The Politics of Community in Contemporary British Fiction

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Acknowledgements

Abstract

This thesis draws on the work of philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy to propose 'community' as a conceptual and hermeneutical figure that opens up productive possibilities in the study of contemporary British literature. Community is advanced as a form of political ontology, which moves beyond contingent appearance toward radical possibilities for transformation in the current political landscape. Particular attention is paid to the way in which community is 'put to work' as part of the operation of the capitalist state, where community emerges as a central site of political contestation. Community is demonstrated as offering ways of rethinking the figure of 'politics' itself, opening avenues for developing its meaning through emergent theories of 'gender', the 'queer' and 'trans'.

Community is addressed in the space of literature and representation, where Nancy's figure of 'myth interrupted' is presented as an important dimension of communitarian thought. Through interrogating the representability of community, its mythic foundations are subjected to a process of radical openness that allows for a vibrant and dynamic form of community to emerge. Situating these capacities in the works of authors Jackie Kay, Jon McGregor and Ali Smith, literature is presented as a singular space through which communitarian possibility can be glimpsed. The conceptual figures of 'death', 'gender transformation' and 'magic' are proposed as offering new possibilities in our understanding of community, demonstrating how literature can offer productive and innovative ways of reimagining our understanding of community in the contemporary moment. In this way, this thesis contributes to ongoing debates about the significance of 'community' in contemporary thought, drawing on literature to propose the 'politics of community' as a productive avenue for addressing this.

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'The political domain that remains for us is the domain of the possible'[1]
(Georges Bataille, letter to Dionys Mascolo 1958)

'There is no such thing as society'[2]
(Margaret Thatcher, 'Interview for Woman's Own')

Why Community?

Shortly after winning a landslide electoral victory leading to her third term as UK Prime Minister in September 1987, Margaret Thatcher gave an interview with the magazine *Woman's Own* in which she offered a broad and frank summation of her political vision and her plans for the future. Of all she said in the interview, however, one statement would gain widespread notoriety, becoming emblematic of perhaps her entire career. Responding to the hypothetical claim 'I am homeless, the Government must house me!', she argued there is no structure, be it government, society or community, that has a responsibility to do this. In fact, she pronounced that 'There is no such thing as society', only 'individual men and women' as well as 'families' which should be seen as:

> [a] living tapestry of men and women and people and the beauty of that tapestry and the quality of our lives will depend upon how much each of us is prepared to take responsibility for ourselves and each of us prepared to turn round and help by our own efforts those who are unfortunate. [3]

What is striking about Thatcher's claim is both its banality and its expansive destructiveness. At first glance, we might find little to contest in her vision of a 'living tapestry', which in its 'beauty' can reasonably be read as an affirmation of what is traditionally termed 'society'. What else, after all, could this tapestry be other than a *social* fabric, how else can one account for the inherent relationality of a life lived together? It is nonetheless precisely this evocation which is the basis of the seemingly contradictory claim that society does not exist, and we are therefore faced with a very particular kind of refutation and negativity. We should read this apparent inconsistency not simply as misstating or exaggerating her claim, but rather as expressing a very particular *dual* logic. Thatcher's denial of society must be understood in the context of the material denigration which she

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[1] Georges Bataille, cited in Patrick Ffrench, *After Bataille: Sacrifice, Exposure, Community* (London: Routledge, 2017).
[2] Margaret Thatcher, 'Interview for Woman's Own' (September 23, 1987) Margaret Thatcher Foundation http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106689 [accessed 23 August 2017].
[3] Ibid.

was inflicting on *certain* aspects of society, be they unions, social housing, manufacturing jobs, or the unemployed, but also as an embodiment of the radical political ideology that underpinned and justified these decisions, which not only negated aspects of social and communal life, but also reconfigured them as *part* of this very political ideology and vision.

In her image of a homeless person demanding a social right to housing, the effect of Thatcher's pronouncement is to absolutely deny the possibility that society might be either the *cause,* or the *solution* to phenomena such as poverty, homelessness or other social 'problems'. It ceases to be a political actor at all, and it is precisely in its agentic capacity to assert either right, freedom, or political demand, that Thatcher negates society and human community. We see this logic in the order in which Thatcher invokes our relation to the tapestry; its 'quality' and 'beauty' depends in the first instance only on '*ourselves',* and the extent to which we are 'prepared to take responsibility', where the latter can have no communal or relational foundation. If we are an 'us', we are nonetheless responsible as 'each of us', where 'each' does the work of ordering us as foundationally discrete, separate, and individual. Our care for others comes only if we choose 'to turn around', to move from 'ourselves', so as to 'help' those who are 'unfortunate'. Stripped of their social and structural determinations, poverty, homelessness, and inequality are a matter of mere 'fortune', something we can choose as 'private citizens' to address or to ignore. The individual thus emerges as a totalizing form, *individualizing* all social phenomena, which are neither *caused* nor *addressed* by society. Indivisible and foundational, the individual therefore becomes the only recourse of the ethical and the political.

What is negated is therefore not simply the idea of 'society' in all its various meanings, but a more specific reference to 'civil society.' This term has gained traction in political thought through the work of Hegel and Marx, but can be traced back to what Aristotle terms '*Koinonia politike'* (translatable as 'political community').[4] For Aristotle, people are 'political animals' and must therefore comprehend their sociality not only through the laws, norms and traditions governing society, but also at the level of their very being. In this way, the notion of civil society must be seen as a *particular* instantiation of a *general* and irreducible bond between individuals, which is the 'natural reality', and the ultimate foundation of any given juridico-political regime.[5] For Hegel 'civil society' plays a function which is constitutively distinct and separate from the political sphere. It is the scene of contradictory forces, both those expressing the hegemony of an economic order, and

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[4] Phillipe Raynaud's 'Civil Society' in *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon* ed. Barbara Cassin, trans. Steven Rendall et al. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), p.146.
[5] Ibid., p.137.

forces which resist this process.[6] This is analogous to what Marx in his early writings refers to as society's 'base', the basic relations of production and social reproduction that determine political society, which in certain circumstance can 'come into conflict with the existing relations of production' leading to a disputation of the fundamental ordering of a political system. [7]

It would therefore be this *civil* sense of society which becomes impossible in the Thatcherite ideology, where politics is founded only through the structure of the solipsistic individual, or through the construal of a technocratic state designed primarily to aid the free movement of capital. Any sense of a collective force through which the will of citizens could be expressed outside of the heavily regulated mode of representational democracy is denied, and in this way Thatcher's negation (and reconfiguration of) society must be viewed primarily as the refusal of any constitutive foundation of civic and political right which could have any degree of autonomy from the neoliberal state apparatus. In contemporary capitalism Jean-Luc Nancy claims that 'society' has become an 'impoverished word' 'emptied of all 'sociation' and 'association,' not to mention emptied of the 'communities' and 'fraternities' which it invokes.[8] As such, Thatcher's refutation of civil society works specifically to deny the importance of *community* as a repository of wills and desires which are not reducible to the work of the state. Human 'association' is stripped of its political and ethical power, no longer invoking responsibility for the 'other' or denoting empathy and solidarity, rather reduced to logic of individualism and competition.

In this way, we may recast Thatcher's statement in a more precise formulation, addressing the deliberately ambiguous use of the term 'society' to expose the more specific meaning of her negation; *there is no political community.* Community, insofar as it exists, has no inherent political meaning, value or agency. Community must simply be an extension of the private realm of the individual, who alone is the foundation of freedom, decision and responsibility. But why, if her argument is simply about the constitution of the realm of the 'political', does Thatcher choose to deploy her argument not of specifically *political* society, but of this form *in toto?* We can understand the immense impact and contentiousness of her statement precisely through its quasi-*ontological* dimension. By denying society *as such* her claim works to expand beyond the usual confines of the political to a far more generic claim about the existential status of the citizen, whose modes of

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[6] Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right,* trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991)*,* § 181.
[7] Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977), pp.20-21.
[8] Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural* trans. Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O'Byrne (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), p.49.

sociality, relationality and affinity are negated at a foundational level, tacitly postulating its very *being* as a priori individual, self-contained, and static.

This quasi-ontological dimension of Thatcherism may be further explored through political commentaries which have characterized the post-Thatcher political landscape through the paradigm of neoliberalism, specifically the way that social and economic reforms have induced substantial transformations in modes of subjectivation in the general population. Thatcher, along with Ronald Reagan in the United States of America, drew heavily on the radical ideas of neoliberal economists such as Milton Friedland and Fredrich Hayek, implementing a programme of far-reaching economic, social and political reforms which can be effectively understood as a reimagination of the role of sociality in relation to capitalist and democratic structures. Indeed, Thatcher would later in her life make this intellectual debt explicit in her sole political work *Statecraft* (2017)*,* where she draws on Hayek's characterization of 'social' as a 'weasel word', sullied by its association to Socialism and Communism,[9] in order to oppose any politics of 'social justice' in favour of an ethics of individual 'freedom' and responsibility.[10]

Neoliberalism cannot, therefore, be adequately analysed simply as a mode of capitalist development, marking major reforms in the conditions of labour and the wider economic and political sphere. Rather, its effects can be traced beyond the traditional formal confines of the political and the economic, affecting the wider social life of a state. In fact, we may locate the specificity of neoliberalism precisely in the way that it weakens the formal divides between the economic, the political and the social, where all aspects of life are increasingly subsumed to an overriding economic principle. In this way the intervention of neoliberalism runs very deep; it creates techniques of power, or what Foucault terms forms of 'biopower' which interpose a form of political control onto the 'body' and 'life' of its subjects.[11] For Fredric Jameson, central to this emergent form of power is a certain ontological claim in which neoliberal ideologies, practices and subjectivities are seen to express the condition of life as such, where '[t]he market is' is to be found 'in human nature'[12], an instantiation of what Adam Smith had previously termed, *homo economicus,*

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[9]   Friedrich Hayek, *The Fatal Conceit: The Errors of Socialism* ed. W.W. Bartley (London: Routledge, 1988), p.14.
[10] Margaret Thatcher, *Statecraft: Strategies for a Changing World* (London: William Collins, 2017), p.432.
[11] Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-79* trans. Graham Burchell (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p.148.
[12] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism; Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), p.263.

where economic impulses to 'barter, truck and exchange' were taken as the basic assumed condition of human society.[13]

If classical liberal economists had claimed a certain anthological principle of 'exchange' in the human animal, however, neoliberalism can be seen to enact a transformation in this understanding, whereby the basic mode of interaction would move from 'exchange 'to 'competition', not simply as a principle of the relationship between economic actors in the free market, but rather, precisely as a more fundamental claim to the general disposition of the human. For Jason Read, neoliberalism therefore 'entails a massive expansion of the field and scope of economics' generating a drastic reconfiguration of the 'way in which human beings make themselves and are made subjects', according to an insurgent logic of a foundationally competitive and agonistic mode of interaction.[14] In this way, the neoliberalism effects a radical project of subjective transformation according to an economic principle that seeks to cast the very condition of sociality in its own image, promoting forms of competition, individualization and instrumentalized relationalities as intrinsic to being as such.

For Jeremy Gilbert, the consequences of this subjective transformation may be located primarily in the civic life of the state, most notably in its very conception of sociality and community. The heterogeneous sets of political and economic practices which make up neoliberalism coalesce in the shared goal of 'encourag[ing] particular types of entrepreneurial, competitive and commercial behaviour in its citizens,[...] cultivating [...] individualistic, competitive, acquisitive and entrepreneurial behaviour'.[15] In this way, although neoliberalism may be viewed historically as an exercise in economic thinking and reform, its effects may be seen in terms of a general 'neoliberal culture', consisting in 'an aggregation of ideas, a discursive formation, an over-arching ideology, a governmental programme, the manifestation of a set of interests, a hegemonic project, an assemblage of techniques and technologies'.[16] Gilbert's insistence on the far-reaching cultural dimensions of neoliberalism point to a radical change in the constitution of society, which may be traced through shifts in modes of cultural, artistic and literary production, which increasingly become sites of the expression and contestation of such ideological transformations.

