



**The dissensual everyday: between daily life and exceptional acts in Beirut, Lebanon**

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# The Dissensual Everyday: Between Daily Life and Exceptional Acts in Beirut, Lebanon

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## Abstract

*In discussing how people make political use of public space from below, recent writings either emphasize the repurposing of monumental spaces, like Tahrir Square, or else look to how the poor and marginal produce facts on the ground through their everyday interactions without explicit political intentions. In the Hamra neighborhood of Lebanon's capital, Beirut, the daily life of politicized youth was, in the years following the Arab Spring uprisings, something more than passivity and something less than constant avowed resistance. Through their dissensual everyday inhabitation they made Hamra a compelling political site that was good to fight for and in which it was good to fight. Building on attempts to affirm possibility in anthropological engagements with urban life and political activism, I suggest that such spaces, containing an experiential, embodied, and enspaced memory of radical engagements, can maintain political actors in the face of defeat and setback, and provide encouragement for future political action. [Subjectivity; The Everyday; Activism; Space; Lebanon]*

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In late 2010, a wave of protests, demonstrations, and uprisings swept across the Middle East and North Africa. At around the same time, various social movements erupted onto the political stage in the Global North: *indignados* in Spain, the occupations of Syntagma Square in Greece, and the Occupy movements in the US, the UK, eastern Europe, and further afield. These engagements made striking use of public space. Some made demands of the state, others called for the overthrowing of rulers, almost all created commons in the spaces they occupied. And then, in that public and expansive form, these protests were suddenly gone. The squares were cleared. In much of the Global North, there has been a transfer of energy from the street into electoral politics. With a few exceptions, the Arab uprisings have turned into reaction, the spirit and creative energy unleashed in those months seemingly retreating in the face of violent repression, co-option, counter-revolution, and civil war.<sup>1</sup> The original events were exceptional and took place in exceptional spaces: protestors came to the squares and parks, acted, and then they were gone. Where did they come from, and where did they go? Might there be an everyday space of activism, and if so, what might it look like?

In this article, I shift away from the repurposing of “monumental spaces”—sites like Gezi, Syntagma, or Tahrir—through exceptional acts of political will to look instead at daily life in Hamra, a Beirut

neighborhood where many Lebanese activists lived in the years before and after the Arab uprisings. Historically home to literary avant-gardes and an incubator for leftist national and regional formations, in recent years Hamra had once more become home to a new circuit of political activists, a younger generation who have engaged in multiple protest mobilizations over the past ten years, and who find themselves in an uneasy relationship to those older formations. I re-center discussions of political action onto how inhabitation and exceptional political acts co-occurring *within the same site* make it a compelling political space. Activists' inhabitation of Hamra exhibited something that I call the "dissensual everyday". By this I mean that their daily life was something more than passivity but something less than constant avowed resistance. Activists did not spend all their time in a heightened state of conflict with those around them: their daily life did not in itself disrupt the ability of the powerful to hold sway in that space, nor was it the kind of radical and immediate challenge to hegemony constituted by the movements of the squares and the Arab uprisings. They did, however, inhabit Hamra askance to the norm, informed by the awareness that what they were doing was unlike how they would be able to act elsewhere. This askance inhabitation created an oppositional belonging that was both political and personal, built of the space's valorized pasts and imagined futures, and of activists' experiences not as outsiders but as intimate parts of that space.

In what follows I draw on Jacques Rancière's formulation of dissensus as "a division inserted in the common sense: a dispute about what is given and about the frame within which we see something as given" (2010, 69). By shifting the boundaries of possible ways of living, activists in Hamra laid foundations from which to engage in acts that make "visible that which had no reason to be seen" by "plac[ing] one world in another" (Rancière 2010, 38). Such making-visible is, as shown via the exceptional acts in monumental space with which I began, ephemeral and difficult to sustain: they are, in Rancière's evocative phrasing, always "on the shore of [their] own disappearance" (2010, 39). In discussing Lebanese political activists' askance inhabitation of Hamra, I show that such dissensual acts can often be more longstanding and transformative when daily life and exceptional acts occur in the same place. The things activists did as part of their dissensual everyday, then, were fundamental for making a political subjectivity, capable of such acts, feel common-sense and natural. Through its rich and contested Left cosmopolitan history, Hamra allows us to view inhabited space as being capable of politicization through both everyday inhabitation and exceptional political acts that themselves become part of the fabric of the neighborhood. There, dissensual acts are not a suspension of regular use but, instead, the very reason one wishes to be there and not elsewhere. Such spaces are a powerful resource for forces of change: they sustain political actors after defeat and setback, and they provide encouragement for future acts. I suggest that by investigating these everyday spaces of activism, we can

better appreciate how exceptional acts in monumental spaces remain possible even after the squares are cleared.

In discussing where the capacity to act politically comes from and how it is maintained, this article both builds upon and contributes to what we might call, to paraphrase Maple Razsa (2015, 210), attempts to “affirm possibility” in anthropological engagements with urban life and political activism, respectively. Recent studies of the everyday, for example, look at the political effects of ways of living that are not conceived in political terms or enacted with ideological awareness (Holston 2009; Bayat 2013), and have been insightful in their treatment of the urban poor, the subaltern, and the disenfranchised on the margins of the city (Caldeira 2017; Kanna 2012). They show that the practices of daily life, by creating “facts on the ground” (Bayat 2013, 315), can subvert and repurpose the material layout of a space and how it could be used. In this article, I show how intentional political actors, like the broad activist community in Beirut with whom I have carried out fieldwork since September 2013, also create facts on the ground. For them, I suggest, daily life was not so unthinking, explicitly political acts not so exceptional—and the ebb and flow between the two matters greatly if we are to understand where the capacity to act politically comes from.

