Staging Maralinga and Desiring Community: (Or Why There is No Such Thing as a ‘Natural’ Community)
James Arvanitakis

The definitive version of this article is published as:
Arvanitakis, J. 2008, ‘Staging Maralinga and Desiring Community: (Or, Why There is No Such Thing as a ‘Natural’ Community)’, Community Development Journal,

Available online at:
http://cdj.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/reprint/44/4/448
(institutional or subscribed access may be required)

Community Development Journal is available online:
http://cdj.oxfordjournals.org/ (institutional or subscribed access may be required)

doi: 10.1093/cdj/bsn021

Copyright remains with the publisher

Disclaimer
Please note that this is an electronic, pre-print version of this article produced by the Centre for Cultural Research, University of Western Sydney, in accordance with the requirements of the publisher.

Whilst this version of the article incorporates refereed changes and has been accepted for publication, differences may exist between this and the final, published version. Citations should only be made from the published version.

User Agreement
Copyright of these pre-print articles are retained by the author. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article to facilitate their own study or non-commercial research. Wider circulation and distribution of the material and/or use of it in profit-making activities is prohibited.

URLs to access this post-print version can be freely distributed:
http://www.uws.edu.au/centre_for_cultural_research/ccr/people/researchers/dr_james_arvanitakis
Staging Maralinga and Desiring Community: (Or Why There is No Such Thing as a ‘Natural’ Community)

James Arvanitakis

Abstract
Though the concept of community crosses all political divides – from the reactionary, progressive and radical – it is a notion that is rarely problematized. Rather, ‘community’ is seen as something natural that emerges organically, reflecting all the elements of oxygen: it is unseen, cannot be felt unless it disappears and said to be vital for our survival. This paper raises concerns about such an approach, arguing it can lead to exclusion and divisiveness. Building on the arguments of Brent (in ‘The desire for community: illusion, confusion and paradox’, Community Development Journal, vol. 39, no. 3, pp. 213–223, 2004), I argue that community can only be created through ‘reciprocated’ desire. Using a community development project as a case study – the stage production of ‘Maralinga’, a story of nuclear veterans exposed to fallout – I highlight how community building can fail and how desire for community can emerge from unexpected places.

Introduction
The idea of community is something that crosses all political divides – from the conservative, reactionary, progressive and radical – all groups invoke the word community. Defenders of globalization, for example, argue that the processes of globalization result in the formation of a global community, increased opportunities, shared understandings and ultimately peace (Friedman, 1999). Critics of globalization also summon community in their arguments, noting that the same processes lead to a diminution of local communities: a position echoed by both progressive and reactionary ‘antiglobalists’ (see Poynting, 2006; Goodman and James, 2007). Community is embraced by both government and non-governmental organizations and programmes. Each looks for the ‘magic’ ingredient that will lead to community building.

From the delivery of international aid to anti-immigration riots in Australia’s beachside suburbs, community is invoked, discussed, defended, protected and promoted but rarely, if ever, problematized. Building on the arguments of Brent (2004), this paper undertakes a critical approach to the concept of community. Reflecting on a recent ‘community building’ project that presented the stories of several nuclear veterans exposed to fallout in tests undertaken in Maralinga, Australia, I attempt to understand the phenomenon of community. In so doing, I argue that the belief that community is ‘natural’ and based on communitarian ideals of ‘recognition’ is deeply flawed – leading to exclusion and divisiveness. Rather, community can only be created through ‘reciprocated’ desire.
Understanding Community

According to community worker, Jeremy Brent, community is something that is always called upon when social problems are experienced (Brent, 2004). Likewise, Zygmunt Bauman describes our cultural craving for community:

   It is like a roof under which we shelter in heavy rain, like a fireplace which we warm our hands on a frosty day (Bauman, 2001, p. 1).

Despite such a longing for the stability and warmth of community, Brent (2004) argues that the concept is a double-edged sword; it can produce cooperation and mutuality, but can also be divisive and create conflict. This prompts Brent to ask, ‘what phenomenon is community?’ While it is something that does not have a concrete manifestation, its sense of existence (or failure to materialise) has a real impact on people’s lives.

The dominant, orthodox conceptualizations of community revolve around the idea that there exist ‘natural communities’ based on recognition (Brent, 2004) and views community as unproblematic and uncontested. According to Oliver (2001), ‘recognition’ dominates contemporary theory and practice regarding community. This defines community through ideas of natural formation, relying on shared identity, recognition and social formations arising out of mutual beliefs, understandings and practices – creating a stable sense of identity (Taylor, 1994). According to this viewpoint, we form natural communities only with those that we recognize as being ‘like us’. It is from this position that the related communitarian and libertarian schools of community have arisen. There are a large number of communitarian theorists including Taylor (1994) and Sandel (1998), but it is Fukuyama’s (1989, 1992) interpretation of ‘recognition’ that is the focus of this paper.

