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INTRODUCTION

Digesting the public sphere

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The word ‘public’ is a concept that conveys an understanding of a generalized other that seems to include the speaker as well as ‘all of us’ in a distant referencing to people who are paradoxically inclusive yet distantly positioned. Who, then, is the public? Is it all of us, or just some of us? Who, then, would be the ‘us’? In developing an understanding of who ‘we’ are, we are faced with a tension between belonging and exclusion. The notion of belonging may reinforce the status quo while normalizing patterns of thinking and acting. However, such a notion implies not belonging and speaks to those who are marginalized through changing venues of cultural, social, economic, or political positionalities. This process of creating ‘us’ and ‘them’ generates the power to define and delineate, resulting in an evolving friction inherent to a construction of the public even in its most generic framing. In this way, the commonality of who we are now, who we have been, and who we will be, is challenged in a variety of contextualized tensions (Anderson, 2005; Schweik, 2009; Valverde, 2003) that distinguish norms of understanding about spatiotemporal occupancy while reframing less obvious articulations of the public construed of by social, political, and legal discourses. Such tensions speak to an enlivened, fluid construction and contestation of everyday interaction that engenders the phenomenon of the public sphere.

The spatio-temporal existence of place creates atmospheres of being (Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, 2015) through commonplace activities. One such activity, the practice of walking, can characterize a public through the practice of mobility within a public sphere that allows for people to move on foot from place to place (Barr, 2016; De Certeau, 1984; Mohr & Hosen, forthcoming, 2017). When walking on sidewalks, one is sure to encounter strangers, or unknown members of the public, (Loukaitos-Sideris & Ehrenfeucht, 2009) who broaden the conceptualization of who the public might include, or who one overtly tries to avoid. These encounters, while perhaps uncomfortable, form the basis of a public sphere that is robust in its unavoidable inclusion of all types of people and perspectives (Kohn, 2004). This notion of the public sphere fosters a unique notion of formal regulation and social governance (Jacobs, 1961; Valverde, 2012) that may be visible through the spatial aspects that limit occupancy, such as walls (Jones, 2012), lines (Brigham, 2009b; Marusek, 2012), or sight (Obasogie, 2014). Through these jurisdictional frameworks, there are multiple ways that publics in public spheres construct narratives about power amidst materialized practices of spatiality. De Certeau (1984, pp. 29–30) calls our attention to ‘the modalities of action, to the formalities of practices’
as distinguished by ‘the types of operations and the role of spaces.’ Dvora Yanow (2014, p. 369) notes ‘spaces are so much around us that they seem to recede into the taken-for-granted backdrop of cognition’ as ‘so much of our comprehension of and response to built space and other artifacts is tacit knowledge.’ The public sphere is, as Yanow (2014) and De Certeau (1984) suggest, a space that operates through routinized consumption of a generalizable public with ensuing tacit understandings thereof. It is this knowledge that generates and sustains a public sphere by providing an epistemological foundation for the ontological and phenomenological digestion of power and place.

Take for example, the knowledge construction that happens with airplane seats and the perpetuated exclusion of fat bodies as examined by Joyce Huff (2009). Huff (2009, p. 184) critiques the universalizing discourse of a standard body size that transpires ‘when the public sphere is designed in manner that excludes certain members of that public.’ For Huff, inclusion in the public sphere happens through seating designed to fit corporate profits rather than expanding waistlines. In this way, notions of a generalizable public, even in their expected body size, can be critiqued according to accompanying spatial implementations and implications that speak to an under-examined perpetuation of the status quo. Spatially, the public sphere transpires through community engagement (Merry, 2000; Putnam, 2000), alignment with the past (Bacchilega, 2007; Dovey, 1999; Levinson, 1998), political resistance (Scott, 1998), and cultural parameters set for belonging (Davila, 1997; Valverde, 2003). Often these frameworks bring attention to the marginalization of groups within the larger social spectrum. However, the reduction of the public sphere to qualified participation sets alarming guidelines for belonging and may in fact further mindsets of exclusion (Anderson, 2005; Blomley, 2011; Schweik, 2009). In line with Lefebvre’s attention to spatial production and the exploitation of what lies within, Delaney’s ‘pragmatics of world-making’ calls attention to the architecture of the public sphere as a site of power through which occupants challenge normalizing frameworks and consequentially, reconstruct ways of knowing (Delaney, 2010; Lefebvre, 1991). In such quotidian environments as the airplane, but expanding even into the political realm, the public has a hand in both creating and rejecting the public sphere in which to dwell.

