

## **Strange Speech: Structures of Listening in Nuit Debout, Occupy, and 15M**

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Practices and techniques of listening were at the core of recent social movements that explicitly espoused horizontal direct democracy: 15M, Occupy Wall Street, and Nuit Debout. These movements sought to imagine nonhierarchical structures through which large groups of strangers could speak and listen to each other, considering seriously the coconstruction of communicative form and political values. Drawing on participant observation; 23 long-form interviews with social movement actors in Paris, Madrid, and New York City; and texts such as video documentation and “best practices” literature, this article performs a comparative analysis of internal assembly communications—particularly bodily mediated methods of transmitting and perceiving spoken language—and their relationships to deliberation and decision making. All of these movements struggled to reconcile the mandate to listen with the material and infrastructural challenges of autonomous public space. Nuit Debout’s strong commitment to accommodating those who could not comfortably participate in an occupation (day laborers, *sans-papiers*, disabled, etc.) caused its internal communication practices to differ in its attempts to conserve time and to prioritize translation.

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In order to enter into political exchange, it becomes necessary to invent the scene upon which spoken words may be audible, in which objects may be visible, and individuals themselves may be recognized.

—Rancière, *Dissenting Words* (Panagia & Rancière, 2000, p. 118)

Starting in late 2010, an upsurge of publicly sited social movements, broadly termed “the movements of the squares,” attempted to solve the problems of democratic deliberation, public speaking, and group listening. These questions of communicative processes were at the core of movements that explicitly espoused direct democracy as a form of prefigurative political praxis: 15M, Occupy Wall Street

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(OWS), and Nuit Debout.<sup>1</sup> These movements all sought to imagine nonhierarchical structures through which large groups of strangers could speak and listen to each other. The practices employed by these groups articulate attempts to make publics through listening, and to consider seriously the coconstruction of communicative *technics* and politics. Questions of timing, translation, permission, and inclusion arose in all of these movements, and were handled somewhat differently based on their infrastructural and technical resources, the constraints imposed by their respective states, and their own political principles.

This article performs a comparative analysis of internal assembly communication tactics—particularly methods of transmitting and perceiving the voice—within these three movements. More space is given to the practices within Nuit Debout to go into detail regarding this most recent movement, which has thus far received less attention in social movement studies than the others and which differed structurally in some important ways. I begin with a brief outline of some of the key movements of the squares taking place over the 2010–16 period. This is followed by literature reviews situating this article’s intervention in new social movements’ communications studies and in contemporary literature on political listening and sound studies. Drawing from interviews, participant observation, and secondary texts, I then describe each movement, in chronological order, with regards to its communication, listening, and deliberation practices. I conclude that Nuit Debout differed from 15M and OWS in its gestures toward a more inclusive and durable communications practice, and suggest that this study of the political and ethical values in these movements’ assembly communications is important in part because these protocols form the basis of emerging collaborative listening and decision-making algorithms.

### The Movements

The term *movements of the squares* has been used to describe an outbreak of public, outdoor protest movements taking place in—and often occupying—the public squares of major cities worldwide (Gunning & Zvi Baron, 2014; Gursozlu, 2015; Kioupkiolis & Katsambekis, 2014).<sup>2</sup> It is hard to say where the movements of the squares “began.” The Tunisian Revolution in December 2010 was followed shortly by the 2011 Egyptian Revolution, which began in January 2011 in Tahrir Square in Cairo, with an 18-day occupation of the square. A series of protests in Portugal starting on March 12, 2011, certainly inspired the 15M movement in Spain, which initiated a 25-day occupation of the Puerto del Sol square in Madrid on March 15, 2011, along with many other similar occupations throughout the country (Martin, 2011). On May 25, 2011 *Aganaktismeni* anti-austerity protestors occupied Syntagma Square in Athens, until they were evicted by the police on July 30, 2011. From September 17, 2011, to November 15, 2011, Occupy Wall Street protestors camped at Zuccotti Park in downtown Manhattan, and similar occupations soon took place throughout the world as part of the #OccupyEverywhere movement (Schneider, 2011). From May 28, 2013, until June 15, 2013, protestors occupied Taksim Gezi Park in Istanbul. From September 26, 2014, to December 15, 2014, protestors occupied streets and intersections throughout Hong Kong as part

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<sup>1</sup> Although these movements had branches in many cities, my fieldwork was conducted in Madrid, New York City, and Paris, and I take these sites as examples of the movements.

<sup>2</sup> Here, I briefly outline of some of the major movements of the squares, focusing on those that included occupations of public space as their form of protest (rather than only marches or demonstrations). Many other important movements are inevitably left out (2013 Brazilian protests, etc.).

of the "Umbrella Movement." Finally, the Nuit Debout movement spread throughout France, starting in Paris, where the movement held nightly assemblies in the Place République starting on March 31, 2016, and through the spring, tapering off into *vacances debout* by August 2016.

I here look specifically at 15M, OWS, and Nuit Debout, as these were the most prefigurative of the movements, concerned with internal practices as much as—or perhaps more than—external effects. Both 15M and Occupy arose in part out of mass frustration with government corruption and financial crises. Government support of risky investments by unregulated corporations was blamed for the 2009 mortgage crisis, leading to a rise in homelessness, foreclosures, unmanageable debts, job loss, and broad cuts in public funding. The movements responded to this frustration with state power and corporate greed by occupying public space and attempting to refashion a direct democracy therein.

Nuit Debout, coming some five years later, differed somewhat in its roots: Although its participants clearly articulated a similar feeling that neoliberal state power had failed them, the movement originated as a specific protest to the "*Loi travail*," a set of proposed labor law reforms, which weakened unions, reduced overtime pay, and made lay-offs easier. Introduced to French parliament in February 2016, some of these reforms were subsequently passed into law using Article 49.3 in the French Constitution, which allows the executive branch to bypass the legislative branch in times of crisis. Nuit Debout assembled in the midst of this process, reacting against the erosion of labor rights and democratic process, and expanding its critique to include "the labor law *and* its world" (Clement,<sup>3</sup> personal correspondence, December 18, 2016). As I discuss below, Nuit Debout differed from 15M and Occupy in the specificity of its origin and concerns, and perhaps because of this more focused redress of the state, had a slightly more pragmatic approach to its communicative and deliberative praxes, while still clearly characterizing itself as a prefigurative project.