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[13] Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), p.93.

[14] Jason Read, 'A Genealogy of Homo-Economicus: Neoliberalism and the Production of Subjectivity' *Foucault Studies* 1.6 (2009), p.28.

[15] Jeremy Gilbert, 'What Kind of Thing is Neoliberalism' in *Neoliberal Culture* ed. Jeremy Gilbert (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2013), p.9.

[16] Ibid., p.6.

In this way, we can address Thatcher's strident existential denial of society through the lens of these quasi-ontological, cultural and political shifts, understanding the neoliberal project as the general production of neoliberal subjectivation and social being, which 'configures all aspects of existence.[17] In this incarnation of capitalism, we are not told only what to do, that is, what our productive value and work is, but we are told who we are, and what we are not. There is no such thing as you, if you do not conform to the structure of the subject and the individual. There is no society, if this term denotes anything but a general aggregation of human individuals, whose relation to society is nothing but a secondary and apolitical supplement to their role as neoliberal subjects. For Stuart Hall, the Thatcherite neoliberal project conceived this societal shift precisely as its major 'success' locating the wide-scale 'dismantling of any collective social responsibility' as the most potent and enduring legacy of Thatcherism, which far from retreating after her premiership, has arguably continued and even intensified in subsequent governments.[18]

Thatcher's revelatory denial of society has therefore taken on such an emblematic and infamous valence in contemporary political discourse precisely due to the way in which it exceeds the confines of its initial frame and context. The statement resonates through its pre-emptive and predictive power to describe not only her contemporaneous political situation and the ideology which she was promoting, but almost the whole trajectory of mainstream political thought as it is has developed since that time in UK politics.[19] In its polemical but nonetheless prescient character we can trace the development of the neoliberal mechanisms which she so effectively instantiated as the status quo functionality of the British state. Neoliberalism develops precisely through the large-scale retreat of society and community as political modalities and the decreasing capacity of the citizens (and noncitizens) to form collective, communal, and cooperative modalities which can exert any form of significant political power. In this way, the history and contemporary predominance of neoliberalism indicate the enduring relevance of community as a component of political thinking, where it serves a crucial zone of contention between neoliberalism's proponents and detractors.

In this way Thatcher heralds a process of individualization and alienation which more and more characterizes political and social life. But this cannot simply be seen as the destruction of community *tout court.* As we have seen, Thatcher's statement does not in fact serve to negate society as such. It

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[17] Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015), p.17.
[18] Stuart Hall and Alan O'Shea, 'Common-sense Neoliberalism' in *Soundings* 55.55 (2013), p.19.
[19] For example, see Thomas Jones, 'Blair's Thatcher, Thatcher's Blair' in London Review of Books Blog, (April 8, 2013 https://www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2013/04/08/thomas-jones/blairs-thatcher-thatchers-blair/ [accessed 15 October 2017].

is not a refutation of the facticity of a life lived *socially,* within a proximity and complex network of interaction, relation, and shared identity. We see in her repeated affirmations of nationalism and her criticism of immigration, that she is consistently committed to certain forms of collective life and the idea of a shared identity.[20] Rather, the force of the claim is to absolutely deny that anything like society, community, or identity have any legitimate recourse to the realm of the political, constituting them as inherently exterior to neoliberal (small) state governance. In this way, society and community are negated in Thatcher's vision only insofar as *they are tacitly affirmed in depoliticized, nationalist, and ethnocentric ways*. They are *deployed* as part of a cultural lexicon as ways of binding the nation in times of crisis, but in this process, they become drafted into the neoliberal project itself, standing not as separate modalities of the political, but as extensions of the fundamentally individualizing figure of the nation and its ontological and subjective claims on its citizens.

Appropriating the lexicon of philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, we may say that community is therefore not simply negated, but *put to work.[21]* It becomes part of the essential operation of the neoliberal state, an aggregation of the monadic, alienated, and individualized workers and citizens. As Thatcher's office subsequently stated, in a clarification designed to address the consternation that the initial claim provoked, society *does exist,* but only as a 'concept' (in that it cannot in fact 'act'), and thus its political being is found only to its ability to collect 'individual and families', which are the 'real sinews of society'.[22] Indeed, the question of society and community relates precisely to the *real*, that is, to our very perception and experience of reality, where community takes on a certain *unreality* in the neoliberal project, stripped of any political power, and relegated as a supplement to the triumph of the individual, where it emerges only as an extension of a neoliberal logic whose power would grow even after her fall from power.[23]

In this sense, Thatcher's statement resonated not only because it was a highly effective encapsulation of the type of politics which she deployed as political hegemony, it was also notable in the sheer scope, and radical negativity of its claim. To deny society as a term at all is to reduce the scope of political action and imagination, to negate, at its heart, any sense of a communal way of

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[20] For example, see Margaret Thatcher 'TV Interview for Granada World in Action', Margaret Thatcher Foundation, January 1978 http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/103485 [accessed 15 October 2017].
[21] This phrase is derived from Jean-Luc Nancy's '*désoeuvrée* and will be explored in more detail in the next chapter.
[22] Margaret Thatcher, 'Statement issued to Sunday Times', Margaret Thatcher Foundation, (July 10, 1988) http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106689 [accessed 23 August 2017].
[23] See Jeremy Gilbert, *Common Ground*: *Democracy and Collectivity in an Age of Individualism* (London: Pluto Press, 2013), pp.70-71.

being as anything that *could* or indeed *should* have access to political power or demands. At the same time as Thatcher made this claim she was engaged precisely in the destruction of this kind of political power. As David Harvey argues, this constituted nothing short of a 'revolution' not only in economy, but also the entire terrain of the political itself, where nearly all her major reforms were targeted precisely at loci of communal, collective and *political social* life, destroying their ability to have 'a real influence within the state apparatus':[24]

> [The neoliberal revolution] entailed confronting trade union power attacking all forms of social solidarity that hindered competitive flexibility [...] dismantling or rolling back the commitments of the welfare state, the privatization of public enterprises (including social housing), reducing taxes, encouraging entrepreneurial initiative, and creating favourable business climate to induce a strong inflow of foreign investment.[25]

In this way, the neoliberal project, in all its complex history and heterogenous incarnations, has its primary cohesive force in the waging a systematic civic war against political community (or what Harvey terms 'social solidarity'). If this war was in the name of a nebulously named 'freedom', which in the neoliberal context is largely restricted to the 'freedom' of 'the market', and the freedom of the 'individual' to act within this economically determined apparatus, it may be noted that this ideology also had a clear enemy in mind: that of communism. It may be no exaggeration to claim that, at least linguistically speaking, what is destroyed in the Thatcherite vision is any sense of the '*com*' itself (i.e. of community, communism, communization), that is, it is no longer possible to speak politically as a 'we', and as such, it is not possible to speak of a 'politics of community'.

Philosophies of Community: The Problem of 'Immanence'

It may be no surprise that this political conjuncture, poised at the apex of the neoliberal project, produced philosophical resistances precisely aimed at the problem of 'community'. This term arose as something that not only need to be rethought against Fascist regimes in Germany, Italy and Spain, but also as something that need to be re-asserted in a radically renewed configuration, against *both* its negation in neoliberal democracies *and* its 'totalitarian' co-optation outside of this. For Jean-Luc Nancy, who first published his landmark essay 'The Inoperative Community' in 1985, 'community' as

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[24] David Harvey, *Space of Global Capitalism: Towards a Theory of Uneven Geographical Development* (London: Verso, 2006), p.12. For more on this argument see also David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

[25] Ibid., p.16.

a valence of the political had reached something of an impasse that needed to be addressed through an absolute refusal of the restrictive opposition between its incarnations in capitalist democracy, communism and fascism, all of which offered inadequate and oppressive understandings of its meaning. His argument was not that the failures of these respective systems was *directly comparable,* or equal in its oppression, rather that none of these figures offered a vision of community which escaped a minimally (or maximally) *totalizing* function to its character.[26]

The question of community is in no way restricted to the opposition between neoliberalism, socialism, fascism, democracy and other forms of governance and ideology which characterise the realm of the political in its presented reality and history. It demands in fact that we do not restrict our thinking to just these forms, as they fail to offer, at least in their present incarnations, any adequate conception of what community *is.* In different ways, all present the same problem for community, the spectre of its 'fullness', which would be the precise way in which they all reduce community to a form of 'essence':

> [This is the] stumbling block to a thinking of community. A community presupposed as having to be one *of human beings* presupposes that it effect, or that it must effect, as such and integrally, its own essence, which is itself the accomplishment of the sense of humanness.[27]

Any attempt to bind the realm of the political to a sense of 'essence' must lead to the reduction of the life of the community to a single work such that it moves, inevitably, to a form of 'totalitarianism'. In this way, the question of community is constructed in a radically *ontological aspect.* The problem is centred not just in the disputation of ideology, but in the realm of being-itself, which is part of the configuration and constitution of the political at the same time as being disavowed as one of the terms of contention. In this way, the question of 'totalitarianism' can be recast as a problem of a philosophical *'immanentism'*, 'as long as we do not restrict the term to designating certain types of societies or regimes but rather see in it the general horizon of our time, encompassing democracies and their fragile juridical parapets.'[28] Community limited to an immanent essence is in fact *communion,* a people bound to a single myth, which serves to denigrate and

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[26] See Jean-Luc Nancy and Phillipe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Retreating the Political,* ed. Simon Sparks (London: Routledge, 1997), p.131 and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Truth of Democracy*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Ashland: Fordham University Press, 2010).

[27] Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, trans. Peter Connor et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p.3.

[28] Ibid.

diminish the very communality it binds together. For Nancy, this can only end in the logic of 'suicide of the community that is governed by it', where the binding identity of a communion can only be maintained through violent exclusions which ultimately destroy the community itself.[29] Community must therefore be rethought as the *singular-plural,* that is, as the co-constitution of being through the vectors of our irreducible singularity and plurality, which must be open to the infinite possibility of reconfiguration beyond any logic of 'the one'.[30]

The figure of 'the one' emerges most strongly in the spectre of 'totality', which Nancy ascribes to all contemporary instantiations of community, ordered as they are by a single logic (of state, the individual, neoliberal reason etc.) For Nancy, the overdetermined form of contemporary politics is therefore the *totalizing* function of state capital, which 'negates community because it places above it the identity and the generality of production and products: the operative communion and general communication of works.'[31] Neoliberalism may be the operative and dominant order of the present, but even in the apparent alternatives to these models, be they Nordic Social Democracy, Socialism, or even attempts at Communism in Cuba, The Soviet Union and China, they all fall prey to, reproduce, and react, in the first and last instance to global capital which, 'dominates the human beings and human world it organizes.[32] Given the sheer totalizing strength of capital as a global, economic, political and even ontological force, no system can successfully step outside of its logic, and thus the task of contemporary politics must be addressed precisely at this totalitarian and anti-communitarian impulse, to find ways of thinking beyond it in imaginative and radically communitarian ways.

It is at this point of departure and faced with this task that this thesis seeks to intervene, addressing the continued anti-communitarian function of capitalist modernity in contemporary politics. Whilst global capitalism has mutated and changed a great deal since Nancy's initial essay, the challenge of thinking a politics of community has only been made more difficult and prescient. Nancy's intervention is of crucial importance in addressing the political denigration of community as he takes this function right to the heart of political subjectivation and ontology, deploying a philosophy which places relationality right at its very core, which offers modes of resistance to neoliberal capitalism which are striking in their disruptive and radical possibilities for transformation. This thesis therefore works, in different ways, to bring Nancy's initial communitarian provocation into the present,

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[29] Ibid., p.12
[30] Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, p.82.
[31] Nancy, *Inoperative Community,* p.75.
[32] Brown, *Undoing the Demos,* p.76.

developing (and sometimes departing from and questioning) his concerns by putting them in dialogue with more contemporary phenomena. If community is a political modality which is still to be properly *thought and imagined* in neoliberal capitalist democracy, this thesis will look to emergent theories of the political alongside contemporary representations of community in British literature to take on the difficult but necessary task of (re)thinking community as a radical political force in the present.