In another example, Nicholas Blomey’s work on sidewalk governance calls attention to the circulation of pedestrian traffic and the subsequent condemnation by urban municipalities of stationary interruptions. In his work on pedestrianism, Blomley (2011) critiques a regulatory framework of public space that is premised upon the aesthetically-driven enforced forward movement of walking. Such interruptions of walking may include the homeless who sit or lay down or protestors with signage that obstructs the oblivion of people in motion. Using a social justice framework, Blomley’s critique of how public space has historically developed into contemporary banality and joins the work of others with similar projects (Jacobs, 1961; Loukaitos-Sideris & Ehrenfeucht, 2009; Mohr & Hosen, forthcoming, 2017; Valverde, 2012). Sidewalks epitomize a public space in which the construction of who the public is, and who the character of the public should be, is challenged for its normative complacency. Similar to the critique of Huff, the public sphere can be manipulated by those who design its architecture and encourage an uncritical examination of its inhabitation.

As in airplanes and on sidewalks, the public sphere is created and re-created in contiguous motion with fleeting interactions found in everyday life. This is what can be referred to as ‘digesting the public sphere’. Simply put, digestion is the breakdown of something
that is consumed. Biologically, this process results in multiple byproducts that provide the physiological body with energy. Conceptually, when we break down the public sphere, multiple meanings of space, place, and identity animate understandings of otherwise routine, commonplace insignificance. Digesting the public sphere stimulates a contextu-

alization of the public in everyday situations to reveal the discursive tethering of power to place. In the routine spectrum of daily life, we digest the public sphere. Whether in the airplane, on the street, trolling the shopping centre, or riding on the bus, we engage with the empowered, the disempowered, the omitted, and the powerful. The examination of this inhabitation beckons a varied interpretive methodological framework and encourages insight into its multi-dimensional presentation and complex perspectivization located therein. A critique of the public sphere involves a complexity of approaches examining aspects of everyday practices pertaining to design, narrative, and expectations for (as well as rejections of) the status quo. Where ‘public’ happens, the public sphere can be visualized, experienced, and contested through its construction, ceremony, and ultimately, its digestion. Whether in buildings, institutions, or on the street, commonplace spaces and activities engender insight into the inclusivity as well as exclusivity of who the public is, where the public happens, and how the public generates the political. Through perceptions of inequality, metaphors for knowledge, critiques of consciousness, and/or practices of belonging characterize the variety of ways in which the conceptualization and contextualization of ‘the public’ contributes to ordinary life. Identity formations, narratives of community, and quotidian manifestations of the everyday materially and discursively transpire within the public sphere.

This Special Issue highlights methodological approaches to the interpretative layering of the public sphere. The contributors first met at the Interpretative Methods and Methodologies Pre-Conference Workshop of the Western Political Science Association (Las Vegas) in April 2015 to address the conceptualization of ‘public’ through applications found in the public sphere. Arising largely from the discipline of political science and drawing upon interdisciplinary interpretive methodological insight, we embarked upon this lively engagement with varied approaches to politically digesting the public sphere. As digestion is a process that takes time and energy and is unique to that which is consumed, the amount of time spent eating, and the individuality of the body’s digestive journeys, this group of scholars came together to eat, metaphorically speaking, about the ideas of the public and the public sphere. Our extensive conversation set the stage for subsequent digestion, as many ideas and avenues for inquiry were brought forth as fodder for future feasting. This Special Issue is the subsequent meal, and although not all workshop participants appear in this issue, we hope to honour their foundational conversation throughout our discussions.

