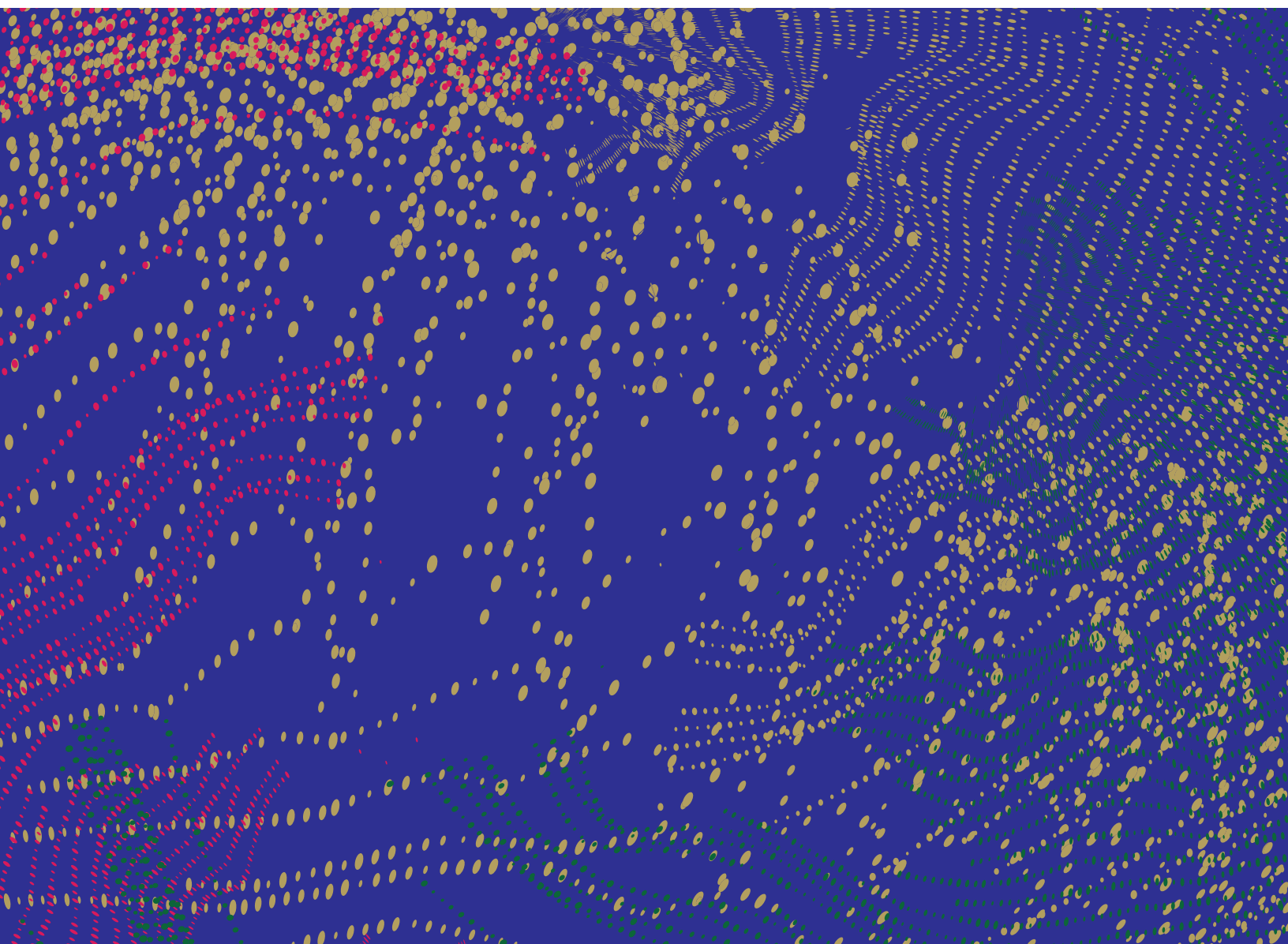The World Humanities Report

Researching Activism in "Dead Time": Counter-politics and the Temporality of Failure in Lebanon

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Researching Activism in "Dead Time": Counter-politics and the Temporality of Failure in Lebanon

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I went to Beirut in the summer of 2016 to conduct ethnographic fieldwork for my doctoral dissertation. I came to examine Lebanese activism in the aftermath of the garbage protests (*Hirak*) of summer 2015—that is, in the aftermath of yet another "failure" at prolonged mobilization. I was interested in how the desire to work toward transformative change was being nurtured after this political event, when activists found themselves in a conjuncture characterized by what many of my interlocutors called *iḥbāṭ* (frustration), with complex overtones of stasis, exasperation with the status quo, and hopelessness. On one hand, what ways of acting and thinking did the temporality of post-*Hirak* activism and scholarship authorize and popularize? On the other hand, what did it make unpalatable? What happens when a temporal configuration comes to be perceived as a permanent state of affairs, as a reality that can only ever be slightly adjusted?

