

Between success and failure: dwelling with social movements in the hiatus¹

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Abstract

This article explores the ways social movement “successes” and “failures” are conceived of and measured, particularly in relation to research that strives to act in solidarity with such movements. Reviewing some of the best examples of politically-engaged research, we contend that even these assume normative categories of “success” and “failure” with respect to both movement and research outcomes. Drawing on our work in the Radical Imagination Project, a politically-engaged social movement research project in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada, we argue that social movements typically dwell not at the poles of the success/failure binary but in the “hiatus” between “not-success” and “not-failure.” We contend that a more dynamic mapping of social movement success and failure produces a richer and more robust understanding of social movements, the significance of their activity, and social change. This reconceptualization and remapping of success and failure also has important implications for the way researchers seeking to work in solidarity with social movements can productively reimagine their own measures of success and failure.

Reimagining success and failure

In 2010, we won a grant to experiment with “convoking” the radical imagination. We wanted to contribute to efforts to reimagine the relationships between social movement researchers and the social movements they study. We chose to do this research in the unromantic and marginal city of Halifax, Nova Scotia, an intentional departure from the cosmopolitan contexts which tend to dominate social movement studies. With a population of just under 400,000, sprawling out across a huge geographic area on Canada’s east coast, we were interested in working with movements experiencing stagnation, frustration, and failure, rather than those enjoying momentum, exhilaration, and success. We wanted to imagine a form of solidarity research aimed not just at supporting or working for particular social movement campaigns or organizations, but at intervening in the difficult, slow space between and amidst movement participants and groups as they attempted to contend with global and local issues.

¹ See the video appendix at <https://vimeo.com/77785507>

Three years later, after dozens of interviews, several public events and dialogue sessions, and a goodly amount of participant observation, we found ourselves reflecting on the successes and failures of the project (not least because our funders, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, required us to do so to justify the money they gave us). While we have published the particulars of our research method elsewhere (Khasnabish and Haiven 2012) and will be sharing some of the results of our research in a forthcoming book (Khasnabish and Haiven forthcoming), the present essay is a critical reflection on how we measure and imagine “success” and “failure” in social movement research, especially research that strives to work in solidarity with the social movements in question.

We begin by narrating the development of academic social movement studies, from its functionalist origins to recent forms of co-research or solidarity research. But we suggest that even some of the best examples of this work take for granted the categories of “success” and “failure” both in terms of what makes for “successful” movements and what makes for “successful” research. In the second half of the paper, we draw on thinkers like Judith Halberstam, Fredric Jameson, and Donna Haraway to argue that a more substantial understanding of social movements, and of social movement research, can come from a more dynamic mapping of success and failure. Drawing on our ethnographic research, we argue that social movements typically dwell in the “hiatus” between “not-success” and “not-failure,” and that researchers seeking to work in solidarity with social movements can fruitfully reimagine their own criteria of success and failure through this model.

Objects of contention: the lives of social movement studies

The history of scholarly attempts to make sense of social movements can be characterized as fundamentally fraught. Prior to the 1960s, collective behavior theory was the dominant academic perspective on social movement activity which was operationalized as collective contentious action mobilized outside the halls of power and its formal political channels. In a decidedly functionalist tenor, it frequently cast social movements as little more than mob behaviour, an “escape valve” for the supposedly unarticulated and misdirected frustrations of the lower classes that had no real bearing upon politics as such but which, as a form of collective catharsis for the unwashed masses, served to maintain the equilibrium of the system as a whole (see Staggenborg 2012, 13–14). This cast social movements as reactionary rather than creative and dynamic and emphasized structure over agency.

The dramatic upsurge in social movement activity in the 1960s cast serious doubt on the assumptions animating the functionalist paradigm, particularly because many of these movements – feminist, queer, civil rights, anti-war, anti-colonial, anti-imperialist, student, black and red power – defied the mob caricature through

their intentionality, radicality, and organization in addition to the eloquent and powerful critiques and alternatives they advanced to the status quo and the vested interests at work within it (see Edelman 2001; Katsiaficas 1987). Rather than demanding a “seat at the table” with powerholders or seeking piecemeal changes to existing structures of power and privilege, many of the movements which coalesced in the 1960s both in North America and globally took aim at the systems they saw as responsible for perpetuating inequality, exploitation, and violence as well as contesting the very way in which social life was constituted and organized.

Our own use of the term “radical” belongs to this legacy, extending well beyond the New Left, of movements and approaches that understand the problems confronting them as irresolvable within the structure of the current political system and so seek systemic change rather than piecemeal reform (see Day 2005; Holloway 2002). In the face of the seeming inability of collective behavior theory to make sense of the rise of the New Left in the ‘60s, political process and resource mobilization models were advanced particularly by North American sociologists and political scientists as a route to conceptualizing social movements as genuinely political actors rather than as aberrant psychological phenomena (Staggenborg 2012, 18). Around the same time, in Europe social movement scholars were elaborating what would become known as new social movement theory (see Melucci 1985; Touraine 2002). While these new schools of social movement analysis emerging on both sides of the Atlantic represented strong breaks with the preceding functionalist perspective, they also followed divergent trajectories as to how they conceptualized social movements and their activity (see Tarrow 1988).

From the political process/resource mobilization perspective, movements were viewed as collective political actors making claims against the dominant order whose success depended largely upon their capacity to mobilize material (organizational infrastructure, funding, etc.) and immaterial (leadership, member commitment, social capital, etc.) resources as well as the nature of the political system itself (the presence or absence of institutional allies or challengers, the relative openness of the system, the system’s perceived legitimacy). While the political process/resource mobilization represented a significant advancement over collective behaviour theories in terms of its robust analysis and its willingness to take movements seriously, the paradigm still fundamentally reconciled social movements – however radical or militant – as merely one political contender amongst others seeking to leverage influence and affect change within the established socio-political and economic order and largely in the terms set by it. At the same time, across the Atlantic, European scholars were elaborating a school of social movement inquiry that would become known as new social movement theory (NSM) which advanced a perspective that focused on macrosocial struggles, seeing movements originating in the 1960s and after as engaged in post- or immaterial struggles revolving around issues relating to the nature and constitution of social

life itself in the context of late or “postindustrial” capitalism (see Melucci 1985; Touraine 2002).

