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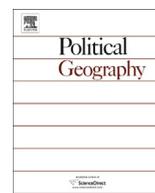
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## Social-spatial narrative: A framework to analyze the democratic opportunity of conflict



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### ABSTRACT

Conflicts and contention increasingly challenge the capacity to govern the city. Social conflicts are not only problematic but also reveal a sense of active citizenship and engagement. Agonistic theories argue that governments should embrace contention to improve democracy, but this notion has rarely been made tangible in a framework of analysis. This paper proposes the 'social-spatial narrative' (SSN) framework to analyze if, when, where, and how conflicts can create opportunities to strengthen urban democracy. The SSN framework analyzes the social geography and political significance of street-level encounters in processes of urban conflict. It unravels exactly how the micropolitics of citizenship interacts with policy practices at the street-level. Narratives reveal the perspectives of stakeholders, but in order to study how some actors establish power and others get excluded, I argue for a social-spatial approach to critical moments. Critical moments may create liminal moments to (re)negotiate meaning, relationships and repertoires of action. The potential of conflict lies in the dramaturgy of these critical moments, which are therefore pivotal vantage points for critical reflection on the repertoire of urban politics. The paper coalesces theories from conflict studies, geography, and public policy to examine conflict empirically through case studies. I illustrate the framework with a case study in Amsterdam that addresses when and where opportunities to engage plural voices in decision making have emerged, and how local officials have missed these opportunities.

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Cities are increasingly challenged to deal with local conflict and protest (Harvey, 2012; Massey, Allen, & Pile, 1999). Riots between youth and police in Paris in 2005 and London in 2011, the Occupy and Umbrella movements, and the recent Black Lives Matter demonstrations reveal emerging publics that use the urban landscape to stage grievances. Social movement theories provide insight into understanding the relationship between governments and protest movements (Goodwin, Jasper, & Polletta, 2009; Tilly & Tarrow, 2006). Urban conflicts, however, do not only take shape through large-scale protests; conflicts over policy and planning or community development also take shape through small-scale and informal forms of dissent. At the street level, citizens organize themselves informally and ad hoc. They form publics (Dewey, 1927), demand a voice in the public sphere (Arendt, 1998), and require urban governments to act as problem solvers. Informal tactics can shape 'spaces of freedom and possibility, alternatives to the official order, where ... new creative solutions to intractable

urban problems may emerge' (Wagenaar, 2014, p. 219).

However, the informal repertoires of small-scale and ad hoc urban conflicts are often overlooked as forms of political action or citizenship. When urban governments – often unintentionally – ignore these informal forms of political action, grievances tend to deepen, exclusion reifies, and tensions escalate. Whereas social movements receive much attention, there is a scarcity of literature that examines the significance of small-scale and ad hoc urban conflicts that emerge out of the interactions between the informal tactics of citizens or other stakeholders and the formal strategies of governments (Certeau, 1984).

In this paper, I provide a theoretical framework to study the process of local conflicts, to analyze the dynamics of inclusive and exclusive decision making, and finally to rethink how urban conflict can be an opportunity to strengthen democracy at the street level. Such theoretical framework demands a reconceptualization of both politics and citizenship. In political geography, micropolitics of citizenship has gained attention (Wills, 2012; Wood, 2012). Citizenship studies seek to broaden the notion of citizenship and enrich the study of politics with empirical analysis of how people

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perform 'everyday citizenship' (Holston & Appadurai, 1999; Isin, 2005). This understanding of citizenship blurs the boundaries between formal and informal, public and private, and macro- and micropolitics. Such a broad and inclusive conception of everyday citizenship is a helpful basis for studying citizenship and politics in the details of street-level interactions.

Citizenship has also gained attention in public policy literature through the emphasis on engaging active citizens in the process of decision making (Healey, 1997; Raco & Flint, 2001). In response to a so called 'crisis of democratic legitimacy' (Castiglione & Warren, 2006), local governments have adopted the deliberative approach to engaging active citizens in decision making. The deliberative model, however, has been widely criticized for its focus on consensus (Laclau, 1996; Mouffe, 2000; Ranciere, 1999). Scholars of the agonistic approach argue that deliberative models will always have exclusionary effects, as not all citizens are equally equipped to participate in deliberative procedures. The agonistic approach proposes that conflict itself can be an opportunity to strengthen democracy because plural values are essential to the political nature of society, and antagonism and contestation are necessary in an inclusive democracy (Mouffe, 2000, p. 101).

Although the philosophy of agonistic democracy has been widely acknowledged, there are very few in-depth reflections on the mechanisms of agonistic democracy in rapidly unfolding situations (Metzger, Allmendinger, & Oosterlynck, 2014; Verloo, 2017a). In this paper, I propose the 'social-spatial narrative' (SSN) framework, which helps us analyze if, where, when, and how the claim that conflict is a democratic opportunity can be substantiated, starting with the notion that disagreements and tension are at the heart of political praxis. Conflicts shake up the status quo, engage citizens on the basis of their own demands, and form groups to demand a voice in decision making (Coser, 1957). Episodes of conflicts – whether large or small – have the potential to shape a democratic public sphere that includes a variety of voices.

Local government provides an excellent context for understanding the opportunity of conflict, because it is embedded in the reality of the street level. The moments of interaction between policy makers and citizens 'constitute the relationship of citizens to the state ... [holding] the keys to a dimension of citizenship' (Lipsky, 1980, p. 4). When citizens organize against policymaking, the distance between residents and public professionals decreases. Street-level encounters allow us to observe in practice how citizens and policy professionals (re)negotiate the tension between 'the producers of space and the makers of place' (Taylor, 1999, p. 12). The street level is thus conceived of as a source of difference and disagreement, but which affords the less powerful ample opportunity to stake (and win) their claims (Amin & Thrift, 2002, p. 140). It provides a lens for observing how citizens, policy professionals, and other stakeholders negotiate the meaning of citizenship and politics (Vinzant & Crothers, 1998).

To identify performances of citizenship and politics at the street level, I defer to Arendt, who posits that people become political beings through their interactions in the public realm (Arendt, 1998: viii). For Arendt, excluding groups from that realm and ignoring political performances are the biggest threats to democracy (Arendt, 1998, p. 9). This conception of citizenship interprets politics as a chain of performances that contribute to the production of a public sphere and thereby the production of democracy. Politics should thus be studied as 'performed' or 'enacted' (Hajer, 2009, p. 54). Therefore, the SSN framework employs a dramaturgical approach to street-level encounters, in which I use three basic concepts: scripting, staging, and setting – I will return to these later.

An empirical approach to the study of opportunities afforded by conflict requires us to analyze the complex disagreement over

fundamental beliefs and values. Any framework that seeks to analyze emotions, beliefs, and values falls in the danger of reifying the complexity of the human experience. The SSN framework seeks to deal with this by approaching the conflict from two distinct ontologies: first, through narratives, which reveal the stories through which people make sense of their experience; and second, through observed actions, to reveal what people *do* rather than what they *say*. By combining narration and action, the SSN framework seeks to include the often contradictory and complex characteristics of human behavior in moments of rapid escalation.