The *Hirak* developed in response to a crisis in the waste sector. Governmental neglect and mismanagement caused rivers, mountains, and valleys of trash to gradually overrun the Lebanese landscape. What began as a hashtag introduced by civil society activists—#YouStink or #Tol3etRe7etkom—evolved into a campaign calling for public sit-ins before metamorphosing into a full-blown popular mobilization in August 2015, which drew tens of thousands from a variety of confessional, regional, economic, educational, and political backgrounds to Martyrs' Square in downtown Beirut. While the activists who initiated the You Stink campaign focused their energies on demanding a solution to the garbage crisis, the protests organically developed into a platform for airing a variety of complaints, including but not limited to "unemployment, precarity of livelihoods, and the commodification of public services."[1]

But the *Hirak* was undermined by what others have called the "nongovernmental organization mentality" of the civil society organizations that positioned

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[1] Carole Kerbage, "Politics of Coincidence: The Harak Confronts Its 'Peoples,'" Working Paper, Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy, 2017, 5, https://www.aub.edu.lb/ifi/Documents/publications/working_papers/2016–2017/20170213_wp_hirak_english.pdf.

themselves as its architects and managers.[2] Civil society groups like You Stink demanded a "clean environment, water, electricity, [and] housing," without articulating the politico-economic underpinnings behind their lack and without offering a structural reading of the problems plaguing Lebanon that could pave the way toward alternatives worth vying for. The organizers of the *Hirak*, Carole Kerbage writes, "did not frame, politically translate, or clarify their meanings. Thus, new participants took to the streets and protested, some vented to the media, and then everybody went home."[3] When the government approved a waste management plan, there was no alternative vision to rally around and fight for because groups like You Stink had insisted on restricting the scope of their demands, focusing only on a technocratic solution to the garbage crisis. Their tactics, as Kerbage argues, produced a momentary broad emotional appeal, drawing many to the protests, but they "could not frame and retain a narrative" for the *Hirak*.[4]

My research unfolded in the aftermath of this political event, amid the ruins of political potentiality, in a period experienced by my interlocutors as "dead time."[5] They were contending with not just a recent political failure but a legacy of failure in anti-status-quo activism. I became interested in the temporality of Lebanese activism at that juncture, specifically the consequences of an understanding of the past as characterized by defeat, of the present as permanent, and of radically alternative futures as pipedreams. I wanted to explore and understand how my interlocutors' political imaginaries were affected by their cyclical work toward mass mobilization that seemed always doomed to dissipate. By "political imaginary," I mean the ability to conceive of and believe in alternatives to the present worth working toward.

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[2] Lamia Moghnieh and Moe Ali Nayel, "The Protests in Lebanon Three Months After," *New Politics*, November 7, 2015, http://newpol.org/content/protests-lebanon-three-months-after.

[3] Kerbage, "Politics of Coincidence," 21, 17.

[4] Kerbage, "Politics of Coincidence," 19.

[5] Craig Jeffrey, "Foreword," in *Ethnographies of Waiting: Doubt, Hope and Uncertainty*, ed. Manpreet K. Janeja and Andreas Bandak, xiii–xv (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018).

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The Politics of Waiting

During my two years in Beirut, I became fixated on the fast-growing popularity of an urban social movement composed of professionals-turned-activists. The organizations, collectives, and independent activists that made up and supported this movement rejected the divisiveness of "ideology" and messiness of "politics" in favor of what they put forward as a neutral, universalist, unifying discourse of the "right to the city": a noncontentious, technocratic, issue-focused approach to sociopolitical agitation focused on livability and well-being. In addition to making sense of the appeal of this pragmatic and technocratic approach among disenchanted middle-class activists in Beirut after the *Hirak*, I gradually became committed to highlighting its limitations—how this approach to challenging Lebanon's sectarian neoliberal order risked, in my reading, reproducing it or aiding in its mutation.

Ghassan Hage argues that in response to the permanentization of crisis on a global scale, "stuckedness has been normalized" as a state that must be coped with rather than escaped.[6] "Stuckedness" refers to the widespread condition wherein we no longer actively wait *for* or *to*, but passively wait *through* or wait *out*—an approach to the status quo that generates a politically debilitating ambivalence. The dignity that can be derived from "waiting something out," Hage tells us, has emerged not just as a coping mechanism but as a mode of governmentality, one that prevents a mass oppositional response to naturalized conditions of precarity.