Boggs (1977) uses the term *prefigurative politics* to describe a political movement or group that embodies "those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture, and human experience that are the ultimate goal" within its "ongoing practice" (p. 100). Therefore, the internal practices of prefigurative groups articulate their politics, and their internal struggles can be studied to better imagine how to refine these politics in more solidified future forms. To study the successes and failures of these prefigurative movements' communication and decision-making models is to study a testing ground for emerging forms of democratic communication. Boggs' concept of the prefigurative arose to address Marxist groups' battles against internally reiterating the structures against and within which they struggle. These difficulties remained true for the movements of the squares: The preexisting circumstances (political, infrastructural, material) within which these assemblies took place played a role in conditioning their access to resources such as architecture, time, and communication technologies, all of which influenced their politics of listening, deliberation processes, and techniques of communicating.

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<sup>3</sup> All names of personal correspondents are pseudonyms.

### **Mediated Publics: The Text, the Network, the Aggregation, the Assembly**

Warner (2002) has written that “a public is a relation among strangers” (p. 417), which is self-organized and “exists *by virtue of being addressed*” (p. 413, emphasis in original). Warner posits that shared concerns over shared ideas in a shared text create a discursive public, regardless of whether the readers ever meet. This concept of a discursive public has great resonance for prefigurative social movements, which took seriously their methods and practices of speech. The movements of the squares had a different relationship to space and time, however, making publics through the copresence of strangers and comrades and creating their conversations and addressing their concerns therein. This means that their modes of speech, and of listening, as essential to constituting public life, were structured instead around these conditions of being in the same (outdoor) space at the same time.

Since 2011, there has been an outpouring of scholarly work on these social movements, some of it written from the perspective of participant observation (Estalella & Corsín Jiménez, 2016; Gould-Wartofsky, 2015; *Les Temps Modernes*, 2016). Work on communications in the movements of the squares has largely, and justifiably, focused on the ways in which corporate networked platforms such as Facebook and Twitter were used to mobilize these movements (Barassi, 2015; Castells, 2012; Gerbaudo, 2017). My research here instead is predicated on a recognition that centralized and commercial online communications networks, although instrumental in publicizing these movements, ultimately failed them as tools for sustained, practiced, horizontal self-organization within the squares. Instead, this article is interested in the alternative, internal, often embodied strategies of communication and modes of deliberation these assemblies developed to better serve and structure their political values.

Castells (2012) asserts that “social movements exercise counterpower by constructing themselves in the first place through a process of autonomous communication, free from the control of those holding institutional power” (p. 9). He goes on to credit online social networking tools with providing such autonomous, horizontal zones for these movements to self-organize and to take on public space. Castells’ recognition of the desire for autonomous communication is important to my inquiry here, and Internet-based social networking tools certainly had a huge role in coalescing these social movements. I suggest, however, that true autonomy is more of an aspiration than an actuality under the conditions of advanced capitalism. The Internet, in particular, has proven to be a site of surveillance, control, and “flexible” neoliberal exploitation, feeding the “new spirit of capitalism” (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2007) at the same time as it also provides tools for organizing.

Although new social movements certainly have used online networks to mobilize, freeing them in some ways from reliance on mainstream broadcast media, the main goal of these communications was to constitute an assembled public, not a networked one. This is essential, in fact, to the concept of a public as being open to and constituted by “strangers.” Juris (2012) distinguishes between the logic of networks, which is defined by a form of collectivity based on affinity, in which everyone already has some knowledge of each other (or of each other’s others, as in Facebook’s “mutual friends”) and “a logic of aggregation,” which instead forms a public by the coming together of autonomous individuals. Such publics can form a movement, but the durability of their collective subjectivity is constantly at risk because of the ad hoc nature of their logic of assemblage. This article is interested in what Castells labels “the first place”—in the

allegedly free and autonomous spaces and times wherein these ad hoc, aggregate publics realize themselves and their values, through communicative practices. For movements such as Nuit Debout, which defined themselves as public and prefigurative, this place was the square.

As Juris (2012) and Kaun (2015) suggest, constituting an aggregated public in an outdoor square is easier said than done, and requires different tactics and tools than the network provides. These movements struggled to reconcile the mandate to accommodate a diversity of strangers, with the necessity of facilitating their conversations, thereby calling into question not only the procedures of assembly politics, but the relationships between material conditions, recognition, otherness, and listening techniques. The mandate to participate, through tireless outdoor public physical performance (speaking, listening, standing), in the very articulation of democratic process required free time, patience, and some measure of bodily resilience, resulting in the marginalization or alienation of many groups (parents, elderly, the undocumented, differently abled people, people working multiple jobs, etc.). Polletta (2014) argues that these procedural forms of participatory democracy, although time-consuming and frustrating, remain essential because, by being radically participatory and open, they provide an opening into political activity for those who are excluded from participation in institutional power. This article makes some attempts toward an analysis of the ways in which these forms of democratic discourse are subject to, and have struggled to overcome, the material and infrastructural struggles that make autonomy elusive and retrench this exclusion.

Goodwin and Jasper (2004) describe the field of social movement studies as “roughly divided between a dominant, structural approach that emphasizes economic resources, political structures, formal organizations, and social networks and a cultural or constructivist tradition, drawn partly from symbolic interactionism, which focuses on frames, identities, meanings and emotions” (p. vii). In studying the technical and structural means of making meanings, intersubjective connections, and ethical recognition within social movements, this research suggests that structural and infrastructural conditions are determined by political economic power and relate to our ability to construct meaning, feel community, and reimagine political structures. For Williams (1977), ideological power is actually drawn from processes of feeling that reassemble personhood. Williams goes on to explain that these “structures of feeling”—dynamic, lived, intersubjective habits of relating and emoting—are what truly govern our political and psychological possibilities. Power then operates by limiting and prescribing the ways that subjectivity and intersubjectivity are constructed. Rancière (2010) similarly speaks of “the distribution of the sensible,” an act of power that determines the terrain on which—and the access to the terrain on which—political subjects can perceive and communicate with each other. Deconstructing the distribution of the rights to speak and to hear is therefore essential, especially if one considers the possibility that such distribution is involved in more generalized apparatuses of population control.

