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Religion in the Public Square

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7. A Rural Sustainable Farm as Public Sphere

A Place of Interfaith Action

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Abstract

The Asian Rural Institute (ARI), based in Tochigi, Japan, is a Christian-based nonprofit. The goal is to train people from around the world—particularly those from countries that have been negatively impacted by colonization—to grow their own food sustainably. I argue that at ARI, interfaith action cultivates public sphere dialogs through the nature and closeness of the work, the trust and (sometimes) affinity that develops, and the space for productive conflict. Interfaith action and dialog play a role in daily life at ARI by enabling it to function as what Catherine Squires (2022) calls a *satellite public sphere* in this rural place.

Keywords: rhetoric, interfaith action, satellite public sphere, dialog, rural space

Introduction

“Your parents, are they alive?”

“Do you like the American president?”

“What do you think of Christianity?”

“Why is the U.S. dollar worth more than the Indian rupee?”

“As an American, because you are American, do you feel like you are higher than everyone else?”

These are some of the questions I received while at the Asian Rural Institute (ARI). ARI is based in Tochigi, Japan and is a Christian-based nonprofit. The goal is to train people from around the world—particularly those from countries that have been negatively impacted by colonization—to grow their own food sustainably. They operate with three pillars in mind: foodlife, servant leadership, and community of learning. Although they are a Christian organization, they accept people of all faiths. The farm requires constant work: animals need to be fed; vegetables picked, planted, and sowed; bathrooms cleaned; walls repaired; food prepared; dishes washed. The list goes on and on. While some tasks do not lend themselves to conversation (e.g., designing a website, soliciting donations, or writing lectures), many do. They are physical, collective, and simple. We would often perform them in companionable silence or play a game like what-would-you-do, giving each other scenarios to see how others would react. It was not uncommon, though, for people to start deeper conversations like the ones I referenced above.

Interfaith action and dialog play a role in daily life at ARI. By interfaith dialog, I mean discussions about important topics where the participating parties come from different religious backgrounds and feel equally heard. Interfaith action is slightly different; Marymount University (n.d.) explains it as, “when a group of people of different beliefs do something together, such as plant a garden for those in need.” In this case, shared labor provides a productive context for meaningful conversations because it offers an opportunity to develop relationships with other people, gives people a common goal to work toward together, and offers an activity if people do not want to speak to one another. Although ARI is based in Japan, the community is comprised of people from all over the world. By having debates and discussions with one another, they can develop a wider understanding of the world. This kind of peacebuilding is not entirely the purpose of ARI, but the leadership knows it happens and encourages such dialog. Given its deep intercultural nature, ARI offers an interesting example of a diverse public sphere that emphasizes and expands key concepts of public sphere theory. Although ARI is not as open as a town hall or Reddit, it does operate as what Catherine Squires (2022) calls a satellite in that it is separate from the broader public sphere but engages with it primarily by considering its dominant issues. By living, working, and eating meals alongside someone else, people have an opportunity to gain a perspective that would otherwise remain unavailable, which is why I conceptualize ARI as a public sphere.

I argue that at ARI, interfaith action cultivates public sphere dialogs through the nature and closeness of the work, the trust and (sometimes) affinity that develops, and the space for productive conflict. In this essay, I will first explain how rhetorical critics conceptualize the public sphere. Next, I will give additional background about ARI and my methodology. Then, I unpack the themes of activity, affinity, and conflict using my own experiences as examples to illustrate these points. Finally, I discuss the contributions this project makes to public sphere

scholarship by conceiving of the public sphere as a rural place for discussions made possible through interfaith action.

Intercultural Public Spheres and Satellites

The public sphere refers to a place (physical or virtual) where people come to share and debate ideas. Scholars in communication studies often go back to Jürgen Habermas to ground research about the public sphere, detailing his conceptualization of the public sphere as space to discuss politics and current events (see, e.g., Hanada 2006; Murray 2016; Ncube and Tomaselli 2019; Platt and Majdik 2012). Debate in the public sphere is a necessary component of a functioning democracy; such discussions encourage productive ideas and ensure that many people participate in creating the laws of a country, state, or city (Murray 2016). Significantly, Habermas advances the idea that wherever people are discussing issues, the public sphere is created. In other words, it is the act of conversing—a behavioral practice—that constructs the public sphere rather than any features of the space apart of it being a “free and open public square” (Murray 2016, 462). Another arena of the public sphere is a metaphorical one: media coverage. While strongly regulated through gatekeepers such as editors, this version of the public sphere reinforces perceptions of what topics are appropriate and desirable for general discussion. Coverage can shape not only what people think about but also how they perceive important issues (see, e.g., Kenterelidou 2012; Darian-Smith 2014; Kejanlioğlu, Kubilay, and Ova 2012; Lee 2020; Mann 2015).