My interlocutors argued against deterministic, apocalyptic thinking; against the naturalization of the permanency of crisis; against the inevitability of communal strife and essentialist understandings of Lebanon; and against the idea that the citizens and denizens of Lebanon did not deserve or could not handle a political system other than the one they had long been burdened with. I understood the labor of the activists with whom I worked in a context of "dead time"—the aftermath of supposed political failure when widespread hopelessness and a sense of the endlessness of the status quo had again become normalized—as an attempt at secular conversion, in this case of the complicit, hopeless, or fearful citizen or denizen. To come under conviction, in this case, would have constituted realizing not only that something should be done, but that something could be done about the order of things in Lebanon.[7] This desire to counter the

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[6] Ghassan Hage, "Waiting Out the Crisis: On Stuckedness and Governmentality," in *Waiting*, ed. Ghassan Hage (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2009), 97.

[7] Susan Friend Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

ubiquitous sense that change was impossible in Lebanon generated an obsessive anxiety to act among my interlocutors, wherein getting *something* done, facilitating some kind of change, was framed as more important than the scale or impact of that change. What this meant was that they repeatedly deviated from or abandoned their radical political imaginaries in favor of logging short-term "successes."

In this essay, I argue that it is necessary to think critically about this fixation on short-term successes among activists. I make the case for reexamining the binary between paralytic heterotopia and reactive pragmatism.[8] I think through the potential of academic work that resists romanticizing activist action, the literal movement of social movements, and evaluates them via a speculative and anticipatory lens. This mode of scholarship begins in the future, looks back to the present, and commits itself to futurity as an anti–capitalist practice in contexts where neoliberalism has debilitated the political imagination. I want to explore the potential of a mode of scholarship that takes its cue from marginal political actors, collectives, and movements that are committed to a praxis of "waiting for" in hopeless conjunctures, treating the waiting room as a "horizon," and insisting that while waiting may destroy us it might also "forge innovation and creativity."[9]

The Detached Academic

A few months into my fieldwork in Beirut, I met another Lebanon-focused academic and early career researcher to discuss my research and the observations I had gleaned from my preliminary work with prominent activists in Beirut's

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[8] I borrow the term *heterotopia* from Michel Foucault, whose thoughts on the concept are quite complex and varied. In my work on activism, I use it to connote a kind of political sanctuary, a zone to which one can retreat to act out a version of their understanding of the good political life but which does not disrupt the hegemonic order beyond its borders. It is important to note that a heterotopia is not necessarily a haven, by definition. A prison can be considered a heterotopic space, for example—a bounded zone of horror that preserves the perception of the space beyond it as good and righteous. What distinguishes heterotopias as sanctuaries is that they can offer outcasts or dissidents a space to "get outside of themselves," but they cannot "realize or even offer the utopian promise of their getting outside of the broader society that had brought or driven them there." James Faubion, "Heterotopia: An Ecology," in *Heterotopia and the City: Public Space in a Postcivil Society*, ed. Michiel Dehaene and Lieven De Cauter (London: Routledge, 2008), 37.

[9] Aimee Bahng, *Migrant Futures: Decolonizing Speculation in Financial Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 6; Andreas Bandak and Manpreet K. Janeja, "Introduction: Worth the Wait," in *Ethnographies of Waiting: Doubt, Hope and Uncertainty*, ed. Manpreet K. Janeja and Andreas Bandak (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 3.

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urban social movement. During our conversation, I offered up what I thought
to be a timid critique of the limitations of some approaches I observed. I was met
with a somewhat aggressive response from my acquaintance, who challenged
my authority to question the work of well-established activists when I had only
recently arrived from Oxford, a detached academic mired in my own pontifica-
tions with no alternatives to offer up.

Over the course of two years in Beirut, punctuated by conversations with
Lebanon-focused scholars I encountered in conferences, I found myself repeat-
edly faced with this dismissal of the critical lens I had organically come to apply
to the activists with whom I worked. This was particularly the case when I
engaged with scholars who had grown up or spent long stretches of time in
Lebanon and who had also encountered the campaigns and initiatives I was
critiquing, developing personal relationships with and investments in the activ-
ists with whom I worked. I witnessed a romanticization of "action," regardless
of where that action was leading or had led, on the part of Lebanon-focused
academics eager to acknowledge and prop up a form of labor they deemed
intrinsically more valuable than their own. Activists were the boots on the
ground, and we were the talking heads in the ivory tower.

I came to see this knee-jerk celebration of activist work, romanticizing form
rather than content, as a product of a kind of guilt on the part of the "native"
scholar in particular—a guilt likely rooted in having seemingly abandoned the
home and transmogrified it into a site of research. This seemed paradoxical to
me, given the amount of energy that scholars spend on proving our relevance to
the world beyond academia. Was the political purchase of our work only evident
when we were speaking back to the West? Did we have nothing to offer our
own contexts? Were our critiques only righteous when aimed at the dominant
class, and did we have nothing constructive to offer the marginalized or the
dissident?

