

2. Bound up

In the latter half of the twentieth century, arguments around ‘community’ re-erupted within continental philosophy’s white patrician silverbacks, instigated in large part by Jean-Luc Nancy’s book *‘The Inoperative Community’*. Others like Maurice Blanchot, Alphonso Lingis, Roberto Esposito, Giorgio Agamben and Jacques Derrida piled on, and still others like George Bataille were revived and posthumously dragged back into the fray. These particular philosophical debates have largely returned to hibernation, but the urgency of the interrogation remains, carried forward in new languages by critical theorists, innovative philosophical movements, and more pressingly, by waves of migrants, activists, refugees, refusers and decolonial movements. The crises and failures of state-driven, authoritarian fascist and socialist experiments drove those discussions just as it had earlier in the twentieth century.

Speaking of ‘community’ is to ask after *sociality* – forms of being-together between humans and more-than-humans alike. The sociality we are after here is a fidelity that can escape both its familial and statist bonds, but we have almost no faith in contemporary commons literatures that whitewash over difference and history, a tendency perhaps most galling in environmental literature.

Facile claims that global warming somehow exceeds all difference and forges an ‘anthropocene’ where ‘we’ are all equally in peril and equally responsible to respond are precisely this: an aggressive depoliticization that obscures both the causes and responses and is as rude as any ‘one world’ or ‘we are all in this together’ rhetoric.

We can take heart from ecological crises. Not because we have hope that any catastrophe, emergency or quarantine is going to instigate widespread renunciations of extractive priorities, but these crises demand such jurisdictional reallocations and reorientations that a sweetness of life, of being-together, is imaginable, a new planetary world crawling out of the rubble of this one.

It's tempting to try and build an argument around the idea of *belonging*, to ask who belongs where? It is an easily-evoked environmental argument, that if we all felt that we really belonged somewhere we might take better care of the land we live on. Belonging has a close relationship to possession, to ownership. I belong here. This land belongs to us.

Belonging reveals a desire for permanence, for home, for fixity, for emplacement: a longing for, a be-longing, a renunciation of movement that calls for assimilation or expulsion. It betrays a desire for an extra-material transcendent connection to a place or a person. Belonging gives permission to the possession of territory and other bodies, gives us permission to push the boats back in the sea: those people do not belong here.

If we belong here – as so many localist politics claim is the benchmark for legitimacy – then it is *Us*, and only us, who can offer access to this place via permanent administration, assimilation, reconciliation and rights and eject those who do not adhere. It indexes, orders and re-orientes bodies, demanding and cataloging re-education camps and citizenship oaths. Belonging grants the power to contain, process, re-educate and/or admit. Building a politics around belonging doesn't sound like much of a world to live in, especially for anyone who doesn't belong, or is from somewhere else.

This idea of fidelity to the Fatherland, of exclusive claim to a place, threads through ethno-nationalist and religious fundamentalist arguments as easily as it does localist or ecological politics. This is precisely where revived far-right movements, nationalists and white environmentalism overlap and repeat one another[. The original Nazi party had a very comprehensive green platform. John Muir was an out-and-out racist who hated Indigenous people. John James Audubon was a brutal slaveholder and anti-abolitionist. Edward Abbey was an enthusiastic

xenophobe and unapologetic racist, who called for hyper-militarized borders.

Certain strains of conservationists and environmentalists invoke similar hearth-and-home evocations of a nostalgic past to argue against immigration, for national control of borders as the only way to protect ecological integrity. This is not a malfunction of ideology; it is because their doxic narratives flow from the same fetishizations of togetherness. The evocation of conservative calls to family, homeland, and belonging are as useful to blood-and-soil politics as they are to localist environmentalism.