Many scholars have critiqued Habermas’s theory for its closed nature. As such, public sphere scholars have also pushed beyond the initial articulation of the theory to detail different cultural understandings of meeting places. For example, Lyton Ncube and Kyan G. Tomaselli contend that the Zimbabwean practices of *Dare* and *Dariro* provide democratic debate forums that are “consonant with the Habermasian public sphere” (2019, 37). Similarly, Tatsuro Hanada compares and contrasts the public sphere with the Japanese concept of *Kugai*, which shares the public sphere’s “connection with urbanization” even as it focused on the sacred and was based on the “absence of property ownership” (2006, 614). Scholars have also advanced the idea that multiple public spheres exist. For example, Squires advances the idea of three types of alternative public spheres that are not identity based: enclaves, counterpublics, and satellites. A satellite, which, “seeks separation from other publics for reasons other than oppressive relations but is involved in wider public discourses from time to time,” most closely describes the community at ARI (2022, 448). By “maintain[ing] a solid group identity,” that they distinguish from the surrounding Japanese culture, ARI positions themselves as independent and largely self-sufficient. As a small community, they are, “not wholly independent of other publics or the state, but by design their paths only overlap intermittently with others” (Squires 2022, 463). Two aspects of the public sphere that I will focus on are its connection with religion and its dependence on a space.

In a democratic society, ideally, all members would voice their opinions and argue for their perspectives. In making those arguments, though, how should citizens use and weigh religious support? In other words, what role should religion play in public square debates? This is a central question for communication studies scholars who offer a wide variety of positions. Perhaps one of the most important aspects of this is the consideration of evidence; Gary Selby asks, “Can justifications rooted in religious convictions not shared by the entire

citizenry ever play a legitimate role in public deliberation?” (2009, 317). For some, the answer is a resounding yes; they argue that religion provides a needed moral compass (see, e.g., Fârte 2015; Lee 2002; Little Liu 2016). As Gheorghe-Ilie Fârte contends, “Liberal democracy needs citizens with a strong sense of truth and with a sufficient will-power to follow both a personal ideal and a collective ideal. Religious beliefs provide people with just such a sense of truth and with the desire to have a certain kind of character” (2015, 146).

Others argue or imply that religious people should bracket their beliefs or translate their evidence into a rationale that would appeal to secular citizens as well. Carrie Ann Platt and Zoltan P. Majdik delineate how Habermas himself has changed his position over time and argue, “The key change in his argument hinges on the . . . idea of privacy” (2012, 140). In short, if religion is a private practice, it should not be offered any special consideration (or discrimination), and yet religious people are *citizens* and therefore should not have “to translate their positions, or to look for more universal, secular truths within specific religious claims” (Platt and Majdik 2012, 140). For Dave Tell, this dichotomy sets up a debate that has long passed its usefulness and instead advocates for a plurality based in Augustinian thinking. He writes (2007, 228):

In the debate over religious discourse in public life, then, the need of the hour is for a pluralist politics that does not depend on idealized notions of neutrality. And this is Augustine’s importance, his theology grounds plurality in the *ambiguity* of the political, rather than the *neutrality* of the political. And unlike neutrality, ambiguity requires no bracketing and no privatizing; it requires only a measure of epistemic humility.

The effort to step out of this debate results in a few other approaches to conceptualizing religion in the public sphere.

A question of the dominance of religion is one that scholars also investigate as it has consequences for how groups view themselves and others as they engage in the public sphere. Positing that religion in the public sphere dilutes one’s faith, Daniel Brown writes, “disclosure of one’s personal faith, so common in the North American public sphere, injures the Christian faith itself” (2010, 262). Some on the far-right—some Christians and other political groups—see themselves as part of a counterpublic, a marginalized group that must resist pressures from dominant groups (Reijven, Cho, Ross, and Dori-Hacohen 2020). On the other hand, Kristina M. Lee (2020) argues that theist-normativity—the dominant assumption that normalizes having a religion—is standard in the United States, and it is, in fact, atheists who are marginalized (both in terms of numbers and normative public speech) in the public sphere. With less dominant religions, inclusion in the public sphere has consequences for how people view those religions (e.g., positively or negatively, with more or less understanding) as well as if established authorities can maintain power unchallenged (see, e.g., Darian-Smith 2014; Eko and Putranto 2019; Kejanlioglu, Kubilay, and Ova 2012; Mann 2015).

ARI, as a religious organization, rarely debated the role of religion specifically or reflected about its place in the public sphere. Christianity was the backdrop for everyday life at ARI and meant that religion was always at least in the background of conversations, informing people’s opinions and perspectives even if not explicitly acknowledged. Instead, I argue that this space

gives people of different faiths a chance to engage in meaningful dialog with one another. The physical space, though, is key.

Public discussion must take place somewhere. In its initial conceptualization, the physical space was urban, upper-class, and open to men—places such as coffeehouses and government buildings. A trend that has continued, given that contemporary research demonstrates that “whiter, older, wealthier, and better educated” groups tend to participate more in the public sphere (Kirby Goidel, Freeman, Procopio, and Zewe 2008, 801). Although the public sphere encompasses many topics, some are relegated to other areas such as the technical sphere or personal sphere. By establishing different kinds of spheres, people can limit who is included in some discussions as well as which topics are considered suitable for public discussion.¹ The exclusivity of this space has been noted, and in light of that, virtual places have gained ground as potentially more open spaces (see, e.g., Calefato 2004; D’Haenens 2021; Stoltenberg 2021; Waldherr, Klinger, and Pfetsch 2021). People from anywhere can connect to conversations that would have once been closed to them.

