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RECLAIMING COMMUNITY

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In our current era, conversations regarding "difference" and "community" often share characteristics that deter a more complex comprehension of either term. Both "difference" and "community" are often essentialized and dichotomized in cultural conversations. In many public and educational discourses, "community" is simplistically summoned; in other, more critical discourses, the revelation and celebration of "difference" is the unquestionable goal. Shane Phelan notes that "community has been firmly entrenched within the logic of the same that mandates self-identity and unity among members. In such definitions, community becomes an essence, a thing to be studied and acted upon and used."¹ As Phelan points out, the summoning of the ideal of community signals an identitarian politics of sameness, unifying and fixing individual selves in order to construct stability and order in a disorderly world. Such unifying discourses of community are popular among many Americans in the 1990s. Schools, more particularly, are frequently sites of such unifying communal constructions, and it is no wonder, given the chaos of some of our more disenfranchised institutions of public education. Summoning values and structures of "community" through reforms of decentralization, parental involvement, and teaming of teacher and student cohorts within school organizations, many public schools see a school community as a construction that would bring order and stability to a chaotic, conflict-ridden system. In one educational administration text, the authors point out in the introduction that "true community requires facing and *resolving* differences."² Community, used in such ways, signifies *smoothing over* differences, *uniting* a divided people, *healing* a broken nation, and making *morally responsible* those who are deemed self-centered rights-chasers. Individual differences within such notions of community are tears to be mended or bumps to be smoothed (in other words, erased). The ideal of community, as cast against difference, has also been powerful in recent movements to escape the public sphere. In the rhetoric of school choice, "school community" can signal escape from the public sphere to islands of like-minded (like-classed? like-raced?) ideological spheres of sameness and security. Community rhetoric can conceal erasure of differences in the narrowing and purifying of public domains.³

1. Shane Phelan, "All the Comforts of Home: The Genealogy of Community," in *Revisioning the Political: Feminist Reconstructions of Traditional Concepts in Western Political Theory*, ed. Nancy J. Hirschmann and Christine DiStefano (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996), 239.

2. George Manning, Kent Curtis, and Steve McMillen, *Building Community: The Human Side of Work* (Cincinnati: Thomson Executive Press, 1996), xix (emphasis mine).

3. For further commentary on this point, see Nel Noddings, "On Community," *Educational Theory* 46, no. 3 (1996): 245-67.

Yet even as many in our public spheres essentialize "community," "difference" is essentialized by others, especially in postmodern discourses. Michael Gardiner's critique is succinct: "for all their oft-celebrated talk about the 'Other,' many postmodernist theories reify otherness and make a fetish out of pure difference, or else subordinate the other to a project of self-actualization that is essentially Nietzschean in inspiration."⁴ Nicholas Burbules and Suzanne Rice describe a trend in some postmodern discourses wherein "the celebration of difference becomes a presumption of incommensurability, a denial of any possibility of intersubjective understanding."⁵ Difference can become the sole point of characterization of persons or groups; difference is, as a result, acontextualized and thus becomes an unreflective, flat description of how various human beings live and act in the world. Difference is constructed, in these cases, as hyper-individuality. Genuine expression of difference is also constructed as impossible within any communal construct. Indeed, some critical, postmodern, and feminist theorists have positioned themselves against community, believing that all forms of community allude to a homogenizing, oppressive social grouping. Critiques of community have been concise and sharp by these theorists, pointing out the ways in which community is used rhetorically to eradicate difference by oppressing or excluding persons deemed different from social norms.⁶ Community, it is argued, is a modernist construction, and must be abandoned as a social pursuit.

Difference and community have each undergone overlapping and parallel constructions of essentialization and dichotomization. As difference discourses have, at times, essentialized the traits that have historically been labeled as culturally distinct from the Anglo majority culture, community discourses have often washed out differences in the laundry of cultural unity. When community and difference become essentialized, their complexities eliminated, it becomes easy to position them as binary opposites.⁷ The consequences of this segregation of spheres are significant, since the creativity of our social imaginations are limited by our discursively constructed world-views. In other words, if we cannot imagine community without imagining how human differences can peacefully co-exist and even thrive in its organic and shifting borders, then we will find ourselves hard-pressed to build social alliances across the constructed lines of social identity that currently keep us segregated and in violent conflict.

4. Michael Gardiner, "Alterity and Ethics: A Dialogical Perspective," *Theory, Culture and Society*, 13, no. 2 (1996): 123.

5. Nicholas C. Burbules and Suzanne Rice, "Dialogue Across Differences: Continuing the Conversation," in *Teaching for Change: Addressing Issues of Difference in the College Classroom*, ed. Kathryn Geismar and Guitele Nicoleau (Cambridge: President and Fellows of Harvard College, 1993), 9.

6. Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990); and Nancy Fraser, *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the 'Postsocialist' Condition* (New York: Routledge, 1997). These books will be cited as *JP* and *J* in the text for all subsequent references.

7. In some ways, this opposition has replaced the modernistic dualism of community and individual, which has been well-documented by postmodern, feminist, and other contemporary scholars.

Discourses have relations to the material world, and the binary positioning of community and difference is not a purely theoretical phenomenon. Community practices and boundaries of all kinds have often penalized or excluded those deemed "different," and for these reasons the theorists I critique here find the two terms incompatible. The theoretical works analyzed in this essay reject community because it is a practice that continues to oppress or confine certain classes of people. The idea of community is rejected in light of freedom and basic human dignity. Based on the material evidence of communal exclusion and oppression, this rejection is quite sensible. But it is not clear to me that we can simply choose to reject community either as a cultural ideal or an imperfect human social unit. Community ideals are bound up in our cultural and religious myths in powerful ways; moreover, community practices have, in the past and the present, upheld important moral norms of justice and compassion, despite communal practices of marginalization and abuse. I argue here for a reclamation of the term "community."

