Occupying Language at Occupy Wall Street

One of the most salient qualities of the Occupy Wall Street movement from the point of view of literary studies is the way it has foregrounded the revolutionary potential of everyday language. Far from accepting as given the neutral patois of both the mass media and general institutional life in the twenty-first century, OWS recognizes as a fundamental principle the way language—organizational language, in particular—is saturated with the tacit assumptions, hierarchical tendencies, and unchallenged biases that maintain inequality in social relations. Our attempts to overcome the challenges posed by everyday language, indeed by the ways people from different social milieux communicate with one another, has taken clever and creative forms but has also revealed how difficult it is to shift the linguistic ground while, as it were, you are still standing on it. The most obvious and publicly visible form of OWS’s distinctive use of language—other than the widespread adoption of “the 99%”—is the way meetings and General Assemblies are typically conducted. At these meetings, such devices as hand signals, “progressive stack”, “step up/step back”, and the use of facilitators to guide consensus decision making rather than leaders who determine an agenda are employed to ensure both that no voice is silenced and that people who identify as members of traditionally marginalized groups have the opportunity to speak first. Despite these efforts, some of which remain controversial, many OWS participants feel as if the movement is effectively being run by a small cadre of self-appointed organizers and intellectuals who think their educational advantages entitle them to make decisions on behalf of those who do not possess the same degree of linguistic competency. This division, between those practiced in the articulation of injustices and those who merely suffer them in silence, is the product of the language regime from which the Occupy movement sprung. Like the ongoing struggle to occupy physical spaces, it will remain a challenge for as long as occupying Wall Street entails an occupation of language itself.

My original intention for this paper was to discuss the distinctive language style that was evolving among Occupy Wall Street participants in New York during the movement’s apex of notoriety and activity. I remember finding this language style pervasive throughout Occupy Wall Street but most in evidence at meetings of its various Working Groups, particularly the Facilitation Working Group, of which, along with the People’s Library, I was an active member. Since last fall, however, the form of the OWS movement has changed considerably: both the scope of the occupation itself and the frequency with which its large, public plebiscites—the General Assembly, or GA, and the Spokes Council—take place have been significantly curtailed. Although it might be as premature to say that the idiosyncratic language usage of Occupy Wall Street is
more or less dead as to say that the movement itself has more or less gone into hibernation, there has definitely been a shift in the overall culture and traction of OWS since the encampment was brutally disbanded by the NYPD in November, 2011. Since that day, Occupy Wall Street has become increasingly perceived as a discrete historical event receding ever further into the past rather than the permanent, diffuse platform of critique it was really meant to be from the beginning. Organizers did make efforts to keep people coming together through the winter months in meetings held in churches and various other spaces around New York City, including at Liberty Plaza. By and large, however, these meetings tended to attract only the most committed activists with the most flexible schedules. The expectation was that warmer weather this spring would inspire some kind of revival: the crowds would return and the GAs would once more become exciting and relevant. But the physical occupation, symbolically located as it was in the financial district only blocks from Wall Street, seems to have been more integral to the vitality of the public sphere that OWS activists painstakingly brought into existence than they had hoped. And it was that public sphere, with its highly publicized, directly democratic character, that I had personally found so compelling about the movement. My remarks today will therefore be more in the vein of a retrospective account than a discussion of how OWS’s unique style of internal communication developed and where it is going today. I should also add that, as a direct participant myself, my observations are entirely subjective, deeply personal, possibly misguided, and undoubtedly contentious.

In focusing on the language of Occupy Wall Street, I am not referring to slogans like “We are the 99%,” powerful though they may be, or the alleged impact on discussions of income inequality in mainstream political discourse that the movement is supposed to have had. Rather, I
am referring to the way occupiers themselves talked to each other in formal situations and how they structured their conversations. In addition to describing these practices, I will also speculate about why they thought it necessary to keep their internal discussions within certain boundaries of propriety and consider some of the consequences of enforcing basic principles of communication. Not every Working Group adopted or employed these practices in precisely the same way, and other occupations developed their own codes of conduct, so what I will describe is more of an ethical template, one that was constantly being modified, than a hard and fast rulebook. Some of it will likely sound familiar depending on your acquaintance with consensus decision-making and anarchist thought (as a scholar of late sixteenth and early seventeenth-century English poetry, mine is actually pretty limited).