### **Listening Publics**

Prefigurative social movements, such as Nuit Debout, attempted to “redistribute” the sensible by taking seriously the power structures allowed by their processes and technologies of listening, recognition, and self-governance. Couldry (2010) shows that the processes of giving voice, and attending to voices, are fundamental to the ethical project that allows for democracy. All humans have in common the ability,

need, and right to create their own narratives. Studying listening practices, then, participates in Couldry's project to "build an alternative view of politics" (p. 1) focused on the social cooperation required and enabled by process of voicing and attending to voice.

In these movements, the practice of direct democracy was realized by trying out modes of listening that did not expect to hear voices of political representatives, but rather listened so as to enact more distributed or rotating forms of narrative, discourse, and decision-making power.

Much of the recent work at the intersection of sound studies, aesthetics, and critical theory has focused less on political listening and more on the ways in which listening has the ability to form or articulate the listener's intentions. Barthes (1985) identifies three different ways of listening: indexical, symbolic, and psychoanalytic, which proceed from hearing for survival, to listening for meaning, to participating in interpersonal empathy. Chion (1994) and Schaeffer (2004) similarly attempt to describe different kinds of listening into categories based on the listener's attention to information, semantics, or pure acoustmatic qualities in the sounds. Nancy (2007) responds to Schaeffer, Barthes, Derrida, and others, positing the listening act as more than selective hearing; it is something that fashions the boundaries of self:

To be listening is thus to enter into tension and to be on the look out for a relation to self: not, it should be emphasized, a relationship to "me" (the supposedly given subject), or to the "self" of the other (the speaker, the musician, also supposedly given, with his subjectivity), but to a relationship in self, so to speak, as it forms a "self" or a "to itself" in general, as if something like that ever does reach the end of its formation. (p. 12)

Nancy's assertion here is fundamental to my thesis that listening is an act that seeks to condition and articulate subject positions. This ever-forming self, however, is only constituted in relation to others, becoming an ever-forming public in the cases of collective listening that I discuss below. A political subjectivity conditioned by listening provides a stark contrast to the isolating "commodified personalization" (Manzerolle, 2014) that seeks to construct contemporary subjects into highly specified, predicted, and consumerist "users" of smartphone apps and targeted online advertising. Sterne's (2012) work on the history of sound recording technologies tells the story of the attempt to fix the "subjectivity of listening" (p. 94) and the values such attempts might reveal. This article is concerned, similarly, with the ways in which listening techniques form political subjects and encode value, albeit through mainly analog and embodied methods.

In their work on political listening practices, O'Donnell, Lloyd, and Dreher (2009) assert that "listening is and should be an important theme in media and cultural studies because it helps to reframe media theory and practice in relation to questions of difference and inequality" (p. 423). That is, the study of listening, as opposed to speech alone, allows an emphasis on the ways in which the reception of speech (or other sounds) can frame intersubjective and political relations. Dreher (2009), in her work on "listening across difference," proposes that studying the political power of listening requires an understanding of the material, cultural, and political economic conditions that create the conditions of

listening. This reframes political listening as focused on understanding

networks of privilege and power and one's own location within them. This shift may also enable a politics of listening to avoid the pitfalls of identity in favour of a politics of interaction . . . from the perspective of listening. (p. 452)

### **A Note on Methods**

O'Donnell et al. (2009) recognize the difficulty in studying listening practices, which, unlike practices of visualization, are difficult to document: "Sound, in comparison to the visual, floats away, seems more entropic, and far more difficult to pin down. . . . To explore listening means to stand back from the past and engage temporality, to track the unspoken" (p. 426). To compare and contrast listening and deliberation practices in these three social movements, this article draws on qualitative methodologies including long-form interviews, participant observation, and close reads of various texts documenting communications and decision-making practices within these groups. These texts are "best practices" literature authored by social movements, such as diagrams describing hand signals and Web pages with advice for how to best listen and facilitate assemblies. I take these texts as codifications of listening practices for these movements, and they are analyzed the same way one might perform a close read of software code to understand the values in a technological design. To study the effects and affordances of these practices, I conducted 23 interviews, mostly in person, with social movement actors, each of which lasted between one and three hours. This article also draws on participant observation in OWS (and passingly in Nuit Debout) and video documentation of Nuit Debout to enrich the analysis.

### **15M: Active Listening and Weary Politics**

What happens when we start to think of politics not as a practice of speaking but of listening? You have to be patient; the main virtue is to listen and be patient.

—Ricardo, a participant in 15M and the Lavapiés neighborhood assembly (personal correspondence, January 11, 2016)

The 15M assemblies cultivated a practice of listening described in the movement's literature as "active listening" (Take the Square, 2012). This form of listening attempts to take on the other's perspective as one's own to fully understand "their underlying emotions, concerns and tensions" (Seeds for Change, n.d., para. 1). The time spent listening is not spent waiting to speak, but it is spent imaging the other and changing one's mind (Take the Square, 2011). According to the "Quick Guide" for Activities of Popular Assemblies, the fundamental condition necessary for this process of listening is time (Take the Square, 2011). Best practices literature and participants alike articulate inexorable connections between the idea of consensus, the concept of "collective intelligence," physical copresence, patience and "slow time," and the practice of "active listening."