Yet on what grounds can we reclaim community? Community rhetoric is often used, especially in more conservative circles, in an attempt to "heal" social difference, regarded as inherently problematic. To title a paper "Reclaiming Community" in such a sociopolitical climate is potentially to position oneself against the significance of human difference within any social fabric. The aim of this essay, however, is to upset the dichotomy and essentialization of both community and difference discourses. I wish to reclaim community discourses from their use by those who wish to narrow and subdue difference rather than configure human difference within communal boundaries and accounts. My argument for reclaiming community as a critical component of education depends not only on a clear definition of what I mean by community, but more specifically, on the status of difference within that community construct.⁸ No account of ethics and community life in schools that is relevant to issues of social justice in the late twentieth century is adequate without a full account of difference among and between persons. Henry Giroux characterizes the significance of this problem, arguing that in this current cultural moment, "[e]thics becomes a practice that broadly connotes one's personal and social sense of responsibility to the Other."⁹ There is agreement, based on historical as well as contemporary evidence, that communities can have homogenizing, exclusionary, and oppressive impulses. Difference is seen to be antithetical to most notions of community as it has been traditionally enacted, and this is why many critical and postmodern theorists have abandoned the community ideal.

I argue for a certain conception of learning communities that, writ large, explicitly values differences among persons, dialogical and material forms of interaction, norms of organic consensus, conflict, and full participation among the

8. My focus in this work is on educational communities, especially those in public, K-12 institutions. Certainly many of the ideas can apply to higher education and other types of non-institutionalized communities, but the notion of community within a public institutional setting requires specialized concepts and theoretical development that may not easily transfer to other kinds of community life.

9. Henry A. Giroux, *Border Crossings: Cultural Workers and the Politics of Education* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 74.

members.¹⁰ While there is not room here to conceptualize fully the idea of a learning community, in this essay I am particularly interested in laying the theoretical groundwork for understanding the notion of difference as inseparable from this communal ideal. I believe that notions of community are no longer useful to those of us working in education without the reframing of this concept. To lay the theoretical groundwork for such a notion of community, I use the insights and methodological strategies of feminist-pragmatist perspectives. By developing a conception of difference based on feminist and pragmatist theories, community is shown to be the required context for understanding human difference, rather than its antithesis. Such a conception of difference in community thus distinguishes a feminist-pragmatist model of community from those forwarded in most communitarian discourses circulating in American culture.¹¹

The essay begins with a brief analysis of the ways in which notions of difference and community have been set against one another, using the works of Nancy Fraser, Iris Marion Young, and Elizabeth Ellsworth as examples of the ways in which community is denounced. I attempt to deconstruct these formulations with an introduction to the manner in which pragmatism and feminism both intersect and interrogate one another in theoretically fruitful ways. After laying this theoretical and methodological frame for the essay, I support my claim that human difference is an indelible aspect of learning communities by turning to Fraser's work for evidence. Suggesting four ways of conceiving difference derived from the work of Fraser, a leading feminist-pragmatist thinker, I applaud her conception of difference but question her tendency to avoid all notions of community. Fraser, I will argue, requires some conception of community in order for her notions of difference to hold any meaning for human actors. In a feminist-pragmatist frame, difference and community are two sides of the same coin, in a sense, and cannot be conceived as binary opposites. Yet such dualisms continue to cloud our thinking on these issues.

COMMUNITY AND DIFFERENCE: DECONSTRUCTING DICHOTOMIES

Given the fact that community and difference continue to be discursively positioned at cross-purposes, and given the political significance ascribed to notions of difference by feminist, postmodern, and critical thinkers, it is not surprising that community is a suspect notion among some well-known theorists. In this section, I summarize the critiques of Young, Fraser, and Ellsworth against the ideal of community. These three theorists, each a formidable contributor to her field of

10. For a more complete articulation of a feminist-pragmatist model of learning community, see Kathleen Knight Abowitz, *Making Meaning of Community in an American High School* (Cresskill, New Jersey: Hampton Press, in press). An interesting example of a somewhat similar project, using case-study data and a critical-postmodern theoretical model, is William G. Tierney, *Building Communities of Difference: Higher Education in the Twenty-First Century*, in *Critical Studies in Education and Culture Series*, ed. Henry A. Giroux and Paulo Frieri (Westport, Conn.: Bergin and Garvey, 1993).

11. Communitarianism, an intellectual and social movement originating in contemporary critiques of liberalism, has been articulated most vividly in philosophy in Alisdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981) and Alisdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Whose Rationality?* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988). MacIntyre espouses a neo-Aristotelian ideal of community, not in keeping with the philosophical and political commitments of pragmatists or feminists.

scholarship, tend to continue or exacerbate the dichotomies of community and difference.¹² Later in the essay, I will use the work of Fraser to argue against her own position on community.

Young has argued that the ideal of community is based upon an erroneous assumption of shared subjectivity. Young sees community as an unattainable ideal, based on "common consciousness ...[where] persons cease to be other, opaque, not understood, and instead become mutually sympathetic, understanding one another as they understand themselves, fused" (*JP*, 231). Arguing that notions of community rest on this metaphysical illusion of shared subjectivity and are thus hopelessly utopian, Young states that "the ideal of community denies the difference between subjects...[and] often operates to exclude or oppress those experienced as different" (*JP*, 234). Young's social ideal is city life, "a form of social relations which I define as the being together as strangers" (*JP*, 237). Young embraces the postmodern ideals of difference as she rhetorically departs from community, a term she finds fatally loaded with illusions to modernist and pre-modernist homogenizing social groups.

