The New Politics of Community

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Abstract

Ideas about community are especially prominent in late-twentieth-century U.S. society. The term *community* resonates throughout social policy, scholarship, popular culture, and everyday social interactions. It holds significance for different populations with competing political agendas (e.g., political groups of the right and the left invoke ideas of community yet have very different ideas in mind). No longer seen as naturally occurring, apolitical spaces to which one retreats to escape the pressures of modern life, communities of all sorts now constitute sites of political engagement and contestation. The new politics of community reveals how the idea of community constitutes an elastic political construct that holds a variety of contradictory meanings and around which diverse social practices occur. In this address, I analyze how reframing the idea of community as a political construct might provide new avenues for investigating social inequalities. I first explore the utility of community as a political construct for rethinking both intersecting systems of power and activities that are routinely characterized as "political." Next, by examining five contemporary sites where community is either visibly named as a political construct or implicated in significant political phenomena, I investigate how the construct of community operates within contemporary power relations of class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, age, ability, nation, and race. Finally, I explore the potential intellectual and political significance of these developments.

Keywords

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Barack Obama's election in 2008 catalyzed new questions concerning democracy's capacity to grapple with social inequalities. The election of the first African American president seemingly signaled a substantive change within social relations of inequality, one where marginalized peoples might use mechanisms of democracy for advancement. At the same time, the Obama presidency reignited deep-seated concerns that democratic institutions, no matter who runs them, are not capable of dramatically altering deeply-entrenched social inequalities.

Understanding social and political phenomena such as the Obama election may require a new language of politics that more effectively addresses how social inequalities simultaneously change yet stay the same. Toward this end, redefining the construct of community might be useful for grappling with the "changing-same" patterns of social inequalities that characterize intersecting power relations of race, class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, age, ability, and nation.[1] Because the construct of community constitutes both a principle of actual social organization and an idea that people use to make sense of and shape their everyday lived realities, it may be central to the workings of intersecting power relations in heretofore unrecognized ways. Recasting the notion of community as a political construct highlights how social inequalities are organized via structural principles of community and are made comprehensible through a language of community.

In this address, I analyze how reframing the idea of community as a political construct might provide new avenues for investigating the changing-same patterns of social inequalities.[2] I first explore the utility of community as a political construct for rethinking both intersecting systems of power and activities that are routinely characterized as "political." Next, by examining five contemporary sites where community is either visibly named as a political construct or implicated in significant political phenomena, I investigate how the construct of community operates within changing-same patterns of social inequalities. Finally, I explore the potential significance of the construct of community for contemporary power relations of class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, age, ability, nation, and race.

WHY COMMUNITY?

Power relations are typically organized around core ideas, namely, the cultural stock that forms the bedrock of social relations, that shapes social structures, and that makes those structures comprehensible to people. Important core ideas typically reflect a synergy between the taken-for-granted, commonsense, everyday knowledge that circulates throughout a social setting and the technical, formal knowledge of public transcripts. While elites and ordinary people may agree that any given core idea is significant, they may disagree on the meaning of the idea. The most significant of these core ideas are sites of political contestation over the social practices and institutional formations that ensue. Typically, elite knowledge permeates a society's public transcripts—its formal knowledge of theology, philosophy, and science—and, as a result, is recognized as authoritative. By contrast, the everyday knowledge of ordinary people, especially political knowledge, may operate through hidden transcripts. Elites may discredit these hidden transcripts, but they can be important sites of political contestation for ordinary people (Scott 1990).

Core ideas constitute the contested terrain of symbolic and structural dimensions of a society, regardless of whether an idea is identified as political. Take, for example, the idea of "love" within American society. Despite its prominence within theology, music, literature, and everyday use, defining love with any degree of precision or authority remains elusive, and building causal or predictive models of love seems impractical. Instead, love circulates as an ambiguous, contradictory, and messy construct that people use in a variety of ways. When love

becomes intertwined with sexuality and the erotic, it may constitute a site of political contestation (Foucault 1980; Lorde 1984). When connected to projects of contentious politics, love becomes central to political action (Emirbayer and Goldberg 2005). Martin Luther King Jr. subscribed to a politicized version of love, noting in his ''Where Do We Go From Here?'' speech, that ''one of the great problems of history is that the concepts of love and power have usually been contrasted as opposites, polar opposites, so that love is identified with a resignation of power, and power with a denial of love. . . . What is needed is a realization that power without love is reckless and abusive, and that love without power is sentimental and anemic'' (Carson and Shepard 2002:186). Love illustrates a contested terrain of ideas, in this case, the power of an idea to mean many things and to move people to action.

The construct of *family* constitutes another core idea central to social relations of power whose meaning and valence varies dramatically. Simultaneously a principle of actual social organization as well as an idea people use to make sense of everyday lived realities, historically the construct of family was theorized in apolitical terms, safely tucked away in the private sphere of household and neighborhood. This view advanced an uncritical binary idea of society, dividing social relations into the nonpolitical private sphere of family (where love and loved ones naturally reside) and the public sphere of work and civil society. Feminist theory challenges this view, pointing out its deeply gendered meanings. In particular, scholars show how the construct of family is not only a building block of patriarchy but also helps structure social inequalities of sexuality, class, race, and age. In contrast to earlier interpretations that naturalize, normalize, and idealize the family, the new politics of family conceptualizes family as a site of political contestation (Collins 2006).

The construct of *community* might operate in a similar fashion as family, as an important, albeit unrecognized, site of political contestation.[3] Historically, the concept of community occupies one side of Ferdinand Tönnies's ideal types of *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (civil society) (Tönnies 2001). Conceptually, family, community, and love are tightly bundled together within the idea of *Gemeinschaft:* the seemingly natural and loving kinship relationships of mother and child or among siblings, and the biological relationship of a man and a woman (Tönnies 2001). Claiming that ''fatherhood is the clearest foundation for the concept of *authority* with community'' (Tönnies 2001:25), Tönnies describes how structures of power within families form the bedrock of communities.[4]

Within sociology, Tönnies's conception of community laid the foundation for subsequent uncritical acceptance of the idea of community as the marginalized, nonpolitical sphere that frames more important debates about civil society, the true site of politics. These naturalized and normalized views situate community as geographically specific, culturally homogeneous, and inherently apolitical entities— seemingly natural phenomena of families, villages, neighborhoods, and ethnic and religious groups. Moreover, Tönnies's endorsement of naturalized authority buttresses perceptions of naturalized hierarchy within family lineages and among races, ethnicities, and religious groups (Banton 1998). Whether by choice or by force, people belong to primary communities, and such communities are typically ranked. Institutional practices concerning families and communities, as well as elite and everyday knowledge about family and community, form building blocks of social inequalities of class, gender, ethnicity, race, age, sexuality, and religion.

Despite its epistemological framing as an apolitical, natural concept, the construct of community is central to multiple forms of power relations: for example, national projects that construct racial, ethnic, and religious communities via inclusionary and exclusionary polices (Balibar 1991); or subordinated groups who frame political protest through the

specific language or cultural practices of community (Santos, Nunes, and Meneses 2007). Community, as refracted through the core idea of family, is the space to which women, racial minorities, ethnic groups, the faithful, the dependent (young, old, and disabled), and the overtly or differently sexual are assigned—in essence, the embodied, premodern, "dark" side of society, ostensibly characterized by its irrationality and emotionality.[5] In this context, the organizational principles and interpretive meanings of community do the heavy lifting of shoring up multiple systems of social inequality. For example, protecting family, community, home, race, and nation merge within ideologies of white supremacy, and from this fusion come social practices designed to protect hearth and homeland. As evidenced by the legacy of the Ku Klux Klan, domestic violence, and gay-bashing, people do atrocious things to one another, all in the name of protecting their loved ones and communities from perceived threat.

