

**COMMUNITY AT
LOOSE ENDS**

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COMMUNITY

Recalling a Community at Loose Ends

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The writing of community, especially when mobilized by a strategy of critical revision, is a task of retrieving and unraveling loose ends, one's own as well as the multiple and often contradictory significations conjoined or recollected by this collective signifier. It is a task that although it lacks any definitive authorizing foundation, is always already situated, paradigmatically, politically, libidinally, and institutionally. The condition of being situated in the contemporary world order, marked as a "global village" linked by technologies of transport, communication, and information systems that reconfigure spatiotemporal distances and limits, is a complex affair of overdeterminations and polymorphous affiliations. The writing of community under such circumstances both calls and recalls the paradoxical places from which it emerges and toward which it moves.

When I reflect on the situation of this particular writing, I find myself moved to represent it through the feminist and postmodern discursive figures of the fractured subject whose discourse emerges through a play of semiotically coded positions. Whoever or whatever speaks in this text has emerged as a consequence of the variety of positions—geographical, temporal, affective, among others—that I have had occasion to occupy since some of my colleagues at Miami University began to organize the two-year series of events that became known as "Community at Loose Ends." One phase of that process is represented by the essays in this volume, all of which were presented, in some version, at our institution in Oxford, Ohio, during the fall of 1988.

Many of those voices likely "belong" to some of my colleagues at Miami who have been working together for over two years on the dimensions of the

“community at loose ends” that cannot be adequately represented or simulated by this volume. What situates this writing but cannot exactly be written is the effect of this proleptic endeavor of trying “to be a community” at the same time that one is also reading and thinking, and writing and talking about it. In practice, this meant that “the Miami chapter” of the community at loose ends, only some of whose contributions are directly represented in this volume, sustained itself as an elective commitment to the pursuit of the question of how to exist as a community devoted to the pursuit of community. Much of what emerged from this process is inscribed in a situationally specific register that does not lend itself to description or prediction, and that cannot be represented on a blueprint or measured for a prescription. Its exchange value may be limited by the fact that it existed in local script, which is never completely transferable. And because, at least in my case, the value of that experience is also registered in a currency of pleasures and resistances that are inseparable from the specificities of their occasion.

Part of what was especially valuable, that is, pleasurable, and at times infuriating about this process for the Miami contingent was that this community at loose ends was one that entailed a commitment of time, energy, and mental space to do work that was not, in any of the ordinary institutional senses, “one’s own.” This was a community that was, therefore, enabling but also demanding. Its structures both facilitated and expected a commitment both to the solitary discipline of reading and thinking, and to the discipline entailed in getting together periodically to talk and think collectively about what we had read in common. This process, to be sure, was not without its frustrations and struggles. This was after all a group that although from a certain demographic height appeared relatively homogeneous—i.e., mostly white, middle-class intellectuals (students and faculty) from humanities departments—was also defined by and heavily invested in the differences in its members’ expertise, institutional positions, ideological affiliations, and political agendas. These differences became objects of deadlock and resentment almost as often as they enabled a provocative semiotic play of positions. As a community in resistance—to hegemonic forms of authority, knowledge, and institutional and discursive practices—it was also a community that produced its own forms of resistance, to which I will return in the concluding statements of this essay.

But at the outset, and with a certain nostalgia, as I reflect on the effect of the community on my thinking about community, I must confess that the dominant register is that of pleasure in the form of a *jouissance* that is specific both to being a community and to being this particular community. Not surprisingly perhaps, this effect became most pronounced for me during the semester when I began writing this piece, which was also a semester in which I was away from the community that I was, at least in some sense, writing for and about. Faced with my own separation from the activities of the group, I became more acutely aware of their significance. The occasion to read in common and speak with each other

about what we had read was a significant part of the enterprise of rethinking community, especially in light of the institutional logic of the academy, where one's professional position is justified largely by the fact that there is no one else there reading and studying what you do. Against this background, reading in common with those with whom one also shares an institutional space is powerful and in this case was also provocative. Part of what the activities of this group provoked, beyond some intensive arguments and debates, was a collective sense that the sign of community in this case was not just a discursive object, but also a way of being and doing things collectively in which those party to the discussion and the project in which we were engaging together were also implicated, emotionally and psychically as well as intellectually.