Fraser's critique of community, less developed than Young's, shares a similar complaint. Stating her preference for the term "publics" over "communities," she writes:

"Community" suggests a bounded and fairly homogeneous group, and it often connotes consensus. "Public," in contrast, emphasizes discursive interaction that is in principle unbounded and open-ended...the idea of a public, better than that of a community, can accommodate internal differences, antagonisms, and debates (*JJ*, 97).

Fraser joins Young in abandoning ideals of community altogether in favor of terms that are explicitly open-ended and denote a greater sensitivity to difference among persons and groups.

Ellsworth joins Young and Fraser in critiques of community with similar complaints. Critiquing notions of dialogue, one of the primary progressive practices of learning communities advocated by many educators and activists, Ellsworth finds notions of dialogue antithetical to sustained human difference:

Dialogue in education is assumed to be capable of everything from constructing knowledge to resolving problems, to ensuring democracy, to securing understanding, to teaching, to alleviating racism or sexism, to arriving at ethical and moral claims, to enacting our humanity, to fostering community and connection. Transcendental claims such as these hide the histories, cultural competencies and assumptions, and interested desires that communicative dialogue, as a structure of relations, requires of its participants and positions them within. We may get pleasure out of ignoring or forgetting that even through dialogue, direct communication or understanding is impossible. But meanings and operations of power are also played out in that ignore-ance.¹⁴

12. My critique of these theorists should not be understood as a critique of their work or positions writ large, for I make considerable use of the scholarship of these thinkers, particularly Young and Fraser, in my own work (see Knight Abowitz, *Making Meaning of Community in an American High School*). Yet I believe that these thinkers provide useful examples of how and why scholars reject community ideals, and therefore wish to examine these aspects of their work.

13. It is important to note that Young and Fraser, both political theorists, are primarily concerned with the pursuit of justice. Community, in this pursuit, denotes unjust social arrangements and as such is deemed inappropriate for public realms. Most schools are, technically, public spaces, yet in my view they represent unique public spheres with special political and social requirements. Among these requirements are the nurturing and sustenance of human growth through associated living; a communal model can respond to this requirement.

14. Elizabeth Ellsworth, *Teaching Positions: Difference, Pedagogy, and the Power of Address* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997), 85.

Ellsworth advocates a form of dialogue called "analytical dialogue" that would replace the communicative dialogue espoused by Burbules and other pragmatist philosophers.¹⁵ Unlike traditional notions of dialogue, understanding is not the goal of analytical dialogue, but rather, a return to difference — a refusal to bring connection, closure, or authoritative meaning to inquiry or relations in the learning environment. Ellsworth, using psychoanalytic theory, denies the relational as both unrepresentative of human experience and as oppressive to many in our society.

Young, Fraser, and Ellsworth are examples of three different feminist theorists, working in different scholarly subfields, who have positioned notions of community against notions of difference, either in explicit denouncement, or through implicit failings to develop a conception of community that places difference as a central ethical issue. There are, perhaps, good reasons to disavow community: Both in past and present, communities have served to regulate desires, limit the growth of unrecognized or second-class citizens, and either erase (we are all the same; no special "rights" are needed for any one group) or invent differences among persons (non-whites are "different" and less than whites; women are "different" and less than men) in oppressive practices of political life. Although it is possible to list many sins — exclusion possibly being the least deadly among them — committed by or through communal groups, I wish to make two observations regarding the arguments and reasoning used by Young, Fraser, and Ellsworth. Their biases against community are as much to a construction of the community/difference binary as they are to the impossibility of the communal construct to offer possibilities for democratic life.

The argument to eradicate community ignores a postmodern realization concerning language. That is, "community" and "difference" help construct one another in their opposition. Postmodern and other theorists have analyzed the impact of other binaries on the Western consciousness: man/woman, reason/emotion, objective/subjective, individual/social.¹⁶ It is in the very opposition of the two terms that their meanings become distorted, blunted, and limited to the binary construction. One of the outcomes of the community/difference binary for theorists such as Young, Fraser, and Ellsworth is the denial of human interrelation. Because "community" is viewed by these theorists as a shared understanding accomplished through dialogical union of people, and because this (hopelessly utopian) ideal by its very construction must oppress those who are not of the formed union, the entire notion of human interrelation is implicitly denied. Binary logic in the community/difference construct is used to conclude that if a communal construct can be rhetorically or materially used as a source of oppression, then elevating and celebrating sources of difference must be the most productive political and moral step.

Human interrelation — the ever-imperfect joining of persons through blood, ideological and other kinds of kinship, friendship, and association — seems a

15. Nicholas C. Burbules, *Dialogue in Teaching: Theory and Practice* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1993).

16. Elizabeth Frazer and Nicola Lacey, *The Politics of Community: A Feminist Critique of the Liberal-Communitarian Debate* (Buffalo, N.Y.: University of Toronto Press, 1993).

tremendous denial. The argument to eradicate community, produced by binary logic, is inevitably confronted with the fact of human interrelation. The desire to disavow community is a bit like wanting to stop using machines to get from place to place due to their fatal effects. Machines of transportation (cars, airplanes, and buses) kill thousands upon thousands of people each year. Their existence is responsible for deaths and maimings, as well as environmental decay. We choose not to eradicate such machines but to work on ways to improve them or eradicate their negative effects, knowing that travel is an undeniable aspect of our existence. There are forms of transportation that are safer than others; there are ways of driving that minimize the chances of accident; there are safety regulations and checks for all modes of transportation; there are modes of transport that are far less damaging to our ecological environment. To argue that community has been oppressive is to argue that in all its forms, community has failed to nurture positive, productive relations among and between persons. To deny community in some way implies a denial of the interrelatedness of humans who share resources, political projects, and physical space. To move toward a reclamation of community, as I argue here, is to be reflective in the ways we discursively and materially construct and maintain forms of community, paying particular attention to the ways in which "community" can signal "lack of difference" to discourse participants.