Meanwhile, recent anthropological engagements with activism have been adept at teasing out precisely the interplay of radical and everyday practice, with a particular emphasis on the transformations wrought upon activists’ senses of self and their capacity to act, whether through altered temporal horizons (Razsa 2015), distinct emotional dispositions (Gould 2009), or the creation of new “ways of being” (Sitrin 2012). To this emphasis on subjective transformation, “a discussion of activist inhabitation allows us to engage more explicitly with the material spaces of activism”. In affirming possibility, though, we must not lose sight of the fact that the capacity to act transformatively upon the world is a potential whose existence we must not take for granted. This is true, too, of the spaces in the city that help maintain the possibility of engaging politically. They are the product of shared and accumulated layers of history and personal experience, and it is these that render a space a resource from which one can draw, and to which one becomes attached. For this quality to maintain itself, however, requires that a space be reaffirmed as such with every act of care or defiance upon its walls, on its streets, and in its buildings.

I begin by describing the activists who called Hamra home, and why the neighborhood was, for them, a particularly compelling space in the city. Starting here, I trace the trajectories that bring my interlocutors to Hamra and the ways they spend their time there. Where recent works on the politicization of space on one hand and everyday practice on the other often engage with distinct urban spaces, I provide examples from activists in Hamra of daily life askance to the norm and exceptional acts occurring *in the same space*. This complicates questions of governance, securitization, and subjectivation, and affords us the opportunity to

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affirm the political possibilities that already exist in the city. In closing, I turn to how such a space, and the askance inhabitation it permitted, maintained a political subjectivity able to imagine doing otherwise. For activists, this made Hamra a site that was good to fight for and in which it was good to fight.

## Hamra: Politics and Space

*Lebanese activism, Left history, contested space*

In the first half of 2014, I would sit often with Karim, who was always happy to talk and, if not busy with political meetings or his studies, could normally be found at one of a couple of coffee shops around the Hamra neighborhood. Karim's politicization dovetailed with the aftermath of Lebanon's part in the Arab uprisings, *isqāt al-niẓām al-ṭā'ifī* (Bring down the sectarian system).<sup>2</sup> Specifically, he had been a member of Take Back Parliament, a grassroots campaign to elect parliamentary candidates from beyond institutional elites, many of whose older participants had cut their teeth on *isqāt's* protest marches to the city center via residential neighborhoods, and in its long organizing meetings in sites across the city. By the time I arrived to begin fieldwork, however, the campaign was over—not because it was unsuccessful, but because incumbent parliamentarians voted to extend their own mandate, postponing elections for a calendar year. Karim's recent and intense introduction to activist networks made him an excellent person to talk to as I first made sense of the political lay of the land.

It was with this in mind that we met at eight o'clock one February night at Café Younes, located just off bustling Hamra Street. Even at that time and with the cold, most of the outside tables were a mess of people chatting, coming and going—mostly under thirty, many of them students. Karim informed me he was finally moving to Hamra the very next day; until then, he'd commuted from his university's other campus, an hour's bus ride away. He joked about having to retake exams as he'd neglected his studies due to the amount of politics he had become involved with: from long meetings with Take Back Parliament to the intense protests that took place over the summer in Downtown Beirut over the parliamentary extension; to attempts during the previous few months to create an umbrella secular and progressive student union to cover the whole country; to his migrant solidarity organizing.

We paused our conversation every so often as Karim said hello to people he knew, sitting at other tables or passing by. Now, though, we were interrupted by Anis coming to say hello to me. I had been introduced to Anis a few months earlier by a mutual acquaintance who had been in the same leftist political group at his university. When he wasn't at Café Younes, he was often found on the frontlines of demonstrations,

in physical confrontation with police and security forces, as had been the case at the parliamentary extension protests the previous year, and even more so a few years later during the trash crisis (more on this below). I introduced Anis to Karim and we chatted for a few minutes. “He’s a friend of a friend,” Karim told me once Anis had left, “and I see him around a lot, here and at protests. It’s a small community of people, you know. Either you get stuck here or you leave the country.” Karim had been thinking of leaving for postgraduate study abroad—perhaps Germany, where there might be some funding available. He was on a scholarship at his university and had no private means of supporting himself. Pivoting back to activists, he added that “everyone has enough money to be okay here, some even come from rich parents; but no poor people, they would not get the opportunity.”

The activists with whom I carried out fieldwork neither constitute an internally coherent ideological formation, nor are they completely distinct demographically from the wider communities of Hamra, Beirut, or Lebanon. As Karim intimated, the majority come from a contextually broad middle class in which families are often, but not always, able to help pay their children’s way through university. Most activists are going or have gone through tertiary education, are between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five, and are at least bilingual between English, French, and Arabic. Though almost all now reside in Beirut, they come from across the country, with no preponderance of any one confessional group. Anis and Karim, for example, shared no regional or sectarian affiliation, nor family political background—though Anis’ family had a history of involvement in leftist organizations, Karim’s family were broadly apolitical supporters of their co-religionist party on one side of the country’s institutional political schism. Many activists are engaged in precarious intellectual labor for NGOs as researchers writing reports, or they work in the tech industry or some form of professional white-collar labor. Almost none earn enough money to afford to live on their own, but they do often have disposable income, which they use to spend time at cafés and bars.<sup>3</sup>

Their activism has taken the form of a variety of protest mobilizations: *isqāt*, TBP, the parliamentary extension protests, and more recently the long summer of running battles during the trash crisis. It has also led to maintaining alternative social spaces, engaging in long-term relationships of friendship and political cooperation with marginalized populations (Syrians, Palestinians, migrant workers), and intellectual production. Many Lebanese activists, while abroad, took part in the Occupy movements in the US and UK; anarchist squats in the Netherlands; and student mobilizations, occupations, and strikes across Europe. They also draw on a deep history of revolutionary leftism in Lebanon, steeped in Third-Worldism, Arab nationalism and Maoist insurrection, alongside the more recent trajectory of the Arab uprisings and LGBTQIA organizing across the region. All this came together to form a rather heterogeneous political landscape informed by a number of leftist trajectories.