Step one in an SSN analysis is to collect the ideographic storylines of actors that reveal their experience of conflict and the power dynamics at play. Step two is to identify the critical moments within these storylines when beliefs and values are expressed at the street level and clash. Critical moments theorize whether and how street-level encounters allow case actors to (re)negotiate meaning, relationships, and the repertoire of action. The analysis of critical moments explains how stakeholders perform in 'spaces of resistance' (Connor, 1989) that reveal the expression of politics by marginalized groups. Step three is the dramaturgical analysis of these critical moments in social and spatial terms. 'Social' to empirically analyze how stakeholders use language to position (Austin, 1962; Harré & Langehove, 1999) themselves during encounters, and 'spatial' because the framework helps to empirically analyze how spaces and places co-implicate practices of resistance and governance (Certeau, 1984; Lefebvre, 1991; Leitner, Sheppard, & Sziarto, 2008). Step four is to analyze how critical moments afford liminal opportunities (Turner, 1987a; Wood, 2012), which emerge between periods of stability and are marked by uncertainty. That uncertainty shapes spaces and moments in which everyday political subjectivities can be renegotiated (Wood, 2012). The framework thus offers a methodology to analyze liminal opportunities.

The SSN framework contributes to political geography in four ways. First, the framework reorients the analysis of politics to the street level, which is a unique perspective from which to study everyday politics performed in action (Wagenaar, 2014). Second, the framework allows for an analysis that makes observable the claim that conflict is democratic (Metzger et al., 2014) by introducing a rubric for analyzing liminality. Third, the dramaturgical approach to critical moments responds to the urgent demand to broaden our understanding of citizenship (Isin, 2005). Finally, the framework contributes to the emotional turn in the field of geography (Bondi, 2016; Davidson & Milligan, 2004) as it specifically seeks to include the experience and performance of emotions in encounters and places. The distinction between the 'social' and the 'spatial' has analytical relevance as it allows analyzing what Brown and Pickerill (2009) have explored as 'spaces of emotions in activism' and Leitner et al. (2008) have called the 'spatiality of contentious politics'. These authors integrate the temporal, the self, the interpersonal, and the space in activism and resistance. In a similar vein, the SSN framework combines these elements without privileging one. It does so by analyzing the temporal through identifying critical moments, the self via narratives that reveal conflicting beliefs and values, and the interpersonal and meaning of space by a dramaturgical analysis of encounters.

I explain the SSN framework in four steps in the following section and conclude by illustrating the framework through a case study of local conflict in Amsterdam.

## 1. Democracy through critical moments – a framework of analysis

The SSN framework analyzes social conflicts, in which "the parties are an aggregate of individuals, such as groups,

organizations, communities, and crowds, rather than single individuals” (Oberschall, 1978, p. 291). I treat conflicts as what Turner calls ‘social drama,’ which can be understood as an “objectively isolable sequence of social interactions of a conflictive, competitive or antagonistic type” (1987b: 33). Treating conflict as a social drama enables the development of an approach that crosscuts the levels of the individual, the social, and the political.

A SSN analysis is driven by the empirical details of a given process of conflict, whose scale, stakeholders, interests, and setting are unique. The framework is not bound to one cultural or institutional context – it can be applied to any process of conflict that happens in space and time and includes several moments of interaction among stakeholders that can be studied empirically. Although local conflicts often take place at the level of the neighborhood, I do not approach the neighborhood as an administrative unit defined on a map, but rather through the ‘inherently political and conflictual struggles between groups over land use, ownership, planning, identity and purpose’ (Madden, 2014, p. 472). The neighborhood and the city are not the subject of my analysis, but rather the process of conflict itself is. Approaching the process as the unit of analysis allows for the boundaries to be drawn empirically: all stakeholders that participate in the sequence of events are included, and all the events that stakeholders identify as critical are analyzed.

The SSN framework is grounded in the experiences and practices of participants in urban conflict who creatively devise various tactics and strategies to influence the process of conflict without deep philosophical reflection. Therefore, I use empirical practices as a pragmatic starting point to rethink which theories should be used, rendering SSN analyses reliant on the empirical details of case studies. The framework requires detailed data that reveal experiences and action throughout the process of conflict. I employ an ethnographic approach that collects two types of data: stories of case actors through narrative interviews (Georgakopoulou, 2006; Mishler, 1986) and descriptions of social interactions through participant observations and mental maps (Verloo, 2017b). The SSN framework provides a structure both to describe the process of conflict empirically, and to analyze the meaning of action and reaction through critical moments as they unfold in the process at the street level. I explain below the four steps of the SSN framework: narrative dynamics, defining critical moments, analyzing the dramaturgy of critical moments, and liminal opportunity.

### 1.1. Step 1: narrative dynamics

Like any social event, the social structure of power relations, as well as emotions, memories, beliefs and values shape the repertoire of action and the meaning people give to their own roles, identities, grievances and opportunities in a process of conflict. To capture this complexity, I combine narrative and action-based approaches. In the narrative approach, the data used to (re)construe the perspective of a stakeholders comes directly from ideographic storytelling by the case actors themselves. The narrative approach gains insight into how individuals make sense of the self, others, and the situations. In conflict studies, scholars study how people in violent conflict use narratives of grievance to rationalize certain responses (Unruh & Abdul-Jalil, 2014). During episodes of conflict people explain their intentions, experience, and positions through stories (Bruner, 2004). This makes collective storylines not only a source of contradiction and collective action, but also the place where new meaning can be shaped and where unexpected groups can be included (Cobb, 2003; Polletta, 1998). A narrative approach is not simply linear in nature (Ingold, 2007), it also shows how stakeholders give meaning to the present through memories and feelings that have developed in the past. In other words, narrating

about the present is an active emotional engagement with the past and the future.

Narratives are also used in the field of public policy to analyze public involvement (Hampton, 2009; Roe, 1994). Scholars of narrative policy analysis propose to account for conflicting perspectives through storylines but to be aware of “objectively weaker arguments” that result from unequal power relations (Roe, 1994, p. 266). They propose producing a “meta-narrative that turns this polarization in another story altogether” (Hampton, 2009). This proposition overestimates the ability of different storylines to occupy an equal position or to be merged into a single narrative. Consequently, in order to study how the relationship between stories changes over the course of conflict and to understand how one perspective becomes dominant, we need to examine the details and language of dominant stories further, as well as the stories expressed in everyday interactions or even symbolic actions.

Instead of a meta-narrative, the SSN includes conflicting storylines that allow us to reveal, relate, and analyze different perspectives of stakeholders. Perspectives and emotions are rendered through the language that is used in storytelling interviews. In reconstructing a storyline, the analyst should stay as close as possible to the language used by the stakeholders themselves. The challenge for developing a SSN analysis is not to consider some emotions or perspectives as good or others bad; neither should experiences be considered as true or false. Rather the purpose is to explore practices of citizenship and tumultuous politics from the direct narration of stakeholders who hold contentious perspectives.

In Fig. 1, we see the first step of an SSN framework that visually represents three storylines of case actors, the location and duration of which depends on the empirical details of the case. Each storyline represents a description of a sequence of events as experienced by a group of case actors. Although depicted separately, they storylines are related and reveal the power dynamics among case actors as their storylines change, intersect, contradict, and overlap.

The reconstruction of ideographic stories of case actors demands a distinction between two voices; the voice of case actors and the voice that analyzes the changing relationship among these subjective storylines. That distinction prompts a question about the difference between stories and narrative. I draw on the convention that defines stories as descriptions of a sequence of events in action, and narratives as expressions of these stories in an analytic representation (Porter Abbott, 2008, p. 19). This implies that the voice of case actors is revealed in stories that represent their experiences first hand. These are told in interviews *and* interactions at the street level (Bamberg, 2006). On the other hand, narratives are the analytic interpretations of storylines (Polkinghorne, 1987) that the researcher produces. These narratives reflect on the shifts in relationships, differences in meaning, and the dynamics that exist between the storylines.