The activists with whom I worked were not necessarily dismissive of
academia. Some had published reflections on their work in prominent journals.
Their studies and analyses often revealed a deep understanding of the intricacies
of Lebanon's political system. But in their political and diagnostic work, these
activists found themselves having to "ignore their critical capacities" and provide
prescriptions and solutions that their own research revealed were inherently
limited.[10] The anxiety to act, it seems, overwhelmed even the most astute analy-
ses of the Lebanese condition at that time. This anxiety fashioned an optimistic

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[10] Nikolas Kosmatopoulos, "Toward an Anthropology of 'State' Failure: Lebanon's Leviathan
and Peace Expertise," *Social Analysis* 55, no. 3 (2011): 118.

commitment to managerialism, despite the evidence these activists had provided for its limitations and pitfalls.

In the oscillations between "cynical resignation" and "naïve optimism"[11] that I witnessed among activists in Lebanon, I saw echoes of Mark Fisher's work about what he called capitalist realism. For Fisher, capitalist realism refers to "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system," but that "it is now impossible to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it."[12] But the term is also meant to describe the sense of purpose and fulfilment that those positioned against a capitalism to which no realistic alternative can be imagined derive from committing themselves to the belief that it is "bad," regardless of whether they continue to "participate in capitalist exchange." If capitalism, and in Lebanon's case sectarian neoliberalism, cannot be dismantled and fully replaced, then we can resign ourselves to alleviating its most dire consequences or opposing it discursively. "What late capitalism repeats from Stalinism," Fisher writes, "is just this valuing of symbols of achievement over actual achievement."[13] What I observed in Lebanon was not so much the pitting of academia against activism but a resignation to capitalist realism among academics and activists.

Lauren Berlant makes the case for a scholarly ethics that refuses "to relinquish utopian practice," that rejects "the apparently inevitable movement from tragedy to farce that has marked so much of the analysis of social movements generated post '68." In making the case for the radical political imaginary in anti-ideological conjunctures, I follow Berlant's call to not succumb to capitalist realism and to resist an approach to theorizing, assessing, or doing politics beholden to a false sense of urgency that dismisses all critique unaccompanied by a tangible and immediately implementable alternative. Like Berlant, I choose to "take the ill-fitting mantle of '68 to stand . . . for something like the risk of political embarrassment, of embracing undercooked transitional thought about the possibilities of and politics of futurity itself."[14] I call for questioning the uncritical embrace of "actually existing social possibilities" that abandons the future in favor of adjusting the present and for embracing the willingness to "be bathed in the fading light of whatever has been declared useless." That which has been declared useless—utopia, the radical political imagination, futurity—requires our urgent attention. As scholars, we have an "ethics of responsibility" toward

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[11] Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), xiii.
[12] Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009), 2 (italics in the original).
[13] Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 13, 42–43.
[14] Lauren Berlant, "'68, or Something," *Critical Inquiry* 21, no. 1 (1994): 126, 128.

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bygone revolutionary possibilities and toward the future-impossible. In Lebanon's case, we have an ethics of responsibility not only toward the revolutionary actions of decades past but also toward the recent but short-lived October Revolution of 2019, which unfolded after my research had concluded and which took many of my interlocutors by surprise. They, of course, like so many others, embraced the euphoria of the moment and engaged in modes of organizing that had previously been dismissed but whose potential the revolutionary moment revealed. With the revolution's deflation, however, and the coming of crisis after crisis—from economic collapse to the global pandemic to the explosion in Beirut port on August 4, 2020—Lebanon saw a return to not only hopelessness but, in many cases, despair and nihilism, with activists if not retreating back to the pragmatic then abandoning organizing altogether. Our praxis should embrace the hauntological and the utopian rather than the chrononormative: the naturalization of "specific regimes of asymmetrical power into seemingly ordinary bodily tempos and routines, which in turn organize the value and meaning of time."[15]

In writing critically about the pragmatic and technocratic turn in Lebanese civil society between 2016 and 2018, my aim is not so much to argue against the principles that informed it, that is, to engage it ideologically and demonstrate

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its ideational vacuity. Rather, my aim is to demonstrate what this approach to agitating against the status quo did in the world—the effects it had or could have had, and how these effects contradicted the long-term goals of my interlocutors. In my dissertation, for example, I discussed public space–focused activists in Beirut and explored the consequences of inviting the neoliberal Lebanese state into neglected public spaces in the city used mostly by the working classes and migrant or refugee communities, and of attempting to convince this state of the profitability of preserving such spaces in an urban context of hyperprivat-

