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Why community? Reading difference and singularity with community

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Abstract. Geographers have increasingly recognised that communities are not homogeneous social formations but contain great diversity and are meaningful in a variety of material, relational and political ways. This has resulted in the apparently contradictory notion of "community with difference"; that community may be performed even while heterogeneity and disagreement are present. But geographers have yet to address satisfactorily the question of *why* communities continue to be the subject of fascination and study when attempts at definition have proved so problematic. Following on from Young's critique of community, this paper first engages the work of Nancy and Secomb to consider Nancy's conceptualisation of 'singularity' as a way to explain the human construction of—and possible need for—notions of community. In short we address the *why community?* question. Using a rural Australian case study, we demonstrate that meanings of community reflect many differences. This case also illustrates the role of human singularity in the negotiation of these differences, defining the manner in which individual perspectives of community are articulated as well as underpinning people's responses and struggles when ideas of community are challenged.

Introduction

The genesis of this paper lay in the simultaneous debates problematising the notion of community, and the ongoing use of the term in academic, lay, and political circles. This led us to ask: is there some condition that drives human engagement with community? We were aware that a number of authors had specifically examined the issue of difference in community (for example, Rose, 1997; Secomb, 2000; Young, 1990), and a larger group had concluded that community is a social construct to be variously and continuously negotiated (for example, Cloke et al, 1997; Day, 1998; Goodwin et al, 1995; Mackenzie and Dalby, 2003). Indeed, during the 1990s considerable progress was made in deconstructing the concept. But, although possible parts appeared to have been identified, the *rationale* for their assembly remained unconvincing. Scholars were focusing most effort on the construction, operation, or critique of community, with little recognition of the *why community?* question. In this paper, we suggest that the pieces of this intellectual jigsaw may already be on the table awaiting assembly. Notwithstanding Fynsk's (1991, page x) warning that Nancy's (1991) conception of community "includes an ongoing destruction of much of what we have known as community", we suggest that Nancy's approach indicates why there is a wide and ongoing need for community and ongoing attempts to define the term. Furthermore it provides us with a starting point from which to analyse and explain diversity and division of views recorded in empirical cases. In our case this thinking developed part way through a programme of research investigating the experience of small rural communities in New Zealand and Australia (Liepins, 2000a; 2000b; Panelli, 2001; Welch, 2002). We realised that our conceptualisation of community did not explain the diversity and division we were observing within supposedly cohesive constructions, and we found it fruitful to take a conceptual step away from the detail of our field

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research to consider why community was articulated by our participants. In this paper we outline the *why community?* question and present a reading of Nancy's conceptualisation of "inoperative community" before illustrating its significance for a rural case study conducted in Victoria, Australia.

The paper is divided into three parts. In the first, the evolving literature that approaches community as a constructed concept with complex and problematic meanings is examined. Reference is made to works that illustrate authors' interests in reading community with diversity and difference. The second part of the paper examines *why*, as well as *how*, diversity and division play a central role in the construction of community. Specific reference is made to the framework provided by Nancy's (1991) conceptualization of the significance of (individual) finite existence, or singularity, in what he terms the 'inoperative community'. The final part of the paper examines a case study, informed by Nancy's theorising, to show how community is articulated alongside (and because of) experiences of difference and singularity. These possibilities are illustrated with reference to a complex rural case that displays a degree of unity whilst also indicating heterogeneity and disagreements within it. The case study is essentially a pragmatic one; our concern with the fundamental nature of community stemmed from studies we are conducting into change and community in rural New Zealand and Australia. However, the application of our reasoning to a rural case also goes some way to redress the relative paucity of rural examples presented in the literature, and to counter discussions that have frequently relied on idyllic notions of rural community. There now exists a robust literature pointing to the problematic realities occurring beyond any cosy constructions of rural communities as harmonious, inclusive hearths of human connection (Bell, 2003; Cloke et al, 2002; Panelli et al, 2004). This paper adds a further contribution to such work, highlighting how, while community may not guarantee common experience or harmonious social communion, it is nevertheless sought to counter challenging human – society experiences – conceptualized as *singularity*.

Approaching community: towards considerations of 'community with difference'

Silk (1999, page 6), introducing a special issue of *Environment and Planning A*, wrote that community:

> "suggests any or all of the following: common needs and goals, a sense of the common good, shared lives, culture and views of the world, and collective action."

He observed that community is always a construction, originating from one discourse or another. Silk situated the special issue within the long philosophical history of community. He noted that, as an analytical term, community had emerged in a range of academic contexts, a trend that has continued. Some writers concentrate on place-specific or territorial communities (for example, Mackenzie and Dalby, 2003; Rodriguez, 1999; Staheli and Thompson, 1997), whereas others focus on communities that can be stretched beyond immediate, single, place-specific locations (Allen and Hamnett, 1995; Gandy, 2002; Miller, 1993). In yet other cases, the focus is on imagined communities, such as the nation, or an ethnicity-based subgrouping in which members of a community do not necessarily know most other members (for example, Lave, 2003; Radcliffe, 1999; Walmsley, 2000).

The 1999 special issue was also significant for the way in which contributors emphasised that community is not associated with a particular scale or locality. Rather, the contributions showed the multiple scales and the material, relational, and political ways in which people express forms of shared experience or interest; or negotiate concerns about identity, trust, care, or justice (Doel, 1999; Dwyer, 1999; Radcliffe, 1999; Smith, 1999). In line with thinking that had been developed during the 1990s, these and more recent authors also moved away from past approaches in which community was understood as a

discrete, relatively homogeneous social category. Instead, they treated community as a social construct, emphasising the fluid and contested nature of the term. The subtext of this scholarship suggests community needs to be recontextualised, even reconceptualised.

In the second part of Silk's editorial, where he addressed the instrumentalist motivations of individuals, power structures, and community-with-difference, the opportunity was presented for just such a reconsideration. Although he usefully reviewed the wide range of approaches to the study of community, Silk did this without directly addressing the question of why a notion of community has currency. As already indicated, we view this question as critical to any understanding of human engagement with community. In the section that follows we seek to outline evolving perspectives on community-with-difference in preparation for our addressing the *why community?* question in the second part. Specifically, we examine a set of social theory and empirical investigations that have tackled the challenge of considering community alongside social diversity, difference, and disagreement.

Broader social approaches: towards reading community with diversity, difference, and disagreement

Studies of community are not unique in facing the call for more sensitive acknowledgements of multiple social differences. Indeed, they reflect broader trends in nuanced studies of gender, ethnicity, sexuality, youth and age, development, nationalism, and so forth. What is more striking in the case of the community literature, however, is the way in which ideas of difference, diversity (and the potential for disagreement) initially appear as the complete antithesis of the concept of community; challenging the continued relevance of the term. This is demonstrated in Young's (1990) often cited critique of community, in which she argues that the ideal of community is oppressive in that it requires the bounding and homogenising of social identities and relations and where a 'politics of difference' may do away with the concept of community.

Secomb (2000) also argues against former political and philosophical theories of community that idealise agreement and unity. She reviews liberal social contract theories, communitarian communalism, and ideas of interactive rationality. In concluding that these are unhelpful in their overemphasis on notions of agreement and/or unity, Secomb differs from Young by advocating continued engagement with the concept of community. To achieve this, she turns to Nancy's (1991) conception of the unworking and inoperative community. Secomb argues that:

> "differing needs, objectives, and views expressed through disagreement have to be acknowledged. Instead of insisting on consensus, community needs to be open to disagreement, resistance, and fracture. This expression of disagreement would not only allow a place for difference, it would also overcome stagnation and complacency, and generate transition and transformation" (2000, page 137).