According to NSM theory, while “old” social movements – like organized labour – fought for material benefits, “new” social movements – like the anti-nuclear and peace movements - concerned themselves with the deep logic of the social order, contesting not only the material consequences of a system governed by inequality but the very spirit animating it. While the NSM paradigm contributed significantly to scholarly understandings of social movements in ways that exceeded the functionalism of collective behaviour and the materiality and liberalist rationality of political process/resource mobilization it was by no means free of its own blindspots. In focusing so prominently on distinguishing “new” from “old” social movements the NSM paradigm posited a radical break in forms of collective contentious action that obscured important continuities. In emphasizing “immaterial” struggles over the social logics of “post-industrial” capitalist society, the NSM perspective also tended to ignore the structural nature of violence, oppression, and exploitation and valorized struggles that tended to belong to more privileged social actors and classes.

None of this is to suggest that dominant social movement studies paradigms have not yielded valuable insights into understanding the dynamics of social change and contentious action outside of formal political channels. In many cases, such work has even served to legitimate social movement activity in the eyes of the mainstream as genuinely political and not merely aberrant or pathological. Sometimes this research is driven by the values of solidarity, and can occasionally see researchers work with or for movements. Some of the lacunae present in earlier paradigms have also been corrected for with a more recent focus by social movement scholars on issues including emotion and biography (Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta 2001; Jasper 1999), consciousness (Mansbridge and Morris 2001), issue framing (Benford and Snow 1992; Olesen 2005), networks (Keck and Sikkink 1998), and globalization and transnationalism (Bandy and Smith 2005; Della Porta, Kriesi, and Rucht 2009).

Nevertheless, the multi-disciplinary field of social movement studies has tended, since its inception, to approach social movements as “objects” of study in a manner not dissimilar to the classificatory and taxonomic systems elaborated by biologists engaged in the identification of different species. In many cases, the analysis and its significance remains structural and functionalist even if the substance of the analysis has moved away from such restrictions. In this sense, the form of analysis and its representation betrays the epistemological and ontological assumptions of the practices of knowledge production at work (see Lal 2002). When the “objects” under consideration are far more radical in their deviation from these norms the stakes and consequences of such disciplined interpretations increase considerably. It is one thing, for instance, to make sense out of mobilizations and campaigns occurring under the banner of “Make Poverty History” – a campaign tied strongly

to the UN Millennium Development Goals and linked to organized labour, faith groups, and the NGO development sector. It is quite another to try and use the same analytical schema to explore radical anti-capitalist organizing on a transnational scale as it unfolded under the auspices of networks like People's Global Action at the height of the alter-globalization movement, which were decentralized, based on the principle of local autonomy, and characterized by an anarchistic commensurability of means and ends.

All too often, in good faith attempts to shed light on the complexities of socio-political change driven by extra-institutional actors, social movement scholars have disciplined and domesticated social movements by rendering them in terms sensible with respect not only to the scholarly traditions of their field but to the assumed socio-political backdrop against which such action was positioned. This often had the effect of naturalizing dominant socio-political and economic structures, institutions, actors, and practices – to say nothing of the ideologies animating them. As Marina Sitrin argues, a focus on “contentious politics,” so common amongst North American social movement scholars, renders all movements “in a contentious relationship to the state, or another form or institution with formal ‘power over,’ whether demanding reforms from or desiring another state or institution” (2012, 13). Because they could not be rationally positioned against such a backdrop, lost from view in such a perspective are the radical challenges issued by some movements to the status quo as well as the imaginations, hopes, and desires inspiring them.

Movements, stories, and militant ethnography

In his work on the importance of story to the life of revolutionary movements and moments, social movement scholar Eric Selbin argues that it is through the collective telling and retelling of stories that the possibility of resistance, rebellion, and revolution persists. This reality, Selbin contends, necessitates “a systematic return of stories to social science methodology,” a move that acknowledges and is capable of engaging “the myth and memory of revolution and of the power of mimesis for the mobilization and sustenance of revolutionary activity” (2010, 3–4). Selbin's contention is not simply that stories matter but that, when considered comprehensively, their telling and retelling constitutes “a story structure, a repository of stories which undergirds and shapes our daily lives” (2010, 45). He goes further: “We (re)compose stories and (re)configure them in an effort to (re)connect with each other and to build community.... Truth, direct or otherwise, is less important than the extent to which stories represent people's perceptions or capture what they feel. They form a collection of who we were and where we came from, where and who we are now, and guide us to where we are going and who we wish to be” (2010, 46).

Selbin focuses on four key types of revolutionary story in his work, but his articulation of the importance of story to social change struggles has much broader implications as well. Indeed, the territory of stories and story-telling that Selbin navigates in his work is a vital space of the radical imagination at work. The collective articulation and circulation of revolutionary stories constitutes a key mechanism by which social movement participants bring the radical imagination into being and affirm the enduring possibility of radical social change. While social movement scholars have sought, primarily via theories of “diffusion” (see Tarrow 2005), to chart the way ideas, tactics, and strategies circulate through movements and the activists who constitute them, such examinations, while undoubtedly valuable, primarily consider the mechanisms facilitating such circulation with some attention paid to the role of context in this dynamic. Why these ideas and repertoires of struggle matter – what they signify and how they work to construct collective visions of political possibility that animate struggle – is accorded much less significance. The application of framing theory to explain how movements engage in meaning-work and symbolic contestation has similarly yielded results that are analytically sophisticated without probing very much beyond the mechanisms (human rights discourses, digital media, the Internet, etc.) facilitating such struggles (see Olesen 2005).

A much more embodied, robust, and engaged perspective on social movements – particularly the newest ones emerging out of and in the wake of the alter-globalization movement – has been advanced by a constellation of explicitly politicized social science researchers. Recent work by David Graeber (2009; 2007), Jeffrey Juris (2008), Alex Khasnabish (2008), Marianne Maeckelbergh (2009), Marina Sitrin (2012), and Lesley Wood (2012), for example, exhibits a strong tendency not only to engage with movements on the ground and from an avowedly politicized stance but to take movements seriously as engines of social change and incubators of social possibility. Many of these works, though by no means all of them, are ethnographic in their form and methodology, an important departure from the dominant core of social movement studies that has tended to work from much more structural, institutional, and organizational perspectives.