At the same time, social groups have used the idea of community as a site of affirmation, identification, and political expression. Emancipatory social movements have invoked the language of community as a powerful tool to challenge social inequalities. For example, the U.S. civil rights movement percolated in the space of kitchens, Black churches, and freedom schools, building around Martin Luther King Jr.'s desire for a "beloved community" where power, love, and justice constituted synergistic ideas. The construct of community is not only an important principle organizing power differentials *between* communities, but it can also be used by ordinary people and elites to challenge these hierarchies.

Community as a Political Construct

When feminists politicized the construct of family, they instituted a sea change in analyses of work, religion, schooling, and numerous other social institutions. The idea of community stands poised to undergo a similar interpretive shift. Because the term *community* serves as a core construct for organizing a variety of social groups for very different ends, it is central to the symbolic and organizational structures of intersecting systems of power. The idea of community constitutes an elastic social, political, and theoretic construct that holds a variety of contradictory meanings around which diverse social practices and understandings occur. It stands to reason that if this term garners such linguistic currency, then it might be central to understanding the organization, dynamics, and social processes associated with contemporary social inequalities. Moreover, because the construct of community has long been associated with women, ethnic groups, non-Western peoples, poor people, religious minorities, and similarly subordinated groups, it remains neglected as a core construct of political analysis for understanding the workings of race, class, gender, sexuality, age, ability, and ethnicity as systems of power. Instead of being a natural, apolitical space, or even an empty category that can be used for political purposes, the construct of community may lie at the heart of politics itself.

Several characteristics of the construct of community make it a promising candidate for examining the changing-same nature of social inequalities, and the intersecting power relations that animate them, especially within the contemporary United States.[6] First, the United States is awash in the language of community, making the construct of community ubiquitous in both everyday and elite knowledge. For example, community vocabulary permeates the elite language of education, where the terms *learning communities, community of learners,* and *classroom community* are prominent (Pardales and Girod 2006). In everyday knowledge, people often use the term community interchangeably with concepts of neighborhood. This points to the place-based underpinnings of the construct and how community is central to group identification. In some cases, these uses coalesce,

with patterns of use varying from one setting to another. For example, Latino communities can be envisioned as constellations of geographic neighborhoods, sets of face-to-face relationships among ethnic groups, or imagined transnational communities comprised of Cubans, Dominicans, Mexicans, and Puerto Ricans who simultaneously negotiate shared interests and experiences and reject classificatory efforts.

Second, the construct of community is versatile, malleable, and easy to use. Yet these characteristics also make it unexamined, taken-for-granted, and difficult to define (Cohen 1985). In everyday knowledge, the term community is used descriptively, so it seemingly needs little analysis or explanation. Whether an imagined community is a place-based neighborhood; a way of life associated with a group of people; or a shared cultural ethos of a race, national or ethnic group, or religious collectivity; people routinely feel the need to celebrate, protect, defend, and replicate their own communities and ignore, disregard, avoid, and upon occasion, destroy those of others. Elite knowledge also demonstrates how the construct of community is easy to use yet difficult to define: one survey of academic literature identifies 94 different uses of the term community, which in many cases have minimal overlap (Hilary 1955).[7]

Third, the construct of community holds varied and often contradictory meanings that reflect diverse and conflicting social practices. People can share the same cultural symbols yet understand and deploy them differently, a situation that catalyzes varying meanings and practices. In contexts of social inequalities, malleable meanings of community simultaneously catalyze contradictions and enable those contradictions to coexist. For example, the concept of ''black community'' may appear relatively straightforward—political polls routinely sample African Americans to assess the ''black vote,'' which ostensibly represents the ''black community's'' perspective. Yet the symbols of ''black'' and ''community'' remain far more contentious. In the 1960s, the construct of community was largely taken for granted in ways that minimized differences of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, age, and religion. Instead, people paid attention to the types of political agendas that could be profitably pursued in representing the black community's interests, as well as who was qualified to speak for the community. By contrast, African Americans and their allies who currently aspire to use ''black community'' for political purposes must negotiate the contradictory meanings that accompany both ''blackness'' and ''community.'' For example, the HIV/AIDS crisis challenged the seeming unity in African American politics concerning use of the term ''black community'' by pointing out how differences of sexuality, gender, and poverty status affect health outcomes (Cohen 1999). In essence, the construct of ''black community'' has survived, but the politics that surround it are quite different.

Fourth, the construct of community catalyzes strong, deep feelings that can move people to action. Community is not simply a cognitive construct; it is infused with emotions and value-laden meanings. People may believe and support their political leaders, but their level of emotion and care about their communities is central to their political behavior (Emirbayer and Goldberg 2005). Take, for example, the operation of two very different nationally-organized groups: youth gangs housed in African American and Latino low-income neighborhoods and academic disciplines housed in diverse college and university departments. For the former, initiated gang members often describe their local gangs as surrogate families, their territories as communities that merit protection, and their national gang as an imagined community of men who understand and care about their everyday experiences (Shakur 1993). For the latter, faculty members express allegiance to the broader academic discipline that is their field, but they also experience their departments as

places where space, resources, and people matter greatly. Department infighting, which often ends with a truce to present a united front to the university, makes sense not simply as a cognitive position, but through departments' ability to garner strong feelings among faculty, staff, and students. The department is more than a place—it is a community. Despite their obvious differences, organized gangs and university departments do exhibit some commonalties: (1) strongly-felt social ties that create surrogate families whose loyalty requires great personal sacrifice; (2) pride in and defense of the ''hood,'' which faces internal (the police) and external (rival gangs or other disciplines) threats; and (3) for historically established gangs and departments, a sense of connection to carry on the name and the meaning of the group/community. Organized gangs and university departments are especially effective when they find ways to marshal their members' strong feelings for political ends—noble ends in the case of departments, or nihilistic ends in the context of many low-income urban neighborhoods.

Fifth, the construct of community is central to how people organize and experience social inequalities. Because people exercise power in their everyday lives as individuals in multiple and crosscutting communities, it stands to reason that ordinary people will use the construct of community to think and do politics. Social structures such as neighborhoods, schools, jobs, religious institutions, recreational facilities, and malls are the institutional expressions of social inequalities of race, class, gender, age, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, and ability. These structures are typically hierarchical and offer unequal opportunities and rewards. When people travel among neighborhoods, they notice these structural inequalities. Increasingly, media enables people to see structural inequalities, both locally and globally. Yet social structures do not exist independently of people. Whether intentional or not, people use the construct of community to make sense of and organize all aspects of social structure, including their political responses to their situations. Similarly, social institutions use the symbols and organizational principles of community to organize social inequalities. Communities thus become major vehicles that link individuals to social institutions.

Because the idea of community is ubiquitous, versatile, multifaceted, and able to marshal emotions that move people to action, it is a potentially powerful idea for crafting diverse political projects. Political leaders know that when individuals cease seeing themselves as part of a mass, a mob, a collectivity, a population, or a public, and instead claim a sense of belonging to a community, they are primed for political analysis and action. The substance of the political identifications communities claim for themselves is certainly important—the Obama administration's democratic ideals differ markedly from nihilistic political agendas of youth gangs. Yet it is equally important to point out that, while community may appear to be a benign, apolitical term, even avowedly nonpolitical communities participate in power relations.