In the words of Conor, a musician who was involved in 15M,

Listening became part of our vocabulary. Not so much listening to the soundscape, but “let’s listen to each other.” Spanish are not listeners. We are very loud. But this idea of listening, listening to the other, that was very different. Let everyone talk and listen to each in their time. (Personal correspondence, January 18, 2016)

Speakers and listeners, then, are expected to be paying attention to each other, constantly giving and getting feedback, switching roles, and evolving ideas. Governing is part of being rather than the work of experts. It is time-consuming, slow-moving, and cannot be delegated. Estalella and Corsín Jiménez (2016), in their scholarly work based on participant observation in Madrid’s Lavapiés neighborhood assembly, describe this political awareness as a preoccupation with caring for and attending to the city rather than an occupation. Attention is focused outward on listening to and responding to others, to receiving sensory and informative feedback from one’s neighbors and strangers.

Estalella and Corsín Jiménez (2016) coin the term *weary politics* to describe listening in the consensus-based popular assembly. Weary politics are characterized by process and sensuality: slowness, patient listening, and a bit of exhaustion. Weariness, then, is not an unfortunate side effect, but an ethical atmosphere:

The slowness [to which] we are referring is not a procedural phlegm or strategic delay, it is not the effect of elusive consensus or impossible agreements. The slowness to which we are referring is the result of making a place for new perspectives. (p. 159)

Certain sedimented values within the assembly were called into question by the presence of strangers, who did not yet share each others’ politics, and who were unfamiliar with the assembly procedure, often further slowing down the process and derailing ideology: “Being out of it, they turned out to be part of it. . . . The stranger becomes a source of the unexpected in the middle of a periodic repetition” (Estalella & Corsín Jiménez, 2016, p. 159). That is, the hope for political growth is in strangeness.

Paul, a member of a French left organization, called this hope a “benevolent attitude,” which is essential for consensus, and links it to sense of trust, even of the stranger:

Talking works as long as there is trust and pre-supposed shared principles. You have to still value others’ points of view and be willing to argue and listen. When the benevolent attitude disappears it is impossible to resolve anything with consensus. (Personal correspondence, December 19, 2015)

In the case of these public social movements, the “shared principles” took the form of listening and consensus processes. Take the Square (2012) lists seven “conditions for consensus,” which run the gamut from practical issues of time and space, administrative process, and shared dispositions: “common goal, commitment to reach consensus, trust and openness, sufficient time, clear process, active participation, and good facilitation” (para. 27).



The basic process outlined here involves six steps:

1. Introduce and clarify the issues
2. Explore the issue and look for ideas
3. Look for emerging proposals
4. Discuss, clarify and amend your proposal
5. Test for agreement—are there any blocks? Stand aside, reservations, agreement, consensus
6. Implement the decision (Take the Square, 2012, para. 41)

Each of these steps is carefully detailed in terms of procedure, questions to ask, the necessary infrastructural conditions, intersubjective attitudes, and roles participants must assume to administrate the process.

Marcos, a 15M participant and member of the Lavapiés neighborhood assembly's "methodology" working group, explained the connection between these rules and listening:

The methodology is *very* important. Prepare an agenda, times before every meeting. Facilitator is very important. You have to write the consensus. When this is very important, you prepare this—you have people who are about it. It is important to improve the ethics of listening. [The] methodology of horizontalism and the ethics of listening are mixed together. Without method you can't improve the process of listening. (Personal correspondence, January 21, 2016)

But the imperative of time creates its own hierarchy and can work against strangeness. As found in studies of other participatory direct democracy movements (Conway, 2013; Kaun, 2015; Petrick, 2017; Polletta, 2014), the lack of existing infrastructural and economic systems to support weary politics made it so that those who could participate in this political practice became those who had the luxury of time. In the words of one 15M participant, "It was very clear to me . . . well, if you have a lot of time to stay in the assembly, you are a more important person, your voice is stronger" (Carlos, personal correspondence, January 18, 2016). Kaun (2015) describes this in the Occupy Wall Street movement: "the dominant logic of current accelerated capitalism and the time consuming practices of participatory democracy came to stand in stark contrast to each other" (p. 237). The demands of showing up for various kinds of outside work (jobs, childcare, housework, etc.) made participation in weary politics difficult for many.

### **Occupy Wall Street: Unpermitted Speech and the People's Mic**

Occupy assemblies followed very similar consensus and listening practices to those of 15M. One remarkable difference was the use of the "People's Mic" at OWS, which arose because the movement was not granted an amplified sound permit by the police (Radovac, 2014, p. 34). Whereas amplified sound was allowed in the Puerto del Sol and Place République, New York City has laws restricting amplification, and requires applications for sound permits to be filled out at least five days in advance for a limited-time event (New York City Police Department, 2016), making the permitting process impossible for an

indefinite and continual occupation. These restrictions by the city provided the unique conditions for the adoption of the People's Mic, through which OWS ended up initiating its own permitting process.

It was remarkably simple: A speaker would call out "Mic check!" to grab the attention of the crowd. Those who heard her and were willing to listen to her would respond, "Mic check!" This process might repeat itself a few times until a critical mass of listeners had gathered to participate in the People's Mic. The speaker would then speak in short, simple sentences, only a phrase or two at a time. This would be repeated by everyone within earshot. That repetition would then be repeated by everyone behind those speakers, and so on, so that the speech continued to the far reaches of the crowd through a process of embodied resonance. In large groups (hundreds or thousands), this could take quite a few iterations, and facilitators would count the repetitions of the phrase with their fingers in the air to keep track of the sound's progress through the crowd, signaling to the speaker once it had finished so that she could continue on with her next phrase.

If the strength of one's speech constitutes the core of parliamentary politics, the act of listening is what constitutes assembly politics. In a consensus model, permission and legitimacy are granted not by "positive" means such as voting for representative voices, but by lack of dissent. Just as participation becomes affirmation, refusal gains power as a political and discursive gesture. In OWS, the People's Mic embodied this. The act of voicing was conflated with the act of listening, and the Occupiers' silence, or the refusal to repeat speech they found unendorsable, had the power to stop transmission. To listen, to take part in the assembly, one had to speak another's words. Being part of this practice was really the difference between being inside or outside "the occupation." In this respect, occupation became not just about territory—not just about taking up cartographic and spectacular space—but also about being within a collective sounding body.