In adopting this orientation and taking the perspectives of movement participants seriously, this newer body of engaged scholarship takes up Selbin’s exhortation to return stories and story-telling – understood broadly as the collective, social act of communicating collective understandings of what has been, what is, and what might yet be – to its methodological core. Without simplistically elevating ethnographic methods, it is worth ruminating upon what ethnographically-grounded approaches to social movement research can provide in contrast to conventional social movements studies perspectives. In order to do so it is necessary to unpack “ethnography.” Ethnography needs to be understood not only as a genre of scholarly writing characterized by “thick description” or even as a set of research methods grounded in participant observation and immersion in “the

field” but as a perspective committed to understanding and taking seriously people’s lived realities. Ethnographic methods including participant observation, long term fieldwork, and in-depth interviews are founded on the conviction that the world is not comprised simply of objects to be analyzed but is acted and imagined into being by active subjects, including (importantly) researchers themselves.

Because of its groundedness and its willingness to take matters of subjectivity seriously, ethnography is a research posture particularly well-suited to exploring dynamic phenomena such as social movements as well as their less tangible dimensions. Ethnography is also a perspective and methodology that lends itself well to engaged research that is committed to taking part in rather than merely observing social change struggles. Anarchist and anthropologist David Graeber has gone so far as to suggest that ethnography could be a model for the “would-be non-vanguardist revolutionary intellectual” because it offers the possibility “of teasing out the tacit logic or principles underlying certain forms of radical practice, and then, not only offering the analysis back to those communities, but using them to formulate new visions” (2007, 310). Jeffrey Juris has articulated a similar vision of “militant” ethnographic practice which refuses the valorization of “objective distance” and the tendency within the academy to treat social life as an object to decode (2008, 20). Juris contends that in order “[t]o grasp the concrete logic generating specific practices, one has to become an active participant” and within the context of social movements this means participating in and contributing to the work of these movements themselves (2008, 20). Indeed, in bringing together a variety of ethnographers with direct experience with various manifestations of the Occupy movement, Juris and Maple Razsa note provocatively that “activist anthropologists” might be considered the “organic intellectuals” of Occupy given the roles played by many within the movement, roles that were coextensive with rather than outside of their research commitments (Juris and Razsa 2012).

Again, without unduly valorizing ethnography or anthropology, the interventions made by engaged ethnographers in the study of social movements, particularly in their more radical manifestations, point importantly toward what methodological choices can illuminate and what they can obscure. At issue is not simply the subjective versus the objective but how we understand the nature of social change struggles and the scholarly “vocation” itself. We have considered these questions at length elsewhere (Khasnabish and Haiven 2012) and it is not our intention to rehash them here, but it is useful to briefly consider them in light of how they intersect with the how we understand movement successes and failures as well as how this bears upon the work we have done in the Halifax Radical Imagination Project. Central to this question of how we study movements are the questions of how we understand them as entities – how we perceive them – and how we gauge their socio-political and cultural effects – their “successes” and “failures.”

If, for example, we look at social movements through the lens of hegemonic mainstream social movement studies, we see movements as organizations whose

principal objective is policy change which they seek to achieve through pressure leveraged against dominant political institutions and actors. Success is measured through a movement's ability to achieve this and to sustain itself. Of course, what disappears from view through this lens are the multiple effects produced by movements that are non-institutional and non-instrumental in nature. For example, absent from this conceptualization and analysis are the effects produced by movements which have contested racism, misogyny, capitalism, and war whose struggles successfully challenged the relations and ideologies sustaining these structural forms of violence at the level of everyday social reality. Of critical importance to this attentive perspective is an understanding of social movements not as "things" but as products of the collective labour and imagination of those who actually constitute them. Attending to movements as effects of the relations that constitute them leads the critical analytical eye away from their most ossified, obvious remnants like policy change or electoral impacts, and instead foregrounds struggle as a product of collective encounters between activists, organizers, allies, opponents, and the broader public.

David Featherstone's (2012) work on solidarity as a transformative political relationship rather than a "thing" to be achieved or not demonstrates the utility of this approach. Tracing histories and geographies of left internationalism, Featherstone excavates the labour of building solidarity between different actors engaged in a multitude of different struggles, a process that is never devoid of conflict, power, or inequality but which, when successful, has the ability to reshape the field of politic possibility as well as to transform the subjectivity of those engaged. A critical focus on the relationality at the heart of radical movements has also been a focus of ethnographically-grounded engaged social movement scholarship (see Graeber 2009; Juris 2008; Khasnabish 2008; Maeckelbergh 2009; Sitrin 2012). Instead of focusing on instrumental outcomes of movements and reading success and failure through a lens focusing on institutional impact, these works insist on the significance of understanding and engaging movements as living spaces of encounter, possibility, contestation, and conflict. As Sitrin contends in her work on horizontalism and autonomy in the newest social movements in Argentina, "participants speak of the success of the movements, and of a success that is not measurable by traditional social science, but rather one that is measured by the formation and continuation of new social relationships, new subjectivities, and a new-found dignity" (2012, 14). Such movements do not merely serve as vehicles for the dissemination of "action repertoires," they are laboratories for experimenting with ways of imagining and living otherwise (see McKay 2005).

Convoking the radical imagination

Yet there is also something absent from even these attempts to take movements seriously and it relates centrally to the question of what social movement

scholarship is good for. In all of the above examples, whether considering mainstream social movement scholarship or its politically engaged variations, scholarly attempts to engage social movements occurs in the context of fully-formed movements. There is, of course, undoubtedly value in this and such scholarship has yielded a wealth of information about contentious and radical politics outside of the halls of elite power. At the same time, as we have explored elsewhere (Khasnabish and Haiven 2012), such work can be characterized as functioning within scholarly strategies of invocation and avocation.

In the case of invocation, scholars have used their academic work and privilege to retroactively legitimate social movements as politics conducted by other means. In the case of avocation, scholars have sought to disavow their academic privilege and to lend their research skills to movements by disappearing into them. If conventional movement studies might be considered an example of a strategy of invocation, methodologies like participant action research could be considered a manifestation of a strategy of avocation. Indeed, over the last twenty years at least there has been a proliferation of politically engaged strategies that could be grouped under the label of avocation, including: action research, engaged research, advocacy research, participatory action research, collaborative ethnography, and militant anthropology (Burdick 1995; Hale 2008; Lamphere 2004; Lassiter 2005; Low and Merry 2010; Mullins 2011; Sanford and Angel-Ajani 2006; Scheper-Hughes 1995). This trajectory is preceded by and emerges out of decades of politically committed feminist research (see Cancian 1992; Federici 2003; Harding 2005; Mies 1986; Mohanty 2003; Naples 2003). It is also informed by efforts to challenge the continuing hegemony of universalist objectivism within the enduringly white, male, and Eurocentric academy (see Lal 2002; Vargas 2006; Wallerstein et al. 1996; Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva 2008). Our own experiment with a research-based method of convocation also owes a great debt to these alternative paths.