Making sense of this heterogeneity was at times bewildering, all the more so because, as Karim's mention of the "small community" shows, my interlocutors understood themselves as part of a recognizable demographic group. But one aspect of their lives did draw all activists together: their location. In Beirut, certain areas of the city are *bright*, in philosopher Levi Bryant's terms—that is, they are sites that exercise a pull for certain people in relation to particular activities, desires, and attachments (2014, 203–5). Downtown Beirut was one—a space in which large-scale protests against the Lebanese state and political elite take place. This is monumental space par excellence: a centrally located, depopulated site of symbolic associations relating, in Martyrs' Square, to the nation-building myths of resistance to Ottoman rule and French colonial occupation and, with the refurbishment of the central district in the aftermath of the civil war, a mythos of the pre-1975 Belle Époque (Sawalha 2010, 23–50). This was a space to which people *went* to protest, precisely because it was resonant through excluding everyday inhabitation. Another bright space where my interlocutors spent time was the Christian working-class neighborhood of Mar Mikhael in the city's east, a nightlife hotspot and the location of a feminist social center, with a migrant worker community center nearby. But by far the brightest space for activists at the time was where my encounter with Karim and Anis took place: Hamra. To understand why requires an appreciation of the neighborhood's urban fabric and political history.

*(Inhabited) political space*

Hamra is one of the historic neighborhoods of Ras Beirut, the westernmost part of the city. North to south, it roughly spans the streets between the American University of Beirut (AUB) and the Lebanese American University (LAU). East to west runs Hamra Street itself. At most, excluding the universities, the neighborhood covers one square kilometer. It is a cosmopolitan space, with a history of pre-civil war coffee shops frequented by progressive nationalists and avant-garde poets from across the Arab world (Sawalha 2010, 89–106). The Arab National Movement was founded at AUB, and its members would subsequently found multiple Arab nationalist and socialist formations over the following years, groups that, in turn, would take part in the Lebanese civil war of 1975–1990 (El Khazen 2000, 73–88). In the years before the war, AUB had been rocked by student strikes that had more to do with national politics and the Palestinian cause than university matters (Barakat 1977). The civil war divided the city between east and west, with the Green Line cutting directly through the downtown area. The western half of the city, including Hamra, suffered heavy bombardment and occupation by Israeli forces in 1982. Along with the rest of Beirut there was a considerable demographic shift in Hamra, and since the end of the civil war it has been figured as a mixed but predominantly "Muslim" area of the city.<sup>4</sup>

From the mid-2000s, cafés and bars have opened with claims to being Left spaces. Some are owned by progressive or left-wing individuals. Others are frequented by student radicals. Others still are used as meeting places to organize actions. All are frequented by both the politically minded and the apathetic. It is to these sites in particular that activists were drawn as part of their inhabitation of Hamra. Given the near-daily movement in and out of the neighborhood by my activist interlocutors, I prefer here the term inhabitation over residence, which would suggest a more permanent settled-ness. Some resided in Hamra on a relatively permanent basis, others only for a time, others still would come in for work or study, and still more would come to Hamra from elsewhere in the city on a relatively consistent basis. Karim was a good example of such a trajectory; he moved in and out of residence in Hamra on multiple occasions but remained a relatively permanent fixture in the neighborhood during this period. As I discuss again below, the dissensual everyday was as much or more a product of the aggregation of such flows of people into Hamra from outside as those permanently residing there. Its “brightness” in this regard was best encapsulated by another activist acquaintance, who described Hamra as “an oasis of diversity, progressive politics, and revelry” (Jadaliyya Reports 2011), an open space in contrast to other, purportedly “closed” areas of the city.

One might be forgiven for doubting this openness, given that Hamra is one of the most securitized landscapes in Beirut. The entrances to both universities are guarded internally by university security and externally by soldiers. Pillboxes, sandbags, and guard huts dot their perimeters. At the eastern entrance to Hamra are the Ministry of Tourism and the Bank of Lebanon, both surrounded by anti-tank barriers, soldiers, and pillboxes, alongside two-meter-high concrete barriers painted the colors of the Lebanese flag. A number of the area’s side streets are also variously guarded, protected, or closed off if persons of interest reside there.<sup>5</sup> Alongside the loosely state-sanctioned materiality of security, the Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party (SSNP) also makes its mark on Hamra. In its own words a secular and non-sectarian party, its headquarters on Makdisi Street, one road down from Hamra, has party flags rising out of concrete-filled barrels daubed with slogans. The walls in its vicinity are plastered with the party’s posters. Fervent supporters of the Syrian regime, it was no surprise to Hamra residents that, after the re-establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries, Makdisi was chosen as the location of the Syrian embassy in Lebanon.

There is a tendency for much work on urban space to concentrate on regimes of governmentality (Glück & Low 2017), technologies of rule and the architecture of security (Monroe 2017; Fawaz & Bou Akar 2012), and on the kinds of subjects they produce (Amar 2013). It is easy to imagine how such regimes of control would structure the lives of Hamra’s inhabitants. Regulation of space here attempts to compel “users to operate... passively” (Bayat 2013, 52), Beirut being “a relatively extreme case in the expansion of its security system and the levels at which it interferes with the daily practices of residents” (Fawaz et al. 2012, 174). In Beirut,



as elsewhere, such forms of governmentality and control produce “suspects, criminals, victims” (Fawaz & Bou Akar 2012, 106). But by gazing so closely only at the ways in which lives are delineated by totalizing technologies of governance, it becomes difficult to conceive of anything other than a living in the margins. As such, the capacity to act transformatively on one’s environment becomes a vexing question. It need not be so. For example, alongside the state and the SSNP, in Hamra activists also physically marked space: almost every surface in Hamra is covered with posters, stencils and graffiti. In the polysemy of flypostings for cheap Wi-Fi, accommodation for female students, and gigs “brought to you by Red Bull Lebanon” are advertisements for Migrant Worker Celebration Day, or glossy and ironic candidacy posters for the constantly postponed elections. These were produced by civil society groups and NGOs with the means to print such posters en masse. Activists, meanwhile, preferred graffiti and stencils: “fight rape!” “Take Back Parliament!” “no to the parliamentary extension!”—often stenciled in both English and Arabic. There is something unmistakably proactive about such uses of the neighborhood’s material space, given how this repeated, continuous, and low-level inscription serves to make claims on Hamra. More than passive inhabitation, such inscriptions contested the desire of the SSNP, who see themselves as the political “owners” of Hamra, to control the symbolic and affective registers of the site: of what it can mean and for whom.<sup>6</sup> They gesture, then, toward “a gap in the sensible” (Rancière 2010, 38) in the most sensory of meanings: “a dispute over what is given and about the frame within which we see something as given” (Rancière 2010, 69).