MAPPING THE NEW POLITICS OF COMMUNITY

Ideas about community may be undergoing a significant reconfiguration in the late-twentieth century. No longer seen as naturally occurring, apolitical spaces to which one retreats to escape the pressures of modern life, communities of all sorts now constitute sites of political engagement and contestation. In turn, these sites catalyze dynamic social and political identities that actively engage contemporary realities. In this context, the term community resonates throughout social policy, scholarship, popular culture, and everyday social interactions. It holds significance for different populations with competing political

agendas (e.g., political groups of the right and left invoke ideas of community yet have very different ideas in mind).[8]

I identify five important contemporary sites that rely on the construct of community and where diverse political projects can be detected, whether they are overtly claimed as ''political'' or not. Because these five sites fall within the general criteria of being ubiquitous, versatile, holding contradictory meanings, and invoking strong feelings, they may shed light on communities as vehicles that people use to organize power relations. These sites share several thematic elements. First, the sites are socially meaningful to people: the language of community is present, visible, and emotionally relevant. This focus on agency enables me to examine community as a dynamic dimension of lived experience, rather than as a simple taxonomic category. Second, the term community is named across all five sites, illustrating the elasticity of the language of community and how such language is part of the taken-for-granted lexicon of contemporary social relations. Third, by illuminating how people use community as everyday knowledge to think and do politics, the sites illustrate one aspect of how contemporary social inequalities are renegotiated. The sites show elasticity in the term's uses: community as an organizing principle of political behavior as well as a system of meaning for political understandings. Finally, the sites point to how the construct of community is used to respond to specific political challenges associated with intersecting power relations, especially where issues of social justice are part of the political terrain.[9]

Gated Communities as Metaphor and Reality

In many ways, the growth of gated communities is a metaphor for preoccupation with risk and security that characterizes societies as they undergo social change. In the United States, physical walls, numerous gates, and techniques of surveillance are increasingly called into service to maintain social inequalities that symbolic walls and gates of custom and practices formerly provided (Low 2003). Maintaining borders and policing who belongs within them is increasingly the currency of contemporary social relations, in the United States and globally.

Building walls and gates around communities is not a new phenomenon. The period of massive social change following the Civil War and Reconstruction was characterized by the growth of racial segregation. Using legal tactics to confine African Americans to inferior schools, jobs, and neighborhoods, formal social policies of racial segregation disenfranchised African Americans by separating them. The post-1970s period also brought racial change, this time by granting African Americans newfound citizenship rights. Yet contemporary patterns of desegregation simultaneously catalyzed new strategies for managing low-income African American, Latino, and immigrant populations—strategies that rely on old methods of confinement. The symbiotic relationship between inner-city schools, the disproportionate number of young African American men in prison, and the ghetto as a subjugated gated community suggests that metaphors and practices of incarceration and surveillance continue to have a disproportionate impact on these populations (Waçquant 2001).

Metaphors of gated communities resonate with early twenty-first-century public policies concerning immigration and citizenship. Take, for example, how the emphasis in the United States on homeland security engages policy debates about protecting the integrity of national borders. In the aftermath of September 11, concerns with sustaining the security of U.S. borders increased. Yet the increased attention to immigration policy can also be seen as a contemporary expression of the swinging gate that adjusts population flows and access to citizenship to regulate the labor

supply (Glenn 2002). In the post-9/11 context, the swinging gate not only reflects historical policies of differential treatment of immigrant groups based on race and ethnicity, but it is also intertwined with national security. One sees a parallel between symbiotic social institutions that incarcerate low-income African Americans, keeping them within inner cities, and the Office of Homeland Security's preoccupation with protecting individuals within U.S. borders from foreigners and foreign terrorists. The shift toward local, rather than national, immigration policies is a Homeland Security strategy to rid the country of undocumented, illegal immigrants who have become socially constructed as criminals by recent immigration policies. These examples pivot on fear and risk catalyzed by ideas about the ''enemy without'' as well as the ''enemy within.''

In U.S. towns, suburbs, and urban neighborhoods, gated communities signal a reversal of the value attached to public and private space and the seeming security attributed to each. Historically, elites achieved security by regulating the use of public space: they locked up undesirables in prisons and mental hospitals and controlled everyone else through laws and customs. Today, as African Americans, Latinos, women, immigrants, religious minorities, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and queer (LGBTQ) people have been granted more political protections with the loosening of restrictions on the use of public space, elites' previous techniques are decreasingly effective. The public sphere has been redefined in ways that formally protect individual rights, despite differences of race, sexuality, ethnicity, class, gender, and ability. Privatization has been the response to the democratization of public space. With claims that fences are designed to protect their children from undesirables, elites use the same techniques of security that they formerly used to keep undesirables out of public space to restrict these same populations within

public space. Specifically, undesirables are boxed into inferior and often dangerous public schools, public transportation, crumbling public infrastructures, underfunded public hospitals, and subpar public housing. Elites retreat to private automobiles, send their children to private schools, enjoy private-option health insurance, and, when necessary, live in gated communities.

The elasticity of the idea of gated communities is not confined to elites. For people who inhabit public space—for example, the hospital worker who takes the bus after working the night shift, or the ninth grader who walks to public school through gang territory—the threats are real. For populations confined within public space, installing fences, gates, and sophisticated surveillance technologies in housing complexes, schools, and the local corner store can provide protection against risks and threats posed by drugs, crime, and similar social problems. For example, Rouse's (2004) ethnography of how low-income African American women built and maintained a Muslim community of faith in a dangerous urban environment illustrates how community serves as a source of security and protection. These women used their community of faith as a political response to threats posed to their children. Growth of gated communities points to a reversal of safety and danger: safety is now associated with life within private gated communities and danger spreads through the uncertainty of public life. In the elusive search for safety and security, far too many people retreat to the private space of self-incarceration.

Despite diverse political agendas, gated communities all face the challenge of sustaining their borders: How should they manage surveillance and security? Should they have a guard at the gate, or a video surveillance system and card swipe system? How often should private security patrol the neighborhood; who can get past the guard at the front door of the urban high school? Metaphoric borders require comparable

policing. For example, debates over gay marriage or whether LGBTQ people should be allowed to serve openly in the military may not be framed using the language of community, yet defending community is the ethos that makes these policies comprehensible. Gay marriages pose no substantive threat to the practice of heterosexual marriage—one can assume that heterosexual people will continue to get married regardless of what LGBTQ people do. Similarly, debates about having out LGBTQ people serve in the military speak to the need to sustain a sense of military community that sees a heterosexual homogeneity as part of its imagined community. The small numbers of LGBTQ people who wish to marry or to serve openly in the military are not the issue here; rather, the challenges that these practices make to the symbolic borders of marriage and the military are at stake.

Collectively, these examples suggest that boundary work constitutes a significant dimension of contemporary social relations. Moreover, they suggest that maintaining community boundaries requires malleable gated communities. Such work is ongoing and never-ending, primarily because a preoccupation with issues of safety, risk, and security in the context of changing patterns of social inequalities is a threat to power.

Grassroots Politics and the Significance of Community

The construct of community has long permeated the grassroots politics and political activity of less powerful groups. African Americans, Latinos, new immigrant groups, Appalachians, and other groups with a disproportionate population of poor people approach politics through the specificity of their everyday lived experience, and the group-based ethos that this engenders. One can see the effects of differential zoning by race, ethnicity, or class when chemical plants or recycling facilities are routinely located in your neighborhood, whereas more affluent areas rarely encounter these patterns of land use. This does not mean that individuals situated within such communities all get along, agree, or strive to articulate a group-based standpoint (Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis 2002). Challenging the primacy of the individual as sacrosanct in politics becomes more likely when individuals can see how a chemical spill affects everyone in a neighborhood, not one by one, but as a community. Politics may be refracted through a language of community, where community is not a space to retreat and regroup but an important site of politics.

