

Mapping Frictions

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If we stare at a satellite photo of our planet it seems like a smooth place. While mountain ranges, rivers, cities and other human-made structures may be visible, each of these features seem to flawlessly blend into each other. As we know, however, the closer you are to the earth's surface, the more details we see, this illusion quickly disappears.

Despite the tensions that exist, many describe the world as something smooth. In *The World is Flat* for example, *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman praises the processes of globalisation, seeing the power of globalisation as removing boundaries and allowing a smoothing of the world that affects countries, companies, communities, and individuals.¹ Driven by technology, cultural exchanges and international trade, the world is flattened and many of us get to move freely around.

Paradoxically, those who raise concerns about globalisation also describe the world as becoming a smooth space. Influential cultural theorists Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri² examine parallel changes in the world's financial system: whereas commercial trade used to be linked to the physical element of gold, it is now based on virtual transactions where numbers are simply transferred from one bank account to another. The value of the transaction sits nowhere and everywhere, as it moves smoothly across national boundaries that once attempted to control such movements.

With its artful ring, we find the word *smooth* being used to describe a desired state: the smooth transition from a mining economy to post-mining economy; the smooth functioning of the transport system; or the smooth transfer of power from one government to another.

The concept of smooth can also be allied to our understanding of how communities function: smooth and harmonious is the goal after all. But how do communities really function? Can we recognise the smooth interactions in the absence of friction? Or should communities recognise, embrace and accommodate processes that are smooth *and* those filled with friction—not just to survive but to flourish? These questions have baffled theorists for centuries.

Communities are normally understood to form and grow and function around people who have something in common. We are drawn to those with whom we share forms of recognition, and are naturally drawn to, and build community with, 'people like us'.

¹ Friedman, T. (2005). *The world as flat*, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.

² Hardt, M., & Negri, A. (2001). *Empire*, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

This idea has a long tradition in western thought, crystallising in the post-enlightenment age with the work of 18th century philosopher Georg W.F. Hegel. Contemporary theorists echo Hegel when accepting that the formation and functioning of a community eventuates from a shared identity and social formations. This is a smooth process, founded on mutual beliefs, understandings and practices.³ People who are different do not live together—conflict is inevitable.

Yet do we only form communities with those that we recognise as ‘people like us’?

In reality, this is a very dark view of humanity, because ‘being like us’ can be taken to any extreme. Communities may decide that ‘being like us’ relies on speaking the same language or following the same religion, sharing the same culture or strictly identifying only one form of sexuality—heterosexual. A community may even understand recognition of commonality to mean particular skin colours or having the same shaped eyes. Forming communities around such commonalities is about the power to exclude—to disallow belonging to those we do not like or with whom we disagree. Further, what defines ‘like us’ is necessarily in a state of constant flux. ‘Us’ might be defined in dynamic and flexible ways, or, as most devastatingly demonstrated by writer George Orwell, be slippery and unreliable. Either way, it can change from hour to hour or day to day, and is required to change across larger timeframes.

If the recognition-based community can be seen to harbour the rather sinister implications of exclusion and oppression, what is the alternative view?

One contemporary way of understanding the way we form communities is presented by philosophers Rosalyn Diprose and Jeremy Brent, who focus on the ideas of ‘alterity’ (or difference) and ‘desire’.⁴ Here, we understand formation of communities as based not simply on those we recognise, but also around a human desire: we are drawn to those who embody intrinsic differences from ourselves. That is, people come together to form communities not by some natural process, but through a sense of desire.

In essence, this approach tells us something we can all recognise in ourselves: we do some things because we want to. We form communities with others because we want to. It is our shared sense of humanity that drives this, not any particular or dominant element of our lives such as religion, skin colour or interests. In this community, alterity—or difference—is appreciated and celebrated.

³ Taylor, C. (1994). The politics of recognition. In A. Gutmann (Ed.) *Multiculturalism: examining the politics of recognition* (pp. 25-74). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

⁴ Arvanitakis, J. (2008). Staging Maralinga and looking for community (or why we must desire community before we can find it). *Research in Drama Education*, 13(3), 295-306.

What is important here is that this is not seen as a smooth process. It celebrates and accommodates friction.⁵ Human frictions have always existed where communities of people from multiple and diverse backgrounds come together—whether that diversity is genetic or cultural, lingual or religious. And suburbs such as Bankstown are no different when it comes to the harmonious potential of like-formed communities all over the world. Frictions emerge when elements come together: sometimes with hard impact, other times with a gentle touch.