Methods of exclusion are perpetually changing through frameworks of ability (Anderson, 2005; Schweik, 2009), perceptions of privilege (Marusek, 2005, 2012), and hierarchies of place (Barr, 2016; Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, 2015). As Ethel Tungohan describes in her paper, the public’s character becomes apparent through exclusionary expectations of belonging linked to national identity. In her example, nationalist discourses of xenophobia couch fears of foreigners as enemies of cultural, economic, and social avenues. In the examination of migrant experiences in Canada, Tungohan asserts that public discourses of belonging perpetuate a value system that juxtaposes “good migrants with ‘bad’ migrants.” This framework of immigration hinges on a public defined by and aligned
with Western values, which extends even to Facebook. For those immigrants not culturally aligned with the West through social, cultural, or political means, Tungohan argues that these perceptions of threat characterize and limit the Canadian public while sustaining a dichotomy about the nature of who can belong in terms of who can relate. Nationalist ideas about belonging and community are contrasted with associations of non-Western barbarism and potential invasion. In this application of the public sphere, the perpetuation of presumed community values is linked to ethnicity and country of origin. The stereotyping of these values as inherent and determinant (and therefore dangerous and unwelcome) in represents a notion of who the public is by illuminating those who are out of the loop.

Julie Moreau and Ashley Currier discuss the notion of multiple publics in overlapping public sphere. Set in South Africa and Namibia, Moreau and Currier provide intimate knowledge into the dynamics of belonging as found in the transnational sphere of counter-publics involved with sexual violence. Standpoint epistemology comes to the fore in their reflection and examination of how competing publics can shape the internal dynamics of social movement negotiation. Legitimacy takes many forms, and in this paper, is linked to public intervention that is both racialized and gendered through criteria for action and inclusion. As Moreau and Currier illustrate, public spheres overlap in ways that create new tensions, discussion, and dynamics that propel the public sphere forward despite internal disruption and chaos.

As multiple publics employ various techniques to either enliven or diminish the potentiality of public definition, a larger statement about power over place can be visualized. Take for example, Scott’s work on forest architecture (Scott, 1998). When forests are managed, trees are planted in lines and the chaos of wild-growing flora and fauna is eliminated. Hence, plants that are not purposively cultivated take on new meaning as weeds and pests. The organization of nature then takes on new meaning as mapping through governance compels the visual aesthetic of a German forest and disguises the traditional knowledge and usage of an old-growth forest with medicinal plants and herbs. Even in a forest, the public sphere is present as communities are defined through bureaucratic logic with outcomes that are intentional in their design and outcome. With this being said, the visible often hides the unwanted. The unwanted, as Rebecca Johnson’s work on the socio-legal exclusion of breastfeeding mothers and their children in pubs points out, results in the blurring of boundaries between the allowed and the undesirable (Johnson, 2005).

In both the forest and the pub, the public sphere is implicated in a tension over that which is presented and that which actually transpires. In Natasha Behl’s paper on a gendered public in India, the public criteria of belonging is critiqued as a duplicitously dichotomous un-reality in which the street environment stands in contrast to the state’s espoused political rhetoric. Behl articulates a notion of a gendered public in India in which women and men do not share the same public space nor the same level of participation in government despite the formal inclusion of women in the politics of government. The result of this divide is a cycle of gender-blindness. The example Behl draws upon is the shockingly violent gang rape of 2012 that occurred in the public space of a Delhi municipal bus. In Behl’s analysis, the publicness of the bus is representative of a public sphere that boasts of a system of openness and equality with regard to gender-based political inclusion, yet when the doors are shut and the bus is in motion, sexual and gender-based violence ravage the normative rhetoric of a democratic society.
Often discursive frameworks are distant from actualized experience. Let’s look at yet another example of a discordanic public sphere involving power and place. Western life is based in the automobile as the public sphere is vehicularized in its daily motion. To the extent that the public moves about in busses, cars, and bicycles, public space has become a commodity in which the act of walking has been colonized by an empire in which speed and forward motion dominate and propel governance. In these pavement-based public spheres, a vehicularized public operates anonymously and spontaneously in ways that are driven (literally) by normative expectations about mobility that preclude actual participation. Through automotive engagement, the qualifications for participation are framed through automobility (Marusek, 2012; Shoup, 2005; Tranter & Doyle, 2016). However, whether through walking or cycling, the public may be liberated from the defining paradigms found in the four wheels of a car or bus for the two wheels of a bicycle. For Pernilla Johansson and Stacey Liou, the public in Los Angeles, while normatively vehicular in nature with drivers and cars dominating the socio-cultural landscape, has an emancipatory element through mass bike events. These ‘mobility events’ empower a notion of the public characterized through the embodied practice of cycling. Cyclists in these events, and on streets typically mobbed by honking automobiles, seek to redefine the urban public sphere through the structural juxtaposition of human power to gasoline power. Whether as individual or en masse, the cyclists’ united desire to reshape the public sphere is a sociopolitical phenomenon replete with social divisions that continue to persist. Johansson and Liou assert that such a definition of public, not just in LA, but descriptive of Western society in general, should include those who travel by bike or by foot by acknowledging the lifestyle limitations for those who cannot participate.

