Towards Community Without Unity: Thinking Through Dis-positions and the Meaning of Community

Jonathan Lepofsky

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

DOI: https://doi.org/10.13023/disclosure.12.05
Jonathan Lepofsky
Towards Community Without Unity:
Thinking Through Dis-positions and the Meaning of Community

Introduction
An interesting development in human geography is the recent surge in the sub-discipline of moral geography. Many of these investigations hold fast to the premise that proximity increases the opportunity for ethical behavior, and therefore morality has an inherently geographic dimension. This proposition is remarkable because of how much it seems to resonate with common sense: if individuals live near one another, they will likely act well towards each other, even if each has differing motivations for such behavior. Moral geography locates ethics (and subsequently the possibility for the good life) in place, in the interactions that occur between people within a bounded locale. This articulation between place and the good life has seen a revival in both academic and popular thought about how to improve social life. One of the forms this articulation has taken is the positing of the need for greater community to ameliorate how people live.

This paper is an attempt to take the urges of moral geographers seriously, albeit more critically. As such, this paper seeks to understand how community—as an articulation between people and place—can be theorized to understand how community can express forms of collective identification that do not necessitate an essentializing connection between identity and locality. Such limiting notions of identity are dishonest to the growing interconnectedness of social life that transcends many divisions established by locale-based community. It is necessary, therefore, to open up the parameters by which people can become beholden to one another rather than merely relying upon proximity as the indicator (and limit) of care and collective action.
I draw upon a range of emergent ideas that have emanated from—to use the titles of two recent books—a theory of a community that posits social connection between those who have nothing in common (Lingis), or more succintly, community without unity (Costant). While exploring the abstractions of the meaning of community, I explicate community-building—particularly urban community-building programs employed as urban anti-poverty strategies—as a signifier through which certain struggles (over urban redevelopment, post-welfare state social policy, shifts in public-private spacings, as well as forms of citizenship and other mechanisms to claim the right to participate in the future of a place and social life) all pass to gain signification.

Assuming that community is important, this paper attempts to understand how community can realize itself as a more open form of collective identification, one that does not retreat to static identities or get too stuck in place. Often, community is thought of as an easily identifiable group of people who share a common location and who have dispositions towards common actions and experiences. Such a definition necessitates that community members maintain and demonstrate this commonness, lest the status of membership fall or is brought into question. Given the ways in which such a framework for connecting community has been shown to be more about the struggle to maintain that disposition (so that people are either excluded from powerful communities or cordoned off from power because of the community to which they belong), this paper will argue for a sense of commonality that always already exists among people through sociality, and that always already binds them into relationships requiring ethical engagement. Community, therefore, is the process by which people can collectively engage different modes of identification from which social life unfolds and gets experienced but which do not hinder responsive actions towards others. As such, community without unity is a form of community that occurs when identity and place are both treated as temporary constructions of material life that guide but do not determine how people act.

This paper, in sum, is an attempt to theorize community as a collective of dispositions, or, more directly, a process towards dis-positionings, as opposed to a collection of ready-made dispositions. Rather than rehash the popular debates about the relationship between a need for community to repatch the social fabric, this paper is an attempt to understand how, following Jean-Luc Nancy, "community, far from being what society has crushed or lost, is what happens to us—question, waiting, event, imperative—in the wake of society" (The Imperative Community 11; original italic). This paper advocates community without unity and attempts to trace how such a community can be conceptualized and realized in social life.

Why Community Without Unity?

More and more, closed ideas of identity and bounded notions of locales are harder to maintain in a globalizing world. Identities are infused with hybridity and transculturulation, so that diasporic models of identity capture people's experiences of identity more so than nationalist contensions or closed definitions of identity. More and more, identities, and the places by which they gain meaning, are recognized as produced and constructed entities of social life rather than pre-given statuses. As such, the making of identity is a process in which many social actors engage, and are themselves engaged, at varying levels of competency, participation, and power. This process is more often a struggle between contested notions and these varying levels of competency. As such, collective identification rather than being an ideal form of experience is more akin to a struggle that occurs over different meanings, interpretations, and expressions of that identity.

Similarly, while the experience of a globally compressed temporality and spatiality maintains its own uneven geography (one that incurs "localization" for parts of the planet not incorporated within "global" networks), finding locales that are not infused with the artifacts and expressions of an explicitly global world has become an arduous task. While globalization is by no means a unitary phenomenon, globalization makes it clear that people and places exist as part of spatial and temporal processes, coalesce within varying scales, and are increasingly connected through technology, population flows, governance mechanisms, and capital flows.

Given the reality of a more interconnected world of processes, it seems that the desire to locate the good life in bounded places is a tenuous and difficult expression both of people and place and of the geographic dimension of collective forms of identification. As such, community based on notions of essential identity and place appears more as a nostalgic ideal and less as an honest appraisal of how many experience contemporary social life. But, it is necessary to keep in mind that, however idealistic, the desire for community and the associated articulation with intimacy, propinquity, and care, is a strong response to a globalizing world that many see as increasingly risky, unstable, fractured, and difficult to navigate.

While more open experiences of community might be how many people experience the world, many people turn towards closed definitions of community to express a sense of control in a world with increasingly diffuse locations of power. Moreover, community remains a powerful discourse through which divisions of human beings continue to occur, divisions that can be, have been and continue to be the basis for politics of exclusion. While closed community can form a basis of empowerment for those who can claim membership (i.e. the various identity politics movements), ultimately this type of community is reactionary to divisions that have been set up for the purposes of exclusion and denies the hybridity and transculturulation of identity which can serve as a more agentive basis of power. Therefore, it is necessary to understand how community can be a useful signifier of processual ways to experience identity and place and can be a conduit for beholddleness to others, a signifier that captures the flows with which more and more people experience social life.