That dynamic relationship between storylines can be grasped through a distinction between dominant and counter narratives. Stories become dominant when they refer to widely accepted interpretations of what is at stake (Bamberg, 2004). ‘Dominant narratives’ – or ‘master narratives’ – are understood as storylines that support hegemonic power and guide action and the understanding of events (Bamberg, 2004, p. 360). They produce power and have the capacity to exclude contradicting stories from the public sphere. Storylines that pick up elements of the master narrative are more likely to be accepted as ‘real’ or ‘true’. Dominant narratives therefore have higher ‘tellability’, which means they are more easily expressed among case actors and in the public debate (Norrick, 2005). Case actors who do not identify with the dominant narrative might produce opposing stories that scholars have called ‘counter narratives’. These are less accepted interpretations of what is at stake and are often told by marginalized groups (Talbot, 1996).

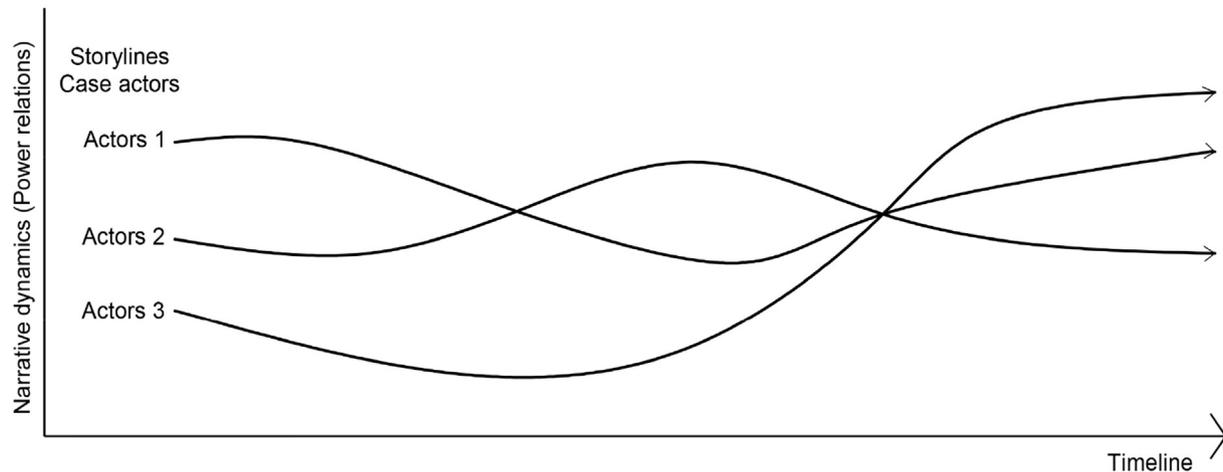


Fig. 1. Narrative dynamics.

These stories are more difficult to voice and thus have low 'tellability'. Analyses of conflict through the SSN framework seek to analyze the dominant and counter quality of storylines. The notion of tellability helps us understand which stories are expressed more easily in the public sphere and which stories tend to be excluded therefrom.

Dominant storylines shape power dynamics in three ways: 1) it defines the most accepted interpretation of what is at stake; 2) this dominant problem definition limits the appropriate repertoire of action; and 3) because it has higher tellability, it will be shared more easily at the street level, and the counter narrative will consequently have even lower tellability. The reconstruction of narrative dynamics forms the basis for studying how storylines – and consequently relationships and action repertoires – change or get disrupted during a process of conflict.

### 1.2. Step 2: define critical moments

Processes of conflict are characterized by the moments when case actors act to change the dominant narrative and sequence of events. Critical moments shape the process of action and reaction because they mark when and how people engage in negotiation. They can be orchestrated, for example, in a public meeting of a participatory process, but they can also happen unexpectedly – for example, when a civil servant meets a demanding neighbor on the street. Critical moments may create three shifts in the process of conflict. First, by changing the meaning of current events, critical moments reinterpret the meaning of past and future events (Green & Wheeler, 2004; Leary, 2004). Second, new meaning in storylines also shifts the appropriate repertoire of action (Cobb, 2006, p. 148). And third, critical moments can change the dynamic relationship between actors. To understand how processes of conflict unfold, where escalation takes place, and how parties are included or excluded, we have to examine the interaction between case actors that defines critical moments.

Because critical moments take place on a timeline, they may seem to fixate on a linear approach. To address the unpredictability of conflicts and that time is not simply linear (Ingold, 2007), we must also include critical moments that happen outside the timeline that is established through the narratives of stakeholders. For example when new stakeholders emerge and organize an event, this event should be included in the analysis. In turn, the existing stakeholders should be asked to reflect on the meaning of that event in their storyline. Another rupture in time can emerge when a

group reflects on an event that was critical to them, but happened before the conflict started in the storyline of other stakeholders. The memory of past events shapes the way stakeholders act in the present, and therefore shape the sequence and outcome of a process.

Studying conflict through critical moments helps us grasp how case actors enact agency. Fig. 2 illustrates the critical moment in existing storylines. To define critical moments in the timeline, we must return to the storylines of case actors because “developing effective theory about critical moments can only be enhanced if we can include the distinctive perspectives of practitioners and disputants in our accounts of decisive shifts in negotiation” (Leary, 2004, p. 314). Critical moments may spring from an act of one stakeholder group and are therefore observable in the actions of people. The SSN framework highlights the unfolding process, rather than outcomes or ends; it examines how case actors experience critical moments. For some, a moment may be critical, and for others not – this is illustrated in Fig. 2 where the first critical moment is only critical to case actor group 3 and in critical moment 2, which is critical to actor group 1 and 2. If actor group 1 represents the storyline of local policy officials, actor group 2 represents the local police, and actors 3 local citizens, one can imagine the effect on power relations if policy officials only acknowledge the conflict in critical moment 2 without involving the citizens but the local police. When in critical moment 3 the encounter is acknowledged by all stakeholders, power relations among stakeholders might shift. It is in the different experience of critical moments that we can learn about (missed) opportunities to engage people in decision making.

To study the experience of critical moments, we must look at stories as well as action. The latter is important because in order to make sense of street-level interactions and include stories with both high and low tellability, we have to look beyond what people say and analyze what they do as well.

### 1.3. Step 3: analyzing the dramaturgy of critical moments

Critical moments are an attempt to make visible what would otherwise be difficult to see: the subjective performance of citizenship and politics. To analyze how a critical moment may reinforce or change meaning, the sequence of events, or relationships between case actors, we need to analyze the dramaturgy of street-level encounters. This is the second way in which the framework addresses the geography of emotions. A dramaturgical analysis is