Nevertheless, I am concerned with physical space for this project because the space where important conversations happened at ARI was physical. The material component of the public sphere is tied to bodies and space. For example, Patrizia Calefato (2004) emphasizes polyphony in her articulation of the public sphere by detailing how language and bodies interact with one another and space to create and dispute meaning. In other words, people are always speaking from a subject position that is influenced by their physical body and the physical space not only creates the conditions for conversation (i.e., people existing in the same place for long periods of time) but also can encourage conversation by building relationships through shared activities. As Billie Murray writes, “If we take seriously the role that public spheres have in the formation and dissemination of critical publicity, then the physical spaces that give rise to or constrain those practices have enormous consequences” (2016, 460). Whereas a virtual space must be visited intentionally (e.g., I am visiting a sub-Reddit to participate in this conversation), a physical context creates opportunities to participate in conversations that one has never considered and with people who could be both similar and different (rather than more similar).

The type of space and activities that construct that space are also important. Göran Sonesson argues, “The boulevard is a public place, as is, of course, the town square. Spatially, however, the boulevard is a place of passage, while the square is a meeting place. This should be taken quite literally, as we shall see: on the boulevard, itineraries run in parallel (at least partly), but on the square they tend to cross” (2014, 16). In this quote, Sonesson emphasizes a few qualities of a space that make it more likely to function as a public sphere: its openness (public versus private), purpose (“a place of passage” versus “a meeting place”), and how people move in the space (“in parallel” versus across one another). Murray’s findings reinforce this: “What is interesting about [the Occupy movement] is that it could only occur in the

¹ Relatedly, Anindita Das (2019) discusses how women in the Marwari community take space in the kitchen and some religious places, but they are limited in not only their power in society but also in their consideration as private rather than public spaces.

physical spaces of the movement and was, in fact, enabled by its location in a free and open public square” (2016, 462). Ncube and Tomaselli highlight the circular arrangement of people in a *Dare* and *Dariro* as a key feature that is not only mirrored in how village settlements are arranged but also “how Africans valued cyclic as opposed to linear communication” (2019, 42). One contribution that my analysis is poised to make is by demonstrating that shared activities—such as eating and working together—contribute to constructing a meaningful public sphere in which debates and questions about religion as well as a number of other subjects can come up in a more natural, less intense way.

Background about the Asian Rural Institute and My Methodology

The Asian Rural Institute (ARI) centers peacebuilding and sustainability and identifies Christianity at the heart of its mission. “The mission of the Asian Rural Institute is to build an environmentally healthy, just and peaceful world, in which each person can live to his or her fullest potential. This mission is rooted in the love of Jesus Christ” (ARI 2023a). To accomplish this, they focus their training program on three primary values: foodlife and ecology, peace and service, and community building. After morning exercises (the first time the community comes together each day) and before each meal, ARI prays as a community. They invite one person—their faith background does not matter—to pray aloud or silently. In this way, daily life is shaped by faith and purpose. But the organization is not interested in converting people to Christianity. They focus much more on developing rural leaders who can foster the common good in their home communities. Similar to a Jesuit university, ARI’s space is distinctly Christian—we meet everyday in the Oikos Chapel, for example—and yet the organization itself does not promote Christianity directly, evangelically. Instead, Christianity serves as an ideological foundation and people connect with one another in this space.

ARI is a sustainable farm and run by staff, participants, and volunteers from around the world. Staff primarily are permanent and recognized experts in their areas such as farming and cooking. They also comprise office, programming, and fund-raising staff. They come from primarily Japan and the U.S. with a few from countries like the Philippines, Ghana, and India when I was there. Participants, who are generally from countries negatively impacted by colonization like Sierra Leone, the Philippines, and Cameroon, are there to learn but are also recognized leaders in their home communities. Many work in their faith communities as pastors with congregations of their own while others work with agricultural organizations or other nonprofits. In addition to working in the fields and kitchen, they attend classes and field trips to develop as rural leaders and share their knowledge. Volunteers are there to support the staff and participants; they are generally from wealthier countries like Japan, Germany, and the U.S. They work in the fields, kitchen, and office and keep things going all winter when participants are not present. Both participants and volunteers pay for their housing and meals, but these costs are usually covered by a “sending body,” which is an organization that wants a leader in their community to be trained (in the case of participants) or wants to promote religion, peace, or sustainability (in the case of nonprofits that send volunteers). All participants and volunteers live, work, and eat on campus; some staff live adjacent to but not on campus and others live further away.

Their lives while at ARI are intensely focused on the organization. Many—but not all—staff live immediately adjacent to campus, which means their lives also revolve around the

daily rhythms and needs of the farm and community. The point is that through long hours on the farm, at the chapel, and in the dining hall, they develop close relationships. Additionally, commuting volunteers (those who do not live on campus) and members of the community come to campus for lunch, to buy farm products (e.g., rice, soy sauce, eggs, or carrot juice), and to do research on radiation in the area. Therefore, while not a public space like a street or town center, ARI has a robust community of people with widely different backgrounds who encounter one another regularly.