The leap of faith by moral geographers and many others that life lived in a bounded place not only is a better life but also is even possible is common and part of a general "return" to community that expresses a desire for a less fragmented, nurturing way of life in which people in places take care of one another. Community has come to signify the authentic life that organically grows in places, in opposition to the alienation of modern society and its ever-expanding reach across place. This is especially pressing given how much the recent "return" fits with the emerging realization of a world in which an unencumbered civil society serves as the backbone of social, political, and economic relations through which everyone performs their civic responsibilities to one another outside of state apparatuses, a form of governmentality that necessitates some expression of a com-
Bourdieu argues that social subjects are fully capable of both knowing their position in society as well as changing this position. People with similar subjective and objective knowledge of their position in society express such knowledge through similar, habitual mechanisms of "practical mastery." As common forms of habitual action arise in reaction to and in contestation of a known positionality, people begin to recognize each other as being in similar positions and inhabiting similar social realms, and to practice life from within a similar habitus (Bourdieu "What Makes a Social Class?"). This occurs through society, which serves to uphold patterns and mechanisms of exchange between individuated subjects. Societal exchange allows subjects to recognize forms of commonality and the possibility of collective action.

Bourdieu, therefore, assumes a certain interaction between individuals and society. But he does not find that individuals are merely purveyors of the social context in which they are embedded. The habitus is formed through the relationship between the process of individualization and the processes reproducing social life. Social life is not pre-given; rather, it is forged out of the intersections of individuated subjects and the habitual actions of these subjects as they encounter what comes to be known as society (i.e. the system of these interactions). As these habitual actions get repeated and solidify into social acts that have meaning within society (i.e. traditions, customs, and performative declarations that pronounce the subject as part of and positioned in society), habitus takes form.

The habitus, therefore, is the embodiment of habitual social acts that have meaning within a group of subjects who similarly understand their positionality. More discretely, the habitus is the practiced form of a disposition to interpret (consciously or not) one's place in society. The disposition gains credence when it becomes reified as "second nature" to a subject as a guide to action: dispositional action is guided by less-than-conscious beliefs that such action is the proper way to act. For a disposition to lessen its steering force, a subject must be able to recognize it as a disposition, rather than the "natural" way to be.

It is important to remember that the habitus is constructed of both structured and structuring structures, giving the habitus and dispositions malleability over time. By indicating how society simultaneously functions as a noun (systematic structure of relations), a verb (structured system of relations), and a gerund (structuring system of relations), Bourdieu is able to convey that society is a system in the making, something that is constantly being created through the ways in which dispositions are practiced and recognized. Changing the habitual practices of subjects and the structuring structures of social life can alter dispositions.

In order for such changes to have any sort of social meaning (and therefore bearing on collective identification), subjects must recognize the various functions of society towards the maintenance of a disposition. These functions interrelate to maintain meaning for a disposition in what Bourdieu calls the illosio (The Logic of Practice). The illosio is the set of taken-for-granted beliefs that are necessary for dispositional action to make sense given a subject's position in society. In other words, the illosio represents the "rules of the game" which are played out by the dispositional action of habitus (The Rules of Art). While these rules have objective meaning, according to Bourdieu, only those operating within the illosio truly know the "rules," and, therefore, only those with such knowledge can know how to
change dispositional action in a socially meaningful way. Knowledge of the \textit{illusio} is a precondition for collective action and altering collective forms of identification.

Altering the embodied, dispositional practices of \textit{habitus} comes from a fusion of objective and subjective knowledge (what Bourdieu calls "structural constructivism" (Fowler 17)) and is an agentic process to work within the dispositions of \textit{a habitus}. The relationship between a subject and the trifold concept of society, mediated by \textit{habitus}, is similar to a musician and a composition: while the musician plays a structured tune, there is significant room for improvisation (Outline). Indeed, Bourdieu offers that the ability to master one's \textit{habitus} is the ultimate source of freedom ("Scattered Remarks"). In other words, meaningful improvisation of action is the freedom to change in society that all subjects potentially can enact. Enacted collectively, the entire basis of a group identity (i.e. common dispositions) can change and be more strategically constructed to establish a "better," more powerful position in society. As with any system, perturbations can have an effect throughout; society is not indifferent to the improvisations of subjects as they navigate \textit{habitus} and create new forms of dispositional activity.

Bourdieu conceives of society as a struggle over the better position amongst differently empowered groups of collective subjects. Two sets of relationships guide subjectivity: the first, discussed above, occurs primarily between individuated subjects in how they recognize one another as in a common and collective action that embodies a shared \textit{habitus}; the second refers to the relationship that these groupings have amongst other, differently dispositional groupings. This latter relationship occurs within fields, or, the "systems of objective relations which are the products of the institution of the social in things, or in mechanisms that have the quasi-reality of physical objects" (Wacquant 44). The reality of society is experienced in the interaction between different subject positions within certain fields. Fields take form around valorized relations and reified entities, which receive value as forms of capital, including financial, symbolic, cultural, and social capital. Different fields valorize certain forms of capital over others. The struggle amongst social subjects is to accrue valorized capital in the appropriate field that can lead to a better position in society for themselves and for similarly dispositioned subjects.

As this struggle unfolds, appropriate forms of capital are utilized to realize and impose an understanding of \textit{how to properly act} upon other subjects (i.e. normalize an "illusio"—knowledge, once again, accrued from dispositional action and experience, so that the goal of the "game" is to gain a societal position whereby one's way of being is recognized as the norm). For Bourdieu social struggle emerges over social reproduction, in the desire to reproduce a sense of proper action and to determine the "rules of the game." As such, social reproduction of dispositional action embodied in \textit{habitus} occurs through the belief that one is acting in the best way possible given one's position. This belief, the knowledge of how to act socially, sets the parameters of collective meaning for society, and ultimately, reality. This understanding of reality, according to Bourdieu, is a "doxa," a set of beliefs—but not mere beliefs that equal an ideology or false consciousness—in the face of the current condition of the societal struggle for best position (Bourdieu and Eagleton). The doxa is the way in which one knows the reality; it is what a collectivity of subjects enacting similar dispositional action acts upon, and the very justification for action. Society is the collection of struggles for doxa to appear as real, through which subjects can imagine themselves in common with one another.