It is not that such activity cannot be understood within the frames of governmentality or neoliberalism. But it is to say that we lose the capacity to imagine anything in these acts other than a raging against the dying of the light. Maple Razsa speaks to precisely this point when he states that the “critical anthropology of neoliberalism” is unable to look beyond its own diagnoses of the ills of the present: “one cannot only rail against dominant political arrangements. What is needed is an affirmation of other social and political possibilities” (2015, 210). In keeping with a desire to affirm possibility, Marina Sitrin asks, “how we can not only open up a space for new ways of being in a crisis, but continue to



*Figure 1.* Security architecture in Beirut. Two-meter concrete barriers painted in the colors of the Lebanese flag on the way into the Beirut neighborhood of Hamra (Photo: Fuad Musallam). [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]



Figure 2. Activist and NGO graffiti on a Hamra wall (Photo: Fuad Musallam). [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

develop these relationships” (2012, 3). It is to the location of political possibility and new ways of being that I now turn (Figures 1–3).

## Making Life Political

### *Exceptional acts in monumental space*

Given the movement of the squares and the creative use of central civic space during the Arab uprisings, research on the politicization of space is dominated by discussions of spectacularly exceptional action in public as the paradigmatic mode through which space is made political by actors on the ground. At its most microprocessual, one finds analysis of the tactical uses that actors make of the materiality of public space: how security architecture is disrupted, circumvented, or destroyed (Maharawal 2017); the capacity for certain actors to flow where others, including security forces, cannot (Sopranzetti 2014); the creation of an architecture of zoning and control by protestors themselves to keep authorities out (Willow 2011). On a symbolic level, mass presence in public space has important effects in contesting hegemonic norms of rule (Tripp 2012, 71–133).

Spectacularly exceptional action in public is central, too, to theorizing radical political imaginaries. Here, analysis looks at the forms of exceptional interaction that occur in such spaces, and the role of intentional political networks and communities in politicizing space: the creation of a commons of deliberation and decision-making (Raza & Kurnik 2012), variations on the right to the city as a site in which human potential can flourish (Harvey 2012), perhaps even to coming forms of radical municipalism (Graeber 2013). Such analyses often point to how,



Figure 3. Posters for activist concerns side by side with advertisements aimed at cosmopolitan consumption (Photo: Fuad Musallam). [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

in these imaginaries, public space is deemed to be politically valuable as *public space*, with a particular valorization of “the commons” (Dawney et al. 2016; Hou & Knierbein 2017). Otherwise, analysis attends to the importance that a site takes on for movement participants during and, in particular, after the event, precisely because it was the space where they chose to act politically (Haugerud 2012). The space and the action are fundamentally intertwined, insofar as the action makes the space into something worth having.

To give a recent example from my own fieldsite, the summer of 2015 saw escalating protests against political elites for their failure to resolve contractual issues with the main provider of refuse collection in Beirut



Figure 4. Downtown Beirut transformed through demonstrations and policing (Photo: Fuad Musallam). [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

and surrounding districts. Over many months, trash piled up meters high on the city's streets, or else was put out of sight through illegal dumping or burning. At the protests' height, the whole of Downtown was transformed through demonstrations and policing. Security forces erected more and more barriers, fences, and checkpoints. Protestors, in turn, produced graffiti on almost every surface, with the more artistically inclined drawing portraits on a hastily erected two-meter-high concrete barrier. Mere days later, protestors brought that concrete barrier down—a story that still lives on in activist circles and beyond. Walking through the area many months later, I was struck by how Downtown remained a site transformed, the banks and luxury shopfronts covered in slogans that provided a stark reminder of the protests, even when all those involved were no longer there. I was not alone in pondering the significance of these changes: as I and a few friends left Downtown after one of the later protests, Majid, an active participant over the previous months, looked around us and stated to general approval that the area was now “a war zone... and it looks the best it ever has.”

Where Hamra's graffiti might suggest the potential for dissensus, there is little doubt that what protestors did to Downtown was fundamentally dissensual, as a direct challenge to those who hold power. Majid's comment points to three aspects of the explicitly political transformation of monumental space that are worth highlighting. Firstly, these acts are radically disruptive, transgressing the “appropriate” uses of central civic space (“like a war zone”). Secondly, they are so precisely because the subversion of the space's “appropriate” use is seen as a general good (“it looks the best it ever has”). And thirdly, such subversion is transient, tied to the immediacy of the political act and the reaction to it; it is “always on the shore of its own disappearance” (Ranci re 2010, 39). Ultimately, in Downtown, the storefronts were cleaned, the area returned to its “appropriate” use as a site of luxury consumption and elite control, the protestors left, and what remained to mark the challenge was an expanded security architecture.<sup>7</sup> Where then should we look when the squares and parks have all cleared? (Figure 4)

*The politics of daily life*

**D**istinct from work on explicitly political transformations of monumental space, there has also been renewed attention to theorizing how everyday practices cumulatively produce conditions that defy logics of rule and the intentions of state and elite actors. Unlike the earlier literature on “everyday resistance” (Scott 1985) that looked at acts of disruption, this work looks at the regular inhabitation of space, emphasizing how informal or unsanctioned facts on the ground yield massive change that only later becomes a political question, if at all. For example, by looking at situated everyday interactions we can recognize how “residents use their ingenuity to create daily a world of adaptations, connections, and strategies with which to inhabit modern metropolises” (Holston 2009, 249). These are not intentional political acts meant to defy the powerful, yet cumulatively they show that logics of rule “do not preclude... local vitalities” but are “often reshaped by them” (Holston 2009, 249). Informal arrangements with the state can afford space for “extralegal claims to livelihood” (Anjaria 2011, 68), just as house-building on the urban periphery creates a reality on the ground that the state accedes to “*after the fact* to modify spaces that are already built and inhabited” (Caldeira 2017, 7).

