Sharing as sociomaterial practice: Car sharing and the material reconstitution of automobility

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ABSTRACT

Sharing has become one of the buzzwords of contemporary urban life and scholarship, as cities and social lives are transformed by the share economy and collaborative consumption. This paper advances critical analysis of sharing economies through an investigation of the ways in which objects are mobilized in the practice of sharing. Drawing on an empirical base of 35 interviews conducted with Sydney residents using car sharing as a form of transport, we explicate the material entanglements that constitute car sharing in order to highlight the complex intersections of the object being shared, the constellations of objects brought into the orbit of the practice, and the code that flows through each. Bringing together a material-focused analysis into conversation with the concepts of share economies as both performed and hybrid, we advance the concepts of sharing as a set of socio-material entanglements. We argue that the divergent spatialities and temporalities of objects and humans both hold together and tear apart the experiences of sharing, which in turn underpins car sharing's implications for the reconstitution of automobility.

1. Introduction

Sharing has become one of the buzzwords of contemporary urban life and scholarship, as cities and social lives are transformed by the share economy and collaborative consumption (McLaren and Agyeman, 2015). Houses, cars, tools and rides, to name a few, are accessed by many on a per use, on-demand basis, rather than individually owned and accessed. Businesses like Uber and AirBnB are challenging and reshaping urban economies and regulation (Gurran and Phibbs, 2017; McNeil, 2016). Unsurprisingly the rapid proliferation of sharing has stirred academic and popular commentary. One stream of thought enthusiastically endorses the sharing economy, and the practices of sharing it entails, as socially and environmentally equitable alternatives to market-based resource distribution. For example, Botsman and Rogers (2010) coined the term collaborative consumption to describe a new ensemble of product service systems, communal economies, and redistribution markets that are united in the creation of a more sustainable form of consumption. A critical engagement with sharing has recently emerged, posing questions about the balance of the commercial and communal considerations woven through sharing (Belk, 2007; Marvin et al., 2016), as well as emerging links between sharing and the uncertain labour practices of the 'gig economy' (Richardson, 2017). Geographers have recently made important contributions to these debates on the politics of sharing, for example highlighting sharing as an instance of performing the economy (Richardson, 2015), and a set of dynamic practices carried out in the digital on-demand economy (Cockayne, 2016).

Central to these discussions is the extent to which sharing challenges and/or reproduces social, economic and political hegemonies. Thus far most attention has focused on the integration of capitalist and more-than capitalist logics in sharing, or the relative presence and importance of collaboration and individualism in contemporary sharing. For example, while discourses of sharing can be pervaded by social logics of sustainability and gift giving (Eckhardt and Bardhi, 2016; John, 2012), such discourses can also be emblematic of individually opportunistic and protective desires (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012; Martin, 2016). Recent more nuanced analyses show that collaboration and individualism are dynamic and produced rather than an inherent or pre-existing characteristic of sharing. Thus for Richardson (2015) there is a narrative of collaboration performed by the label sharing, while for Scaraboto (2015) the meanings of sharing are paradoxical (both collaboration and individualism) and significant discursive and material effort is required to temporarily reconcile and sustain this paradox (see also Belk, 2014; Schor et al., 2016). Likewise economic analyses of sharing note that both capitalist and non-capitalist modes of value and organization are in evidence (Belk, 2014; Martin, 2016). Sharing practices and economies, in other words, are hybrid constellations of collaborative and cooperative ways of

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consuming and business organization interwoven with individualist, profit-seeking consumption and production. In this paper we take this notion of sharing as a hybrid performance in two new directions.

First, while there is acknowledgement that sharing practices vary by platform (Cockayne, 2016), analyses of sharing's hybridity have thus far focused on a limited range of empirical cases. In this paper we extend the corpus of cases beyond economy and digital labour to the sphere of mobility, and in particular car sharing. While cars have long been shared, for example between family members of the same household or trusting friends, we are concerned with recent car sharing associated with collaborative consumption (Botsman and Rogers, 2010). In this, a person becomes a member of a car sharing organization, with membership entitling them to access to a car on a per use basis. They typically use various web 2.0 technologies to book and pay for the use of a car for a period of time, with cars parked in marked locations across the city, and smart cards used to open cars. Payment is typically by the hour (or equivalent time period), and cars are either returned to their starting point or other designated location. Car sharing is not ride sharing (such as in Uber) since it is the actual object of the car that is shared rather than the service of the trip (Kent and Dowling, 2016). Car sharing business models are diverse, ranging across co-operatives (such as some car clubs in the United Kingdom), peer-to-peer lending of vehicles, or for-profit businesses such as ZipCar in the United States and UK (Shaheen and Cohen, 2013). The past ten years has witnessed exponential growth and dispersion of this type of car sharing worldwide, with millions of drivers purportedly trading private car ownership for car sharing in large and small cities across all continents (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012; Shaheen and Cohen, 2013). For-profit businesses have been predominant in this trajectory, and these are our focus here. In bringing the example of car sharing to geographical understandings of sharing, we are able to point to understandings of collaboration and individualism beyond the economic.