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[15] Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), xiii, 9, 3. When I speak of an academic embrace of the hauntological, I am referring to a practice of excavating traces of the bygone in the present—searching for the ghosts that haunt the present and whose specters can be generative rather than paralyzing. To embrace the hauntological is to give oneself over to a yearning "for a future that has never arrived" (Hua Hsu, "Mark Fisher's 'K-Punk' and the Futures That Have Never Arrived," *New Yorker*, December 11, 2018, https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/mark-fishers-k-punk-and-the-futures-that-have-never-arrived), and to see this yearning as productive rather than debilitating. I elaborate on this practice further below.

ization. This invitation, I argued, although it might save a public space eyed by developers from being privatized in the short term, in the long term threatened the "unscripted" character of such sites that my interlocutors were committed to maintaining and risked such spaces becoming inaccessible to those who would be able to use them precisely because they were neglected.

If looked at superficially, the pragmatic strategies and tactics adopted by my urban activist interlocutors to log short-term successes appeared robust; these activists seemed mobile and busy. I watched these tactics repeatedly hinder long-term goals and visions. I began to view them as the product of an anxiety to act in order to counter widespread hopelessness and power the engine of change that, while noble in its intentions, hollowed the potential of activism. This approach focused on negotiating and collaborating with the state in ways that failed to undermine the authority of the ruling class and impinged on the desire to mobilize against it and the sense that such mobilizations were even possible.

Pragmatic politics have grown increasingly popular among activists around the world. The development and appeal of Beirut's urban social movement needs to be understood in light of what scholars like Eric Swyngedouw, Japhy Wilson, and Jodi Dean have called our global, postpolitical conjuncture. In this conjuncture, the hegemony of capital introduced mass processes of depoliticization, which inspired modes of activism that aspire toward consensus and claim nonpolitical or apolitical intentions, focusing on the lowest common denominator to bring people together to adjust (rather than fundamentally challenge and transform) oppressive systems. If the humanitarian industry, as many scholars have compellingly argued, has abandoned "the utopian telos of total transformation in favor of short-term relief and a 'minimal biopolitics,'" the same can be said of pragmatic politics and techno-populism. Both of these approaches to rights advocacy—regardless of intention—are complicit in the spread of a rationality that "evacuates the near future in strikingly similar ways" to that of the "neoliberal imagination."[16]

In our temporal conjuncture, the urgent need to address growing mass precarity and seemingly permanent crisis calls for the counterintuitive withdrawal from reactive activism and for a shift toward an imaginative engagement with the future that can shape our politics in the present to be more egalitarian and inclusive by orienting them to the not-yet-here. Practices that appear "less efficient" in the short term and less productive of "marketable results" might be,

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[16] Antina von Schnitzler, *Democracy's Infrastructure: Techno-Politics and Citizenship after Apartheid* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 172.

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in the long run, "more sustaining" of the kind of political communities needed to facilitate systemic change.[17] Thus, what Eric Swyngedouw calls the anxiety to act, the need to agitate against the status quo regardless of outcome, is enabled by a ubiquitous neoliberal rationality that satisfies the question "what did you do today?" in a way that turns the attention of potentially disruptive actors and movements away from a more generative engagement with

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the structures that oppress them.[18] This leaves us with the question: What alternatives to this "nervous" activism can be imagined, and what role can critical academics play in this imagining?

Toward the end of my fieldwork, in the aftermath of the catastrophe that was the 2018 parliamentary elections for independent candidates in Lebanon, I witnessed an increasing acknowledgment among proponents of pragmatic politics that perhaps the sociopolitico-economic system as it existed could not be adjusted or improved.[19] I saw them begin to pause and contemplate whether it was more fruitful to pause and contemplate. Increasingly, their short-term pragmatism began to appear as that which was perhaps "dangerously 'utopian.'"[20] Rather than seeing such a retreat as succumbing to failure and as a form of political paralysis or inertia, it is important that we understand it as a reorientation toward futurity. It is a refusal of a politics that is beholden merely to the possibilities of the present rather than the potentialities of the future.

In the remainder of this essay, I make the case for paying scholarly attention to counterintuitive political undoings or not doings, for wondering about

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[17] Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure*, 9.

[18] Eric Swyngedouw, "Insurgent Architects, Radical Cities and the Promise of the Political," in *The Post Political and Its Discontents: Spaces of Depoliticisation, Spectres of Radical Politics*, ed. Japhy Wilson and Eric Swyngedouw (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 169–88.

[19] During the 2018 parliamentary elections, as was the case during the municipal elections of 2016, Lebanese voters overwhelmingly cast ballots aimed at the reproduction, rather than disruption, of the ruling class.