Our point here is not to valorize or debase any particular methodological orientation but to point out that research methods, much like the tactics of those engaged in social change struggles, are always most effectively when deliberately situated in relation to the context in which they will be deployed. That being so, avocation and its various strategies can only work in spaces where fairly robust movements or struggles are present, where researchers have a self-consciously constituted collective into which to submerge themselves. But what is the utility of social movement scholarship in a context where movements are dormant, demobilized, nascent or fragmented? In much of the global North, such a characterization could have been accurately applied to the terrain of radical politics in the latter part of the first decade of the new millennium. In part, this dissipation of radical movement can be attributed to 9/11 and the pretext it provided to drastically augment the repressive apparatuses of the state, restrict civil liberties, and demonize and incarcerate a wide variety of social justice activists in the defense

of corporate interests and under the banner of the “War on Terror.” At the same time, before 9/11 many activists involved in the alter-globalization movement were already discussing the limitations of summit-centred convergence activism and looking for ways beyond it (Day 2005). While many of the activists and organizers involved in the alter-globalization movement would become involved in the anti-war movement that coalesced in the lead-up to the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, despite mobilizing historically unprecedented numbers, this movement, too, faded in the face of its inability to impede the march to imperialist war (Graeber 2011; Mezzadra and Roggero 2010).

These dynamics also characterized the situation in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada, the context in which our Radical Imagination Project was situated. Compounding them was a particularly rancorous split between more moderate and more militant activists in the city which fractured relations of cooperation and solidarity that had been built through the work of activists and organizers over the previous years. In the midst of this historical low point for social movement activity, strategies focusing on simply observing, commenting on, or even going to work within the fabric of social change struggles no longer appeared, to us, as viable or effective routes for engaged research. Instead, through the Radical Imagination Project, we have sought to mobilize the (unjustly) privileged, relatively autonomous space of the academy and academically-based research to facilitate with activists and nascent movements what they had not created for themselves: an intentional and non-sectarian space and process capable of summoning into being the radical imagination that is the spark of radical social movements (see Haiven and Khasnabish 2010). Rather than focusing on analyzing movements as if they were insects pinned within a shadowbox, the Radical Imagination Project has sought to participate in “convoking” the radical imagination in collaboration with activists in Halifax – to provide the opportunities, resources, time, and space necessary to collectively bring into being the prefigurative capacity to envision and work toward building more just social worlds (Khasnabish and Haiven 2012). From this perspective, issues of movement “success” and “failure” along with other empirical “outcomes” of movement analysis so common to social movement scholarship fade from view, replaced by a focus on relationality, encounter, and dialogue.

Over the course of two years, we spoke with emerging and elder activists, those who were considered central movement participants and those on the margins. Our research partners worked in a variety of organizations on a range of issues and included employees of environmentalist NGOs, street punks, anti-racist organizers, book publishers, student activists, feminist militants, Marxist party members, radical academics, and anti-poverty advocates. Halifax is a city where most people in the radical milieu know one another, and where many activists participate in multiple organizations. We began with purposefully vague definitions of “radical” and “activist,” and sought out our research partners through a combination of participant observation, word of mouth, and advertising in local activist-oriented

media. Very few activists we approached declined to participate, though many expressed skepticism regarding what the project could contribute or achieve. We conducted open-ended interviews with each participant, asking them to narrate their own journey to radicalism and activism, to express their key frustrations and greatest inspirations in organizing, to reflect on what it would mean to win, and to share with us their hopes and fears for the future. Based on key themes and tensions that emerged in the interview stage, we facilitated three dialogue sessions where we invited selected participants to articulate their position on their session's theme publically, and an audience of other participants responded and discussed. In the final stage of the project, in response to requests from our research participants, we curated an occasional speakers' series aimed at bringing fresh and stimulating ideas into the Halifax radical milieu.

As the primary research phase wound down, we were forced to question the criteria by which we and our movement partners should assess the project's successes and failures. If we are to take the lessons of recent innovations in solidarity research seriously, we cannot imagine that research success is merely a matter of collecting reliable data, nor simply helping movements themselves "succeed" in any simplistic way. If we are to imagine radical movements as fraught and conflicted force fields of possibility, animated by stories, relationships, visions, and often contradictory practices and driven by dreams of the future that reject success *within* the present sociopolitical order, how then must we imagine their successes?

One option might be to consider the mere existence of such radical movements a success in and of itself: the mere fact that they overcome the ideological and material structures of power and are able to imagine and fight for a different reality is significant enough. But this answer will satisfy neither movement participants, nor researchers. And then what would be the point of research? Another option might be to ask movements themselves what success might mean. But our experience (and we asked, specifically, "what would it mean to win?") is that movement participants typically have a vague answer to this question, and their answers are rarely immediately aligned. We believe there is a critical utility in holding the question of success open, and dwelling with the further (sometimes uncomfortable and perhaps unanswerable) questions it evokes.

The queer art of failure

Judith (Jack) Halberstam's *Queer Art of Failure* (2011) offers us a useful place to begin reimagining social movement and social movement research "success." Halberstam asks us to consider: if "success" is defined within an oppressive, exploitative and unequal society, can "failure" be a liberatory practice? What are the "arts" of failure that help undo the normative codes of success, especially in an age of rampant neoliberalism where personal advantage-seeking is held to be the key to success, for both individuals and for society at large (thanks to the "invisible

hand of the market”)? For Halberstam, these questions are framed most cogently around questions of queer politics: if “success” in gender performativity means being able to match one’s performance of self to the given gender norms assumed to be associated with one’s genitalia, is the queer “art” of bending, challenging, or simply “failing” to obey these norms not key to resisting the status quo?

Halberstam is also interested in social movements, although through the lens of popular culture, noting the ways that many popular children’s films (contrary to pessimistic readings that see them as purely hegemonic) actually narrate the failure of the sort of possessive individualism that is seen typically seen as “successful” neoliberal behaviour. These films often depict the victories of those who we might consider “failures,” to the extent these failures band together and challenge the overarching regime of success.