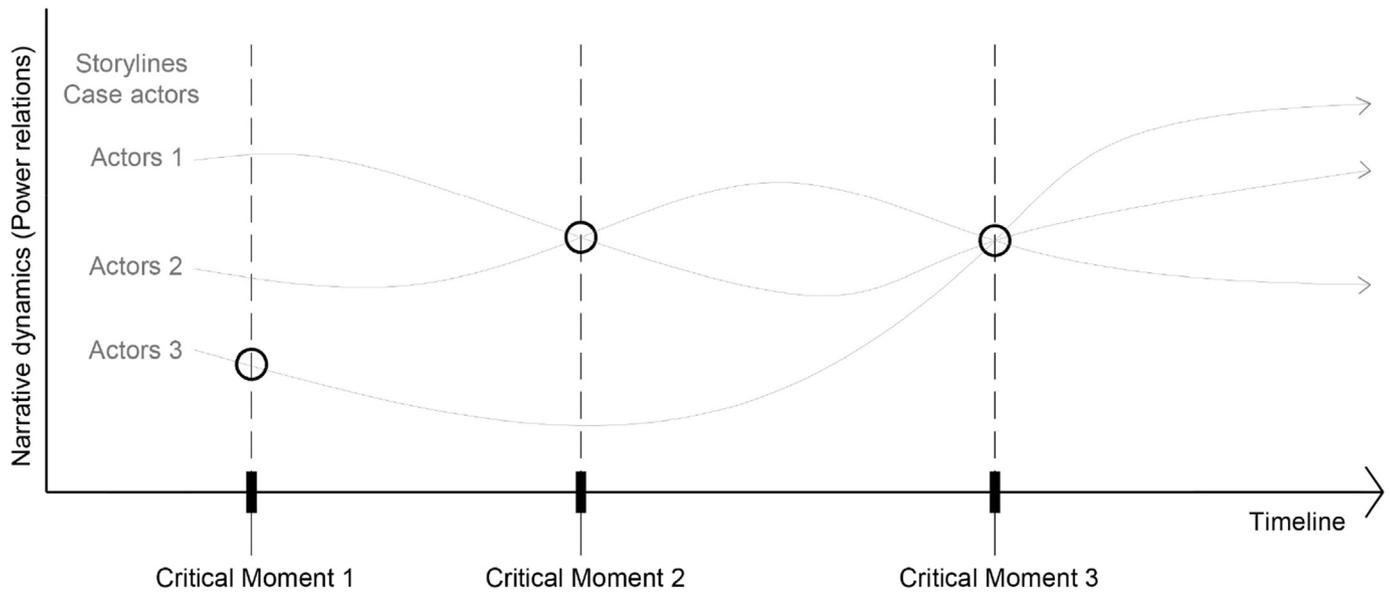


Fig. 2. Defining critical moments.

equipped to move beyond what people say and examine the subjective ways in which stakeholders perform or ignore emotions. I include the performances of all actors who constitute the public sphere: policy practitioners, politicians, other street-level bureaucrats, and also residents. This dramaturgical approach is based on Hajer's (2009) framework, which looks at encounters through scripting, staging, and setting. It encourages studying critical moments in terms of what I call 'social' performances<sup>1</sup>; through the linguistic and performative scripts that people develop to create a repertoire of action. Scripts are created through the cues for appropriate behavior, while counter scripts mark the effort to undo the script of the protagonists (Hajer, 2009, p. 66). The framework also suggests studying critical moments in terms of 'spatial' performances; by including in the significance of the setting where contentious politics occur, as well as the co-implications of how spatiality shapes the trajectory of politics and how politics shape places (Leitner et al., 2008, p. 158).

### 1.3.1. The social

To analyze the social meaning of a performance, we can look at how actors seek to (re)position themselves. A consideration of positioning is "the analysis of fine-grained symbolically mediated interactions between people, both from their own individual standpoints as representatives or even exemplars for groups" (Harré & Langehove, 1999, p. 1). Positioning captures the play among contending roles, ideas, and stories in critical moments, as it includes "thoughts, feelings, intentions, and plans of all those who participate" (Harré & Langehove, 1999, p. 5). By performing a script that is the logical result of the dominant narrative, parties stage themselves, their identities and their relationships to others. In contrast, we can observe how parties perform counter scripts that contest the dominant storyline and can lead to a critical moment. Fig. 3 illustrates a critical moment that is analyzed in terms of the 'social'.

Scripts and counter scripts get expressed through speech acts. We can observe and listen to what people 'do with words' (Austin, 1962). The act of saying something has a direct impact on the

feelings, thoughts, or actions of the audience, the speaker, or other persons (Austin, 1962, 101). The analysis of speech acts allows us to dive into critical moments of interaction between stakeholders and observe how their speech acts reinforce the dominant narrative and the existing power positions or how speech acts can enforce the counter narrative as an appropriate interpretation and can change power positions.

### 1.3.2. The spatial

Not all stakeholders have the same ability to use speech acts to voice a storyline. What counts as appropriate language and who can use it varies with the setting and the individuals involved. Stories with low tellability are especially difficult to voice through speech acts. Allowing these stories a voice in the public sphere often demands a stage that adds symbolic meaning to the performance. To understand an event, it is necessary to understand why particular actions took place on a particular site and not elsewhere, because each site conveys a limited range of messages (Kuper, 1972, p. 421). Benches, squares, community centers, and city councils all provide settings for the scenes in which conflicts are negotiated. But spaces are more than just the setting in which voices are transmitted; they can also fuel political activism because 'space is emotionally saturated and spatial elements transmit the effects, feelings, and emotions' (Brown & Pickerill, 2009, p. 5). We should therefore attempt to include both human as well as non-human agency by looking into the ways 'materiality regulates and mediates social relations and daily routines within a space and is thus imbued with power' (Leitner et al., 2008, p. 11). To analyze how performances are effective, we must look beyond speech acts and understand how materiality also shapes conflict. The SSN framework addresses this by linking the analysis of positioning via speech acts to the way people voice stories through the discursive use of spaces and places and in turn, how spaces shape citizenship and political repertoires, as represented in Fig. 4.

From Lefebvre (1991) we have learned that the meaning of spaces is produced through the actions of their users. Spaces acquire meaning through the "representations of space" that are "tied to the relations of production and to the 'order' which those relations impose, and hence to knowledge, to signs, to codes ..." (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 33). This *conceived space* is the realm of planners

<sup>1</sup> The analysis of social and spatial is an analytic device, not a natural distinction.

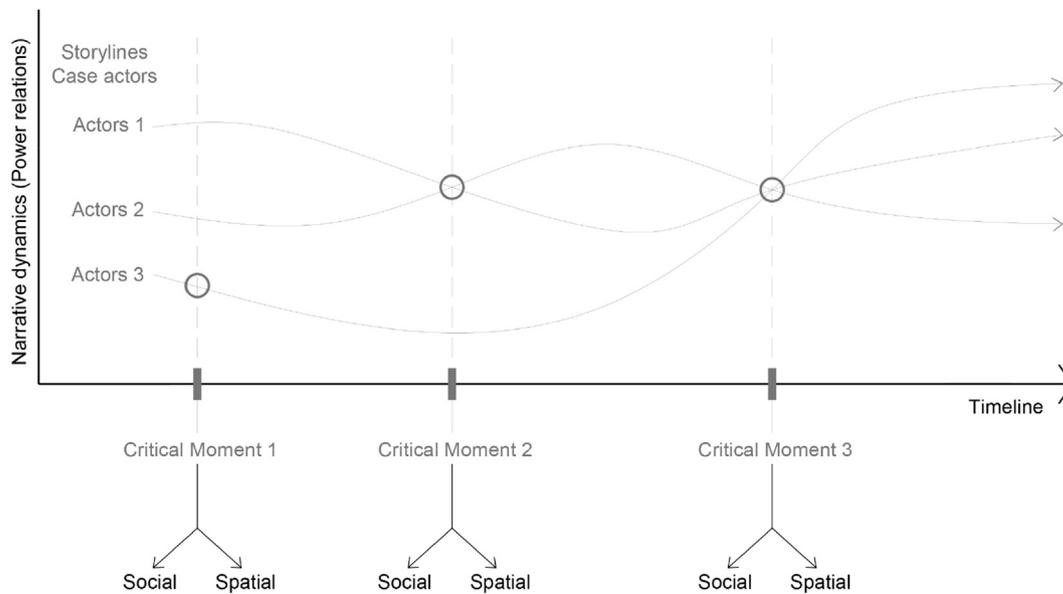


Fig. 3. Analyzing critical moments through the 'social' and the 'spatial'.

and governance that impose a social order on spaces and produce meanings that are dominant expressions in any society (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 39). On the other hand, users create a *perceived space* that is the "tangible form of space that provides a degree of continuity and cohesion to each social formation" (Martin & Miller, 2003, p. 146). This form of spatial production highlights the material experience of space and the production thereof through daily routines and performances that express appropriate social relations. Critical moments mark events in the process when the meaning of the conceived or the perceived space is contested.