During my five months working as a commuting volunteer at the farm, I took field notes and interviewed 45 people. For the first six weeks, I ate all my meals in the community dining hall to establish relationships and learn about daily life at ARI, which meant that I was on campus for more than 12 hours a day. For my remaining time, I volunteered about 30 hours a week, eating lunch with the community. Even without eating breakfast and dinner there, I was still highly involved. Technically, I lived off campus, but I rented an apartment from ARI and was only about 25 feet from the boundary. Since it is an intense work environment, I got to know the community members in my work groups very well but did not know all the participants at a deep level. After work, people wanted to get in touch with family and friends living back at home or pursue other interests. It was common for most volunteers and participants to congregate in the dining hall and classroom since those are the only two places that have internet access. With the seasons, big shifts in how community members spent free time occurred. During the winter, people were tired and cold (most residential buildings in Japan do not have central heating); they tended to gather around the pot belly stove and read books or practice a hobby or instrument quietly. During the spring and summer, the community was larger because participants arrived in April. With their enthusiasm, the lengthening days, and a more widely distributed workload, everyone had higher energy after dinner. The dining hall and classroom would be bustling as many people worked on homework, practiced other languages with one another, and communicated online.

I adopted a participatory critical rhetoric approach, meaning that I gathered data *in situ* and analyzed these artifacts (fieldnotes and interview transcripts) from a rhetorical perspective. I occupied a privileged position insofar as I am white, a strong English speaker (English is the *lingua franca* of ARI), highly educated, and had a Fulbright grant to support my project. I was disadvantaged in terms of my farming experience, which allowed me to ask a lot of questions about processes and the ideologies supporting ARI's farming practices. I am also a woman who resists gender norms, for which I was occasionally mildly disciplined. For example, in walking to dinner from doing chores, a Liberian man told me I "walk[ed] like a man" and the other men around him laughed. I include this example to show the differences in ideologies that were constantly present at ARI and to give a sense of my role in this community. It is also important because it provides a sense of how my identity directly impacted the interactions I had with other people. Since this essay is concerned with the public sphere, I write about my experiences and observations of debates, discussions, and conversations during work and mealtimes on this sustainable farm. As a participant in this space, I was part of the discussions happening; I was in some ways shaping the character of this place. However, most of the examples I write about in this essay were generated by other people; only one time did I raise a topic of conversation. I recognized that I had a responsibility for being a good community member in this space and as such it would have been unnatural—and unethical—for me to

try to limit my interactions to observations. I am grappling with my role and responsibilities in this space and this essay reflects that. As the opening of this essay indicated, the topics of conversations are often prompted by the people having them. With people from almost 20 different countries and a variety of religions and socioeconomic backgrounds, the opportunity for discussion, conflict, and dialog was strong.

Public Sphere Dialog on a Rural Sustainable Farm

Some divisions can seem insurmountable when reading or listening to someone from a different perspective make their case. Distance and our own viewpoints make it difficult to imagine how we might speak civilly about important yet controversial topics. However, knowing that we must live and work daily with someone, we may be more likely to embrace ambiguity, as Tell described, in the plurality of ideologies and religions on ARI's campus. Rather than encouraging community members at ARI to remain neutral in their discussions, working together prompts people to accept ambiguity, to acknowledge that they may not have the answer to a problem and that others might see it in a different way. This is one goal of interfaith action nonprofits, giving people of different faiths an opportunity to work alongside one another in a low stakes environment to provide the context for discussion. ARI functions as an interfaith action nonprofit because their work model creates conditions that provide a space for dialog like one might find in the public sphere. ARI's guiding motto is "that we may live together," which manifests in their three pillars: foodlife, servant leadership, and community of learning (ARI 2023b). These three illustrate how dialog is conceptualized on ARI's campus. On their website, they explain, "We strive for a sustainable Foodlife [a term that centers the interconnectedness of food and life] in which the soil becomes richer as we produce food, and human relationships become more beautiful" (ARI 2023b). They extend this idea:

ARI is dedicated to help rural communities become self-determined and sustainable. Our Community of Learning is the training ground for members to examine the way forward. It is a dynamic and diverse setting in which we come together as people of different cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds. We dare to live together with these differences, vulnerability and conflicts while growing and sharing food.

Working together, sharing food, and learning even when there is conflict is part of the ARI experience. Conversations and dialogs are an expected part of life there, which makes it a great place to study interfaith action and the public sphere.

Although spaces that are informal, organizational, and semi-private are not typically theorized as public spheres, ARI provides a space of opportunity for dialogs that can shape larger discussion and experiences. Moreover, my argument might prompt a question of what distinguishes a general conversation from participation in the public sphere. To address this, I harken back to Habermas's conceptualization of the public sphere as manifesting through conversations in coffee shops and to Sorensson's notion of the town sphere as a meeting place. In these spaces, there is opportunity for conversation about important topics with friends and strangers, informed by different experiences. More than the physical space even (as research into virtual public spheres indicates), the *dialog* is what makes a public sphere. At ARI, dialog happens constantly but the conversations do not generate organization-wide

external action, which is why I contend that this rural sustainable farm functions as a satellite public sphere. Fostering dialog while working means that people are in close proximity for long periods of time, which itself can spark conversation. If the discussion slows down while people are working, it does not feel as awkward as U.S. Americans might feel under similar circumstances. Additionally, it gives people time to think. While the topics of conversation range from trivial to deep, several things prompt discussion: activity (and proximity by implication), affinity and trust, and conflict.