OWS as a whole met collectively in two, large, public gatherings: the General Assembly and the Spokes Council. The GA was open to absolutely anyone who had something to say (with the obvious strengths and weaknesses of that approach) and was meant to be a model for a leaderless, non-hierarchical, radically democratic model of decision-making. The Spokes Council was a more focused decision-making body that was implemented by the GA so as to give the various Working Groups, as the subdivisions of activist operations were called, a more structured setting in which to coordinate with one another. The GA, the Spokes Council, and the Working Groups themselves, when they held official meetings, all followed a very specific protocol or process (and this word, “process,” turned out to be one of the key words of the Occupy Wall Street movement for those of us who, for better or worse, attempted to wade into its more logistical aspects). The process was simply the agreed-upon procedure according to which meetings would be conducted. This entailed the selection of facilitators, whose role was to run meetings
efficiently while guaranteeing everyone’s right to participate; the use of a progressive stack, which is a method of ordering speakers on a given topic according to their perceived degree of privilege (more on this later); the substitution of silent hand signals for audible responses to speakers; and the use of a relatively complex and ever-changing alternative to voting called consensus decision-making, which I’ll try to briefly describe. In the version of consensus decision-making used at Occupy Wall Street, all formal proposals in any meeting required, after a lengthy discussion period, the unanimous consent of all present to be approved and adopted. Those who disagreed with a proposal could either allow it to pass anyway, since consent was not tantamount to endorsement (a fact that many of us often lost sight of), or, if they felt strongly enough, block it entirely. Blocking was meant to be a rare and serious event meant only for moral, ethical, or safety concerns that were so profound, the blocking individual or group was prepared to leave the movement entirely if the proposal in question passed. Of course, if you give people a tool, they are going to use it (the U.S. Senate’s bizarre rules on filibusters and cloture come to mind), and blocking did, in fact, become more commonplace than was ever intended. This brought about the amendment of the process to allow proposals to pass with at least 90% in favor in a straw poll but also raised the issue of what counted as a moral, ethical, or safety concern. Blockers were obligated to articulate their rationales, but not everyone would necessarily agree that the rationales were rational. This recurring situation eventually led to the proposed introduction of mechanisms for consensus decisions on the legitimacy of a block to a consensus decision. I can assure you that this is only funny when you aren’t living through it.

I don’t want to get much more into the fine details of the process than that, but suffice it to say, every step of consensus decision-making, though it looks simple enough on paper, ended
up accumulating at OWS at least as many adjustments and modifications, many of them quickly adopted, variably enforced, and soon forgotten. The confusion was such that even experienced facilitators had trouble keeping up with the current state of the process and newly arrived occupiers with much needed new energy often felt alienated by an opaque set of procedures that left them feeling frustrated rather than empowered, since it was genuinely difficult to figure out not only the appropriate time to speak in appropriate ways about specific topics but also, more importantly in my opinion, the most effective way of navigating this system in order to accomplish the activist goals that had putatively brought us all together in the first place.

Nevertheless, the mysterious, nebulous quality of the process seemed somehow appropriate to its function. Since OWS lacked a _de jure_ leadership cadre, the “process” itself became exalted into a kind of numinous authority of ultimate arbitration. The problem with that, naturally, is that people have to agree on what the process is in order for it to function and how to interpret its spirit and intent. As useful as the process often was for running meetings with some degree of fairness, efficiency, and consistency, it was therefore the site, as well, of much contestation and led to any number of meetings about the best way to run meetings. One of the Working Groups to which I belonged, the Facilitation Working Group, was, in fact, largely devoted to this purpose, and it was uncanny to me how much we came to resemble strict Constitutionalists in our servility to, as it were, the letter of the law. It’s worth pointing out that my experience with the process derives mostly from that group and does not necessarily reflect its impact on other Working Groups, the members of which could very likely have been operating in total, blissful ignorance of it for the entire duration of occupation. That real possibility notwithstanding, the Facilitation Working Group organized the GAs and the Spokes Councils and thereby set the tone
for how the process was implemented in general. For this reason, rightly or wrongly, the members of that group were often accused of being self-appointed leaders who manipulated the process and therefore the assemblies in order to advance their own agendas.

