RE-EMBEDDING COMMUNITY

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In "disavowing community," Stone[1] has rekindled the debate on *community*. On deconstructing the modernist understanding of community she rejects the principles of sameness and locale hitherto found to be necessary for any community formation. Instead, the principle of difference is emphasized, as she proposes a new conception, that of *heteromity*, as a postmodern replacement. Along similar lines, Young,[2] a feminist philosopher, proposes the politics of difference, while rejecting the ideal of community; in community she finds an innate problem of exclusion because of the desire for wholeness and unity. Her postmodern conception, the politics of difference, is derived from the ideal of *an unoppressed city*. At issue for both philosophers are the modernist concept and foundation of community, and its rejection.

Raywid,[3] in her presidential address in 1988, best captured the modernist notion of community, drawing primarily upon its Deweyan understanding. She argued for an attachment and bonding found missing among many youngsters in our schools, particularly inner-city schools. Her proposals for rootedness and memory, cohesion and commonality, were a far cry from the postmodern deconstructivist version of community we find in Stone and Young.

I propose to examine these two strands of the community debate by delineating the postmodern deconstructivist conception as seen particularly in Stone and Young and the modernist Deweyan conception proposed by Raywid. Interestingly, these three philosophers draw upon the urban scenario in either proposing or rejecting community. It is this very urban setting, I will argue, that should engage us in reconceptualizing community; however, my argument is grounded in ecological considerations. For this, I draw upon postmodernists to make a constructivist case for re-embedding community.

MODERNIST COMMUNITY

The following two paragraphs are the most commonly quoted Deweyan sources that capture the essence of modernist community.

> There is more than a verbal tie between the words common, community, communication. Men [sic] live in a community in virtue of things they have in common; and communication is the way in which they come to possess things in common. What they must have in common in order to form a community or society are aims, beliefs, aspirations, knowledge — a common understanding — like-mindedness as the sociologists say.[4]

> Whenever there is conjoint activity whose consequences are appreciated as good by all singular persons who take part in it, and where the realization of the good is such as to effect an energetic desire and effort to maintain it in being just because it is a good shared by all, there is in so far a community.[5]

Community, for Dewey, denotes a group of individuals who have shared interests and mutually pursue the common good. One cannot impose membership on an individual. Rather, communities come into being because individual members come together to pursue common interests. The single most prevalent distinction between the premodern and modern conception of community has been the almost inseparability of neighborhood and community in the former. However, unlike premodern times, when neighborhood and community were almost inseparable, proximity of association and

living, though generally considered important, are no longer a requirement for community. No geographical boundaries and spatial limits can prevent the formation of communities. Nonetheless, when not bounded in time and space, such communities have limited though specific purpose and interest. Locale does foster and nurture the possibilities for long-term association and membership.

As Raywid has elaborated, interdependence, communication, mutuality, and sharing are all essential qualities of community. She adds "the intention of longevity and permanence and an ethic of individual concern and sympathy" as constitutive elements of community.[6] The above conditions help "the shaping of individual identity, an acceptance of group standards and a desire to abide by them, commitment, a sense of place, and identification with a group, along with a consciousness of a kind," Raywid argues.[7] Further, these result in a sense of harmony and mutuality, although some degree of group exclusion is inevitable, according to her.

Community, thus, is said to perform functions significant both to the individual and to society; it advances not only personality development and integration, but also social cohesion and stability, as Raywid has elaborated.[8] Since she finds that these qualities are "missing from our lives," she proposes a firmer and more rooted sense of self[9] and, as a major task of education, the creation of attachments and bonds when there are few.[10]

DECONSTRUCTING COMMUNITY

For deconstructivists, at issue is this modernist ideal of community where identity, commonality, and unity are privileged over difference; where direct contact or immediacy is prized over mediation; and where sympathy or understanding of others' points of view is an unqualified requirement irrespective of one's limitations in understanding those points of view.[11] While community may be cherished as a dream, it is considered to be politically problematic. In desiring unity over difference, community inevitably promotes homogeneity, it is argued; one only needs to look at modern cities to realize how unrealistic this vision is, the deconstructivists claim.

Worthy of exploration, I believe, are the following criticisms levied at community and alternatives proposed by deconstructivists: unity and sameness are prized over difference; time and space distanciation are not accounted for in community formation; and, embodying the politics of difference, the ideal of the unoppressive city provides a more realistic alternative to the ideal of community.