Young's critique is more frequently quoted in human geography, although Secomb's approach, emphasizing the need to conceptualise community better rather than jettisoning the term, more accurately reflects practice in the subdiscipline. For despite Young's call for a move away from the ideal of community to a politics of difference, many scholars continue to acknowledge the academic, lay, and political relevance of the term while increasing their focus on *how* difference is manifest, performed, or negotiated—a decision that more closely parallels Secomb's approach. Geographers have acknowledged that ideals and mythologies of unity and common experience often mask, deny, or control complex social differences and power relations. For instance, Staheli and Thompson (1997) demonstrate how conflict over public space results in the formation of different constructions of community based on characteristics such as residence, political participation, and countercultures—an example of the dangers of homogenising processes and exclusionary boundaries highlighted by Young (1990).

Staheli and Thompson (1997, page 38) conclude that recognising various constructions of community and the definitions of citizenship and public space remains central to understanding how differences are negotiated 'through community'. Day (1998) also argues that community remains an important notion because distinctions between ideals of community and how communities occur in specific circumstances highlight how divergent groups may share some unifying community identities while simultaneously forming 'communities within community'. In parallel cases, other scholars have reflected on the strategic ways in which a united community identity may be formed in the face of an external threat (Dalby and Mackenzie, 1997; Rodriguez, 1999; Wilson et al, 2004). Importantly, however, they acknowledge that some internal differences and voices are silenced and marginalised through such processes; and that such identities are never singular or stable (Mackenzie and Dalby, 2003). This also is reflected in the internal complexity and divisions Radcliffe (1999) found within the constructed national community of Ecuador. Across these works, community is observed as a strategic form of social collective that may be invoked to serve the varied purposes of a few, or many [for example, the interests of powerful national governments or particular class interests or local residents and activists (see Radcliffe, 1999; Stenning, 2003; Wilson et al, 2004)].

Several helpful themes have been developed for a more detailed reading of how community is constructed and enacted within a social setting that includes diversity and difference. First, geographers have continued to emphasise the importance of *context* when addressing complex communities. For instance, Lave (2003) and Radcliffe (1999) have argued the importance of considering the historical, political, and religious specificities surrounding community identity formation, and Dwyer (1999), Mackenzie and Dalby (2003) have shown the need to acknowledge the discursive, material and symbolic particularities of imaginations of community and identity. In readings of community in which attention is given to heterogeneity and the implications of difference, the study of numerous contextual dimensions is important to understanding the basis of differences and the consequences arising from them.

Second, reading 'community with difference' involves acknowledging the diversity of *people* and their participation in both discursive and extradiscursive relations with community. Dwyer (1999) portrays this in her account of different young women's associations with community through discourses of Islam and negotiations over dress and behaviour. These women become "boundary markers for a community" yet are neither "passive nor powerless" (1999, pages 59, 66). Alternatively, Rose (1997) argues that people involved with community—in her case, community arts workers—will be active, using 'tactics' that both enable connections yet always maintain processes and practices of community as incomplete and continuously performed. Thus, in creating more detailed readings of community, acknowledgement can be given to people constructing, and constituted by, community—not only as subjects of this social phenomenon nor of the discourses that seek to define it, but as multiply positioned and constantly active in their behaviours, voices, and silences.

Third, the formation of community will involve the articulation of *meanings*. These may be recognised as explicit symbols or identities of community (as noted by Mackenzie and Dalby, 2003) or they may be read in the silences, creative processes, and incomplete performances of community projects (for example, Rose 1997). In short, community includes some creation of meaning that is articulated (and likely contested) in a number of ways. These constructions may include processes of othering or the concealment of minorities' interests and experiences (Dalby and Mackenzie, 1997; Liepins, 2000b). Also, these constructions can be challenged when social, cultural, and economic processes threaten to unsettle meanings that enjoy hegemonic positions (Liepins, 2000b; Naples, 1994;

Secomb, 2000). Thus, in terms of some practicalities in analysing community, readings might involve the identification of symbols, identities, and discursive understandings that are strategically shared by many, at least temporarily (Mackenzie and Dalby, 2003; Wilson et al, 2004). However, readings should also tease out the processes by which these understandings can *other* minority groups or positions, or are in turn challenged or resisted by alternative meanings and experiences. Searching for disagreement or dissonance within community will be as informative as identifying consensus.

Fourth, community involves social relations that can be observed in practices or performances that are spatially constituted. Elsewhere Lave (2003) and Liepins (2000a; 2000b) have argued that these *practices* and *spaces* that are important to community and identity may include the very ordinary examples of shopping, collecting mail, and interactions around local halls, schools, and sports grounds. Yet the apparent simplicity of these activities and sites should not take our attention from the powerful way they can convey dominant meanings and relations of community; nor from their vulnerability to change or contestation as communities are altered or reworked by internal and/or external processes (Mordue, 1999; Naples, 1994; Wilson et al, 2004). Both the practices and the spaces in which communities are negotiated form opportunities for readers to face clear expressions of diversity and struggle.

Engagement with the work of Nancy has proved particularly helpful across these themes. Taking different scales and political agendas, Rose (1997) and Secomb (2000), respectively, highlight the usefulness of Nancy's conception of community that is not comfortably uniform, complete, or blessed with consensus or agreement. Nancy (1991) has argued that the constant state of incomplete communication, of (transient) self, and 'unfinished sharing' provides the opportunity to theorise an 'inoperative community' that is continuously 'unworked' and performed. Through the discourses and silences of a variety of Edinburgh-based community arts projects, Rose (1997) applies Nancy's approach. She shows how community is constantly performed as a process rather than a product; a collection of contradictions rather than a singular agreed notion; a series of voices rather than a unified, substantive object. Perhaps even more radically, Secomb's extension of Nancy's ideas results in her reading of an Australian national community that is fractured, constantly unworked, but also continually sustained by the difference and disagreement that stretches between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal groups, laws, and culture.

Although Secomb's subject is a particularly volatile and intense community, her approach, together with Rose's, illustrates the importance of reading the practices or processes through which community is performed and fractured. Although these processes highlight the possibility of discord and struggle as a regular and necessary part of community dynamics, little attention has been given to why such struggles are valued or engaged. Thus the *why community?* question begins to take form.

Cumulatively, studies within rural and recent wider social literature have provided a new era of possibilities and relevance for geographies of community. Day and Murdoch (1993) argued that community retains a conceptual currency—notwithstanding it being a significant problematic—because it encourages investigations that combine social processes with material conditions and the symbolic meanings or imaginations about community. Subsequent critiques of community raise the possibility of completing more detailed geographies of how community is enacted with difference. But, as we indicated in the introduction to this paper, we are of the view that this evolving approach to community itself remains undercontextualised in that it has not addressed the question of why community is sought or debated as a relatively enduring concept within political and cultural landscapes. In the following section, we seek to provide an initial account of such a contextualisation.

Addressing the *why community?* question

In her influential critique of the ideal of community, Young (1990, page 300) noted that:

> "Community is an *understandable* dream, expressing a desire for selves that are transparent to one another, relationships of mutual identification, social closeness and comfort. The dream is *understandable*, but politically problematic, I argue, because those motivated by it will tend to suppress differences among themselves or implicitly to exclude from their political groups persons with whom they do not identify" (emphasis added).

