

# Anthropology, Philosophy and a Little Aboriginal Community on the Edge of the Desert



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## Certificate of Authorship/Originality

I certify that the work in this thesis has not been previously submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in the research work and preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

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## Abstract

This thesis explores a rethinking of community, one without identity. This thinking became possible and necessary because I lived in a little Aboriginal community in south central Western Australia, called Ululla.

The Jackman family have made Ululla *a* home (a home among others, this changes over time), not as a kind of ideal place that would stabilise and centre an identity, but as a place one leaves and returns to, where family gathers and stays for awhile – a number of years or a few months – depending on other forces going on in the region and with kin. What I gained a sense of, was that the claim of another – their work – forces one's sense of responsibility outward, towards other gatherings across time and space; an extension that does not rest, stay put, *but that moves*. Extensive relatedness puts a community in motion, forces a thought of community without notions of bounded identity. A community at 'loose ends' perhaps, where differences, discontinuities and multiplicity do not become One (Miami Theory Collective 1991).

Anthropologists have noted that what Aboriginal people emphasise is regional relatedness and extensive social ties rather than exclusive or restricted groupings (Myers 1986). There is no centring as such, rather relations are pivotal, turning one towards another without rest. As a result, and drawing broadly from Jean-Luc Nancy's work on community, I think of community as movement and imperative – an outward extension – rather than a retreat or consolidation – an inward concentration. Here, community is not to be controlled or managed or unified (centred, bound-as-one ) but something to go with, to feel happening as an imperative or inclination; a kind of event where one gets ready to respond to the call of others from elsewhere. Following Nancy, I think of community as something that is happening – an event, a call, an inclination – rather than an object of description (Nancy 1990).

My thesis draws upon a critique of anthropology and a use of Nancy's philosophy (Levinas and Lyotard are also important at times) to say something about Ululla. The problem with anthropology, as I argue here, is that it works to secure the identity of a people through uncovering an underlying unity that is supposed to order and sustain the group (Norris 2000); the anthropologist works to centre an identity in order to speak of the group itself. I imagine a different possibility here, one that would reflect Aboriginal social practices of community.

The thesis is structured in a non-linear way and is organised around 'gatherings' 'breakaways' 'articulations' and 'spacings/rhythms'. This organisation means that the form and shape of the community, it's rhythm if you like, is reflected in the structure of writing itself. Events happen, one is taken away, breakaways and gatherings take place across space.

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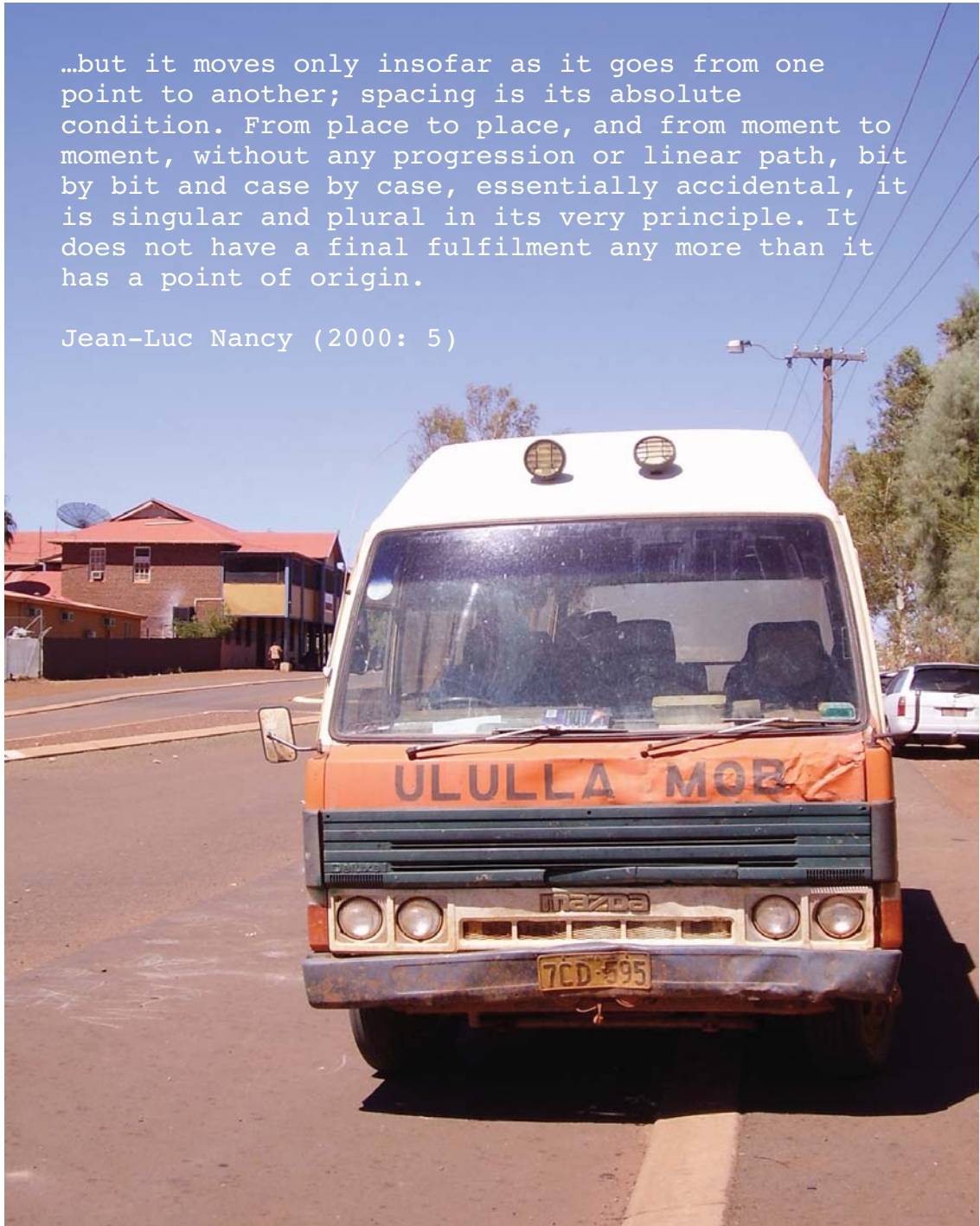
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...but it moves only insofar as it goes from one point to another; spacing is its absolute condition. From place to place, and from moment to moment, without any progression or linear path, bit by bit and case by case, essentially accidental, it is singular and plural in its very principle. It does not have a final fulfilment any more than it has a point of origin.