In 15M and Nuit Debout, sharing of voice was achieved through the circulation of the amplification devices. In the case of the People's Mic, the voices of the assembly must be deployed for any single person to be heard. Instead of many being condensed into a representative voice, one voice was resonated through the many. This technique—distributed and mimetic rather than broadcast—relocated and enlivened the permitting process, collapsing and confusing the practice of listening, the act of speaking, and the technologies that make such actions possible. Deseriis (2014) theorizes this relocation of the transmission medium into the public body as "a return to an ancient notion of medium as a middle ground that is associated with the public and the common" (p. 1). In the OWS assembly, "the medium as middle itself is 'a component of the event' rather than a neutral channel that distributes preexisting representations and statements" (p. 43).

This technique can be understood as an extreme form of active listening, which advises listeners to repeat (or, rather, rephrase) in order to listen. Seeds for Change (n.d.) instructs listeners to "summarise and restate what's been said . . . show people that we've heard them properly, and understood their point by re-phrasing the core of what they said and offering it back to them" (para. 3). Whereas this document conceives of the listener and speaker as each having fixed and separate subjectivities, other manuals on consensus practices encourage participants to feel "part of a whole" and "blend into others" (Take the Square, 2011, para. 27) in their listening.

The People's Mic makes the assembly a group of resonating, attentive, sympathetically vibrating bodies. Participants report that it allows them to better understand and remember each other's words and fosters a strong sense of community (Anonymous Occupier, personal correspondence, November 15, 2011). Many participants in the People's Mic, myself included, often reported feeling swept up in the sounding-listening process and "losing themselves" (Anonymous Occupier 2, personal correspondence, November 15, 2011) and their sense of individual boundaries, suggesting that the dissolution of the listener-speaker dyad led to a dissolution of individual subjectivity. Participants noted the powerful physical and psychological dimensions of the People's Mic and the ways in which this dynamic opened up a space for a very different kind of listening, which, in its practice, realized an embodied, communicative instantiation of participatory democracy and a new means of constituting the commons, which was linked to a new kind of subjectivity.

Garces describes the People's Mic as a "deeply ascetic experience, to the extent that speaking up refashions oneself as part of the collective, mind, body, and soul" (as cited in Ruby, 2012, para. 11). This only works, however, when one understands and practices the gestures of refusal and dissent within the assembly that are absolutely necessary for the practice of participatory and deliberatory democracy. To participate in the discourse in a meaningful and thoughtful way, the importance of refusal and permission needed to be held in mind. One Occupier explained this problem with participatory listening:

The conundrum is that Occupy was intended to give everyone a voice, but participating in the People's Mic form has one chanting along with things they might find utterly offensive. . . . I remember participating in it, then stopping mid-phrase realizing that I was repeating some paranoid rant. (Brandon, personal correspondence, June 29, 2016)

Garces (2013) relates this practice to Critchley's (2012) concept of "infinitely demanding ethics," which ask continuous and vigilant engagement of the participant. One of the greatest challenges in honoring such infinite ethics reiterates itself in recurring questions of practicality: infrastructure, process, and, not insignificantly, time.

### **Nuit Debout: Up at Night (but Not All Night!)**

Despite its oblique reference to pulling an all-nighter, Nuit Debout eschewed weary politics to some extent, and as such, listening was less "active" and less codified, and speech and deliberation were more formal. Nuit Debout's most fundamental difference from 15M and Occupy was that it was not an occupation. An occupation differs from a temporary sit-in or a protest march, as it reconfigures the act of protest from a moment of dissent to a semipermanent proposal for an alternative public sphere: perhaps from critical to creative. Nuit Debout attempted to straddle the worlds of occupation and protest, experimenting with internal freedom while negotiating with the reality of external structures and superstructures. The most recent of these movements (so far), and, significantly, the longest lasting, Nuit Debout found a middle ground between the traditional and adored French *manif*,<sup>4</sup> in which people walk

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<sup>4</sup> A *manif* (short for *manifestation*) is a protest march, usually permitted.

together through public space,<sup>5</sup> and a sit-in or occupation, in which people make indefinite claims to a space and refuse to move.

Nuit Debout's name, meaning "stand up/rise up at night" or "night on our feet," articulated the movement's situation in between these two approaches with regard to space and time: "Debouistes" assembled in a public square every night after the traditional workday, for a set period of time, temporarily creating a semiautonomous political world, and then disbanding every night with the expiration of their nightly permits. This oscillation between the internal world of the assembly and the "outside world" of state and capital provided possibilities for the inclusion of those who could not comfortably participate in an occupation. The decision to meet during the evening hours, to assemble but not to occupy, made the movement more available to those who might be otherwise excluded for reasons of logistics and timing, such as day laborers, *sans-papiers*<sup>6</sup> who would not feel safe in an unpermitted assembly, parents of young children, and more. Pablo, who participated in both 15M and Nuit Debout, explained, "Nuit Debout assemblies were definitely shorter than 15M, and affordable for someone working and very busy" (personal correspondence, January 3, 2017).

This stance also kept one foot in reformist politics and one foot in the prefigurative project. It was perhaps the most outward facing of the three movements, founded to address a specific legislative action: The movement began as a protest against proposed labor law reforms and expanded into a broader critique of neoliberalism. In addition to negotiating permits from the city every day, Nuit Debout accepted infrastructural support from and—to some cautious extent—worked with labor unions.<sup>7</sup> One Debouiste explained that these affiliations and structural choices were also a result of having learned from the movements of 2011: "We had a lot of people from Occupy, 15M—a lot from 15M—who came and said: we need links with unions; make smaller groups to do decisions" (Clement, personal correspondence, December 18, 2016).