Although, importantly, Young exposed community as a problematic, we take issue with her assertion that community is a necessarily *understandable* dream. Indeed, notwithstanding the progress made in theorising community in the last decade, we identify a number of components of a significant, ongoing problematic that suggest the human fascination with community is anything but either understandable or understood. For example, there is: continuing confusion resulting from the wide range of community types identified; frustration at the apparent dislocation between the need for community and the general inability to define the term; uncertainty about the motivations of those seeking to create or construct community, and an associated lack of trust in this process; and suspicion that community is a euphemism, but for what?

Thus although we concur with Young's (1990, page 300) assertion that the "vision of small, face-to-face, decentralized units … is an unrealistic vision for transformative politics in mass urban society", we suggest that the reason why community continues to have wide currency needs to be theorised and incorporated into case analysis. We therefore propose a further engagement with the approach suggested by Nancy (1991).

Acknowledging the *need* for community

Community as theorised by Nancy is sufficiently removed from empirical experience to constitute an intellectually challenging prospect for academics and practitioners alike. His questions of community and difference have most frequently been considered by those working in literature or those mounting political critiques or metaphysical and corporeal accounts of otherness and death (Donovan, 2002; Egginton, 2002; Jenckes, 2003; Palumbo-Liu, 2002; Salama, 2002). But using specific place-related populations, Rose (1997) and Secomb (2000) have engaged Nancy's proposition that, far from suggesting collective commonality, the term community is replete with difference; or, as Hoem (1996) suggests, a community of 'beings' (rather than unitary individuals) who each negotiate singularity and the need for communication rather than communion. What is worth further acknowledgement is that Nancy also provides a rationale for the *need* (or motivation) for people to act on in order to construct community—and that this need operates at the level of the individual as well as being capitalised upon by certain interest groups (for example, politicians, privileged classes). We suggest that, at the level of the individual, the implications of two important, articulated propositions are not commonly addressed. The first is that the process of constructing or invoking community, in whatever form, is related to a metaphysical question of (individual) human existence. The second proposition is that recommendations simply to replace the focus on community with 'a politics of difference' will be ignored in the practical world of decisionmaking. Politicians, administrators, and planners, together with academics seeking research contracts, will continue to return to the frustrating business of invoking or investigating would-be communities of unity. Without a theorisation of these propositions, much about human engagement with notions of community fails to make a great deal of sense. Consequently, we suggest that continued intellectual engagement with community, albeit not in its ideal(ised) form, is essential. In this section, we consider how Nancy's theorising of human singularity can shed light on these propositions and

thereby inform our understanding of communities in a practical as well as an abstract sense.

What Nancy proposes is not uncomplicated—an articulation between an ultimate (individual centred) metaphysical uncertainty and the way humans socially engage via ideas and performances of community. As already noted, Nancy (1991) further challenges our thinking by conceptualising community as inoperative—as an aggregate of connections that result from (individuals) 'being-*in*-common'. By this, Nancy means that 'being' *precedes* and is always *separate from* any awareness or expectation that may be common. This is the antithesis of the widespread, idealised form of community understood to be the repository of 'common being', common perspective, or unity in which common identity (rather than diversity and individual being) is the higher order of awareness. Donovan (2002) argues it is also the antithesis, and therefore a potent critique of, absolutist and totalitarian atrocities that emerge from homogenising superconcepts of commonality (that type of ideal of community that Young also challenged).

In contrast, Nancy theorises perspectives and relations that are *individually* driven by the need to come to terms with existential reality. For him, communities are not constructed or identified as places within which individuals can safely operate as a unified group. They do not reflect the "transcendence of a being immanent to community" or the existence of common bonds or attachments between individuals (Nancy, 1991, page 29). Rather, it is individual transcendence that is immanent. Thus, as we summarise visually in figure 1, individuals are not ephemeral participants in ongoing (albeit changing) concrete constructions called communities [figure 1(a)], but their transcendence is the very stuff of community [figure 1(b)]. Accordingly, Nancy's idea of community is shown [figure 1(b)] to have imprecise form (having multiple, transitory meanings) and is

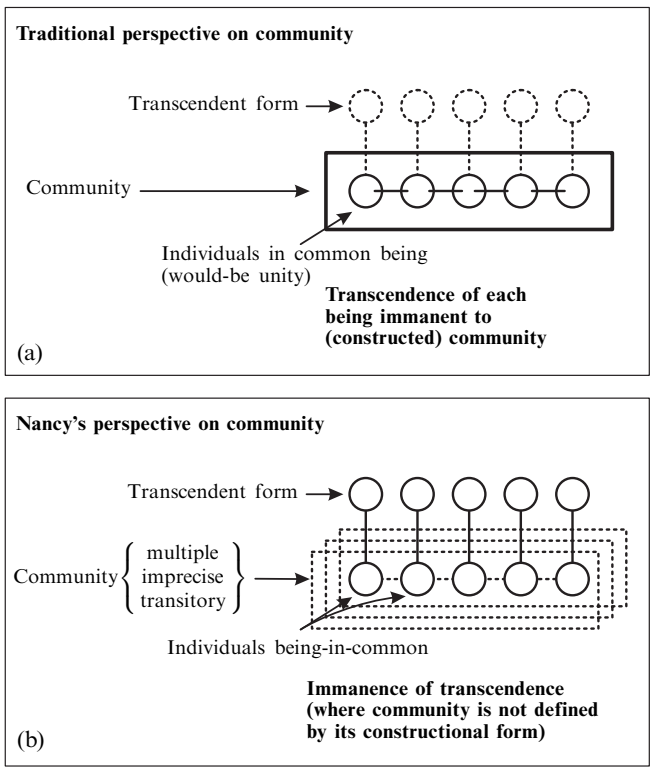

Figure 1. Contrasting perspectives on community: (a) traditional and (b) inoperative forms.

variously defined by transcendent individuals seeking at least temporary collective security in a world that is individually experienced.

The nature of articulations between individuals in Nancy's inoperative community unworks common constructions often taken as givens, and rubs together relations and processes that frequently have been treated as oppositional binaries. For instance, Nancy theorises the following in an inoperative community:

> "[A] bond that forms ties without attachments, or even less fusion, … a bond that unbinds by binding, that reunites through the infinite exposition of irreducible finitude" (1991, page xl).

Bonds exist because of common position or situation rather than common perspective. The issue, for Nancy as well as geographers concerned with theorising community, is *how* this being-in-common is communicated:

> "How can we be receptive to the meaning of our multiple, dispersed, mortally fragmented existences, which nonetheless only make sense by existing in common? … In other words, perhaps: how do we communicate?" (1991, page xl)

This is the issue that confronts us when we seek to theorise community and interpret empirical cases. Nancy (1991, page xl) suggests that as a necessary first step in the process we should "dismiss all 'theories of communication' which begin by positing the necessity or the desire for a consensus, a continuity and a transfer of messages." He goes on to assert that "it is not a question of establishing rules for communication, it is a question of understanding before all else that in 'communication' what takes place is an exposition: finite existence exposed to finite existence …". This suggests the importance of intellectual engagement with the significance of singularity (finite existence) in any theorising of community. Egginton (2002) and Palumbo-Liu (2002) note that such singularity intersects increasingly deeply with experiences of otherness and death in Nancy's later works—extending from the proposition that our finite existence is exposed via inoperative community. In this form, community "is the presentation to its members of their mortal truth" (Nancy 1991, page 15).