Contentious politics, however, cannot simply be observed in terms of well-organized practices. In order to also include marginalized voices and publics, we must include both formal actions and informal actions – for example an improvised confiscation of a public space or, as we will see below, a local memorial. Thus, political action in the SSN framework is not always strategic in nature; it can also be improvised and tactical (Certeau, 1984). 'Tactics' take place in ways that do not fit the conventions of political action. They must utilize the gaps and circumstances that open in the sphere of control. They counteract the powerful and organizing sphere of 'strategies' (Certeau, 1984: xix). By studying the tactics as well as strategies that case actors use to construe or respond to critical moments, we study the dramaturgy of interaction through speech acts in relation to spatial performances. In turn, these spaces also shape or deny certain repertoires of citizenship and politics. This dramaturgical analysis of critical moments reveals in detail where and how actors demand a voice in the public sphere. Moreover, it also reveals when, where, and how that demand is ignored or missed. The remaining question is: 'what does this tell us about the opportunity afforded by conflict?'

#### 1.4. Step 4: liminal opportunity?

The final step in a SSN analysis is to consider how the analysis of critical moments is related to the narrative dynamics. Did the actions in a critical moment develop new interpretations of what is at stake? Did they shift meaning or disrupt existing narratives? Cobb argues that the term 'critical' in critical moments 'refers to both the process outcomes and the relational trajectories, as well as the transformation of identity and the struggle for legitimacy' (2006:

149). Critical moments provide an opportunity because actions (temporarily) disrupt the dominant power structure and open up the space of renegotiation. I call this 'liminal opportunity.'

Fig. 4 illustrates the relationship between the dramaturgy of a critical moment and the analysis of a possible liminal moment. A liminal moment is defined as a stage between two relatively stable states. It opens a space for change because nothing is stable, and meaning can be renegotiated. Liminal moments are characterized by uncertainty and ambiguity (Turner, 1987a: 103), which shapes spaces<sup>2</sup> and moments in which everyday political subjectivities can be (re)negotiated (Wood, 2012). Liminal moments resemble what Hajer has described as an 'institutional void' where rules and regulations are unable to make sense of or deal with the problem at hand (Hajer, 2003). Episodes of conflict are characterized by liminality because they disrupt a relatively stable state. Within the process of conflict, however, we can also seek to recognize liminal moments by analyzing the liminal opportunities that emerge out of critical moments. A SSN framework analyzes the process of action and reaction among case actors during episodes of conflict in order to unravel the liminal opportunities that critical moments may create.

In Fig. 4, we see the representation the SSN framework as a whole. It represents the storylines of case actors and several critical moments that are analyzed through their social and spatial dramaturgy that may or may not lead to liminal opportunities. The acknowledgement of a liminal opportunity or the lack thereof – depicted with a question mark – reconstitutes the storylines of stakeholders. Let us turn to a case study to illustrate empirically how the SSN framework generates insights into liminal opportunity or missed opportunities.

## 2. Social-spatial narrative analysis: the bag snatcher

On January 17, 2005 an urban crisis emerged when a young man died in an attempt to snatch a bag from a car in Eastern Amsterdam. In response, the woman whose bag was snatched put her car in reverse and pinned the young man against a tree. He was a Dutch

<sup>2</sup> Liminality is both a social and spatial concept (Turner, 1987a: 102).

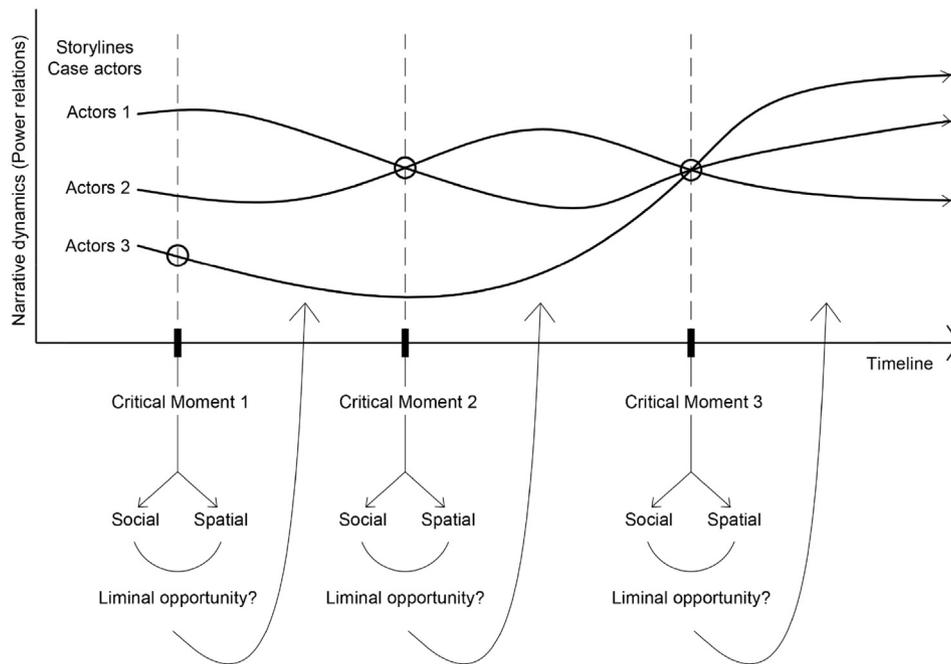


Fig. 4. Analyzing the liminal opportunity of critical moments.

citizen by birth and of Moroccan descent, a detail that placed the story of ‘the bag snatcher’ in close relation to another tragic event from two months earlier – November 2nd, 2004 – when another man of Moroccan descent murdered the famous Dutch filmmaker, Theo Van Gogh. Famous for his criticism of Islam and the Islamic community in the Netherlands, Van Gogh was shot dead and a note was pinned to his chest that decried a film he had made that criticized Islam. This violent episode took place around the corner from where the bag snatcher would die two months later.

The response to the death of Van Gogh was quick, public, and unconventional. The mayor called for a ‘demonstration of noise’, a reversal of the conventionally response to acts of senseless violence in the Netherlands where people walk a march of silence to commemorate the victim and protest against senseless violence. The proposed demonstration of noise would invoke this precedent in a protest on Dam Square.<sup>3</sup> By making noise, demonstrators were to show support for freedom of speech, which many felt was threatened by the murder. 20,000 people came together at Dam square to make noise. The murder of Van Gogh and the memory of a demonstration of noise strengthened the narrative that integration had failed in the Netherlands and linked one specific community of immigrants – people of Moroccan descent – to the challenges of multiculturalism. It was in this context that we should understand the death of the young man two months later.

### 2.1. Step 1: narrative dynamics

The death of the bag snatcher immediately raised diverse interpretations. For some, the death was a response to the growing fear of Moroccan youth. They focused their storyline on the fact that the boy had robbed a bag and argued that ‘it was his own fault.’ An

opposing storyline was told by people from the Moroccan community,<sup>4</sup> who questioned whether the boy’s death was the right punishment for robbing a bag. They understood the death of the boy as an act of senseless violence and understood the tragedy through memories of ‘discrimination and marginalization.’ In the following week, these storylines formed the basis of several clashes and liminal opportunities at the street level, which challenged the local government’s formulating an appropriate response and preventing further escalation or even riots.