This evidenced itself in the communications conditions of the assembly: The unions provided a sound system, a screen, electricity, and a stage; the emphasis on labor rights caused the assembly to meet mainly from 6 to 8 p.m. (Charlie, personal correspondence, January 5, 2017), when day workers were free from their jobs, but before their dinner and bedtimes. As a result of this time constraint, speech within the assembly was amplified, timed, and limited to two- to three-minute segments. Proposals were authored and edited by smaller working groups, and decisions were taken by vote. One participant in Nuit Debout, who was also involved in the founding and facilitation of OWS, articulated this difference:

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<sup>5</sup> French *manifs* were described to me by a deputy at Paris City Hall as "the national sport" (Michel, personal correspondence, 2016). They are very common, hugely attended compared to U.S. protests, and considered a regular part of the political culture. In this way, they are sometimes looked on as less disruptive or challenging to the status quo.

<sup>6</sup> Literally "without papers," *sans-papiers* is the colloquial French term for undocumented migrants.

<sup>7</sup> OWS also accepted endorsement and in-kind donations from unions, but to a much lesser extent. In general, participants in all three of these movements expressed concerns about being co-opted by existing political groups (parties, unions, etc.), and therefore they were wary of collaboration with such groups.

Occupy was more about creating prefigurative conditions, actually doing direct democracy. Occupy was more inwardly focused. Nuit Debout was more outwardly focused and speaking to the state, to political power. They used amplified sound, they used visual aids, they wanted to be clear. Maybe that has some relationship to speaking to the state. (Sophie, personal correspondence, January 2, 2017)

Although Nuit Debout experimented with it occasionally, the People's Mic was slow and sometimes unclear, and there was no need for it: Permits were obtained and amplification equipment was provided. Although this made listening more efficient, it was less participatory. Sophie, who participated in both movements, explained that it "felt a little bit more passive to sit and have people talk at you (vs. the People's Mic). . . . It didn't have the same sense of the collective" (personal correspondence, January 2, 2017).

### ***Decision Process: "Sort of Consensus"***

As in Occupy and 15M, assemblies were moderated and agendas were organized using a stack. Two very important differences were the voting process and the timing of speech. Each speaker was allowed up to three minutes to state his or her position, and then responses were allowed, in the form of a point-counterpoint debate. Unlike Occupy and 15M, there was no progressive stack.<sup>8</sup> The discursive form provided by timed speech was expected to limit the dominance of any one person's voice. As compared with the informal, often spontaneous, and sometimes rambling speeches of Occupy, "people [in Nuit Debout] were more reticent and would prepare statements to read" (Sophie, personal correspondence, January 2, 2017). A separate part of the evening was designated as an untimed "open mic" "precisely in order to avoid people giving long speeches in the assembly that were not related to the discussion topic" (Alfredo, personal correspondence, January 5, 2017).

Instead of immediate deliberation toward consensus, Nuit Debout developed a two-phase proposal revision and voting system that took one week (see Figure 1). Proposals were introduced to the assembly at the beginning of the week during an "Assembly of Propositions." Such proposals, if accepted as worth consideration, underwent a "consultation workshop" with the smaller commissions within Nuit Debout over the course of the week. After this, during the general "Assembly of Decisions" at the end of the week, the proposal was re-presented with any amendments or critiques. The assembly then would vote on the proposal, and proposals with a four-fifths majority would pass (Farbiaz, 2016, pp. 158–159).

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<sup>8</sup> In the "progressive stack" form, people from demographics that are considered less-dominant voices (women, people of color, etc.) are bumped to the top of the "stack" of people waiting to speak.

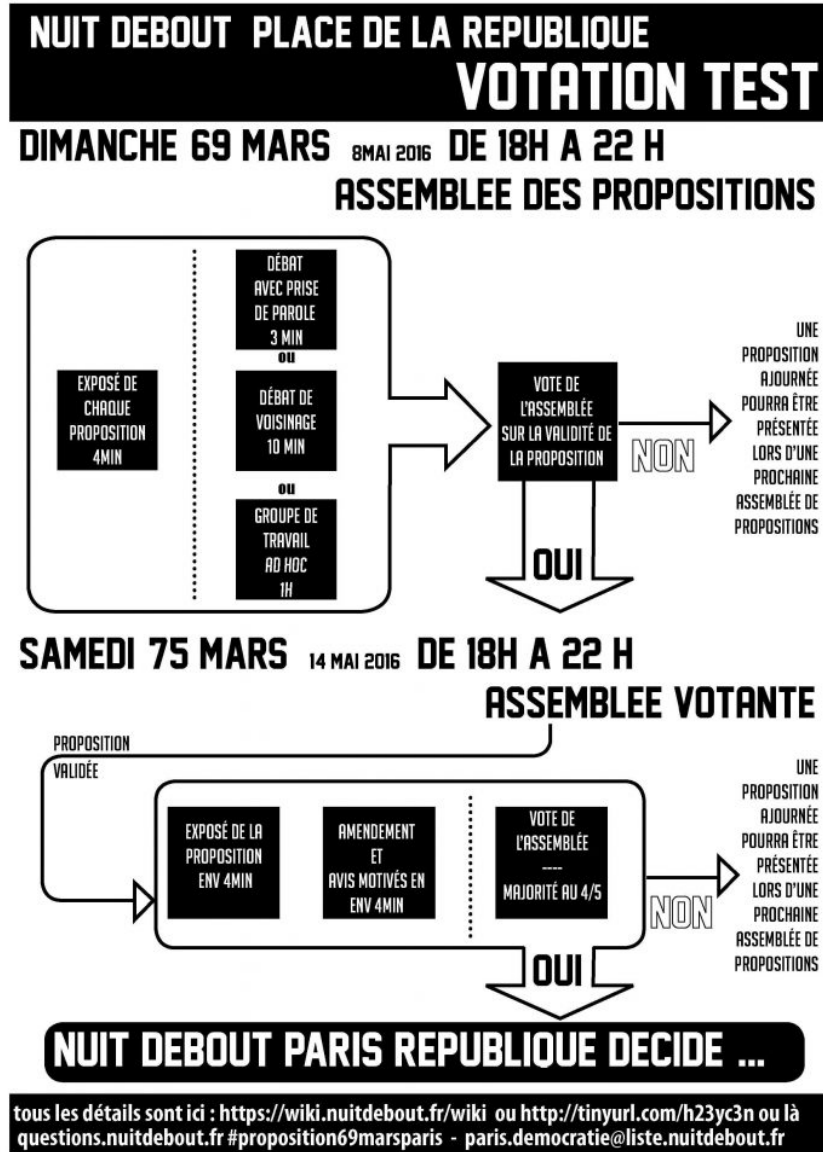


Figure 1. Nuit Debout's proposal for voting process (<https://nuitdebout.fr/blog/2016/05/03/processus-de-vote/>, 2016).