What might social movements and scholars of social movements learn from this approach? As we have seen in the first section, social movement studies has, to a large extent, fixated on the question of movement success, even when that success has been understood less as quantifiable material and political gains and more as the fortitude and intensity of networks, or as transformations of subjectivity. Likewise, successful social movement scholarship has typically been marked by the observation and interpretation of movement successes, or the successful identification of the causes of social movement failures. To embrace Halberstam’s “queer art” of failure would be to look to failures as potential sites of rupture and possibility.

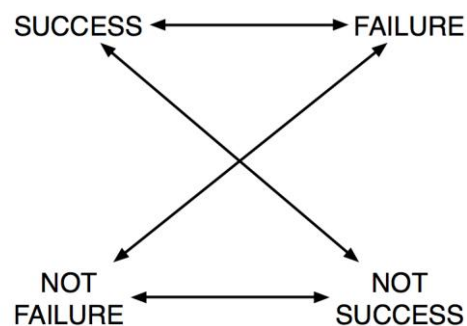


Figure 1

Here another tool from critical theory can be equally useful. For Frederic Jameson (1976, 1981) and Donna Haraway (1992), the “Greimas Square” (named after the French semiotician) offers a profound heuristic tool for taking apart binary thinking and pluralizing the horizons of thought. While the rich and complicated semiotic theory behind the square is beyond the scope of this paper, the basic idea

is that tension between two (ostensibly) contrary concepts (in this case “success” and “failure”) can be productively opened up by, in a sense, “squaring” the equation, adding into the mix their “contradictories” (“not-success” and “not-failure”). The four terms can form a square, the sides of which offer up new possibilities for interpretation.

What is key is that “success” is not the same as “not-failure,” and “failure” is not the same as “not-success.” The “lines” in the square represent fruitful and provocative opportunities for reconsideration. This is because, in Jameson’s interpretation, the initial binary (success and failure) is “ideological.” That is, it is an always partial, fractured way of understanding reality. The binary is forged within and tainted by the society of which it is a part. For instance, most critics will be familiar with the critique of the “binary gender system”: the binary of “male” and “female” exists as an element of a patriarchal gender system that allows certain traits, features and behaviours to be feminized (and devalued) and certain ones to be masculinized (and valorized) (see Butler 1990). The binary gender system grows out of a patriarchal society, and, in turn, it shapes our thinking, performances of self, and interpersonal actions in ways that see (most of) us reproduce a patriarchal society. To return to Halberstam, our binary of “success” and “failure” is one defined by a normative social order, built by and reinforcing heteronormativity, patriarchy, class exploitation, white supremacy, and other modes of oppression. Within the limited “success/failure” binary, the absence of equal marriage rights for gays and lesbians is seen as a “failure,” and the gaining of these rights is seen as “success.” But it is queer success within a heteronormative framework, which might lead us to question whether “success” is all that “successful.”

For Jameson (1976, 1981), in his Marxian approach to the Greimas square, the final reconciliation of the initial binary (some sort of possibility to transcend the ideas of “success” and “failure”) is utopian: it exists just over the horizon of our thinking, possible only in (an impossible) world to come where we have conclusively overcome all the sorts of oppression and exploitation that frame (and benefit) from our ways of thinking (see Haiven 2011). Until then, it is the job of radical critique to deconstruct and open up supposed binaries and pluralize the sorts of options available for thinking and acting beyond the pre-given epistemic order. As such, each “line” in the above square represents a key ideological tension, and in the rest of this section we think through each in turn, first for social movements, then for solidarity researchers.

Social movements and the hiatus between (not-) success and (not-) failure

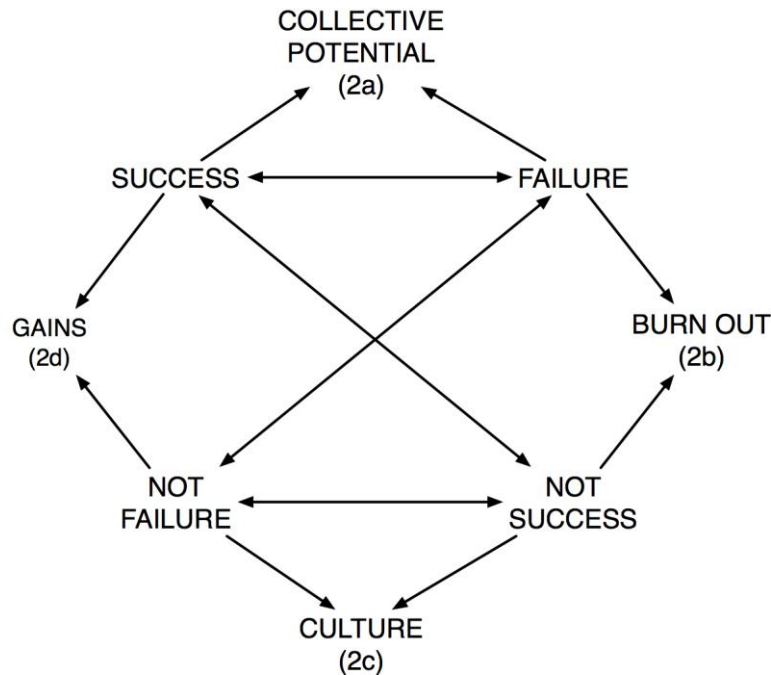


Figure 2

What is key is that on each axis of the square, a synthesis can emerge. For instance, on the original “top” axis (2a), we might say that the synthesis of “success” and “failure” is that utopian moment when we no longer live by the sorts of binary expectations that are characteristic of systems of power (“rich”=success, “poor”=failure), which we might call “collective potential.” That is, it would be a world of freedom where individuals and groups were able to constitute and reconstitute themselves without the restriction of prior expectations. This is the sort of utopian moment of which social movements dream (Haiven 2011). The key critical power of this methodology is that it refocuses us on what the more substantive goal might be beyond particular ideas of success. In our square, we might be tempted to imagine that the left-hand synthesis is the most desirable, but the Jamesonian square (for by now it has gone well beyond Greimas’s intentions) forces us to see that whatever emerges in this left-hand space (2d) is really only a limited possibility within (not yet beyond) the society that has created the initial opposition in the first place. That is, while it might be important, whatever fills that space will fall short of the more substantive and radical possibility at the “top” of the square (2a; in this case, utopia).

