013). They also reflect activist responses to NGO practice in other regions where political transformation through non-political means achieved pre-eminence in the 1990s and 2000s – most prominently the former Yugoslavia – whether through explicit rejection of NGO-ization (Kurtović & Hromadžić 2017; Razsa 2015: 62-98) or a more complex engagement with professionalization and expertise (Greenberg 2014). But first and foremost, the students' derision towards the NGO representatives' lobbying of political elites and mitigation of contentious political forms, alongside their jokes about NGO funding structures, were the product of first-hand experience. Their narrativization of the protest, then, produced them as a group of people with the same idea of what had happened and why. For them, the folkloric element was important for retaining an idea of the kind of activists and political subjects that they were, even while for the NGO representatives the folklorization was only that: a mythic version of the event, one that was frozen in time and could say very little about what was needed now. Of course, for the students, the protest had marked the endpoint of NGO-style engagements – the moral of the story of the parliamentary extension protest was that working with the NGOs was useless. For them, it was the NGOs who were frozen in time. A narrative of failure, then, bound each side to one another and generated the possibility for future action. Not agreeing on what that failure was, for the students at least, marked the impossibility of working together in that future.

Narrative and story-telling

Having discussed the terms in tandem until now, I would like here to distinguish narrativization from story-telling.[8] Narrativization is the production of events as a story, or narrative. Loosely speaking, it will produce a beginning, middle, and end, and there will be progression of some sort through these various parts. The 'ands' and 'thens' of a narrative are not juxtapositions of many things; rather, they maintain a causal force, weak or strong as it is, that links the events that are retold. In sociologist Francesca Polletta's words, 'Events are configured by plot, the logic that makes recounted events meaningful . . . Without it, events would . . . simply follow each other rather than unfold' (2006: 9). Let us return to Majid's recollection of the Syrian embassy protest. Telling the story in the first place came about because I had mentioned Syrian exile perspectives on the conflict over the border. Being on one side of that conflict himself, Majid took the opportunity to tell a narrative of how the Syrian conflict had had an effect on him and on Lebanese activists generally. When he talked about the police and

the lawyer, the narrativization offered ample opportunities to pass judgement on their corruption and inability to get things done, respectively.

These implied causal connections mean, of course, that narratives require and leave themselves open to interpretation. In being told a narrative, one does this interpretative work and decides whether the way the story is being told is correct. In the case of the organizational meeting, there was conflict over what the previous year's protest meant, about the lesson that should be taken from it. In their desire to get the students on board, the NGO's pandering was particularly telling, precisely because of how awkward the students' narrativization made the tactics that the NGOs were proposing. For the NGOs, the memory of that protest produced it as dead and unhelpful in explaining what must be done now. For the students, meanwhile, that memory was salient precisely because its narrativization said something important about whom to work with, what can work, and what cannot.

If narrativization is the way in which one produces a story, story-telling attends to the social life of that narrative. Stories circulate, and, in being told, personal meanings are made public, shared and shareable. Story-telling is, in Michael Jackson's words, 'an empowering act' because it allows one to 'experience oneself, not as a creature of circumstance but as someone who has ... some creative say over how those circumstances may be grasped' (2002: 132-3). This empowerment is necessarily social, because one's claims must be intelligible to others, if not wholly valorized. It is the social acceptance of narratives that provides story-telling with the power to make the world make sense. And so the mutual understandings of how things happened during the Syrian embassy fight bolstered Majid's narrative and valorized how he recounted what had happened to him, for example.

Narrativization and story-telling are of course different modes of the same process. I am here dividing them out as a heuristic to see these two sides of a story: its internal logic and its circulation. The two are always interrelated. Narrativization relies on shared meanings as well as the story-teller's personal recollections, or 'the interplay of intersubjective *and* intrapsychic processes', in Jackson's phrasing (2002: 15, emphasis in original), and these are produced through the circulation and consumption of stories themselves. We can see how these two elements come together in the accounts above. The emplotment of a narrative already gives a causal account of how things go, which can be either accepted or not by the person(s) to whom it is offered. Within activist groups, the above accounts find fertile ground for acceptance. Even when only parts of an account continue to circulate amongst people who know it well, it reactivates both the sense of commonality that makes for fellow feeling and the knowledge the narrative intends to pass on: the moral of the story, in other words. Importantly, one must already be a particular sort of person to be affected the way that one is by the story. So for the students, the moral of an account of the parliamentary extension protests is that NGO-style politics, and, by implication, NGO-style people, cannot be worked with, shown in the high level of mistrust evident in the meeting. The authority of a story is intersubjectively produced as, for both examples, it is based on the level to which it finds agreement with its audience. The moment of contention arose precisely when there was a split in the shared understandings of the audience at the meeting. If the purpose of these stories is to convince people outside the in-group of activists, then this authority will often fall short. But in bolstering the fellow feeling of the in-group and (re)producing 'a horizon of shared possibilities' (Portelli 1997: 88), it proves impressively efficacious.

