

## Inclusion and Acknowledgement: Towards an Open Community

SHUYU XING

Graduate School of Education, Kyoto University

*In order to live a communal life in a society, we all necessarily need to form many kinds of identity, which at the same time means to be included in communities. However, in light of Lyotard's notion of narratives, we found that all communities that presume a shared identity, no matter whether based on shared origins or shared goals, are necessarily closed ones. Therefore, inclusion is the other side of separation, and the exclusion of others from the community has been causing misunderstanding or even violence in the society. Is it possible, then, for us to imagine an open community? Referring to the work of Leonard Lawlor and Sandra Laugier, we found that such a community can be based on the fact that we are all vulnerable and powerless, not only because our lives depend on others' care, but also because of the fact that we can never know our origins or goals that result in closed identities. Therefore, in order to build an open community, the first thing we need to do is to recognize and acknowledge ourselves' and each other's vulnerability, which have long been overlooked in our society.*

### INTRODUCTION

In this essay, I would like to discuss some important scenes in the films *This is England* and *Shoplifters*, mainly focusing on the former. In the light of the films, I would like to address the issue of inclusion and identity in a community. After discussing the necessary closed nature of communities, I would like to inquire about the possibility for an open community, and the politics we need if possible.

### INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION: FORMATION AND TRANSFORMATION OF IDENTITY IN A COMMUNITY

In order to live a communal life in a society, we all necessarily need to form many kinds of identity, from gender to ethnicity, religion and nationality. Attaining an identity means being included into a community, but meanwhile it also means being separated from people outside the community. That's because according to basic of logic, by saying that I'm an "A," at the same time I'm also saying that I'm not a "not-A." And in order to be identified as a member of a community, I must be born with or attain distinctive features of that community.

In the film *This is England*, a young boy, Shaun, meets a gang of "skinheads," whose leader is named Woody. Though he becomes friends with them, he also wants to be a real member of the gang. In order to attain the distinctive features of the community, he starts to speak curse words, wear jeans, Dr. Martens' boots and Ben Sherman's shirt, and most of all, he gets a skinhead haircut.

At this stage, though the gang of skinheads gives Shaun a sense of inclusion, it does not give

him any purpose. All they are doing is only fooling around and vandlising abandoned houses. Certainly, the identity of skinheads implies certain political meanings. They are teenagers from working class families, marginalized groups in depressed areas, being labeled as “the ugliness of society.” But for Shaun, they were more like friends. He probably did not quite realize the negative labels society put on them, because his mother did not show much firm resistance when her son identified himself as a skinhead.

However, the relationships inside a community can take many forms, and different relationships also determine different identities formed in the community and actions of individuals. Some relationships are relatively equal, such as classmates and school clubs, and in Woody’s skinhead gang; while some are rather hierarchical, like in armies and companies. In the former cases, individuals are more likely to be allowed to maintain their heterogeneity to a larger extent, while in the latter cases, members are more likely to be asked to maintain homogeneity to a greater extent, in order to serve a communal goal that dominates each member. Sometimes, the relationships inside a community can be changed for internal or external reasons. Such a transformation is possible because the nature of community is always opened to new interpretations.

The skinhead gang also goes through a transformation following the return of “Combo,” a former gang member who has been in jail. Combo transforms the gang from a group for fun into a community dominated by a nationalist ideology, that is, the exclusion of other ethnic groups from the country. He transforms the gang by telling the members a story about England’s history.

Combo’s story has the features of what Lyotard calls “small narrative.” First of all, the legitimacy of the narrator and listeners as legitimate members of the community must be guaranteed, therefore Combo asks Milky, a Jamaican boy whether he considers himself as a Jamaican or English. Only after Combo confirms that Milky considers himself as English, does he start the narrative, and the goal of which, in return, is precisely reconfirming the legitimacy of members. The narrative is about how “English people” fought other people that tried to invade England in the past 2000 years. The narrative is a panchronic one, because same story happened repeatedly in the past 2000 years and is happening now. The hero, “the English people,” can be a historical character, but also can be anyone listening to this story.

This narrative gives them a shared origin. Meanwhile, this claim of shared origin implies a shared goal, an goal that legitimizes their future action. The community is therefore changed by Combo, ex-members that do not like the story are excluded, the remaining ones, including Shaun, are connected and dominated by the nationalist ideology. To this end, they take actions in oppressing and bullying people from other ethnic groups; this finally ends in Combo’s violence towards Milky.

A community based on a nationalist narrative is necessarily a closed one because it requires a shared origin from its members. For people from other nations, it’s impossible to change their origin, therefore they can never be included in such a community. But on the other hand, for Lyotard, meta-narratives which give humans from different origins a shared goal are also unreliable, because the universality of meta-narratives is fictitious, there is always a hidden introduction of particularity in narrating the stories of universalism.

Therefore, as long as there exists no universal community, there is always a separation

between “we” who attain the identity and “they” who do not. No matter whether the identity is “English” or “skinheads,” it always requires homogeneity to some extent and the shared identity bonds members into a community. But as we see in this film and many real world examples, a closed community with certain “identity” may be in danger of being exclusive and even hostile towards others.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT AND CARE: TOWARDS AN OPEN COMMUNITY

Would it, then, be possible to imagine an open community? It seems paradoxical, because without an identity, what bonds the heterogeneous members into a community? For Leonard Lawlor, what bonds us in a non-totalitarian, open community is “powerlessness.” In Lawlor’s opinion, the problem with pre-modern small narratives and modern meta-narratives is that the shared origin or shared goal is fictitious and results in a closed community. Therefore, in order to build an open community, we should precisely start from recognizing our powerlessness in that by no means can we know our origin and goal. In Lawlor’s words, “Unable to find the answers to the questions of what happened and what will happen, being deaf and blind, this person or persons would hear and listen better. They would hear and see the others within themselves, allowing themselves becomes otherwise” (Lawlor, 2011, p. 711).