So on the left side of the square (2d), if we think of what social movement “success” and “not-failure” might mean, we might think of practical and material victories: success by a movement’s own standards, or what we might call “gains.” While not insignificant, what the square forces us to imagine is that a movement’s own standards of “success” may not, in and of themselves, be all that animates that movement. Hence the recognition that even when movements “win,” they rarely pack up and go home, nor are the battles they fought necessarily finished. For instance, the 2012 Quebec student movement succeeded in their stated objectives of turning back the planned increase in tuition fees but a proposal for tuition increases, albeit more modest ones, was reintroduced by the incoming provincial government in winter 2013. So is this movement success or failure? As this example illustrates, the dichotomy is facile and occludes other more enduring, less spectacular outcomes. Student resistance to tuition increases continues and Quebec continues to enjoy the lowest university tuition rates in all of Canada but, perhaps more importantly, the spirit of that movement lives on, both in campaigns for free tuition, groups that are confronting neoliberalism in other sectors of society, and in the affinity groups and friendships that formed during the strike and whose consequences are yet to be seen (Thorburn 2012).

Likewise, then, the square forces us to reimagine “failure” as well. On the right-hand axis of our square (2b) we have the synthesis of “failure” and “not-success.” Not only are we thinking about a tactical or a strategic collapse and a failure of movements to reach their stated objectives and make their desired impact (the contrary to their concept of “success”), there is also a more profound socio-psychological dimension, an absence of success. In the context of the movement actors we spoke to, we heard a lot about what our participants called “burn out.” This meant not only pessimism about the possibilities for real change (success) but a weariness and cynicism that was wounding to the soul itself. Many participants reported “being” burnt out (and having withdrawn from activism), or having burnt out and recovered, or worrying about burning out in the future. Causes of burnout were numerous. Often it resulted from activists getting so caught up in the quest to succeed that they worked themselves too hard, often coming to resent or becoming alienated from other movement participants who were not perceived to be pulling their weight. Others noted that for those with more advanced anti-oppression approaches, or who came from marginalized groups, the toll of dealing with ignorance and privilege was extremely taxing. Others confessed that the further they delved into movement participation, the less they had in common with non-activists and that many relationships with non-movement friends and family members atrophied, leaving them lonely, especially in times of movement crisis and failure.

Based on these testimonies, our own experiences as activists and organizers, and a significant and growing body of activist reflection on self- and community-care and burnout (Carlsson 2010; Loewe 2012; Padamsee 2011; Plyler 2006), we think that

activist “burnout” is a key category that deserves much more exploration and consideration. Many elder or more experienced activists we spoke to revealed biographies that included periods of burnout, often followed by transitions into other movements or causes, sometimes radically different than those they had engaged previously. Often this included a shift from “activist” work (the organization of direct action, political lobbying, and public education) towards “organizing” and forms of self- and other-oriented care (including formal and informal social work, teaching, community mobilizing, or working for NGOs). A few participants wryly and wistfully confided that, after burning out, they thought themselves done with radical politics for good, at least in any organized sense.

Burnout is key in part because it is so universal among radical activists. But it is also key because it is something radical social movement researchers can help with. Movements, we learned, often have difficulty offering the institutions, practices, and spaces to help individuals avoid or return from burnout. Social movement researchers interested in working with movements might be able to create these missing elements of social movement culture (what we identify as “solidarity” work, below). For instance, many of our research participants admitted that the semi-formal opportunity to privately talk through their issues with researchers gave them new perspectives and helped them work through metaphorical wounds, a sort of radical therapy (see Berardi 2009). We also offered opportunities for movements (not just single movements, but multiple overlapping activist circles) to meet and talk about broad issues and ideas, which also allowed some of the issues that lead to burnout (judgmental atmospheres, oppressive behaviour, unequal labour) to be addressed – though certainly not solved!

Along the bottom axis of our square (2c) is the synthesis of “not-success” and “not-failure,” which we have identified as “culture.” This is, to the best of our understanding, the near constant state of social movements. Because the horizon of social movement potential exceeds the limited and stated forms of “success,” often articulated as the concrete goals of struggle or specific campaign objectives, the work of movements is never done. This dwelling between “not-failure” and “not-success” represents the key psychosocial landscape of social movement actors, and it is the ability to keep hope, solidarity, and purpose alive, for both groups and individuals, that is the heart of social movement energies. We might call the horizon of social justice at the “top” of the square (2a) the terrain of “transcendence,” the necessary wish for a different society that animates radicalism. The antithetical “bottom” (2c) is the terrain of “immanence,” the everyday, existential shared landscape of perseverance. It is between these two that what we have elsewhere (Haiven and Khasnabish 2010) theorized that the “radical imagination” exists: it is not only the ability to dream of different worlds, it is the ability to live between those worlds and this one, between “not-success” and “not-failure.”

Our research partners in Halifax developed many ways of doing this. Most reported that relationships were key. Many talked about needing to keep spheres and areas of life separate from their activism, or have other groups of friends and hobbies. Many of our participants' abilities to dwell between not-success and not-failure were cast in reference to history, to the way that movements in the past appeared to be "going nowhere" until, all of a sudden, there was a breakthrough. Interestingly, perhaps the most pervasive technique for dwelling in this space was cynicism, a wry knowingness, often articulated as a sardonic fatalism. Often with reference to the worsening global ecological situation and the consolidation of corporate and state power, almost all our participants performed a sort of cagy and sardonic tone towards their seemingly Sisyphean labours, which perhaps helped insulate them from the heartsick reality whose naked presence might lead to demobilizing fury or despair.

We have called this axis (2c) "culture" because it helps reveal the importance of stories, images, practices, beliefs, relationships, ideas, and institutions that allow movements to persist (see Selbin 2010). It is this sense of culture, understood as a material and symbolic practice of meaning-making rather than merely as a thing one possesses, which allows us to see that movements do not exist in isolation. Almost everywhere, multiple movements enjoy overlapping "membership" (whether formal or informal) and are cross-cut by a social commons constituted by relationships and individuals, sometimes colleagues, sometimes neighbours, sometimes lovers, sometimes rivals. Radical social movements, then, are both the products and the producers of culture at the crossroads of not-success and not-failure, an ecology of persistence.

Our argument here is that the space between not-success and not-failure is a vital one for researchers to study, not only because it (rather than definitive success or failures) is the real substance of social movements, but because it is in this hiatus - a beautiful word, which stems from the Latin word for "opening" - that solidarity-researchers might be able to find their place in relation to the social movements they study. What if, rather than "helping movements succeed," we conceived of our role as helping develop strategies for dwelling in not-success and not-failure?