We secondly take sharing in a new direction through the exploration of sharing as a socio-material practice. While analysis of the discourses of sharing (Cockayne, 2016; Martin, 2016) is critical, equally important is sharing as enacted in everyday life, cemented and reconfigured through practice. We specifically focus on the place of objects in the practices of sharing. Objects hold a critical place in the constitution of social lives, selves and mobility (Boyer and Spinney, 2016; Miller, 2005), operating variously as orchestrating or anchoring devices in daily life (Rinkinen et al., 2015), becoming valued through modes of attachment, or having a vitality that motivates action (Woodward, 2016). Objects are central to sharing as well, and in the case of car sharing it is the object of the car that is shared and as such has immense capacity to shape the meaning and practice of sharing. Yet sharing as a material practice extends beyond the object that is shared, as other objects and infrastructures are brought into the orbit of car sharing. Through an investigation of car sharing as socio-material practice, we demonstrate that objects are critical to the work of sharing and in turn its hybridity.

The paper begins with an expanded outline of the socio-materiality of sharing. This is followed by an introduction to car sharing, its framing by and contestation of automobility, and the research upon which the analysis is based. The remainder of the paper illustrates the material entanglements and hybridities of car sharing as practiced in Sydney, Australia using an exploration of the experiences and routines of those undertaking car sharing, specifically those elaborated by 35 participants interviewed as part of a wide-ranging qualitative investigation of sharing and other disruptive forms of transport. In particular, we argue that objects do the work of sharing in three ways: they foster a relationship with a person that sits at the nexus of individual and shared ownership; the digital coding of objects underpins sharing yet disrupts control; and in expanding the social life of people and things cars become both collective and individual. We conclude with reflections on the simultaneous fissures and endurance of automobility produced by car sharing, and the opportunities for further materialist analyses of sharing.

2. Sharing as a socio-material practice

Sharing is an umbrella term under which a dynamic and diverse set of activities are housed. There is, for example, a variety of objects shared, including cars, houses, tools and offices, and shared economies are constituted through a variety of business models, including peer-to-peer, for profit or cooperative ventures. This diversity in sharing practices and objects is paralleled by the range of disciplinary and theoretical perspectives through which they are understood. These include marketing (Belk, 2010), political economy (Martin, 2016) computer science and sociology (Coleman, 2013), in addition to geography as outlined in the introduction. In this paper we conceive of sharing as a socio-material practice, an activity that is discursively and materially carried out in the course of daily life. Sharing, in other words, is a dynamic performance (Richardson, 2015; Scaraboto, 2015). It is not our intention to rehearse discussions of sharing practice here (though see Kent and Dowling, 2013). Rather, taking our cues from Jenkins et al. (2014) we outline an approach that foregrounds the materiality of sharing.

It is no longer controversial to state that social life is materially constituted. Social practices, relations and meaning are crafted in and through objects and the material characteristics of our surroundings. The importance of materiality is recognized, though theorized differently, across a range of theoretical frameworks including actor network theory (Kurokawa et al., 2016), assemblage theory (Bear, 2012) and material culture studies (Ingold, 2007). For our purpose of understanding the practices of car sharing, we find Ian Hodder's (2012) specification of the sociomaterial as 'entanglement' most useful in its emphasis on the networks and agencies of humans and objects that characterise social life.

For Hodder, 'things'[1] – defined as "an entity that has presence by which I mean it has a configuration that endures, however briefly" (2012: 3) – are key elements of social life. Like others, Hodder's argument is that social practices are constituted of relations of humans and objects. Social life, and by implication, a practice like sharing, is constituted by, and constitutes, myriad and multidirectional material relations, of which humans are just one element. On the one hand, humans craft, and are crafted by, relations with things such as cars. The former includes, for example, the process of accommodation through which an object is brought into an individual or collective's realm of practice and meaning (Miller, 2005). As Grosz suggests, the material realm has a:

> "life'' of its own, characteristics of its own, which we must incorporate into our activities in order to be effective, rather than simply understanding, regulating, and neutralizing it from the outside. We need to accommodate things more than they accommodate us.'
>
> Grosz (2005: 132)

At the same time, in drawing materials and humans together in particular arrangements, objects are woven through practices and can hold them together. The freezer, for example, is not only necessary for freezing and modern cooking practices, but orchestrates them (Rinkinen et al., 2015). Finally, objects assemble, or draw into their orbit, other objects; they form networks of connections within and beyond the material world. For Hodder these networks are entanglements: "sets of interlinked *dependencies* between humans and things" (Hodder, 2012: 105; emphasis added). These dependencies "create potentials, further investments and entrapments" (Hodder, 2012: 89). Hodder's elaboration of the term highlights the 'dependencies' elements

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[1] Hodder (2012) prefers 'thing' to object because object is a more human-centred definition. Though this point is accepted, object is used in this paper because it is more commonplace in both sharing and mobility research.