The Nature and Closeness of the Work

Physical work at ARI prompted discussion, which was not intended to generate social movements or policy changes but rather to get to know other people personally, pass the time, and develop our knowledge of different cultures and religions. Working on something in an office does not promote conversation in the same way because people must stop what they are doing to chat. They are typically concentrating on words if they are doing office work. Conversely, when working alongside one another in a task that (once you know how to do it) is not difficult and does not require thinking, the opportunity for conversation and curiosity is ripe, which creates the conditions of a public sphere. Examples of this would be sitting in a circle and putting seeds in small pots with soil, weeding a field, thinning potatoes, or collecting stones. Additionally, working together often means that people are near one another. Such close proximity made it possible to chat lightly or deeply without disturbing the work or while taking a break.

People formed relationships through light conversation while working. Asking about one's religious background was not taboo during this type of conversation but religious debate or conversations about convictions did not surface much in my presence. People sought information and common ground to help develop relationships. For example, one day while making lunch, the lead staff member of the kitchen asked a volunteer to play some music from his phone. She asked him to choose music that he would usually listen to because, as she put it, "we want to know you." As we worked and listened, he talked a little bit about why he liked a particular band, which prompted conversations about other bands people liked. Although this conversation stayed light, others that began with typical getting-acquainted questions sometimes ended with deep dialogs about heavy subjects. For example, while we raked cedar branches and transported them to a different part of the farm, a participant from Sierra Leone and I began talking about our families; I asked him if he had siblings and volunteered the same information. We then discussed discovering flaws in our parents as we got older, which transitioned into a conversation about responsibilities. We ended our half hour of work that day talking about the politics that led to a civil war in his home country and why he had to live in a refugee camp for a decade. I was somewhat shocked by the progression from familiar to unknown territory (for me). Additionally, although I learned much from this participant, we were not engaging in a debate of any kind. That was not always the case when working together prompted conversation.

While weeding onions one day, staff, participants, and volunteers had a mild debate about pesticides and different levels of government enforcement of labels like "organic." This deeper conversation, prompted by our task (weeding) and our proximity to one another, allowed us to share knowledge about different cultures and practices of sustainable farming. We were

coming from entirely different places in the world and there was an established hierarchy with staff still positioned as in charge and knowledgeable. Therefore, the debate was not heated, more probing and curious. However, there were times when spontaneous debate would erupt among participants and volunteers while working together. Often debates were about how to do a particular task, which makes sense since there are many ways to accomplish the same goal. The debates that are relevant for this paper are the ones about contentious issues.

Two examples of spontaneous debates that occurred while we were working were about global economics and child marriage. In the first instance, a participant from India asked a group of participants and volunteers why the U.S. dollar was worth more than the Indian rupee. As the person closest to him, I responded first saying that I was not an economist and did not know. Then everyone looked at a participant from the Philippines who was an economist. She offered an explanation (some countries have a lot of debt); some people asked questions or countered with their own perspectives (e.g., the U.S. has a lot of debt). We uncovered the inequities of borrowing the same amount of money in different countries in terms of how much someone owes later. And, yet the question remained: why is the dollar worth more? Her response surprised me when she defended the U.S. by saying that people here work hard to have a good economy. I found myself strongly wanting to argue with her because that answer seemed like the product of hegemony, but I also had to consider the interpersonal implications (e.g., What would be the result of my characterizing people from my own country as greedy and self-centered, as controlling and xenophobic?). I also plainly had to confront the limits of my own knowledge. I tried for a diplomatic response, agreeing that people in the U.S. work hard to be wealthy but added that people all over the world work hard and never get anything in return for their work. It is not a fair system. That effectively shut down the conversation unfortunately.

In the second example, some participants and I were waiting to start transplanting rice when they told me the story of how they first met. The Ghanaian man said that he first saw the Ugandan woman in an Ethiopian airport wearing a shirt that said, "End Child Marriage," and it made him so angry. Then, hours later, he saw her again in a Japanese airport where they had landed, and he thought, "Oh!" He realized that they were going to the same place and would be working together for the next nine months. During the course of a serious but congenial debate, it emerged that the Ghanaian man was planning to take a 15-year-old as his second wife (he was 35 at the time). Polygamy is illegal in Ghana, and it would be illegal to marry someone younger than 18; but those facts did not enter the debate. A Cameroonian woman tried joking with him, saying that she was going to tell his wife, but when he continued to bluster and defend himself, she simply asked him to stop. The debate came to an uneasy conclusion then and we began transplanting rice. Conversations such as this one both contributed to deeper relationships (e.g., for example between the Ugandan and Cameroonian women) but also laid the groundwork for potential future conflicts between people who disagreed. Pesticides, globalization, and child marriage are serious topics and discussing them allowed us to get to know the issues from a perspective that is unavailable in an ordinary news article. The function of work in this context was to not only accomplish a shared goal but also to facilitate discussions about controversial issues. In addition to aligning politically on contentious topics,

working toward a shared goal helps people bond and foster a sense of trust, which is the next conversational prompt.