Unity and sameness prized over difference: For both Young and Stone the longing and preference for unity, sameness, and commonality that community requires, create exclusions and dichotomies.[12] Stone, for instance, finds contradictions in setting up "individualism, rationality, and choice — in themselves atomistic units — as central components of community."[13] In unpacking the contradiction, she proposes a shift in the understanding of associations — one founded on difference rather than similarities. Her new ideal — heteromity — would not only replace 'community' but also take care of the internal contradictions she finds in community, since the base of "sameness" would be replaced by one of "difference":

> Several conceptual components seem crucial to a heteromity and the first is the basic inclusion from difference rather than exclusion from sameness. A second is multiple and changing sub-group interior and exterior regrouping in which members move in and out — group boundaries are easily permeable. A third is that members' identities are themselves multiple and non-privileged and therefore are "differing" in themselves. A fourth is that group identity is conceived of as itself decentered in the differentiated and disrupted marginality of all its members.[14]

For Stone and also Young, the multicultural realities of urban life compel a rethinking of the criterion of sameness and unity required for the formation of community. The logic of identity is problematic for Young because "it is a metaphysics of the whole, of unity, of togetherness."[15] Insofar as it is a "closed totality" and "creates an outside/inside distinction," Young finds the metaphysics of

presence responsible for the "mutually exclusive oppositions that structure whole philosophies."[16] In denying difference, community submits to fusion instead of separation as the social ideal, argues Young.

Building on Kristeva, Young argues that subjects cannot make themselves transparent, wholly present to one another.[17] For her, the ideal of community assumes that individual subjects can empathize with one another, understand one another as they would understand themselves; however, comprehension of another is impossible because the subject does not understand himself or herself. Therefore, she claims that reciprocity is a futile endeavor; the denial of difference further makes it difficult for people to respect those with whom they cannot identify.[18] By denying heterogeneity, "… the ideal of community exhibits a totalizing impulse…. First, it denies difference within and between subjects. Second, in privileging face-to-face relations it seeks a model of social relations that are not mediated by space and time distancing."[19] Like Stone, Young too, proposes a new alternative to the individualism/ community dualism and the possibility of sharing of subjectivities in the formation of community. Her ideal is derived from the unoppressed city life, to be examined later.

Locale and direct contact cannot account for time and space separation and distancing: Community, in premodern times, was almost inseparable from locale; the gemeinschaft/gesellschaft distinction needs no elaboration. However, the face-to-face relations associated with the formation of community do not account for the consequences of modernity: those of time and space distanciation, where in "faceless commitments" are a way of life.[20] The model of decentralized small units is "unrealistic and politically undesirable," in particular as it avoids the political question of the relation among communities, once decentralized.[21] Young and Stone argue that theorists of community are inclined to privilege face-to-face relations because they wrongly identify mediation and alienation.

This disembeddeding of social systems from local contexts of interaction, and their restructuring across indefinite spans of time-space, are consequences of modernity. While community, and hence the spatial dimensions of social life were governed by local presence, the coming of modernity "increasingly tears space away from place fostering relations between 'absent' others, locationally distant from any given face-to-face interaction…[;]place becomes increasingly phantasmagoric: that is to say, locales are thoroughly penetrated by and shaped in terms of social influences quite distant from them."[22] Hence, the criteria of face-to-face interaction and coinciding of space and place must be contended with in any discussion of postmodern community.

In valuing difference over unity, sameness, and wholeness, and taking into consideration the limitations of face-to-face interactions, unoppressed city life provides a deconstructivist alternative to the ideal of community.

City life as an alternative to community: Young derives the norms of "openness to unassimilated otherness" taken from her understanding of modern urban life.[23] Rather than community as the normative ideal of political emancipation, "a model of the unoppressive city offers an understanding of social relations without domination in which persons live together in relations of mediation among strangers with whom they are not in community," maintains Young.[24]

For Young, the gemeinschaft portrayal of community as decentralized, economically self-sufficient, and embodying face-to-face relationships, is not only utopian but also undesirable. Her alternative:

> A model of a transformed better society must in some concrete sense begin from the concrete material structures that are given to us at this time in history, and in the United States these are large scale industry and urban centers. The model of society composed of small communities is not desirable…. If we take seriously the way many people live their lives today, it appears that people enjoy cities, that is, places where strangers are thrown together.[25]

City life exerts a vigorous attraction for many; Young points to its energy, its cultural diversity, its multiplicity of activities and vitality, and its technical complexities, as a positive experience which is welcoming to the formation of a vision of the good society. She describes the city as a "*kind of relationship* of people to one another, to their own history and one another's history."[26]

Young's attraction to city life lies in its contradiction to community: strangers meeting, dwelling side by side, encountering one another directly face-to-face or indirectly through media, "always to go off again as strangers."[27] In the metaphor of city life (as a political ideal of the unoppressive city), she finds the embodiment of the politics of difference.