The language of community reappears in grassroots politics, not as a knee-jerk resistance to social change, but rather as a political tool for protecting families and neighborhoods. Policy debates regarding the disposition of poor, African American communities in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina illustrate this point. Intellectuals and politicians who had long advocated dispersing individuals as the solution to poverty saw Hurricane Katrina as a natural experiment to test their ideas. By contrast, poor African Americans who were actually dispersed supported community development strategies that would enable them to return home (Imbroscio 2008). This debate did not simply concern ideological positions; it pivoted on issues of political power and control. Natural disasters not only illuminate contemporary social inequalities, they also reveal longstanding tensions between competing analyses of the causes of social inequalities, different strategies for addressing them, and power differentials among social actors (Coelho 2007). Academics' and policymakers' arguments about racism and poverty are well known, largely because these groups have greater capacity to use elite knowledge to influence social policy. By contrast, the everyday knowledge of poor people, racial and ethnic groups, new immigrant groups, women, and similar populations remains less known and less influential.[10]

A constellation of terms related to community development shows how the language of community reappears across many settings. For example, terms such as *community control, community action,* and *community building* surface within grassroots political projects. Black-American and Black-British struggles for political power in the 1960s were often advanced within a framework of community control, especially for neighborhoods within large cities. The community control movement used the term ''community'' to maintain that what happened to the group (often seen as family) affected all, politicizing individuals within the group, and to argue that control over group life lay elsewhere. In schools, antipoverty programs, and neighborhood agencies, demand for community control was a demand for power. Women's visibility as community workers within grassroots organizations illustrates how social justice initiatives invoke a language of community. Here, traditions of African American women's motherwork and carework exist in recursive relationships with community work (Collins 2006). Similarly, this trajectory of framing grassroots political projects through the language of community spurs community action (Willie, Ridini, and Willard 2008). The ethos lies in addressing social problems that affect a group by seeing the group as a community that, because it is harmed collectively, is best helped through collective response. In this sense, the language of community retains its power as a vehicle for grassroots political organization (Warren 2001).

Hurricane Katrina and similar disasters provide a glimpse of more widespread practices that disproportionately damage communities disadvantaged by race, ethnicity, or class. Disasters may appear to be exceptional events, but they represent the tip of the iceberg. Low-income communities are far more likely to be harmed by the everyday practices of global capitalist development, such as job export, mechanization, deindustrialization, and practices of environmental degradation like dumping, deforestation, and strip mining. In this context, the grassroots politics of low-income African American, Latino, immigrant, indigenous, and poor white communities are frontline sites where people encounter harmful practices as threats to their communities, and they may invoke a language of community to resist them. Agency is key here, because market forces not only destroy local communities as physical entities—they also can catalyze people to create new communities as political entities from the stuff of prior social relations. Take, for example, how transnational migration has catalyzed the growth of transnational communities that transcend sending and receiving nations (Portes 1997). Migrants join existing immigrant communities, organize new ethnic communities in their new societies, and maintain ties with communities at home, thus forming new transnational communities. These transnational communities might constitute a new form of grassroots politics that empowers individuals both in sending societies (through receiving remittances) and within the receiving society.

Grassroots politics might be infused with a distinctive ethos that draws heavily on ideas about community. Under neoliberal policies, individuals may have formal rights, yet these individual rights may be rendered meaningless in the context of group subordination. Within disadvantaged groups, individuals who lack material resources or the capacity to exercise their formal rights often only have each other. In such situations, a self-oriented political language of individual rights may be far less useful than a language of community that potentially provides a functional statement of collective political demand.

Imagined Communities: Mediated Communities

Benedict Anderson's influential volume *Imagined Communities* (1983) sparked new analyses of nationalism, nation-state policies, and the centrality of imagined political

identities to understandings of politics and power. Noting the tenacity of nationalism as a political ideology, even when staunchly critiqued, Anderson redefined the construct of nation as an ''imagined'' political community, in the sense that members of even the smallest nations could never meet every individual within the nation. Yet, every community member could imagine terms of their inherent connectedness to others in the group. Ideas of the nation or a national community thus encourage members to be good citizens by fostering feelings of connection that lead people to serve and make sacrifices for the good of others who belong to the imagined nation. Anderson argues that all communities larger than those based on face-to-face contact are imagined and must be ''distinguished, not by their falsity/ genuineness, but by the *style* in which they are imagined'' (p. 6 [italics added]).

New communications technologies have catalyzed new styles for imagining and organizing communities of all sorts, including explicitly political communities.[11] For example, young people's use of convergent media forms—music, mobile phones, blogging, Web sites, the Internet, desktop publishing, and digital cameras—has catalyzed new forms of agency and social networking within mediated communities (Bloustien 2007). Youth may have led the way in using media to imagine communities, yet the effects go much further than youth populations. Sociologists, for example, can no longer imagine the sociological community as a small group of faculty from elite American, French, German, or British institutions who speak for everyone. This style of imagining a sociological community by placing an elite group at the center of power is becoming increasingly fractured within the new global context. New communications technologies enable individuals in the margins to speak directly with one another. With little need to consult the center on issues of what constitutes bona fide sociology, the entire sociological enterprise is

changed. Sociology now extends across regional and national borders and through various organizations that knit together people in an imagined interpretive community that is simultaneously local, global, multicultural, and aspirational. These mediated sociological communities create new possibilities for the practice of sociology in multiple social locations. New communications technologies enable sociologists to craft entirely new mediated communities that build on, transcend, and challenge existing sociological power configurations.

These new communications technologies raise at least two issues regarding the significance of mediated communities for community as a political construct. First, despite the existence of a very real digital divide that disenfranchises those who lack access to the Internet, the emergence of user-generated material via blogs, citizen journalists, YouTube postings, and mass text messaging can shift the balance of power away from top-down control of information to a high-tech, bottom-up grassroots ethos. New technologies can encourage new forms of imagined communities that express diverse political agendas. The 2008 Obama campaign, for example, used cell phones to organize populations who had difficulty imagining themselves as being in one community—Latinos, young people, African Americans, and women—and to link this national network to old-fashioned, place- and issue-based community organizing (Sampson et al. 2005). In essence, new communications technologies unsettle notions of a top-down public sphere, where elites control knowledge and public information, the apparent hallmark of Western bourgeois society (Habermas 1989). Instead, these changing patterns of the flow of information may signal a fundamental shift from a hierarchical, top-down organization of power to a bottom-up, Web-based organization of power grounded in potentially more egalitarian social relations. Despite its short tenure, patterns of change in the overall organization of the Internet illustrate these

changes. The shift from a Web 1.0 perspective, where Web users were primarily consumers of information, to a Web 2.0 perspective, where each individual can become a creative producer of information, reflects how political communities might be imagined and organized.

Second, technological tools might also enable people to imagine new social relations that transcend the limits of geography. At their most basic level, social networking sites and similar Web-based meeting places provide powerful dissemination tools for information. Enhanced access to information profoundly affects basic definitions of political communities, largely because information enables individuals to transcend, and often erase, boundaries of the gated communities of actual social relations. It is now possible to see pictures of communities much like one's own on the other side of the world, hear world music that expresses similar feelings and aspirations, see and try dance movements from unheard of places, and communicate directly with actual people in different contexts.

This expanded access to information cuts both ways. On the one hand, it can foster a voyeurism about the lives of others from the safety of one's gated community; for example, new technologies enable black culture to be commodified and sold in the global marketplace (Collins 2009). On the other hand, expanded access to information can unmask the power of gates by revealing the humanity of people who have been depicted in stereotypical fashion. Hip hop, an imagined community whose initial expression came from black youth, illustrates this trajectory. In her study of the aesthetic and political dimensions of hip hop, Perry (2004:44) notes that ''hip hop nourishes by offering community membership that entails a body of cultural knowledge, yet it also nourished by offering a counter-hegemonic authority and subjectivity to the force of white supremacy in American culture.'' Hip hop may have begun as a cohort specific, mediated community that served as a site of political contestation for African American youth, yet it has spread far beyond these origins. Hip hop culture's ability to attract youth from diverse national groups, linguistic groups, racial and ethnic groups, genders, sexualities, and abilities points to the political significance of artistic mediated communities within contemporary mass media venues.