Like Rose (1997), we have been drawn to the question of how the inoperative community is experienced in empirical cases rather than philosophical or literary questions. Nancy takes us some of the way by describing what the inoperative community is not, and by outlining the dangers for local, real politics inherent in standard perspectives on the unifying community. Drawing the distinction between *being-in-common* and *common being,* Nancy is concerned by the myth and totalitarian excesses that follow attempts to define community in terms of the latter. Our approach to community acknowledges the role of both 'common being' constructions-of-convenience and individually experienced metaphysical uncertainties associated with singular 'being-in-common'.

We construct this alternative approach from a set of related propositions, after Nancy (1991):

(a) humans engage intermittently with broad metaphysical issues, especially experiences or expressions of finite existence ('singularity');

(b) they find such existentialist interpretations fundamentally challenging;

(c) consequently, humans construct ideas about the world including constructions of community in unchallenging terms while having some awareness of the shortcomings of such unifying formulations;

(d) these constructions postpone or avoid having to confront the implications of finitude and an ultimate aloneness; but

(e) the dissonance and uncertainty this process generates within the individual are commonly redirected into perspectives on *constructed* community.

We concur with Nancy that standard formulations of community (of common being) are inherently unsatisfactory and potentially dangerous. We also agree with writers such as Young (1990), Rose (1997), and Secomb (2000) that a key component of community research is the analysis of difference. But we are of the view that any understanding of community must also acknowledge the human capacity to coengage with the construction of communities (of convenience) and with the metaphysical turmoil stemming from ideas of human singularity.

When studying empirical cases we would expect to encounter not only the drive to create community(ies), differential identification and engagement with community(ies), and reticence and othering. We would also expect to identify some, or all, of the following: individual reflections suggesting (at least transitory) awareness of singularity; evidence of perceived difference and subsequent examples of inclusion or exclusion; lack of consensus about what constitutes (the) community; on-going un-working, or in-operation with respect to community; reflections on the transitory usefulness of constructed (sub)communities; and/or examples of struggle over community meanings, spaces, and practices.

What we are suggesting is that the role of the community researcher is neither to define community (in some impositional sense), nor to dismiss the validity of imperfect formulations that become evident. Rather, it is to show how the range of confused and confusing perspectives on community can be enhanced by registering human responses to metaphysical positions and experiences of singularity. In the third part of this paper, the case of Newstead is considered. Community is read by observing how inhabitants articulate experiences of singularity, 'being-in-common' and difference while they construct various accounts of community to alleviate these coexisting experiences.

Reading difference and singularity with community: the case of Newstead, Australia

Background

Newstead is the name of a small township and a former shire, 140km northwest of Melbourne in the historic gold fields area of central Victoria (see figure 2). Newstead also forms one of a number of case studies in our recent research that has considered Australian and New Zealand rural social relations and governance issues, respectively (Kraack and Panelli, 2004; Liepins, 2000a; Panelli, 2001; Welch, 2000; 2002). After the 19th-century Victorian gold rush, Newstead became a service centre for a predominantly agricultural population. However, in recent decades, as businesses and services have aggregated in larger centres, Newstead has increasingly developed as part of a commuter corridor spreading northwest from Melbourne along the Calder Highway. Since 1995 Newstead has been part of the larger Mt Alexander Shire that is serviced from the regional town of Castlemaine (15 km to the east). This change in local government was part of statewide amalgamations that occurred in the mid-1990s under the then Liberal government. As a consequence of these developments, an areal definition of Newstead is somewhat difficult to make. Nevertheless, local people associating with Newstead continue to include residents of the Newstead township (about 505 in 197 households—1996 Australian census immediately preceding the field work period in 1997). Numerous other people associate with Newstead and were included in the research, including those living on surrounding farms, lifestyle blocks, and very small settlements that were originally part of the former Newstead Shire (for example, Fryerstown, Joyces Creek, Sandon, Welshman's Reef, and Yandoit—see figure 2, over). In this way the Newstead case holds a community identity in terms of what Silk and others have previously noted both as a place-based, locality-specific

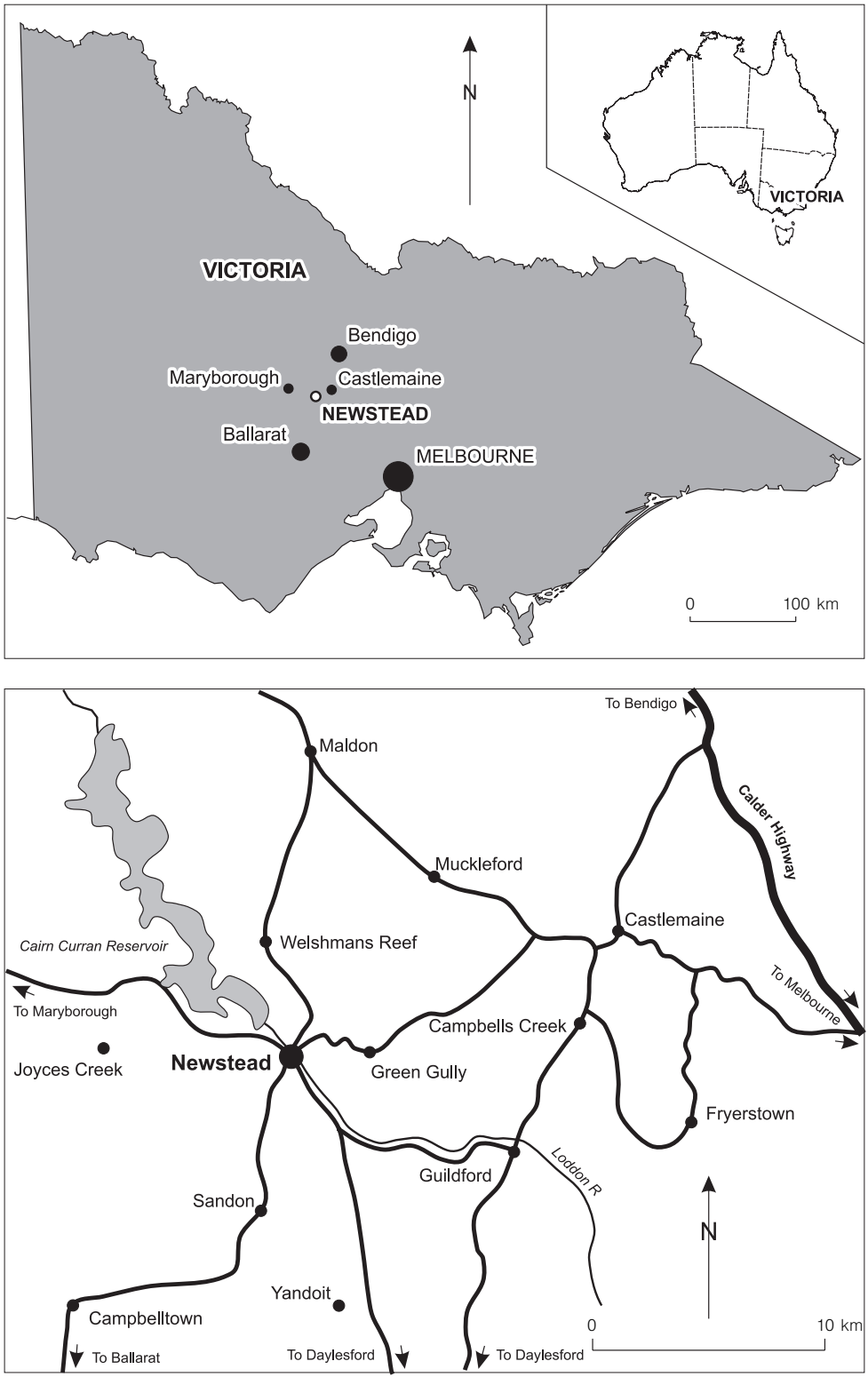

Figure 2. Newstead and surrounding district.

notion, as well as a political territory that (although it has since been aggregated) continues to hold local currency as an imagined community.