If there is an affirmation of community in this project, it will not emerge simply as an object to be asserted or proposed in a particular guise, but rather as a complex and ontological form whose major challenge is its own radical *reconfiguration.* It will therefore be necessary to take community in its most nebulous, disruptive and marginal forms, where it fractures from dominant determinations in capitalist modernity to produce ways of rethinking and re-working it according to a more egalitarian logic. Only in these partial, precarious and unexpected forms can we find representations which do justice to community's anti-totalitarian and radical force, and it has been this drive which has informed the trajectory and direction of this thesis. In this way community must be taken as a structure which necessarily resists any attempts at universalization or generalization and as such this text does not seek to offer a general theory of community, nor does it simply serve as an extension of a coherent 'Nancian' project. Rather, this thesis takes precisely the structure of 'interruption'[33] as its overarching principle, configuring community as a figure of the unruly, the unassimilable, and the unlikely, where it emerges only in moments of rupture, where the interruption of norms and operative determinations may offer a glimpse of the 'coming community', whose horizon is seemingly impossible and inexistent, but absolutely necessary.[34]

As the Nancy's conception of community has sought to demonstrate, community as a political and ontological object is increasingly an under-represented and, in some ways, unrepresentable form, and it is necessary therefore to address community's radical political potential precisely at the level of its *representation,* where mythic interruption can take place in our very *thinking* of community*.* If community is marginalized in contemporary society, literatures of marginal authors can inspire a radical hermeneutics of community, addressing themselves toward modes of being and relating which are erased and put to work by contemporary capitalism. Literature offers a uniquely speculative and radically interruptive space through which to expose and challenge marginalizing

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[33] Chapter 2 of this thesis will offer a fuller parsing of this term in relation to Nancy's conception of 'myth interrupted'.

[34] I take this term from Agamben influential book *The Coming Community,* trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

operations. The literary representation of political movements associated with minority communities which suffer both material and symbolic oppression due to their race, sexuality, gender or class, therefore offers new avenues for thinking the politics of self and relationality today. The neoliberal project, as a continuation of a general process of increasing capitalist domination, clearly demands that we rethink community and society along radically transformative lines, and this is the intention of this thesis: to draw on the crisis in the existence and representation of community in contemporary Britain as a means of producing new and challenging ways of addressing politics and representation in the current conjuncture.

The Multiple Political Axes of Community

Despite the focus so far, it is not the intention of this thesis to add to the already well-developed body of work on neoliberalism. Rather, following the insights of Brown and Nancy, the perspective of community must be much wider than this, acknowledging the way in which crises in community today are largely dominated by a general tendency of capitalist democracy to put them to work in a way which negates and diminishes their capacity for political self-assertion and expression. If Nancy does not engage primarily with neoliberalism in his own work, it is the purpose of this introduction to demonstrate how community remains a prescient and vital task of the political today, and thus discussion of the philosophy of community should not be seen as part of a historical moment of debate in the late 1980s and early 1990s, but part of the horizon which global capital poses in all its incarnations.

Furthermore, it is not simply capital which must be addressed, but the way in which it intersects with other modalities of oppression, aspects of the political which have received systematic scholarly attention only in recent decades. In fact, it is often in the so-called 'identitarian' spaces of politics where community emerges in radical and disruptive ways. Far from the reductive caricatures of 'identity politics' as introspective, individualistic, and incapable of understanding wider substantive change,[35] trajectories of the 'queer' and 'trans' situate particularly the form of gender transformation as an important axis in thinking the radical potential of community today. Community is primarily a privileging of relationality and thus its methodology inevitably has similarities with the recent emergence of the term 'intersectionality', coined in a paper by legal

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[35] See Saul Newman *Unstable Universalities: Poststructuralism and Radical Politics* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007*)*, Angela Nagle *Kill All Normies: Culture Wars From 4Chan And Tumblr To Trump and the Alt Right* (Alresford: Zero Books, 2017) and James Penney *After Queer Theory: The Limits of Sexual Politics* (London: Pluto Press, 2014).

scholar Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in 1989, which has come to serve as a placeholder for attempts to think the political in *its irreducibly relational character.*[36] For Nancy, the constitution of the 'political proper' as precisely *outside and beyond community,* reduces community to a form of particularity which is not yet part of the privileged structure of the 'universal'. We must therefore rethink community precisely as a *pluralization of the form of the political itself,* shifting its focus to those axes of oppression which have been historically marginalized in political action and thought.

Beyond (but not entirely without) overdeterminations of capital which must always situate politics within an often rigid and orthodox Marxist schema, community allows for this approach to develop along multiple and heterodox axes, taking into account counter and parallel determinations of the political, which often demand their own approaches and methodologies in order to be thought productively. A returning theme for thinking the political is the queer concept of 'normativity', which this thesis takes to be a useful term for developing Nancy's own use of 'operativity', both exposing the continued pertinence of the term in Nancy, as well as adding a much need specificity to the way this works in the presented reality of political action. If Nancy cannot be seen as a writer of the 'queer', in fact at times seeming to be incompatible with this, this thesis nonetheless interrogates how queer community can be affirmed through his theories, and how Nancy's own privileging of 'interruption' and transformation can allow his own ideas to mutate and develop in unexpected and disruptive ways.

The space of the queer is always marginal and precarious as it is by definition subject to processes of symbolic and material erasure. So too, we may argue, is the space of community, which must be constructed against and beyond its capitalist and immanent determinations. This has greatly affected the choice of theoretical texts used in this thesis, which has sought to draw not only on the highly Euro-centric and white-male dominated tradition of the philosophy of community, but to expand the scope and horizon of community, going beyond the confines of this well-established canon into new spaces and directions. This thesis focuses on the writers Jackie Kay, Ali Smith and Jon McGregor, who each, in their own way, and for different reasons, are often omitted or marginalized from processes of canon-making in contemporary literature studies. This attention sheds light not only on their marginal status, but also the specific ways that these authors offer challenging, experimental and innovative modes of literary expression, which open onto the question of community in interesting new ways. Following Nancy, this thesis will propose a community always

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[36] Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics' *The University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989.1 (1989).

open to the *indeterminate presencing of the world,* which is nothing by its contingent emergence *as itself,* without and against reductions of its being to singular logics of the 'one' (for example in universal reason). Nancy's project itself then must be opened to this very openness, and thus it is not taken here as a paradigm or orthodoxy to be simply followed. Likewise, this analysis of community is not designed to be a simple 'queering' of the community, but rather to address the intersection of communitarian politics and queer politics to expose hidden relations as well as contentions. Queer Theory, for all its innovations and intellectual contribution remains often reticent in its advocation of political action, especially in regards to how a radical reconfiguration of the heteronormative capitalist state might be achieved, and thus I take 'queerness' less as a coherent methodological tool indebted to the canon of Queer Theory, and more as a still open question as to how to combine reflections of sexuality with a substantive and general political vision for radical societal change.[37]

In engaging Nancy, the aim is not to proceed immanently through a purely philosophical methodology, but rather to put him constantly in dialogue with literary and political theory, in ways that both compliment and contradict his schema. As such, I have sought to affirm how Nancy's philosophy of community can be elaborated and developed through gender, queer, race, and critical theory, exploring the productive possibilities of these relations, drawing attention to useful ground for intersectional analysis and avenues for further research. In this way, this thesis relies on often strong or counter-intuitive readings of Nancy, but does not seek to justify these readings through a purely philosophical or immanent approach. Likewise, it does not always proceed through a critical interrogation of Nancy's ideas, situating him within the wider field of philosophical thought and commentary, as this approach can often work to contain concepts within a singular field rather than producing more widely productive avenues of thought. By forging unexpected relations between Nancy and political modalities which are largely *absent* from his work, the aim is to expand the thinking community, both in its philosophical and political incarnations, interrogating how this intersection can encourage us to rethink both approaches. The space of this relation will be that of literature, which demands hermeneutical approaches which draw on political theory and philosophy at the same time as exceeding and complicating both. If politics and community are for Nancy 'put to work', as representational, conceptual, and material forms, then literature can be a place for their imaginative *unworking* and *reworking,* where their radical transformative potential can be glimpsed.

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[37] For a thorough and provocative contribution to the limits and political potential of Queer Theory, see Kevin Floyd, *The Reification of Desire: Toward a Queer Marxism* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

Community is bound up with its representation, in a way it *is* its own representation as its expresses the impulse to share meaning as communication, where the latter does not simply reproduce meaning, but *is meaning.*[38] As such community is may be productively explored through its representation, especially in disruptive and experimental literary forms which express community not simply as a given form, but as a mode of being which is irreducible, singular and therefore in some way *unrepresentable* in its character. Community is a fundamental component for any contemporary reworking of the political, but likewise it emerges as a vital way of interrogating the political valence of literature itself, which as part of the communication of communal being, is always bound up with the work of community, whether through expressing its more operative and overdetermined forms, or through disrupting these through experimental and creative techniques. The unrepresentability and structural *inexistence* of community, as something which is necessarily *negated by the current order of the political,* means that it is precisely in the space of the literary and the fictive, where community can emerge, not in a complete form but in a mode of disputation and mythic interruption which expresses a specific mode of resistance to its own operativity. In this way, this thesis has looked to moments of disruption, both at the level of the political and the literary, where community, if only briefly, can be glimpsed.

The authors which are interpreted in this thesis, Kay, McGregor and Smith, each offer texts which, through different forms of literary experimentation, produce disruptions at the level of literary form and content, which generate a productive interplay between the political, the philosophical and the literary. Community becomes a way of binding these distinct, but correlative modalities, which are comprehensible only through their complex interrelatedness. In each, this interplay plays out in striking and productive ways, opening up new avenues for addressing the object of community beyond a simple thematic or empirical object, toward its potentialities at the interface of a literary, political and philosophical imagination. Kay, McGregor and Smith are taken to be exemplary practitioners of literary experimentations with questions of identity, community, and relationality, integrating communitarian impulses not only into their themes, but also the formal dimensions of their texts. As such each author can offer fresh and provocative perspectives on the stakes of representing and thinking community today.

In Kay, formal displacements within conventions of biography and realism are captured in their relation to peripheral subjective realities, where focus on a fragile queer community brings to the fore barriers to representability and intelligibility. Through viewing the real through its philosophical

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[38] Nancy, *Being Singular Plural,* pp.2-3.

and literary conventions, Kay is shown to deploy interruptions in each of these functions simultaneously, producing striking political effects which have been consistently underplayed in her critical reception. In focusing on Kay's deployment of realist techniques alongside a general questioning of 'realness', both at the level of literary form and ontic reality, Nancy's conception of myth is offered as a useful philosophical analogue for recent developments in Trans Theory. Kay's work contributes to continuing and complex discussions of how to interpret and represent the vital political, subjective and ethical claim of claiming a realness to gendered identity in the process of transition, where narrative displacements of reality can shed light on this process. Kay emerges as a crucial, if still marginal literary figure, whose work demands further critical attention through questions of embodiment, authenticity, and political capacity, where community's relation to love, gender and the limits of politicization and social exposure can come into focus.

Likewise, McGregor is addressed as an exemplary writer of contemporary community. This can be found in the content of his work, which has been drawn to underrepresented urban areas of a fictively evoked Midlands, focussing on quotidian, suburban and apparently unremarkable settings and marginalized social groups. Community also emerges in the formal composition of his work, specifically his innovations in prose, which, drawing on a more recognizably poetic lexicon, as well as modes of modern taxonomy and technical writing, may be seen to offer new avenues for the contemporary British novel and its narrative conventions. Most powerfully, in his text *Even the Dogs* fragile communities of homeless, impoverished and precarious bodies are evinced through an unconventional, but highly evocative first-person plural narrative. This narrative voice is composed of a community which is empirically speaking impossible, which emerges from a fictive sphere which in reality was not present or possible, incorporating fragmented and voiceless voices, including those of the dead. In this way, literature McGregor may be seen to share with Nancy an investment in the ability of literature to stage and forge disruptive relationalities which shatter the confines of the present from a position of apparent impossibility, mirroring the philosophical and political barriers and potentialities which exist for political community today.

