

## Community: **performance related fray**

Where once the *polis* inaugurated a political theatre, with its *agora* and its *forum*, now there is only a cathode-ray screen, where the shadows and spectres of a community dance amid their processes of disappearance... (Virilio, 1991: 19)

Paul Virilio engages consistently with the military-industrial complex of the modern technologic city and the dangers of the resulting 'abandoned real'. In *Lost Dimension* (1991), he points to the growing lack of 'plenum', space that should be filled with (human) matter and substance. Plenum, he suggests, has been abandoned for 'an electronic topology', erasing face to face encounter. Virilio's prediction of the demise of communities posited on live presence is not unique. Indeed, Williams' community, a 'warmly persuasive word to describe an existing set of relationships' (1976: 76), with its implication of physical locus, has been challenged, jostled and nearly thrown out with the bath water in the thirty years since *Keywords*.

As a performance and applied theatre academic, community is a provocative and testing centrepiece of life. In this brief opportunity to let it tug and chafe some more, I will suggest, in Part 1, some shifts that have contrived to destabilise prior readings of 'community' turning it into an insecure and unreliable concept in our area and, in Part 2, ask how such destabilisation might have ramifications for a performance praxis.

### **Part 1**

In certain academic disciplines (e.g. anthropology, sociology), research has shifted from 'located' articulations of place and community to, for example, imagined nationhood, symbolic communities and, most recently, translocation. For Anderson (1993 [1983]), nationhood was 'modular' and portable: you retain a national identity wherever you might live. Community could be conceived as a form of imagined, ethnically-rooted nationalism where you maintain your sense of belonging to a shared brother/sisterhood, even at a distance. Other voices contributed to this dissociation of physical locus and community. Cohen emphasised the symbolic guardians of a community's identity: 'The reality of community in people's experience thus inheres in their attachment or commitment to a common body of symbols' (1985: 16) - and symbols are transportable; your flag or your dance travel with you. Most recently, research has grown in transnational studies: 'new ideas about transnational spaces ... are the most exciting and promising directions currently being explored' (Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga, 2003: 1). Particular interest focuses on migrants who retain links with real, remembered and imagined places of origin whilst simultaneously developing living affinities in new habitations.

These examples signal the increasing fragmentation of 'traditional' communities that pervade much writing on community over the last thirty years. What such readings have in common is that they situate themselves in response to the impact of widespread social changes of the last fifty years including: migration (enforced or otherwise); transformed communications (the air industry to the web); increased opportunities for, and expectations of, particular groups (e.g. women in many cultures); shifting job markets (e.g. the loss of agricultural worker roles); the

break down of political systems (e.g. communism). The impact of these (much that is now associated with 'globalisation') has reinforced the loss of community or 'organic, traditional and ascriptive ideas of a past way of life' (Hetherington, 1998: 83). Instead, *identity* has been described as a contemporary 'surrogate for community' (Bauman, 2001: 15); the postmodern, individual self (although not always plausible outside privileged western 'democracies') has the luxury of comparative physical and metaphysical freedom. Our identities are, apparently, subject to change and we adapt to different environments easily and quickly, changing our social selves (and possibly our private selves) according to the situation. Mobility is the key to this although, as Eagleton suggests, it may well be only the rich that have such mobility whilst 'the poor have locality' (2003: 22). Bauman coins the phrase 'exterritorial' for the 'new elite' whose 'world has no "permanent address" except for the e-mail one and the mobile telephone number.' This global and elite exterritorial *wants* a 'community-free zone', resenting 'engagement on the ground' of a committed, long-term nature. (*Op. cit.*: 55, 75).

The physical and ideological scattering of communities together with the technological substitute that Virilio predicated has not been fully successful in banishing an *ideal* of community however. Tönnies' comforting and tenacious traits of his late 19<sup>th</sup> century *Gemeinschaft* (small-scale, localised community with shared values, common interests and strong interpersonal relationships) have not waned entirely. A vision of community as a potential panacea for hectic, illogical existence offers safety in the midst of an unstable, changing world or, as Phelan shaded it: 'We see the continuing appeal of community as a vision of human relations that resists the advance of the modern state' (1994: 77). Conveniently forgotten are possible negative associations of 'traditional' communities: the expectation of conformity; the need to defend positions/boundaries; a lack of diversification; exclusion of 'difference'; a resistance to change. Instead, mutual trust, a deep sense of belonging, shared values/ideas and commonalities are remembered more willingly. As a result of field research exploring the retention of a community idyll, Pahl has coined 'communities of the mind' for a harking back to a golden age of community (2005: 625) and Delanty raises the persistence and power of this image: 'The vitality of community is above all due to its imagined capacity: it is found as much in the search and desire for it than in its capacity to provide enduring forms of symbolic meaning.' (2003: 188)

So, has 'community' attenuated to such an extent that we are Virilio's 'multitude of passersby' who spend time dreaming of an idealised 'warm circle', as Rosenberg describes a utopian vision of community (2000[1])?