It is this affective sense of a connection that is singular and yet not solitary that I am both recollecting and drawing upon with pleasure as I write this. The specificity and nonrepeatability of this part of the community at loose ends will, I suspect, continue to connect those who were a part of it in ways that will never be fully articulate to any of us, but will nonetheless continue to haunt and appeal to us. It is also that which this text hopes somehow to commemorate, as a gesture of gratitude for a gift that cannot be repaid in kind, both to our guests and to those with whom I continue to work. Their voices can also be heard in this essay, and in the others in this volume.

Although our discussions were marked by a certain local specificity, they might also be situated within the more general paradigmatic frameworks marked by another contemporary collective signifier, that of "postmodernism." Although that signifier suffers from a certain vagueness, and is often used to abridge important differences between the viewpoints collected under it, the form our discussions took, the questions we asked and the issues that emerged as sites of contest, bore the influence of theory and aesthetics in which any gestures of preemptive totalization and condensation are already problematized, and in which much of the traditional rhetoric associated with discussions of community has already been placed under erasure.

This discussion is also informed by a critical sensibility in which the discursive and political potency, legitimacy, and utility of the language of community is not and cannot be taken for granted because so many of the other signs and concepts that have historically been appropriated as part of its articulatory apparatus have also been put in question. Since deconstructive readings have problematized the mechanisms of closure that have traditionally produced unified, coherent, rational subjects and societies, dissolving them into semiotically localized plays of differences, the strategic and conceptual function played by the notion of community must also, as a consequence, be recast. In a postmodern context, the problematic of community is no longer that of articulating the possible conditions for the formation of a collective will or state of being capable of superseding or supplementing a situation in which individuated subjects are already particular-

ized through placement in a grid of oppositional distinctions. Nor can community be figured as a mark of a state of grace already given to those with being in common as consequences of a common origin or nature. Absent the foundational terms that have traditionally functioned as its markers, community in the post-modern world is a far more complex and ambivalent signifier, linked not only with need and desire, but also with the forces of resistance and denial.

In the discourse of Western metaphysics, concepts of community emerge within a logic of bipolarity in which the language of collectivity is paired as the opposing or supplemental term with respect to individuals or particulars. Within such a dualistic framework, the function of community has largely been that of managing, consolidating, or overriding the dissembling effects of a *nonregulated* interplay of differences. The maintenance of order through appeal to the collective is as vital to Plato's republic as it is to Kant's kingdom of ends. Within the oppositional logic of individuals and universals, the problem of community is cast largely as a problem of genesis, which seeks the modes of affiliation, co-presence, and identification that could emerge, or that already serve to bind this collection of already autonomous and atomistically related particulars.

This way of posing the problem of community initiates a particular agenda with respect to the representation and positioning of differences. Differences are what this concept of community is intended to overcome. As two hegemonic formations constitutive of our contemporary conception of community, Christianity and liberalism represent historical efforts to initiate visions of a social order founded on a model of community in which differences are harmoniously sutured or drastically diminished in their effect and significance. Whether through appeal to a myth of common origins in God or to the natural order, to preestablished harmonies, human nature, or social contracts—to name but a few of the apparatus nominated for this function—the effect of these hegemonic formations of community has been to solidify a logic of sameness with respect to that which it also collects, while concealing or mystifying the mechanisms by which this effect is produced.

For both Christianity and liberalism, the economy proposed for the elimination of difference is the economy of presence. But as with all such recuperative gestures, they also work to reactivate that which they exile or repress. Hence the logic of difference reasserts itself within the logic of community, not as a representation of presence, but as a supplemental difference that emerges from its circulation, its exchange, its writing. As a result of its circulatory recurrence in a range of sociometaphysical paradigms, the sign of community is infected with a certain elasticity that resubjects community to a range of projects and strategies. The term circulates promiscuously through a variety of discourses—often with the effect of muddying the ideological waters. One may find appeals to community as an authorizing force of exclusion, when the U.S. Supreme Court uses the language of “community standards” as the basis on which particular cultural ar-

tifacts may be removed from circulation. One may hear in the totalizing discourses associated with hegemonic forms of authority the appropriation of community as a way of marginalizing the effects of structuring difference, like race, gender, and class, precisely in order to pacify those disadvantageously positioned by those differences. Both presidential candidates in the recent election were careful to remind Americans that “we are all one” — even as government statistics demonstrated the widening economic gaps among us. Similar rhetoric is often associated with advocacy groups like the Chamber of Commerce.