Finally, Smith's text *Girl Meets Boy* is presented as paradigmatic of a specific political trajectory in Smith's writing, expressing a tacitly utopian investment in queer relationality and gender disruption as conduits of more expansive political change. Smith's vision of the political has consistently drawn on the capacity of literature and literary community to incite changes in perception and imagination, and in *Girl Meets Boy* she offers arguably her most strident vision of this relation in an almost militant vision of aesthetic and political action. By locating such potentialities in intimate queer

relationships, the possibility of large-scale political change is captured in embryonic form in the forging of small-scale, but disruptive queer community. Such processes of politically charged subjective transmutation can be productively viewed through the figure of 'magic community' as an aesthetic and political principle tied to the political upheavals and artistic experiments of the Modernist era. By placing Smith in dialogue with the proto-queer Surrealist artist Claude Cahun and her partner Marcel Moore, this thesis will present Smith as an author who reflects an uncompromising vision of politics through the figure of impossible transformation akin to the revolutionary and artistic practices of Modernism. Emphasizing Smith's debt to a Modernist tradition of writing, which inflects even what are more often seen as postmodern texts, Smith's experimental use of prose can be seen to react to contemporary world with a renewed spirit of creativity and disruption, reinvigorating an investment in art and literature as spaces of radically transformational possibility. [39]

Structure and Method in Community

The thesis comes in two parts, the first developing the idea of community as a theoretical term, drawing on philosophy, political theory and literary theory, and the second deploying these theoretical ideas in order to interpret specific literary texts. The first part is comprised of two chapters which examine the political and philosophical vectors of community through the figures of 'universality', 'the riot', and 'myth', deploying the term 'onto-political' to interrogate the complex negotiation of community in its intertwined, but distinct ontological and political components. In the first chapter, community will be explored in its political and philosophical components, using the example of the 2014 British riots, the Black Lives Matter Movement and recent philosophical discourse on political 'universality' to expose how community is a major vector for thinking politics in the contemporary conjuncture. Through focusing on the figure of 'myth' in the second chapter, the role of representation will be interrogated in its fundamentally *communal* function, as well as through its relation to ontology. This will lay the ground for a literary theory of community through combining the notion of experimentation in literary form with transformative relational potentiality. In this way, literature will be proposed as a fundamental space (or *atopos*) through which ontological and political questions of self and community can be interrogated and disrupted, allowing for the *operative* function of community (that is, its subsumption into the work of the capitalist state), to be resisted and transformed.

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[39] See David James *Modernist Futures: Innovation and Inheritance in the Contemporary Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012) for how the legacy of Modernism marks more a continuity than a point of departure for the postmodern novel.

Taking the example of contemporary British society and its literature, the thesis moves through its two more theoretical chapters to produce innovative readings of three prose writers, taken to be exemplary, in very different ways, of the way in which literature has attempted to rethink the question and political trajectory of community. In chapter 3, the focus is on Jackie Kay's *Trumpet* and the figures of trans identity and queer community. These are examined as modes of being and relating which have been structurally and symbolically unintelligible in dominant and operative rationality, but which have nonetheless forged lives and relations outside and *in excess* of operative and normative configurations. In this way, they challenge the constitution of the 'the real' itself through an *embodied* interruption of gender norms and politics. Likewise, Kay deploys her complex and subtly experimental literary form precisely as a means of investigating this marginality, and the vexed question and ethics of representation in relation to symbolically marginal and invisible subjects. Ultimately, the *refusal of relation,* which we see in the novel allows for a new, fragile community to be formed, one forged against the grain as the disruptive and vibrant 'community of lovers'. In this way, a reading of this novel is developed which draws on the philosophical literature and tradition of community at the same time as following Kay's lead to address this at the level of gender transformation, thus leading Nancy's theoretical paradigm into a new and perhaps unexpected terrain.

Chapter 4 takes on the figure of death, which for Nancy is the 'limit' of community as it exposes its constitutive 'finitude'. Following the previous chapter, the focus will be on a mode of relationality where its very terms of called into question, and where this produces disruptive political effects. McGregor's novel *Even the Dogs* is analysed as an exemplary exploration of the politics of mourning and grieving, where death produces important and politically rich conceptions of community. What emerges is a vision of the 'community of the dead' which straddles the limit of finitude in the infinite demand of a community ordered by an impossible justice. Through Walter Benjamin, we see the community of the dead would be the promise of 'return' in the 'redemption' of a radical temporal break. Through the impossible, but absolutely necessary relation with the dead, where community serves as a space which *hold onto the dead* in the name of justice, allowing the dead to speak in the always unfinished project of justice, the community of the dead emerges as a potent figure of radically transformative, if not revolutionary potential. Through producing an impossible community of the dead, McGregor becomes the writer of political community *par excellence,* offering a vital resource for construing community today as an always present absence, poised in the potential of its becoming as a radically disruptive force.

Finally, in chapter 5, Ali Smith's *Girl Meets Boy* is explored as a text which addresses the question of community in its specifically political capacity, one which Smith deploys through a particular attention to the figure of 'magic' as a mode of speech which is deeply endowed with an unruly force of political transformation. Smith's literary project is thus exposed as being based in a foundational interest in the capacity of literature to *instantiate and provoke radical political transformation,* and this may be seen in her continued interest in the figure of magical community, a community constituted and asserted through its own magical transformation and (im)possibility. Taking on Nancy's understanding of language and literature as part of the *taking place of communal being,* where communication does not simply represent the world, but produces and transmits it in its foundational relational being, magical community emerges as a figure of that which can anticipate and precipitate change, instantiating its own being through re-presentation.

In each chapter the overarching logic is one of *transformation,* where each topic (be it the 'the subject', 'the riot', 'myth', 'love', 'death', 'gender' and 'magic') offers a representational and conceptual form through which a radical reconfiguration of community can be glimpsed. These motifs all mark a 'limit-point', where community comes up against a border, and where it's meaning is called radically into question at the same time as being opened to the possibility of its radical becoming. Some of these themes (for example love, death and myth) are crucial parts of the Nancian lexicon, although their situation within literary criticism allows for new ways of thinking their use, whilst the focus on 'gender' and 'magic' are departures from the Nancian frame, allowing for new theoretical perspectives on community to emerge. In the proposition of 'magical community' in the final chapter, we see a culmination of the thesis's key conceptions of 'myth', 'gender' and 'love', bringing them together in a vision of literature as a space of radical communitarian transformation.

Privileging neither philosophy nor literature, seeking always to avoid the instrumentalization of one by the other, communitarian hermeneutics must inhabit the margin and the border, the space where the relation (as well as disruption, interruption and transformation) takes place. This thesis does not seek to offer an overview or an exhaustive study of the manifold ways of representing community in contemporary fiction, nor does it seek to simply stay faithful to a Nancian methodology, offering Nancian interpretations of different instances of the exposure of community. Through privileging precisely the ambivalence, inconsistency, and chance of the relation, this thesis looks to the moments of potential rupture and disruption which literature might offer. Kay, Smith

and McGregor are exemplary instances of a much wider trend which we might tentatively terms the 'relational turn', where novelists have been interested in deploying literary and formal experimentations in order to explore the possibility of thinking and representing community and subjectivity in new ways, against the increasing individualisation and monadic character of contemporary life. These authors are taken as engaging in a particular moment in contemporary fiction, where after the predominance of 'postmodern' literature, they offer a revitalization of a more committed ethical and political literature, responding to the increasing prescience of rethinking politics in an era dominated by neoliberal capitalism. Although the British context is a limited site for what is in fact a global conjuncture, the specificity of British experimentations in literary form offers valuable and often unexplored resources for offering resistance to political domination.

By focusing on these often marginal and under-researched authors, this thesis demonstrates the considerable productivity a hermeneutics of community can afford, and how, as part of the very constitution of being and language itself, community emerges as a vital and indispensable figure for understanding not only our contemporary socio-political moment, but also the way in which literature, art and representation have responded to this. Through taking a wider view of Nancy and his interlocutors in the philosophy of community canon, but also bringing these into dialogue with more recent and challenging theories of race, gender, sexuality and class, this thesis responds to the highly *contemporary* challenge which community forces us to confront, as well as offering theoretical perspectives of how this might be productively addressed. Faced a neoliberal project which despite its contradictions and toxic symptoms still fails to produce any resistance which can offer any real sense of an alternative, community emerges as a crucial figure in the rethinking of society along egalitarian and progressive lines, offering a way of reinvigorating radical political thought through its under-examined ontological dimensions, and producing fresh and challenging new horizons for the thinking of politics and aesthetics today.

'Community exceeds politics in all directions'[1]
(Jean-Luc Nancy, 'The Political and/or Politics')

'Drag that first person out of the social death of history, then we're kin.'[2]
(Claudia Rankine, *Citizen)*

Chapter 1: The Politics of Community: Unworking, Work, Idleness

Introduction

To begin speaking of a 'politics of community' is to find oneself inevitably in a conceptual space indelibly marked by the thought of Jean-Luc Nancy. Nancy is in many ways the thinker of community *par excellence,* his 1983 essay 'The Inoperative Community' (*La Communauté Désœuvrée*) serving, in many ways, as the threshold through which community would be taken up by contemporary European philosophy as a serious object of enquiry, immediately provoking a response by Maurice Blanchot, and inspiring a wide range of texts by other philosophers.[3] Nancy proposes a philosophy that proceeds through a radical disputation of any assumption of a stable self or sovereign subject, figures he sees as foundational to much of Western philosophy, offering instead a relational ontology with no essential content other than relationality itself. Although Nancy's work has spanned nearly five decades, incorporating a large range of different subject-matters and philosophical questions, often reaching beyond philosophy to the world of art, dance and literature, the major cohering theme of his work can be found in his consistent insistence of relationality at the heart of all being and an unrelenting critique of all conceptions of essence, origin, or what he will term 'the one'.[4]

It is from this philosophical position that this thesis will propose a 'politics of community', and through this highly expansive relational configuration, postulated at a level of sometimes recalcitrant abstraction, that a politics can emerge. Although Nancy practices a form of studied reticence around proposing any direct politics of community, preferring largely to avoid engaging more ontic or empirical questions of actually existing community, his methodology is designed precisely to ask

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[1] Jean-Luc Nancy, 'The Political and/or Politics' *Oxford Literary Review* 36.1 (2014), p.5.
[2] Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* [2004] (London: Penguin, 2017), p.72.
[3] See Maurice Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community,* trans. Pierre Joris (New York: Station Hill Press, 1988), Roberto Esposito, *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community,* trans. Timothy Campbell (Stanford: Stanford Press, 2010) and Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).
[4] Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural,* trans. Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O'Byrne (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), p.24.

more fundamental questions about the status of community and relational being. In his recent book *The Disavowed Community,* where he revisits his text *The Inoperative Community,* Nancy admits that his deployment of the political was 'not always coherent or clear', but locates this problem as a fundamental component of political community itself:[5]

> A crucial paradox lies at the heart of this matter of community (and/or communism): We respond - Bailly, Nancy, Blanchot, Agamben, everyone - to this question of "communism" that should be characterized as sur-essential, but whose sense escapes us. Suffice it to say that it still escapes us.'[6]

Suggesting here a fugitive form of community, Nancy crucially links the 'paradox' of community to the political project of 'communism', a constant, if undertheorized touchstone of Nancy's work on community, which is a shared concern for his interlocutors Giorgio Agamben, Maurice Blanchot and Jean-Christophe Bailly. In each case the 'sense' of 'community (and/or communism)' is in a crucial way not available, eluding those who nonetheless attempt to resuscitate its 'exigency', and we can understand this contradiction precisely in Nancy's enigmatic combining of community and communism as parallel and interlocking terms. [7] In this convergence, we can see Nancy gesture to a material and historical *limit* which would be the absolute *non-appearance* of 'real communism' as an actually existing political entity, deriving from Nancy's insistence that those regimes that have taken the name of communism have been faithful neither to its political nor ontological imperatives.[8] In this sense, the task of thinking community shares its fate with that of communism, as an ever present, but by no means assured potentiality, constantly 'escaping' the terms of the present, with distant but insistent possibilities.

