Occupy Wall Street: A Hybrid Counterpublic

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Abstract
In this article, I explore the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) Movement in New York City as a hybrid counterpublic. I conducted research on OWS during its encampment at Liberty Plaza from September-November 2011 to understand its membership, emergence, and growth. I describe OWS as a hybrid counterpublic mediated by discourse that is both physically, through the use of bodily performance, and virtually, through social media channels online, circulated. These discursive forms embody the ideological principles of decentralization of power, collective participation, and individual agency. OWS created innovative spaces, practices, and temporalities to extend the existing social architecture and modes of communication, effecting democratic deliberation through affective performance. The hybridity of this constructed social space has allowed for novel sensorial experiences that expand and reinforce engagement with the OWS counterpublic. I propose that OWS has allowed for significant social actors to emerge and become publicly salient while subverting hegemonic institutions of the state and dominant civil society through the redefinition of citizenship. Since the eviction of the Liberty Plaza encampment, OWS in New York City has lost some traction. This signifies the integral symbiosis between the virtual and physical discursive realms of the movement’s existence and sustainability. Furthermore, this analysis of the OWS movement demonstrates the cultural emergence of a new hybrid counterpublic that mediates the way Americans engage with politics, dissent, and everyday life.

Keywords: Counterpublics, sensorial hybridity, affective performance

Introduction
On September 17th, 2011, the transformation of Zuccotti Park, located in the heart of New York City’s financial district, into the Liberty Plaza encampment marks the birth of the Occupy Wall Street Movement (OWS), a protest stemming from discontent with national economic and political conditions. The OWS intends to draw specific attention to the imbalance of wealth distribution in the United States and to the heavy influence of Wall Street on national legislation. The movement evolved quickly as labor organizers, ethnic minorities, student groups, and social activists of all kinds, across the political and social spectrum, participated and identified themselves under the address of the 99%. For example, on October 15th, 2011, an OWS “Day of Action,” thousands of protesters marched and collected in New York City’s iconic Times Square. The chorus of the crowd rhythmically chanted in unison, “We are the 99%,” as they filled the streets. Looking out onto the makeup of the protesters, signs

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1 Zuccotti Park was renamed Liberty Plaza by Occupiers after the establishment of the OWS encampment.

2 OWS, from its central hub of Zuccotti Park, organized multiple “Days of Action,” where members from all over the city were encouraged to join mass demonstrations in public locations all over New York City.
representing diverse issues are held up high: the unemployment rate, gay marriage, American Indian Rights, and environmental concerns. Despite the infinite number of political positions and grievances this unique pastiche of participation nonetheless represents a single cohesive social force.

OWS in New York City asserted its presence through the establishment of the Liberty Plaza encampment, mass demonstrations, and also through online social media. These modes of action exemplified, much like the revolutions of Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia, the current historical moment of dissent, characterized by the partnership of physical and online communication technologies to incite change. Physical forums for deliberation, such as daily General Assembly meetings, were established to regulate everyday occupation and to discuss goals for the movement. Simultaneously, Twitter, Facebook, Wikispaces and the Global Revolution video livestream acted as important tools for communication and planning online. This duality of communication was crucial to OWS as demonstrated by the loss of its physical manifestation. OWS in New York City saw a drastic decrease in mobilization and activity after the physical eviction of the Liberty Plaza encampment by New York City authorities in November of 2011. This displacement of the movement from its geographic hub has shed light on the integral dynamic between the activities and interactions within the physical encampment and those online, thus blurring its virtual-physical distinction.

To unpack the dynamics between the physical and virtual aspects of OWS, it is important to understand in what ways OWS members engage with them. In this article I identify the characteristics of the OWS movement that contribute to the mobilization of such an amorphous membership. In order to do this, I will discuss the creation of the social space and the regulating practices through which OWS philosophies and actions circulated. OWS developed a flow of its discourse through the intersection of social and virtual space that dynamically constructed and shaped the movement.

I argue that OWS exists as a counterpublic, realized and mediated by innovative forms of discourse that permeate both physical and virtual space. Furthermore, I will propose that this movement, therefore, exists in a hybrid social space, embodying both online culture and physical experience. This embodiment permits a unique affective performance – a visceral mode of demonstrating membership to OWS as well as sensory communication to encourage individuals to engage with OWS. This sort of discursive performance does not utilize conventional modes of public address, such as text, but rather uses collective visuals, sound-making, and environmental conditions to convey their message through sensory experiences. Within this space, the performance of OWS practices, which often embody the ideological concepts of decentralization of power and inclusive participation, facilitate unique and engaging sensory experiences. This social space fosters practices of deliberation and discussion that redefines what it means to be a democratic citizen. Ultimately, the circulation of and engagement with the OWS discourses demonstrates the power of new discursive technologies, both online and within the physical world, to subvert hegemonic forces. The

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3 General Assembly meetings are daily deliberative forums developed to serve the needs of Occupiers and to make decisions regarding the trajectory of the movement.