The Trust and (Sometimes) Affinity that Develops

Trust is a constant presence at ARI; everyone must trust one another to prepare food correctly and safely, to hold the ladder while they paint, to pay attention to where their shovel is moving, and during countless interactions every day. Working next to a reliable person builds trust even if people do not like one another. Sometimes, though, personalities align, commonalities are found, and people develop an affinity for one another. These bonds encourage discussion among people who might never have encountered one another without the proximity and trust of working together. This category is distinct from the previous one because it describes conversations that happen by choice, which taking a break from work or eating dinner, for example. I contend that although sharing labor creates an opportunity for discussion, the conversational partners are somewhat restricted in their movements because they cannot leave the task they are supposed to be working on. To perform their work well, they need to continue even if they do not want to be in the conversation. Alternatively, the discussions in this category happen because people choose to sit next to each other at lunch or when they are not working. Many people consider the act of sharing food to be a productive avenue to have deep conversations. I agree but would add that people first must want to sit near each other. At ARI, most people do not choose who they work with, but they do choose who to be around when not working. Whereas the last category was predicated on sharing labor and space, this one is about sharing space by choice.

Before I describe these grounds for conversation, though, it is necessary to distinguish the kind of conversations on which I am focusing. Given the number of people who come to ARI with a religious (indeed a pastoral) background, it is not surprising that many people attempt to convert nonbelievers. However, to try to convert someone to one's own religion does not require a sense of trust or affinity. Anyone who has been approached on the street by a stranger can attest to this. In some cases, there is a previous relationship, but such an attempt may sour it, as multiple volunteers had discussed with me. Although these kinds of conversations may seem to have the same characteristics as those in the public sphere, their core purpose—to change someone's beliefs—is not the same. A conversion approach can be equally off-putting when it pertains to a political topic. However, those were not as common at ARI. Explaining one's own position or seeking common ground is not what I mean; I am referring specifically to efforts to evangelize. I did not observe any staff member encourage or discourage conversion conversations. It is not ARI's goal to convert people to Christianity, but staff members understand that deep and sometimes challenging conversations will happen at ARI.

Thinking back to the theoretical framework established above, it is important to emphasize the assumption of privacy as it relates to religion in public square research. Religion is a personal choice, which for some means it is a private practice. While others may want to share their faith and invite everyone to join them (making religion much more social), some will resist that and regard attempts to draw them in as disrespectful. Part of this conversation, like in the public sphere, could be a differing definition of evidence. Whereas one person might not need this (faith after all, is not about proof), some others will not accept another's faith as

evidence for the argument that they should change. At ARI, within the first few days of meeting someone who was not Christian, it was not uncommon for a believer to try to persuade someone that they should convert or engage in behaviors that align with conservative or traditional Christian ideals (e.g., get married). These are not the kinds of dialog that are based on respect and trust, but they still happen frequently at ARI especially when the participants arrive and meet volunteers for the first time. Many but not all participants are from strong Christian communities with evangelical goals. By contrast, many volunteers are not Christian. In Japan, for example, only 1.1% of the population is Christian (U.S. Department of State 2019). However, after that initial period, real dialogs can emerge based on trust of another person's self-determination and lack of a fear of rejection or finding a space to tackle a curiosity.

The difference between these two kinds of conversation was highlighted for me one day at lunch when I was sharing a table with several participants. After everyone else got up from the table, a Filipino participant slid over to sit closer to me, making it clear that he wanted to talk. Carefully, slowly, and starting a few different times, he asked me, "As an American, because you are American, do you feel like you are higher than everyone else?" Even now thinking about it, I can feel the blood draining from my face. I said, "No," and immediately began going over in my mind the work we had been doing together that day, that week. Feeling anxious and embarrassed, I was thinking about what I had said to people or not said. Nothing was coming to mind, and I waited to hear what had prompted this question, assuming it was an interpersonal conflict. However, the participant explained that in the Philippines, he encountered several U.S. American missionaries who seemed to assume that they knew more than the Filipinos they were trying to convert. I said that I understood why he might infer that many people from the U.S. were like that based on his experiences. I offered examples of my time teaching in Utah (where I frequently had Mormon missionaries in my classes) and how some returning missionaries seemed respectful and thoughtful while others were arrogant and entitled. As a Christian, he agreed that he had met a number of different missionaries and their personalities were often quite distinct. I thanked him for asking me about this, and I meant it. This is a hard question to ask someone directly, but it produced a good conversation about missionary work, its purpose, larger patterns of movement, and assumptions of knowledge. I appreciated that he trusted me enough to ask a difficult question so that we could discuss something that was bothering him.