[20] Japhy Wilson and Eric Swyngedouw, "There Is No Alternative," in *The Post Political and Its Discontents: Spaces of Depoliticisation, Spectres of Radical* Politics, ed. Japhy Wilson and Eric Swyngedouw (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 310.

and wandering through the possibilities of an activist otherwise, and for asking what such an otherwise might produce. A speculative approach to the study of resistance can allow us to glimpse the political potentiality in acts that we might otherwise read as cynical, nihilistic, idealistic, or naïve.

The Politics of Hope

Gabriel Marcel "distinguishes between desire, on the one hand, which is intrinsically insatiable, impatient, and does not tolerate any form of delay, and hope, on the other, which involves waiting."[21] Pragmatic and technocratic politics are beholden to desire and abandon hope. Hope depends on a radical political imaginary, a commitment to a horizon and a not-yet-here. Political action driven by hope refuses any action that is not geared toward a particular utopian horizon, regardless of how delayed or impossible such a horizon might be.[22] Political action rooted in desire becomes fixated on the action; on the illusion of movement, effectiveness, and the possibility of success; and not its potential end goals. It can offer an actor a sense of purpose and fulfillment in the present, but one that depends on the belief that transformative change is an impossibility. We are already made to wait by the structures and institutions we are subjected to, but are there ways to wait subversively and see subversive waiting (rather than nervous action) as the antidote to stuckedness?

What Arjun Appadurai calls a politics of patience is, according to Andreas Bandak and Manpreet K. Janeja, a "slow collaborative process that entails practices of accommodation, negotiation, long-term asset building and cumulative change rather than a politics of confrontation."[23] I view this politics of patience as the antithesis of the anxiety to act critiqued by Swyngedouw. In our contemporary context, Bandak and Janeja argue, "hoping for change . . . rests on negotiating emergency and urgency with patience, which requires the 'capacity to aspire,' defined as a capacity that is 'a navigational one . . . that allows people to make their way from more proximate needs to more distant aspirational worlds.'" A politics committed and oriented toward a utopian horizon involves an approach to time that we can understand as messianic, fixated on the "gap opened by the already not yet" that perceives "salvation" as that which "has already arrived but is yet to be fulfilled."[24] Such a politics recognizes that

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[21] As cited in Bandak and Janeja, "Introduction," 2.
[22] Fredric Jameson, "The Politics of Utopia," *New Left Review* 25 (2004): 35–54.
[23] Bandak and Janeja, "Introduction," 8.
[24] Bandak and Janeja, "Introduction," 8, 12.

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time as we know and live it is a construct. It recognizes that we have been made to feel that we occupy the afterlife of bygone radical moments whose potential can never be recovered and counters "the common sense of the present tense" by speculating alternative futures drawn from forgotten pasts and buried presents.[25] This entails burning holes in secular time and mining tunnels underneath it in an attempt to uncover *Kairos*, the "decisive moments with the potentiality of the irruption of the unexpected." It draws on the future-past and the future-impossible to operate subversively in the present. It lives a life of anticipation rather than resignation and allows for "the scenarios and prospects of what the actual wait will lead to" to "work back on the present situation."[26]

Elizabeth Freeman defines *chrononormativity* as "the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity."[27] But in Lebanon we can understand it as organizing these bodies toward a resignation to stuckedness and the "heroism of the stuck"[28] as the only mode of dignified being available to them—be that a stuckedness in the form of acquiescence or full embrace of the status quo or in the form of an approach to activism that challenges the status quo in ways that paradoxically help sediment it.

I conclude by inviting a reflection on the existence of other modes of relating to the state that I observed during my fieldwork in a moment of dead time and that did not reify the kind of power dynamics described earlier, asking if there are ways of enabling processes of political subjectivation that do not require an appeal to self-interest or a guarantee of success. If so, what might such practices generate? In these final paragraphs, I want to think through the potential of what Donna Haraway calls staying with the trouble, of cultivating, more specifically, a politics of refusal—a refusal to act, on the one hand, and, on the other, a refusal to make requests, rather than demands, of the state.[29] This is not meant to be a romanticized commentary on such practices or an assertion of their universal applicability or productivity, but merely an attempt at a generous and imaginative engagement with alternative forms of counter-political practice. My hope is that such a "thinking with" can inspire a reconceptualization of what we conceive of as political praxis or the "doing" of politics. There is much to be learned, for example, from examining the recent history of political activism of migrant domestic workers in Lebanon, who collectively make up

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[25] Freeman, *Time Binds*, xv.

[26] Bandak and Janeja "Introduction," 12, 20.

[27] Freeman, *Time Binds*, 3.

[28] Hage, "Waiting Out the Crisis."