4 The Global Revolution Channel on livestream was established along with the physical encampment and provided a live video feed of Liberty Plaza, as well as, larger OWS demonstrations. See http://www.livestream.com/globalrevolution.
hybrid discursive space of OWS, through the affective and deliberative performance of its counterpublic, does not attempt to merely reform the political influence and agency of the public sphere, but transform it.

Counterpublics, Circulation, and Agency

The theoretical conversation surrounding the emergence of a public captures how civil society was historically constructed and described. However, my analysis of OWS challenges this traditional way to view a public force. Modernist analysis of the emergence of civil society and the public sphere has identified new possibilities for democracy through the discursive participation of a plurality of individuals (Habermas 1989). Many of these discussions are rooted in the obscured and shifting relationships between the private and public sphere, as well as, the relationship between civil society and the state. Jürgen Habermas, in The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, defined the public sphere of civil society as “an arena of deliberative exchange in which rational-critical arguments, rather than mere inherited ideals of personal statuses, could determine agreements and actions” (1989:23). The success of this public sphere depends on the autonomous organization of individual actors within civil society through rational-critical and influential discourse. This emergence of the modern public sphere, as independent from the state, is shaped by the participatory discourse mediated by the circulation of and access to mass media (Habermas 1989). While, rational-critical discourse may have been the mode of participation in civil society in the past, I argue that today, the OWS movement offers a more viscerally-charged discourse to act within civil society.

Much of this article applies a reading of Michael Warner’s, Publics and Counterpublics (2002), which builds on Habermas’s claim that accessible and circulating forms of textual discourse construct the public sphere and its actors. However, Warner distinguishes between the public and a public, arguing that the public sphere is comprised of many distinct publics that are self-organized and independent from the state or other preexisting hegemonic institutions. A public is thereby defined as any social space created by the reflexive circulation of discourse (Warner 2002). The characteristics of a public, according to Warner, are thus important to the construction of our social world.

Furthermore, according to Warner, the discourses of a public are the sources from which the social conditions of its existence are derived. The members of a public are strangers related only through their participation in its discourse. Warner goes on to claim that attention to this discourse is the "principal sorting category by which members and nonmembers are discriminated" (2002:87). Attention, in this sense, implies that it is through an engagement with, and not necessarily the subscription to the specific group or cause for an individual to be part of a public.

The engagement of members with a public’s discourse is dependent on its circulation. According to Bejamin Lee et al. (2002), “circulation is a cultural process with its own forms of abstraction, evaluation, and constraint, which are created by the interactions between specific types of circulating forms and the interpretive communities built around them” (2002: 3). To this effect, the circulatory architecture within a social space —that is the preexisting modes and channels of communication— mediates the creation and practice of novel discursive forms that can summon individual actors into a public. As discussed by Dilip Gaonkar and Elizabeth Povinelli (2003), the dynamics of national, transnational, and subnational public life cannot be
truly engaged without understanding that [circulatory] “flows and forms” are integrally related. As Habermas (1989) claims, a distinctive culture of circulation, which addressed an indefinite public through mass media laid the foundation for democratic ideas. This allowed the critiques of public opinion to have an impact on authoritative bodies like the state. However, forms of circulation encouraging stranger sociability and deliberative discourse did not occur solely because they engaged a public, but also because they captivated one (Goankar et al. 2003; Wedeen 2008). The notion of captivation thus leads to forms of circulation that expose the limitations of rational discourse when compared to the power of alternative discursive performance.

Warner discusses the potentials for discursive performance through his analysis of counterpublics, claiming that “the poetic functions of both language and corporeal expressivity” are important to the construction of their social imaginary (2002:106). The poetic/expressive character of counterpublic discourse emerges from its self-conscious status as subordinate to a dominant public force. Warner distinguishes a counterpublic as one that is "formed by their conflict with the norms and context of their cultural environment" (2002: 115). Because it emerges through situations of conflict or of injustice, a counterpublic has a much stronger tie to the ways its members form and transform their roles as social actors. Furthermore, the protocols of discourse and debate within a counterpublic remain open to affective and expressive dimensions of language (Warner 2002). In this sense, the address of a counterpublic is not extended to an indefinite public, but only to individuals socially marked by their capacity to participate in this alternative discursive expression — one that engages its membership though visceral experience.

The participation of a counterpublic is a collective project of world making that may intend to transform the public sphere. It, therefore, allows for new discursive forms to emerge, many that are not limited to rational-critical discourse, which are posited in opposition to the hegemonic order of the state. Warner (2002) highlights that counterpublic discourse incites tension between itself and the state, as well as the dominant publics; it challenges the pragmatics of the public sphere, described by Habermas, through discursive forms that “embody sociability, affect and play” (Warner 2002).