When personalities align and people work together frequently, the public sphere is at its strongest. One day while making beds for transplanting, I initiated a conversation with a Cameroonian participant about culture and fitting in. This woman and I got along very well and felt comfortable enough with each other to share personal struggles and discuss deeper issues. Several months into my time at ARI, six U.S. college students arrived from three different universities to volunteer for between four and six weeks; two were Asian, two were white, one was Latino, and one was mixed Asian and white. They changed the dynamic of the place not only because they brought shared ways of speaking and cultural references but also because they only sat with one another at meals. In a room of about 75 people at lunch, those six only sat with each other for weeks. As someone familiar with *Why are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*, I understand that these students were seeking comfort in a new cultural space. But it bothered me, and I wondered if anyone else had noticed or cared. I

decided to ask my friend from Cameroon. Before I could even finish my question completely, she said, “Yes.” As a participant with three other people from her country at ARI, she could empathize with them. We talked about if I should say something or not. I was unsure because I was just another volunteer, but she felt strongly that I should. Our discussion revealed cultural norms about age and respect as well as norms around ARI. This would not have been possible without working together, developing not only trust for one another but also an affinity. It changed somewhat how I saw myself on the farm and challenged me to find a way to speak to these college students without being too face threatening or exercising my (nonexistent) authority in this situation. After I brought it up with them, some started sitting with other people and being more open. Topics like religion and national identity can leave people vulnerable because they invite critique and a change in perspective. Developing trust and affinity among work crews meant that even these sensitive topics could be broached in this satellite public sphere. But it did not mean that conflict was avoidable. As with any close community conflicts emerged, and they sometimes generated discussions.

The Space for Productive Conflict

As with any place in the public sphere, conflicts occur on ARI’s campus. Personality, ideology, religion, work style, homesickness, and culture shock can all contribute to conflicts in this space. Mine is not a suggestion that sharing labor and meals erases differences or makes people get along. Rather, it is an argument that working together creates the conditions for productive public sphere conversations. In the previous two themes, I argued that activity (proximity) and trust and affinity can prompt discussions, which aligns with the principles of interfaith action. However, conflict might seem antithetical to the goals of developing a more just world through dialog. If the conflicts are petty, personality clashes, they might not be productive. Those certainly exist on ARI’s campus; people are grumpy and have bad days or are not friends or intentionally annoy someone out of boredom. In previous sections, I used the term “debates” as a synonym for discussion and conversation; debates are not personal even though they can stem from ideological difference. When I use the term conflict however, I mean a situation where someone aims to exert and resist power or exercise grievances. Out of these aggressions, community members at ARI could still have productive discussions even if it was not among the people involved in the conflict. Although I heard about a few religious conflicts at ARI (e.g., the time a Muslim participant smashed an egg on a Christian’s head because the Christian gave the Muslim a birthday card), I did not observe any conflicts about religion directly. This section, then, is about the conflicts that are micro-examples of social issues. Public sphere discussions such as these echo the second-wave feminist notion that the personal is political, and my first example is about gender roles.

Gender was often the source of conflict for people at ARI because some people came from countries, cultures, and religions where women and men were strictly sex segregated with different roles and modes of work. Others came from places and ideologies where women and men do not have strict divisions, are seen as equals, and where, in fact, those two categories are insufficient descriptors. To return to the example I introduced when describing my method above—where I was told I walk like a man—I was not sure how to respond in the moment because I strongly wanted to be a good community member at ARI and wanted to be friendly and nonthreatening so that I could productively conduct research there. I followed the dress

code, respected the rules about the sex-segregated dorms, and even grew my hair long so that I would be read as a gender-conforming white woman from the U.S. Therefore, in that moment, I said simply that it was because of my work boots and continued walking to the dining hall. But I got the chance to indirectly establish that this way of gender disciplining me was not acceptable when I sat with the man who made the comment along with two female-identifying volunteers from Germany and Japan.

The two volunteers began discussing sexism in the form of questions about boyfriends, husbands, and children. Then the German volunteer said that a participant the year before had tried to degrade her by telling her three times that she looked fat. We each shared a few stories, laughed, and said how rude these men were. At that point, I brought up the Liberian man's comment directly, looked at him, and said nothing else. We laughed and got up to wash our dishes. Having this discussion at a meal with friends was a way of shaping the culture of ARI and my future interactions with the Liberian man. Even though the Liberian man and I never became friends, we still worked together often and would sit together at meals occasionally. That was not my last frustrating gender encountering, but after a few weeks of the new community forming at ARI gender equality was more the norm than not.