Indeed, Nancy's *The Disavowed Community* highlights this historical limit as an important aspect of his initial text that has nonetheless not been taken adequately seriously, drawing attention to the final line of his essay *The Inoperative Community* where he enjoins to the reader to pass beyond the confines of his own text: 'We can only go farther [*Nous ne pouvons qu'aller plus loin*].'[9] Noting that this claim was designed to express the 'perhaps insurmountable difficulty [which] threatens the ambition to state the being of the sharing being',[10] Nancy locates this 'difficulty' precisely in the incommensurable relation between the philosophical and the political, where any deployment of

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[5] Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Disavowed Community* trans. Phillip Armstrong (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), p.13.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Maurice Blanchot*, The Unavowable Community*, trans. Pierre Joris (New York: Station Hill Press, 1988), p.9.
[8] Nancy, *Disavowed Community*, p.2.
[9] Ibid., p.4.
[10] Ibid*.,* p.5.

community as *in itself a political project* would enact a dangerous fusional logic that his philosophy precisely hopes to avoid. In this way, Nancy expresses concern regarding Blanchot's claims to be faithful to this injunction to 'go farther' by 'passing beyond it in all senses one could give to this word,' admitting that he 'perceived [Blanchot's] intention only with much confusion and malaise'.[11] Nancy must therefore strongly dispute Blanchot's valorisation of a communal 'ultrapoltics' which is 'not instituted but even insitutable', and which consisting in 'excluding nothing', as a 'politics beyond politics' that oversteps the ability of philosophy to determine a political object. [12] Blanchot's 'ultrapoltics' is not only be untenable as a philosophical position but also perilously risks disavowing the political into a hypostasised and impossible figure which is neither realizable or even desirable except for the idealized 'sovereign' writer of philosophy who imagines himself without limits. [13] For Nancy, it this idealized and impossible form which most clearly characterizes as Blanchot's tendency to 'aristocratic anarchism'[14]:

> All relation, all community, everything that is common thus finds itself disavowed, in other words, deprived of avowal, in the primary sense of the word: the recognition of the suzerain owes to his vassal. The only community that is accepted is that which unbinds itself and which, unbinding itself from all submission, also unbinds itself from itself. Unusually ambiguous, what remains is the noncommon - the perfect unsubordinated without avowal and which writes sovereignly.'[15]

Perhaps paradoxically, to *avow* the political for Nancy is therefore to cede it ground as an autonomous space of emergence *outside* the confines of the philosophical, which as we see in Blanchot, cannot capture the political meaning of community without reducing it to an elitist reflection of its own essentially apolitical practice. Rather, Nancy seeks to delineate a limit to his own project which the reader is enjoined to push 'farther', figuring his theoretical contribution not as an orthodoxy or system to be simply followed, but as an injunction to rethink community beyond its operative configurations which reduce it to a single operation or identity. The figure of the 'political' therefore, insofar as Nancy can relate it to community, must be found in his enigmatic term '*désoeuvrée',* where '"Political" would mean a community ordering itself to the unworking [désœuvrement] of its communication, or destined to this unworking: a community consciously undergoing the experience of its sharing.'[16]If Nancy leaves the terms of this destination unclear, his

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[11] Ibid., p.5
[12] Ibid., p.ix
[13] Ibid*.,* p.5
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid., p.60
[16] Nancy, *Inoperative Community,* p.40

focus on communication, and in the later chapters of *The Inoperative Community,* 'myth' and 'literary communism', offer up literature as an important limit point at which a philosophy of community may find further specificity and form, a theme which the latter chapters of this thesis will explore in more detail.

For Nancy, as for Bataille, '*Existence is* communication…[as] everything in me gives itself to others', such that it is not possible to adequately address matters of being without attending to the modes through which being is *transmitted,* in language, literature, writings and any communicative practice, which rather than being construed as cultural categories, become the basis upon which a *relational* being can be seen its very forming of relation.[17] For Bataille this may lead us to privilege the field of 'literature' as '[l]iterature is communication: a sovereign author addresses sovereign humanity, beyond the servitude of the isolated reader.'[18] For Nancy takes up this idea in a different guise by proposing the notion of 'literary communism' as the 'the sharing of community in and by its writing, its literature,' where it is literature in particular which can engage in an 'unworking' of its own form, as well as engaging and disrupting the social basis and operative norms in which it is situated. [19]

In this way, Nancy's thinking of 'community' reaches far beyond its everyday configuration, seeking to 'dissociate the idea of "community" from all projection into a work that is made or to be made - a State, a Nation, a People, or The People'.[20] This dissociative approach derives some of its critical force from the critical tradition of deconstruction, seeking to question some of the core suppositions of conventional deployments of the term 'community', and opening it up to conceptual and semantic renewal. Taking inspiration from Jacques Derrida's entreatment to 'retreat the political' from his 1968 paper *Les Fins de L'Homme,* Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe went on to found the Centre for Philosophical Research on the Political in 1980, which they run for four years based at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris, laying some of the crucial ground for Nancy's later work on the political.[21] In this project, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy develop a dual-meaning to the term 'retreat' [*retrait*] as delineating a form of flight from its common-sense usage, as well as an enjoinder to *re-treat* its very meaning and operation, allowing for new conceptions and configurations to arise.[22]

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[17] Cited Andrew J. Mitchell and Jason Kemp Winfree, *The Obsessions of Georges Bataille; Community and Communication* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009), p.9.

[18] Ibid., p.15.

[19] Nancy, *Inoperative Community,* p.67.

[20] Nancy, *Disavowed Community,* p.72.

[21] This history can be traced in Jean-Luc Nancy and Phillipe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Les Fins de L'Homme: à partir du travail de Jacques Derrida* (Paris: Hermann, 2013).

[22] Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *Retreating the Political*, ed. Simon Sparks (London: Routledge, 1997).

Simon Sparks succinctly summarizes this deployment of the term *retrait* in his preface to the collection, as the 'withdrawal of the political as that which is most obvious…[where] it is only in the face of such a retreat, in the *closure,* precisely, of the signification of the political, that it *can* be re-traced or re-treated by raising it in a new way'.[23] Similarly to Nancy's enjoinder to 'go farther', the 'retreat' of the political designates something like a border and a limit, where a philosophical 'exigency' to 'get[…] away from' the 'transcendental...*ground* of the political', necessitates rethinking the terms of the political beyond its own disciplinary and categorical confines, at the same time as refusing to construe philosophy as prior to, or more primary to the political itself.[24] Through exploring this complex relationship, the book ends with a question which will lay the ground for Nancy's coming work on community: 'the so-called question of relation' which 'remains...*the* central question' of how to construe such relations beyond the restrictive notions of identity that so often characterize their conventional deployment in political discourse.[25] Nancy's subsequent conception of the 'unworking' and 'inoperative' community may in this way be seen as an attempt to answer this question, derived from this conceptual movement of dissociation and renewal.

In this way, any postulation of a 'politics of community' must be left undetermined and radically open, acknowledging Nancy's own delineation of a limit to the political uses of his work, at the same time as remaining faithful to the political 'exigency' which is the driving force, and effect of his work. In order to draw out this aspect of Nancy's work this chapter will offer a summary of Nancy's evocation of the 'inoperative community', examining how it is asserted through a relational ontology, which offers a productive avenue for rethinking politics in the contemporary moment. Through attention to the figure of the 'subject' as the basic structure of much of philosophical thought, community is proposed as a vital critical modality which can challenge the assumption of self-contained, monadic, and *individual* self, to expose multiplicity right at the heart of existence. The second half of the chapter will use the example of 'universalism' to demonstrate how a 'politics of community' might be deployed as a theoretical and hermeneutic approach, using the example of the 2011 UK riots. Exploring the potential of a form of political 'idleness' as we see in the riot-form and in Nancy's own word '*désoeuvrée*', this chapter will ultimately propose a 'politics of community' as a strategy of pluralizing our thinking of the 'political' itself, something which will lead us beyond a specifically Nancian approach to a wider theoretical frame.

Political Ontology: *Désœuvrement* and Negativity

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[23] Simon Sparks in Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe, *Retreating the Political*, p.x.
[24] Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe, *Retreating the Political*, pp.132-133.
[25] Ibid.

By privileging the political dimensions of Nancy, this methodology comes into contention with much of his critical reception, where the politics of community has gone largely unnoticed or been greatly downplayed, producing a wide range of often conflictual and contradictory accounts of what his relation to the political might be.[26] Prevalent in critiques of Jean-Luc Nancy's philosophy is the argument that although he has time and again sought to engage a notion of the political, his analyses fall short of their object, that despite the originality and depth of his work, it has nonetheless appeared resistant, if not opposed, to any coherent or useful political strategy. This is partly due to the fact that Nancy has proved to be disinterested in any schematic or empirical response to traditional questions of the political, instead addressing, or rather readdressing, these questions along more ontological and philosophical lines.

This has led Peter Hallward to argue that Nancy 'precludes in advance any consequential engagement with actual relations or with our actual world' and that '[i]n spite of his insistence on relation and world, [his]… work is an integral part of a non-relational and extra-worldly configuration of thought.'[27] For Hallward, Nancy's refusal to engage philosophically with 'with things in the normal, material or ontic sense of the world', necessarily renders his philosophical thought 'extra-worldly' and thus unsuitable and even irrelevant to the realm of political struggle.[28] In addition, Simon Critchley, although more sympathetic to Nancy's approach, nonetheless argues along similar lines, writing that 'Nancy reveal[s] the limitation of deconstruction when faced with the question of politics and awaken[s] the need for a supplement to deconstruction'.[29]

Although there is a basis for making these claims, what is often unaddressed in these criticisms is any significant attention to the critical possibilities entailed in the term 'operativity', as well as a persistent overlooking of Nancy's repeated evocation of Marxist and communist traditions of thought. Inattention to these components of Nancy's thought has led to a systematic privileging of ethics in his work, as well as a tendency to downplay its political significance. Nancy clearly does not offer an account of community which can *directly* engage with community in its ontic and material political character, neither proposing new forms of community nor offering interventions in mainstream discussions surrounding the political meaning of community. His philosophy

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[26] For an example of the wide range of political approaches Nancy has provoked, see Irving Goh, *The Reject: Community, Politics, and Religion after the Subject* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015) and Philip Armstrong, *Reticulations: Jean-Luc Nancy and the Networks of the Political* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

[27] Peter Hallward, 'Jean-Luc Nancy and the Implosion of Thought', *Oxford Literary Review* 27.1 (2005), p.160.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p.217.

nonetheless offers us many critical resources for doing this, which through their underpinning in his highly evocative study of ontology are not only relevant but prescient to political concerns today.

Nancy rarely proposes the figure of community through clear political determinations, nevertheless we may look to his claim that it is 'negated by capital' as central to his general thesis.[30] For Nancy, capitalism is not only a form of 'economic domination',[31] but also functions through a process of subjectivation which works as a 'universality and generality' that governs all social behaviour in the 'atomization of the industrial division of labor'.[32] The effect of this process consists in the *generation* of the relational life of the *demos,* which must proceed through the central figures of the individual, atomized worker and the state which work at the expense of any vision of a 'communitarian, communist, or communal society'.[33] To move beyond operativity, as his book demands, would therefore require a thoroughgoing critique or even dismantling of those structures which Nancy sees as putting community to work (the state, capitalism, national identity), and we can therefore tentatively place Nancy's thought within a radical political tradition of Marxist and Communist thought, if we at the same time accept that like 'Bataille, Benjamin, Bloch', he owes 'little or nothing to a consideration of capitalist exploitation or class struggle. [34] Nonetheless Nancy will repeatedly remind his reader that it is 'Communism' which is his 'essential motive' for his writing on community, even if his fidelity to this word is enigmatic and largely divorced from Marxist orthodoxy.[35]

Although Nancy elides substantive attention to the materialist concerns for political economy, (as one cannot 'make an economy out of an ontology'),[36]we may note a Marxist trace in the totalizing function played by Nancy's key term 'operativity', where the central role of the capitalist state is the *putting of community to work* such that it is 'subjugated to the goal of a *human* community, that is, to achieving a community of beings producing in essence their own essence as their work.'[37] In this process, '[e]ssence is set to work in them [the *demos*]; through them, it becomes its own work' and this is what we may term 'totalitarianism', where community is reduced to a single 'essence' which negates its very being.[38] Through differentiating two opposing modes of politics: that of the current

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[30] Nancy, *Inoperative Community,* p.75.