This discursive performance works to create novel spaces, practices and temporalities that expand the existing social architecture—the social channels that mediate discourse—that foster democratic deliberation. In her book, Peripheral Visions, Lisa Wedeen (2008) explores how everyday practices of deliberation can also be considered democratic action, although they may be outside of the institutionalized procedures of the state, such as voting. Wedeen, as well as Warner (2002), would argue that within a self-organized discursive public, individuals are actively engaging in deliberative practices of speaking, writing, and thinking. These practices allow them to acquire a sense of belonging and individual agency. Using the Derridian understanding of performativity, referring to repeated practices, Wedeen (2008) explains the formation of the self as a “democratic subject.” This performance within the public sphere creates, what Wedeen claims is, the "substance of participatory politics" through social interactions of deliberation, thus implying new forms of citizenship. It is through the interactions of these individual actors that group identification is articulated and imagined into existence (Wedeen 2008).

Although this participatory performance may allow individuals to realize themselves as agentive subjects, Warner (2002) claims that the focus of counterpublic circulation on
performance arenas, rather than textual forms of discourse, that can be disseminated to an indefinite public, limit their potential for agency because they do not adapt to the practices of rational critical discourse. While agency may be assigned to more dominant publics through the formulation of sovereign opinions that act upon civil society and the state, Warner writes, “counterpublics may not be attributed with the same force of agency because we do not inhabit a culture with different language ideology, a different social imaginary that can allow a counterpublic discourse to hold salience, power and decisiveness” (2002:123). The intent of the counterpublic performance is therefore, rooted in the transformation of the public sphere and its relationship to hegemonic systems (Warner 2002:124).

Public discursive space, forms of circulation, and agency dictate the ways modern social movements communicate their message. There is a unique tension that emerges surrounding the forms of discourse of a social movement because of the diverging notions of what it means to be a collective actor in the public sphere. OWS, if categorized as a public, a social movement that adheres to dominant public discourse, is ascribed with an expectation that it should intend to directly impact the state through public opinion and proposed policy reform. However, the discursive space of OWS is not mediated by the conventional systems of opinion and reform of the public sphere. My analysis of OWS instead offers insight into the emergence of novel discursive forms through affective and deliberative performance as a counterpublic.

The OWS counterpublic mediates itself—meaning it constructs and transforms its actions and ideas—through the circulation of novel cultural forms of social discourse that 1) reflect the ideological principles of their social imaginary and 2) display the affective performance of this social imaginary. This performance uses spectacle, ritual, and sensory stimulation to circulate discourse. The forms of OWS discourse thereby embody egalitarian and collective participation within their deliberative practices. The construction of the OWS social space is dependent on the circulation and performance of this discourse, a phenomenon exemplified by the Liberty Plaza encampment. The performative nature and the affective engagement involved in OWS discourse allows for individual participants to realize themselves as social and political actors, outside the preexisting frameworks of civil society. This phenomenon potentially redefines democratic practice and citizenship. Ultimately, the OWS counterpublic subverts hegemonic norms of the state and the dominant public sphere through its attempt to demonstrate an alternative social and political existence.

Methods

Data for this article was collected over a period of two months of fieldwork from September-November 2011 at the site of Liberty Plaza. I employed ethnographic methods of participant observation and formal and informal interviewing. In total, I conducted fifteen formal interviews and over forty informal recorded conversations. I visited Zuccotti Park daily along with a week of living in the encampment. This allowed me to participate in the everyday life and practice of the OWS NYC. I also participated in large scale marches organized by OWS. During my time in Zucotti Park, I became involved as a moderator in the OWS Think Tank, a station and working group located within the park that acted as an open space for topical discussion and the democratic sharing of opinions by all. I was active in online forums by posting, replying, and following key handles on Twitter. I also joined OWS related Facebook groups and
Hybrid Occupation: The Symbiosis of the Virtual and the Physical

In this section I explore how the OWS movement is dependent on the symbiotic relationship between virtual and physical modes of discourse. I argue that these modes are intertwined and provide a seamless discursive space in which the movement can exist. As Brigitte Jordan writes, “people now exist in a hybrid world where the boundaries between what is physical and what is digital continue to fade...consciousness is to some extent shared between an offline physical and an online virtual self” (2009:26). This cultural phenomenon results in major shifts in social landscape and the concept of space. It is important to understand the online, communication technologies that have allowed for this phenomenon that provide a virtual space for alternative worldviews, democratic practices, and novel social actors to emerge and gain salience. The use of these technologies by OWS demonstrated their potential to challenge institutionalized hegemonic order. Furthermore, OWS created an arena for dissent through merging the use of online technology with that of physical presence. Within this constructed space, novel discursive forms, embodying the deliberative and performative characteristics of the counterpublic imaginary, circulate seamlessly within and through the virtual and physical worlds.