The disposition, for Bourdieu, is at the heart of subjectivity. Nested somewhere between rational free will and determinism by structure, the disposition is a fusion of the epistemological and the ontological: it is the basis of how one knows the world (the doxa) and how that knowing is a statement of how one is in the world. Yet what seems underdeveloped in Bourdieu's thought is how the disposition emerges, or whether it is an a priori device from which one can formulate an analysis of the social and engage social life. At times Bourdieu does seem to fall back on an a priorization of the disposition (perhaps as the essential building block of subjectivity that fuses rather than problematizes the categories of individual and society). He does claim that the operation between \textit{habitus} and the field is twofold: the field conditions \textit{habitus} (and subsequently the dispositional structure that inform \textit{habitus}) and \textit{habitus} gives meaning to the field (Wacquant). But this assumes that the dispositional capability within subjectivity is already present and not revealed simply at the moment this relational activity between field and \textit{habitus} occurs. The historical process of this relation brings forth the disposition into social life, demarking its limits and clarifying its formulation of a certain doxa, yet this historicization necessitates a dispositional structure to always already exist in social subjects, rather than be a historical contingency itself. The way out of this, it seems, is in how Bourdieu understands identity formation.

If disposition is the heart of subjectivity, then the practices of multiple subjects from dispositions in similar points in the social realm form the basis of a Bourdieusian theory of community. But the practice of dispositional subjectivity by multiple subjects does not necessitate group formation and communal action in everyday life. Bourdieu acknowledges that in the relationality of the field, the illusion, and the \textit{habitus} that brings to fore the sociality of subjects, there is a distinction between "classes on paper" (or theoretical groupings of subjects) and an actual group mobilized in common struggle. This distinction arises because, in the words of Stuart Hall, there is no necessary correspondence between knowing one's position and acting according to the logic that would best improve one's position in society (a logic that always hinges on capital accumulation for Bourdieu). Indeed, while Bourdieu's sociology offers an insight as to how similarly dispositioned subjects can recognize themselves conceptually as in common, it does not provide elucidation into how similarly dispositioned subjects could or should act upon this recognition.

In Bourdieu's formulation, he short cuts from the epistemological othering necessary for identity formation (i.e. knowing that different positions in society exist but that similar positions can allow for similarity in identity through processes of categorization) to the ontological positioning that populate such formations (i.e. all those with similar doxa are necessarily within the same category and identity). In part, this can be restated to say that Bourdieu glosses over how the articulation of different social identities informs the interpellation of subjects into those identities. This shortcut can be expanded and clarified by recognizing how this occurs via social performatives, social performatives that Bourdieu mar-
Bourdieu does offer this: "this work of categorization, i.e. of making-explicit of and classification, is performed incessantly, at every moment of ordinary existence, in the struggles in which agents clash over the meaning of the social world and of their position within it, the meaning of their social identity" ("The Social Space" 729). He does recognize that there is work to be done to uphold the categories of identity (though this work is not ideological, it is doxic) and that subjects are not magically transposed into identities simply because certain classification schemes exist. But what seems missing is the technology of this interpellation that conjunction the classification (identification) with certain subjectivities residing in similar dispositional structures that can be usefully understood as classes (identities). In other words, how do classes on paper become classes in action? And how do they materialize into a collective of subjects who act beholden to one another?

In part, this lack is one limitation of Bourdieu’s work for thinking through community without unity, for he too often assumes that if a subject is classified by another subject who has more capital than the former, the agentic struggle of improving class meaning does not occur until after the latter has classified the former, making the dispositional actions of both subjects simply determined by positionality in a societal hierarchy. In other words, he is too quick to assume that with the authority backed by the right capital, the performative classification utterances of those of higher rank in society easily creates the classification realities of those lower in social position, therefore limiting the improvisational ability of subjects. Judith Butler pursues a similar point in critiquing Bourdieu’s use of Austin's performative philosophy of language ("Performativity’s Social Magic").

According to Bourdieu, subjects are both classified and classifiers simultaneously, though with the uneven distribution of capital and the uneven power different subjects and groups can utilize, not all are equally classified and classifiers. But while the classification is an on-going struggle, the social performative to classify serves as a weak basis to hold others into a classification. All subjects are classified, but some are more classified than others. In Bourdieu’s own theorization that makes capital accumulation the determining factor in dispositional improvisation, he falls back on stabilizing the classifications that he wants to keep as “classes on paper.”

In part, Bourdieu is limited by his use of performatives as mere exchanges in a symbolic economy of language. The use of performatives is bound by the uneven distribution of the cultural and symbolic capital that informs a subject how to use them properly. While this economy is framed by the illusio and field in which it operates, Bourdieu seems to already assume a closure about the meaning of such performative acts and how such uses are functions of a fixed sense of what classes (identities) can and will be formed. Subjects that contest the meaning too much thus fall outside of a field and its “rules of the game” rather than participate in improvisational activities that serve to alter it and its internal economy of capital. The meaning of performative acts is seemingly an a priori to the system of interactions that provide the context to those meanings. In other words, Bourdieu seems to argue that meaning is pre-social. Hence, identities are brought into being by being named, but only if these names are already recognizable as names, as identities, as possible positions of subjectivity, as already having meaning. For Bourdieu, this naming is done by the authority always already given that power to name: “the holder of the monopoly of official naming” ("The Social Space” 734). This fixing of authority to name through the technology of the official, the public, seems to undermine any understanding that might be gained from Bourdieu about dispositional activity as more than a reaction to a pre-determined structure of meaning: dispositional activity, whether collective or not, can only be a struggle against what has already been named.