During 1997, research commenced in Newstead via initial meetings and invitations with local leaders (Liepins, 2000b). A form of community-oriented participatory action research was negotiated whereby a local research assistant worked closely with the Newstead population for a period of six months. This work involved: publicising the research throughout the Newstead area; inviting local participation and contact in any form people wished to offer; and establishing and maintaining a community reference group (CRG). The CRG in the Newstead case included seventeen people who ranged in age, gender, economic status, and sociocultural interests. It included members of established farming families who enjoyed long histories in the area, through to recent arrivals from a variety of different economic and social circumstances. The group was established to reflect as many of the differences in the population as possible. Field research also included thirty-four in-depth semistructured personal interviews with local residents; and the completion of two projects developed through the CRG (namely a small community survey and a community exhibition/performance day). Later in 2000 Newstead was included in a complementary research programme comparing the forms of local level governance in Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom (for the first results of this work see Welch, 2002).

The present paper reports on much of the data generated from the 1997 fieldwork, including notes from the CRG meetings, interview transcriptions, newsletters, survey results, notes on the planning and running of an exhibition/performance day, and a detailed field log. But the later 2000 project further stimulated our thinking surrounding the practice of continued invocation of community in lay and political discourse, even when difference, division, and political restructuring challenge the very possibility of community. The following reading of difference and singularity with community is made by analysing the data for the themes identified in the previous discussion of *why community?* Initially, we show how local individuals having some association with Newstead produce different, multidimensional perspectives on how Newstead is constituted. We also show that individuals are variously aware of this range of difference and its implications, and suggest that this acknowledged awareness provides a conduit for the reading and interpreting of singularity through community. Second, we document how individuals' accounts of Newstead community(ies), represent a response to this singularity and act as individually constructed counterbalances—articulated as forms of social and spatial association. We suggest that the form of these accounts is consistent with the theorisation of human engagement with 'constructed community(ies)' as a process of continual adjustment (a series of temporary compromises). Finally, we make the case that it is the issues and conditions that challenge *individual* constructions of community (as well as superficial, group constructions) that generate the commonly observed, interrelated processes of defensive exclusion and the creation of otherness. Across each of these themes, we show how individuals' perceptions of their engagement with community(ies) and their acknowledgement of the contrast between group and individual (their own) reflections on that engagement, affirm the potency of Nancy's (1991) theorisation that singularity is a significant human driver within "community-that-is-inoperative".

Theme 1: Individual perspectives on Newstead as community: reflecting difference and singularity

Analysis of interviews showed that many individuals recognise and narrate difference. They describe Newstead as a settlement and social unit of great diversity. Categorisations of the population (Barker and Liepins, 1997) were variously constructed and

include those based on length of residence, occupation, and motivation for living in the Newstead area:

> "It's an incredibly diverse community … you've got groups or individuals there who come from quite different backgrounds and have got different aspirations. Some are very much what I term the carry-over from the 1970 hippie era. [Then there is] the more traditional … groups where they're carrying on their family business or life as there has been traditionally in a very conventional manner. … Then of course you've also got another group: professionals coming out of the metropolis and living in this area because it's only an hour and fifteen minutes away" (interview 2: middle-aged, male, local government official).

> "There are three distinct groups in the community. There is the old traditional farming community, that do farming for a living, and on a serious basis. There's the category in which I fit, the 'ex-Melbournes' who make a lifestyle decision to live in the country. And there's those that choose to live in a community such as this purely for economic reasons, low accommodation costs et cetera ... . The dynamics of Newstead as I observe them, are very much the interplay between those three groups" (interview 9: middle-aged, male, business operator).

We also found no unanimity of voice on what constitutes the spatial parameters of Newstead-as-community. Instead, interviewees showed a high degree of awareness that (1) community does not have a single, uncontested, spatial form, (2) the social parameters of community are not uniformly defined, and that (3) awareness of such difference is *not* a cause of concern.

Rather than constructing Newstead as an idealised rural community of commonality or homogeneity, these types of narrative record interviewees' awareness of diversity in the population. What is more, interviewees expressed individuality and a range of individual values in conjunction with their perceptions of a diverse community. For instance, one resident observed:

> "It's [the Newstead community] such a diverse lot of people and they're all individuals. Each individual has got their own style of living and interests and that sort of thing…they don't have to interact greatly" (interview 20: older, female, farmer).

Another asserted:

> "I don't believe we have a right to tell everybody that they should be doing what we think they should be doing. They're part of the community but they're still an individual. They have the right to be who they are and do what they want to do" (interview 17: middle-aged, single mother, business operator).

The significance of such expressions of difference and individuality lies in the way they interweave with narratives of Newstead as a social and spatial setting in which movement from singularity to interaction-with-community is facilitated. For instance, in describing Newstead as a social centre, one resident conceptualised it as an entity with which individuals variously choose to engage by way of repeated, everyday activities:

> "Newstead … serves as a centre, it does socially for many of the surrounding farming community. It's good for interaction. It's the place where you pick up your mail, it's the place where you buy your lawn mower, it's the place where you buy your paper in the morning" (interview 9: middle-aged, male, business operator).

In this case the resident had recently moved to Newstead but sketches the individual everyday patterns of a life (where one needs to collect mail, mow grass, and buy a paper) that allow him transitory (noncommittal) contact with others. Other residents developed this theme further by suggesting that contacts via such everyday practices provide:

"the common links between people that don't have links" (interview 16: middle-aged, farming couple).

The perception that the Newstead community is replete with diversity and is composed of groups and individuals who "don't mix widely" (interview 6: middle-aged professional man living on a hobby farm), juxtaposed with the assertion of individuals' rights within community, should not be read as an undermining of the significance of community for the individual. Speaking about events following the death of her husband, one interviewee observed:

"I can't speak too highly of this community in the support that I got, often from the most unexpected quarters, because they were people that had known you … people … were just there when you needed them, or people who'd just come out of the woodwork and did something extraordinarily ordinary in a way, that just meant they were there batting for you" (interview 17: middle-aged, single mother, business operator).

At a time when her experience of singularity was unavoidable, and potentially acute, the kind acts of others acknowledging this widow's membership of the community served to lessen its impact. There is no evidence from the interview transcript that relationships between this woman and those showing kindness materially changed, or were even sought, as a result of this process. Such acts, stemming from common position within community (but with commonality of position with respect to singularity as the subtext), need only be of limited duration and intermittently displayed.

Awareness of the artificial and ephemeral nature of community and an individual's unchanging singularity is drawn into sharper focus by another interviewee. When referring to a friend in Newstead, they noted that:

"she had this idea when she arrived in Newstead of trying to create community, but [now] believes this is impossible. However, *men and women need to belong*" (interview 1: middle-aged, male, local government official; emphasis added).

Such awareness is consistent with Nancy's theorisation, and we return to this theme later in the paper.

Theme 2: Community(ies) as response to singularity

Whereas previous literature has associated individuals' experiences of community with a "sense of belonging", the idea of an inoperative community of transient connections, produced as a response to the condition of singularity, suggests a different interpretation of acceptance and belonging. It suggests the need to read the individual's engagement with community differently. We exemplify this through individuals' perception of their engagement with numerous and changing groups and their perception of particular place(s).