It is important to first explore how digital media has altered and transformed modes of activism. During a lecture, entitled, “Social Movements in the Age of the Internet,” given at the London School of Economics, Manuel Castells (2011) described the capacity of institutionalized power to shape the internalized norms of our society through the mediation of everyday sensory experiences. Until the advent of accessible, mass communication technology, any alternative view of social existence could not circumvent these established channels of mediation. Castells (2011) goes on to state that mass communication offers the potential to create autonomous networks, which bypass that of the government, of corporations, and of the mass media in power. The mediation of public discourse through novel technologies therefore challenges the hegemonic norms through a transformation of our daily sensory interactions.

As Gabriella Coleman writes, uses of digital media have cultivated new modes of communication that have “reorganized social perceptions and forms of self-awareness, and established collective interests, institutions, and life projects” (2010:72). Social media technology has provided a digital platform for the growth of communicative interaction between large portions of the global populous through user-generated content. These technologies are furthermore discursive spaces where creativity and connectivity can facilitate democratic participation (Coleman 2010). Therefore, in accordance with Kate Milberry (2009), the use of online modes of democratic practice implies a dialectical relation between the technological and the social. Milberry writes, “the creation of community through democratic practice in cyberspace prefigures alternative conceptions of social organization offline” (2009:36). Milberry suggests that alternative, democratic social spaces, such as the OWS
counterpublic, are physical projections derived from online cultural practices. However, I propose that within the context of OWS, the relationship between the culture and practice in Liberty Plaza is not merely influenced by that of the online world, but rather, there exists a hybridity where physical space and virtual develop together and where they struggle to exist as salient without each other. This spatial hybridity is a powerful force in the everyday sensory experience of the OWS counterpublic that has allowed for specific social actors to emerge.

The virtual realm has a physical existence in Liberty Plaza through the electronic infrastructure of mobile technologies and textual/visual displays that circulate online discourse within the physical public. The physical realm exists in virtual space through the circulation of physical experiences using mediated online communication, thereby transcending its own spatial boundaries to engage a virtual public. The flows and forms of circulation of OWS has revealed a historical moment where interplay between the physical space of the movement, localized around Liberty Plaza, and the virtual space of the movement, using online communication tools, places the OWS movement in a hybrid social space.

To understand the hybridity of the OWS counterpublic, we must first acknowledge the common characteristics of the social spaces in which these forms of discourse exist and circulate. I argue that the discursive space offered online and within Zuccotti Park share a common, even purposeful, ambivalence with regards to ownership, regulation, and potential for public engagement. In the case of online technology there is an anxiety among online users that has emerged as to whether these technologies will be potentially liberating outlets for the public or if they will act as a regulatory resource for preexisting hegemonic institutions. In other words, when a virtual space emerges that shows promise for the transformation of civic participation and democratic development, it can fortify the social imaginary of a counterpublic, but also still remains vulnerable to authoritarian or commercial domination (Rheingold 1993). By virtue of this tension, as Milberry (2009) claims, technology is inherently political, both in its design and in its use.

The creation and distinction of private and public physical space is also inherently political. In a sense, the same social tension that surrounds technological advents online, also apply to privately owned public space, as in the case of Zuccotti Park. The question being: will this space ultimately be controlled by state authority, by corporate powers, or by public citizens? I propose that the ambivalent nature of a privately owned-public space —an ambivalence stemming from the liberating and oppressive potential they possess— such as Zucotti Park, is analogous to that of cyberspace development. This plays a role in the organic fusion of these social spaces in order to create a hybrid, discursive architecture for the OWS counterpublic. Just as the virtual realm and its discursive tools existed prior to the emergence of OWS, the physical space also existed before the Liberty Plaza encampment was established. This specific urban space leant itself to the OWS occupation. For this reason, it is important to understand its background as an urban space, as well as, how it had been spatially transformed through the social interactions and affective performance of residing Occupiers. In this sense, Liberty Plaza was not just a physical location for OWS; but moreover, it emerged as the physical manifestation of the OWS social imaginary.

Liberty Plaza: The Production and Construction of Physical Space

OWS allows for the analysis of a crucial link between dissent and the use of urban public space. The role of Zuccotti Park, a privately-owned public space very close to the New
York Stock Exchange provided both a physical space to act but also represented a social imaginary that created and mediated discursive circulation. The creation of the encampment at Liberty Plaza allows for the analysis of the interplay between what Setha Low refers to as the "social production" of space and the "social construction" of space (1995: 22). Low makes an important distinction between the two, claiming that social production of space is "the physical creation of the material setting," while the social construction of space described "the phenomenological and symbolic experience of space as mediated by social processes and activities" (Low 2002: 24). Social construction, therefore, implies that the daily use of the material settings within a space transforms it. Human social interactions, thereby, allow the space itself to gain a semiotic significance apart from its physical existence.