Jean-Luc Nancy (2000: 5)





## Foreword: beginnings and ends

This thesis is not a discussion of community but an argument towards a particular conception of community. There is no surveying of the literature on community here. What I consider is a conception of community developed by the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy that bears a strange and strong resemblance to the notions of ‘community’ I was exposed to in Ululla, a little Aboriginal community in south central Western Australia. We could easily reverse this and say that it was being at Ululla, being exposed to the specific forces and rhythms of the relations experienced there, that made way for Nancy’s thoughts: a specific experience of community forced the sense of another thought of community into view. These two forces intertwine here and I use them to say something about anthropology, Ululla and philosophy. Each ‘part’ (anthropology, philosophy, Ululla) – could it be called a phrasing, or a spacing, a unique turning to the world? – says something in relation to, and about, the others. I move between them as a way to create and sustain openings. I try to force another way to think of ‘community’ in the process.

I initially lived in Ululla (a small community of less than 20 people, basically one family group – the Jackmans, 70km out of Wiluna) for 18 months in 2002-03. Whilst there I was not working in a research role, and I fitted in wherever I was useful: driver, ‘School of the Air’ home tutor, station worker, bureaucrat, Centerlink negotiator, tea maker, bread baker, car tow driver, shop keeper, seed picker. I later returned to Melbourne to begin a badly thought out thesis at Monash University. After the ensuing crisis – that comes from things that are poorly thought out – I left Monash, had time off, re-thought the project, and was saved from thesis oblivion by Stephen Muecke and UTS’s Transforming Cultures Centre. The fact that I was initially not in a research role at Ululla has created various insights and problems along the way. Firstly, not being in a research role and having no research focus meant that I was able to let things happen. A sense of the place unfolded slowly. In a careful way I could say that I was ‘freed’ – at least in writing – from the

pressure to develop explanation and meaning. Tentatively, I could say that perhaps something else becomes possible when you let things happen and withhold determinations; and I definitely explore that idea at points in this thesis (especially in the ‘event gathering’). But of course I was always thinking. I quote from a letter I sent to a friend early on:

It has been a soul-enlivening experience being intimately and intrinsically tied to the mood of a place, your emotional energy dependent on the vibe, on the infinite contact between bodies and place, your disposition and sensibility buoyant on its themes. This of course can be good and bad, but always goes to show the dependency one has on the community and on place.

And this idea of how we respond to the force and sense of community resonates strongly in this thesis. Here, the question is not so much *what community means*, but *what does the experience of community make possible*, what does it force one to see? What disposition happens in community; what kind of buoyancy is there? How does the work of others force another sense of the world into view?

However, not initially being in a research role has created its own set of ‘problems’. I began writing at Monash without ‘field notes’ and without points of research focus at Ululla. This quickly created a rather confused mess and as a result a kind of hyper-deconstructive focus on the impossibility of representation. It was by returning to Ululla in 2005, 2007 (for six week research trips) and numerous times in 2008 (I moved, with my young family, to Geraldton – the closest regional town), that made it possible to respond productively to the things that were going on at Ululla and with the Ululla mob. The change in my relationship from initially just ‘being there’ to being there as a researcher has created new sets of negotiations, responsibilities and obligations that have deepened relationships.

In hindsight it seems so obvious that the community has a force that makes you see its imperatives, sometimes you have to stay with the things that happen.



It is at this point, that I would like to thank people at Ululla for their work, patience and openness to my questions. I would especially like to thank Sheila, Sadie, Rita, Molly, Gail and GB, Don and Helen (thanks for the photos), as well as Gidgee, Joanne, DJ, Stumpy, Kupsie, DD, and Sniper. You made Ululla a great place to live, you made things happen, there and elsewhere; you gave me a sense of a life and community power that enveloped us and impelled us onwards towards others, a community in motion that extends without limit. I would also like to thank Stephen Muecke for his guidance and inspiration throughout this process. He has the confidence to let others find their feet in their own way, he has helped me, crucially at times, to do this, and the work here is reflective of this, big thanks.