The sociologist Asef Bayat (2013) has been clearest in conceptualizing how non-intentional acts have massive effects through aggregation: the “shared practices of large numbers of ordinary people whose fragmented but similar activities trigger much social change, even though these practices are rarely guided by an ideology or recognizable leaderships and organizations” (2013, 15). Similar concerns underlie recent anthropological discussions that foreground the “ungovernability of public life” (Chalfin 2014, 104), or which state that there is “something irrepressible about complex urban life” (Kanna 2012, 366). It is here, in the realm of everyday inhabitation, that ways of living differently, “other social and political possibilities” (Razsa 2015, 210), take shape and become commonsensical. Their banality makes it easy to overlook their significance. Yet they are powerful precisely *because* they are naturalized. This is the power of “life as politics” (Bayat 2013): that forces of repression would have to wage war on the act of living itself. With this in mind, I turn now to a discussion of activists’ everyday inhabitation of Hamra. Though they might act intentionally, “we should not overlook or take for granted that activists, too, engage in banal daily practices that are not explicitly political in nature”. They, too, create facts on the ground, facts on the ground that make certain “ways of being” (Sitrin 2012, 3) possible there in ways they might not be elsewhere.

While writing in Café Younes in March 2014, I was surprised to see Lamia come in, as we normally met across the city at the feminist social center that she helped run in Mar Mikhael. When I mentioned this she laughed and said, simply, “This used to be my place.” She was back for a vigil over a bill on domestic violence, and decided to come hang out in Younes for the afternoon. We talked about recent developments in the

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activist scene I was a part of in the UK, and we joked and rolled our eyes at the pedantic way a mutual friend had corrected her Arabic translation of the vigil's announcement. Later, as we drove to the vigil, she described her routine as a student in and around AUB, years before she had felt any inclination to engage in activism. After the vigil, we went to the social center in Mar Mikhael for a film screening run by a Syrian exile association before returning to Hamra, our pedantic friend in tow, to drink in a bar until very late.

During a return visit to the field a year or so later, in April 2015, I met Sari, a veteran student activist, at Zenjabeel, a café more or less equidistant between the two universities. As with other cafés and restaurants in the area, like Ta Marbouta and Re Gusto, political meetings were often held here. Yet though many of the student activists I knew were there, no meeting was taking place. Loosely arranged in groups of twos and threes across the furniture on the upper floor, people were chatting, joking, flirting. Sari was sitting with a couple of superannuated members of the group, no longer students but still part of organizing decisions and, clearly, friendship circles. Sari and I filled each other in on our lives over the previous few months as others came and went. Eventually, I asked about the student group. When I pulled my notepad out, though, Sari blew air out of his mouth and looked affronted: "I thought we were catching up as friends!" Though he filled me in briefly it was clear that he had no intention of spending too long talking shop. By the time I left, a few hours later, the raucous atmosphere had only escalated in intensity, and laughter could be heard up the street as I made my way home.

In contrast to the trash protests Downtown, there was nothing particularly exceptional about either of these events (or, indeed, my encounter with Karim and Anis recounted earlier). They were so ordinary that I could have related any of my many days spent in Hamra's cafés and bars with my interlocutors. And though these people were politically active, and we spent at least some time discussing politics, there is little intentionally political in either account—quite the opposite. For activists, Hamra was political but not only. Witness the places they spent time, freely frequented by people within and outside the activist community. There are, of course, sites from which explicit politics is inextricable. Social centers, like Lamia's, are of that kind. But such explicitly political sites, if they are isolated, create attachments and circuits of use around themselves only. Hamra, meanwhile, was home to a broader, more diffuse circuit of everyday inhabitation that did not mark those involved as being substantially different from everyone else.

This organic quality created a strong sense of belonging to the neighborhood as a whole, and was the product of repetition (what Bayat calls "aggregation") and scale. To the first point, where the Lebanese norm is to invite friends and family to one's home and entertain them in the sitting room, this almost never occurred among activists. "Instead, cafés and bar-restaurants, through repeated daily use, became front rooms located outside the house", rendering social and domestic life public and

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located outside  
the house*

presupposing a sense of ownership akin to a domestic space.<sup>8</sup> Karim, for example, would let others know he was in his Hamra café by saying, “*mayyilō*” (“lean this way”), a term that means “come on by,” and is otherwise used to tell a relative or acquaintance to come by *the house* to visit. This sense of belonging can become highly pronounced. When Zinjabeel closed in 2016, for example, the outpouring of grief among friends was palpable. May, a younger member of Lamia’s social center who also spent time with the student activists, was distraught as, for her, “it was the only place left in Beirut that felt like a refuge, and now it’s gone.” Beyond repetition, though, scale is of fundamental importance in elevating *the whole neighborhood* as a space of communal belonging. An activist spending time in Hamra would be well aware that in any one of many sites in the neighborhood others remarkably like them would be doing the same things. When someone did not take up Karim’s invitation to *mayyil*, he knew that they had simply gone to one of the other such spaces—spaces in which, for example, he often saw Anis before I introduced them to each other.

In their own discussion of domesticating public space, geographers Regan Koch and Adam Latham (2013) remark that “Much of what goes on within public space is in fact privately directed.” Acts such as “getting from A to B, shopping, eating, relaxing, [or] meetings friends” become more than private insofar as they involve “some sort of orientation towards, involvement with, perhaps, even responsibility for, the others with whom one collectively inhabits space” (all 2013, 14). Hamra’s bars and cafés are a compelling example of such domesticated space. The public nature of these “sitting rooms” meant that unplanned encounters happened all the time such that, despite Karim’s invitation, there was seldom the need to ask for someone to show up. Dropping by knowing someone will be there makes a site feel like an organic, effortless part of daily life. The intimacy generated in these bars and cafés, meanwhile, made being together in public something more than merely “private acts.” Domestication, then, rather than “constrain[ing] public life,” in fact constitutes “an essential part of the process through which people come to inhabit urban spaces” (Koch & Latham 2013, 14).