Non-ascriptive, voluntary consociations offer one way of revisioning community for the more mobile in this contemporary age. *Ascribed* communities insist on certain essentialisms: you are part of the 'lesbian community' because you are lesbian, for example. Sullivan suggests that there is a problem with such ascription because it excludes 'multiplicity and lived realities' (Sullivan, 2001: 139) and points to pressures that are entailed with this single community identity. In a similar mode, Amit agrees that there has been a strong tendency to use the term community for such ascriptions and, particularly, for transnational communities e.g. the 'black' community. She refers to this practice of broad usage as 'hijacking' the term community, suggesting that ascribed community relationships such as ethnicity *are* portable but that such a 'primordial moral claim' on collective identity can be 'dangerous' and even

'violent' (2003). These are strong arguments towards the promotion of *non*-ascriptive communities, of the kind Rapport suggests:

Attachment to a cultural community should be seen to be a matter of individual choice, not necessity or duty (an achievement not an ascription), and the existence of communities be deemed an expression of free negotiation between individuals. (Rapport in Amit and Rapport, 2002: 9)

Here, communities become a matter of choice. Amit takes this voluntariness further, suggesting *consociations* as forms of community where face to face interactions are, still, an essential part of being-in-the-world although these interactions need not be well-established historically or all-inclusive. Indeed, you will be part of many consociations, she claims, at any time of your life. Most of our communality will come from consociations on a local level such as the parent-teacher association or socialising with work colleagues and variations of identity will emerge in each situation. (2002; 2003) Such voluntary, contingent and partial communities offer, perhaps, some recompense for the loss of bounded security dreamed of in the community of the mind and allows access to fragmented communality without the restrictions of hermetic location. Pleasurable experiences in sharing consociative events may even provide a pale form of communion. Whilst not quite Rosenberg's 'warm circle', they do suggest a set of physical and located practices rather than a community of the mind and they indicate a shift away from imagined communities of broad identity that assume communality through a set of symbolic constructions (e.g. religious iconography).

Less satisfactory might be the slippery political position of this reification of community. In *his* description of community, Williams suggested a 'polemical edge, as in community politics' (*op. cit.*). This is lacking in the underwriting of daily consociations and there is a marked softening of the political role for 'community' through such dissipation and plurality. A decreasing emphasis on overt political activity in descriptions of community mirrors the complex realignment of political display from the communal and public to the personal and private over the last thirty years, of course. A depoliticising of community in voluntary, consociative, non-ascriptive adaptations is not entirely surprising, therefore. However, it could be argued that the net result of a loss of political activism together with decreasing emotional engagement[2] leads to a dilution of one 'traditional' aspect of community: *mutual responsibility*. Such an interpretation of community may well be entirely outdated in this allotropic revisioning of contemporary consociations[3].

## Part 2

How does such a re-shaping of community impact upon performance[4]? In this more idiosyncratic section, I want to raise a fundamental problem that some of us are left with in the wake of the purported disintegration of tied communality. This is with particular reference to the area of practice most popularly known as applied or social theatre/drama.

Forged out of a range of genealogies such as community drama, theatre education, theatre for

development, theatre in prisons and probation, participatory theatre, drama in education, reminiscence theatre, interventionist theatre and others, applied theatre has a bewildering gaggle of antecedents and progenitors and, partly *because* of this, it sits well within the *uber*-field of performance[5]. Out of all the striations of performance, community is most prominent in (and an unavoidable centrepiece of?) applied theatre. This is not to dismiss the presence, function and role of community across all performance praxes but the sub-discipline of applied theatre has a hefty claim on it and lays some store by its relationship with the concept.

Applied theatre, like other forms of participatory theatre, is a people's theatre. It demands community presence and action, and it especially requires a commitment to helping others help themselves, As Pompeo-Nogueira (2002) says: "[T]heatre is practiced by the people as a way of empowering communities, listening to their concerns, and encouraging them to voice and solve their problems". (Taylor, 2003: 27)

Taylor's coterminous positioning of community and applied theatre here is not unusual. As the field of applied theatre matures, however, a closer interrogation of the interaction of these bedfellows is developing[6]; the assumption of cohabitation in the same conceptual space is being problematised and critiqued. With the deconstruction and reconstructions of community gifted to us from other disciplines, as suggested above, there is plenty of encouragement in this. Arising from such a take on contemporary community as outlined above, for example, a key issue manifests itself immediately: if contemporary individuals do not live in communities that are holistic, homogenous, coherent, all-inclusive and politically aligned but vacillate across a range of consociations instead, how can theatre be deemed helpful (or 'empowering') for *a* community?