Despite its obfuscations and potential conflicts of interest, however, the whole point of the process was to safeguard OWS’s leaderless, horizontal, and progressive quality as much as possible. In that vein, there were several ideological underpinnings as important to the movement as the formalities of the process itself. Two elements in particular, the recognition of privilege and the belief in the occupation’s persistence, were deeply entwined in the ideology of Occupy Wall Street. On the one hand, there was the occupiers’ sincere desire to prevent OWS from simply replicating the race and class based hierarchies of society within its own midst. On the other was the expectation that although the occupation shared many of the characteristics of a one-off protest rally, it would nevertheless endure to become a lasting social movement and that, echoing Gandhi, it therefore had to be the change it wanted to see in the world.

So much emphasis was placed on the avoidance of what might be termed hierarchical forms of communication because many occupiers perceived our tacit assumptions and unchallenged biases as the ultimate source of the social inequality they had gathered to call attention to and that the movement as a whole was a pointless waste of effort if they failed to articulate a practical and meaningful alternative. It was certainly easy to mischaracterize OWS as some kind of anti-capitalist rabble of malcontents who merely hated or envied the rich. In my own experience, however, most occupiers felt the problem lay more in the realm of human relations as such—specifically in the way we talk to each other—than on the shoulders of specific malefactors. The problem, that is, wasn’t perceived to be the so-called 1% as people, though any number
of them might be responsible for any number of despicable deeds; it was the fact that the 1% came to exist at all and came to exist in a country purportedly committed to principles of equal, democratic participation that such an enormous wealth gap militates against. The premise of the non-hierarchical communication style employed at Occupy Wall Street is that inequality in wealth and income leads inexorably not only to inequality with regard to political discourse but a political discourse that is itself segregated according to race and class. The better educated can easily condescend from their assumed position of superior knowledge to those they regard as inferior even if they ostensibly share the same politics. And that’s if they deign to speak to them at all. Thanks in large part to the Internet, but in no small measure abetted by the demographic clustering and educational filtering of recent decades, it has become quite easy for people to self-select into groups whose constituents resemble themselves in ideology and life outcomes while ignoring everyone else as so much human background noise. One of the most salient qualities of OWS in my experience was the opportunity it provided everyone involved to not only meet and talk to people they might not otherwise have encountered but to engage with them in a political process that encouraged their collaboration on equal terms. With this sort of utopian image in mind, the organizers of the movement realized that we cannot help bringing our hierarchical attitudes with us, well-intentioned though we might be, and that at least some checks on behavior would be necessary if the genuinely horizontal and leaderless politics they aspired to implement had any chance of success: hence the idea of recognizing privilege.

“Recognizing privilege” was one of the most important concepts introduced into Occupy Wall Street’s formal proceedings. This typically meant recognizing the extent of your own privilege. You could be the most radically-credentialed of dyed-in-the-wool radicals, but if you pos-
essed life chances or advantages relative to other people in the movement, in any given meeting, or in society at large, advantages that made you feel especially comfortable dominating conversations and issuing authoritative opinions—essentially, if you were a white male—you were expected to be mindful of these intangible benefits, of your privilege, and “step back” from time to time so other people, those who identified as members of “traditionally marginalized communities” had a chance to contribute to conversations, lead group meetings, or spearhead decision making. It’s worth adding that stepping back was also expected of anyone, however they identified, who accrued more than their fair share of power, influence, or attention. This recognizing of privilege was so fundamental to the movement that it might be said to have formed the basis of its operational ethics, much more so than any stance toward the giant vampire squids of Wall Street.