Aseel Sawalha has written of Hamra in similar terms: spending time in the same spot, she says, “resembled an intimate gathering at home.” One of her interlocutors added that, “I felt that that small old table became an extension of my own living room” (2010, 93). Except that this interlocutor is in her late middle-age, and Sawalha is describing Hamra in the 1950s and 1960s. Thus domesticating public space, rather than being something specific to present-day activists, continues a mode of daily life that marks Hamra as a particular sort of space in relation to the rest of the city. If they are not all explicitly aware of this longer history, activists certainly recognized the importance of this naturalized mixing and its relevance to avowed political projects. When I asked Carine, who had come to Beirut from a village in Lebanon’s north, to tell me about

Hamra's significance to her, she said, "I never felt this feeling of community anywhere else. Whoever I am talking to I will be comfortable... without worrying that I [will] reveal something about myself they can use against me."

With Carine's reflections, we see that even the most banal interaction in Hamra was shaped by her desire to be there and not elsewhere, a desire that rested on a politically intentional foundation even when daily life appeared anything but intentional. Though they might not have kept it in the forefront of their minds, activists were aware of the political importance of their conduct, and this served to valorize that everyday inhabitation further, not only because it was politically worthwhile but also because it was comfortable and fun. In Hamra we find practices that stand in contrast to hegemonic norms of sociality in many, though by no means all, parts of Lebanon. Activist sociality made gender-mixing the norm where it might not otherwise have been, and it rendered non-sectarian interaction as unmarked. With both gender- and sect-mixing there is of course a matter of degree, much of it tied to piety, class, or both. For example, for pious Shi'i youth in Beirut's southern suburbs the tenor of gender-mixing is substantially different, with sect-mixing not particularly valorized (Deeb & Harb 2013, 15), while young Palestinian women modify their behavior to "conform to rules of propriety" in Beirut's differently classed leisure spaces: carefree on the popular seaside promenade, reserved in elite Zaytuna Bay (Khalili 2015, 588). Further, though bars and cafés in Mar Mikhael and other leisure hotspots in the city appear similar to Hamra regarding gender and cross-confessional interactions, I seldom came across any evidence that the tenor of those interactions was deemed a product of the neighborhood. As Majid once put it to me, having chosen to meet up in Mar Mikhael for a change of pace, "I would miss Hamra if it was gone. Hamra is cosmopolitan. If Mar Mikhael goes, who gives a shit?"

The domestication of bars and cafés, then, was fundamental to how activists "make a sort of home in the city" (Koch & Latham 2013, 7) in a relatively organic and unmarked manner. Domesticating such spaces does not mark any sort of anticapitalist refusal or the creation of a commons, given that these sites remained, primarily, sites of consumption. And coming to Hamra because it is characterized as being relatively open does not require that one embody a radical political sensibility. But for activists, the historical and political background mattered greatly, and it influenced their choice of certain sites and not others. Why Zenjabeel? Its owners were Aleppo leftists in exile, an association rooted in activist support for the uprising across the border, though seldom made explicit. Why Ta Marbouta? Since opening in 2006, it has been a center—almost despite itself—of activism and organizing, even as it remained a commercial enterprise, the leftism of its owners known but not explicit (Hermez 2015; Sawalha 2010, 136–38). Why Younes or Re Gusto? Because of their associations with university activism and cultural events (Younes),



and with older generations of leftists and intellectuals (both). With these choices we see the longer *durée* of domesticating space in Hamra tied to the recent biographical experiences of those who take part in this domestication. Together they created a particular circuit to daily life, one valorized by the long history of the neighborhood and one's community's part in it. We see it, too, in the graffiti and posters on Hamra's walls, which inscribe this recent biographical history onto the materiality of the neighborhood, adding this most recent generation of activists to what came before.

*Exceptional acts at home*

We have seen what intentional political action looked like in the monumental space of Downtown, and we have seen how the everyday became instantiated as part of a broader political history in Hamra. And yet, the people engaged in the domestication of sites in Hamra were *not only* hanging out; they were also engaging in political action opposing hegemonic norms in Hamra itself. In discussions of daily life, intentional political acts appear almost exclusively when facts on the ground come under threat. James Holston, for example, recounts that it was only after a court official served eviction papers in one neighborhood that residents began to organize in defense of their “illegally” appropriated land (2009, 250–55). In Bayat's words, politicization occurs “when a common threat turns the subjects' passive network into active communication and organized resistance” (2013, 25). In other words, it is attempts by the state to roll back the effects of daily life that compel people to actively resist. This might lead to new forms of political organization, “demanding changes to institutions, legislation and the ways in which the state operates” (Caldeira 2017, 17), or else to forms of getting by through constant negotiations with (often low-level) “state functionaries” that are “not only combative but also collaborative” (Anjaria 2011, 61). In Hamra, by contrast, domesticating politically salient sites, communally and with a strong sense of continuity with respect to the history of the neighborhood, created felicitous conditions for proactive action opposing hegemonic norms *in that same space*.

Take the case of a migrant worker cultural celebration that took place in early May 2014. As part of three days of events, a cultural festival was held in a parking lot at the eastern entrance to Hamra Street. It was a mixture of NGO and explicitly political forms of organizing, of advocacy and action: the first day had seen the launch of a report on the exploitative *kafāla* (sponsorship) system, and the third day would see a May Day march. This, day two, was a celebration, and hundreds came. As I arrived in the early afternoon, a group of Ethiopian women were ceremonially roasting coffee, and later danced in unison to much joyful laughter and shouts of encouragement from the crowd. A banner-making session ran throughout the afternoon, asking all those passing by to create signs in every language possible for the march. In attendance were many

participants in the Anti Racism Movement, with which both Karim and Anis had been involved, the main group engaged in solidaristic organizing between Lebanese nationals and migrant workers. Food, clothing, jewelry, and other items were being sold by migrant workers from the Philippines, Nepal, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Sudan, Madagascar, Sri Lanka, Nigeria, and Kenya. Many more came to hang around and have fun. Later, a DJ played mostly West African pop and reggaeton. Those of us still there—Lebanese, Arab, East and West African, Malagasy, Nepalese, and Sri Lankan—danced, sweatily, together into the night.