In gently pursuing this particular question, the unreliability of 'community' is foregrounded. Here, for example, there is an assumption that individuals worldwide *do* inhabit consociations and, in free-form, float across a number of different groupings for their mild shots of communion. As Eagleton suggests, however, this is less likely to be so, the less capital you possess. For the Estibrawpa Bri-Bri people of the Yorkin community in the Costa Rican rain forest and displaced Azeris living in internal camps in Azerbaijan, free-form consociations are not an issue[7]. Rapport's idyll of freely negotiated, self-chosen cultural communities would be difficult to envisage here. There is more likelihood of *these* groupings sharing interest, location and collective identity (three acknowledged typologies of community), willingly or not, than the suburban, western, house-holding people of choice, indicated by Rapport and Amit. Yet, even in such confined locations, applied theatre practitioners cannot make assumptions of community and any concomitant facilitation towards self-help. As Nicholson suggests, communities of locality 'are often rather messy and imprecise places' (2005: 87) and, rather than places of finitude, they offer 'only a fragmented set of possibilities'[8]. How does theatre 'empower'[9] messy and imprecise groupings of people? How can practitioners approach applied theatre work for such a 'fragmented set of possibilities'? Certainly, we cannot rely on 'community' as a stable, fixed idea to assist us.

A short engagement with community, as this is, doesn't allow for detailed responses to these provocations and, for many of us in the field of applied theatre, these are lifelong working

debates. Indeed, responses are more fully apprehended in reflecting upon extant practices taking place in specific contexts rather than in theoretical analysis. Problematising ‘community’ is a start, and addressing the ethical implications of working in ‘communities’ closely follows[10]. However, it is in the aggregation and evolution of praxes that grounded understandings of applied theatre’s intimacy with community is being unravelled[11]. There is room for eclecticism and heterogeneity too. Applied theatre has a greater remit than ‘helping others help themselves’, as the list of forebears suggests. Innovative theatre education practice, for example, might focus less on the needs of the community into which it delivers than sharing artistic education with a range of associated individuals. Also, there are ways of deconstructing community differently that can lead to other forms of investigation and reflection. A closer look at the communion implicit in creative practice and the impact on participants as a *performing* community might yield some maverick re-workings of community and performance practice, for instance[12]. Such meanderings might, usefully, release some pressure on the deconstruction of ‘community’ in our field.

Williams’ keyword was complex in 1976. Today, and in its extended complexity, the term is insecure, unreliable and multivalent – yet persistent. For performance practitioners, with a particular nod at applied theatre, it is vexing, tantalising and infinite – yet paradoxically inspirational, still.

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 [1] Cited in Baumann, 2001: 10.

[2] This refers to the potential loss of the expressive and the affectual in contemporary consociations. In fact Hetherington prefers a resurgence of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century 'bund' to community for this very reason, because of 'its conceptual precision' and 'its basis in feeling and emotion for organisational structures rather than its instrumental practices' (Hetherington, 1998: 84). Consociations are unlikely to offer the same base premise of an affectual binding.

[3] Bauman would disagree: '[I]f there is to be a community in the world of the individuals, it can only be (and it needs to be) a community woven together from sharing and mutual care; a community of concern and responsibility for the equal right to be human and the equal ability to act on that right.' (*Op. cit.* 149/150)

[4] Here, I am referring to performance as Carlson's (2003) and Mackenzie's (2001) 'cultural

performance' rather than the anti-discipline suggested by Conquergood (cited in Kershaw, 2006) and others.

[5] Conquergood placed something like applied theatre in his three 'perspectives' of performance: Accomplishment, Analysis and *Application*: describing community - his alternative to application - as 'citizenship and civic struggles for social justice' (cited in Schechner, 2002: 18).

[6] See Thompson, 2003, and Nicholson, 2005, for example.

[7] These are settings of two applied theatre projects (1998-2006) involving staff and students from my institution, CSSD.

[8] Here, Nicholson is citing a phrase from feminist Elspeth Probyn.

[9] In using quotation marks around empower and empowerment, my intention is to actively question the use of this word. Without a subject *and* an object, the word appears to lack matter and substance.

[10] See the Special Issue of *Research in Drama Education: On Ethics*, 10.2, 2005.

[11] With some synchronicity, a colleague exemplifies very recently the kinds of debates taking place about practice in an internal review of an article. On this occasion, he is referring to Theatre for Development, one area of applied theatre: 'I wanted TfD [theatre for development] problematised a bit here – the article seemed to suggest that people from outside the community could develop an endogenous practice and while of course this might be possible, something of the types of performance practice already present amongst these communities would have helped the analysis of the programme that they developed.'

[12] Here, I am thinking of an imbrication of Buber's I:Thou, Jean-Luc Nancy's 'being in common' and Turner's *communitas*. Currently, my own interests lie in how this might impact on participants' response to place, [recorded on an AHRC-funded DVD, \*Performing Place\*](#).