This might not seem to bode well to further explore community without unity, for the unity is seemingly already achieved in this theorization and the “improvisational” move becomes to remove the unity rather than to begin from community without unity. The disposition, it seems, is in the last instance determined by how it has always already been named by authority, not the supposed basis by which a subject can position itself to claim naming through improvisation. However, this actually serves as a foundation to move closer towards community without unity, particularly if the disposition is problematized further as a point of departure for performative struggle (that has discursive as well as material outcomes). That is, it is necessary to fully pursue what Bourdieu means when he writes the class-on-paper: it “is not really a class, an actual class, in the sense of a group, a group mobilized for struggle; at most, it might be called a probable class” ("The Social Space” 725). In other words, it is necessary to pursue not only how classes, identities and the subjects inhabiting such formations are functions of articulation and interpellation (Lacou and Mouffe), but also how groupings are always probable, always in potential, and therefore always lacking in unity (but not necessarily unification). Before I return to how this potential is engendered in the very construction of the habitus and its dispositional structures that bring identification and eventually community without unity to the fore by its performative namings, the meaning of potentiality needs elaboration. To fully explore the struggle that Bourdieu seems to close off in the last instance, it is necessary to turn to the philosophers of potential, particularly Jean-Luc Nancy.

Nancy and Diasporic Retreats of Freedom

“Being-called or being-in-language is the non-predicative property par excellence that belongs to each member of a class and at the same time makes its belonging an aporia.” - Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*

Similar to Bourdieu, Nancy seeks to understand how collections of individuals come together outside of an a priori basis of essential identity for common action. However, before one attempts to see the connections, one must reconcile the extreme differences between the two and the limits on simply fusing the two together into a new way to think of community. As such, only certain concepts overlap and only provisionally, and this paper will focus further on these points, leaving aside the incommensurable disagreements.

With that disclaimer, it is important to note that while Bourdieu reconciles the
power of the state as an authoritative structure in identity formation (and ultimately calling upon an increased state presence as a fortification against the increased social stratification wrought by neo-liberal globalization). Nancy explicitly wants to move away from formalized structures such as states (in the sense that states have been understood as nation-states) bound to definitive geographies of belonging and territory (Van Den Abbeele). However, he also wants to avoid the individualism of neoliberalism (Dallmayr). While both Bourdieu and Nancy write from a France deeply implicated in a post-Fordist social formation and accelerated globalization, Nancy seems to be more willing to embrace this epoch as one of positive change, even given the struggles that emerge (as exemplified for him by the massacres of contemporary Sarajevo). While Bourdieu at times wants to hang onto the historical geographies of struggle, Nancy seems to desire a more poetic geography of community that explodes the hegemonic geographies rooted in roots. Nancy, seeking the deferral of geography as part of common identity (i.e. the French or the Germans), seems to be a poetic geographer of diaspora and dispersal.

While Nancy's work is at times impenetrably dense, he does directly address the question of community, explicitly advocating for community without unity. While he defines community in numerous ways (community as ecstasy, community as finitude, community as myth) to refuse a singular definition, he does push towards community as forged in potential. The potential for community is community in itself, which Nancy terms "for itself"—"specificity" (The Inoperative Community). The coalescence of that potential into actuality is its moment of fixity, and such fixity is death. The essentializing logic of any moment of fixity is what Nancy identifies as the unity that kills community (or rather, the unity from which communities kill): "With unitary community [communauté unité] there is nothing but death, and not the sort of death found in the cemetery, which is a place of spacing or distinctness, but the death found in the ashes of crematorium ovens or in the accumulations of channel-houses" (Being Singular Plural 154-5; original italics).

Nancy's hyperbolic descriptions warn against actualizing a Bourdieusian "class on paper" without accounting for how that "class on paper" discounts the improvisations that occur when collectivities actually happen in social life. While Nancy may seem nihilistic, he alludes to numerous examples of such community at work such as German Nazism (based on the operationalization of an essential Aryan identity), the Bosnian Serb and the Hutu and Tutsi genocides (similarly justified by essential notions of identity and the threat to a community and its way of life), and French right-wing politics (such as Le Pen and his associated politics of fraternity, nationality, and isolationism).

While Nancy moves through the logic of communitarianism quickly to its end in fascism and totalitarian politics, it is easy to follow his logic, and the basis of his argument follows anti-essentialist efforts in identity work. At the heart of Nancy's thoughts on community is the inoperative community: inoperative because it does not work. Working community, he claims, is the achievement of belonging as a basis of communal interaction, and once the gesture towards belonging is made, one introduces technologies of exclusion. Nancy desires a community that necessitates no such technologies for its reproduction because there is no reproduction: community is recognized as always happening. Community is always happening as the struggle over what community means. Once that struggle achieves resolve, the process of that happening ends and community becomes an operative function to reproduce that resolve. In other words, once a community resolves itself as a community of something (i.e. Germanness), then the community has a purpose: to maintain that something via its reproduction (i.e. its Germanness, by getting rid of all of the non-Germans). Once community has a purpose, it becomes operative and necessitates technologies to uphold that purpose. As Nancy's allusions indicate, these technologies always have the potential to turn into physical violence.

For Nancy, individuals are always already within a context of sociality, not pre-given entities brought into social life or constructed out of society. Subjectivity is a matter of finitude in the sense that identification is contingent on another to signify the limits of the self and to recognize the self as a difference (Ingram). Thus, being is always being-with (Heidegger's Mitsein that comes before Dasein), and the basis of subjectivity is in sharing.

This then appears as the logical precursor to Bourdieu's dispositional activity. In Bourdieu's sociology, Nancy would argue that dispositions do not only beget their improvisational characteristics and insight into a greater societal context, but more importantly, engender (and are formed by) other dispositions. A significant difference in the two sets of ideas revolves around the categorization of these dispositions. For Bourdieu, the interaction among dispositions occurs in the realm of meaning, meaning which has been shown to be a pre-given entity of society in the above analysis, so that dispositional activity is recognized by individuated subjects as in common, as similar, as performatively sharing meaning. Dispositions, then, seem to be a priori categorized. Theoretical classes can easily slide into classes in social life. For Nancy, however, dispositional activity is recognized by subjects because it is recognized as uncommon, as different, as contesting shared meaning.