As in any context, some stories are more accepted than others; i.e., some stories have higher tellability than others. In the case of the bag snatcher, the story of ‘his own fault’ became dominant through two mechanisms. The first is obvious: people in positions of power reinforced the storyline. National politicians used the storyline of ‘his own fault’ in their responses (Telegraaf, 2005). The second mechanism is less obvious. At the local level, officials had well-established working relations with the Moroccan community, which they did not want to jeopardize. In response to the tragedy, local politicians tried to mediate between the two opposing storylines. They proposed a third and less politicized storyline that interpreted the death as a pattern of ‘action-reaction.’ They believed that this interpretation of what was at stake could be acceptable to both the Moroccan community and the group who believed that it was ‘his own fault.’ This third storyline was less controversial because it did not assign fault or refer directly to the negative reputation of Moroccan youngsters, and the story did not include the theme of marginalization and discrimination. The ‘action-reaction’ storyline immediately had high tellability (Norrick, 2005) because it used the same causal structure as the storyline of ‘his own fault,’ thus rendering the ‘his own fault’ framing dominant in the politically correct form of ‘action-reaction.’ This, however, excluded the most important element of the storyline of

<sup>3</sup> Dam Square is located in the center of Amsterdam and is a symbolically significant place because of the national WWII memorial. For a thorough analysis of the responses of political leaders to the murder on Theo Van Gogh at Dam Square and the tensions that surfaced in Amsterdam and Dutch society as a whole, see Hajer and Uitermark (2008).

<sup>4</sup> I want to highlight that there is no such thing as a homogeneous Moroccan community in the Netherlands or in eastern Amsterdam. For the purpose of this paper, I use this term to describe the group of Moroccan residents that were participants in the events that ensued after the boy’s death.

the Moroccan community: their experience of marginalization.

With these three storylines in place, local officials, police officers, and citizens of both Moroccan and Dutch descent were negotiating the meaning of the tragedy and their storylines at the site of the incident.

## 2.2. Step 2: defining critical moments

After the tragedy, the responses unfolded through five critical moments. In Fig. 5, we see a visual representation of the critical moments in the case study. The arrows below mark the parties that experienced the critical moments as critical. Note that the tragedy only became critical for policy professionals during the third critical moment. The dramaturgical analysis of these critical moments will explain what we can learn from that insight.

## 2.3. Step 3: dramaturgical analyses of critical moments

### 2.3.1. Critical moment 1, the tragedy

In response to the first critical moment – the tragedy itself – the Moroccan community improvised a local memorial at the site. People laid flowers and lit candles near the tree where the car had collided with the boy. It was around this local memorial that people started to make sense of what happened and where the contradicting narratives of ‘his own fault’ versus ‘discrimination’ took shape. In the limited space that the dominant storyline of ‘his own fault’ had created, the site for mourning allowed a voice for their storyline of ‘discrimination.’ The public character of the improvised performance tells a story to other parties that the community needed to attribute a public meaning to their loss.

### 2.3.2. Critical moment 2, removing the flowers

On Wednesday morning of January 19th, something unexpected happened. The flowers and candles were ‘cleaned up’ by the public works department. The department regarded its decision to remove the symbols of public mourning as the legitimate result of balancing the use of the site as a place of grieving with considerations about safety. The district mayor later explained that “it was unfortunate, but that it remained unclear who gave the order” (Interview district mayor).

The act of removing the flowers underpins why a performative approach is so important to the study of local conflicts. This performance did not come up in the storyline of policy practitioners; they did not regard it as a critical moment – as portrayed in Fig. 5. The unfortunate and maybe unintended script of cleaning the memorial did, however, have a real effect. It fed back into the interpretations of the incident. The removal discursively deepened the storyline through which the incident was understood. One boy said, “now that the traffic poles are replaced, they cannot prove it was murder anymore” (Volkskrant, 2005). Thus, the removal of the flowers reinforces the storyline of the Moroccan community.

Regardless of the motivation, the act of cleaning the memorial site conveyed a message to the Moroccan community: they are no longer to perform their mourning in the public space. From a performative perspective, cleaning the memorial could be understood as an embodiment of their limited access to the public sphere. By sweeping away the artifacts of commemoration, the storyline of ‘marginalization’ was excluded from negotiation in the public space. The clean street became a ‘conceived space’ (Lefebvre, 1991) that is policed by rules and regulations that dictated what repertoire of politics and citizenship was appropriate. By cleaning up the artifacts of public mourning, the storyline of ‘marginalization’ was ousted from the public sphere.

### 2.3.3. Critical moment 3, call for protest

The third critical moment is a response to the removal of the flowers and the feelings of frustration that accompanied the course of events. That afternoon, the boy’s family and friends improvised a counter script (Hajer, 2009) and decided to hold a protest march. The march would allow the community to reclaim their presence in the public space, thereby re-implicating the spatial repertoire of politics. They distributed pamphlets to invite people to come and participate in the protest march. This is when the tragedy became critical to the local government. The call for a march prompted the first critical moment for local authorities – see Fig. 5. From the script of their ‘action-reaction’ storyline, a protest march would be an inappropriate response to the incident with the bag snatcher. It demanded an immediate response. Policy practitioners had the responsibility to prevent violence, and a protest march could be risky in the polarized context, liable to trigger emotions, escalate

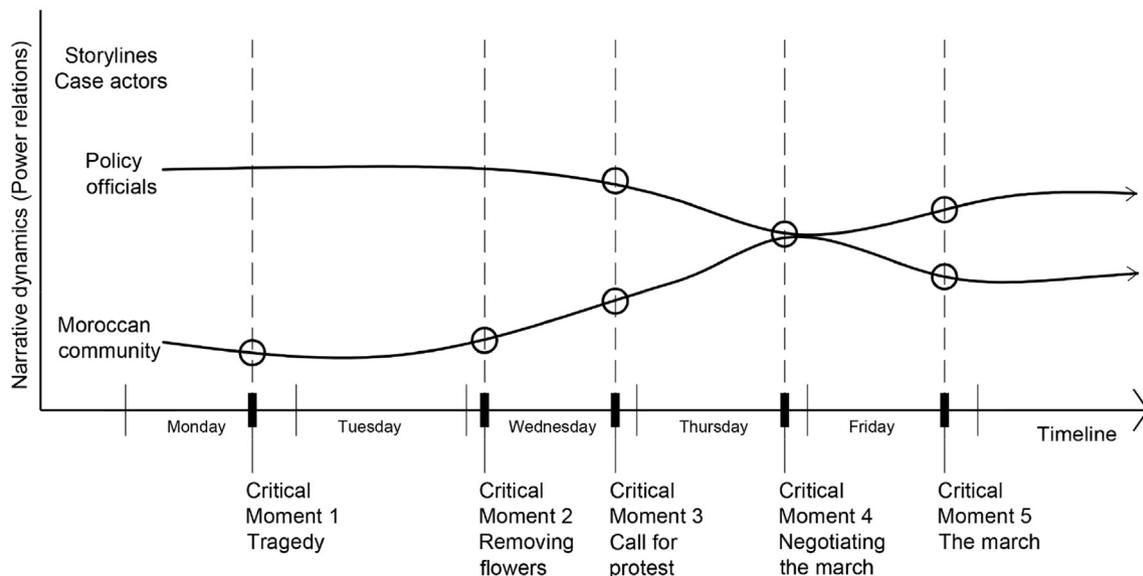


Fig. 5. Critical Moment overview of the Bag Snatcher case.

tensions, and perhaps even boil over into violence. A local civil servant argued, “then people started to become nervous. They thought, who would be attracted to such a march? Before you realize what happened, the military police starts to hit around and this whole thing turns into chaos and fighting” (Interview security coordinator).