Listen, for example, to Marine Le Pen from France's National Front speaking about their ecological platform:

Environmentalism [is] the natural child of patriotism, because it's the natural child of rootedness, if you're a nomad, you're not an environmentalist. Those who are nomadic [...] do not care about the environment; they have no homeland.¹

This is startlingly similar to many localist arguments: a togetherness that accepts no punctures, no failing of identity, an essentialism that brooks no argument.

Much of continental philosophy attempts to chart a route beyond these movements by asking after an *inessential* community, a sociality that is not dependent on any essential quality. The best of these call for a 'community of people who have nothing in common' a being-together that is not yoked to nostalgic evocations of transcendence, nor the amelioration of personal anxiety or collective insecurity. This kind of inessential being-together cannot be the product of a 'work' – it cannot be attempting to achieve, or un-achieve, anything, it can have no teleological essence – but can only bind people together through a desire for exposure, or vulnerability.

1 Oliver Milman, 'Right-Wing Climate Denial Is Being Replaced – by Nativism', Mother Jones, November 22, 2021.

Jean-Luc Nancy laboured to “invert the usual rational order in which community succeeds individuality” because any community that becomes “a single thing (body, mind, fatherland, Leader) necessarily loses the *in* of being-*in*-common. Or, it loses the *with* or the *together* that defines its essence. It yields its being-together to a being of togetherness.” This loss is the foundation of all authoritarianisms and condemns “the political to management and power (power of management/management of power).”² This is the venom of all nationalisms, of all belonging. Being-together cannot accede to being fused into a single body or absorbed into a common entity.

As soon as anyone is sublated into a common, transcendent identity, they are no longer exposed, and thus lose the possibility of actually being-*in*-common: they exchange the porous exposure of being-together for the security of being-as-together, which is, of course, the move that all fascism, or nationalism, rests on. This is precisely where the political goes missing, lost in the fog of belonging – and ‘politics’ is rendered as disciplinary administration, management and border patrols.

The attraction of an inessential community is as palpable as it is pressing. The peril, of course, is that it hazards an embarrassingly romantic view of ‘humanity’. In the context of innumerable years of pain, suffering and exploitive violence, any evocation of exposure, unworking, community without identity – or the more hipster ‘horizontal affiliations’ or ‘human microphones’ – runs the risk of aggressive depoliticization and a non-conflictual amnesia in the service of privilege.

When Nancy calls for a *community without unity*, or Agamben speaks of a *coming community*, those are unthinkable interventions, in the best and worst senses: it’s so hard sometimes to imagine what that might entail. Desire for an inessential community, a commons or a communism without any entry fee is the proper refutation of nationalism as much as any yearnings for ‘communities of shared understanding.’ But an inessential community is also ready-made for erasure.

2 Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*. University of Minnesota Press. 1991. 39.

After centuries of colonialism, unbridled racism and violent misogyny, the call to throw off identity in the name of community can sound assimilationist at best. It sounds like people who say that the colour of someone's skin doesn't matter to them at all, or they don't see race. Excluded and colonized people have every reason to resist any continued exposure to violence, and to dismiss fever-dreams of harmony or inessentiality.

Any organizing around notions of inessentiality immediately runs into the violence of racialized and religious expulsions. A borderless world is intensely appealing philosophically, but in the context of ongoing colonizations and ethnic cleansing efforts across the globe, bourgeois musings about inessential community are intensely perilous. Of course so many philosophers in the Western tradition are fixated on inessentialism – their essential identities have never been challenged.

Imagining new renditions of community beyond any transcendent identity is exactly what is required to surpass the violent nationalisms that stain our times. But this cannot float above the fray of the here and now, the everyday realities of deportations, dispossessions, drownings and incarcerations.

But a non-statist sociality – a utopian borderlessness – is not unthinkable, as Achille Mbembe implores. Utopian thinking is needed more than ever now. We are all always more than just our identities – and borderlessness requires us surpassing identity in ways that both affective and assemblage politics reach for. But we are all subject to the pain and weight of history and, in our estimation, utopianism should happily embrace essentialist identities – an intersectional politics that is not a transit point, nor a necessary evil en route to inessentialism – but as complementary ways of being in the world that are always bound up with one another.