Migrant domestic workers in Lebanon number somewhere between 200,000–250,000 in a workforce of just over a million (KAFA n.d.). Under the *kafāla* (sponsorship) system they are the legal responsibility of their employer (sponsor), whose employ they cannot leave unless said employer agrees to transfer the *kafāla*. If they are imprisoned in the home, or their passports are confiscated (common occurrences), they have little protection. Migrant workers are seldom seen in public if not in the course of their duties, except for Sundays when they have their day off (if they get that). In such a context, where boundaries are so stark, the closeness, friendship, even bodily proximity as equals with migrant workers who one does not know, is fundamentally dissensual. Entirely askance to the ways in which Lebanese people generally treat migrant workers, this form of interaction “makes visible that which had no reason to be seen” and “places one world in another” (2010, 38)—and is therefore affirmative of different ways of living for all participants. The placing of “one world in another” would be dissensual anywhere in Beirut. Hamra was a particularly plausible location at the time, though, because many of the activists and migrant workers involved *already* inhabited it. Were the event to have taken place in Downtown then, as with other political acts in monumental space, the forms of interaction it compelled would have remained exceptional, transient, potentially ephemeral. And though dissensus is “always of the moment and its subjects are always precarious” (Rancière 2010, 39), by taking place in inhabited space dissensual interactions between Lebanese nationals and migrant workers came across as anything but exceptional or limited to the event itself. Thus the migrant worker celebration was a politically intentional act that affirmed a way of being in daily life that was askance to the norm.

There were also other, different examples of exceptional political acts in Hamra—and these, too, affected daily life in their wake. On August 2, 2011, a protest took place in front of the Syrian embassy in opposition to the Syrian regime’s repression of dissent. It was not the first such protest: on previous occasions, protestors had been jeered at and threatened by members of pro-regime parties, the SSNP among them. Younger activists and the SSNP found themselves on opposing sides over events in Syria, having been allies only a few months earlier in protesting the sectarian system as part of *isqāṭ al-niẓām al-ṭā’ifi*. A few minutes after the beginning of the protest, a counter-demonstration of roughly equal size attacked the protestors with sticks. From behind the embassy others came out to

fight, and others still came from the direction of the SSNP headquarters up the road. One protestor was cracked over the head, dropped to the floor bleeding, and was then dragged away to a nearby hospital. Many tried to run away or find cover, but, as Majid told me later, “everyone closed their doors and stopped anyone from coming in.” Some protestors ran to the Hamra police station, where they were turned away because the regime supporters had “political cover” (Jadaliyya Reports 2011). Another friend, Ahmad, hid with others in the bathroom stalls of a busy restaurant on Hamra Street. Eight men came and stood outside the toilet door, and taunted them for fifteen minutes before losing interest and leaving. No one from the restaurant intervened. Majid, already beaten up earlier, was attacked again on Hamra Street by five or six men who had followed him as he fled and beat him bloody. Others were less lucky: a cracked skull, a broken hip.

While Hamra might have been a home space for activists, the events that day made it clear that it was never only their space: “Behind the bars and coffee shops and stores, Ras Beirut, like everywhere else in Lebanon, is also owned by a particular political party” (Jadaliyya Reports 2011). This alienation from Hamra was echoed by Ahmad, whose attachment to the neighborhood compelled him most days to come in through heavy traffic from the outskirts of Beirut. Reflecting on the protest a few years later, he commented: “It’s funny. You eat, you shop, you go out, work, enjoy yourself in Hamra, and then you realize that it is not your place, you don’t belong to it.” An anonymous eyewitness ended their account of that night defiantly, stating that, “Our friends and families live [in Hamra], we go to school there, we work there, we live there, and we frequent bars, restaurants, and cafés there. And we will continue to be politically active there” (Jadaliyya Reports 2011).

Both Ahmad and the eyewitness put great stress on their daily life, including political engagements as part of their everyday. They understood well that the assault was an attempt to unmake their organic attachment to Hamra, the work that their daily life had served to compel as a *fait accompli*—as facts on the ground. Sari was most eloquent in defining the contested spatialization of Hamra, wrought between daily life and exceptional acts:

Hamra is the only place that is ours... the place where you can be relaxed, for its heritage also. The presence of the SSNP grows [but] the relationship with Hamra does not change drastically because we don’t have another option. Enemies, yes, but this is the place for activists.

The events that day had little in the way of a silver lining. Yet where such an event in Downtown would end in withdrawal from the space, in Hamra this did not happen. Rather, the event itself became part of daily life through a reinscription in the circuits of sites in which to spend time: notably, the bars that refused to let protestors in for shelter were no longer frequented as before.

## The Capacity to Do Otherwise

It is not enough, then, to conceive of daily life for activists in Hamra as having been political only in defense of gains. Nor that ways of being during exceptional political acts be restricted to the time of their occurrence. Rather, the banal and the political interweaved in ways that occurred as they did only because Hamra was inhabited space in a way that Downtown was not. In Hamra, activist political subjectivities were formed through the interplay of daily life and exceptional acts. This interplay has been central to recent ethnographies of activism, in which there is an understanding that the capacity to engage in exceptional acts must come from somewhere (Gould 2009), and it must be sustained outside of exceptional moments (Khasnabish & Haiven 2014).<sup>9</sup> Maple Razsa describes this as a “subjective turn” in activism itself, “the struggle to develop individual and collective subjects who are antagonistic to dominant social relations and yearn for radical change” (2015, 27). Marina Sitrin describes it, tellingly, as a set of “everyday revolutions” through which communities are “not only... finding creative ways to sustain themselves, they are recreating themselves in the process” (2012, 8).