What is being said, then, through these narrativizations and their circulation? I have stated that the narratives contain a moral: in describing the way in which he and others were beaten up by the SSNP, Majid's narrative viscerally produces the reason why independent activists cannot work with political parties, even those with whom there might be some ideological affinity. This is its moral. Bluntly put, the story makes sense to its audience, which in this case was other independent activists (and myself). In the case of the organizational meeting, there was contestation over the narrativization of the parliamentary extension protest. Though there the student narrative went unchallenged overtly, the deferral in assessing the weakening of the tomato revolution ('we'll talk about it later') and the silence when the students mentioned that the NGOs abandoned the protest on the second day indicate that the two NGO representatives would have told the story very differently. The angry disagreement on what the protest's folklority meant in the present evidences this rupture in meaning all too clearly. The two sides did not recognize the same successes and failures, and their different narratives left this in little doubt.

Stories for endurance

The key process here is that it is the communal reproduction of events that makes them make sense. For Francesca Polletta, '[S]tories turn the strange into the new' (2006: 34). For Michael Jackson, 'In making and telling stories we rework reality in order to make it bearable' (2002: 16). For Carole McGranahan (2015), '[T]he worlds built through stories create truths, they do not just hold or represent them. Stories give frameworks to hopes, to morals, to politics, to ethnographies'. With this in mind, let us return to the phenomenology of failure. The atmosphere of failure had great affective strength for independent activists in Lebanon. This much is clear from Fadia's worry about transmitting the feeling of failure to younger, starry-eyed activists. It is clear too in the way that those who had felt the failure of the previous eighteen months of organizing could seldom look beyond the restricted options of the political present. It is also clear in the ways that their tactics during this period were all responses in some way or another to the feeling of failure impinging upon them. Further, in a context of withdrawal and the waning of political efficacy, failure talk was ubiquitous.

And so too was story-telling. In particular, there was a narrativization of the key political events of the last few years, two of which I have discussed here. The numerous agonistic confrontations that activists had with various elites figure prominently in this narrativization. Insofar as the moral of the story can be made to be shared by listener and orator, then the story remains alive and politically resonant, precisely because it still means something in the contemporary moment and has something to say about what should be done in the future. It is hardly surprising, then, that moments of struggle figure prominently for such treatment (as both events show, the role of violence enacted upon bodies is particularly important in encoding meanings). It is in such moments that knowledge of difference – from the political parties, from the NGOs – is made meaningful on a far more visceral level than abstracted knowledge could achieve. Fadia, reflecting on the behaviour of the NGOs during the parliamentary extension protests, told me:

> It was a very emotional break ... you can theorize all you want about how NGO decisions are donor driven, and we can talk and laugh and make fun of NGOs, but the moment you realize it, the moment it actually hits you – it means they take away your protest. When you really understand at an emotional

> level what these things mean beyond just a theory, you understand that there is absolutely no hope [in working with them].

Passing on the feelings that make this knowledge so vital is incredibly difficult. For those who have not shared in the intense experience or its equivalent, it may not mean the same thing with the same force and in the same way – the phrase 'you had to be there' captures this sense well. But for those who *were* there and who can draw on the same knowledge, story-telling can have a very powerful effect in reaffirming that knowledge and in reproducing oneself as a fellow feeling activist – in other words, someone with an equivalent political subjectivity to my own. In the face of an overbearing atmosphere of failure, being able to narrativize failure *together* was a powerful process through which a level of political engagement was maintained to get activists through the lean times, and for the morals of those stories to remain politically salient for the next upturn in political fortunes.

Conclusion

In this article, I have provided an account of what it felt like to keep politically active when it seemed easier to not bother. Even in an atmosphere of failure, activists continued to engage politically. Some engagements aimed to maintain activist infrastructure that was still extant. Others, like the political circle, looked backwards to forge ahead, by creating an environment in which communal discussion of past events *alongside* higher-level discussion of substantive politics, strategy, and targets was privileged and made actionable. The impulse to tell stories about past actions was not brought about by engagements like the political circle; rather, story-telling carried on in informal and formal contexts, and these stories held fundamental importance for activist self-understandings. Together, reactions to the experience of failure and stories of past political actions were able to make continued activist engagement sensible to enough people to maintain a base level of mobilization: a group like the political circle gave an impression of permanence and of future viability, while stories produced solidarity through the intersubjective production of knowledge and meaning. Making continued activist engagement worthwhile was a profoundly affective endeavour; the (re)activation of solidary feeling called on stories of political engagements either experienced together or commensurable to equivalent experiences such as to make them intelligible in common. Such affective attachment is fundamental to the maintenance of political subjectivity. As Maple Razsa has stated, 'we must find ways to represent the powerful emotional charge generated' by political activism. Successfully representing '"love at the barricades" – as well as the quiet solidarity of a shared meal – requires finding ways to communicate, for example, those experiences that make palpable one's belonging' (2015: 212, 213). Stories of failure had the capacity to do this for activists, communicating their own experiences to themselves and those around them.