When reframed through power relations, imagined communities can be marshaled for oppressive or emancipatory political projects. In this sense, technologies that facilitate social networks move beyond their origins as basic vehicles for companionship (e.g., the social networking sites of adolescents) or functional tools for business (e.g., virtual meetings, teleconferencing, and Skype). From sociology to hip hop, new communications technologies enable people to create social meanings through shifting patterns of face-to-face and mediated interactions. In the context of globalization, these new technologies create organizational opportunities for new sorts of political communities.

Citizenship and the Call to Community Service

The commitment to community service routinely found within the United States may reflect the peculiarities of American culture; yet, the core idea of service to nation as imagined community has deep roots across many social settings. With its expressed commitment to community service, the Obama administration has refocused attention on an important component of American national identity. On January 19, 2009, the day before his inauguration, Obama issued a call for a renewed commitment to community service in a speech delivered for the Martin Luther King Day of Service at an inner-city high school:

> I am asking you to roll up your sleeves and join in the work of remaking this nation . . . don't tell me that we can't

usher in a new spirit of service to this country. I know we can do this. America is a great nation precisely because Americans have been willing to stand up when it was hard; to give when they have little left to give; to rise above moments of great challenge and terrible trial. And I know that I am here today—as are so many of you—because somebody, at some point, decided that *loving their community and their country meant doing something to change it*. (Obama 2009; italics added)

In this passage, Obama equates volunteerism with civic engagement, service with patriotism, and explains the notion of ideal citizenship using the rhetoric of loving one's community as one's country.

Community service may seem to be a universal category that could be achieved by anyone, yet the construct of service is refracted through prevailing social inequalities. One's placement within social hierarchies of race, class, and gender may narrow or expand one's access to service opportunities and the value placed on service itself. Moreover, the service individuals pursue is differentially valued by society. Compare, for example, military service and care-work as forms of community service. Military service is a highly visible and valued form of community service, in part because the community served is the nation as community, and in part because military service has historically been the province of men (Yuval-Davis 1997). Soldiers volunteer to serve the national community, potentially sacrificing their lives. Yet within this service tradition, class, race, gender, and sexuality shape where men, women, Latinos, African Americans, whites, middle-class, working-class, and poor people are situated and how their service is valued.

Care-work constitutes an important form of women's labor that draws on ideas about community service and women's place. Within paid care-work, poor women and women of color provide low-paid care-work that relieves middle-class and affluent women of such duties (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001). Within unpaid care-work, one sees a similar hierarchy in the value placed on specific service activities. Although middle-class women are far more likely to work today than in the past, the service activities they pursue—and that they have time to pursue because they can employ low-paid domestic workers—are often more valued. For example, stay-at-home moms' service as organizers of school fundraisers or troop leaders for the Girl Scouts, or professional women's involvement in philanthropic board and fundraising service, is highly valued. By contrast, the service of poor and working-class women who take plates of food to elderly neighbors, run daycare centers in their homes for women who work the late shift, or perform volunteer activities in their churches garners less recognition. Thus, when it comes to military service and care-work, the value placed on volunteerism and sacrifice varies depending on individuals' gender, race, and class.

Poor and working-class populations not only have different access to forms of community service, but the very meaning attached to the notion of community service may reflect lived experiences. Service can mean very different things to middle-class and working-class people. Many working-class people reject ideas of community service altogether, viewing service work as devalued, low-paid labor that is part of a history of exploitation. Because women and people of color have been forced to take service jobs, much of it dirty work, service signals submission and can be a reminder of their placement within social hierarchies. For many working-class people, community service does not conjure up lofty ideals of volunteerism and sacrifice as suggested by President Obama; instead, community service is something you get as an alternative to jail time.

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that poor and working-class communities lack traditions of service. There are unrecognized alternative traditions of civic participation and community service: helping out neighbors, supporting churches, and running neighborhood groups fall within the purview of community service but are rarely embraced as such. Community service traditions of care-work in African American communities, much of it done by African American women, have been vital to the survival of families and neighborhoods. Retired, professional African American women often conceptualize their community service in terms of intergenerational community responsibility and race uplift. These women may engage in similar activities as middle-class white women but attach different social meanings to the work (Slevin 2005). Care-work can be especially essential in poor communities that lack access to the benefits their more affluent counterparts routinely experience, particularly if care-work is linked to grassroots politics and the community ethos this engenders.

On the surface, the category of community service is a universal category open to anyone, which will yield similar benefits to all who engage in it, and that is good for neighborhoods and the nation. However, drilling down into how social inequalities affect community service shows stratified patterns of access to service, as well as inequalities in how service is valued, defined, and perceived by different groups. Specifically, alternative community service traditions of subordinated populations might constitute political projects in their own right. Providing tutoring and free meals can be seen as benign volunteerism. Yet in the context of the political struggles of the 1960s, both of these community service activities took on a different meaning. Specifically, the freedom schools aimed to provide alternatives to public education in Mississippi and other Southern states, but the literacy training they provided equipped African

Americans for voter registration drives and similar forms of political action. Similarly, the radical political agenda of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense included a breakfast program that, by feeding children every morning, demonstrated the failures of government institutions.

In a context where community service is closely linked to ideas of patriotism and citizenship, as is the case in the United States, calls for community service help manage the contradictions of competing political agendas. President Obama's call to community service may be a sincere gesture, yet community service is unlikely to fix the range of deep-seated social problems that stem from multiple social inequalities. Agendas of community service are effective because the malleability of the term ''service,'' coupled with the similarly elastic notion of ''community,'' allows multiple social meanings to attach to this ostensibly universalistic political agenda. In this use of community as a political construct, attention is diverted away from public policies that might address root causes of social problems and toward facile forms of amelioration. This construction suggests that painting the school corridor is a valid substitute for providing skilled teachers for poor schools, or that working in a food pantry one day a year is a viable response to hunger. Using the construct of community to invoke strong feelings—in this case, the emotional satisfaction of helping the less fortunate through community service— feel-good experiences may mask equally important responsibilities of citizenship.

The Complexities of Community Organizing

President Barack Obama worked as a community organizer on the South Side of Chicago, an experience that may have influenced his campaign strategy and his style of governing. Whether accurate or not, Obama's history highlights multiple and

contradictory meanings that people attach to the term *community organizer.* Would Obama's perceptions of community organizers lead him to act as an advocate for special interest groups—specifically, African Americans—thus further balkanizing partisan politics? Or would Obama be a community organizer in the sense of organizing the American public into an imagined national community dedicated to participatory democracy? In which direction might the elasticity of the term community organizer stretch in serving the political purposes of the Obama administration?

These debates concerning President Obama's loyalties reflect prevailing ideas that view community organizing through the lens of either identity politics or affinity politics. In effect, the curiosity of the American public as to whether Obama will be a ''special-interest'' president or one serving all of the people reflects widespread assumptions about the seeming contradictions between identity and affinity politics that reflect Tönnies's binary of community and civil society (Tönnies 2001).