RE-EMBEDDING COMMUNITY

By disavowing the unity, commonality and face-to-face interaction of community in favor of the difference and temporality embodied in the multicultural city life, Young and Stone, I believe, have rightly captured the disembeddedness of modern life. However, their deconstruction of community leads to an alternative association wherein individuals stay encapsulated as strangers to one another, interacting with one another as strangers, and parting once again, as strangers — not uncommon to urbanites. Grounded in the deconstructivist vocabulary of *difference*, 'heteromity' and the 'unoppressive city' are proposed as alternatives to the ideal of community. The conceptual terrain of difference mapped above serves as a framework, for me, not for rejecting community as Young and Stone do, but rather, for re-embedding our disembedded lives.

What indeed can be the imaginative possibilities for re-embedding community, given the urban scenario? One prospect can be derived from the ecological project and its considerations for ecological literacy and ecological sustainability.[28] Critical to its undertaking is the acknowledgement of the ecological destruction wrought by modern societies; in succumbing to the disembedding mechanisms of the market, individuals, as consumers, are caught up in the struggles of endless wants, economic growth, and competition. Little wonder then that wedded to the concepts of individualism, rationality, and choice — the atomistic units that Stone finds as antonyms to community — *homo economicus* provides credence to the fragmentation of our lives. "City life" may appear as an attractive deconstructive alternative to "community" — but solely as an academic project, I would argue. The ecological unsustainability and the associated violence found in cities (especially when considered in global terms) behoove us to consider the possibilities of moving beyond the attractions of concretized and disembedding structures and associations. In proposing an ecological perspective for re-embedding community, which I view as an *educational* project, a simultaneous reexamination of the deconstructivist view of unity, commonality, and differences, seems fitting. I argue for a reconsideration of difference, and claim that an unoppressive city is a misnomer.

A reconsideration of difference is required. The nature of difference, examined by Burbules and Rice, does not discount the possibilities of overcoming the boundaries posed by being strangers:

> *There is no reason to assume that dialogue across differences involves either eliminating those differences or imposing one group's views on others; dialogue that leads to understanding, cooperation, and accommodation can sustain differences within a broader compact of toleration and respect.* Thus what we need is not an antimodern denial of community, but a postmodern grounding of community on more flexible and less homogeneous assumptions.[29]

Along similar lines, Kanpol argues that the deconstruction of difference has failed to take into account the "*similarities* of struggles that sever oppressive, alienating, and subordinate conditions and lead to affirmations of community, dialogue, identity, and intersubjective relatedness."[30] The recognition of similarities in spite of certain differences enables individuals to identify with the causes of the "other."[31] In a recent critique of postmodernism, Beyer and Liston have argued against one of its tenets: "the crucial importance of multi-vocal 'otherness' makes communality in discourse and action infeasible and/or dangerous."[32] In emphasizing the "other," deconstructivists have rightly

argued for the cause of the exploited and the need to acknowledge the plurality of voices. However, in doing so, they reject community because of what they believe are its limiting and silencing effects, largely due to its search for unity and commonality. But, why reject community? As Beyer and Liston argue:

> if the valorization of otherness precludes the search for some common good that can engender solidarity even while it recognizes and respects that difference, we will be left with a cacophony of voices that disallow political and social action that is morally compelling. If a concern for otherness precludes community in any form, how can political action be undertaken, aimed at establishing a common good that disarms patriarchy, racism, and social class oppression? What difference can difference make in the public space?[33]

Community, thus, should not be confused with conglomeration.[34] Community can never be formed where there is mere physical association or when people merely aggregate. Ecological literacy, for instance, would require that there be a common vocabulary from which people can derive meaning; the "resoiling of education"[35] is necessarily a *community* venture. For instance, Orr's postmodern pedagogy and curriculum, embedded in community, would require that, despite our differences, there be a *common* "awareness of planetary limits and interrelatedness of life"[36] so that we can begin to define, direct and construct knowledge for ecological sustainability.

Unoppressive city is a misnomer. The oppression of certain groups has become a commonplace acceptance of city life; class, race, and caste are best played out in cities. Cities are built on an economy that necessarily oppresses nature, as well. While anomie and disconnectedness are acceptable as a deconstructivist project, being residents rather than dwellers of land, urbanites have no sense of place. Although the possibilities of community formation exist beyond space, given mediation, locale does serve as the best nurturer for embeddedness. The ecological project with its requirement for ecological literacy and its virtue of *enoughness*, can best serve as the medium through which dialogue across differences can occur in our cemented and concretized cities.

Again, consider Orr's prescriptions for ecological literacy;[37] communities can be reembedded if we ask, what does it mean to educate people so that they can live sustainably? His foundation of education is built around the following principles: recognition that all education is environmental education; environmental issues need to be addressed through interdisciplinarity; education must occur through conversations and dialogue that also include a language of place (e.g., language of nature); the process of education is as important as the content (e.g., education ought to change the way people live, not just how they talk); experiencing the natural world is a critical part of education; and practical competence in local ventures of building sustainable communities is indispensable to ecological literacy.