Whether on foot, on the bike, or in the car, the public sphere operates locally, insofar as we are located where we are doing things that we already know. The ‘we’, of course, becomes the problematized variable on the social landscape that takes public discourse into account amidst the movement between constructed public spheres. Moreau and Currier have described a public that is determined by political commitment and invites the overlapping of multiple publics in sometimes problematic ways. This problem of paradox is central to many of these papers, and as Sarah Marusek and Robin Harper show, this paradox, as it happens with involvement of the state, leads to an imagined public that may in fact be construed by the state for economic gain or with hollow promises.

Through representation, the public is articulated. As Kathleen Tipler and Christina Chang describe in their paper, art can be a site of representation as images of ‘the people’ transpire in institutionally statist ways. Participatory art in which the people are envisaged as having a voice embraces a pluralist reconceptualization of who the public is through who the public can be seen as. What we see through such artistic renditions operates in an aesthetic manner which may often sculpt a particular public memory. Likewise, what we don’t see (Schweik, 2009) as well as how we know what we know without seeing it (Obasogie, 2014) both become ways of knowing premised upon sources of knowledge operationalized in public ways. In this way, representations of the public are constructed through art, as Tipler and Chang suggest, through mobility, as Behl and Johansson/Liou suggest, and through social access, as Tungohan and Moreau/Currier suggest. The public architecture of accessibility operates in naturalization ceremonies, as examined by Robin Harper’s paper, and through linguistic discourse, as in Sarah
Marusek’s paper. In each of these methods, the public comes to light in various ways that overlap and inform each other. The public is then a discourse that functions at a non-bureaucratic level, yet is informed through bureaucratic means that are often challenged through social critique. As Tipler and Chang suggest, through the art of social practice by artists, community self-identity and self-reflexivity are encouraged through the constructed forum of community gathering places.