Let us take, as an example of the discursive and material production of meanings of community, the notion of consensus. The idea of community often implies some form of consensus or agreement around practices or ideology. Charlene Seigfried writes that she is "surprised that feminists often conflate consensus with coercion."¹⁷ I have a slightly different take on this. The move to question "consensus" is an important contribution that feminist thinking can contribute to pragmatist conceptions of community. If a human being has been denied ways to understand and express their own interests, and "consensus" is given through acquiescence, then intelligent practice would dictate further investigation of the depth and quality of the consensus achieved. The term "consensual sex" gives us clues as to the difficulty and politics of consensus. Does silence mean agreement to sex? Does only an explicit verbal utterance ("Yes, I would like to have sex") signify consensus? Do we understand what each party means by the cloudy term "sex" in these exchanges? The terrain of consensus is extremely complex, involving both the understandings of the players involved and the interpretations of communication practices. We should never halt inquiry when consensus is supposedly reached; we must continually probe the strength and depth of consensus through communication, careful to look into the political, economic, and cultural forces that shape ways that various individuals and groups give or fail to provide consent. Consensus, therefore, must be viewed as an organic point of harmony and conflict, a point to be marked and perhaps acted upon but never unquestioningly enacted or translated into a stable Truth. This kind of consensus is the product of the difficult work of community.

17. Charlotte Haddock Seigfried, *Pragmatism and Feminism: Reweaving the Social Fabric* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 275. This book will be cited as *PF* in the text for all subsequent references.

Consensus is one process of community life that has been used to exclude many individuals or groups, yet the solution is not to eradicate any meaningful use of the term. Ridding ourselves of useful communal processes and virtues is not the solution to problems of communal oppression and exclusion. As Burbules and Rice point out, the problem is not the ideal of community per se, but the traditional groundings of community on immovable moorings of unthinking sameness and unity:

There is no reason to assume that dialogue across differences involves either eliminating those differences or imposing one group's views on others; dialogue that leads to understanding, cooperation, and accommodation can sustain differences within a broader compact....[What is needed] is a postmodern grounding of community on more flexible and less homogeneous assumptions.¹⁸

Learning communities cannot be the places where our foundations are sameness and unreflective unity. They are more likely to be places where we must meet people who see the world differently, perhaps in ways that challenge our deepest-held beliefs. Even our darkest impulses and beliefs are carried into learning communities, as Moraga points out:

[T]here is little getting around racism and our own internalization of it. It's always there, embodied in someone we least expect to rub up against. When we do rub up against this person, there then is the challenge. There then is the opportunity to look at the nightmare within us.¹⁹

As Moraga's statement implies, one of the most powerful ways that we might understand and communicate with diverse others is in community, in a setting where we "rub up against" others with whom we must work, especially those whom we fear or dislike. Schools as learning communities provide such spaces for students and adults, where we can be engaged in constant interaction — on a homework assignment, on a committee, on a sports team — with those who are unfamiliar by virtue of ethnicity, race, religion, culture, or ability. By viewing community as a primary cultural space for deep learning about difference, we cannot conceive of a learning community *without* a substantive notion of human difference. In one's small enclave of daily life, there may be no reason to "rub up against" diverse others; it is very possible that one who is deemed "different" is always at arm's length in the workplace, the supermarket, or at the mall (our new public commons, a place where we can work together in the "common" tasks of consumption?).

The deconstruction of the community/difference binary shows the ways these terms have been rendered in stark opposition to one another, defined oppositionally rather than more expansively. Rather than challenging these commonsense notions of community and difference, Young, Fraser, and Ellsworth use these everyday understandings to draw conclusions that implicitly deny the fact of human interrelation, the connection of persons in social groupings from family to nation to world. In these renderings, consensus denotes a fixed, binding rule that suppresses conflict and disagreement. Meanings of community are discursively fixed, similar to conservative rhetorical constructions of the term, into static constructions of sameness.

18. Burbules and Rice, "Dialogue Across Difference," 10.

19. Cherry Moraga, "La Guerra," in *This Bridge Called my Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, ed. Cherry Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (New York: Women of Color Press, 1981), 33.

Possibilities for alternatives to these meanings become locked out when binary logic constructs our understanding of these terms. Feminist-pragmatism is a useful and appropriate tool with which we can unlock the dualism of community and difference.

FEMINIST-PRAGMATISM AS A TOOL FOR RECLAIMING COMMUNITY

The intersections of many feminist and pragmatist theoretical perspectives have been the subject of a growing number of theorists in philosophy.²⁰ Versions of pragmatism and feminism are joined together under various names (pragmatist-feminism, feminist-neopragmatism). Regardless of the classification, these two mutually informing philosophies are fruitfully being used in dialogical union to analyze a wide array of contemporary issues.²¹ The negotiation of difference within community is particularly salient upon examination of two of the primary commitments of many feminist and pragmatist thinkers: an orientation to praxis, and a focus on relational ethics.

PRAXIS AND DIFFERENCE

Philosophers in both traditions approach philosophical inquiry with an focus on experience, praxis, and social contexts. Phyllis Rooney approvingly quotes William James's situating of pragmatism within philosophy as a model that may endorsed by many feminist philosophers:

A pragmatist turns his [sic] back resolutely and once for all upon a lot of inveterate habits dear to professional philosophers. He turns away from abstraction and insufficiency, from verbal solutions, from bad *a priori* reasons, from fixed principles, closed systems, and pretended absolutes and origins. He turns towards concreteness and adequacy, towards facts, towards action and towards power.²²

Pragmatism and feminism both emerged out of lived experience. Feminism, as a diverse body of thinking, inquiry, and activism, stems directly from the lives of women who have been traditionally cast as Other.²³ Pragmatism, as a uniquely American philosophy that originated in the works of G.H. Mead, Charles Peirce, William James, Jane Addams, and Dewey, transformed philosophical thinking on experience, truth, morality, and knowledge in an America that was moving rapidly from a rural agrarian society to a complex, industrialized, and diverse conglomerate.