In conclusion, I would argue that *rather than the deconstructivist rejection of unity and community, the ecological project would require a reconceptualization of community to include not only the human but also the biotic*. City life, built on endless wants and desires, is tied with the status quo of domination of nature; the present urban scenario provides no recourse from competition. If, instead, *enoughness* is viewed as a viable urban project — one that is inseparable from the ecological project — we can possibly reembed community. Ecological sustenance requires that we consider the possibilities of striving beyond our atomistic lives.

This postmodernist constructivist view of re-embedding community simultaneously enhances the possibilities for future generations; the postmodernist agenda, I believe, would need to move beyond deconstruction of "I" and "We" to include those who will inherit our legacy.

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[1] Lynda Stone, "Disavowing Community," in *Philosophy of Education 1992*, ed. H.A. Alexander (Urbana, Illinois: Philosophy of Education Society, 1993), 93-101.

[2] Iris Young, "The Ideal of Community and the Politics of Difference," in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda J. Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1990), 300-23. While I have taken Stone and Young as representative of the deconstructivist position on community, see also Elizabeth Ellsworth, "Why Doesn't This Feel Empowering? Working Through the Repressive Myths of Critical Pedagogy," *Harvard Educational Review* 59, no. 3 (August, 1989): 297-324. For a critical analysis of the "antimodern" view see Nicholas C. Burbules and Suzanne Rice, "Dialogue across Differences: Continuing the Conversation," *Harvard Educational Review* 61, no. 4 (November 1991): 393-416. A discussion and critique of postmodernism can also be found in Landon E. Beyer and Daniel P. Liston, "Discourse or Moral Action? A Critique of Postmodernism, *Educational Theory* 42, no. 4 (Fall 1992): 371-93.

[3] Mary Anne Raywid, "Community and Schools: A Prolegomenon," in *Philosophy of Education 1988*, ed. J. Giarelli (Normal, Illinois: Philosophy of Education Society, 1989), 2-17. Also see the modernist positions in the same volume by Kenneth D. Benne, "If Schools Are to Help Build Communities," 18-23; and Steven Tozer, "Response to a Prolegomenon on Community," 24-31.

[4] John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Free Press, 1916), 4.

[5] See John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1927), 149.

[6] Raywid, 3.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Raywid, 5.

[10] Raywid, 6.

[11] Young, 300.

[12] Young, 301; and Stone, 2.

[13] Stone, 8.

[14] Stone, 10.

[15] Young, 303.

[16] Young. 303.

[17] Young, 308.

[18] Young, 311.

[19] Young, 305.

[20] See Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1990).

[21] Young, 313.

[22] Giddens, 18-19.

[23] Young, 319.

[24] Young, 303.

[25] Young, 316.

[26] Young, 318; emphasis in original.

27 Young, 319.

28 See Wendell Berry, *What are People For?* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990); Edward Goldsmith, *The Way: An Ecological World-View* (Boston: Shambhala Press, 1993); Arne Naess, *Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle,* trans. and ed. David Rothenberg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); and David Orr, *Ecological Literacy: Education and the Transition to the Postmodern World* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1991). Although I do not address these, a certain degree of understanding about sustainable economies, and the virtues of enoughness and simplicity, are required in order to gauge the implications of the ecological argument and the ecological projects pursued by Berry, Goldsmith, Orr, Naess, and many other postmodernists.

29 Burbules & Rice, 402; emphasis in original.

30 Barry Kanpol, "Postmodernism in Education: Similarities within Differences and the Democratic Imaginary," *Educational Theory* 42, no. 2 (Spring 1992): 220.

31 Kanpol, 221.

32 Beyer and Liston, 373.

33 Beyer and Liston, 380-81.

34 For example, people may come together only once, because they are watching a movie in a cinema house. Strangers to one another, once their interest fades, i.e., the movie ends, each individual goes his or her own way. There may be no future contact between these individuals. Whereas the pursuit of a "common" interest brings individuals together to form a community, an interest in the "same" thing or activity may bring individuals together under one roof. Unlike a community, the fulfillment of interest is not sought by the individual as a common pursuit; each individual pursues her or his own interest individually, but in the presence of others. Thus, although the Deweyan community must have individuals in close proximity, a mere conglomeration of people under the same roof does not constitute community, either. In other words, coming together is not sufficient.

35 I am grateful to Madhu Suri Prakash and Kevin O' Sullivan for their insight and practical knowledge associated with the ecological project; preservation of indigenous cultures and the greening of pedagogy can only be undertaken as constructivist *community* ventures.

36 Orr, *Ecological Literacy*, 133.

37 Orr, 90-92.