Places where the public gather contributes to the identity of the public and larger discursive framework of the public sphere. In her paper, Robin Harper examines the U.S. naturalization ceremony as a site of public discourse in which the formalities of citizenship operate on two levels. The first level is through the language and formalities of the state that are articulated as naturalization oaths and the Pledge of Allegiance. The second level is through the reception (or more often incomplete reception) by the audience applying for citizenship, for many of whom, English is not their first language. The architecture of these ceremonies as well as the spaces in which they occur, invite closer examination into the underlying message of the state through practices of cultural indoctrination that effectively marginalize despite the rhetoric of inclusion. As Harper notes, the evanescence of the built environment in which naturalization ceremonies take place are themselves a momentary descriptor of citizenship practices that are private in nature yet take place in public spaces. Harper’s approach is similar to those of Tungohan and Behl insofar as the social elements of citizenship preclude formal doctrines of belonging. For Harper, the citizenship rite of naturalization found in such ceremonies is a show of state power that continues to marginalize the immigrant in fleeting, under-examined ways. Such is the demonstration of state power. The public sphere is often constructed through officially-sanctioned ceremony and rituals intended to create and sustain a particular understanding of the public. This understanding represents a performance by the state that may seek less to overtly marginalize and more to memorialize. Memorialization can be a complex tool for selecting particular aspects of public life and construing them in a purposive manner. In this way, the changing composition of a public over time can often reflect a type of public memory that can be resurrected by the state. Such is the case in Sarah Marusek’s paper that examines the use of the Hawaiian word and concept ‘aloha’ by state authorities in Hawai‘i. As a reminder of the historical identity of this fiftieth U.S. state, the incorporation of ‘aloha’ into touristic and governance discourses reminds the public in Hawai‘i of a re-enlivened indigenous heritage. However, the use by state rhetoric is paradoxical in affirming Hawai‘i more as an exoticized place in which the tourist economy brings in millions of dollars in annual revenue and less of its former status as an independent nation. The knowledge about ‘aloha’ characterizes multiple publics, from the visitor to the resident to the local government. Counter to its meaning, ‘aloha’ does not distinguish between these groups but instead invites them all through a cultural meaning of peace, love, and respect for one another. In a similar sense of public forum, the use of the Hawaiian language in tourist destinations is a form of state-sponsored branding for the State of Hawai‘i’s official identity. The paradox that this represents is a state that celebrates, yet also commodifies that historically marginalized indigenous culture. However, this paradox, evident though the state’s tourist gain, may be a boon to a language revitalization movement whose celebration is lived in everyday culture through the state, even apart from state-based promotional materials and platforms through language and officially sanctioned images for tourism.
If the public depicts norms and expectations of who belongs, then the public sphere could be considered as the place where this happens. While the place speaks of a locale, such a place could also pertain to the spatio-temporal notions of place (Braverman, 2013; Braverman, Blomley, Delaney, & Kedar, 2014) in which place is not tangible, but instead metaphysical in nature. Richard T. Ford’s speaks about jurisdiction as the relationship involving territory, social order, and the relationship between a public and the state (Ford, 2001). Through Ford, we can see that the public is defined as a set of social practices associated with jurisdiction. In this sense, jurisdictional relationships are spatial, local, and representative of the body politic. Furthermore, ‘jurisdictional boundaries help to promote and legitimate social injustice, illegitimate hierarchy and economic inequality’ (Ford, p. 213). Ford envisions boundaries that exist physically, but also politically and spatially. Spatiality defines the public through territorially assertions of power and control, but also through a more metaphysical sense of who is constructed in such political subjectivities. Spaces inform these subjectivities in everyday places in which formal institutions of government are more absent than present. In these places, the public is constructed in social, political, and cultural ways that uniquely characterize that public sphere and the experiences of visualizing and understanding what the public is according to where it is or how it happens. Such places of the everyday may include a bus (Behl), an airport (Marusek), a city street (Johannson and Liou), Facebook (Tungohan), courtrooms (Harper), and community gathering spaces (Tipler and Chang; Moreau and Chang).

In his analysis of shopping malls, Kim Dovey examines the public realm through the viewpoint of a promenade. On the promenade, the public is collectively imagined while individualized through its participation. In the interior hallways of shopping malls, the lifestyle of the public is privatized in space yet enlivened through contact with strangers, as Kohn (2004) also might suggest. These places of pseudo-public space are commodified areas of superficial encounter that are achieved through consumerism and consumption. Ironically, these places are more often than not under private ownership and subject to differing jurisdictional purview than the promenades found on the urban sidewalk (Blomley, 2011). Public planning then relegates the stranger encounter, so crucial for public interactions (Kohn, 2004), to private areas in which monetary purchasing assumes the power to dictate. Multiple publics are associated with multiple shopping venues. In this way, the material discursiveness of the public sphere can be found in something as banal as shopping for a new coat. In fact, shopping malls are so culturally ingrained in Western life that public planning includes their placement and effect. As structural sites of power, the mall is a mythical construction of the public insofar as mall regulations keep out many folks and unwanted behaviors (such as loitering, skateboarding, and the like).