Forms of political behavior categorized as identity politics strive to craft political solidarity around social identity categories. For this type of community organizer, the organizational task lies in politicizing a preexisting shared social experience that might not be seen as a political identity. Community-organizing traditions grounded in place-based, local, or seemingly homogeneous social identities often constitute the benchmark of identity politics. Neighborhood community development initiatives fall under this rubric—gated communities and neighborhood grassroots activism both reflect this place-based ethos of social identities at the core of community organizing.[12] Because participants share a specific geographic focus, these initiatives build on shared social networks and experiences to organize residents in face-to-face settings of apartment buildings, neighborhoods, villages, churches, workplaces, and clubs. Community

organizing under the rubric of identity politics might also involve politicizing a preexisting, visible social identity: for example, organizers might recruit workers at a factory into the labor movement using an identity as ''worker'' that can be imagined to apply to other workers in diverse work situations; feminists strive to organize women around a new social identity attached to the concept of ''women''; and, in the 1980s and 1990s, the religious right tried to attach a political agenda to the social identity of ''Christian.'' Community organizing might also bring entirely new social identities into being; in the 1960s, LGBTQ activists challenged the social identity of ''homosexual'' advanced by the medical establishment.

By contrast, forms of political behavior categorized as affinity politics might emphasize organizing groups for political action, but might not see their actions as organizing communities per se. The task for organizers under an umbrella of affinity politics lies in politicizing individuals by helping them develop an affiliation grounded in a commitment to a shared set of social interests; for example, working for or against climate change. The goal is to craft a political organization of like-minded individuals who work on behalf of a social issue. Despite the crosscutting, mutually-constructing nature of identity and affinity politics, holding fast to this binary will limit community organizing. Not only is this framework of identity and affinity politics not especially useful to actual community organizers and their projects, but it privileges one form of community organizing over another. Specifically, this binary framework replicates longstanding dualistic thinking that elevates political forms of civil society— the individualism of affinity politics—and derogates the collective ethos most often associated with forms of community organizing of subordinated groups, namely, identity politics.

Effective community organizing draws on multiple organizational forms. The identity/affinity binary may be useful as a starting point in that, initially, one form may be

more salient in a specific social context. Yet, community organizing that works with people where they actually are—in gated communities, low-income neighborhoods, churches, national organizations, or the mediated communities of professional organizations and contemporary youth culture—and engages broader social issues that concern them (e.g., the differential meaning of community service), suggests that political action always occurs at the intersection of identity and affinity politics. For example, a group of African American residents fighting a chemical plant being placed next to their neighborhood school may appear to be an identity-based political project, yet this project is simultaneously part of a broader, environmental justice initiative that cuts across categories of race and class.

Rather than classifying community organizing as being either identity or affinity based, a more fruitful approach lies in identifying issues that shape community organizing of all sorts. It is important to note that ''community organizing'' refers to all types of communities, not just explicitly political ones associated with social movement politics. This broader conception of community suggests that ideas about identity and affinity might be better conceptualized as organizational tools, rather than as ostensibly oppositional types of community organizing that can be easily ranked. In this sense, all communities are inherently political: to exist, they must organize across the differences in power among their members. They must also position themselves within a constellation of other communities engaged in similar organizational projects. Communities must manage internal differences in power among their members as well as negotiate differences in power among unequal communities.

The global women's movement illustrates the tensions community organizers must negotiate between internal and external differences of power. Many young women of color in the United States express excitement when they discover feminism in Women's Studies classrooms. Here they can form new communities based in affinities with one another as individuals as well as with the broader transnational women's movement. Yet they also criticize the terms of their new-found freedom, which can encourage them to choose affinity politics over the identity politics they left behind. Because they are social mobiles, they see the false choice they must make between identity and affinity politics (Hernandez and Rehman 2002). Transnational feminism expresses these same tensions. It sees empowering women as its core political project, one that requires organizing a global political community among women. Yet how might this political solidarity be achieved? One approach is to organize women around identity categories such as women, feminists, and sisters. Yet this approach has been criticized for flattening meaningful differences among women created by systems of race, class, sexuality, age, ethnicity, religion, and nation. Another approach identifies a social justice agenda—for example, reproductive rights, schooling for girls, violence against women, or the globalization of women's poverty—positing that commitment to these principles will override differences among women. Yet this approach faces the challenge of specifying how the core principles of transnational feminism apply to women from vastly different backgrounds. For young women of color who claim feminism, as well as the transnational feminist movement overall, identity and affinity politics constitute interrelated, essential components of community organizing.

Because the construct of community includes both a principle of actual social organization (from local to global settings) and an elastic idea that people use in everyday life, the theme of community organizing is central to oppressive and emancipatory projects within intersecting power relations. In the context of contemporary massive changes, refocusing attention on contested perspectives

of community organizing sheds light on how people organize themselves and others for diverse political ends.

RETHINKING COMMUNITY: POWER, SOCIAL INEQUALITIES, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

In the context of intersecting power relations that catalyze changing-same constellations of social inequalities, community has not disappeared from view. Instead, the new politics of community detailed here suggests that community remains hidden in plain sight. Practices such as retreating to gated communities to protect loved ones from perceived threats, finding strength in community in response to challenges of globalization, using new technologies to imagine new mediated communities, annexing the symbolic power of community service to state agendas, and organizing groups that accommodate seemingly antithetical approaches to community, are but a few examples of the pervasiveness of the community construct within contemporary politics.

Several features of community as a political construct may make it especially salient for examining intersecting systems of power of gender, ethnicity, sexuality, age, ability, nation, race, and class. First, the construct of community provides a template for both relational thinking, an increasingly necessary skill for navigating social relations of interdependence, and social theories that strive to understand these relations (Emirbayer 1997). Relational thinking need not be a cognitive category; instead, the idea of community may provide a template for examining how relational thinking operates across a range of social venues, some explicitly political, others less so.

From a blossoming world music scene to terrorism, growing recognition of multiple forms of humanity's interdependence requires new ways of conceptualizing social relations. Whereas binary thinking is central to systems of slavery, colonialism, imperialism, and sexism that focus on sorting and ranking populations into non-overlapping categories, relational thinking emphasizes connections among and across these categories. The shift from disciplinary to interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary fields of inquiry, or from national to international and transnational frames for global politics, reflects this conceptual shift within knowledge and power relations. Seeing new connections among and across individuals, groups, categories, and theories is the hallmark of contemporary patterns of interdependence.

Because the construct of community is inherently about *inter*relationships across differences in power—the aforementioned power negotiations within identity communities and across affinity communities—the relational thinking that accompanies multiple practices of community in actual social relations may be a useful entrée into strategies people deploy within an increasingly interdependent world.[13] Because community embodies similarity and difference, both within the internal politics of communities and across communities, the word community inherently expresses a relational idea (Cohen 1985). Redefined notions of community might be profitably incorporated into ongoing projects to rethink social phenomena in relational terms. For example, broad projects of rethinking cultural interdependence that have catalyzed contemporary patterns of multiplicity, mixing, *mestizaje,* and hybridization (Canclini 1995) might be placed in dialogue with analyses of community as a political construct. This construct of community might also resonate with broader intellectual frameworks that draw on relational thinking. Take, for example, scholars' use of intersectionality as an emerging paradigm for analyzing race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, and age as mutually constructing systems of power. Scholars of intersectionality have made relational thinking central to their analyses of

power and social inequalities (Knapp 2005; Walby 2007), yet analytic treatments of community as a political construct remain in their infancy in this literature.

Second, community's proven track record as an adaptable, functional principle of social organization—recall that community is difficult to define yet easy to use—makes it useful for responding to changes associated with the reconfiguration of systems of racism, sexism, class exploitation, and heterosexism. Do people living through massive changes draw on the familiar organizational principles and interpretive frameworks of community to respond to unfamiliar social relations? Traditionally, the language of community mapped comfortably onto constellations of people who seemingly belonged together. For example, ethnic constructions routinely separated Blacks, Irish, and Italians into hierarchically ranked groups. The boundaries between groups organized as communities were clear. Under a logic of segregation or separate spaces, people belonged in specific places (e.g., neighborhoods, ethnic groups, nation-states, or occupational categories) and all places were ranked. Social inequalities of race, gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity, age, religion, and ability all drew on a shared logic of ranked social groups organized around varying configurations of core social identities.