This powerlessness shows an aspect of our vulnerability. Because we are unable to know our origins or goals, our autonomy cannot originate from ourselves or from any closed community bound by closed identity. We only seem to have autonomy because of our dependence on others. But sadly, the interdependence in our society tends to be overlooked or neglected. As Sandra Laugier (2020) points out in her not yet published paper Lessons from COVID-19, the disaster has made us realize more about our dependence and vulnerability, and the importance of “care” that has been a blind spot in ethics before.

Therefore, we should start from recognizing and acknowledging the vulnerability in ourselves and others. Recognizing means that we know the vulnerability, not only in those who are exposed to higher risks, but also in every person because of our powerlessness in not knowing our origins and goals. But acknowledging is not merely recognizing. When recognizing it, the vulnerability of others makes a claim on us; we may answer to it, then it means that we acknowledge it, or we can let the vulnerability remain unanswered, in which case we do not acknowledge it, though we still recognize it.

In these films, we can also see some examples of acknowledgement. In fact, both stories start from acknowledgement. In *This is England*, when Shaun heads home after having a bad day at school, he meets Woody’s gang and Woody recognizes his frustration from his look and his troubled face. Shaun’s frustration makes a claim on Woody and he answers to it. Similarly, in *Shoplifters*, Osamu and Shota find Yuri playing alone. They acknowledge Yuri by answering to the claim of her loneliness. The acknowledgment does not happen merely by accident, because Shaun and Yuri have been making claims for a long time, and other people, like Shaun’s schoolmates and Yuri’s neighbors, have been indifferent to them. Therefore, the inclusion of Shaun into the skinhead gang and Yuri into the shoplifters’ family were not one-way relationships, but bi-directional claiming and answering.

In many cases, we are likely to remain indifferent to another’s vulnerability, especially when we think of the other as not one of us, or when we are occupied by our own goals. That is

because we do not recognize our own vulnerability. We rarely neglect our own vulnerability, because when it makes claims on us, it renders us powerless to pursue our goals. Therefore, inasmuch as we acknowledge our own vulnerability, we should acknowledge that of the other's, or to say, another self's vulnerability.

If we can build an open community based on our fundamental vulnerability, can we remain heterogeneous? When thinking about heterogeneity, we tend to think of different nationalities, different races, or different religions. But those are closed identities, which always involve inclusion and exclusion. Heterogeneity does not mean a diversity in members' Facebook profiles, because a claim of exclusion is already made by identifying oneself as represented in the profile. However, real heterogeneity means an identity that is never complete. Because of our fundamental powerlessness and vulnerability, we necessarily depend on others and therefore are open to become others. In such a community, we keep writing our names through our interdependence with others. In Lawlor's words, "We must continue to write more: never will there be enough written in the name of passage" (Lawlor, 2011, p. 712).

It would be extremely difficult for such a community to exist in modern society, but it does not mean that there is nothing we can do with the politics now. As Laugier suggests, "the ethics of care calls our attention to phenomena commonly unseen, but that stand right before our eyes." Our vulnerability, our dependence on others, our being taken care of by others, are happening at every moment in our daily lives. But politics by far has viewed what makes our lives possible as of least value and most despised. However, a crisis like COVID-19 has made us realize the importance of caring and caregivers. Therefore, the first step towards an open community would be letting caregivers have their voice in public conversations.

## CONCLUSION

After examining the nature of communities in light of Lyotard's notion of narratives, we found that all communities that presume a shared identity, no matter whether based on shared origins or shared goals, are necessarily closed ones. Is it possible, then, for us to imagine an open community? Referring to the work of Leonard Lawlor (2011) and Sandra Laugier (2020), we found that such a community can be based on the fact that we are all vulnerable and powerless, because we can never know our origins and goals, also because our biological and social lives have to depend on others'.

We can conclude that, in an open community, we must recognize and acknowledge ourselves' and each other's vulnerability. However, in today's modern society, the very fact that we all depend on others to live an ordinary life has been overlooked, and the importance of caregivers has been unseen and unvalued, which has rendered it difficult for us to build an open community. Therefore, the very first step we can take in politics would be calling for a change so that caregivers can have their voices heard.

## REFERENCES

- Koreeda, H. (dir.), Ando, S., Franky, L. (Perf.) (2018) *Shoplifters* [*Manbiki Kazoku*] [DVD] (Fuji Television, Aoi Pro, Inc.)
- Laugier, S. (2020) Lessons from COVID-19, presented at the virtual event, University College London,

Institute of Education, November 11, 2020.

Lawlor, L. (2011) The Postmodern Self: An Essay on Anachronism and Powerlessness, in: *The Oxford Handbook of the Self*, Gallagher, S. (ed.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 694-712.

Meadows, S. (dir.), Turgoose, T., Graham, S. (Perf.) (2006) *This is England* [DVD] (Warp Films, FilmFour Productions).