In *The Coming Community*, Agamben tries to mind the gap by speaking of a *whatever singularity* – and in this case 'whatever' does not mean ambivalence or something that does not really matter, but the exact opposite. He speaks of 'whatever' as that which *always* matters. He explains his *whatever* thinking:

Love is never directed toward this or that property of the loved one (being blond, being small, being tender, being lame), but neither does it neglect the properties in favor of an insipid generality (universal love): The lover wants the loved one *with all of its predicates*, its being such as it is.³

This seems to get us some of the way past the binding of inessentialism to erasure. We are interested in a community in which there are no conditions, there is no entry fee, no rent demanded, no work to be done, no passport to be shown. Where the threshold is a convivence that does not interrogate an essence, cares nothing for any citizenship, never asks for any papers. This makes imaginable a solidarity in incommensurability – an inessentialism that does not require a shedding of identity but wants *all of it*.

But living in an age of ecological collapse, that formulation needs more. We are always exposed to the more-than-human, and to imagine a renovated ecology we have to mean being exposed to all of it, far beyond the human. We are exposed to animals and plants and oceans, but also to viruses and floods and fires and death, all of it – all the violence and injustice and cruelties of the more-than-human world. It is precisely an insipid generality that we have to refuse in the face of crises: we are not all in *anything* together. But we submit that the urgencies of ecological peril bring into sharp relief the idea of a community with no conditions: a borderless freedom to move, a refusal of recognition, a renunciation of any conditions – a time when no one has to drown in the Mediterranean.

In Derrida's estimation, exposure is at the heart of friendship – which is always bound up with grief. Being with a friend is always to simultaneously enjoy their presence and mourn their death. The pleasure of friendship is inextricable from the grief and loss of that friend. The only way to be-in-common is through exposure – exposed to finitude, exposed to death, and exposed to grief, or what he called the politics of

3 Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, University of Minnesota Press, 1993. 2.

friendship. We are particularly interested in what this means as we stare at the grief of a world dying around us.

As Willow Verkerk writes,

For Nietzsche, agonistic relationships are formative of identities since people come to define themselves through the acknowledgement of their differences in opposition. The other spurs one on to greater performance and gives one the opportunity to examine one's selves through respectful competition.⁴

We are searching for a 'we' that is stripped of all its colonial, statist and anthropocentric fixities, one that can refuse to renounce identity while reaching for an inessentialism. This being-together has to be constantly exposed to the more-than-human. Community needs to extend far past the human if it is to retain any force: it has to think past species just as easily as beyond flags.

But if the first people we turned to here were Nancy, Agamben, Nietzsche and Derrida – we had better move quickly to get outside that continental tradition as well. As Sarah Ahmed puts it, that kind of thinking is really a 'reproductive technology', a "way of reproducing the world around certain bodies".⁵ Maybe another way to ask the same question is to ask *who* is so fixated on 'community', and why? What's with all the hand-wringing? Continental philosophy is unapologetically fixated on who is in Europe and who is out – where are its borders located and why? But in whose interest is it to keep returning to these centripetal narratives of 'we're all in it together'? How can we escape the gravitational pull of these renditions of community and still imagine the politics of a borderless world?

Towards this project, we have started working from an astringent idea of friendship. Something that moves beyond definitional certainties. In the wake of Carl Schmitt, it is customary to suggest that if pol-

4 Willow Verkerk, *Nietzsche and Friendship*. London: Bloomsbury: 2019, 49.

5 Sarah Ahmed, *Feminist Killjoys: Making Feminist Points* <https://feministkilljoys.com/2013/09/11/making-feminist-points/>.

itics are to have shape and meaning, we require enemies and friends. We come from a very different direction – the exact opposite direction actually – looking for a very different politicization, one demanded by ecological urgency.