By calling for a protest march, the Moroccan community forced their storyline back into the negotiations in the public sphere. Policy practitioners were informed by their network of ‘neighborhood fathers’ about the underlying grievances of the community. Instead of prohibiting the protest march – which was in their power because they could withhold the permit to hold a demonstration march – they decided to invite people from the Moroccan community to discuss their safety concerns. The negotiation of the march was a top-down organized critical moment with the opportunity to engage the voice of the community.

#### 2.3.4. Critical moment 4, negotiating the march

The meeting took place at the district council on Thursday January 20th at 2:00 p.m. The participants included the mayor of Amsterdam, the mayor of the district council, and the district safety coordinator. From the community, the boy’s sister and two of her friends were present, as well as several representatives of the Moroccan community. Outside of the building, a group of youngsters was waiting for news about the march.

The meeting began with the mayor of Amsterdam offering his condolences to the boy’s sister: “Guys, it is really sad what happened, I can imagine that you are in a lot of pain, but on the other side, something did happen. He did something that was not right as well” (interview civil servant). With this speech act, the mayor positioned the ‘action-reaction’ storyline as the dominant narrative. The speech act thereby established the course of the conversation (Austin, 1962, p. 101). The language chosen by a person in a position of power limits peoples’ ability to voice the counter story, giving it lower tellability, and limits their opportunity to negotiate other interpretations of the incident.

After establishing that the length and route of the march should be short and local because of security concerns, the focus shifted to the meaning of the march. From the perspective of ‘action-reaction’ and ‘his own fault,’ the meaning of the march as a protest would be out of the question. After all, there was nothing to protest against, as the death of the boy was the consequence of his own behavior. The neighborhood fathers who were concerned about the reputation of the Moroccan community understood the controversial meaning of the protest. In response, they tactically proposed another form of marching: a silent march. A silent march is a common Dutch practice of mourning that is used to protest and recall acts of senseless violence. The noise manifestation, following the murder of Theo Van Gogh, was a symbolic counter-practice to the commonly used march of silence that underpins the nation’s firm belief in freedom of speech. In line with that tradition, the neighborhood fathers proposed a march of silence to protest. In their storyline a silent march was an appropriate response to the act of senseless violence.

Policy practitioners, however, questioned the appropriateness of a silent march. It raised questions about categories: does the incident meet the criteria? A local civil servant offered a solution: “If you want to mourn the loss of your brother, call it a mourning march, not a silent march. Because the link to senseless violence irritates people, they ask themselves: senseless, he was a criminal? But nobody would deny your mourning” (Interview safety coordination).

A ‘march to mourn’ would take away the public meaning of a silent march and leave the march in the private realm. Policy practitioners saw that distinct and private meaning as an

opportunity to give the Moroccan community a chance to mourn without the connotation of senseless violence. However, the neighborhood fathers were disappointed about the way policy practitioners politicized the meaning of the march: “The family did not approve a march that would only mean ‘to mourn,’ they did not even approve of a silent march. In the end, we could bring them to the decision for a mid-course, a silent march. But some politicians did not even approve of that. They even wanted to take advantage of it” (Interview member of the Moroccan community). The private meaning of a ‘march to mourn’ was thus too far removed from the desire to demonstrate against injustice. The underlying need was to voice their experience of marginalization within Dutch society. The negotiation over the march had brought that experience to the surface once again. The negotiation did not allow the community to voice how a dead body on the street and the responses to that violence had embodied their sense of exclusion.

Although the meeting was the local government’s attempt to include the Moroccan community in problem solving, the dramaturgy of the interaction revealed no room for negotiating meaning and diverse interpretations of the incident. The established positioning created an environment in which the Moroccan community had to be appreciative of the small space they were granted to take any action at all. A march to mourn would have no public meaning and would not convey any message to the broader public than the message of private commemoration. Fig. 5 shows that for a moment power relations were renegotiated – the lines cross as the actors interact. Although the meeting was meant to be a negotiation, the interactions between the representatives of the Moroccan community and the policy practitioners did not leave space for underlying grievances to be voiced, stories to be communicated, or an action repertoire to be renegotiated.

#### 2.3.5. Critical moment 5, the march

The march took place on Friday January 21st, five days after the fatal collision. It attracted around 300 to 400 people who walked from the site of the incident via two long residential streets to the Mosque. The script of the public officials did not allow them to join the march because it had a private meaning. They stood at the sidelines and observed. The district mayor explained, “I tolerated the march because I thought it was a way to mourn, not a demonstration ... The mayor and I thought the march should not have the wrong connotations” (Interview district council mayor). The performance of policy practitioners during the march reinforced their interpretation of it – a private mourning – which once again re-established the perceived meaning of the incident as a sequence of ‘action-reaction.’

In contrast, a neighborhood father described the march in different terms. In the performance of the march, the community improvised a tactic: silence. The neighborhood father explained:

We said, ‘that boy died and we want to commemorate him appropriately.’ A wish from the family was that the march went quietly, an approach that would entail fewer risks. We had a microphone: ‘we are holding a silent march, and that means SILENCE!’ (interview representative of the Moroccan community).

The community used the orientation towards security to legitimize a performative tactic that would keep the march under control. The performance of silence intended to prevent violence, but it also conveyed a symbolic message: its reference to senseless violence made the performance a symbol that communicated the participants’ discontent.

Within the boundaries of what was politically possible, they invented a way to communicate their story. They voiced their grief

and anger through silence. Through this symbolic performance, they temporarily shifted the meaning of the public sphere from a conceived and policed space into a perceived place (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 33). The performances contested the regulated meaning of space that the district council enforced. In this public sphere, their storyline was voiced through performance instead of through speech acts. The act of silence was controversial because of its symbolic meaning that did not fit the opposing interpretations of the incident. In fact, the city's authorities rejected a public silent march. Ironically, that rejection made the paradoxical message of silence even stronger and the meaning of space in which the performance took place even more public.

#### 2.4. Step 4: liminal opportunity?

The case study reveals several critical moments in which liminality emerges. First, it appeared in the divergent interpretations of the tragedy itself. Second, it is identifiable in the liminal quality of the public space of the street where the commemoration was performed and storylines emerged. However, the liminal opportunities to transform the crisis into inclusive governance emerged out of a tactical counter script that the Moroccan community enacted when they called for protest. In response to this critical moment, local policy practitioners realized how critical the tragedy was to the Moroccan community and decided to include them in problem solving.

The meeting during which the march was negotiated had several liminal opportunities. In order to facilitate a negotiation of meaning, it was important to allow the clash of interpretations to be shared and give voice to stories with high and low tellability. Sharing stories does not mean that everyone has to agree. In fact, negotiation theory teaches us that in order for problems to be solved interactively, meaning has to be up for discussion (Kelman, 1996). In this case, the storyline of 'action-reaction' was fixed and thereby received higher tellability in the rest of the conversation. That action, perhaps unintentionally, closed the opportunity for other storylines to be included in the negotiation.

Positioning the dominant storyline of action-reaction also had repercussions for the negotiation of the meaning of the march. A silent march would have created a space for the Moroccan community to commemorate, but more importantly, to engage in the creation of the public sphere as well. Democratic governments are responsible for constituting the public sphere as a place where multiple voices can be heard and a diversity of perspectives considered (Arendt, 1998). Here, the concern for the public sphere was not weighed against safety and administrative concerns. From a dramaturgical perspective, a silent march would have given the marginalized group the opportunity to engage in the public sphere through a silent performance of mourning that was a common act within Dutch society's repertoire of action. Undeniably, that meaning would have been contested, but societies develop and integrate diverse groups through such social contentions (Mouffe, 2000).