As difference is a fundamental concept of subjectivity, it is the sharing of difference (via exchange) that is at the heart of subjectivity. Dispositional activity is only realizable in the expression of difference through exchange. Difference must be upheld, or exchange ceases to occur. As thinkers from Aristotle to Marx have recognized, it is difference that makes exchange possible, for interlocutors in exchange only engage exchange because the other has something or is something different. The commonality resides in the existence of forms of exchange, forms of exchange which get reworked in everyday life to become acts of sharing, not just exchange. Out of these mechanisms of exchange, which form the basis for social life (though not in any necessarily structured manner), subjectivities can recognize how dispositional activity can be constructed as similar. The realization of being in common is a concept that must necessarily be constructed, constructed in certain ways, and maintains little correspondence to how different subjectivities approach exchange. Thus, Bourdieu's "class on paper" gets constructed and purposefully enacted to become a real class, a real configuration of dispositions, but only after much work is conducted to make this transition possible—work which never reaches an end. Therefore, in contrast to Bourdieu, Nancy views collectivity and community as something to be generated by social subjects, not uncovered by them given the proper doxa. Nancy insists that community is the ever-occurring effort to make a "class on paper" become real through shared exchange and that community should not have to work itself in this manner.
To argue that community does not nor should not work is to argue that there is no activity necessary to bring forth community. Rather, it is to posit the opposite: that community based on immanent essence needs to work because the basis of community is the constant and active unworking, or deferral, of essence. Community is not an organic force bringing people together and connecting these people to a place. Rather, community needs to be articulated through communication: the active engagement of subjectivities being-with one another that calls attention to the betweenness of subjects. This betweenness is not a bond because a bond assumes independent entities that exist on either end of the bond. Through communication, finite subjects do not appear in social life (because they are always already implicated in it); rather, communication is the act of what Nancy calls “compairance” (The Impoverished Community). Compairance is the exposure of the self through the other in which the self is able to recognize its own finitude and, therefore, realize that its subjectivity is a condition that presupposes togetherness (i.e. Nancy’s version of individuation, but a version that does not achieve an end for this process, as being is always being with another and becoming). Being together is the movement of being-with articulated as being-in-common (different than belonging or unity) through communicative acts. Communication is the activity of sharing—not just exchange—that finds its ultimate realization and articulation in the myth of community. Because singularity is always already exposing itself through communication and myth, individuation as it occurs in liberal thought does not exist; the only reality is relational. It seems necessary to point out the emergent intersections with Bourdieu. While Nancy problematizes subjectivity with greater complexity than Bourdieu, one can see that both pursue a subjectivity that situates itself in a relational reality. The exposure that Nancy writes on, the transcendental sociality that resides in the fields, the illusio and the habitation through which the disposition expresses itself. The disposition might well be argued as the historical form of being-with. To argue this, clarification is needed to work through its implications for community without unity, and further elucidation must occur to highlight Nancy’s work on myth and sharing as the articulations that bring forth being-with (compairance), or, in Bourdieusian terms, the particular illusio in which dispositions engage social life and become the basis for an actual, realized class.

For Nancy, it is through communication that community without unity emerges as a point of inoperative sharing. The myth that compairs, following this logic, exposes singularity as the constant difference of shared identification: myth is the articulation that brings into relation “the inscription of a meaning whose transcendence is indefinitely and constitutively deferred . . . the practice of a sharing of [different] voices and of an articulation according to which there is no singularity but that exposed in common” (The Impoverished Community 80). Myth is the activity that brings together because it maintains the traces of the historical articulations from acts of compairance. Myths are not only the stories we tell ourselves, but also the way by which we tell ourselves. Myths are always already public, shared, and in that sense performative illocutionary acts of communication. But while myth provides the enframing of compairance, the constant deferral of the meaning of myth is always already present because of inherent differences, and myth is also a point at which unity might be closed to end this deferral. Myth can become operative if it is worked to interrupt the deferral and if it establishes itself as more than myth (similarly to how doxa is emancipatory knowledge only if it is recognized as doxa rather than truth). The imperative moment of freedom, then, arises as the always present potential to interrupt myth’s interruption of deferral.

In other words, the attempt to re-work myth as an interruption of deferring meaning, which lends itself to giving meaning to those subjectivities communicating and positioning themselves through the myth, is an attempt at fix myth. To fix myth is a gesture towards believing in myth past myth: to make myth truth. This attempt at closure is an attempt at closing identification into identity. Nancy recognizes that this attempt is the very heart of political struggle in a post-Fordist social formation in which the enhancement of flexibility is attempted to be resolved by fixity (i.e. multiculturalism that essentializes difference). The reaction of exposing identity to deferred meaning can be to close more strongly the meaning of identity (i.e. close the myth-meaning of Germanness at the very moment of its exposure as constant deferral into true Germanness). Community without unity is a gesture to resist the closure of myth. Because modernity has been a series of processes to close myths, of creating identities (and subsequently identity politics), the agentic political project of a post-modern epoch is to actively defer: “Community then becomes the production and the appropriation of a pre-given identity” (Devisch 246-7).

What emerges here is Nancy’s reconciliation with a world that he claims is “anything but a sharing of humanity” (Being Singular Plural xiii). It is a world that is in constant struggle between fixity and deferral, between roots and routes. In this world, Nancy finds freedom in the very being-with that constitutes what might be called our contextual ontology. In this world, Nancy sees freedom emergent in the ability to engage one’s potential for deferral, to be against fixity. However, one can only do so within the confines of a shared myth, or else move beyond being-with into ipseity; Nancy wants co-ipseity (Being Singular Plural).

But what, or where, is this identification without identity, or community without unity? It resides in the dispersal of diaspora. In diaspora, one’s very being is deferred and meaning is always on the run. Diaspora is the basis of freedom because it provides the social formation of interruption of meaning while simultaneously providing a myth that is constantly being reworked from a number of infinite points in an infinite number of ways. Diasporic identification comes without nation, without a metaphysics of presence articulated through identity. In diaspora, one identifies not with identity, but with myth, with the active process of identity making. In doing so, one compairs into social life, and one can begin the politics of refusing the community that is death.