But ironically, the term that is supposed to supersede the disruptive effects of difference can also be appropriated for discourses of differentiation. When gays, blacks, and feminists, for example, appeal to the notion of community as part of a movement rhetoric or on their own behalf, that appeal takes the form of a demand, a demand for the recognition of differences and the systematic asymmetries they produce. For a member of a marginalized group, the invocation of community marks an existentially and politically vital site of affiliation, and a refusal of false inclusion or erasure.

Community can be offered as an object of appeasement or incitement, aspiration or accomplishment, because it is also an object of appeal, not called in its presence but rather addressed proleptically in its absence. The elasticity of community is its appeal, an appeal that operates not as presence but as discourse, exchange, and difference. The elasticity of community as an overdetermined cultural sign allows for its circulation as a common element of the Western social imaginary, independent of any consensus about its signification. That is because community is not a referential sign but a call or appeal. What is called for is not some objective reference. The call of community aims at response, a calling back. The call of community initiates a conversation, prompts exchanges in writing, disseminates, desires the proliferation of discourse.

When one reads the appeal to community in this way, as the call of something other than presence, the problematic posed by the prospect of community shifts to the economy of discourse and articulation. Within the framework of this dispersive episteme, the question of community is less a matter of organizational logistics or normative consolidations, and more a problematic framed within the strategic dynamics of writing. As a result, the thinker is confronted with somewhat different questions. How, and for whom, does one write of community? From where, or on what basis, does one write? How can one represent the possibility of sociocorporeal totalities in an era of antitotalization? How can community be represented without occluding the very economy of differences upon which writing and articulatory exchange depend?

The variety of idiolects and conceptual strategies taken by the essays that form this community at loose ends indicates that there is much more at stake than a choice between rhetorics and voices and fetishized differences. When community is considered as an intertextual construct with a contradictory and ambiguo-

ous history, the questions of how and for what purpose one now chooses to write of it, and what form such writing should assume, confront the writer with a complex nexus of positional choices. In attempting to write community, should one be operating within the genre of myth, producing a discourse of desire that proceeds on the basis of the lack or absence of that which is called for by the writing? Or is one producing a retrospective commemorative narrative, a writing after the fact? Is the sign of community to be deployed as a descriptive concept, marking something factual, given not as a matter of choice or effort but rather as a dynamic that is situationally conditional? Or is the sign of community to be used as a marker along a normative continuum, and therefore represented in the language of what ought or ought not be? Is community to be figured as that which can be celebrated or strived for as an antidote to alienation and subjugation? Or ought it be challenged for its politics of false inclusion, its denial of difference, and its utility as an apparatus of hegemony? Should the writing of community work to facilitate or obstruct the formation of community in thought and practice?

The essays collected in this volume have reached no consensus, nor did they aim at producing some discursive resolution. But the points of contention between them indicate that resituating the problem of community within a discursive economy does not displace political questions, but reposes them in other registers, among them the registers of intertextual histories of authority and the legitimation of power through knowledge. The epistemic problematic of community emerges as a problem of legitimacy and entitlements. From where arises the authority to constitute the "we" of community, and what position is assumed by the agent or apparatus of this constitution? Is the discourse that writes community a performative in which the forms of collective affiliation connoted by community are produced in the very gesture of naming? Within the framework of an epistemics of difference, on what grounds is one entitled to evoke the sign of that which supersedes difference? What is the relation between power and knowledge assumed by such writing, and how ought its consequences be gauged?

Because community can function as an authorizing signifier, a circulator of authority, and is also that in terms of which demands can be made and claims to entitlement staked or avoided, it has assumed a certain importance for critical discourses, like Marxism, which seek to intervene in the hegemonic construction of authority. The signifier "communism" functions in Marxist discourse as a critical disruption of the dominant myths of community that legitimate the maintenance of an oppressive system of differences. Communism is represented as the alternative to the kind of community that works as a form of mystification and hence as an impediment to the recognition of class struggle. Marxism provides an account of the origins of the myth of community in the needs created by a system in which labor is alienated and human relationships are governed by laws of competitive individualism, possession, and exploitation. Because individua-

tion is produced as a consequence of social relationships of domination, individuation emerges as a form of suffering from which one seeks relief, salvation. It is the persistence of the conditions that produce this need that helps account for the perpetuation of visions of community that are clearly counterfactual, but continue to speak to the proleptic logic of desire. Marxism offers the myth of "communism" as alternative and antidote, as a way of organizing human needs for affinity under the sign of a liberatory revolution, and as a visionary position from which to engage in a systematic critique of existing social relationships.