OWS and 15M both avoided majority voting and usually attempted to reach consensus by checking the response of the assembly through the use of hand gestures (detailed below), aiming for a sense of overall agreement and enthusiasm about a decision. The distinction between majority voting and consensus was not sharply drawn in this case because there was not a clear counting mechanism. Nuit Debout differed in that it originally attempted to take a count of votes by raised hands, but this proved difficult to read because of the size of the crowd. In the end, the movement used colored cards to indicate "for" or "against," so that it became visually clear which color dominated (Sophie, personal correspondence, January 2, 2017). Debouistes described this as "sort of consensus" (Sophie, personal correspondence, January 2, 2017).

### ***Participatory Listening: Hand Gestures***

Nuit Debout did employ the hand gestures that were also used in 15M and Occupy to indicate approval, disapproval, blockage, etc. (see Figures 2 and 3.) In Nuit Debout, however, they rarely served a decisional function, but were used more for giving general feedback to the speaker. One Debouiste explained that the hand gestures were used less for timing or structure, and more to give a general sense of the crowd's response to a subject: "We said this before, etc. etc., not interesting" (Clement, personal correspondence, December 18, 2016). The block, however, was used as an official structural part of the deliberative process. If a block was indicated, the blocker had to explain why he or she blocked, and justify the block. Later in the course of the movement, additional hand gestures were added to the traditional vocabulary to flag oppressive speech. In particular, the feminist working group introduced the "yoni mudra"<sup>9</sup> sign to "denounce statements and behaviors deemed sexist, biphobic, homophobic, lesbophobic, so that we can collectively learn to spot these behaviors, because . . . we all have to become better aware of these issues" (Giuliani & Holmes, forthcoming).

Accounts from participants describe the use of these hand gestures as almost ritualistic. Sophie explained, "people . . . had studied Occupy and 15M from a distance through videos, second hand accounts, etc. They were sort of mimicking the signs without really understanding the context or reasons" (personal correspondence, January 2, 2017). Another Debouiste described the "decision to speak with hands" as coming "from an invisible, implicit institution," linked to a "democratic tradition" that had unclear and somewhat cryptic origins to him (Andre, personal correspondence, December 23, 2016).

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<sup>9</sup> The "yoni mudra" sign is made by facing the palms inward and touching together the tips of the thumbs and the first fingers, to create a diamond shape. This symbol has been used by feminist groups worldwide to indicate solidarity.

# OCCUPY TOGETHER

## HAND SIGNALS

### SPEAKING



**WANT  
TO TALK**



**DIRECT  
RESPONSE**



**CLARIFY**



**POINT OF  
ORDER**

### FEELING



**AGREE**



**DONT  
AGREE**



**OPPOSE**



**BLOCK**

*Figure 2. Chart of hand gestures used in the Occupy movement (de Haas, 2011).*



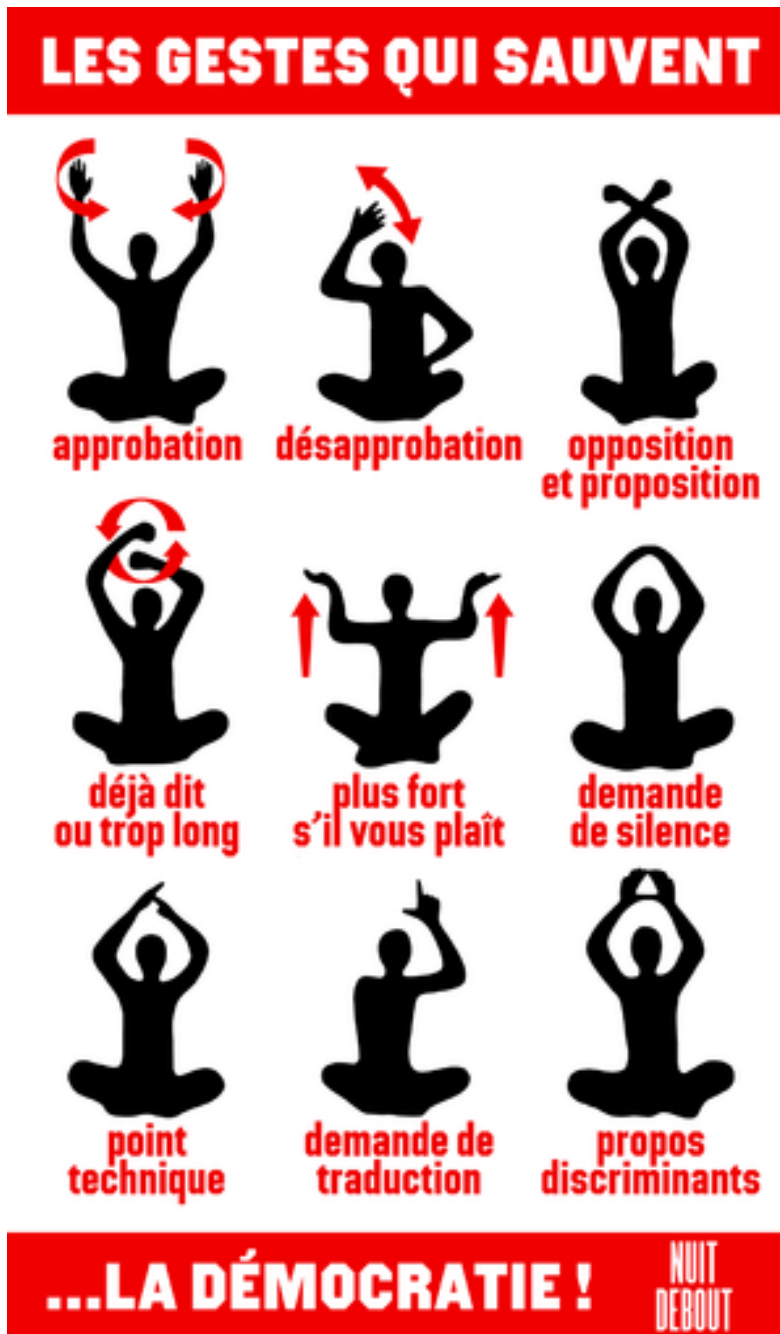


Figure 3. Chart of hand gestures used in the Nuit Debout movement (Marchal, 2016).