As one resident explained:

"One of the things I really like about Newstead is their acceptance of the alternative lifestyle people and anybody new. As long as they pull their own weight, they seem to be tolerated and accepted OK. [Newstead has] various groups in the community, it seems to absorb them all to me—it looks as though it does … I guess I feel accepted for who I am and what we do" (interview 21: middle-aged, female, lifestyle-block owner).

In this case, the interviewee positions herself both as an individual and an observer of the collective 'Newstead'. Her account records her own sense of a singular selfhood "who I am" as well as the construction of a community that may "absorb" or "accept" individuals. She engages with community, but also remains singularly constructed and therefore apart from it. Newstead is perceived to be a good community by this resident because she is able to access both collective and individual experiences. The text also

provides a clue as to the mechanism at work. Acceptance into/by the Newstead community is not automatic but, rather, is contingent upon individuals being perceived to "pull their own weight". The freedom to move between an individual position and the collective of community is dependent upon individuals being *perceived* to contribute to the collective even as they draw from it. Put another way, community can only act as an (albeit temporary) antidote to singularity if individuals feel affirmed through their membership of it. For such affirmation to be possible, most individuals must be seen to be supporting the collective. Whereas the othering of some groups and individuals is voiced in terms of perceived or predicted noncompliance with *community* values, the challenge is to participating individuals and their *individual* needs of community.

Several interviewees also emphasised the wide range of groups operating in Newstead and their significance as points of access into 'the community'. Interviewee 17, who had lived in Newstead for many years, explained:

> "I think that … having forty … groups, that many groups is a good thing, not a bad thing. I mean I think it means that whatever interests you have got when you come into this area, you will probably find something you can slot into and feel like you belong with" (interview 17: middle-aged, single mother, business operator).

Whereas, on first reading, this statement appears to reflect positively on Newstead, Interviewee 17 also confirms that access to groups is *not* perceived to be equally straightforward for all inhabitants; that the large number of groups is necessary because the collective and its groups are *not* universally welcoming.

Perspectives on the relationship between community, constituent groups, and change also proved illuminating, with groups not being viewed simply as tangible subunits of the former. Indeed, central to this rereading of community is the awareness that groups are also fluid constructions, subject to constant change:

> "Most of the organisations [in Newstead] I see are struggling along on a shoestring with a handful of members, probably quite a viable number of members but all doing their own thing, none of them being very vibrant … community organisations go through change, rise and fall with the tides and the ebb and flow of the feelings of the day … in a very short period the people who appear to be the movers and the shakers have gone on to shake somewhere else" (interview 6: middle-aged professional man living on a hobby farm).

Furthermore, there was common acknowledgement that change within/to community generates unease but, for our interviewees, the unease is experienced by members of *some other* group. For instance, one woman noted another population who resisted change to the use of the local community park:

> "that park issue, you have half the town jumping up and down, the rural farmers' wives, and they don't use it, [but] they don't like the idea of change, that's what it boils down to" (interview 22: middle-aged, female, lifestyle-block owner).

But it is a further, reflective comment by another resident that best illustrates the link between change within/to community and the uncertainty this (re)generates with respect to the human singularity:

> "Someone said to me the other day 'I don't like change … I am used to the way it was'. But I think there is a welcoming of the new energy and a bit of life. But they don't want [it] to be to the extent that they don't feel safe about being where they are" (interview 24: middle-aged, single, professional woman).

This issue is examined further during discussion of theme 3.

The perception of particular places can also be read to highlight the way temporary association or communion is accessed to balance the potential aloneness of individual existence. As with other rural communities, local practices and spaces conveying a sense of a Newstead community were attributed to the informal social connections

and common spaces taken up during specific events such as the annual Australia Day concert, school fete, and regular market days (Barker and Liepins, 1997; Liepins, 2000b). There were also more frequent but less structured occurrences, when community was attributed to everyday interactions in a range of spaces: for example, on the street, at the pool, at the post office or primary school. For instance, one couple explained:

"Hotels have always been a place where people come …
People will be coming by and see a car, [and they'll] think 'Oh, I want to catch up with them'. They'll stop and catch up with them at the pub.
The pub is the local focus.
It's a focus in the community, not so much as it used to be, but they count with locals" (interview 12: middle-aged, local business couple).

In another case, another resident who has lived with her partner and children in Newstead for about ten years nominated the pool as a community site because it is a place of social interaction with people "you know":

"The swimming pool would probably be the main focus during the summer because if you want to catch up with someone, there's always a few people you know there on any particular day" (interview 21: middle-aged, female, lifestyle-block owner).

These examples illustrate how sites are places where people can be found within community. In some instances, such as a church, club, or formal occasion, interaction is specific and purpose led (even prescribed). But, more frequently, sites within community are loci of *potential* interaction used by individuals when they need to engage the sense of being part of community. Sites are variously accessible and replete with ephemeral qualities. For example, most are defined in terms of diurnal time/activity, and age or lifestyle changes which result in inevitable adjustments to the nature of individuals' engagement with them. In this respect, sites share both the potential and the limitations of groups as points of individual contact with community.

Theme 3: Defensive exclusion strategies and the creation of 'otherness'

We noted earlier that the process of othering, or the concealment of minorities' interests and experiences, occurs when meanings enjoying hegemonic positions are themselves challenged. In this section of the paper, we return to this theme to suggest that although hegemonic groups may be the vehicles in the process of othering, the motivation is individuals' need to perceive community in (albeit different and changing) forms that facilitate deferred engagement with singularity. The objective is not so much the exclusion of othered individuals undertaken from a position of (group) strength as permitting individuals to hold on to the conceptions of community that they (individually) find comforting.

In our interviews in Newstead we encountered the language of othering. For example, interviewee 6 (a middle-aged professional man living on a hobby farm) informed us that he had "been known to use the word feral" when referring to those living alternative lifestyles in the community. The fact that this group is perceived to be different and does not usually mix with long-term locals results in a number of negative views:

"We had a fund raiser here last year and these people [alternatives] packed out the hotel and we'd never seen them before and we have never seen them since. They are obviously from the hills. Really quite different. Unbelievable" (interview 12: middle-aged, local business couple).

"There's a different type of group down in Newstead now which a lot of people would call the 'greenies' … I would call them that . … they're different to the people that used to go around Newstead because you never seen them at any functions" (Interview 13: older, farming couple).

Here, difference was linked to limited participation in community activities by "greenies", and othering resulted from ignorance about the group's commitment to the community. We suggest this because:

> "Another group [is also] conspicuous by their absence [from community activities]—a bigger group not involved in anything [is the] long-standing locals in their forties" (interview 1: middle-aged, male, local government official).

In this case, group members are not marginalised because their commitment to the community is assumed as a result of their long residency. The limited involvement in community activities of a third group, those individuals running businesses in Newstead, is accepted in a similar manner:

> "the bakery and the supermarket are very important. He's developed that from nothing … he's not involved in much else" (interview 16: middle-aged, farming couple).

Here, the setting up of a business or service outlet is read as a (financial) commitment to the community, the act of service provision and affirmation of the community and its meanings despite the operator's limited ability to contribute to other community activities.

Respondents displayed difference and overall ambivalence in their views on the function of groups in the wider community. For some individuals, the experience had been frustrating because of perceived impediments to membership. One interviewee described Newstead as:

> "cliquey, I s'pose, you've got to be in it. If you're not in it then you're on the outer" (interview 15: a young, male, farmer and lifetime resident).