Fukuyama links community with both the modern liberal state and neo-liberal economic policies to argue that we have reached the ‘end of history’.¹ Fukuyama argues that the modern liberal state combined with free markets presents us with the ‘twin pillars’ of community that have ushered in a politics of equal recognition for each and every citizen within each sovereign state. Reflecting the same point, Taylor (1994, p. 27) also argues that liberal democracy has reached the pinnacle of history. In Fukuyama’s view, communities are formed through ‘rational’ self-interest and materialist desires and the success of the liberal nation-state and associated liberalized markets. While expanding markets driven by self-interest provide the opportunity to fulfil all the material desires of individuals, it is the nation-state that allows neatly defined communities to form as it recognizes citizens having similar experiences, desires and material self-interest.

Such an unproblematized understanding of community is not limited to the communitarian school and more conservative commentators such as Fukuyama. Many progressive academics and community development activists also embrace the concept of community as natural. For example, in their important contribution to the discussion of cultural community development, progressive activists Mills and Brown

¹ Importantly, though Fukuyama has reviewed his position a number of times particularly after the New York terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001, the essence of his argument remains the same (see Fukuyama, 2002a, b).
(2004) discuss how communities evolve through certain practices associated with artist and community partnerships. One case that Mills and Brown discuss is ‘community development’ through production knowledge in a community play around one of Australia’s largest rivers, the Murray (ibid: p. 43). In so doing, Mills and Brown describe community as something that appears through such a production but they do not problematize the concept of community, seeming to accept it as something inherently positive.

As will be discussed below, this approach was also reflected in the very aims of the Maralinga production. In the grant application to the Cultural Development Board of the Australia Council, the production team clearly stated that one of the key aims of the project was to build ‘a sense of community amongst veterans’. That is, through the production and performance of such a play, a community would form as the different groups of veterans would come to recognize each other’s struggle.

Problematizing ‘Natural’ Communities

With reference to Brent (2004), Hage (2003) and Diprose (2003), I highlight four broad concerns that emerge when relying on natural community formation based on recognition. As noted, I will revolve these arguments around Francis Fukuyama’s theoretical positioning on recognition.

The first of these concerns is based around ‘exclusion’, whereby the process of recognition establishes an inside for the privileged and an outside for ‘others’. That is, a privileged community has the ability to only accept those to whom it can relate to and recognize (Brent, 2004). Consequently, while Fukuyama argues that recognition by peers fulfils the first of the ‘twin pillars’ of community, others remain sceptical. For Hage (2001, 2003) and Diprose (2003), rather than being a key to social harmony, recognition simply promotes divisiveness and exclusion.

The second insight provided by Fukuyama’s interpretation of ‘recognition’ involves one individual or community judging whether another is worthy to be recognized and, therefore, accepted. Cornell (1992) and Diprose (2003) remind us that it is usually the dominant group doing the recognizing and, thus, the judging. For Oliver (2001), this is a symptom of oppression as it reinforces hierarchies since one group is making all the judgements. Those wishing to be recognized must ensure that they meet the value judgements of the dominant group.

As will be discussed in the Maralinga case study below, this was highlighted in the story of Australia’s nuclear veterans. The nuclear veterans are not recognized as having faced the same war conditions as those exposed to ‘enemy fire’. This is reflected in both the broader veterans’ community as well as by the Australian government that has refused to award compensation to the veterans. This has seen the establishment of a ‘value hierarchy’ by which to judge different experiences, allowing only those who are judged worthy.

---

2 Sourced from The Australian Nuclear Veterans Association Verbatim Theatre Project: Stage Three. I would like to thank the author of Maralinga, Dr Paul Brown, who made the application available.
The third insight is an extension of the above two and relates to the homogenization of difference. Since the dominant group judges and reinforces its position, both Oliver (2001) and Cornell (1992) argue that such a process ultimately homogenizes and effaces differences. In this way, the broken and cancerous bodies of the nuclear veterans can only be considered war victims if they reflect the wounds of orthodox conflicts. In other words, bullet wounds are ‘recognized’ and therefore seen as acceptable, while cancer and abnormalities borne by children of veterans are not.