In a situation of fluidity and seeming interdependence, who knows who belongs where? As evidenced by the attention devoted to themes of traveling, home, migration, exile, outsider-within existence, and categories of citizenship, questions of belonging and border crossing preoccupy thinkers from diverse fields and walks of life (Naples 2009). Transportation and communications technologies are rapidly destroying pristine neighborhoods and villages where one could easily spot a stranger. Physical places of housing, neighborhoods, schools, cities, religious institutions, and nations no longer provide the certainty of knowing which people belong. Social space

is similarly reconfigured, with people rubbing elbows in schools and jobs while still carrying the social distance provided by categories of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Conceptual space follows a similar logic of separation and ranking—interdisciplinary fields challenge the historical privileges enjoyed by established academic disciplines. In this context, because boundaries signify differences in power, boundary maintenance of physical, social, and conceptual space becomes more intense (Pieterse 2004).

Because flexibility is both the hallmark of contemporary social relations and a characteristic of the construct of community, this construct may be especially suitable in helping people manage ambiguities associated with changing configurations of intersecting power relations. Responses to the changing-same patterns of social inequalities can vary dramatically. Some groups advocate keeping communities the same or returning to former ways of being (e.g., gated communities); others embrace changes and aspire to build new and better communities to address it (e.g., the aspirational content of conscious hip hop).

A third dimension of community as a political construct is that community is closely associated with symbolic boundary construction, and this process may often be drawn on in times of social change. Boundary maintenance becomes more difficult in situations of interdependence—the prevailing ethos of contemporary globalization—hence the impetus to restore order via walls and gates. Because it is impossible to return to the past, the functionality of community in the symbolic construction of boundaries helps explain why communities may be growing in significance at the same time that formal boundaries that regulate social inequalities are waning (e.g., declines in segregated housing for Latinos and African Americans or excluding women from sports). In the aftermath of postcolonial and civil rights movements' activism, formal citizenship rights have been granted to many historically subordinated groups. Yet,

installing formal rights by eliminating visibly exclusionary practices does not mean that social inequalities have disappeared. In the United States, for example, the strict boundaries of *de jure* racial segregation have largely been replaced by a more nuanced, colorblind racism that continues to produce racially disparate outcomes through symbolic and coded mechanisms (Guinier and Torres 2002).

Over the past several decades, many countries have seen growth in political action founded on ethnicity, race, religion, and similar identities among groups who may have achieved formal rights but who encounter symbolic and coded mechanisms that maintain social inequalities. Where the old structural bases of community boundaries are blurred, groups respond by using the symbolic dimensions of community to craft political solutions that either sustain existing social inequalities or challenge them. For example, regardless of ideological content, the renaissance of community among subordinated groups often takes shape through the aggressive assertion of ethnicity and the local neighborhood *against* the homogenizing logic of the nation and international political economies (Cohen 1985). A similar resurgence of ethnicity can be seen among whites and other dominant groups who perceive their power to be eroding within rapidly changing multicultural, multiethnic societies. The rise of far-right political projects within Western European societies reflects this trend.

The conception of community that is asserted by groups that are differentially positioned within power relations is vital. Community can be based on solidarities that draw on fundamentalist ideologies (e.g., Christian, Islamic, and Zionist fundamentalist social movements), or political philosophies that suppress dissent. Purifying the community of heretics, nonbelievers, and traitors is one way of accomplishing political solidarity. Alternative conceptions of community can catalyze more complex understandings of community that grapple with the democratic possibilities of assimilation, multiculturalism, and boundary-blurring forms of hybridity and *mestizaje* (Collins 2009).

Finally, the construct of community can serve as a template for aspirational political projects. Community can never be a finished thing but is always in the making. In this sense, participating in building a community is simultaneously political (negotiating differences of power within a group); dynamic (negotiating practices that balance individual and collective aspirations); and aspirational (a form of visionary pragmatism that places contemporary practices in service to broader principles) (Collins 2000, 2009). The symbolism associated with community is key, with elasticity of the symbol serving as a measure of its effectiveness. Symbols are often most useful when they are imprecise (Cohen 1985): the specific content of a given political project is less significant than how the construct of community enables people to imagine new forms of community, even as they retrieve and rework symbols from the past.[14]

In the United States, community can be a symbol for egalitarianism, the quest for a place where every individual is recognized as an equal member of the community with entitlements and responsibilities commensurate with their ability to serve the greater good. In this sense, ideas about community and participatory democracy remain bundled together—democracy is not a thing that can be achieved but rather a relational process honed in the crucible of lived experience across differences in power. John Dewey, Jane Addams, W. E. B. Du Bois, and other early-twentieth-century American pragmatists saw this connection between participatory democracy and community, viewing both as aspirational constructs that inform one another. The construct of community may be ideally suited for democratic aspirational projects because its effectiveness lies in its ability to wed strong feelings to projects that are designed to advance the greater good.

One reason that these four dimensions of the construct of community—its ability to

invoke relational thinking, help people deal with change, negotiate boundaries, and harness political aspirations—are so effective in grappling with the changing-same patterns of social inequalities is that community is a holistic construct. Community is a ubiquitous, versatile idea that can accommodate contradictory meanings and link thinking, feeling, and action in ways that make it especially useful for contemporary social justice initiatives. Yet this construct links thinking-feeling-action less by integrating them one into the other, and more by aggregating them such that they energize one another (Cohen 1985). People do not aspire for a better or different world for intellectual reasons only. They act because they care. Yet emotion without reason is subject to manipulation. A good deal of the power of community lies in its ability to wed strong feelings to projects with diverse political agendas, especially aspirational political agendas. People who care about their communities, and projects that harness emotions for political ends, possess a staying power. Community provides a window on a holistic politics, drawing on its proven track record and its relational cognitive frame, to provide the hope that is needed for politics.

Social justice initiatives require just this sort of holistic commitment, one where, according to Martin Luther King Jr., "power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is love correcting everything that stands against love" (Carson and Shepard 2002:186). The construct of community can be a powerful organizing principle for social justice initiatives conceptualized within this framework. Nineteenth-century African American journalist Ida Wells-Barnett's anti-lynching crusade illustrates the effectiveness of joining an unshakable commitment to community with a passion for social justice. Wells-Barnett was compelled to act when a friend of hers was lynched. She realized that no individual could be safe from the threat of lynching without changing the legal and

social status of African Americans as a group. Black people were not her mass, her mob, her public, her population, or a statistical collection of potential lynching victims—they were her community. Emboldened by community commitment, Wells-Barnett dared to speak the forbidden and go where she was unwelcome. In her work, we see the power of deep feelings wedded to social justice agendas, as well as a bona fide commitment to a widening of the civic space that might enable neighborhoods and nations to move beyond coexistence to interdependent living. Let us hope that, as long as social inequalities persist, individuals like Wells-Barnett, with a passion for social justice, will emerge who use community in innovative and imaginative ways.

Acknowledgments

Notes

1. I distinguish between intersecting systems of power and specific social formations of social inequalities that reflect these power relations from one setting to the next. Intersecting systems of power may be pervasive, yet some intersections may be more salient than others. For analytic clarity, I refer to intersecting systems of power as the broader, analytic framework, and changing-same patterns of social inequalities as the product of these broader systems (see Collins [2000] for a discussion of the connections between intersectionality and the matrix of domination). For analytic approaches to social inequalities that influence this account, see Tilly's (1998) analysis of the relational nature of durable inequalities; Walby's (2007) account of how complexity theory shapes institutional frames of inequality and social relations of power; and Korzeniewicz and Moran's (2009) use of world-systems theory to investigate the durable nature of social inequalities in the context of globalization.