This politics of refusal is the potential that we share, a potential that emerges in a historical conjuncture of dispersal, such as the current era of mass migration, flexible accumulation, globaliza­tion, and the subsequent “postmodernization” of identity (Turner “Liberalism Citizenship”). In this way, Nancy seems to call for a citizenship of diaspora: one that denies the neo-liberal dream of global citizenship so implicated in a project of globalization from “above,” yet one that recognizes
that the local practice of that citizenship does not necessitate fixing that citizenship to the place where it can be enacted and lived (as in the nation-state). It seems that citizenship in Nancy’s world is relegated to the scale of community, as long as it is community without unity.

If it appears that Nancy’s politics of negativity is no politics at all, or politics of utopia, it is with good reason. Nancy deliberately hopes to retreat from the political as it is often understood, particularly by the Left (Sparks). This is necessary because politics has become the very act of fixity, and Nancy, in wanting to allow potentiality to flourish, must pursue a politics of mélée, or mélange, in which political identity does not exist (Being Singular Plural). In the end of his logic, politics must also be re-imagined as inoperative, as unworking itself, as a politics of whatever (Agamben). In the end, politics is not about articulating and interpelling a condition of belonging (and therefore engaging the hegemonic struggle to make classes), but about belonging as always potential, always probable, always in dispersal and deferral. Politics and community remains a process of the creation of different myths that allow for that belonging to never be interrupted, or made to belong.

Towards Community Without Unity: The Politics of Dis-positionings

“The antimony of the individual and the universal has its origin in language . . . it transforms singularities into members of a class, whose meaning is defined by a common property.”

- Giorgio Agamben, The Coming Community

At this point it is possible to bring Bourdieu and Nancy together to formulate a meaning for community without unity. To do so, the argument will focus on moving from basing subjectivity in dispositions to dis-positionings, towards dis-positionings. By rooting subjectivity at a point of dis-positioning, a point of potential, community becomes understood as the sharing of dis-positionings in a more direct politics than Nancy’s eventual retreat to negativity. After outlining this politics of dis-positionings, based in community without unity, I will attempt to demonstrate how this can be seen in action via the possible counter-work to the hegemonic contemporary anti-poverty efforts of post-welfare state urban community-building.

At heart, dis-positionings is a hermeneutic project that recasts Nancy’s use of the hermeneutics, or sharing of voices, with Bourdieu’s call to democratize the hermeneutics. The hermeneutics of dis-positionings ultimately hinges on a politics of naming. More discreetly, it is a politics of naming the doxic myth of community through performative acts. While this sort of politics serves to unbound the horizon of the hermeneutic through dispersal and deferral, it also remains enfamed by the limits of disposporach and the relations of power shaping such dispersals.

The disposition that Bourdieu initially offers is not a disposition in the common sense of an inherent characteristic of a subject. In his formulation of the real as relational, disposition emerges as the intersection of the individual and society, one that is in part called into being by the historical struggles constantly occurring to shape the field, illusio and habitus in which it can be known as a disposition. While Bourdieu fails to adequately problematize subjectivity—he merely identifies the point of convergence—Nancy attempts to think about dis-positionings as moments of comparison in social life, a notion that seems to more fully explore Bourdieu’s aims.

Nancy writes, “[O]ne is not in the disposition without being with the other-disposition, which is the very essence of dis-position” (Being Singular Plural 97). That is, because of the impossibility of liberal individualization (by which one can only think of singularities), subjectivity is always already implicated in social life through its exposure in social life. Subjectivity is always already in the process of becoming-with another, making itself and its other (co-ipsity). A disposition is never a single point that closes the individual from society but instead the very relationship, the betweenness, of individuals and social life. While a disposition maintains distinction from the historical-geographic conjuncture that bears it, it is also constituting and constitutive of the others in that conjuncture. For Nancy, this is being singular plural. For Bourdieu, it is the limit of a shared habitus. For both, and for thinking through community without unity, it is the basis of the potential of community.

But how does the dis-position bear upon itself and another? In the dis-position, the process of identification arises as the ability for a dis-position to share meaning, Dis-positionings, as deferred places of subjectivity, somehow interrupt the flow of deferred signification to forge communication. But communication, as myth or doxa, must not stop the flow; it need only redirect the flow into a shared communication. But how does a dis-position give basis to interrupt deferred meaning without falling back into the trappings of community with unity? Through the performative acts of dispersal that allow a common myth to prevail yet be infinitely reworked through a process of dis-positioning.

To rework this, the question can be posed differently: how does a subject (assuming, again, that subjectivity is fleeting) come to know itself as a subject, to have meaning? The short, phenomenological answer is through the Other, yet Nancy and those around him have shown that there is a longer answer necessary, particularly if the subject is to reconcile shifting subjectivity. Yet social life is a realm in which infinite deferrals are an ideal state of affairs. Concrete reality (still very relational) is about struggles over positionings to define meaning, and these struggles transpire over efforts of fixing and unfixing. At times the fixing achieves near closure (such as the near closure of the meaning of Germanness under Hitler) and at times the unfixing seems more dominant (such as on the confused streets of Seattle a few years ago). Social life is lived through these struggles of position, through the politics of dis-positioning. To know where this politics might begin, it is necessary to know how a singularity is positioned and how that positioning is an interpellation into a class, eventually to find how that class is articulated as unitary community. From knowing this, one can activate the work to dis-position, always already begun. One can explicitly engage in dis-positionings by pursuing the limits of the hermeneutic that provides a basis for unitary community (given by the limits of the shared meaning of performative acts). This then becomes an everyday struggle for freedom, and the basis for community without unity.
without unity seems to emerge at the boundary of meaning as such. While further work is necessary to elaborate many of the ideas within this paper, particularly in regards to empirical work, this paper has established some initial grounding to think about community without unity. At heart, community without unity is community forged in the struggle to compear and give meaning to that comperrncr, without settling that struggle. Community without unity is struggle in itself, against itself. This struggle is occurring right now, in the efforts to “return to community” and the hegemonic struggles that vie for the meaning of community—and for defining the boundaries of belonging—in many contemporary places.