The circumstance surrounding the social production of Zuccotti Park shaped its role as the central and iconic location of the OWS. This discussion raises questions about urban public space regarding its ownership, access, and regulation. According to Marina Peterson (2006), the notion of public property understood as accessible and open to all, is undermined by quasi-public spaces, such as Zuccotti Park. These quasi-public spaces are mediated by negotiations between the state and the private sector. Peterson argues that this new form of ambiguous, privatized-public space impedes and thereby, transforms the relationship between citizen and state. According to Peterson (2006) and Low (1995), these kinds of spaces deny certain traits of citizenship, that public spaces should ideally include, such as, heterogeneity, open critique, and equality, therefore, claiming that privatized-public spaces limit citizen use and access.

The existence of Zuccotti Park as a privatized-public space is important to understanding its use for the OWS movement. A brief history of the park is helpful for understanding its role in OWS. In 1968, the building developers of Brookfield Office Properties, a commercial, real estate company headquartered in NYC, was contractually obligated by the state to build an adjacent public park to provide an open space within the dense neighborhood along with the construction of their sixty-story high rise. Zuccotti Park was opened as a privatized-public space. According to the city, Zuccotti’s owner, Brookfield Office Properties, is considered responsible for enacting reasonable rules of conduct for the park. They were responsible for the enforcement of specific "social inclusions and exclusions organized around proper and improper use of the plaza" (Peterson 2006:364). Interestingly enough, Zuccotti Park was considered the ideal location for the movement to situate, according to the members of OWS’s Tactical Committee, because of the very fact that it was a privately-owned public space located in the financial district. This decision was based on 1) the ambivalence over who is in fact the regulatory authorities of the space and 2) the association of the space with the corporate sector, thus providing a stronger message of dissent against corporate control over civil action.

The regulatory freedom possessed by the private owner can passively permit the use of the space for protest and demonstration. Bruce D’Arcus describes, "the relation between public space and protest is figured through legal arrangements that sanction dissent by controlling its expression, allowing it to take place in particular times and spaces with permission from and under the watchful eye of the state" (2006: 45). According to zoning law, the city of New York is permitted to close, lock, and prevent activities in public parks after a decided curfew. However, because Zuccotti Park is a corporate plaza, it was open for 24/7
recration. In this particular case, the privatized-public space offered more freedom than the state-regulated public space.

Protest and dissent are often considered defining features of the democratic ideal of a public space. However, dissenting activity that does occur in privatized-public spaces creates an ambiguity between the social ownership of the space, drawing attention to the façade of a public space that is in fact mediated by the private sector (Peterson 2006). In this sense, the use of a privatized-public space by OWS directly challenged the relationship between the state and the market that the park represents. In fact, it is a partnership between the state and the private sector that is seen as the source of injustice in the eyes of the OWS counterpublic.

An occupation, such as Liberty Plaza, is even more effective when democratic ideals are expressed within a privatized-public space; the encampment's existence exposes the regulatory ambiguity between actors of the state (the NYC government) and the corporate sector. The occupation of this space for OWS can be seen as an assertion of democratic citizenship, a reclamation of that privatized-public space as one that not only serves the public, but moreover a counterpublic —a novel democratic imaginary.

Liberty Plaza demonstrates the ways people, as social agents, construct their own realities and attendant meanings based on their daily life within this public-space. The small confines of Zuccotti Park developed into a fully functioning encampment community. The Western side of the park was filled with about 70 tents, which were separated by specific self-identifying camps. Throughout the center and the eastern portion of Liberty Plaza, were desks and stations set up to provide services for the OWS community that includes: The Kitchen, where food is prepared and shared, The People’s Library, where individuals can trade, lend, and donate books, An Arts and Culture Station, where crafts, music and art of all sorts can be circulated as well as a Medical Station, which provides aid for minor health ailments.

These stations, one by one, emerged through the discussions of working groups and decisions made by the OWS General Assembly. Their development was directly concerned with the growth and needs of the encampment residents. I argue that the emergence of these systems demonstrate the integral role of the park as the collective focus, the object of political deliberation for the movement, thereby allowing for an experiment in governance through counterpublic performance.

The People’s Think Tank: Democratic Performance in Liberty Plaza

Performative political participation was crucial to the existence of OWS in the public sphere. The Zuccotti Park encampment, the physical hub of the OWS movement in NYC, was the regular site of this deliberative performance. In accordance with Wedeen’s (2008) analysis, these interactions are democratic practices; therefore, they produce democratic persons outside of the context and structure of the state. As one walks through the camp, there are infinite opportunities to engage with the counterpublic through dialogue. There are circles of heated conversations made up of individuals whose diverse backgrounds and experiences animate debate. This spontaneous dialogue is mediated by the performative actions of each member, as they address an audience of strangers.