20. Charlene Haddock Seigfried's work in this area is perhaps best known; among her numerous contributions to this literature is "Shared Communities of Interest: Feminism and Pragmatism," in a theme issue, for which she served as editor, of *Hypatia* 8, no. 2 (1993): 1-14. Her most recent book, *Pragmatism and Feminism*, carries this same theme. In education, where pragmatism has traditionally been a center of philosophical interest, the marriage of pragmatism with various feminist perspectives is beginning to be explored. For a sample of this work, see Barbara J. Thayer-Bacon, "The Nurturing of a Relational Epistemology," *Educational Theory* 47, no. 2 (1997): 239-60.

21. I emphasize a dialogical rather than an assimilationist model of union for feminism and pragmatism; their areas of difference are not to be muted in this union but scrutinized for their potential theoretical and practical insights.

22. William James quoted in Phyllis Rooney, "Feminist-Pragmatist Revisionings of Reason, Knowledge, and Philosophy," *Hypatia* 8, no. 2 (1993): 17.

23. Simone de Beauvoir, in her classic work *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), pursues the construction of woman as "Other" to man/human.

tion of public spheres. Philosophers in both pragmatism and feminism actively sought to address problems encountered in immediate, lived experiences.

As schools of thought that emerge out of experience, feminism and pragmatism are well-positioned to deepen and widen the discourses on community and difference. The combination of feminism and pragmatism is especially important to incisive analysis of lived experiences, for while classical pragmatists have long regarded pluralism as a crucial contribution to the growth of human beings and their social groupings, their insights on difference are enlarged through feminist critique that connects difference to hierarchy and influence relationships. In plain terms, feminism is one framework that helps pragmatism construct a more insightful analysis of power.²⁴ Seigfried notes, "[p]ragmatists are more likely to emphasize that everyone is significantly and valuably Other, while feminists often expose the controlling force exercised by those who have the power to construct the Other as a subject of domination" (*PF*, 267). DiStefano points out that the language of postmodernism also has "reappropriated the political vocabulary of 'pluralism,'" citing neopragmatist Richard Rorty as one who has conspicuously adopted this vocabulary.²⁵ As Fraser corroborates, the pluralist stance toward difference is premised on a one-sided understanding: "difference is viewed as intrinsically positive and inherently cultural. This perspective accordingly celebrates difference uncritically while failing to interrogate its relation to equality" (*JL*, 185). From the lives of women and others who have been marginalized, feminists can bring an understanding of difference that vividly comprehends the relations between difference and power. For example, the essentializing of women as naturally nurturing, caring, and maternal has cast women not just as different from men, but as "naturally" best fit for the private domestic sphere of child care, domestic work, or the care-taking activities of public life (teaching, nursing, and secretarial work).

The contribution of classical pragmatism is not in the political realm of difference and its intersections with power, but in its ability to help us frame difference in context: What differences make a difference in various contexts, and why? The contribution of pragmatism to the project of reclaiming community is methodological and epistemological. Pragmatist forms of inquiry help us to interrogate experiences of difference and hierarchy that can lead to social action, and to question our assumptions formed by essentializing difference. Theories of pragmatism will also enable us to question the naturalizing of difference in terms of "human nature," seeking not the "truth" of gender or other differences but wanting instead to investigate the beliefs about and consequences of human differences in social relations. A feminist-pragmatist view of difference "militates against any politics of

24. Other hybrids that are potentially well-positioned for this work include the prophetic pragmatism of Cornel West for example, in Cornel West, *Keeping Faith: Philosophy and Race in America* (New York: Routledge, 1993) or critical pragmatism in Cleo H. Cherryholmes, *Power and Criticism: Poststructural Investigations in Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1988).

25. Christine DiStefano, "Dilemmas of Difference: Feminism, Modernity, and Postmodernism," in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1993), 77.

difference that is wholesale and undifferentiated. It entails a more differentiated politics of difference" (JI, 204). Thus, the use of a feminist-pragmatist model of community does not serve to squelch feminist critique of difference as a social construction of oppression, but sharpens the pragmatist stance toward difference that tends to be celebratory rather than critical, and uses pragmatist methodological and epistemological strengths to avoid "difference talk" that essentializes rather than investigates issues of difference. The nature of the feminist-pragmatist stance is best described as dialectical and inquiry-based rather than as a unified joining of identical philosophical perspectives. The strengths of both pragmatism and feminism are brought to bear on a problem, with a focus on praxis. Both partners of this philosophical dialectic also share a commitment to a relational ethics that will prove a fruitful construct for the project of reclaiming community.

RELATIONAL ETHICS AND DIFFERENCE

The enterprise of reclaiming community is, in part, an ethical project. Reclaiming community, as proposed here, seeks a way to conceive of difference-in-community not as an anomaly or an impermanent imperfection, but as a constant state of being-in-common. Both pragmatism and feminism share a focus on what I will call relational ethics, beginning ethical inquiry with the "fact of human interrelationship," rather than from the "mechanics of a formal system [of ethics] or a disembodied interior dialogue" (PF, 224). Therefore, feminism and pragmatism share a disposition to see humans as interrelated, joined in relation by some common concerns and conditions.