[31] Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Truth of Democracy*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), p.23.

[32] Ibid., p.163.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Nancy, *Disavowed Community,* p.8.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, p.65.

[37] Ibid., p.2.

[38] Ibid., p.3.

'organization of society', and an elusive politics that would resist and exceed this, Nancy invokes a minimally dialectical procedure, which has affinities, as Nancy admits in his most recent text on community, with the work of Rancière and his 'more brutal' conception of the 'police'.[39]

Nancy offers this conception through opposing 'Politics' to 'the political'[40] in a paradigm highly analogous to Rancière's opposing of 'the police' and 'Politics',[41] where in both, this opposition can offer a way of rethinking politics against its dominant function as 'an order of bodies that defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying'.[42] Expanding the realm of the political precisely beyond its conventional deployment within specific democratic institutions and practices, the political, as constituted by their respective philosophical methods, comes to pertain to the very sustenance, reproduction and cultural life of a social body. It is involved in the delineation and structuration meaning, and what Nancy terms 'sense' [sens], where forms of domination are to be found throughout out linguistic, cultural, and ultimately ontological environment.[43] Political action, within this expanded understanding of the term, would relate not only to material practices of voting, protesting, workplace organizing et cetera, but would also take place at the very level of 'sense', that is in disputations of meaning in both our social, but also aesthetic, literary, and communicative capacities. In this way, Nancy's conception of politics is centrally organized by a question of work and unworking [désoeuvrement] which spans the term's semantic function in both the literary and wider social context of 'work'. Nancy anticipates a politics 'ordering itself to the unworking of its communication',[44] and as such unworking names at once a political, communicative and ontological practice and trajectory, one which is opposed to the current 'organization of society' as well as any reduction of community to totalizing or unified work.

If Nancy's conception of inoperativity therefore invokes an antagonistic, negative and to some extent dialectical logic, where the capitalist state from 'negates community'[45] such that 'the truth of our times can only be expressed in Marxist or Post-Marxist terms', Nancy nonetheless makes clear that he is not simply offering a Marxist paradigm of class antagonism.[46] In order for this 'truth' to be fully understood, we must also attend to how 'this truth itself demands that it be thought starting from the *with* of co-appearance', where the contingent factors that lead to the continued relevance

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[39] Nancy, *Disavowed Community,* p.11.
[40] Jean-Luc Nancy, 'The Political and/or Politics' *Oxford Literary Review* 36.1 (2014).
[41] Rancière, *Dissensus*, p.29.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Nancy explores this concept in detail in Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Sense of the World,* trans. Jeffrey Librett (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).
[44] Nancy, *Inoperative Community,* p.40.
[45] Ibid., p.75.
[46] Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, p.64.

of the Marxist paradigms in political thinking must be secondary to a more ontological understanding of our political being.[47] In this way, by offering the concept of 'unworking' as an ontological and aesthetic category, as well as a political one, Nancy refuses any possibility of a closed dialectical mechanism, demanding that we account for politics in its wider, more indeterminate possibilities beyond its visible forms, attending to an as yet '*unheard* demand' which may be found in community.[48]

Désoeuvrement therefore entails a specific form of negativity found in the process of *unworking* where community may be ordered precisely around an unworking of any operative function. But as Blanchot insists in *The Unavowable Community,* '[i]n order for there to be "unworking" there must be a work',[49] arguing that a purely negative postulation is not sufficient to ground any practicable sense of what community would actually be. In this way, Nancy responds by admitting that it is necessary to find a concept which will be able to 'succeed this negativity in one way or another that it will certainly not be possible to think of as a positivity but which will not escape the "negative" either – in other words, which will operate a form of sublation [*relève*].'[50] Although Nancy does not substantively explicate this term in the text itself, Philip Armstrong draws attention to its debt to 'Derrida's translation of the Hegelian *Aufhebung* (elevation, lifting up, conservation, negation, abolishing, suspending, sublation),[51] which plays out a dialectical structure whilst refusing 'dialectical reconciliation'.[52] Tied explicitly to this enigmatic figure of sublation of '*relève', désoeuvrement* may be understood precisely as inhabiting this contradiction, between the act of 'negating' and 'lifting up', unworking any basis to community at the same time as producing a work of unworking as the foundation of community itself.

In the context of community, Nancy builds on a dialectical opposition within the political uses of community in the operation of the capitalist state, whilst also opening up this antagonism beyond a closed or restricted sense of the political. Against a purely 'negative dialectic', which he argues must assume 'some prior community that occurs within a continuous historical process',[53] any dialectical procedure must proceed from the indeterminacy of being-with, which although irreducible to material forces of contradiction, is the ground through which they must appear. Community understood therefore as '*désoeuvrée'*, unworked, inoperative, and idle draws upon Nancy's

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[47] Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, p.64.
[48] Nancy, *Inoperative Community,* p.40.
[49] Cited, Nancy *Disavowed Community,* p.ix.
[50] Ibid., p.15.
[51] Philip Armstrong, 'Translator's Introduction' in Nancy, *Disavowed Community,* p.xviii.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Nancy, *Being Singular Plural,* p.74.

rethinking of negativity in *The Restlessness of the Negative,* which offers a striking reading of the function of the negative in the Hegelian tradition. Here, negativity can be understood to derive itself against the 'given' and any sense of determinative essence, offering a striking vision of freedom:[54]

> Negativity makes all determinateness tremble, all being-all-to-itself: it injects it with a shudder and an unsettling agitation. What is so unsettling is the freeing of this determinateness for what it is not - for the other and for the infinite - and whose very being is already in itself the essential sharing.[55]

This form of negativity is at work in *désoeuvrement,* which draws on a dialectical relation whilst also exceeding it through the process of 'sharing', where negativity not only refutes any sense of the 'given', but returns us to a shared being, and ultimately a figure of community. Negativity for Nancy, as seen in the work of unworking, negates in order to realize capacities for change and productive capacity, opening onto the possibility of *reworking* our being: the work which is the 'work of unworking' which Blanchot insists upon. This then leads us to the figure of transformation at the heart of Nancy's articulation of negativity:

> This world of movement, of transformation, of displacement, and of restlessness, this world that is in principle and structurally outside itself, this world where nature does not subsist but steps out of itself into work into history, this world where the divine does not subsist but exhausts itself beyond all its figures - this world moves toward no end or result other than itself, nor toward a resorption or sublimation of its own exteriority.[56]

In placing this expansive figure of transformation at the centre of his work, and integrating this structure into his conception of inoperative community, we can see Nancy offers a type of thinking which opens up many political possibilities precisely through framing the political beyond the determination of conventional modes of political thinking. Rarely directly engaging or integrating material analysis of political reality, he nonetheless offers a productive form of negativity in the figure of '*désoeuvrement*', an unworking which is also a reworking, placing a restless, unruly and radically transformative principle at the heart of social being.

Ontology and the 'Ethical Turn'

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[54] Jean-Luc Nancy, *Hegel: The Restlessness of the Negative*, trans. Jason Smith and Steven Miller (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), p.4.
[55] Ibid., p.45.
[56]Ibid*.,* p.6.

Despite the political implications of Nancy's use of 'operativity', one of the most common strands in secondary literature on Nancy is a focus on the *ethical* function of his work, where any such political consequences have been deemphasized and rendered as secondary to ethical concerns. In part, this tendency toward ethical reading may be explained through Nancy's alignment with the philosophical tradition of deconstruction, which as Robert Bernasconi describes, has sought to refigure politics along essentially ethical lines, 'orient[ing] deconstruction's initial decision around the primordial ethical experience of the otherness of the other.'[57] This trend became 'fashionable' in philosophical work in the so-called 'postmodern era', according to Rancière, who has critiqued this trend through drawing attention to how '[e]thics amounts to the dissolution of the norm in fact', through what he sees as a practice of reified normativity that would tacitly reaffirm social norms as universal principles of 'the good'.[58] Despite its critics, the ethical trend still persists in much of the Humanities, inspiring new approaches which have addressed the political in different ways,[59] and this has in many cases impacted the way that Nancy has been received and interpreted.

The ethical turn may be contextualized most clearly in the thought of Emmanuel Levinas, whose philosophy is for many 'the almost obligatory reference point for any consideration of poststructuralist ethics.'[60] It is largely characterizable through its preoccupation with the figure of the 'other' and 'alterity', which in the wake of challenges to the unified assumption of a stable philosophical subject were deployed as a riposte to totalizing conceptions of the self/other relation. Against this, Levinasian ethics sought to highlight the deep ethical imbrication of this relationship, where ethics is defined as the 'calling into question of my spontaneity' in 'the presence of the other, which guards the 'strangeness of the Other, his [sic] irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and my possessions.'[61] In contrast to an ontological tradition of philosophy which Levinas saw as 'neutraliz[ing]' the other, constructing it as an extension of 'the same' as the projected philosophical subject of freedom, this ethical relation takes attentiveness to alterity at the heart of its philosophical sensibilities.[62] Such ideas went on to become hugely influential, being taken up by

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[57] Robert Bernasconi, 'The Crisis of Critique' in *The Politics of Deconstruction,* ed. Martin McQuillan (London: Pluto Press, 2007), p.91.

[58] Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus, On Politics and Aesthetics*, trans. Steven Corcoran (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), p.184.

[59] For example, in Michael L. Morgan, *Levinas's Ethical Politics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016) and Judith Still, *Derrida and Hospitality: Theory and Practice: Theory and Practice* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010).

[60] Colin Davis, *After Poststructuralism: Reading, Stories and Theory* (London: Routledge, 2004).

[61] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity; An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), p.43.

[62] Ibid.

Jacques Derrida[63] as well as informing, in part, the ideas of Judith Butler[64] whilst also translating across many disciplinary confines, leading to the development of 'ethical criticism' in the field of literary studies, to 'draw out the often ignored significance of ethics for contemporary critical practice'.[65]

The 'ethical turn' has consequences for political thinking through its privileging of ethical encounter, which has lead philosopher Simon Critchley to argue that the political is only accessible if it is first 'mediated ethically',[66] claiming that '[i]t is the demand provoked by the other's decision in me that called forth political invention, that provokes me into inventing a norm and taking a decision.'[67] This leads to an effective primacy of the ethical where it necessarily precedes the political 'decision', but also, crucially mediates it through an essential recourse to 'me', locating the ethical, and thus political act, in an evoked subject or 'I'. Thus, although the ethical tradition overlaps strongly with Nancy's similar questioning of the stability and self-contained nature of the 'self', it nonetheless must take as its basic unit an individual ethical actor, placing any politics of a collective, or a community in a subordinate position to a primordially monadic ethical construction.