A more routine form of these discussions occurs at a designated station within the park called, The People's Think Tank. I worked closely with the members of the Think Tank, who held an open discussion forum three times a day to reflect and respond to general themes or
events pertinent to the movement. The Think Tank organizers describe their participants in their mission statement: Unlike other more conventional platforms for the exchange of ideas, the People’s Think Tank discussions are not powered by the voices of experts, celebrities, prominent public figures or more active participants in the movement (those whose voices already gain an audience via more conventional social channels) but by anyone present who wishes to stop, contribute and listen (Occupy Movement Think Tank 2011). Although the OWS Think Tank is an organized forum of collective discussion, it has emerged within the context and space of the movement as an important cultural form of OWS participation, one that explicitly ascribes a temporary equality among its participants. This group is conducted in this manner and espouses this philosophy in order to embody equality, one of the movement’s attempted goals.

One such Think Tank discussion, surrounding the theme of celebrity presence within the park, incited an effusive debate that exposed a possible conflict between the principles and practices of the counterpublic and the potential to improve the movement’s popularity, public appeal, and fundraising through celebrity involvement. Many argued that the presence of celebrities within the park would disturb day-to-day activities, as well as, undermine the movement because of their wealth and status. Others acknowledged that this antagonizing attitude towards celebrity inclusion was hypocritical, claiming that celebrities should be able to participate in the movement as long as they are not treated or do not expect to be treated differently than the rest of the OWS community. Tim, a Think Tank founder/ moderator, eventually asserted, “Even if celebrity presence transforms the dynamics within the park, I think that it is the responsibility of the Think Tank to make sure all voices are equally heard.” Although the effectiveness of the Think Tank to minimize inequality within their sessions was debatable, the public statements expressing equality created a performative space in which individuals can participate within an imagined egalitarian structure.

This open and public forum facilitates participation through the creation of an egalitarian structure of deliberation. I argue that this process contributes to the creation of an OWS citizen. As Lisa Wedeen describes these forms of discussion give rise to the building of “an agnostically inclined political world” (2008:79). In other words, a political worldview is constructed and maintained through participation in socially and culturally mediated spaces, like the Think Tank, where the assertion of subjective opinions, disagreements and critique encourage democratic performance and the realization of citizenship. While egalitarian participation was certainly touted as the aspiration of this space, it is important to acknowledge that, much like any contemporary democratic environment, certain voices do end up dominating.

Virtual Counterpublic: Collaboration and Communication

As Coleman (2010) describes, activist movements that have emerged in the last two decades have brought to attention the ties between technical decentralization online and the organization and political decentralization offline. OWS exemplifies this notion through the synthesis and the circulation of virtual discourse. Many of these online forms demonstrate the ideological tenants and deliberative practices of the OWS counterpublic: the decentralization of power, the expansion of horizontal networks, and the participatory experience of the individual.
In this section I explore wikispaces in order to understand one of the modes of communication that attempts to capture the espoused OWS ideology.

**Wikispaces: Sites of Collective Deliberation**

Wikispaces act as a medium that fosters deliberative processes within the OWS counterpublic. The OWS working groups use Wikispaces in order to organize and produce collaborative reports and proposals to circulate and share within the OWS counterpublic. Wikis serve as a unique medium for group communication as they work towards the production of a textual work. The wiki, thereby, is a creative space for collaborative authorship. Participants, within this virtual creation of discourse, can openly add and edit content and, therefore, develop a communal sense of ownership and responsibility for the produced text.

Jo was a member of the OWS working group dedicated to addressing issues of psychological trauma and mental health affecting Occupiers residing in Liberty Plaza. He discussed the use of a “Wiki” to compose and publish a magazine entitled, “Mindful Occupation: Rising Up Without Burning Out” to circulate within the encampment. It was intended to increase awareness of the potential psychological effects and struggles that one may experience while living within the Liberty Plaza encampment. Jo said:

The wiki was established so that all the members could contribute their respective pieces of expertise. Being that mental health is a topic that has many varying opinions and that many individuals have different experiences with psychological trauma, it was a real project, one that merited a lot of discussion on the wiki. Most people had a personal connection to the cause, and therefore, were passionate about very specific things. It is definitely a learning experience in compromising, and there was much debate not only regarding content but also with regards to proper conduct when working on a collective wiki. We often had to take a step back and discuss the process of contribution, almost just as much as we discussed what to contribute.

From what Jo had told me in an interview, the collaborating authors were all coming with distinct frames of reference. Jo, a diagnosed schizophrenic and a long time radical mental health activist, approached the content of the work in a politicized manner, focusing on themes such as removing social stigma associated with mental illness and questioning the authority of biomedicine as the arbiter of normalcy. He was joined by nine other collaborating authors; among them were, Dr. K, a prominent psychiatrist who was attempting to organize professional mental healthcare services for Occupiers, and Sami, a social worker, who was concerned with psychological trauma resulting from sexual assault. The deliberations, and ultimately the reconciliations, involved in the co-authorship of this text exposes the Wiki medium as an equalizing force; individual status and identity are not recognized within it, allowing for the process of deliberation to be most important.