Returning now to the left-hand side of the square, we can see how limited the simple contrast of social movement success and failure can be, which can only hope to measure these terms either by movements' own stated yardsticks or by rubrics imposed by the researcher from the outside. Movements do not "succeed" or "fail," they exist in the interstice, in the hiatus. They are borne of and driven by (often unstated, unarticulated) common dreams of a world beyond the binary of "success" and "failure" and they live in the everyday space of "non-success" and "non-failure." From this perspective, often successes are worse than failures: when an electoral victory leads to demobilization, for instance, leaving participants scattered and lost. And by the same token, failures can be better than successes. In both New York City and Halifax, the eviction of Occupy demonstrators was a failure in the

sense that the forces of the state rendered impossible the stated objective of the movement: to occupy public space. But out of that “failure,” in both contexts, have emerged a plethora of new activist networks and groups working on a wide variety of issues, animated by the utopian horizon beyond success and failure and actuated by activist techniques for dwelling between not-success and not-failure. This is to say nothing of the spectacle of their evictions by police, which illuminated a political reality for countless witnesses.² This is not to say successes are not important, or that sometimes successes are not just successes and failures just failures. Successes often lead to greater levels of mobilization as people feel the momentum of victory and often failures lead to burnout, if not prison terms or worse. Rather, it is to say that when we pluralize our understanding of this binary, we gain a more profound insight into radical social movements.

Solidarity research: dwelling in the hiatus

We can use the same framework to reinterpret the study of radical social movements. Let us begin by contrasting what are typically considered research “successes” and “failures.” For mainstream academics, the measure of success is the ability to collect and interpret reliable data. More cynically, it is the ability to “get published.” Failure is ideally conceived of as a methodological mistake, a failure to accurately or reliably collect data. In practice, failure means collecting boring data: data that either does not illuminate anything particularly “new.”

We are less interested in this traditional research and are more interested in research that attempts to find solidarity with movements. For those of us committed to this path, success and failure is more difficult to plot. For some, success still means cultivating reliable data, often at the behest of movements themselves, or in order to illuminate and legitimate movements through the prestige of the academy (Khasnabish and Haiven 2012). For others, success is to be measured by how well movements are served by the research, often by a standard the movements themselves determine. But in either case, as with the movements in the square above (figure 2), the researcher exists between, on the one hand, an impossible utopian relationship with the movement, one of perfect reciprocity and immediacy (figure 3, 3a), and, on the other, a reality of not-succeeding and not-failing (3c). Let us once again go through our syntheses.

² For running reflections on the exciting afterlives of Occupy Wall Street, see the publication *Tidal*, produced by the Occupy Theory working group. <http://occupytheory.org/>.

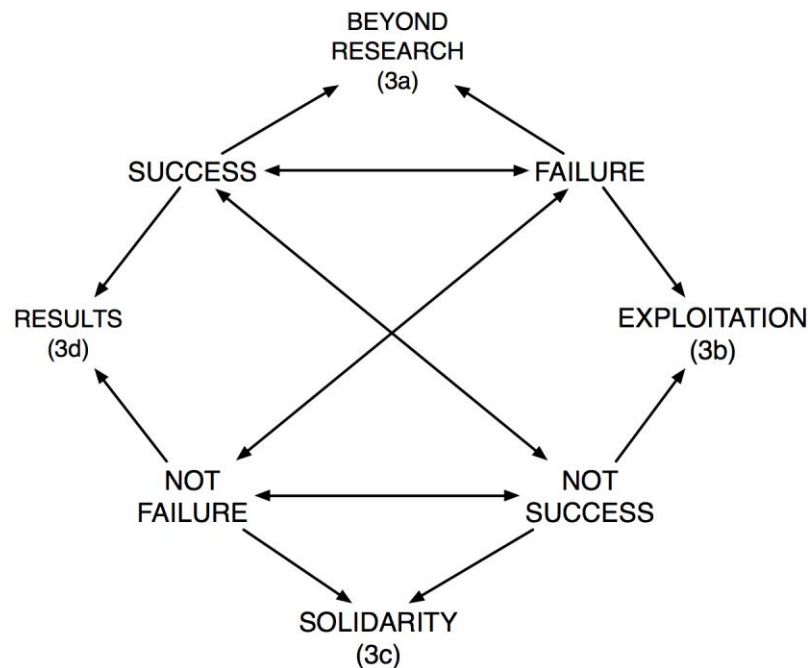


Figure 3

On the left-hand side we have the synthesis of solidarity research success and not-failure (3d). This means that, according to whatever criteria was imagined (whether the cultivation of reliable data or service to the movement in question), the researcher has succeeded and avoided failure, in the sense that many of the pitfalls that accompany social movement research have been evaded: the exploitation or disruption of the researcher or research, the often corrosive effect of power and privilege differentials, the use of researcher information by law enforcement agents, or the alienation of the research from the movements, or from academe. This outcome is, of course, desirable for all sorts of noble reasons. The Jamesonian Square method does not ask us to abandon the “left hand” of the equation (3d), only to recognize that there is more to the picture.

Thus, on the right-hand side we can understand the antithesis of “results” and the synthesis of “failure” and “not-success” as exploitation (3b). Beyond simply not collecting good or reliable data, this side of the researcher-social movement relationship can open onto forms of exploitation such as those mentioned above. Here exploitation might include the exploitation of the movement by the researcher, in the sense that the research serves the latter’s career at the expense of the former. Or, vice versa, social movements may “exploit” a willing researcher, either demanding all their time or placing limits on their autonomy which restricts what we have elsewhere called “the odd (almost perverse) freedom” and the

“critical element of ‘play’” that is in many ways unique to university-based researchers in an age where neoliberalism has dramatically confiscated almost all other forms of critical intellectual autonomy. Exploitation here refers to a failure of responsibility in the radical, poetic sense of the term: a failure for one party to be “responsible” or “responsive” to the other, to be “accountable,” in the sense of being able to “give an account of oneself,” to “settle accounts” (Butler 2005, 9-21). In other words, the synthesis of “failure” and “not-success” (3b) is the perpetuation of power imbalances that undermine the research relationship. The synthesis of “failure” and “not-success” here speaks to the betrayal of the utopian vision (3a) which is at the heart of solidarity research.