The hand gestures were taught at the beginning of every assembly, and there was a large board illustrating them at the front of the assembly, which “appeared one week after the creation of Nuit Debout.” A few weeks later, a new board appeared with “bigger and better drawings” (Clement, personal correspondence, December 18, 2016). Although the origin and appearance of this language seem somewhat obscure, the demystification of the language through the board was unique to Nuit Debout. These hand gestures have a gnostic quality in activist groups throughout the world, indicating one’s literacy in a certain movement or legacy of movements. Like other aspects of consensus process, the hand gestures have a history in directly democratic groups and actions. In particular, activists at the 1999 World Trade Organization protests in Seattle were trained to use many of the hand signals that later appeared in OWS and Nuit Debout, revealing a lineage from the alterglobalization movement. This connection has been articulated by participants and by social movement scholars alike (Conor, personal correspondence, January 18, 2016; Taylor, 2013).

### ***Listening Accessibility: Sign Language***

In addition to voting and signaling, hands were important for other kinds of listening: There was a comparatively strong commitment to sign-language translation in Nuit Debout. French Sign Language (LSF) was provided at the assemblies every Sunday, if not more frequently (see Figure 4). Both linguistic and infrastructural issues challenged these efforts: The hand signals used in the Nuit Debout movement had no meaning in LSF, in fact they were “quite funny for the deaf people because . . . they have completely different meanings in LSF” (Albert, personal correspondence, December 20, 2016). The fact of the assembly happening at night caused a problem for those who relied on sight to participate in discourse. An LSF translator explained that the assemblies, which were scheduled to start at 6, usually did not start until 6:30 or 7 p.m., and “usually at 9 we had to stop because there was no more light for our hands” (Albert, personal correspondence, December 20, 2016), leaving a window of two hours in which deaf people could participate.

One LSF translator explained:

They [deaf and hard-of-hearing] were both included and not. What is very important to understand: It was probably the first time in France for hearing people to express themselves in a public place for many, many days. It was the same for deaf people. It was the first time for many deaf people on the square to have discussions. For them to have discussions among them, it was already a first step for them to gather together and to speak to each other. They live in many different places. And I must say, as a hearing person. . . . Those who were in charge of the organization and the General Assembly always took care of them, asked them what they needed for their comm. They really tried to include them. As they did with others. (Albert, personal correspondence, December 20, 2016)



**Figure 4. Tactile signing during Nuit Debout (Anonymous Debouiste, 2016).**

### Concluding Thoughts

The problem of sunset draws attention to the reality that assembly practice is primarily situated and embodied, and certain material conditions are required for bodies to listen together. Goggin (2009) connects communication architectures and digital technologies that accommodate disability to an ethics of political listening:

Listening can play—indeed needs to play—a key role in transforming . . . disabling power relations, and grasping the cultural challenges of diversity. This entails a new ethics of listening . . . at the heart of which, in small and large cultural and political settings, is an embrace of people with disabilities, which implies a through reworking and reassembling of society. (p. 499)

The great—and paradoxical—challenge of direct democracy is not just to listen to the stranger, but to “reassemble society” to provide the material and infrastructural conditions for such listening to be sustained. In all three of these movements, the General Assemblies were eventually dissolved because of their slowness and ineffectualness. Decision making and discussions moved instead into smaller working

groups or neighborhood assemblies. One Debouiste expressed frustration with the General Assembly's fetishization of process over materialist politics: "It was very sad . . . to go there and see a bunch of crazy people so stuck in all those processes that were empty and depoliticized" (Alfredo, personal correspondence, January 5, 2017). And yet, others expressed a similar feeling of sadness at the disbanding of the assembly. One Debouiste told me a story of a salesman at a nearby store, who went to Nuit Debout after work every day. "He said, 'It makes me feel so good. You don't feel alone. People are listening to you, you always find an ear.' When Nuit Debout ended, a lot of people were so depressed" (Clement, personal correspondence, December 18, 2016).

Klein (quoted in Pinto, 2011) in her address to OWS urged the movement to do the "hard work of building structures and institutions that are sturdy enough to weather the storms ahead" (p. 501). Of these movements, Nuit Debout in particular sought to find techniques that held fast to the ethics of direct democracy, while providing some tentative gestures toward more inclusive and durable methodologies.

One of the most eager outcomes of these social movements has been a collection of online, participatory, digital tools for group deliberation and decision making, modeled very clearly after the more bodily mediated listening and consensus practices developed in "the squares," such as loomio, a collective decision-making application based on consensus processes, or the consul referenda algorithms, which are now being used by the city governments of Barcelona and Madrid. Lovink and Rossiter (2015) suggest that the network will be at the core of the architecture of a new form of the party. Although these social movements indeed used networks to gather themselves, and in some cases have been the forerunners for political parties such as Podemos, a close study of these prefigurative movements shows that their political praxis, once constituted, was based much more deeply on an aggregation of bodies and an ethics of listening. These assemblies' rather analog techniques of listening and decision making are revealing themselves as the communications architectures that have prefigured emerging algorithmic governance tools. Going forward, an important question will arise as to whether the embodied listening ethics described above, which were so essential to structuring the feelings and processes of direct democracy in these movements, can be preserved or translated into something remote, digital, and distributed.

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