Both pragmatist and feminist approaches to ethics have been characterized by an "ethics of care," an ethic that signifies concrete human interactions of sympathy and empathy as ideal.²⁶ As Seigfried notes, a feminist-pragmatist approach to ethics starts "from a recognition of reciprocity and interdependence." Such an approach "criticizes exaggerated individualism, undermines appeals to privileged moral insight, and unmasks entrenched hierarchical relations" (PF, 225). Both feminist and pragmatist thinkers have provided insights on the ways in which Western ethics have

26. *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam-Webster, 1988) describes sympathy as "an affinity, association, or relationship between persons or things wherein whatever affects one similarly affects the other." Sandra Bartky notes that the English term sympathy "has undergone crass commercialization, as in the saccharine Hallmark 'sympathy' card," thereby shaping and distorting our understanding of this term. Bartky helpfully and simply defines the term as "feeling-with." See Sandra L. Bartky, "Sympathy and Solidarity: On a Tightrope with Scheler," in *Feminists Rethink the Self*, ed. Diana Tietjens Meyers (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997), 181. For more on empathy, see, for example, Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); Jane Roland Martin, *The SchoolHome* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992); Jim Garrison, *Dewey and Eros: Wisdom and Desire in the Art of Teaching* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997); M. Regina Leffers, "Pragmatists Jane Addams and John Dewey Inform the Ethic of Care," *Hypatia* 8, no. 2 (1993): 64-77; and Gregory Fernando Pappas, "Dewey and Feminism: The Affective and Relationships in Dewey's Ethics," *Hypatia* 8, no. 2 (1993): 78-95. It is important to note here that Noddings, for example, explicitly constructs an "ethic of care," and that no classical pragmatists labeled their own work in such a way. I use the term "ethic of care" in a generic way, not to summon explicitly any one ideal but to refer more generally to the relational ethic that prioritizes moral deliberation within the scene of human interdependence and sympathetic interaction.

neglected relational morality, a post-rational sphere often deemed "irrational" by mainstream ethics, or "natural" to some human beings (women) over others.²⁷

Feminist philosophers draw out the moral domains of human interrelation that have been ignored in traditional Western ethics. As Gregory Pappas argues, feminist philosophers have expanded how we think of ethics:

Even though there are significant differences among feminist ethicists today, they all agree that there are some moral notions, spheres, and problems that have been devalued, neglected, or ignored in traditional Western ethics. Some of these are the affective (emotions), the aesthetic, and the primacy of actual relationships (e.g., maternal, family, friendship).²⁸

Feminist theorists have challenged traditional Western conceptions of ethics by drawing on various constructions of a morality of caring.²⁹ Caring, as broadly used here, refers to the relation based on empathy and mutual regard between two or more persons. As opposed to more traditional ethical norms of respect, tolerance, or fairness, relational ethics are those modes of ethical inquiry that value the norms of human emotional connection in our shared moral existence. While some feminists see caring as a product of socialization and others see caring as a more natural domain of women as mothers, most feminist ethicists agree that notions of care are well-suited to critique, enhance, or replace traditional understandings of social ethics. Notions of care challenge traditional public/private boundaries, bringing the "domestic" sphere of nurture into our public, institutional lives.

Pragmatist thinkers, always suspicious of dualisms, have also contributed to this blurring of a public/private boundary in their considerations of social ethics. Like their feminist counterparts, pragmatist accounts of moral inquiry place conspicuous attention on the ways in which the affective domains of our lives play an integral role in our experiences. Pragmatists "start from the fact of human interrelationship," and aim to foster in human interaction "the formation of a sympathetic imagination for human relations in action."³⁰ Rejecting the reason/emotion dichotomy so prevalent

27. Rational processes, as traditionally defined, are those defended with evidence, argumentation, and notions of objectivity. Irrational is a label often used in opposition, to refer to various positions that disregard the norms of rationality. The label "irrational" is almost always used to diminish one's position as overly emotional, subjective, or irrelevant to public problem-solving. I am using the term "postrational" to refer to a desired expansion of the discourses on rationalism. I borrow from DiStefano's use of the term. In "Dilemmas of Difference," she outlines three forms of the relation between feminism and Western rationalism: (1) feminist rationalism, which seeks to repair women's exclusion from the rationalist paradigm in their historical construction as less rational and more natural than men, (2) feminist anti-rationalism, a position which celebrates "the feminized irrational, invoking a strong notion of difference against the gender-neutral pretensions of a rationalist culture that opposes itself to nature, the body, natural contingency, and intuition," and (3) postrationalism, which attempts to "transcend the discourse of rationalism" by "simultaneously disengaging from the assumptions of generic humanism on the one hand and feminism construed as a theory and politics for the subject 'woman' on the other." (DiStefano, "Dilemmas of Difference," 66-67). Postrationalism is a construct that allows us to acknowledge difference without ceasing to scrutinize critically differences in their shifting and complex contexts.

28. Pappas, "Dewey and Feminism," 78.

29. See, for another example, Andrea M. Jaggar, "Caring as a Feminist Practice of Moral Reason," in *Justice and Care: Essential Readings in Feminist Ethics*, ed. Virginia Held (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995): 179-202.

30. Dewey, quoted in Seigfried, *Pragmatism and Feminism*, 224.

in Western philosophy, pragmatist thinkers have long defended the role of affect in problem-solving. As James Garrison notes, Dewey found sympathy to be the best source of data in the social sciences as well as in moral deliberation: "Sympathy is the animating mold of moral judgment not because it dictates take precedence in action over those of other impulses (which they do not do), but because it furnishes the most efficacious *intellectual* standpoint."³¹ Emotional responses to situations and people provide us with information to solve problems, but this is not a coldly instrumental process, according to pragmatist philosophers. As Pappas reminds us,

The function of deliberation is to arrive at a thoughtful judgment so that we can choose what to do in a situation. Dewey describes this process as "an imaginative rehearsal of various courses of conduct."...As we engage in imaginative rehearsal the affective is not bracketed from the process but is constantly active.³²

Pragmatists, like feminists, understand that "rationality requires not only the acknowledgment of emotions but also their positive contribution in practical judgment."³³

It is important to note that when both feminist and pragmatist thinkers speak of emotion or affect in these cases, it is not simply referring to "positive" emotions of empathy and compassion; our emotions include anger, jealousy, and hatred, to name but a few. All emotional responses are not lauded as "good" in and of themselves; they are all viewed, however, as informative to social problems. Some emotional responses, particularly those that foster genuine communication between persons, are regarded as especially valuable for social relations.³⁴ Emotion is considered to be one part of intellect, a long-ignored component of social, ethical, and public problem-solving. Pragmatists and feminists find common ground in their efforts to break down the dualism of reason and emotion. Just as many feminists urge us to bring the intelligence of affect into our public spheres, so do pragmatists agree that our emotional lives should not be characterized as detracting from our daily lives at home, work, or as citizens.