As with the recognition model of community, frictions can have a disturbing side, whether internally or spilling beyond the geographical location of community members and their home base. Among the most famous of these in Sydney were the racial frictions that manifested in what is now known as the 'Cronulla Riots'. In 2005, tensions and small-scale conflicts that had built up over a longer period erupted into attacks and counter-attacks that lasted for several weeks. Much like 'Cronulla riots' became shorthand, in the media and at the water cooler, for racial tensions, the protagonists attracted their own labels: 'Lebs' from Bankstown and 'Surfies' from 'The Shire' (Sutherland Local Government Area). The violence was caused by difference, so the dominant narrative went, fitting neatly into the 'clash of civilisations' thesis and 'with us or against us' rhetoric that was deployed to justify the 'war on terror',⁶ and still very much a live issue in the news at the time. Yet, at least as far back as the 1960s, there were frictions and violence between the 'Bankis' (from Bankstown) and surfies from Cronulla. Tensions emerged because of different expectations of 'beach etiquette' between outsiders and insiders: these frictions were not purely about race-fuelled aggression, but about claims of space and identity and, crucially, location.⁷ Few major Sydney beaches have a train station, and Cronulla is the most directly accessible from Bankstown by train.

The 'friction of identity' was used to simplify the issues and obfuscate the vibrant, complex heterogeneous nature of communities across Bankstown and its wider 'host community' of Greater Western Sydney. That such simplification also served specific political interests around foreign policy objectives is as likely to be a cause as a coincidence. Western Sydney was again characterised as a homogenous mass during the 2013 federal election. On the campaign trail, politicians routinely ignored the diversity and many community celebrations of difference and talked about 'the west' as a single region, while invoking fear of gang violence in the tried and tested 'law and order' scrabble to win votes.

⁵ Lowenhaupt Tsing, A. (2005). *An ethnography of global connection*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

⁶ Poynting, S. (2006). What caused the Cronulla riot?. *Race & Class*, 48(1),85-92.

⁷ Moore, K. (2006). 'The beach, young Australians and the challenge to egalitarianism in the 1960s'. In C. Hopkinson. and C. Hall (eds.), *Proceedings social change in the 21st century 2006* (pp. 1-7).Australia, Queensland, Brisbane.

Yet Bankstown is one of many central hubs across the west where vitality and growth are spurred by frictions of identity, frictions that inspire rich cultural exchanges across and between hubs and their surrounding suburbs. This can emerge in grand projects devised with a state-backed sponsorship and policy agenda, but, importantly, are embodied in what Wise and Velayutham describe as ‘everyday multiculturalisms’.⁸ These seemingly small but cumulative encounters might be swapping biscuits over the back fence, to warm introductions at the local shopping centre, from informal space-sharing at public parks to organised celebrations (or commiserations) among the families of local sporting team members. Larger projects might set the same goals as everyday multiculturalisms are quietly achieving. This is not to say the formal or state-sponsored structures of multicultural policy are redundant, as interactions such as ‘One Parramatta’⁹ or the ‘Anti-Racism Research Project’ based at the University of Western Sydney demonstrate.¹⁰

The many facets of formal and informal efforts must operate together, forging and strengthening networks of exchange wherever human interactions occur, and likewise fading where disused or redundant. In this model, frictional energy is disseminated across the scales of social organisation, from neighbour to community and beyond the urban region of ‘Bankstown’, ‘the Shire’ or ‘Western Sydney’.

Friction is traditionally conceptualised as lost kinetic energy: our speed or efficiency is lowered through the heat that is generated by moving parts, or the tensions arising from human movement across and between communities. Such tensions should be acknowledged, and responded to in the many diverse ways we know are available from our understanding of mutuality, exchange, and everyday multiculturalism. We need only imagine what a dull and dreary people-scape a homogenous community would be to advocate, in any of our personal or civic roles, for the shared responsibility *and* the shared joy of celebrating diversity.

Friction give rises to fire, and fire can warm us and feed us—or destroy everything in sight. How the heat is harnessed is something we must continue to strive to steer towards the common good.

⁸ Wise, A., & Velayutham, S. (2009). *Everyday multiculturalism*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

⁹ See <http://oneparramatta.com>

¹⁰ See http://www.uws.edu.au/ssap/school_of_social_sciences_and_psychology/research/challenging_racism