A fourth insight provoked by Fukuyama’s ‘twin pillars’ idea can be found in its reliance on the liberal nation-state which, according to Connelly (1999), further explains the process of exclusion and homogenization. Connelly reminds us that the formation of nations originally relied on ‘biological race’ (Connelly, 1999, p. 74). It is hardly surprising then that race is invoked when there are calls for national unity or when the aspirations of a nation are threatened. With the scientific evidence used to support early conceptions of race now generally dismissed as myth (see Graves, 2004), the stability of a nation-state together is brought into question. The result for Connelly is that the nation can only be ‘kept pure [through] selective memory’ (Connelly, 1999, p. 75). That is, the myth represented by the ‘pure’ nation is constantly polluted by events which must be ignored. This usually involves the population embracing a sense of forgetfulness, particularly of any violent and exclusionary past, and homogenizing a complicated and diverse history. This can then be used to exclude those who threaten visions of unity and a single, stable subjectivity. The exposure of Australian troops to radiation as the country is striving for nationhood is one such memory that is difficult to confront.3

In many ways Secomb’s (2002) ‘haunted community’ echoes this point. Secomb describes communities that are haunted, troubled and ultimately preoccupied by a past they refuse to reconcile or even acknowledge. Under such conditions, Connelly sees the purity of the nation – both its image and its borders – as constantly under challenge. Connelly argues that this purity, and therefore the nation, is found to be hollow as a consequence. This leads to escalating demands on the mythologies that are meant to bind a nation together such as the image of the Anzac spirit – dodging bullets from the Turkish ‘Huns’ – rather than the cancerous bodies of nuclear veterans.

Desiring ‘Community’ and Reciprocity

A radical departure from ‘recognitions’ are those who argue that community is propelled by alterity or essential difference. Here, community does not emerge by some natural process but rather through desiring. This school has its origins in the theoretical positions presented by Lévinas (1981), but it is the interpretation offered by Diprose (2003) that is the focus here.

In essence, Diprose (2003) argues that we are propelled towards each other because of our desires to form a community with the ‘other’ who is unique or radically different, rather than (solely) those we recognize as ‘like us’. This position holds that each individual is radically different or unique, but can only exist in relation to others who

---

3 One such example is reflected in the treatment of indigenous history in Australia where the dominant discourse of Australian settlement persists (Lindqvist, 2007). This is one of peaceful settlement with the occasional ‘skirmishes’ between the indigenous people and settlers (see, for example, the discussions of Conner (2005) published by revisionist historian Keith Windshuttle’s Macleay Press).
are also radically different. The individual exists within a community not as a ‘self-atomized being’ seeking recognition and accumulation of wealth, but rather through a desire to share difference as a fundamental expression of uniqueness (Werhane, 1996; Milberg, 2001). When we interact with others, a new subjectivity is born driven by a desire to experience the ‘other’ (Brent, 2004).

An ‘authentic’ community is composed of different individuals who might not understand each other’s subjectivity but rather possess reciprocal desires to establish and maintain community. Such a conceptualization of community is formed through the desire for alterity, subjectivity and agency between another and me. This is an alterity that is promoted not subdued. For, as Lévinas (1981) notes, the only thing we have in common is our difference. This results in a heterogeneous rather than homogeneous community, as the individual is never reduced to a uniform subjectivity.

To understand exactly how this occurs, we can begin by turning to the work of Diprose (2003) who draws on the metaphor of the ‘handshake’ to discuss the desire for community. This is the ‘hand of friendship’ that signifies the bond of community as it is extended to the stranger. Central to Diprose’s claim is the issue of what is exchanged and shared. The handshake that brings together different bodies has an important meaning. I would argue that the exchange in Diprose’s handshake involves more than just an offer of friendship but also the desire to share hope, trust and a sense of safety. The open hand presents my desire to live together in a open, peaceful and authentic community and all I expect in return is the open hand of friendship to be reciprocated.

**Contextualizing Reciprocity**

Two broad schools of thought have emerged that deal with the concept of ‘reciprocity’ or non-commercial exchange of ‘gifts’. When discussing the reciprocated exchange of gifts, I am not referring to some simple ‘physical swap’, but rather, a multi-dimensional exchange that has religious, legal, economic and mythological aspects that are unique to different cultures. In this way, the non-commercial gift represents the identity of the giver and thus has enormous symbolic value. For this relationship to continue, the gift must be reciprocated in an appropriate way.