Here again, however, the dialectic of pragmatism and feminism brings particular features to a relational ethic that highlight understandings of difference. First, the logic of essentialization is avoided through pragmatic inquiry and anti-foundationalism. Dewey's pragmatism helps us to avoid the tendencies to essentialize women as somehow genetically predispositioned toward an ethic of care. Dewey

31. John Dewey as quoted in Garrison, *Dewey and Eros*, 37.

32. Pappas, "Dewey and Feminism," 82.

33. Emily Robertson, "Reconceiving Reason," in *Critical Conversations in Philosophy of Education*, ed. Wendy Kohli (New York: Routledge, 1995), 124.

34. Dewey's choice of the word sympathy is no doubt deliberate. Beings in sympathy are in relation to one another; they potentially share resources, problems, and interests. Beings in sympathy are not necessarily in loving or affectionate relations with one another; they are connected, however, through associated activities of all kinds. Therefore the emotional possibilities of persons in sympathy with one another run the gamut of human affect, everything from anger to distrust to kindness and compassion. This point is important to make; some conceptions of an ethic of care (see Noddings, *Caring*) have potentially further characterized a so-called "feminine" ethic as one of only nurturing emotion. As stated, I believe a feminist-pragmatist values affect that fosters or maintains *communication*. This standard, then, allows us to value reflective discourse over anger, but at the same time to understand that expressed anger will sometimes help us more clearly communicate with one another over sensitive issues.

does not characterize care as somehow naturally the domain of women, though his emphasis on knowledge derived from experience would echo the power of gender socialization toward or away from an ethic of care. Second, a pragmatist approach tempers a tendency to label an ethic of care as the sole moral ideal for our culture. Such "gynocentrism" sees a so-called feminine ethic as superior to more "masculine," justice-oriented ideals.³⁵ Fraser notes that this view understands "differences that members of oppressed groups evince [as] marks of their cultural superiority over their oppressors" (JI, 203). While I would argue that Western cultures, often characterized by individualism, alienation, and violence, have much to learn from an ethic of care, it is important that we do not essentialize women as naturally caring, nor isolate care as the sole moral ideal as we champion relational ethics. Though women's experiences as mothers and daughters in our culture may socialize many of us toward an ethic of care, we should be careful in defining this as the "nature" of women at large. Such explanations, Dewey observed, halt inquiry and misunderstand the role of habit and socialization. Furthermore, an ethic of caring, the prominent disposition of moral and intellectual problem-solving for the pragmatist, is not to be put on an ideological pedestal, in isolation from, for example, the demands of justice.³⁶

It is Dewey's view that any trait or power of character — no matter how important or central to our moral life — can become a vice if it is not checked, informed, or fused with other dimensions of our character....What we must make room for in morality is not just altruistic emotions but the organic interaction between them and other virtues of character.³⁷

Thus far, I have sketched out two reasons why a feminist-pragmatist conception of community is well-suited to bring notions of community and difference out of essentialized opposition: the predisposition to praxis, and the advancement of relational ethics in both feminist and pragmatist strains of thought. The focus on praxis informs a view of community that constantly draws us back to reflections on lived experiences; too often, community is constructed with neo-Aristotelian ideals rather than lived realities in mind. A methodology of praxis insists that we continue to problematize lived experiences of community and difference, of the inevitable dilemmas that confront diverse people who associate and learn together. The focus on relational ethics provides both an epistemological and a moral grounding for learning communities, highlighting sympathy and reciprocity as guides. Such moral norms place a value on communication between and among interdependent (yet never identical) individuals.

With the primary methodological tools of feminist-pragmatism in place, my focus now turns to notions of difference. What theoretical approaches to difference might provide helpful analytical tools with which to construct a feminist-pragmatist notion of community? Ironically, it is the contribution of Fraser, who deliberately side-steps notions of community, which helpfully informs this quest.

35. Noddings calls an ethic of care a "feminine" ethic, saying that it draws from "feminine," maternal virtues such as compassion and empathy.

36. See Marilyn Friedman, "Beyond Caring: The De-Moralization of Gender," in *Justice and Care: Essential Readings in Feminist Ethics*, 61-77.

37. Pappas, "Dewey and Feminism," 84.

DIFFERENT KINDS OF DIFFERENCE: COMMUNITY AND CONTEXT

Using the methodological and critical strengths of pragmatism and feminism, Fraser argues for a differentiated politics of difference. She argues against theories of difference that do not distinguish various types of social differences (various forms of ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality) for their unique, contextualized characteristics: “[D]isadvantaged social collectivities differ from one another importantly — not only in the kinds of disadvantages they experience, ... but also in the bases of their differentiation and the roots of their oppression” (*J1*, 202). Simply put, there are different kinds of difference.