Another complained:

> "I can't get into a book group in Newstead; if I say I'm interested they just say there are no vacancies in ours" (interview 24: middle-aged, single, professional woman).

In other cases, groups themselves were reported as being marginalised, especially where their use of community facilities could be controlled or denied (observations: February, April, May 1997—log pages 4, 158, 198, 199, 222, 223). For example, a resident explained:

> "The yoga group is not welcomed in Newstead. They haven't found a room, a cosy, warm place [appropriate venue for sessions]. There are little hints from the community that it's not welcome" (observations: April 1997—log page 95).

On another occasion, a participant involved in the local spirituality group noted that they explicitly chose not to advertise their existence or meetings to reduce the possibility of negative community reaction, especially as some topics like Aboriginal reconciliation and racism were likely to polarise local sentiments (observations: April 1997—log page 101).

In contrast, as we have already reported, the expanded array of groups is also perceived to be a mechanism for circumventing such frustrations, permitting individuals to find (individual) ways to engage with community and thereby allow them a voice:

> "you can exist in the community without having any need from anyone else or can join any number of the large number of organisations" (interview 6: middle-aged professional man living on a hobby farm).

Indeed, one consequence of the proliferation of groups has been difficulty experienced in gaining and maintaining group membership. For example, one resident noted

> "we've got heaps of incredible people but only a handful that will actually come together and do anything" (interview 29: older, female, retiree).

Accordingly, we suggest that the position of groups in the Newstead community is neither predetermined nor secure. Some are perceived to employ exclusionary practices

and others experience exclusion, and the Newstead case suggests that social othering at the level of the group is anything but a uniform process driven by uniform perspectives. We believe this can be further illustrated by reference to the independent positions adopted by individuals with respect to groups. This positioning takes several forms, but common to them is the distance that individuals seek to draw between themselves (as individuals) and decisions made by the community in its various collective forms. For instance, as reported previously (Liepins, 2000b), for some members of the Newstead Community Centre Management Committee, community—understood as a formation in which traditional activities occurred—was something to be protected and supported, sometimes in an explicitly defensive and exclusionary way. Yoga, informal drop-in activities, and line-dancing (with its apparent homosexual connotations) were newer activities that the then installed committee refused to endorse by permitting them to operate in the Community Centre. In their role as managers of the Community Centre, the governing committee sought to differentiate between acceptable and 'undesirable' members of the community, in the latter case creating an aggregate and ascribing to each of its constituents the apparently negative attributes of the whole. Many observations, conversations, and meetings illustrate these relations (observations: February, April—August 1997). These included not only references to the types of groups hiring the hall, but also to the use of resources, marking of the wooden floor, cleaning after activities, and orderliness of the kitchen:

"At the end of the meeting others went into the store room [while] 'Mary' showed me around the rooms, hall. Others came to see why the lights were on!! It is absolutely spotless. … Came back to meeting room. 'John' [was] not approving of cluttering the courtyard with seats, notice boards: 'will attract undesirables'. 'Bruce' agreed—'lolly papers, young kids, undesirables. Create a mess for 'Alice' to clean up'" (meeting, 8 April 1997—log page 111).

Although members of the management committee might have sought to inhibit access to (potentially, interrogation of) its constructions of community in this way, they were not successful. Individuals' reflections on actions relating to the use of the Community Centre and the more general marginalisation of groups in the community suggest both independence and relative sophistication of perspective. For example, reaction to the Community Centre Management Committee's decision included the following:

"The Community Centre is a real bore. It's sterile" (interview 24: middle-aged, single, professional woman).

"What gets up my nose is that it's [meant to be] a *community* hall. It's not just for a certain group of people" (interview 8: middle-aged, local business couple, original emphasis).

Reflections on the wider issue of marginalisation within Newstead included comments that illustrate individuals' awareness of the positioning of the (individual) self within community and the importance of not losing sight of the individual in the grouped environment:

"well I don't believe in judging people, but I can't evaluate who or what you are until I know you and I think that is something we fail to do in communities. We tend to sort of judge people by the label" (interview 17: middle-aged, single mother, business operator).

"most people when you ask them what they think of homosexuals—'oh, I hate them'—but what about Joe?—'oh he's great'—you know, people relate to the people because they get to know the people and not the tag" (interview 16: middle-aged, farming couple).

Finally, the suspicion individuals have of groups within community—notwithstanding their manifest usefulness as vehicles of access and mechanisms permitting the amelioration of singularity—is also exemplified by observations made about within-group politics.

> "You don't talk politics at spinning [the spinning group] … to keep the group safe and supportive nothing that is unpleasant to any member is dealt with unless it is a group focus, to maintain harmony and keep it a safe place to keep an interest … I talk of those things with my other friends…we look at other issues, but I wouldn't bring them up in groups" (interview 24: middle-aged, single, professional woman).

The strategy adopted by this interviewee reflects her appreciation of the fragility of groups and fluctuating potential (ephemeral qualities) that they exhibit, as is indicated in her further comment:

> "I say wait, they [the women exercising hegemony] are going to get tired, they are going to get old. They are going to want help and then there will be an opening, or else it [the group] will die."

These reported perspectives do not deny the importance of groups in the functioning of community but, as with community itself, they suggest that groups are the social constructions of individuals whose motivations are deeper (and more individual in nature in response to experiences of singularity) than the focus of any particular group would indicate. This would suggest a more knowing and differently dependent relation between the individual and community than has hitherto been proposed in the human geography literature. It also suggests why communities can be usefully viewed as transitory, challenged, and potentially un-worked.

Awareness of singularity read across themes

We conclude this section of the paper by outlining two groups of issues raised by interviewees that illustrate awareness of and response to singularity, and which can be read across our themes. The first focuses on the significance for individuals of information about community—'knowing what's going on' (interviews 7, 15, 20, 21)—and the manner in which information is disseminated within Newstead. Initial analysis of interview transcripts indicated that individuals are clearly interested in what is happening in the community, even though many participate in community activities in only a minimal way. For example:

> "a single person without kids, working at home, you don't really know *what's going on* unless you have a contact that tells you all that sort of thing" (interview 7: middle-aged, male, business operator, emphasis added).

Another resident outlined the various ways to keep in touch with what is happening in the community:

> "usually the *Newstead Echo* [community newsletter], and the *Midland Express* [a shire-wide newspaper] often have a few things in it. And if you're down the street often you have a look in the shop windows, the notice boards and that. Other than that, it's just the bush telegraph" (interview 15: a young, male, farmer and lifetime resident).

Reference here to the *Newstead Echo* is interesting. This publication first appeared as a newspaper in 1856 when the area was first opening up to gold exploration and farming. The paper later became commercially unviable and ceased publication, only for the Newstead Shire to re-establish it as a way to communicate shire matters (interview 6: middle-aged professional man living on a hobby farm). When the Mt Alexander Shire was formed the *Echo* was continued as a community newsletter, produced by a voluntary editorial group who reflect some of the diversity of the population. In this latest form, the *Echo* can be interpreted as an anchor for community in the new era where singularity as a ratepayer or resident in the larger Mt Alexander

Shire is also part of individual existence. Staff at the new shire recognise this and have supported the running costs of several community newsletters like the *Echo* in areas which previously held their own shire or subshire identity. One senior Mt Alexander official explained:

> "We think that's a critical element, so much so that there are two or three other areas in the shire where they have their own community newspaper. ... They are a very critical tool in maintaining the community interest in issues and keeping the community in touch with issues that are going to impact. ... People are interested in *what's going on* around them locally and that to me is a good indicator that there is the underlying sense of community there" (interview 2: middle-aged, male, local government official, emphasis added).