As one can see, Wikispaces are a virtual tool appropriated to both enable and reinforce the communicative practices within the OWS counterpublic. The use of Wikis, as a means of creating a text intended for public circulation, encourages the performance of democratic practices, as discussed by Wedeen but through a virtual platform. It not only leads to debate and discussion amongst active members regarding the content at hand, but a meta-discussion regarding the very process of collaboration, and therefore a discussion of participatory democratic practice. Milberry, in her analysis of the Global Justice Movement in the 1990’s describes this democratic phenomenon as, “the wiki way” (2009: 76). Milberry
writes: “The wiki social and organizational phenomenon contrasts modern western society and prefigures alternative conceptions of social organizations, making their subversive political implications clear. The process of refining and defending views in a collaborative context leads to a deeper understanding of complex ideas, an understanding with the potential for application in the ‘real world’” (Milberry 2009:78). The attempted egalitarian structure of the Wikispaces is based on notions of decentralized power and horizontal self-organization, the ideological tenants mediating the discursive performance of the OWS counterpublic. Furthermore, its use to create textual forms allows them to embody the egalitarian and collaborative principles of their production as they circulate through the hybrid social space of OWS. However, it is important to recognize that differential access to the Internet and user understanding plays a role in whom and to what capacity one can participate. While I believe the structures of wikispaces and other mediums of discourse used in OWS may not have been as open and accessible to a mass audience, I do think that the intention to use models embodying equality and open participation is part of creating the OWS social imaginary.

*Hybrid Sense and Spectacle*

Till this point, I have analytically separated the forms of physical discourse from those of virtual discourse that have emerged within the OWS social space. I organized my analysis this way to draw attention how the ideological project of the OWS counterpublic shapes the discursive forms in physical and virtual realms. These discursive practices allow for the realization of democratic subjects through participation and performance, thus subverting the external frameworks of civic action of the dominant public sphere. While these forms of discourse possess the potential to manifest and circulate in both physical and virtual space, their hybridity is intrinsic to their form and therefore, may not be immediately perceivable.

In the following section I describe the practice of the General Assembly meeting, as it originally was performed during the months of October 2011 and early November. During this time, OWS had gained salience in the larger public sphere as an emerging sociopolitical force. The daily General Assembly meeting held at around 7pm was the forum where working groups, formed around specific needs and issues, presented their proposals to regulate and improve the encampment. These proposals were then left to open discussion by anyone attending the meeting, indiscriminate of their association with OWS, and then they were subject to a popular vote. The meetings conveyed the OWS principles of decentralized power and collective participation. However, the General Assembly did not serve merely as a forum for deliberation, but rather it was an affective spectacle that engaged the public through an overtly hybrid, sensory experience.

The performance of OWS discourse through the multiplicity of mediated communication gestures transforms the sensorial experience of the everyday. Many communicative innovations such as expressive hand signals and the People’s Mic are novel discursive modes that were created within the social space of the OWS counterpublic. Members voice their agreement, disagreement or vehement opposition by using a series of pre-established hand gestures. Fingers facing up and shaking indicates agreement; fingers facing down, disagreement; arms crossed, vehement opposition; a rolling of the index fingers around themselves indicates the urge to move on or hurry. The gestural meaning or the source of their
development are never really explained explicitly to those unfamiliar with them, but become intuitively understood by those that engage with it.

A crucial part of this collective experience stems from the use of the People’s Mic to create an affective soundscape through the articulation and repetition of an individual’s rhetoric. In this practice, members of OWS collectively repeat and echo the voice of an individual. Any member can choose to utilize the People’s Mic by shouting “Mic check.” The development of this practice symbolically captures the tension between the regulatory forces of the state and the affective performance of a counterpublic; the People’s Mic was a discursive innovation by OWS after city authorities banned the use of bull horns or microphones by OWS in public spaces, a ban that has not previously been applied to public demonstrations. This form of communication, therefore, not only emphasizes the ideological principles of active, collective participation, but also challenges the imposed limitations of the state through its performance.

Charles Hirschkind (2006), in *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Tapes and Islamic Counterpublics*, discusses how new media, in the form of cassette recorded sermons in Egypt enabled a public to be realized through a process of listening that connects the content of the sermons to the political practice of deliberating the common good. To this effect, the People’s Mic could be viewed as new media, an innovation exclusive to this counterpublic, through which its existence is realized and reinforced. Furthermore, the manner in which it functions to amplify a single person’s voice by the use of collective repetition can be seen as a form of circulation that emphasizes the relevance of individual self-expression in the expansion of collective discourse.