If we go further and consider the meaning of the built environment to the public sphere, we can consider Dvora Yanow’s analysis into the meaning of built spaces (Yanow, 2014). Yanow notes that ‘the study of space in social, political, organization, and cultural contexts is, then, a unique research site from a methodological perspective in that it combines both phenomenological and hermeneutic elements’ (Yanow, p. 370). Built spaces are reflective of a public that inhabits these places. Constitutively, the environment and its inhabitants mutually respond to one another as the role of the state in managing either the space or the public associated with that space attests. For Ford (2001), such jurisdiction arises from the social practices that define a locality. For Valverde (2003), such jurisdictional capacity
comes from the socially derivative, locally-respondent common knowledge in which the legal status quo is upheld and often affirmed in everyday situations. If the public sphere operates at behest of state-sanctioned platforms, then the state gets involved either to inform the public or to reinforce its own positioning of control. For Reece Jones, the state forces its hand through the erection of physical walls that keeps out some while keeping in others. In his work on border walls, Jones (2012) reveals that such walls become constitutive articulations of the meeting of social with political power. In this way, the state then becomes the public. However, the assertion of building walls may instead be empty political rhetoric that would alienate both the public as well as other states, as Trump’s proposed wall with Mexico has aptly shown.

Nonetheless, the built environment contributes greatly to the creation and sustenance of a public sphere. Take the public arena, for example. For some (Anderson, 2005), the sports arena is a site of public marginalization as the line of sight for disabled patrons is restricted by virtue of their seating arrangements. For others (Marusek, 2007), the sports arena marginalizes in a different, yet related way, through the public sacrifice of its disabled patrons. The idea of the mainstream is central to this collection of papers, as the mainstream is often an unchallenged normative classification for the status quo in which few of us actually truly belong. The status quo may in fact benefit governing structures of power that promote ideals for citizenship, as many of these papers explore in great detail. And rather than continuing the dichotomous framing of mainstream against marginalization, perhaps a more productive examination of what’s going on is to examine the public sphere. Through its perpetuations of the status quo as well as the built spaces in which such governing manifests, the public sphere invites cultural, social, and political discussions about normative assumptions held in a localized society. In re-envisioning the world in which we live, we might look to David Delaney’s nomospheric imaginations in which meaning-making takes place in seemingly unpolitical, non-quantifiable ways. Whether across the neighbour’s fence or lying down on the sidewalk, the nomosphere opens up possibilities for examining social space in conjunction with a reading of Lefebvre that suggests ‘it is always a question of multiple spaces and a matter of a multiplicity of ideologies’ (Delaney, 2010, p. 101).

As these papers demonstrate, spaces have significations that are vital in sculpting the public sphere (Kevelson, 1996). The distinction between formal and informal institutions and structures of government highlights the relationship of everyday spaces to the political and importantly compels critical thinking about the political to transcend such formalism. In this way, everyday ordinary spaces become keen sites of politics, law, and the contestation of social order within the public sphere (Brigham, 2009a; Dumm, 1999; Marusek, 2005; Merry, 2000; Valverde, 2003). Social order, as well as the public sphere, are constantly evolving in conjunction with the questions presented by this collection of papers as to how the public sphere is digested. Whether as spatial justice (Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, 2015), linguistic justice (Matsuda, 1991), or categorical injustice (Stone, 1984), ordinary landscapes (Dumm, 1999) present rich sites for further examination into how we are as a public, who we are as a public, and what is the relationship between the public and the political. Visualizing, understanding, and experiencing the public sphere invites closer examination into the layering of social life in places routinely inhabited. The architecture of public life is therefore a social construction in which spaces and places open up sites of contestation for an otherwise solidified normative flow.
Notes

1. Such as the political reality created by the sexist, xenophobic, racist, rhetoric of the populist buffoon, President-Elect Donald Trump.
2. Following the generous invitation of the previous year’s co-organizers, Betsy Super and Amy Cabrera Rasmussen, Natasha Behl and I co-organized the workshop, its theme, and its discussion with support from the Workshop’s founders, Dvora Yanow and Peregrine Schwartz-Shea. I would like to thank those attendees who sparked our initial conversation at the workshop in Las Vegas. As Guest Editor for this Special Issue, I would like to further acknowledge the energetic willingness of these seven authors in continuing the conversation through their papers. Collectively, we would like to express our appreciation to Ronan Paddison, Editor for Space and Polity, for his enthusiastic acceptance and continuing support of our collaborative project.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributor

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