In this example, we hear a political construction of the notion of community and, indeed, the *Echo* was cited by a number of interviewees as tangible evidence of a Newstead community being an active, ongoing entity in their lives following the loss of earlier Newstead-Shire-based formations of community:

> "It's a piece of history and it's been reborn and it's good. Lets you know a lot more than [regional newspapers] ... I certainly look forward to getting a copy of it" (interview 15: young, male, farmer and life-time resident).

> "The only criticism [is] that it's too municipally oriented…it's boring as batshit. I'm sure it's not to everybody … it's welcomed by people, it's read by people, and I think it's quite valued by people" (interview 9: middle-aged, male, business operator).

But further examination of interview transcripts reveals reasons for individuals' engagement with sources of information about community that are more fundamental than articulations with changing political space constructions. A second interpretation of 'knowing what's going on' suggests itself, namely obtaining information about the life events being experienced by other individuals in community. This is often information that is not reported in the *Echo*, but which is seen to augment that available in the community newsletter. Several interviewees used the term 'gossip' to describe this type of information. For example, after outlining the formal sources of community information, interviewee 15 stated that since his partner started taking their child to preschool, she "comes home with the gossip now!" Others reflected more fully on the significance of gossip in communities such as Newstead:

> "A little country town, it's nice to know what other people are up to. Though I can understand people would feel that as threatening too ... gossip is very positive, very positive actually.
>
> A lot of people are afraid of gossip ... but most gossip is just what other people are doing, just 'have you heard about someone doing something?'…
>
> The general gossip about someone's gone to hospital, someone's broken a leg, or something, is a way of relating to each other.
>
> I think gossip is a glue as much as anything" (interview 16: middle-aged, farming couple).

Here we see the use of the metaphor of 'social glue'—but it does not bind individuals. Instead we suggest it permits them to relate *without necessarily knowing each other personally.* Again, this emphasises both independence and dependence of perspective; that "knowing what's going on" can be sufficient to ameliorate the individual's experience of singularity.

The second group of issues that can be read across the themes developed earlier focuses on individuals' deeper reflections on their engagement with community, together with their observations that other individuals also experience singularity and engage with community to minimise its impact. First, there is the acknowledgement

that (long before the processes of othering set in) many individuals experience a sense of aloneness, of individual distance from community and its subgroups even when they play an active part in them:

"[in reference to the *Echo*] We don't get enough chat. … It's a matter of finding people who are open, lots of people feel exposed" (interview 24: middle-aged, single, professional woman).

"Everyone by nature is suspicious you know. It is a human condition isn't it? People are trusting but sceptical" (interview 16: middle-aged, farming couple).

Secondly, there is the individual's on-going, and evolving, awareness of the relation with community; of the tension between the need for community and the surprise and satisfaction when relative independence from community is reaffirmed. Interviewee 17, the widow introduced earlier, reflected on the power of community (not precisely defined) over her perspective of self:

"I think the thing was, you're credible because you've been here all your life, everyone knows what you are. And, I mean, that's the thing you fight against a little bit now. But if I walk away from the business that I've put time into (to try and maintain because I believe the history of it was important and all this), … I will lose my credibility—*I will become a nobody*" (interview 17: middle-aged, single mother, business operator, emphasis added).

The contrast between the perception of self-as-individual and self-defined-by-community for this resident was noted later when she observed:

"I do have to start backing off with the idea that things won't work if I'm not there … it's probably about letting go and not wanting to be everything and all things to all people and all that sort of thing" (interview 17).

Reflecting on the same theme, another interviewee spoke of a friend who had been somewhat surprised to learn of the ephemeral qualities of his impact on community:

"[My friend] said it was strange not to be involved in running things and in fact it was quite a good feeling … but he was a bit surprised that something could happen, and successfully, without him being involved" (interview 2: middle-aged, male, local government official).

However, perhaps the most telling reflection was the observation that: "to me a rural community is a philosophy rather than a position" (interview 16: middle-aged, farming couple). This and earlier comments from our interviewees affirm the conceptualisation of community as being never achieved nor fixed but always in process; as a construction to counter singularity and an attempt to form collective social experience. They add weight to our earlier proposition, based on Nancy's theorising, that communities are essentially inoperative, being socially reproduced through continuous negotiation. They illustrate just how dynamic and fragile negotiated constructions of community can be. What is yet more important, they suggest varying degrees of awareness of (preparedness to acknowledge) this complex individual–collective relation.

Conclusions

This paper has considered the *why community*? question and sought to highlight some of the motivations underlying the construction of community. Whether these are produced in lay discourse, or for political or academic reasons, we have suggested that they stem in part from individuals' experiences of singularity. We have drawn on Nancy's (1991) proposition that the human condition (at least dominant Western accounts of this condition) includes experiences of finite existence and perceptions of both individual transcendence and the possibility of social association (and relief) through cultural constructions such as community. Reading community as a social

response, constructed as a result of the unsettling character of these experiences, we have shown that such communities may be articulated in both social and place-specific forms through everyday patterns of life. Unlike community studies that have focused on strategic articulations or mobilisation of community for economic and political reasons, this paper has documented some of the breadth of everyday actions and spaces that make up people's ideas of a diverse, place-based community. We have sought to make the case that individuals' negotiation of these everyday actions and spaces in order to reduce the (individual) experience of singularity can explain why the very real differences experienced within community lead to continuous reformulation of community rather than its destruction; why human engagement with community continues unabated despite the latter's *inoperative* nature (Nancy, 1991).

In the case reported in this paper, no single conflict or struggle galvanised a construction of community as has been documented in other literature (for example, Mackenzie and Dalby, 2003; Staheli and Thompson, 1997). Rather, the Newstead case illustrated how community can be articulated from individuals' awareness of difference and singularity; as a formed (and re-formed) social association that might temporarily relieve or postpone the implications of lives perceived as singular and finite. In this way, we showed how Newstead is narrated as a community where individuals can be 'known', can 'slot in', can 'belong', can be 'accepted', but can also 'opt out'.

Reflecting these relative freedoms, the Newstead case also demonstrates both the conceptual and lived impossibility of unity or commonality that are frequently associated with ideal(ised) notions of community. Accounts of Newstead as a diverse and tolerant community were qualified when interviewees recounted the positions of—or prejudices against—young people, homosexuals, or those with alternative lifestyle or spiritual interests. The example of the Community Centre, established as a defensive (even if not defensible) structure claiming community status in the face of territorial space amalgamations, emphasised that community is always a dynamic and contested artifice. The management of the centre showed the ways even an apparently stable and contented community can be articulated to exclude groups or activities that *could* unsettle the hope of shared or common values and preferences by some sectors.

This work illustrates that, in considering social difference and singularity as contextual precursors to the construction of community in an empiric as well as a conceptual form, we have the opportunity to document the dynamics between social practices and spaces while engaging with the never complete, but continuous, constructions of community: a "process of participation … never quite complete … [but] a performance constantly reconstituting itself" (Rose 1997, page 195). Further understandings may be gained if future theorisation and fieldwork seek to critique both the spatial and cultural implications of the initial concept of singularity (where, or in what positions, or cultural contexts one is faced with awareness of individual finite existence) and contingent performances of community (where community becomes inoperative, and how the unworking of community challenges our conceptualisation of space and place).

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