[29] Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

one of the most vulnerable groups in the country. I end this essay by considering a movement that, while lauded and supported by Lebanese civil society activists and scholars, has not been examined as a model of activism to aspire to or learn from.

Staying with the Trouble

There are, at the time of writing, 200,000 to 250,000 documented migrant domestic workers living and working in Lebanon, and many more undocumented ones. They are overwhelmingly women, and most are nationals of Ethiopia, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, or Kenya.[30] Collectively, they make up Lebanon's largest female labor force. Their presence in the country is managed by the *kafala* (sponsorship system), which binds them "to a single employer (the sponsor, or '*kafeel*') whose consent is de facto required for the worker to return home or seek another job in the country."[31] Migrant domestic workers are not protected by Lebanese labor law, making them susceptible to myriad forms and degrees of maltreatment. The consequences of the *kafala* system include "the non-payment or withholding of already minimal wages (average starting salaries are $150 per month), the seizure of identity documents, the inability to change employers or break contract, chronic overwork, no days off, and no guarantee of time spent outside."[32]

The few migrant domestic workers who manage to turn to the Lebanese legal system to report abuses and seek justice often "end up facing trumped-up counter charges of theft or absconding."[33] Their word is measured against that of their Lebanese employers, and they often find themselves facing courts uninterested in taking their claims seriously. Furthermore, they have to contend with the arbitrary decision making of Lebanon's Directorate of General Security, which has jurisdiction over issuing passports and visas. General Security has detained and deported migrant workers for having children, for lobbying for their rights, and for publicly broadcasting and criticizing their experiences of abuse.

[30] Richard Hall, "Secret Networks Saving Lebanon's Migrant Maids from Abuse," *The Guardian*, August 1, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2018/aug/01/secret-networks-rescuing-lebanon-migrant-maids-from-abuse.

[31] Kirsten O'Regan, "A Day Out and a Union: Lebanon's Domestic Workers Organize," *Dissent*, Fall 2017, https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/lebanon-domestic-workers-organize-union-kafala.

[32] O'Regan, "A Day Out."

[33] O'Regan, "A Day Out."

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Despite belonging to a deeply precarious and vulnerable community, a substantial number of migrant domestic workers have long been proactive in responding to and agitating against the dehumanizing conditions they are regularly subjected to. They risk detention, deportation, and physical and mental harassment in order to fight back against normalized structural but also cultural racism in Lebanon, which has sanctioned their maltreatment and their exclusion from the mechanisms, institutions, and organizations meant to protect workers.

In 2015, the Domestic Workers Union (DWU) was established with the backing of the International Trade Union Confederation and the International Labour Organization, under the auspices of the National Federation of Workers' and Employees' Trade Unions in Lebanon. The minister of labor at the time refused to recognize the initiative, but his response came as no surprise. The union was a gesture of defiance, an assertive, disobedient performance that rejected not just the treatment but also the status of migrant domestic workers in Lebanon. This was a disruptive politics of visibility. Migrant domestic workers presented themselves publicly the way they wanted to be seen—as independent, unionized workers—without asking permission of the state. Instead, they told the state that this was how it was going to be and they would not settle for anything less. They made themselves visible in a way that pushed against the grain of the *kafala* system, detaching themselves from their sponsors and demonstrating that they would accept no less than the complete abolishment of the system. They demonstrated their boldness and bravery by appearing in public in unauthorized ways. They demanded not recognition by the state but transformation on the part of the state.

> The politics of refusal . . . is the precondition for nurturing the social and political imaginaries to respond to political ruptures in ways that can produce cracks in the order of things and allow fragments of the utopian to seep in.

Perhaps most important, these migrant domestic worker-activists refused to engage in a politics of compromises and appeasement to further their cause—a politics that risked entrenching the very inequalities they sought to upend. In 2016, a group of migrant domestic workers split from the DWU and formed the Alliance of Migrant Domestic Workers (AMDW). The DWU was too much of a "top-down project—one that, in seeking formal recognition, arguably diminished the autonomy of the women it sought to represent."[34] Although it could

[34] O'Regan, "A Day Out."

be argued that from a practical perspective, it was perhaps better for migrant domestic workers to be associated with a body like the National Federation of Workers' and Employees' Trade Unions, this arrangement was in many ways an extension of the sponsorship system in less sinister form—a capitulation to the notion that they needed to be guided or even led by Lebanese nationals out of the abusive conditions they were trapped in. The AMDW refused this logic, demanded its autonomy, and took it. Its members chose to adopt a slow, long-term approach to radical change, rather than a short-term approach tainted with concessions that would perhaps allow them to make some gains but would continue to position them as lesser than Lebanese nationals. As they wait for opportunities that can help them inch toward the utopian horizon they are committed to, collectives like the AMDW have cultivated a form of kinship for women who are far from home and loved ones, through which they can experience and share solidarity, cultivate comradeship, ground their suffering in a collective struggle, and hone a political vision and message, while routinely laying and maintaining "the groundwork, perhaps, for political struggles in the future."[35]