And what of that quadrant? Just as social movements dream of something beyond their immediate goals, so too do solidarity researchers, we believe, dream of a utopian horizon. Like all horizons, this one recedes as we approach, and its contours are always hazy and incomplete. But like our earlier square, this utopian horizon is one where the original antinomy is reconciled, where research success and failure are no longer an opposition. This would be a world where the line between researcher and movement would no longer be tenable. That would be a world where “research” is folded back into the fabric of daily life, and where the unequal and unfair division of labour (where some are “researchers” and others are “researched”) disappears. Experiments in co-research have strived for this horizon and have often approached it in admirable ways (see Shukaitis, Graeber, and Biddle 2007). But the true utopian horizon cannot be reached because, in a way, it would be a moment where research itself would be unnecessary. Just as radical social movements’ utopian horizon is one that has no use for them, our researcher’s horizon renders the dreamer anachronistic. Solidarity researchers do the work they do because they think it is an important way of confronting injustice, beyond the “normative” constellations of “success” and “failure.” In so doing, they dream a world beyond the sorts of injustice they believe research can help eliminate.

More practically, radical solidarity-researchers develop methods and strategies that are always, even when pragmatic, grounded in the utopian belief that if the power imbalances of the researcher-researched relationship cannot be overcome (in this society), they can be worked through. And it is this “working through” that we identify with the bottom quadrant of our square (3c), which we have identified as “solidarity.” This is the state of “not-success” and “not-failure” familiar to us from the social movement square, and likewise it is the space of active waiting, of anticipatory pragmatics, of the pregnant hiatus. Researchers dwelling in this place navigate the ongoing difficulties, pitfalls, and irreconcilable conundrums of working with social movements with an eye on the north star (the top of the square). As with social movements, this dwelling between success and failure is a practice of radical patience. And in that, it is fundamentally at odds with the neoliberal university obsessed with “results,” research “deliverables,” and quantifiable baubles of knowledge (see EduFactory 2009).

Beyond failurism

Recently, political theorists including Jody Dean (2012) have taken aim at what they characterize broadly as the Left's obsession with failure as a melancholic attachment, one that sees social movements narcissistically devour themselves by fixating on small, largely insignificant gains rather than demanding and building to win meaningful social change. These theorists, frustrated by the "soft" liberal anarchistic tendencies in radical movements (notably, Occupy Wall Street) call for a rejection of failurism and a return to what Dean calls "The Communist Horizon." While Dean is not exactly calling for a return to the rigid party organization and ideology of the 20th century, she believes that Left social movements need to return to broad visions of a different society and eschew the sorts of liberal individualism and shortsightedness that produce activist subcultures rather than thriving, powerful movements against capitalism and other systems of exploitation and oppression.

Our vision of a research politics of not-success and not-failure is not unsympathetic to this objective. In claiming that social movements dwell in the hiatus, we are not necessarily celebrating that fact, although we do not believe movements will ever achieve some transcendent status of pure success. Indeed, transcendence seems jarringly antithetical to the immanence of the social and the lived, the terrain of real politics. In fact, we believe that movements that are too triumphalist about their own narrative are extremely dangerous. We are also concerned that authors like Dean, in their impatience with Leftist narcissism, might inadvertently invite their readers to fold in the important anti-oppression work movements often do (including seemingly endless soul-searching over themes of privilege, exclusion, and inaccessibility along the axes of class, race, gender, education, citizenship status, and cis/trans politics, among others) into a critique of liberal individualism and movement pathology.

Yet if we were to imagine a move towards a research-solidarity based on the framework illustrated above, it would not mean a glorification of failure. Such a move would, in fact, allow researchers to reimagine their own role vis-à-vis the movements they work with and the impasses, limits, frustrations, and contradictions they inevitably face. In our research project, for instance, many of our partners reported that the interviews and dialogue sessions were a rare occasion for them to articulate and share - in an open-ended, reflexive, and non-sectarian space - broader visions of what they were fighting for, and to be forced to link those visions to their current forms of activism. These solidaristic research interventions became a means to open up the productive tensions between success and failure. As Dean notes, the Left's obsession with failure emerges in part from the way social movement cultures get caught up in the often mundane and unending nature of struggle. The methodological approach we are dreaming of here is one that sees the researcher help create a movement space for broader reflection and strategizing that, outside of more formal party structures, rarely exists. In this

way, our proposal to imagine and work with movements as they dwell in the hiatus between not-success and not-failure is not a celebration of failurism. It may, in fact, help make movement beyond failurism possible.

In Halifax, our primary research phase concluded in the spring of 2011 on a distinctly pessimistic note. The radical activists with whom we spoke conveyed feelings of depression and hopelessness. Crisis seemed ubiquitous, the radicalized mass movements necessary to confront and overcome them conspicuous in their absence, at least in the global North. Our three group dialogue sessions, while fruitful, were frustrating for nearly all involved, frequently raising vital issues of direct concern to radical movements and their participants seemingly without doing anything substantial with or about them. Seasoned organizers winced at the political immaturity of neophytes, recalling their own early embarrassments and missteps. Emerging activists were perplexed, frustrated, and alienated by the level of perceived sectarianism and infighting in the milieu. The specters of movement and personal histories haunted these encounters, even though many participants had no direct experience with or knowledge of them. Our project occurred at a moment of suspension, of “in-betweenness” for radical social movements in Halifax with several movement organizations and groups recently becoming dormant or dramatically imploding. Meanwhile, on the global stage, the age of austerity had been ushered in, driven by an unapologetic, frenzied neoliberal militarism that exacerbated and deepened nearly all the social, political, and economic problems radical activists had been working against. These were dark times indeed.

But then, seemingly from nowhere, the Arab Spring emerged, followed urgently by the Occupy movement. Both of these resonated deeply with our research participants and Occupy Nova Scotia coalesced around an almost entirely new cast of radicalized activists and organizers. In Canada, the subsequent “Maple Spring” student movement in Quebec and the ongoing Idle No More indigenous movement further contributed to a resurgence of movement optimism. For us, this was an important lesson in success and failure. While we could never claim a correlation between the work of the movements we studied and these momentous events (with perhaps the exception of Occupy Nova Scotia, which did include and benefit from a few seasoned activists), we are convinced that these struggles all, in various ways, “resonate” with one another (see Khasnabish 2008): they connect on the level of shared aspirations, personal relationships, movement myths and legends, organizing strategies, and common horizons.

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