The neoliberal school of economics offers the first interpretation of reciprocity, while anthropologists represent the second. For anthropologists, reciprocity presents ‘irreducible dyadic bonds’ (Gudeman, 2001, p. 461) while gifts are driven by the self-interest of the atomized individual according to economists (Levi-Strauss, 1949). Rather than being based on self-interest, I argue that the non-commercial reciprocity

---

4 It is important to note here that the ‘hand of friendship’ can be symbolic or virtual rather than physical.

5 We can differentiate here the difference between communal hospitality and that offered by the individual. Derrida (1991) argues that hospitality to the stranger can only realistically be offered by a community, rather than through the goodwill of an individual. In contrast, conservative commentators have responded to those who demand more humane treatment of refugees or acknowledgement of indigenous land rights by calling on them to offer their own house or backyard. See, for example, Jopson’s (2003) interview with conservative commentator Michael Duffy.
is driven by a desire for community. The reciprocity offered by Diprose’s hand of friendship may not be returned voluntarily, but if it is, it establishes a sense of community based on desire.

My position is based on Gudeman (2001) who argues that reciprocity can be used to cement a relationship, express affection and mutuality, and move towards establishing a community. Gudeman believes that the reciprocity acts as community-centred intentionality and desire, rather than self-centred calculation, crossing the borders of community and inviting others in. This position echoes the earlier work of Levi-Strauss (1949), who argues that reciprocity is the core of the social contract.6 Levi-Strauss asserts the universality of reciprocity across all societies, stating it to be the foundation of all human institutions. If there is no reciprocity, there is no society or sense of community. Reciprocity is a primary building block of community perpetuating relationships.

It is here that I draw the link between reciprocity, the sharing of desire and the establishment or expansion of community. Describing this base and its importance, Gudeman suggests that the ‘base’ of a community is a cultural heritage that brings a community together. A key feature of a community is that it allocates or distributes parts of its memory and identity. The exchange and sharing that crosses boundaries and expands community then is not simply based on some physical gift, but may encompass this communal cultural heritage. Central to this position is that an act of reciprocity is ‘an expression of community’ (Gudeman, 2001, p. 467). The reciprocity offered here, however, is one of the desires for community rather than any physical gift.

Maralinga

In August 2006, the world premier of Maralinga, a play about former veterans exposed to nuclear testing, was held at a Return Services League (RSL) club on the Central Coast of New South Wales, Australia. The place name of ‘Maralinga’ is synonymous with nuclear testing in Australia though the historical detail is not widely known. The play tells the story of both British and Australian nuclear veterans and their journey – both to Maralinga and beyond – as they discover over a number of decades that they were ‘guinea pigs’ and eventually betrayed by the very nation-states they were serving. It is difficult to imagine that the very ‘technology’ that creates fear and loathing today was celebrated as a victory for science and nationhood in the 1950s – though nuclear technology is back in vogue within current debates about global warming.

6 The issue of the social contract and social capital has also become an important focal point of neoliberalism. Fitzsimons (2000) notes that after nearly two decades of radical neoliberal reform, social problems and community breakdown are endemic in many nations. Arguing that this is because ‘neoliberalism does not recognise the “social” or “community”’, neoliberal-dominated governments have now introduced ‘social capital initiatives’ (Fitzsimons, 2000, p. 2). Fitzsimons quotes former New Zealand Prime Minister Jim Bolger’s (1996) speech to emphasize this point. This appears a pragmatic reaction to the failure of social policy and allows neoliberalism to recognize community on its own terms. According to Fitzsimons, social capital allows community to be redefined as ‘individualised trust’ and is seen as producing economic value rather than existing in its own right (ibid). Fitzsimons argues that social capital leads to the re-invention of community. I agree, but argue, that this re-invention of community should be interpreted as a commodification of it.
Political-based theatre, such as *Maralinga*, often aims to bring various groups together with the aims of promoting a sense of community (Mills and Brown, 2004). Specifically, this play intended to bring together the various war veterans’ groups to share their stories and assist them in overcoming the trauma of the events they had experienced. The organizers hoped that this process would assist the nuclear veterans in forming a community by having their stories recognized by the main veterans’ organizations. That is, building communities around some mutual affiliation or experience.

The location of the mid-north coast of NSW has a high proportion of war veterans and widows. This population was thought to be attracted to this story and so would form a natural community with the nuclear veterans – recognizing their struggle for recognition as well as acknowledging their suffering. However, the community that was brought together had little to do with this ‘natural’ community that the organizers envisaged would be attracted to the story. In fact, the broader veteran’s community essentially ignored the production; something reflected in lower-than expected box office receipts.

**Maralinga: Creating the Desire for Community?**

The question that we must consider then is did the production of *Maralinga* meet the broad and ambitious goals of bringing together the various veterans’ groups to form a community? That is, was a reciprocated desire created through this production to form a community among the participants involved in the production of *Maralinga*?

To answer this, let me begin by talking about where community failed. As noted, the justification for performing the play on the Central Coast was due to the belief that there was a ‘natural’ community that would support the production. This community would include various veterans’ and support groups that pepper the Central Coast of NSW.