For some time, especially in a European context, Marxism has been the dominant discourse for circulating community as a critical, revolutionary signifier. It is precisely the hegemony of this idiolect and its specific articulatory apparatus that may have prompted several of the contributors to position their discourses as "post-Marxist." Such a designation asserts an unwillingness to be bound by Marxism's particular mythology, metaphysics, and rhetoric, as well as casting a critical regard on the social movements that have been carried out under the banner of communism. But I think it is a misreading to assume that such a designation marks a site of refusal, an unwillingness to engage the political consequences of the effort to revise a sign as central to our social imaginary as is the sign of community, despite Lyotard's ironic cast on political enthusiasms. The appropriation of Marxism as that which is to be superseded already situates many of these essays within a politically marked space in which Marxism is but one form of articulating revisionist impulses.

If decentering Marxism as the privileged progressive narrative is a crime, then that crime committed by postmodernism cannot be read as one of betrayal, especially since much of the postmodern reading of Marxism as a mythology appropriates and recuperates many of the strategies used by Marxists in their ironic readings of bourgeois social narratives. The refusal to grant regulatory status to Marxist rhetoric ought not be read as tantamount to a refusal of politics as such, as if such a thing were even possible. This refusal is better read as a political strategy, which has, as one of its effects, the reopening of the political as a site of discursive contestation. Because such contestation does not depend on privileged access to some form of knowledge, presence, or consciousness, its epistemic economy moves in the direction of disseminating sites of intervention, and hence decentralizing authority. The strategic effect of politicizing discourse is not to truncate the political but rather to force attention to the political mechanisms by which the political is historically produced as a socially legitimated discourse.

Part of what is at stake in the postmodernist critique of Marxism's image of community entails a dispute over epistemic politics, specifically the rejection of the notion of privileged positions, consciousness, or states of being, presumed by the Marxist narrative of "revolutionary liberation," as well as by the methodology of dialectical materialism.

Part of what may also motivate opposition to the Marxist conception of community is a desire to differentiate discursive politics from the mythology of the revolutionary vanguard, a position second-generation Marxists like Lenin assigned to writers and theorists. In the classical formulation of second-generation Marxists, the vanguard is the ideological arm of revolutionary struggle charged with the historical mission of generating the signs through which the proletariat's emerging class consciousness can recognize and articulate itself. Part of the vanguard's historical mission is to instigate a counterculture capable of displacing the reified mystifications produced by the ruling class. As the mediator between the historically specific position of the revolutionary class and the liberatory position toward which they are to be moved, the vanguard stands in a relationship of transcendence and relative privilege with respect both to the conditions that motivate their discursive production and to the destinations of that production. The vanguard operates in Marxist theory with the authority ascribed to those who can articulate the mechanisms of false consciousness because they also enjoy the epistemic power of transcendence over them. The vanguard can act as free agents, as historically underdetermined, because they somehow avoid subjugation by that which they disclose and resist.

If this is one of the myths in terms of which a community of critical theorists is formed, it is also one from which many theorists identified with a postmodernist politics of knowledge, as well as with movements on behalf of oppressed or marginalized people, would want to dissociate themselves. As one who is both identified with and has been politically educated by these struggles against domination, I have been moved by the writing emerging from these movements that has pointed to the contradiction between Marxism's liberationist rhetorics and its imaginary of social transformation through mastery, dialectical or otherwise. Anyone who has ever been silenced because he or she is female or gay or black or poor would likely, as I do, want to resist the idea that some speech is intrinsically privileged, epistemically, historically, or otherwise. Anyone who has operated from a position marked as marginal needs, at some level, to resist the reification of historical positioning, and its normalization through the authority of knowledge. If such differences of access to authority exist, and they do, the mythology that elevates these differences to the order of being, to an indication of having been chosen for the grace of privileged access, must be resisted strategically, not as false consciousness, but as bad politics, i.e., politics that recuperates its own mythic resistances and then misrecognizes them as liberatory strategies.