Rather than being part of the conflict, the second example I offer was of a conflict I observed as an outsider since my knowledge of the issue—caring for goats—was limited. ARI raises pigs, goats, and chickens on campus; three different staff members run these sections, making decisions about what and how much they are fed, what their enclosures are like, how much exercise they get, and how much meat and milk (in the case of goats) they produce. The goats struggled the year I was there; the mother goats lost weight, and although eight of the kids lived, another eight died by the end of March. There was a conflict between two staff members (both Japanese) and two volunteers (one U.S. American and one Japanese) about the vegetables that were in the fields. The volunteers wanted to harvest them and feed them to the goats, but the staff wanted to reserve them for the humans who worked at ARI. One of the staff members and one of the volunteers both had experience raising goats and had different approaches (e.g., how much to feed goats, how their pens should be constructed, how to milk female goats, how and when to castrate male goats, and how and when to trim their horns). Others could see how some approaches impacted the goats—most people knew when another kid died—and led to discussions about animal welfare, prioritizing human needs over other animals' needs. The discussions I was a part of were practical (solution-focused), philosophical (challenging and justifying animal hierarchies), and anthropological (the norms of keeping animals, animal husbandry historically and contemporarily). Rather than being a mere fact of life or tragedy, the death of the kids illuminated the conflict over the goats' care and prompted further discussions in the public sphere of this rural, sustainable farm.

A Satellite Outside an Urban Area

The Asian Rural Institute (ARI) offers a unique example of the public sphere. While it is not as open as a public square in an urban city where, in theory, many different people could encounter one another and have a debate that advances democracy, it is a space where people from all over the world can encounter one another on more equal footing and discuss important ideas in a low-pressure environment. Staff, participants, and volunteers can build trust while working alongside one another. Their close proximity can sometimes produce

affinity, which can lead to more open conversations, as well as conflict, which also spawns discussion. The topics at ARI were wide ranging, sometimes sparked by interactions (e.g., child marriage), but also by thoughts people had (e.g., the value of the U.S. dollar) or news events (e.g., Do you like the American president?). Equality is also important in this space. At ARI, sharing labor is a key value as is the idea that no one is above any certain job. When entering into conversations, participants will usually be eating the same food or shoveling the same burn pile. Although this does not and could never erase the inequalities between people, for the moment of the conversation at least, they are on more even ground. Moreover, even without being friends, we all learned about each other. Though informal conversations and formal presentations, we learned where people worked in their home country, what religion they were, who was part of their family, what food they liked to eat, and what their orientation toward work was. All of this made the discussions feel meaningful. As opposed to arguing with a faceless person on the internet, debating in person knowing that the person was a mother of a five-month-old who worked for a Christian charity in Cameroon brought insights about that person's perspective. All of this is to say a rural sustainable farm in this case functioned as not only a public sphere but one that fostered dialog and thoughtfulness instead of rewarding extreme reactions and hyperbolic language. This case study also makes a contribution to rhetorical theory about the public sphere.

Most conceptualizations of the space of the public sphere imagine either a physical place in an urban area or a virtual space that people can join from anywhere with an internet connection. My project shows how people in a rural area (and generally from rural areas) can engage in the public sphere on a rural farm together while sharing work. In these areas, it is not always possible to connect with a large group of people from an international context. Additionally, ARI is not tied to any commercial enterprise. Some rural communities use fast food restaurants or gas stations as congregation points to connect and discuss matters of the public sphere. By contrast, ARI is a Christian nonprofit that offers a space to a highly intercultural and international community. This unusual situation demonstrates the capacity of the public sphere to manifest where the conversations occur rather than in any specific physical place. Even more unusual, as a Christian organization, ARI illustrates that the public sphere can materialize in a place that has a pronounced ideological identity. Although ARI staff did not try to convert people to Christianity, prayer, songs, and reflections were a daily part of life. With this backdrop, many people approached topics carefully to show respect. Additionally, as a satellite of the public sphere, ARI offers an alternative to national media and stories that perpetuate cultural myths that prevent people from different cultures from connecting with one another.

Furthermore, it supports the idea that through shared work we can gain a deeper understanding of issues and the people impacted by them. Doing work together provides a neutral topic to return to if the conversation participants are out of things to say about an issue, if the discussion gets too heated, or if they want time to think. Conceptualizing the public sphere as part of meaningful yet low-language work—physical work, for example—provides a chance for different people to engage with one another. In other words, interfaith action is a forum for difficult conversations. ARI overtly references Christianity when articulating its identity. For example, when explaining servant leadership, the website states:

Leadership at ARI is based on the example of Jesus Christ. He served the sick, poor, and powerless with humility and love. As a servant leader, Jesus willingly took up the work to serve others, beginning with tasks that are most needed or most hated. He set an example of giving up one's own life so that others can live with dignity and justice. (ARI 2023b)

Yet, ARI makes efforts to include people from other faiths. While I was there, I heard everyone lead prayers including Muslims, Buddhists, and agnostics. Working alongside people with such different perspectives and life experiences reinforced the effectiveness of interfaith action by creating a public sphere that was open to all topics (annoying, challenging, trivial, and enlightening alike).

This could not be further from virtual public sphere places where people do not see each other, do not work toward a shared goal, and are rewarded for the most extreme positions. Additionally, this is unique from events specifically designed to foster dialog but do not give participants a chance to engage in work with one another and rather focus on round tables sometimes with food. While sharing food might be helpful, it does not operate the same way as working together because eating together does not require participants to share a goal or feel a sense of accomplishment. Additionally, ARI is unique in that people need to build relationships since they are going to be there for weeks, months, or years. Mealtimes take on a different meaning in these situations and create space to ask difficult questions that can prompt deep discussions about issues of concern in the public sphere.

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