2. Framing issues about democracy and social inequalities by juxtaposing change to stasis certainly

permeates mass media depictions of politics —change is defined as the opposite of stability, leaving stasis as the de facto enemy of change and vice versa. The seemingly oxymoronic concept of the changing-same, however, might better describe democracy, social inequalities, and relations between them. The notion of the changing-same encompasses contemporary social dynamics where the global political economy has changed so dramatically, ostensibly providing opportunities for change while replicating old hierarchies. In this global context of the changing-same, social inequalities that accompany intersecting power relations of ethnicity, sexuality, age, ability, nation, race, class, and gender also simultaneously change and remain the same.

3. This project addresses Keller's (1988:168) challenge to sociology: "I seek for us to reclaim community as a vital concept for sociological theory and empirical research, to ground our abstract and over-generalized statistics, and to locate them in meaningful social space." My approach draws from the overall framework proposed by Barry Wellman, yet it avoids both the structural determinism among levels of society and identifying labor (class) relations as most fundamental. Wellman (1979:1201) contends: "The Community Question has set the agenda for much of sociology. It is the question of how large-scale social systemic divisions of labor affect the organization and content of primary ties. The Question has formed a crucial sociological nexus between macroscopic and microscopic analysis. It has posed the problem of the structural integration of a social system and the interpersonal means by which its members have access to scarce resources." In this address, I reframe the construct of community and explore its political implications. Unlike family, community is more visibly situated as a midrange, political construct, which I suggest has macroscopic dimensions of its own. We do not expect families to be political, yet we are not surprised when communities engage in political behavior.

4. The complete passage reads: "If a father's love exists in any strengths it resembles the love between brothers and sisters because of its 'mental' [rather than physical] character. But it clearly differs from that relationship because of the *inequality* of the parties involved, especially in age and intellectual powers. Thus fatherhood is the clearest foundation for the concept of *authority* with community. This authority is not, however, to be used for the advantage of the authority-holder, but to complete his part in procreation by seeing to his offspring's training and education and sharing with them his own experience of life" (Tönnies 2001:24–25). My aim here is not to discredit Tönnies by selectively quoting him, but rather to illustrate how the synergistic relation of ideas about gender, sexuality, age, race, religion, and ethnicity—as organized through prevailing scholarship on family as influenced by Tönnies—has shaped subsequent approaches to community. Unlike family, community has been relatively neglected as a political construct within sociology.

5. The sustained attention within contemporary social theory to examining the contours of ostensibly modern and postmodern social formations constitutes an iteration of this tendency to privilege civil society and the West as the site of significant action and to relegate the premodern to an ahistorical, natural, and often unexamined site. Community constitutes a construct associated with the premodern, the non-West, and a series of ideas that fall on the negative side of Western binary thinking.

6. I hesitate to broaden this analysis of community beyond the United States, primarily because cultural differences may mean that terms other than community may be more salient in other situations. In the U.S. case, a constellation of practices has fostered an emphasis on the term community (e.g., the history of small towns that, for a large segment of the population, symbolize what it means to be "American"). Other core ideas may be equally if not more salient within other national or social settings.

7. Despite the term's widespread use within sociology, after the 1970s, sociological theory largely neglected the construct of community. Yet there are signs that theoretical discussions of the concept are being revitalized (see Brint 2001; Etzioni 1996). Interestingly, rather than social theorists, it is sociologists who offer thorough and compelling analyses of the concept in their empirical work (e.g., Liepins's [2000] analysis of community for contemporary rural studies).

8. Making a similar claim that "community is resurging as a force in its own right and not merely as a residue from the past as a way-station to *gesellschaft*," Keller (1988:173) identifies four main reasons why this is so: (1) a disenchantment with modernity, (2) the search for roots in response to change, (3) new immigration and suburban retrenchment, and (4) a longing for community catalyzed by increasing homelessness. I am less interested in explaining the resurgence of interest in community than in specifying the conceptual practices of community that articulate around power relations.

9. This section is written as a linear argument, yet it is important to note two additional characteristics of its overall organization. First, I am using a web-based format where the sites are conceptualized within an interconnected network of practices and social meanings, rather than arrayed along a continuum or within a hierarchy. The sites do not constitute a representative sample in the traditional

sense, but instead should be viewed as interconnected windows through which we might observe some common phenomenon; in this case, how community functions within power relations generally, and in the context of contemporary social inequalities in particular. Different windows would shift the perspective on what is seen and what we think we know. Second, I am using a genealogical method, one where parts of a story are hidden and others come to the surface (Foucault 1980). I present what is currently visible; alternative uses of community may also be important but, because they remain hidden-in-plain-sight—being too common, ordinary, or popular—remain unexamined. I use the term "mapping" to describe the landscape I can see here and now. The construct of community suggests the particularities of place, a grounded concept that offers a particular standpoint. I am making an epistemological choice to work against the standard "view from nowhere" of seeming objectivity (Collins 1998) and instead use a "situated imagination" that emerges from a situated standpoint (Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis 2002).

10. The field of urban studies has shown sustained interest in the concept and theory of community. Primary themes include the effects of urbanization on community, or communal solidarity through three primary frameworks: the "community lost" perspective, in which urbanization weakens communal solidarity; the "community saved" perspective, which claims that primary ties continue to flourish in urban settings; and the "community liberated" perspective, in which city dwellers are no longer restricted to their immediate kinship groups or neighborhoods and can form close relationships across an entire urban area (for a summary of these positions, see Wellman 1979). These three frameworks all rely on Tönnies's community/civil society binary (Tönnies 2001).

11. The debates that surround new communications technologies and the information society in general are immense and I make no effort to summarize them here. For discussions of how new technologies are changing social relations, especially the construct of virtual communities, see Wellman and colleagues (1996), Driskell and Lyon (2002), and Calhoun (1998). The shift to the information society makes imagined communities even more significant, in that new technologies make new sorts of mediated communities possible.

12. Sociology has a storied tradition of researching place-based community organizing, especially through ethnographies. Chicago is a prime example of the fusion of social identities of race, ethnicity, immigrant status, and class via the changing configuration of neighborhoods. Some of the more sophisticated approaches to community organizing, which drew on social identities of race, class, ethnicity, and immigrant status, can be tracked through the changing composition of Chicago neighborhoods and efforts by successive racial/ethnic groups to develop their neighborhoods and gain equitable access to city services. A copious literature examines community organizing in Chicago among a range of groups, most recently Puerto Ricans and Mexicans (Ramos-Zayas 2003).

13. Western paradigms tend to use linear frameworks and attach prefixes such as "pre" and "post" to a host of terms (e.g., post-modern, post-structuralism, and post-colonialism). By contrast, terms with the prefix "inter" address the growing tendency to conceptualize social relations generally, and the centrality of power within them, in relational fashion. Terms such as interdisciplinarity, international relations, and intersectionality illustrate this shift to relational thinking.

14. C. Wright Mills's concept of the sociological imagination speaks to using community in this capacity. Community can also serve as a powerful symbol for change through the use of imagination: "It permits deeply entrenched customary symbolic forms to be used in radically changed circumstances. It thereby manages change so that it limits the disruption of people's orientations to their community, and enables them to make sense of novel circumstances through the use of familiar idioms" (Cohen 1985:91–92). For a provocative discussion of the potential use of the concept of a situated imagination reminiscent of Mills, see Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis (2002).

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