What is at times muted in these discussions is a recognition of the spatial element to developing these relationships in daily life. They happen *somewhere*, and where that is matters deeply. “The dissensual everyday is an inhabitation askance to the norm that hovers”, or perhaps shifts, between becoming subsumed into taken-for-granted patterns of living and a confrontational otherness. Such everyday-ness is not completely unthinking, and, though it might appear paradoxical at first, an important aspect of the everyday are those moments when the taken-for-granted of daily life is disrupted. Certain meetings skirt the line between the everyday and the exceptional. Engaging publicly in friendship and bodily and affective proximity with migrant workers was a political act that was rendered natural in a space where, though not the norm, it was, nevertheless, possible. Events like the Syrian embassy protest were exceptional acts, yes, but cannot be separated from the flow of daily life when the two occur in the same space: they become reinscribed into the background resonances that a space has for those who experienced it. Such acts may always be “of the moment and provisional” (Rancière 2010, 43), but they also become part of the flow of daily life by becoming the shared memories and stories that people tell themselves about themselves and their location (Musallam 2019). An event like the Syrian embassy protest became, indelibly, a part of what Hamra meant for activists.

The dissensual everyday is not about the community of people it creates except through the space in which it takes place. The ebb and flow of inhabitation askance to the norm made a site like Hamra a space in which and through which to act. In proposing a turn to daily life, James Holston states that to “emphasize the creativity of practice is also to bring to the surface that very possibility among the many conditions

*The dissensual  
everyday is an  
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that exist as potentials in the city” (2009, 250). We must remember, too, that proactive engagements also show this creativity. What matters is how intentional and non-intentional practices come together to produce certain sites in the city as enabling of and amenable to these potentials. By making a political space amenable to proactive action, the dissensual everyday contributes to the bolstering of an agentive political subjectivity. It rendered a space like Hamra plausible for political engagements like the cultural celebration or the Syrian embassy protest. When such engagements were opposed, that contestation, given that it occurred in a space of which one was a part beyond the scope of that particular action, served to clarify the importance of remaining: “we will continue to act politically there” (Jadaliyya Reports 2011). This was a crucial (though by no means the only) reason why political engagement of this sort happened in Hamra in those years and not in other “closed” parts of the city. Hamra provided unique possibilities for mobilization that were simply unavailable elsewhere, precisely because only it was inhabited by those engaging in protests with a view to political acts being a part of that inhabitation.

*Transgressive  
politics do not  
appear only in  
monumental  
space*

The integration of political action and daily life within one space is also telling for the capacity to conceive of political possibility and radical political imaginaries. “Transgressive politics do not appear only in monumental space”. Though they often appear in inhabited space in a low-key manner, this also makes it all the harder to undo. As work on the everyday has shown, controlling daily life is much harder than policing an explicitly political act, and this is as true for the lives of political actors as it is for the lives of the poor and marginalized. Dissensual everyday inhabitation is vital, especially between exceptional events that, by their nature as tactical engagements that suspend normal daily life, do not last indefinitely. Feeling that one’s political subjectivity is rooted in the place that one lives gives the imaginaries that underpin that inhabitation a solid base, making them appear neither far-fetched nor abstract.

## Conclusion: Everyday Living, Askance

I have described the ways in which Lebanese activists lived their daily lives and acted politically in one neighborhood, Hamra. The mode of their inhabitation, which I have named the dissensual everyday, was askance to broader norms, if not necessarily those of the neighborhood itself, and their claims upon Hamra contrasted directly with those of powerful actors in the space. Drawing from work on daily life, I have shown that inhabitation is fundamental to producing facts on the ground that are difficult for hegemonic actors to undo, unlike the formidable but transient political acts in monumental space with which I began. If we are interested in speaking not just to the ills of the world as it is but to the ways in which things might be different, then we must look to how ways of living askance to the norm are maintained. More recently

activists' circuits of domestication have become more diffuse across the city, particularly to the east where rents are more affordable: though explicit repression did not remove activists from Hamra, it seems broader structural forces are at work. Nevertheless, those circuits endure. Spaces closed in Hamra, like Zinjabeel, while others opened elsewhere—and activists continue to use them as frontrooms outside the home; spaces in which to organize, meet, hold events, and hang out.

Though the tenor of activist daily life is not quite as it was, it still follows the patterns of the dissensual everyday, laid out in Hamra on either side of the Arab uprisings. Though it remains to be seen how effective a broader circuit can be, I have shown that when avowed political actors can align the maintenance of life-as-lived with a proactive political subjectivity, we find uses of space that go beyond defending the gains that daily life produces. These are particularly paradigmatic in the monumental spaces of the civic center, but they happen too in the inhabited spaces where the capacity to act is itself fostered. As with all attempts to change the world, the result is almost always setback and defeat. A political space wrought by a dissensual everyday inhabitation, though, contains an experiential, embodied, and enspaced memory of radical engagements that can maintain transgressive political actors in the face of such defeat and setback, in that same space and further afield, providing encouragement for new acts in the future.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup>Though, as this article went to press, protestors have returned to the streets in the Middle East and North Africa—and, indeed, many other parts of the world (Ehrenreich 2019).

<sup>2</sup>For a history of *isqāṭ*, see Hermez (2015).

<sup>3</sup>There is more to be said about the class background of political activism in Lebanon than can be discussed here. Though here I discuss its spatial aspects, see Musallam (2017, 85–117) for a discussion of demography, particularly as it relates to the ability to disaggregate from previous circuits of obligation and social reproduction.

<sup>4</sup>For a discussion of the various phases of the civil war, see Traboulsi (2007, 193–245).

<sup>5</sup>Fawaz et al. (2012, 178) have mapped the city's security architecture in great detail, including Hamra.

<sup>6</sup>For more on graffiti as challenge to hegemonic actors in Lebanon, see Riskedahl (2017).

<sup>7</sup>With the current uprising in Lebanon, Downtown has once again been transformed through demonstration and policing. For a discussion of these new spatial transformations, see Musallam (2020).

<sup>8</sup>In this they are different to the “city-inside-out” of the urban poor, who carry out their daily lives in public spaces because they have no other choice (Bayat 2012).

<sup>9</sup>We see it too in more programmatic work on radicalism, organizing, and exceptional moments. For an emphasis on the exceptional, see Fox Piven (2014). For an emphasis on organizing, see MacAlevey (2016) and Taylor (2016).

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