Fraser suggests that there are four ways of thinking about difference. The first is labeled *humanism*, the view that “the differences that members of oppressed groups evince are precisely the damages of oppression or the lies that rationalize them. Difference... is an artifact of oppression” (*J1*, 203). An example from an educational setting might be the view that girls are less likely than boys to pursue math and science courses in high school and college, the result of ideological and material structures that socially construct females to be unfit for these intellectual and professional domains. A proper political response to this type of difference is to eradicate it: to use policy and pedagogy to change the conditions and school cultures that enforce these gendered patterns.

The second way of conceiving difference, according to Fraser, is “*cultural nationalism*... the view that differences that members of oppressed groups evince are marks of their cultural superiority over their oppressors” (*J1*, 203). Fraser cites examples such as female nurturance, or Native American connection to the land. A familiar educational example is Afrocentrism, where African and African-American cultures are seen as having universalizable truths for humankind. Another educational example is Noddings’s conception of an ethic of care, where a “feminine” ethic is advanced as relevant for Western culture at large, as well as superior to neo-Kantian forms of ethical reasoning. Cultural nationalism seeks to universalize certain traits or values expressed by oppressed groups, especially extending those traits or values “to those who currently manifest inferior traits such as competitiveness and instrumentalism” (*J1*, 203).

A third view of difference is one of *pluralism* or cultural variation. Differences are not “superiorities nor inferiorities but simply variations. They should neither be eliminated nor universalized but rather affirmed as differences... valuable as expressions of human diversity” (*J1*, 204). There are many versions of multicultural education that implicitly or explicitly adhere to this view of difference. One author demonstrates this view when he writes that “[S]tudents need to be exposed to the plurality and multiplicity of voices that reflect the American experience... preparing students to live with the multiplicity of differences they will encounter throughout their lives.”³⁸

38. William De La Torre, “Multiculturalism: A Redefinition of Citizenship and Community,” *Urban Education*, 31, no. 3 (1996), 204.

The fourth position on difference, with which Fraser sensibly aligns herself, is that there are different kinds of difference: "some...are of type 1 and should be eliminated; others are of type 2 and should be universalized; still others are of type 3 and should be enjoyed." Such a position requires us not only to make judgments regarding the categorizations of human social variation, but to "make normative judgments about the relative value of alternative norms, practices, and interpretations, judgments that could lead to conclusions of inferiority, superiority, and equivalent value" (II, 204).

Fraser's work on difference is useful to the project of reclaiming community for at least three reasons. First, her pragmatic approach disallows attempts to take a one-sided look at the ways in which humans vary among cultures, socioeconomic groups, and ability groupings. Instead, pragmatism's methodological bent forces us to view difference in context: in the context of the community and setting in which it becomes relevant. Generalizable stereotypes about groups of learners, teachers, or parents become unacceptable; inquiry, accompanied by normative judgment, becomes necessary.

Second, the feminism employed by Fraser strengthens pragmatic methodology by pushing the analysis of institutions, cultures, and discourses to understand the ways in which they may favor or exclude individual persons or groups. We are therefore required to examine how difference is connected to inequality, a necessary task for learning communities like schools where cultural biases regarding gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and intelligence have historically penalized those seen as "Other." Difference is not simply "celebrated" as valuable; it is realistically viewed as a potential source of exclusion and regarded with the wisdom brought about by reflective inquiry fed by historical and sociological realities of past and present cultures and structural equalities. An emphasis on praxis entails an examination of current contexts that are relevant to school learning, and a reflection upon how these contexts make certain forms of difference particularly salient and possibly related to discrimination, biases, and injustices. Relational ethics demand that a democratic standard of nonoppression guide these judgments.

Finally, both feminism and pragmatism craft a methodological frame on difference that has an explicit ethical focus, avoiding postmodern mistakes of relativism while provided a substantive moral grounding for communal association. Feminism's ethical project, which features the elimination of structural and cultural oppression of women, provides Fraser's difference framework a sound justification to value nonoppressive, open societies over other kinds of societies. Pragmatism's ethical project is similar but more expansive, involving ongoing inquiry into "the problem of discovering how the individual can attain the most satisfactory experience in interaction with his [sic] environment."³⁹ Nonoppressive societies, where all members can pursue life courses in free interaction with their environs, are the goal of pragmatist social ethics as well as feminist ethical ideals.

39. *The Moral Writings of John Dewey*, ed. James Gouinlock (New York: Hafner Books, 1976), xxi.

Fraser's notions of difference, therefore, cannot dismiss ideals of community but instead *rely on* community norms of discourse and common work in order to be reflectively used. Fraser's model offers a succinct yet intricate model for analyzing and understanding difference as a condition of human association. Such a model requires a certain form of community in order to be used in a pragmatic (problem-solving) approach. Deliberating, discussing, debating, working, and coming to judgments about human difference and its relevance to our shared lives are not activities conducted in non-collectivities such as Young's ideal of city life, a mingling of strangers. Fraser's work in particular shows how a pragmatist notion of community can be forwarded even as it is discursively denied — her conceptions of difference rely on communal norms of participation, dialogue, and normative judgment.

Like Fraser, those of us involved in political and educational work care about some forms of community. The pragmatist model of community — which does not, at its heart, have a common set of beliefs but common activity, work, and doing — conveys a non-formulaic, nondogmatic model. Complete union — communion — is not the ideal and ritual upon which I reclaim community. Our imaginings of community are populated by these transcendental, ancient metaphors. Our public landscape is indeed full of popularized constructions of community that seek to minimize difference. With such metaphors, myths, and constructions of community, it is little wonder that difference has replaced individualism to become community's binary opposite. Using feminist-pragmatist theories and methods, I have argued here that difference is not necessarily nor irretrievably antithetical to community but that communicating across, through, and into difference relies upon some notion of a common public space with participants who are in relations with one another. The commons, a site of communication of the diverse players in a learning community, is the site at which differences become salient and relevant in the first place; it is only within a particular commons that certain differences become highlighted and visible.

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