The ambiguous meaning of the march also created a liminal opportunity: the experience of exclusion could have been transformed into a positive acknowledgement if policy practitioners had decided to participate. If policy practitioners had been able to incorporate the storyline that was excluded from the conversation, they would have been able to see the underlying need of the Moroccan community. However, the way the negotiation unfolded prevented them from perceiving this. During the march, the underlying need was performed through silence. If policy practitioners had had the capacity to read the differences and understand the performance as an invitation, they could have performed recognition (Hall & Jefferson, 1993; Taylor, 1994) and could have -

literally - walked their way to a strengthened public sphere where multiple voices could have been acknowledged.

### 3. Conclusions

Democracy demands an appreciation of encounters in the public sphere, and the way state actors respond to these encounters is a critical feature of a viable democratic system. The abstract concept of the agonistic democracy becomes tangible in interactions between citizens and the state at the street level. This paper proposed a theoretical framework that helps analyze how conflicts can create opportunities for democratic governance through the dramaturgy of critical moments. The framework contributes to the geography of emotions as it combines narrative and dramaturgical approaches into one holistic analysis of conflicting perspectives and emotional interactions. The SSN framework structures empirical events along a timeline and provides a theory to analyze if, when, where, and how opportunities to engage different voices in decision making exist. The framework is embedded in the qualitative empirical details of each unique case of conflict. It is thus applicable to a large variety of processes, including contentious politics, activism, and contested decision making. One important requirement for applying the framework is the qualitative data that consists of narratives of stakeholders and observations of critical moments at the street level.

To become immersed in the emotional experiences of case actors, a SSN analysis starts out with a narrative approach to include memories, beliefs and values in the context of existing power relations in empirical details. I illustrated the framework with the case study of the bag snatcher. Here, we saw how the history of Van Gogh's murder created a climate of heightened awareness, anticipation, and scrutiny, in which a subsequent event such as the bag snatcher was bound to adopt a public character. Immediately after the dramatic incident, two storylines emerged: one that interpreted the event as 'his own fault' and another that placed the incident in a history of 'marginalization.' In times of conflict, there are always stories that take up marginal positions, from which the repertoire available to position and voice the counter story is limited. Where authorities or majorities have access to dominant narratives, people who identify with counter-narratives use different tactics. When the marginal storyline of the Moroccan community deepened and their improvised memorial was cleaned up, their tactic was to call for a protest march.

Studying critical moments reveals that they are pivotal vantage points from which to reflect on the repertoire of urban politics. First, the case underscores the approach to conflicts as events that develop through a sequence of action and reaction. SSN analysis highlights the unfolding process rather than outcomes or ends. The case reveals how neglecting earlier critical moments escalated tensions and feelings of marginalization by members of a marginalized group – in this case the Moroccan community. Second, the case illustrates how difficult it is for governments to understand the meaning of critical moments from the perspective of the 'other.' The call for a protest march was the first moment that the conflict involving the bag snatcher became critical for the local government. Now that the security of public space was at stake, local officials were triggered to respond. Critical moments may open up 'spaces of resistance' (Connor, 1989) that reveal the expression of politics by marginalized groups while also revealing the ability of governments to sensitively respond to those voices. In this sense, the SSN framework provides a way to analyze sequences of action and reaction in order to understand how parties get included and excluded from shaping the quality of the public sphere (Arendt, 1998). However, to analyze exactly how and where governments selectively assign salience to some citizenship actions in critical

moments over others, we must delve into the dramaturgy of critical moments.

The dramaturgical analysis unravels the way stakeholders position themselves through language and space. These performances of citizenship and politics take shape at the street level. In the case study, we also saw how engagement in the public sphere does not solely develop around grand events but also through local tragedies that are inconvenient and full of risk. Thick descriptions of the stage, the setting, and the script provide data to analyze how interactions include or exclude case actors and their storylines from decision making. The local government intended to include the Moroccan community in a decision about the march. However, the dramaturgical analysis of critical moment 4 revealed how the interaction fixed the storyline of action-reaction and excluded the repertoire of a public march; instead, a march to mourn was the outcome of the interaction, and once again the story of the Moroccan community was prevented from being voiced in the public sphere. A dramaturgical analysis of the march itself, however, revealed another tactic that was available to the Moroccan community: they re-implicated the repertoire of politics by using the public and performing citizenship through silence. By walking in silence the community performed their storyline – saying everything by saying nothing.

Through a detailed analysis of critical moments, the SSN framework contributes to the field of conflict studies by operationalizing the concept of liminal opportunities. In these liminal moments, earlier events, meaning, and relationships can be renegotiated. The goal of a dramaturgical analysis is to unravel the liminal meaning of critical moments in the process of conflict. Critical moments may have or fail to have an effect on the sequence of events, which deepens the experience of marginalized communities. The case study illustrated how difficult it is to read and make sense of liminal opportunities while in the midst of conflict – for example, during the negotiation of the march and during the march itself. This suggests that the liminal opportunities of conflict blur the boundaries between formal and informal, public and private, and macro- and micropolitics. In order to capture the opportunity of conflict, one must include and acknowledge forms of citizenship and politics that take shape across these blurring boundaries.

The SSN framework provides a structure to empirically analyze if, when, where, and how opportunities emerge. The answers lie in the specific details of each case study. Democratic opportunities emerge during critical moments *when* case actors – often not based on an invitation – seek to contest the sequence of events and the dynamics between narratives. These contentious performances take place in the public spaces and places *where* groups engage in their own tactical or strategic repertoires. The notion of *where* contentious performances take place is an important insight. The informal sites in which citizens perform their contentious acts are often overlooked. Although these sites might seem mundane and insignificant, they mark the places where conflicts escalate and exclusion takes place. As critical moments can emerge out of decisions from governments but also during contentious acts, it is important to study the response to everyday citizenship. The social-spatial analysis helps to unravel *how* some groups are able to establish positions of power through their actions and how others lack acknowledgements for their actions. The latter escalates tensions and leaves the insertion of plural voices in the public sphere (Arendt, 1998, p. 198) in vain. Nevertheless, in the same dramaturgical analysis, we also find a way to understand exactly *how* governments can utilize the opportunity to engage plural voices and recognize informal citizenship.

Governments have a responsibility to keep public spaces secure. To do so they employ a range of strategies to maintain the established order and existing narrative dynamics. Governments also

have an incentive to improve the democratic quality of the public sphere. Local conflicts provide moments of opportunities for the latter, but governments are required to balance that opportunity with the former. The SSN framework helps us rethink that balance because it allows us to pinpoint exactly when, where, and how opportunities emerge in action. Because of a focus on street-level interactions, the context of institutional norms and dynamics of macropolitics could be overlooked. Any SSN analysis should therefore reflect on the larger context and rethink its implications for the repertoire of action. A paradox in this article is the promise to identify moments of opportunity and the case study in which opportunities were missed. I do not want to nullify the difficulty of dealing with the messy reality of conflict, the goal of an SSN analysis is to be more reflective on the specific details through which a process of conflict escalates into more grievances and exclusion on the one hand, but also how interactions in conflict might turn into inclusion and the acknowledgement of opposing voices on the other. The SSN framework analyzes how liminal opportunities lie in the ‘politics of small things’ – in coincidentally cleaning an informal memorial, in unintentionally closing the space for voicing a counter narrative, in proposing a private march to mourn. The opportunity afforded by conflict largely depends on the case actors’ abilities to recognize, understand, and acknowledge everyday citizenship in critical moments. The SSN framework helps to unpack political performances in action and thereby provides an empirical analysis of agonistic democracy at the street level.

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### Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data related to this article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2017.11.001>.

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