There is much to be learned from this movement of radically vulnerable people, who refuse to compromise on their demands, to appeal to a state that treats them as subhuman. They draw on a variety of techniques—from lobbying to protest to cultural resistance—all aimed at a utopian horizon, at an elsewhere devoid of distinctions and discrimination based on race, gender, class, and sexuality (the AMDW has nurtured strong bonds with socialist, LGBTQ+, and feminist collectives and organizations in Lebanon). In the midst of hopelessness, frustration, and stuckedness made ordinary, amid the everyday ugliness of absent opportunities, they do the work of sustaining a social movement as community, as family, keeping each other and their cause alive and actively intersecting the struggle against *kafala* with others in Lebanon.

The AMDW adopts a variety of approaches, from refusal to engagement, from the pragmatic to the seemingly impractical, to further its goals. My argument is not that one tactic is more valuable or productive than another (refusal versus pragmatism, for instance). Rather, the radical political imaginary is a necessary component of a progressive social movement. Academics need to take seriously the absence or existence of such imaginaries when evaluating such movements and deciding what does and does not constitute "productive" political praxis. The AMDW's actions in the present are oriented toward the future and are informed by its members' commitment to abolishing the *kafala*

[35] O'Regan, "A Day Out."

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system. Any tactic that risks betraying this horizon is refused, regardless of the "wins" it might allow in the present. The utopian horizon allows for refusing those compromises that, if looked at in isolation, might appear as successes or achievements but in the grander scheme actually push futurity further away in a manner that can do real, material harm to vulnerable people and communities in the now, as demonstrated by my discussion of public space advocacy. The politics of utopia, as Fredric Jameson has taught us, works on the present; it is an instrument, not merely an idea. He argues that a politics committed to prison abolition, for example, should not busy itself proving whether prison abolition can or will take place—if it is a realistic demand—but should use this political commitment to determine what strategies and tactics, what achievable goals, to adopt and advocate for in the present.[36]

Hope as Method

In the university, Jack Halberstam writes, "we spend far less time thinking about counter-hegemony than about hegemony."[37] Hirokazu Miyazaki argues for shifting from "hope as a subject to hope as a method," building on Ernst Bloch's critique of "the retrospective character of contemplative knowledge."[38] Bloch located the limits of philosophy in its "retrospective character," in its referents being "what has become" rather what could be or, to use Bloch's phrasing, what is "not-yet." Bloch advocated substituting "hope for contemplation as a method of engagement with the world."[39] Middle East studies is also largely retrospective in character, preoccupied with the conditions of possibility for the present, the "how we got here" of the region, and the infrastructures propping up oppression and hindering attempts at resistance and systemic change. Overall, scholarship is rarely anticipatory, bound as it is to empirical evidence.

For academics, a speculative or anticipatory practice depends on an embrace of negative critique. Negative critique does something in the present, even if it does not immediately provide a path to a material otherwise. It lays bare the technologies of power through which the world we inhabit has been construct-ed as natural and through which it has been constructed as "the best of all actual

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[36] Jameson, "The Politics of Utopia."

[37] Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure*, 17.

[38] Hirokazu Miyazaki, *The Method of Hope: Anthropology, Philosophy, and Fijian Knowledge* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 3; Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope: Representative Men* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), 10.

[39] Bloch, *Principle of Hope*, 13, 14.

worlds," to borrow from Elizabeth Povinelli.[40] To say, "not this," as Povinelli puts it, although it might seem like a useless gesture, does something in the world. The politics of refusal can lay the affective groundwork and forge the political subjectivities needed for the event to come. It is the precondition for nurturing the social and political imaginaries to respond to political ruptures in ways that can produce cracks in the order of things and allow fragments of the utopian to seep in.

Inspired by the queer and feminist theorists cited in this essay, and the anthropologists of time and knowledge that punctuate it as well, I advocate for a scholarly turn away from forms of activism that appear most like activism in the mainstream sense, those that appear potentially "effective" in the short term. I call for a turn toward movements that say "not this," that refuse the present and embrace what Fred Moten and Stefano Harney call fugitivity, understood not as retreat but as a political reorientation toward what Karl Marx called "the poetry of the future," away from the horrors and incarcerating borders of the present—a politics of transtemporality.[41]

[40] Elizabeth Povinelli, *Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 191.

[41] Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013); Berlant, "'68, or Something," 132.

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