Despite a belief by the organizers that they would be swamped by group bookings and regardless of the promotional efforts on the part of various volunteers and nuclear veterans, the various groups targeted largely ignored the production. It should also be noted the production included a high profile cast and received some impressive media coverage in the local press. As it eventuated, there were no group bookings and only limited support from the broader veterans’ community. Instead, the play built its audience mostly from the ranks of established theatre-goers, both local and afar. From discussions with the audience, significant portions of the audience were also anti-war and anti-nuclear campaigners who came to learn more about this aspect of Australia’s history.

The reasons that the veterans ignored the production are varied and complicated, with many of the individuals I spoke to refusing to even discuss the issue. A theme that did emerge, however, was that the local war veterans did not believe that the nuclear veterans participated in a ‘real’ conflict. That is, they did not experience the same conflict conditions as the veterans who had experienced a ‘hot’ war. In other words, the broken bodies of the nuclear veterans were not ‘recognized’ by the broader veterans’ communities as being equal to those that resulted from conventional conflicts. Consequently, there was no desire to recognize any common history or a
community by the broader veterans’ groups with the nuclear veterans. The concept of ‘natural’ community based on recognition failed and, in fact, perpetuated the betrayal discussed above.

In contrast, the desire for community came from places that would not be considered ‘natural’. These were groups such as peace activists, antinuclear campaigners, theatre-goers, actors and critics, who saw this story as something that needed to be told and shared. These groups had no natural affiliation and, as noted, attended in large numbers and reflected a significant proportion of the audience. This audience held the desire to form a community not based on recognition but through an exchanged ‘desire’.

There are a number of implications here that are relevant to the work of community builders and practitioners of political theatre alike. First, this means that community can be built across time and space. Both Polanyi (1968) and Sahlins (1972) argue that reciprocity allows for both close and distant social relations to be built and maintained as they are stripped of time and space. Thus, ‘community does not necessarily rise from proximity, nor a common language, religion, culture or even blood. . . these are secondary factors’ (Lietaer, 2001, p. 181). In this way, it is not ‘some stale sociological notion, but a highly dynamic phenomenon that needs to be saved and honoured’ (Creative Communities, not dated).

The result for Maralinga then is that it is possible to build community across generations if the desire is there. This was highlighted by one nuclear veteran, Murray, who was originally recalcitrant about the play because he was not exposed in Maralinga. In a conversation with me, he indicated that the Maralinga veterans were in fact ‘grandstanding’ or ‘showing off’, and did not see the value of the production. However, after attending one of the performances, he was not only moved and desired to share his story with those associated with the play, but returned with his family including his granddaughter. This was a chance, he told me, of explaining his fears and nightmares that up until now had not been possible.

Conclusion

The desire for reciprocity that was experienced in Maralinga does not come from any natural community but a variety of communities. These included various peace groups who travelled hours from Sydney or south from Newcastle, theatre-goers who where originally interested only in the spectacle but then were politically moved, local residents who were told about the impact of the play, those who had connections with the performers and stage crew, and other veterans who desired to reach out to the nuclear veterans. In each of these cases, no ‘natural’ community existed, but a community was desired. Many of those who attended the production felt strongly against the role of nuclear technology. However, in the conversations with some of the nuclear veterans, they do not feel that nuclear testing is negative per se. Despite this, the desire to work together and form community existed.

By viewing community from the looking glass of reciprocity and desire, we can build on Diprose’s (2003) ‘hand of friendship’. To begin with, the desire to share community means that communities do not become exclusionary but rather open to sharing. Additionally, ‘communities’ can be established locally and globally, and can
exist across both time and space. Through *Maralinga*, we see the desire shared and reciprocated, establishing and expanding community not limited by recognition. Rather, this is a free and open sharing of desire that allows one community to be heard and the sense of betrayal to begin to recede.

This paper has argued that natural affiliations do not automatically create a community. Rather, a reliance on natural communities built on recognition can lead to exclusion and ultimately further betrayal. During the production of *Maralinga*, a number of different worlds came together with nothing really ‘in common’ except for a desire to share community. It was this desire, according to Brent (2004), that is the most important ingredient in establishing community. And if nothing else, this is exactly what the play’s producers managed to achieve.
References


Bio

James Arvanitakis is an academic-activist based at the University of Western Sydney and a member of its Centre for Cultural Research. He was responsible for documentation during the production of Maralinga and would like to acknowledge the many conversations with playwright, academic and activist, Dr Paul Brown, in conceptualising this paper and making various documents available.