One of the frequent criticisms of the idea, particularly as it was implemented in such notions as “progressive stack,” according to which women and the traditionally marginalized were given speaking priority over white males, was that privilege is more complicated than a mere reduction to gender or race. Gay men who happened to be white, for example, sometimes objected to being lumped in with all other white people since their experience of exclusion aligned them more with the marginalized. Others felt marginalized for personal reasons—that is, their life experiences, whatever they were, made them feel more like society’s victims than its masters, despite the color of their skin. And there were often class-oriented reasons why individuals might feel as though their experience of marginalization was equivalent to that of women or people of color. Sometimes, the entire premise was challenged, and not only by white men themselves. Apologists for meritocracy preferred a system of total equivalence, in which past inje-
tices did not factor in to an all-leveling dispensation in the present and in which the best ideas would naturally rise to the top. If OWS was going to succeed, they argued, it had to get past alienating and obstructionist identity politics. But the unexpected diversity of opinion was the norm for such an ideologically variegated group of people, not all of whom distilled their opinions from the New York Times editorial pages. I vividly recall one particularly unusual instance of a woman at a Spokes Council who declaimed quite insistently on behalf of the virtues and utility of aggressive male energy. Occasional misgivings notwithstanding, most people who came into the movement and felt initially put off by our punctilious procedures and not inconsiderable expectations for personal introspection eventually adopted them at least in part.

The consensus-driven process of OWS meetings, organized around the recognition of privilege, was actually well thought out even if its execution was hardly ever flawless. That said, the avoidance of leadership and the goal of total inclusivity eventually ran up against the realities of human behavior. The abstract principles fashioned by the more process-minded occupiers left many other OWS activists feeling cold, as if their right to be heard was being squelched for the sake of procedural minutiae. Even within the occupation camp itself, fissures developed between different “classes” of occupiers: the often lamented divide between the over-privileged organizers on the east side of the camp and the marginalized occupiers who were even marginalized within OWS itself on the west side. Given the open, inclusive nature of meetings, it was also very easy for anyone who so desired to disrupt them. Many GAs and Spokes Councils broke down when passions became inflamed beyond recovery by the perceived breaching of process. Since there were no mechanisms for removing disruptive people from meetings or from the movement—and it was a highly charged issue even whether there should have been—OWS as a
collective organization was faced with the unpleasant decision of having either to accept a permanent state of paralysis or else compromising its most fundamental principles by choosing to exclude individuals who refused to participate in good faith. I have never had so many conversations in my life about ethical dilemmas that had what felt like such immediate and important consequences. In the end, I never personally had to vote up or down on this particular issue. I didn’t even have to twinkle my fingers. But I was the facilitator of the Spokes Council at which it was finally decided to formally ban someone from the meetings of that body. This might not sound like much, and, ultimately, perhaps it wasn’t, but at the time, nothing felt more crucial to the future health of Occupy Wall Street than finally settling this issue. It was a long, loud, difficult, and painful evening for all concerned. By choosing to facilitate, I did not have to vote, but that very role put me on the side of the process, of the esoteric system of rules and procedures that were supposed to be used to protect people but could also be taken advantage of by those who designed or understood them well to reach outcomes they felt were desirable. And that is arguably what I did. I didn’t deviate from the process, our common code of conduct, in any way, but I enforced it so rigidly, the proposal to kick someone out of the Spokes Council went through. Many people were grateful for this, but I didn’t feel especially jubilant. I didn’t disagree with the necessity of the outcome, but I also felt the power that can accrue to even the best-intentioned when specialized languages and institutional structures start to emerge along with people who can wield expertise in policing them. The process itself afforded a kind of inertia: it seemed like getting things done, moving through agendas, and conducting our business was the number one priority, not giving people a chance to air their grievances and frustrations, however time-consuming and inefficient that might be. I still can’t say for certain which one of these priorities
is more important. But I do think the underlying postulate of Occupy Wall Street that I have been discussing remains valid: before we can reform our politics, we have to become more conscious of our language. We have to figure out a way to talk to one another unburdened by our culturally conditioned senses of privilege and hierarchy, even if OWS didn’t get a chance to figure it out itself.