During General Assembly meetings, the messages of the Mic Checks do not only provoke the collective echo, but are transcribed and projected on a large screen. The transcription and video feed of the meetings is furthermore, streamed online where Twitter users and online viewers can comment and interact with the goings on. The practice of the People’s Mic during these meetings elicited visceral responses, from all surrounding listeners. In addition to this, Tweets responding to the soundscape produced in Liberty Plaza are projected on a screen and are engaged with during the meeting. There is an added element to this process of discursive interaction; the tweets were not only in immediate response to physical circumstances by the individuals present but were moreover in response to the live video stream of the General Assembly meeting reproduced in real-time online. Twitter thereby acts as the platform for the continuous deliberative democratic practice across actors in the virtual and physical social spaces during these meetings. The auditory, visual, and textual forms of participation transcended physical space and temporal limitations allowing individuals to embody a hybrid discursive presence.

The multiplicity of the virtual and physical modes of expression engages a novel hybrid sensorium. As Talal Asad discusses, the public sphere “is constituted by the sensibilities-memories and aspirations, fears and hopes- of speakers and listeners. And also by the manner in which they exist (and are made to exist) for each other, and by the propensity to act and

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5 Calling for a “Mic Check” allows one to initiate the use of the People’s Mic to address the crowd. An individual can speak and the respondents will subsequently echo to words of the individual. Competing “Mic Checks” often occur, and are often instances where inequality within the OWS community is exposed. The loudest, most prominent voices are often the most heard and echoed.
react in distinctive ways” (2003:185). In this way, the reflexive discourse of a public is dependent on the interplay between these sensibilities. During the OWS General Assembly meetings, the practice of the People's Mic blurs the sensorial distinction between the speaker and listener, as the listener becomes the speaker and in a sense, embodies the speaker’s subjective sensibility. The further amplification and dissemination of the People’s Mic statements through transcription and transmission online adds a synesthetic form of communication; an individual voice is both an auditory, visual, and virtual experience, thus causing a further ambiguity of roles between, speaker and listener, author and reader, actor and audience. This ambiguity of roles creates a unique, affective experience, where the spectacle of the collective, both online and in the park, becomes the form through which individuals engage with the counterpublic discourse and reinforce its existence.

A crucial discussion surrounding this event is one of public performativity, where a collective form of theater engages both members and nonmembers of the counterpublic, on a sensorial level. I would describe this phenomenon as affective performance – a mode of political and social performance that is both constructed and reinforced by unique sensory experience and expression. As Hirschkind claims, the formation of our political discourses is often influenced by “dispositions outside the purview of consciousness” (2006: 9). That is to say that sensory stimulus may unconsciously be involved in our engagement with a particular public discourse. Elaborating on this notion, the virtual transcription and transmission of these sensory experiences may allude to the development of an alternate sensory ability of hybrid engagement. This hybrid engagement alludes to the symbiotic nature of the physical and virtual presence of the OWS movement.

Conclusion

The discussion of OWS as a hybrid counterpublic has shed some light on its ability to engage such a diverse membership. The OWS movement presents a social space to reimagine society and was an opportunity for individuals to realize themselves as unique social agents through the processes of collective world making. The performance of OWS was a public critique of the institutionalized political system in the United States, as well as, the hegemonic institutions, such as the corporate sector, it is believed to empower. The OWS counterpublic suggests that citizenship, under that system, is marked by complacency and helplessness. Therefore, OWS offered a form of citizenship, through democratic deliberative practice, that incorporates the human elements of affect, creativity, and sociability.

The OWS movement also captures the techno-cultural moment of sensorial hybridity allowing for it to be constantly present in both the virtual and physical realms of everyday life through its online embodiment of the physical experience and the physical embodiment of the online experience. This discursive and sensorial phenomenon allows for a large number of individuals all over the world to engage with the OWS counterpublic and experience its affective resonance. This would prove to be an interesting way to conceive of the Occupy movements that have emerged all over the United States and globally.

However, as in the case of the Liberty Plaza encampment, the displacement of OWS from its physical existence was the removal of an invaluable portion of its constructed social and circulatory architecture — a loss from which the OWS hybrid counterpublic presence in New York City may not recover. Since the eviction of the encampment by city authorities, the OWS presence significantly changed, and I would argue, diminished. The everyday needs of
the encampment allowed for a microcosmic project of governance that embodied the philosophies of the OWS counterpublic. The feedback between the activities within the encampment and the online forms of circulation and discussion was abruptly terminated, thereby sequestering OWS discourse solely to online mediums. The physical manifestation of the OWS social imaginary was integral to visceral engagement with OWS discourse and without it, the OWS counterpublic is discursively limited.

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Acknowledgements: I would like to thank all those at OWS Liberty Plaza encampment during the Fall of 2011 for allowing me to conduct my research and participate in the movement. I would also like to thank my advisors, friends, and family for all of their support and guidance.

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