Despite the importance of this tradition for Nancy, his ontology of community may be seen to uproot some of the assumptions underlying the ethical turn, displacing the ethical moment of self/other encounter with a more ontological postulation of relationality. It is in fact precisely Nancy's insistence of an ontological method which places him most clearly in contradiction with Levinas, who argues that only ethical thought can attend to 'all the enormity, all the excess, all the infinity of the absolutely other that escapes ontology'.[68] Levinas writes that ontology is dangerously embroiled in 'power' and the 'State', where its error is in 'not calli[ing] into question 'the same' and therefore producing philosophical knowledge which takes as given the status and form of the state, even elevating its status to an ontological and therefore unmoveable level. [69] Levinas especially identifies this trait with the Heideggerian tradition, which he claims enacts a form of 'egoism' which fails to attend to its own contingency, becoming part of systems of power which reduce its

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[63] Notably in Jacques Derrida, 'Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas,' in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp.79-153.
[64] Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015).
[65] Robert Eaglestone, *Ethical Criticism: Reading After Levinas* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), p.13.
[66] Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction,* p.219.
[67] Ibid, p.462.
[68] Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being, or, Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1981), p. 199.
[69] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity,* p.46.

attentiveness to the other, a process which can be deployed, as we see in Heidegger's relation to Nazi Germany, to disastrous ends.[70]

Nancy shares this concern with Levinas, but is not led to reject Heidegger's ontological method, rather placing at the heart of being a refusal of any possibility of substance or identification through national or ethnic community. By drawing on Heidegger's figure of *Mitsein,* which Nancy argues is underdeveloped in Heidegger's work, produced as 'nothing more than a sketch' and reduced to 'a subordinate position',[71] Nancy expands this term such that he is able to reclaim an altered vision of ontology which addresses Levinas' concerns, offering a way of founding such ethical encounters without recourse to any notion of essence, but also through refusing any basic structure of the 'self', 'other' or individual. In this way Nancy does not reject the ethical, but rather drafts it into his more nebulous sense of 'being-with' offering an alternative basis for ethical thinking which does not require the primordial positing of an ethical subject of decision.

In place of the ethical subject, Nancy offers an alternative figure of the 'clinamen', a web of interrelatedness which sustains atoms at the same time as keeping them in constant flux; 'One cannot make a world with simple atoms. There has to be a clinamen…an inclining from one toward the other',[72] and as such atomistic structures such as the individual or ethical subject are preceded by a relational structure which allows for their very emergence. For Nancy, there is 'no theory, ethics, politics, or metaphysics of the individual that is capable of envisaging this clinamen'[73] and thus he will go on to subtly rebuke the notion of ethics as 'not a branch of philosophy, but first philosophy'[74] as it appears in Levinas, by arguing that 'no ethics would be independent from an ontology. Only ontology, in fact, may be ethical in a consistent manner.[75] In order to be ethically consistent therefore, to be fully attentive to the demands of ethical encounter and the figure of the 'other', Nancy argues we must proceed from a space where the figure of self/other are not yet fixed or visible, positing a relational ontology as their very condition of emergence.

For Christopher Watkins, Nancy's ontology may be seen to radically undermine Levinas' claim to challenge the logic of the 'same', by exposing the 'irreducible plurality of a coexistence that never becomes the same in the first place.[76] In this way, Nancy's challenge to the philosophical subject

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[70] Ibid, p.46.
[71] Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, p.93.
[72] Ibid, p.3.
[73] Ibid, p.4.
[74] Ibid, p.304.
[75] Ibid, p.21.
[76] Christopher Watkin, 'A Different Alterity: Jean-Luc Nancy's Singular Plural' *Paragraph: The Journal of the Modern Critical Theory Group* 30.2 (2007), p.51.

arguably goes further than Levinas, proposing an ontology which moves beyond the self to a reimagining of existence as such. For Nancy, this radically relational vision:

> transgresses humanity in the excess of the appearing that appears on the scale of the totality of being, but which also appears as that excess which is impossible to totalize. It is being's infinite original singularity.[77]

This is not simply a shift in frame from Levinas, but refocuses the possibility of the ethical as 'first philosophy' through a radical questioning of the ontological assumptions that might allow this to be posited in the first place. The 'infinite original singularity' of that which exists resists any 'anthropocentric' tendency to posit human relations or ethics at the heart of knowledge and understanding, rather demanding we examine the constellations of relationality and plurality which would appear to underpin any sense of self as its condition of (finite) emergence.[78] For Watkin it is ultimately 'not the question of alterity that preoccupies Nancy, but the question of plurality,' which becomes the basis for both Nancy's philosophical, as well as political and ethical thinking. [79]

In this way, purely ethical readings of community are in some ways incompatible with Nancy's work, which attempted to overcome any primordial monadic construction of the ethical and political in favour of a radical ontology of community, where the traditional 'I' of the subject is radically destabilized through a structure of relationality without a stable foundation in the form of the subject. Nonetheless, these ethical reading of deconstruction have in some quarters coloured the critical reception of Jean-Luc Nancy, where his methodology has often been subsumed into the Derridean ethics of alterity.[80] In Ana M. Luszczynska's *The Ethics of Community*, Nancy's work on the philosophical issue of 'community' is elucidated through expressly ethical lines, where literature figures as an ethical form of community, a 'space of deconstruction', and this 'space is where were are responsible for the other'.[81] Community is the space of '[c]onstitutive non-identity [and thus] is necessarily thoroughly interwoven with deconstruction and thereby always-already ethically embroiled'.[82] As such, we may see that for Laszczynska, Nancy's work constitutes little more than a reworking of an ethics of identity, asserting 'being-with' as an 'ethical space', with almost no

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[77] Nancy, *Being Singular Plural,* p.17.
[78] Ibid.
[79] Watkin, 'A Different Alterity', p.53.
[80] Other influential readings of Nancy which made be said to privilege the ethical over his Communist influence may be found in Todd May, *Reconsidering Difference: Nancy, Derrida, Levinas, and Deleuze* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997) and Madeleine Fagan, *Ethics and Politics After Poststructuralism: Levinas, Derrida and Nancy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013).
[81] Ana M. Luszczynska*, The Ethics of Community* (London: Continuum, 2012), p.5.
[82] Ibid.

mention of the expressly ontological and political nature of this formulation.[83] Indeed, when Laszczynska speculates on the political import of Nancy's ontology of community she locates this purely in the realm of language and signification, writing that 'being exists *immersed within language*',[84] where its political import functions only through literature's ability to offer a 'transformative experience of interruptive ethics' which can 'illicit distinct and arguably liberatory or democratizing approaches.'[85] In this way, Laszczynska's focus on the ethics of Nancy's approach reduces the politics of Nancy's community to 'experience' in the realm of signification, drawing out a vague sense of 'democracy' and 'liberation' which does little justice to the complexity and radically disruptive nature of his project.

By privileging the notion of a 'politics of community', the account given here will hope to capture the specificity of Nancy's work on community, expanding the terms of his account to a broader view of more material examples and factors. As Nancy writes, the 'effacement of community' must not be regarded simply as a 'sentimental misfortune, not even an ethical one, but an ontological misfortune, or disaster'.[86] This 'disaster' does not simply demand an ethical response but rather a rethinking of being-itself, and therefore we must turn to the how a relational ontology can offer resources for imagining political transformation. In Nancy, it is community which is the basis upon which this transformation must be thought, a term which will serve as a countermeasure against the near ubiquitous predominance of the structure of the 'individual' and the 'subject' as the basis of philosophical, ethical and political thought.

Community Beyond the Subject

In order to fully comprehend the political efficacy of Nancy's work, it is useful to identify the precise nature of his central ontological disputation. This can be summarized in the provocative contention that the philosophical canon has hitherto been dominated by conceptions of the 'subject' construed as foundational, stable and self-contained, which means that all of its major attendant genres of thinking (epistemology, ontology, ethics) are founded on an understanding of being which tacitly assumes on a founding myth of the 'individual' (often the great philosopher).[87] The structure of the 'subject' serves, in the first instance, to assume and enact a 'metaphysics' that relies on a sense of its 'certitude of an authority and a value'.[88] Such postulations of the 'subject' ultimately demand a

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[83] Ibid., p.12.
[84] Ibid., p.11.
[85] Ibid., p.6.
[86] Nancy, *Inoperative Community,* p.57.
[87] See Kelly Oliver, *Subjectivity Without Subjects: From Abject Fathers to Desiring Mothers* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998).
[88] Jean-Luc Nancy, *Who Comes After the Subject?* (London: Routledge, 1991), p.iv.

notion of its *substance,* as *actual basis of being,* which although strongly and richly critiqued in many traditions, nonetheless continues as a crucial part of the philosophical lexicon.

For Nancy, any conception of a 'substance' in the structure of the 'subject' relies on an assumption of anterior essence which is neither verifiable nor justifiable.[89] In fact, the postulation of 'essence' in either the 'subject' or 'community' would reduce our being to a given or presented *task,* which for Nancy would be the central logic of 'totalitarianism'. Rather, we must see the 'subject' as it is operatively construed as an *effect of a contingent mode of subjectivation,* where it reveals its other meaning as being *subjected to* in relation to power.[90] As such it emerges as less the foundation of thought, but rather an effect of it, whose assumption as a stable foundation brings the bourgeois myth of the 'individual' into philosophy by the back-door, expunging collective, communitarian, and relational modes of thinking from its mode of thinking.[91]

Despite its complex history, the philosophical 'subject' most commonly emerges as an analogue of 'self', denoting a singular being construed as the centre of thought, judgment and action.[92] We can see this most clearly in the highly influential structure of the Cartesian *Cogito,* which *brings itself into being* through a structure of self: *I* think and *my* thinking brings *me* into being (and by extension the world). This process is the foundation of a reality principle and an ontology of self which is grasped through an auto-relation, establishing a monadic 'subject' as the basic, originary and irreducible unit of thought. Thus, although Descartes begins his account by accepting 'we cannot reasonably deny that there are adequate grounds for not being entirely sure of the subject',[93] the function of the Cogito is to establish the 'subject' precisely as its *own origin,* insofar as the 'I' inherent in *cogito* (I think), is the basis for existence (*sum)* itself*.* If Descartes doubts reality, what nonetheless emerges as absolute, in both existence and in its relation to epistemology, is precisely the structure of the 'I', which appears to precede the question of existence itself. If Descartes cannot be sure, at least at first, *if* and *how* he exists, it is tacitly assumed in the construction of his formulation that existence *must pertain to the structure of the 'I'*: the single, self-contained subject, which thinks itself into

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[89] Ibid., p.4.
[90] See also Étienne Balibar's conception of the 'citizen subject', in *Citizen Subject: Foundations for Philosophical Anthropology*, trans. Steven Miller (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016).
[91] See Sanja Dejanovic, *Nancy and the Political*, ed. Sanja Dejanovic (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015) and Darren Sheppard, *On Jean-Luc Nancy: The Sense of Philosophy*, ed. Darren Sheppard, Simon Sparks and Colin Thomas (London: Routledge, 1997).
[92] For a fuller account of the complexity of the 'subject' see *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, ed. Barbara Cassin, trans. Steven Rendall et al. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), pp.1069-1091.
[93] Rene Descartes, *Philosophical Writings,* trans. E. Anscombe and P.T. Geach (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971), p.130.

being as the basis of being itself.[94] Community demands therefore that we 'depart resolutely from Descartes' in this way, establishing that if it is possible to speak of an 'I', this is not given as a basic unit of thought and being, but only possible within 'the 'I' of every sensing existence', that is, within the structure of the 'plural/singular'.[95]

An ontology of community must therefore refigure our thinking of existence beyond the assumption of an originary 'self', establishing how structures such as the 'self' and 'subject' only emerge as always already entangled, entwined, *though* and *by* their relationality. Any 'subject' that can be postulated only *appears,* (or as the etymology of 'subject' implies, is *thrown*) through a logic of 'compearance', where the conditions of possibility for its emergence are its relationality *with* other beings in the world.*[96]* This inherent relationality or 'commonality' is not an essence or substance, it does not 'emerge among already given subjects'. Rather it 'consists in the appearance of the *between* as such: you *and* I (between us) – a formula in which the *and* does not imply juxtaposition, but exposition.'[97] In this way, '*you'* are not the *other* to a preordained or originary '*I',* but the condition of its very possibility, the mode of its *exposition as itself.* As such the order and temporality of the subject is one of *simultaneity,* resisting all essence and determination, exposing only the *with* of its own emergence, as being-with or community.