Building Community in the City

Many of these concerns can be empirically investigated by turning to the urban arena. In the contemporary U.S. city, there is a current trend of rewriting the city from a place of pathology to a space of hope. This can be seen in the recent wave of gentrification, the promotion of the neo-traditional development model in urban planning, and even in the Hope VI housing program developed by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Much of this reworking is occurring through the development of community, by which increasing the experience of community in the city will presumably increase quality of life. The turn to community in many cities simultaneously occurs when more and more cities express global ambition, and purposively attempt to achieve positions in a global urban infrastructure as “global cities.”

Most poignant is the turn to community in post-welfare state anti-poverty work in the city. Much of this work has focused on building community to stave off endemic, spatially concentrated poverty, particularly to increase community capacity and neighborhood-level social capital. Programmatic efforts to build community unquestioningly see community as a good because it is assumed to be the natural functioning of human interaction. While people should naturally relate through community, some see it as necessary to impart efforts to build community for others who supposedly lack it.

Ultimately, this community-building work—ever present in urban civil society from settlement houses to Community Action organizations to Community Development Corporations—is seeing its solidification as a primary model to change the condition of impoverished, central city areas. The rise of such vast efforts as Comprehensive Community-Building Initiatives (CCBI) and faith-based development programs, sanctioned by the state, puts an intensified concentration on civil society to solve social problems via the idea of community.

Urban community-building is the explicit attempt to have local actors take control of their immediate context. It represents programmatic endeavors between impoverished neighborhood residents, philanthropies, and government agencies to have resident-lead strategies generated and deployed to solve problems. These problems, and the solutions to them, are conceptualized as generally pertaining to poverty, but are treated as having particular nuances in different localities. The scale of these localities becomes the neighborhood, and a connection is made between the scale of the neighborhood and the scale of the community to be built. The parameters of community-building, therefore, stretch to the limits...
of neighborhood, assuming that this allows a level of familiarity and local knowledge to coalesce into community capacity and social capital.

What is problematic is how such a community gets closed off, particularly the spatial processes that lead to the area being coded as in need of community development. Many community-building initiatives occur concomitantly with a general effort to revitalize an urban area. Such general revitalization efforts often attempt to draw upon strategies that will make a city more competitive in the midst of globalization: attracting commercial development, enticing business and manufacturing sectors with tax incentives and subsidization, investing in and highlighting aspects of the city that can attract tourism and make the city more entertaining, and enhancing current infrastructure such as schools, hospitals, and other services. Many of these efforts occur in strategic plans to comprehensively tie particular projects (such as the conversion of former warehouses into loft apartments) to other streams of development (such as the creation of artists’ districts and other commercial zones for retail outlets). But while community-building efforts may occur simultaneously as these other efforts to rewrite urban space, community-building often occurs in isolation from the broader activities, so that local communities are less local, and more localized, closed off from the context in which they reside and specifically focused on a bounded place.

Community-building programs such as CCLs, which are conceptualized more often in philanthropic boardrooms than in neighborhood streets, ask neighborhood residents to build community amongst themselves. They assume that the specific neighborhood can be the borders of a community and that the simple fact of residency in a neighborhood is enough of a similarity in disposition that such similarly positioned residents would naturally form a community, if only they have the support to do so. Community-building offers residents the resources to make a strong commitment to their place of residence, their local neighborhood, and the other people who also reside there. The belief that underpins this action is that community is the infrastructure necessary for economic development to take hold; by building community, residents are engaging the process to bring investment to their neighborhood and allow for the alleviation of their poverty.

But this turn towards community in the programmatic efforts such as CCLs has failed to connect those experiencing poverty with the overarching causes of that poverty. By focusing residents’ attention on the local, community-building ignores the broader economic, political, and social forces that contribute to an impoverished neighborhood’s condition, forces that occur more vividly at broader scales than the local. By having neighborhood residents focus on community at a local scale, community-builders ignore how the urban, the regional, and even the national and global scales impact a specific neighborhood’s status (Pastor, Jr., et al.). While the stated goal of many CCLs is to do just the opposite, by drawing attention to community without explicitly developing community without unity, this localization binds impoverished neighborhood residents to the place of their poverty and denies them the physical and social mobility that characterizes other inhabitants of the city.

Imagining community without unity as implemented in community-building, it is necessary for community builders to lay aside an assumed correlation between the residents of an impoverished area (often delineated as a local political unit or a census tract with over 40% of the households below the poverty line, the standard set by HUD) and commonality between these residents. Furthermore, the assumed difference between central city residents and suburban or regional residents must be removed as a hindrance to seeing the common fate that these groups share. Indeed, community-building activities should be precisely that: activities that provide the opportunity for previously “uncommon” social subjects to see each other as already being in common, rather than as attempts to build community upon assumed categories of people.

As such, community-building would not seek to make these categories operative (such as by a localized grouping of impoverished neighborhood residents together into a cohesive unit), but by challenging the mechanisms that would articulate them together and exclude them from being considered a part of other categories. One way to begin engaging this process of creating community without unity, one that is more honest to how many people experience social life, is to use community-building as an avenue to increase the rights to the city that its users can claim. As cities become more and more global in the scale at which they operate, the rights to the city need to be distributed in a similar manner, and residents of the city, especially impoverished neighborhood residents who have too often been characterized by and employed strategies based upon isolation, must be able to articulate themselves as beholden to all of the users of the city, regardless of residency or other markers of classification. The community that could be built could be one in which impoverished neighborhood residents can have a greater say in the future of the city, because they can become to be seen (by themselves and by others) as being in common with others beyond the parameters of the local neighborhood. Community-building, rather than a concerted effort to connect people to the places to which they “belong,” could be how belonging gets refused. It could be the mechanism by which community is opened up, and commonality, beholdenness, and collective action are experienced as processes, instead of as goals to obtain.

Conclusion

With all of this focus on community, more critical work is needed to investigate what community means and what community is to be built. Some recent work has demonstrated the contested meaning of community by revealing its ambiguity. Further work is necessary to comprehend not only why community resists so loudly for many people (and who those people are), but also to identify what community means, and how it can be reworked into a radical political concept of collective identification, rather than a reactionary position in a globalizing world. Such work would acknowledge that community is an important concept, but that it needs critical evaluation to learn how it can become a powerful force in bringing about positive change in people’s lives.
Lepofsky

Acknowledgments
I wish to thank Larry Grossberg, Jim Fraser and John Pickles for their insightful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

Notes
1. See Birdsell; Proctor and Smith; Sack; D. M. Smith, “Geography and Ethics: A Moral Turn?”, “Moral Progress in Human Geography: Transcending the Place of Good Fortune”, and “How Far Should We Care? On the Spatial Scope of Beneficence.”