My supervisors at Monash, Liz Reed and Stephen Pritchard, provided keen insights in the early development of this thesis. Lynette Russell was particularly helpful when things fell apart.

Mark Galliford, fellow thesis traveller, deserves special mention for his proof reading and suggestions on the final draft of the thesis. I first met Mark when he rolled up unannounced at Ululla one day in his Datsun 120Y station wagon. We not only shared a deep respect for the Datsun 120Y (my first car), but for Deleuze and philosophy as well. We sat under a tree and talked about the aforementioned; strange connections moving across the ground. I would also like to thank Barbara Brooks for her comments on a section of this thesis, and Steve Tan for design and layout work.

And lastly, I would like to thank Cath and Dusty. Nancy writes that, 'When the infant appears, it has already compeared<sup>1</sup>. It does not complete the love, it shares it again, making it pass again into communication and exposing it again to community' (1991: 40). Dusty is not the end result of love and commitment to each other but

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<sup>1</sup> Nancy's uses the neologism *com-parait* (Nancy 1991: 28-29), to draw attention to co-appearance, that is, that we emerge coextensively with others. As will become clear, he wants to avoid a sense of 'comparison', as this places emphasis on the similarity or the likeness between things. *Com-parait* is translated into an obsolete English equivalence of 'compearance': literally an appearing together, but also the sense of appearing before 'the law' (of community). *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (Fifth edition), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002. All subsequent references will be cited in text as (SOED).

the presence that shows that we can never be done with love. We can never love enough, and that this, as strange as it sounds, is what is good enough about love: its truth is that we cannot ‘attain’ it nor can we ‘free ourselves from it’ (Nancy 1991: 90). But it happens, it takes place, it is going on: we are kept afloat by this going towards another without completion. Cath and I come home, put Dusty to bed, get out photo albums and look at pictures of her and wonder how this can be. This being said, each of you have only known me with thesis in tow, you have as a result seen the best and worst of me over the years in a way that only a thesis can do. So, with this in mind (and with the hope that I have done enough to satisfy this other love, for now, at least) I look forward to the future that extends and will at times trouble, but for the most part will excite and give multiple points of articulation and sharing anew.

#### A note on structure

Firstly, I use two different methods for indicating direct quotations. Quotations that are verbatim (recorded at the time) are indicated conventionally with quotation marks. My recollection of conversations (written down after the event) are noted in *italics* without quotation marks.

Secondly, In order to say something we must have a workable structure, and this is why I have chosen not to organise what follows into the common structure of chapters/sections/ conclusions. The conventional thesis structure gave far too much sense of a linear progression. I feel that life with others is never like that. The conventional structure did not reflect what I was trying to do. As Serres says: ‘You have to invent a localised method for a localised problem’ (1995: 92). What there is instead are ‘**gatherings**’<sup>2</sup> (like sections) that contain ‘**spacings/rhythms**’ (chapters) and ‘**breakaways**’ (just to make sure you get the point that there are no conclusions here!). Between the ‘gatherings’ we have ‘**articulations**’.

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<sup>2</sup> These are not gatherings of unity and stability, but rather gatherings that happen, that persist for a time, and then get taken off by something else. A kind of moment when forces (conceptual forces, the force of events, for example) come together and can be articulated but only insofar as this gets us somewhere else, moves us towards another ecstatic gathering.

‘Articulations’ work as meeting points/points of difference between the gatherings – kind of ‘lines of flight’ that join/differentiate the ‘node’ like structure of the gatherings, to borrow from Deleuze. If you were to draw three circles on a page and draw dotted lines connecting each circle to the others then this would be a picture of ‘gathering’ (circles) and ‘articulations’ (faint interrupted dotted lines). The ‘spacings/rhythms’ would show that the circles are made up only of parts; always of parts that move on, and with, the others. The ‘breakaways’ would be moments of rupture or diffusion when another relation would come along, interrupt, transform and move things off again, giving another sense of things; like a permeable cell wall that ruptures on contact with something other.

What you may have on the page in front of you could well be a mess. But I cling to the thought that the risk that any writer takes can also be a productive and worthwhile one, especially if we try and do something other than the conventional. Being exposed to others, to their work and force, extends us, as if beyond ourselves towards other gathering sites of intensity, to take this as the work. To try and write this.

Portions of some of the work in this thesis have been published. An earlier version of the first ‘articulation’ appeared as ‘So let’s now get back there to this present’, *Cultural Studies Review*, 11(2): 171-178, 2005. Parts of the ‘ethics gathering’ appeared in ‘Representation, photography and the performativity of the pose’, *New Talents 21C*, 7: 119-128, 2007. A combination of ‘spacing/rhythm’ one and two, entitled ‘Anthropology, a science of the non-event?’, has been accepted by *Cultural Studies Review* (forthcoming).