One site of resistance to the politics of mastery has come from the literature of struggle against oppression, which contests the terms in which the boundaries of the political have been hegemonically overdetermined, as well as from the critical interventions of postmodernism into the hegemonic politics of knowledge. When feminists insist the "the personal is political," such discourse works to intervene in the mechanisms that construct the political as a specific apparatus

and expertise to which only some, by definition, will ever have access, whether by choice or necessity. The contention that the personal is political politically contests that construction, in part, with a *different political imaginary*, one in which the political community is not that which is entered electively, hence also that which one can refuse or resist, but a nonnegotiable consequence of our being in relation and in difference.

If the personal is political, so is that which has been generated as its correlate. If the personal is political, so is the call of community. It is not a call that can be refused, in the ordinary sense, but a nonnegotiable consequence of our being together. The political imaginary of community set in motion by this kind of political intervention is not that of another long forced march. Less a politics dependent on the mythology of mass mobilization, the political resistance I am associating with antiauthoritarian struggles like feminism is one dependent on mechanisms of dissemination as well as condensation, inscription as well as conscription. In recasting the political relationship between the personal and that which the personal is designed to resist, a critical intervention is made into the contemporary political economy of knowledge, as well as into the hegemonic social imaginary of those positioned by and invested in it. Addressing intellectuals in a way that already implicates them in a communal context tends to disrupt the hegemonic mythology of a community of thinkers related only as independent dissociated points of view whose value and integrity are defined by the maintenance and fetishizing of differences, particularly those attached to a system of subjects fixed by proper names. This disruption has the effect of occasioning the articulation of a certain form of resistance to the idea of community, a resistance situated in a counterimaginary, that is, a different narrative of what community portends for thinkers.

There is much in the contemporary political economy of knowledge and its system of competitive merit that encourages resistance to the kinds of affiliation suggested by the language of community. In the system of rewards governing contemporary scholarship, value is assessed and privileges distributed according to codes of originality and singularity, that is, by the work's capacity to set itself apart. This political economy is also buttressed by the romantic narrative of the thinker as the one who stands outside the community, as its gadfly, conscience, or prophet. It is a tale as old as Socrates, but one that has been progressively elaborated and reinvented by legendary figures like Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida. It is a story that encourages the thinker to assume a position toward what exists in common that is exclusively alienated, and that addresses it only to destabilize it through critique, disruption, or deconstruction. It is a theme with many variations. One version, initiated by thinkers like Thoreau, Emerson, and Rand, constitutes the sphere of commonality as that which promises false comforts and threatens loss of vision, ingenuity, and power. The heroic thinker is the one who maintains the integrity of his isolation, and whose stature and authority

arise from his refusal of association, his willingness to stand alone. This figure sets in motion an imaginary ideal of intellectual independence that is metaphorized solipsistically, and where the common is only that which is to be overcome, or at least resisted.

The writings collected in this volume address this intellectual imaginary in a way that forms a community of resistance with other antiauthoritarian discourses and struggles. The community at loose ends works against this elective refusal of the common by insisting on its differences in ways that disrupt the circuitry by which the call of community is made and heard, especially by those engaged in the production of cultural signs, which is largely as a call for the denial of difference. Rather than a disciplinary call to mass mobilization, the community at loose ends seduces by its looseness, its willingness to exhibit its differences face to face, in public and in print. This insistence on the conspicuous display of differences works to frustrate and resist any political imaginary founded on mastery, any myth of the common as that which solidifies authority. This strategic display of difference is excessive with respect to a hegemonic political economy in which knowledge is linked with the production of social utilities and the consolidation of authority through the reification of signs and the mass mobilizations of populations around them. For some readers, this promiscuous excess may read as a form of decadence incompatible with a political imaginary founded on models of mastery and organizational discipline. They will want to resist the forms of community-in-complicity that they are being called to recognize. They will want to resist the disseminative imaginary of writing that calls in the form of seduction.

Others, like me, will be seduced into complicity with this effort to reinvent some of our social imaginaries, this disseminative invitation in the call-and-response mode. The appeal of the community at loose ends from where I think and write is that in that very thought and writing, I am already also placed in community with that which also calls and responds in this text. This allows me to begin to imagine a way of speaking and writing community that can recognize itself in all those moments in which my being with others, in relation and differences, is what speaks in me, is what allows me to speak of me and the other. I imagine a call of community that appeals across differences along more promiscuous and disseminative circuits than are currently available. I imagine a speaking of community that speaks in the voice of the other, and is better capable of understanding, appreciating, celebrating what that means.

I refuse to live and create from a defensive position. I write to fight.

—Ntozake Shange