2. By speaking of community-building, I refer to the concerted efforts over the last several decades to have “community” enter the realm of governmentality in more explicit terms (in part because of the ongoing devolution of state power and shifting meaning of the state in governing social life). Community-building, therefore, signifies activities from the development of gated communities in suburbs and neighborhood crime watches, to the public-private community building strategies employed to increase the quality of life of the urban poor (such as Community Development Corporations, Comprehensive Community-building Initiatives, or mixed-income housing developments).

3. For discussions of biologically- and culturally-based exclusions see Gilroy, There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation and Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line; Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity, and Rutherford.

4. See Appadurai; Anderson; Bhabha; and, Jameson and Miyoshi.

5. See Massey; Thrift; Harvey, Justice, Nature & the Geography of Difference, Graham; Hardt and Negri; Held; Przybniak and Dirlik; Vasta; and, Jameson and Miyoshi.

6. See Bauman; Bellah; Putnam, “The Prosperous Community: Social Capital and Economic Growth”; McKnight; Etzioni; and, Hall and Lindholm.

7. See Hillhorst; Brinn; G. Smith; and, G. Rose, “Imagining Poplar in the 1920s: Contested Concepts of Community.”


9. See Fowler; King; Farnell; and, Lane.

10. See Bourdieu and Eagleton; and, Schaffer.

11. Bourdieu means this in two ways: scholastic from the Scholastic philosophers, the source of his use of habitus and subsequent notions such as hexis and doxa; and, the general habitus of academia in which Bourdieu is firmly situated (and, some might say, sitting atop). This double meaning lends itself to enact how he sees one’s ability to be critically aware of one’s habitus, remain within the bounds of that habitus, and engage in strategically altering the habitus through improvisation.

12. Bourdieu draws this from Goffman and his notion of knowing one’s place. Bourdieu uses places and position interchangeably on this point, and I will follow him in that usage.

13. Bourdieu repeatedly uses the term “space” in what I am calling realm. I do this because of Bourdieu’s uncritical use of the term space, which takes on a meaning similar to that of Cartesian space. While the enhancement of Bourdieu’s understanding of space is necessary from a geographic perspective (and can be done using some of the theories that speak to complex spaces in contemporary critical geography), this is a topic for another paper.


16. “It is no accident that the verb katagoreithai, which gives us our ‘categories’ and ‘categoremes,’ means to accuse publicly” (Bourdieu, “The Social Space and the Genesis of Groups” 729).


18. See Bataille; Levinas; and, Blanchot respectively.

19. The more positive side of this statement comes from Aimé Césaire in 1955 in his Discourse on Colonialism: “a civilization that withdraws into itself atrophies; that for civilization, exchange is oxygen” (11).

20. See Dow; and, Nancy, The Inoperative Community.

21. This is also a revision of Marx: being-with as an ontological space and an attempt at a less onto-theological statement about ethics than Marx’s species being provides. Furthermore, Nancy writes on sharing rather than exchange; exchange is an operative relation and therefore one of unfreedom while sharing is relationally emancipatory. This is Nancy’s attempt at a post-marxist revival of communism that is not totalitarian (the political realization of community without unity). Most famously, Nancy calls this “literary communism” (The Inoperative Community), in which, following Bataille, social meaning emerges out of struggle through sharing, but fixing that meaning or that struggle is to create an “accursed share” (Bataille).

22. “In Nancy’s terms, people like Milosevic seek to put community ‘to work’” (Norris 275).

23. Particularly in the Jewish diaspora. Nancy, along with others such as Blanchot, Derrida, Agamben, Cixous (many of whom are Jews), idealize the Jewish experience through diasporic dispersal and uphold the Jew as the paradigm of political identification. This has been taken up as well by those directly in Judaica, both welcoming and critically (see, for example, Boyarin and Boyarin). There is also a long tradition in Jewish theology to recognize the hermeneutic experience of Judaism and the role of narrative in establishing a point of identification without definitive identity (see Shrage). This connection necessitates a different paper, as does the connection between a diasporic politics of identification related to an actor-network theory as the necessary “structural constructivism” knowledge to formulate such diasporic politics.

24. See Hardt’s endnote in The Coming Community about the difficulty of translating the Italian quadrangolare into English as “whatever.”
26. Bourdieu explains, "Language constitutes itself and articulates itself out of the 'as'. No matter what is said, to say is to present the 'as' of whatever is said. From the point of view of signification, it is to present one thing as another thing (for example, its essence, principle, origin, or its end, its value, its signification), but from the point of view of meaning and truth; it is to present the 'as as such'" (Being Singular Plural 88; original italics). Also, see Agamben.

27. See Harvey, Space of Hope; N. Smith; Donald; and, Lees.

28. See Evans; Sites; and, Talen.

29. See Craig; Sassen, "The Global City" and Cities in a World Economy, Knight and Gappert; and, Yeo.

30. See Chaskin; Chaskin et al.; Checkoway; Clavel, Pitt and Yin; Cohen and Phillips; Craig; Dickens; Dominelli; Ferguson and Dickens; Kingsley, McNeely and Gibson; Kretzmann and McKnight; Mattessich, Monsey and Roy; and, Shaw and Martin.

31. See Lepofsky and Fraser; and, Pastor Jr. et al.

32. See Lefebvre; Amin and Thrift; and, Donald.

33. See Craig; Duffy and Hutchinson; G. Rose, "Imagining Popular in the 1920s: Contested Concepts of Community", Talen; and, G. Rose, "Performing Inoperative Community: The Space and the Resistance of Some Community Arts Projects."

Works Cited


Towards Community Without Unity


Lepofsky