It is the analytic problem of 'love at the barricades' that has compelled Razsa to call for an 'affirmative anthropology' (2015: 27). David Graeber, meanwhile, has written of the importance of immanent imagination as a fundamental aspect of social life, generally, but of political action – and activism – in particular (2009: 526-7). This article has attempted to show some of the mechanisms by which the capacity to imagine politically is maintained in the face of feelings of inefficacy and of diminished political horizons. In a Lebanese context marked by an inability to imagine a future without impending war (Hermez 2017), and where the Arab uprisings did not amount to even

glorious defeat, activists appeared doubly susceptible to a broad cynicism that would have undermined their capacity to act. And yet this sense of pointlessness did not arise: intentional and motivated initiatives, like the political circle, in conjunction with the everyday, diffuse, and spontaneous narrativization of past events, warded against this. It is important to address the role of stories in social movement success (Polletta 2006), but all the more so to address how stories – and the act of story-telling, in particular – allow participants to endure and imagine the possibility of enacting radical change when success of any sort seems far away indeed (Khasnabish & Haiven 2014: 50; Portelli 1997). To Razsa's call, then, I would add that an affirmative anthropology of the political, as well as making space for alternatives, must address itself to how the capacity to imagine alternatives is produced and maintained, and how even failure itself can become a political resource. Keeping political meanings alive through in-group story-telling is therefore all the more important in times when despair and failure seem all around.

NOTES

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[1] I use pseudonyms throughout.

[2] In Lebanon you are a citizen only as a member of your confessional community, and it is on this basis that you interact with and access the Lebanese state. These institutional logics, as Maya Mikdashi (2011) and others have shown, are constitutive of sectarianism as a broader structure of feeling in Lebanon.

[3] Radical here denoting that political action 'be based on and aimed at a transformation of the fundamental qualities and tenets of the system itself' (Khasnabish & Haiven 2014: 12).

[4] Mostly aged 18 to 35, highly educated, and hailing from a contextually broad middle class, many activists were engaged in precarious intellectual labour in the form of NGO or research assistant work, or else worked in the tech industry or in one form or another of professional white-collar labour. (For a detailed discussion of activist demography and self-perception across multiple generations, see Musallam 2017: 85-117.)

[5] Failure (*fashl*) was used in noun and verb forms by my interlocutors, in English and Arabic, when discussing previous political engagements. Rather than focusing on the discursive function of 'failure', here I concentrate on the underlying feeling states that arose from the falling short of previous political initiatives.

[6] Further, these interventions reflect a much longer durée of political action in the region; in el Houri's words, 'from the promise of the 2010-11 protests to the disappointment of 2013 (and beyond) there is a line . . . that goes back decades and that has defined generations' (2018: 75).

[7] In its own words a secular and non-sectarian party, the SSNP veered between one side of the political spectrum and the other, but by the beginning of the civil war found itself firmly on the left/progressive/pro-Palestinian side. In recent years, it has fervently supported the Syrian regime.

[8] In doing so, I am building upon Michael Jackson's (2002: 18-23) and Francesca Polletta's (2006: 8-11) own teasing out of the content and circulation of stories.

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« L'échec dans l'air » : récits d'activistes, pratiques narratives de groupe et survie des possibilités politiques au Liban

Résumé

L'échec est souvent vu comme un point final : une horreur dans l'organisation politique, l'arrêt de mort des mouvements sociaux, au point que les mouvements radicaux eux-mêmes s'attardent dessus. Leurs participants, pour leur part, considèrent souvent cette attention comme pathologique. Le présent article explore comment, après l'effondrement d'initiatives de longue durée, des activistes politiques libanais ont pu conserver leur capacité à s'engager dans l'action transformative. Au moment où ils sentaient « l'échec dans l'air », la narration en commun des expériences politiques antérieures, dans des contextes formels et informels, est devenue cruciale pour se (re)voir les uns les autres en activistes. Ces histoires relataient l'incapacité de susciter une action collective future, faisant de l'échec lui-même une ressource politique : non pas une fin mais un commencement. Le présent article s'engage dans une anthropologie affirmative qui maintient en vie le coût de l'échec tout en montrant comment les acteurs politiques radicaux génèrent leur capacité d'agir et leur potentiel d'imaginer autre chose.

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