In his later work *Being Singular Plural,* Nancy develops this disputation of the subject through a thinking of *singularity,* a condition of being which assures the non-exchangeability of human life, and therefore its value. This is not, as bourgeois morality would assert, affirmed and safe-guarded through the self-sufficient 'individual' or its philosophical corollary in the philosophical subject, but is possible only insofar as it is bound to its constitutive multiplicity.[98] Only in the relation between singularity and multiplicity, where self is only single and singular as part of a general mode of its 'with-ness', can we apprehend being (reconfigured as being-with). The originary and monadic subject is refuted in its self-constitution and pluralized in its fundamental structure. Its compearance means that every moment is its *own origin*, where its becoming is never bound to the myth of *self*, but the relationality which undoes this structure, exposing its multiplicity and the possibility of its infinite transformation.

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[94]Jean-Luc Nancy, *Ego Sum: Corpus, Anima, Fabula*, trans. Marie-Eve Morin (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016).
[95] Ibid., p.xi.
[96] Nancy, *The Inoperative Community,* p.29.
[97] Ibid.
[98] Nancy, *Being Singular Plural,* p.70.

This assertion of foundational relationality therefore exposes transformational possibilities at the very level of our being, where we can move beyond the solipsism of individualism to a more communal way of inhabiting and understanding the world. This would be the basis of the political ontology of community, where individualized, monadic and solipsistic life is torn from this structure as determinate and ontological origin, and opened to the multiple constellations which it can inhabit and become. Such an account is not fully compatible with the ethical frame of Levinas, which through positing a foundational relation of self/other, does not adequately account for the instability and mythic function of the 'subject, instead replicating a minimally Cartesian reality of the 'self' (as Cogito) in its very construction. Nancy's complex ontological disputation must be seen as invoking a strong political force, which through disputing monadic, individualized life at the very level of out being, can produce vital ways of thinking a community and world beyond capitalist operativity. In this way, the disputation of the structure of the subject, as well as the differential apparatus of inoperativity offer up tools for thinking how we can come to unwork and rework our thinking of being, ethics, experience, and finally politics itself.

There Is No One Community: Pluralizing the Political

The project of proposing a 'politics of community' has so far focused on Nancy, drawing out his relation to Derrida, Levinas and Descartes to explore the specificity of his political ontology. It is also necessary, however, to address what this interpretative frame might mean beyond these determinations, bringing Nancy's theories into dialogue with more contemporary and material political trajectories and contexts. In this way the rest of this chapter will address the question of community through the prism of political 'universality' and the 'riot-form' in order to demonstrate how Nancy's theories can be expanded beyond their initial frame, coming to inform interventions in contemporary debates in political theory. The common thread to this thinking of a 'politics of community' will emerge in the disputation of the 'subject', 'individual' and 'universality' through a general rejection of philosophical 'oneness'.[99] By disputing singular configurations of ontology and political thought, an affirmation of communality can be produced and asserted at the level of the philosophical as well as in the realm of presented reality, informing contemporary debates about political action and critique.

The project of presenting community as a foundational axis of the political is primarily a project of asserting 'being-with': a relational logic which can resist and even displace all logics of 'the one'.[100]

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[99] For a thorough interrogation of 'oneness' in Nancy see Ian James, *The Fragmentary Demand: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Jean-Luc Nancy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006).

[100] For an in-depth exploration of the politics of 'the one' see *Politics of the One: Concepts of the One and the Many in Contemporary Thought*, ed. Artemy Magun (New York: Continuum, 2013).

Oneness is what regulates and reduces the complex interactions of the *demos*: its entangled interpersonal relations, networks of power and agency, and communities of relation, into logics of identity, where the character of individuals or groups becomes contained and reified through stable and self-identical categories, e.g. 'the Jewish community', 'the working classes' and 'ethnic minorities'. Such categories can be seen to establish modes of relation through a 'total system of subjectivity',[101] whereby community is 'put to work' as part of a political totality which will not tolerate any modes of relationality which exceed the modes of subjectivation which it has established. For Jean-Luc Nancy the exemplary form of this process is the state, which 'actualizes [all] relation'[102] and emerges as an 'absolute' and 'universal' form, rendering community as a necessary and positively affirmed term, which nonetheless bears the trace of this very work; this operative logic which inaugurates and perpetuates the logic of the state at the level of relationality and 'civil society' itself. [103]

Opposition to such a pervasive and foundational onto-political process would demand attention to the manner by which community and relationality are being put to work: the way in which the very spaces where communities might start to build resistances and opposition to coercive modes of power and oppression can themselves replicate and perpetuate the same operative and coercive logics which they are trying to oppose. This process may be seen as emerging in myriad ways, be it through what some theorists have termed 'possessive individualism', where the essential property relation of a capitalist society mean that any political problem can only be tackled by individuals 'as essentially the proprietor of his [sic] own person or capacities',[104] and thus unbound to any form of foundational sociality or relationality, or through more concrete processes through which movements such as feminism and anti-racist politics might be seen to be increasingly focusing on individualist and reformist demands which can crowd out more radical and expansive demands for change.[105]

Such a project would necessitate a rethinking of the terms of the 'political', taking on an imperative to make political philosophy 'recommence, to restart itself from itself against itself',[106] demanding that any identity or oneness of the political be reframed according to the logic of the singular-plural, which 'dislocates every single, substantial essence of Being itself.'[107] This would therefore entail a

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[101] Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Birth to Presence* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), pp.111-112.

[102] Ibid., p.112.

[103] Ibid., p.116.

[104] Crawford Brough MacPherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[105] For an elaboration of this process, see Nancy Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism* (London: Verso, 2013).

[106] Nancy, *Being Singular Plural,* p.25.

[107] Ibid., p.29.

form of philosophical negativity found in the process of 're-treating' the political in the dominant configuration of power and ideology which constitutes the *status quo,* opposing the ways in which the meaning of politics is restricted in the discourse of the capitalist state.[108] However, unlike the purely negative approach that Adorno may be seen to spearhead in *Negative Dialectics,* or the so-called 'non-relational' and 'anti-social' projects of queer negativity that we see in the critical reception of Leo Bersani and Lee Edelman, community is a conceptual tool through which a positive assertion of community and being-with may be found; a resource for renewing the political as well as opposing it in its present forms.[109] Such a positivity can only proceed, however, through this very project of the negative, whereby the operative logics of community, the manner by which community has been 'put to work' in capitalist society in such a way that it has become almost impossible to think it outside of these operative models, which must be critiqued, deconstructed and refigured along radical and explicitly antagonistic lines.

Community is not only the locus of an inherent resistance to operativity but also the model of its very refiguration, the place of irreducible being-with, where relationality always exceeds and undermines its own operative configurations. In this excess, in this resistance to operativity, which Nancy claims is the 'essence without essence'[110] of the political as such, we may find the tools through which to assert a positive paradigm of human relations. This is not positive in the sense of offering up a substance or identity on which community is founded, rather community is simply expressive of being-with, against and without the operative structures of relation which necessitate and perpetuate inequality and domination. As a result, we have an assertion of equality as a foundational logic to any political project, but crucially, one which takes on the demand of equality through recourse only to this structure of relation, and not through a universal or substantial identity of this equality. This is the charge that Nancy puts to Étienne Balibar, who invokes the French Republican call for 'fraternity' as the paradigm for the assertion of an 'equaliberty' to found the universal egalitarian demand. For Nancy this process draws upon a 'generic identity' which undermines the very logic of equality, as its identity cannot help but be founded on a 'politics of exclusivity and the correlative exclusion – of a class, of an order, of a "community".'[111]

In this way the demands of 'community' or 'being-with' signify a mode of relationality which exceeds its evocation in conventional political discourses which naturalize the figure of 'capital' and the

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[108] Jean-Luc Nancy and Philip Lacoue-Labarthe, *Retreating the Political*, ed. Simon Sparks (London: Routledge, 1997).

[109] For example, Lee Edelman *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004) and Leo Bersani *Homos* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).

[110] Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe, *Retreating the Political*, p.45.

[111] Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural,* p.24.

'state', as such iterations would be bound to a mode of operativity that would in fact work to 'negate community'. Thus evocations of 'cosmopolitanism' or 'multiculturalism' that appear to embrace a plural community may nonetheless bear the trace of operativity, subsuming resistance and difference through the very demand for inclusion into the state apparatus. Critical exploration of such models exposes the manner through which they can operate as a form of hegemonic control whereby demands for plurality and 'multi-culture' may be seen to be part of the 'total system of subjectivation', which ratifies the state as the sole arbiter of all relational structures.[112] We may look to the way in which multiculturalism works as a model of regulating community where the *demos* is split into discrete identity groupings that assert their plurality based upon the assumption of a white centre and self-contained 'other' communities, which are 'embraced' only insofar as this structure is posited upon an inaugural separation of 'host' and the 'other'.[113]

Sara Ahmed has argued that liberal multiculturalism can be seen as a tacit reaffirmation of the oneness of the state form itself, as '[t]he multicultural nation […]takes diversity as an ego ideal, as if it has achieved diversity because of its qualities or attributes.'[114] In such a landscape, where the demand of state multiculturalism can in fact make it harder to effectively organize against structures of racism and exclusion which are assumed as absent or peripheral according to the 'ego-ideal' of the tolerant multicultural state, community can emerge as a thoroughly co-opted and politically overdetermined form, tending to name a system of hegemony rather than one of resistance. Thus what is needed is a radical re-evaluation and reassertion of community at the level of the political and ontological, which would absolutely resist the logic of identitarian co-optation and allow for the assertion of community in a more radical and transformative form.

Nancy's project takes on 'the political' at the level of the philosophical, seeking to use the mechanisms of philosophical thought to demonstrate the deep-rooted and pernicious logic of 'the one' where 'philosophical politics regularly proceeds according to the surreptitious appeal to the metaphysics of the one-origin'.[115] However this project is not simply located in an esoteric and purely abstract philosophical dispute about the one-ness, but is also a core component of a more everyday thinking and ideology, where the 'being-with' of the community is often supplanted and regulated through designations such as nation and identity formations such as 'the Muslim

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[112] For an extended analysis of this function of multiculturalism see Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), pp.121-145.

[113] See Stuart Hall, 'The Multicultural Question'*,* Pavis Centre for Social and Cultural Research (2001).

[114] Sara Ahmed, 'Liberal Multiculturalism is the Hegemony – It's an Empirical Fact– A Response to Slavoj Žižek*',* *Darkmatter Journal* (2008) http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2008/02/19/%e2%80%98liberal-multiculturalism-is-the-hegemony-%e2%80%93-its-an-empirical-fact%e2%80%99-a-response-to-slavoj-zizek/ [accessed 15 October 2017].

[115] Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, p.24.

community'. This language of state multiculturalism, although claiming to account for and empower communities, may instead be seen to be reducing relationality to the logic of identity. The problem of community is not so much that it is denied, that its force would simply reside in an asserting of its virtue in the face of its political negation and opposition. Rather, community is insisted upon and demanded by the *status quo*: the language of community is part of everyday political rhetoric, and drafted into the universal vision of the multicultural, liberal nation state, which denudes it of political power by claiming to have already included it.

In this way, Nancy's pluralized sense of the political can serve as a basis for rethinking of form of universalist thinking which have historically made secondary those 'particular' concerns of 'race', gender' and what Judith Butler has called the ''et ceteras',[116] which are variously diminished in significance by liberal and Marxist discourses alike, and made secondary to the primacy of the economic (as the political proper). In recent decades, many philosophers have attempted to salvage the concept of the universal, seeking to address its former exclusions by asserting it in a newly dialectical form, but this has arguably worked at the expense of modes of political inclusion, reducing multiplicity of political vectors which make up human experience and oppression.[117] For example, Ernesto Laclau's highly influential reworking of the Hegelian universalism is presented as a means for combatting the 'elusive character of singularity and difference, which have become the mantras of the 'postmodernist critiques,' which 'seem to logically transcend the opposition of the universal and the particular, but […]can hardly become illustrated historically or find a moral or social referent without returning to the subordinate position of the particular or the sublimated position of negatively incarnating the universal.'[118] Against this, drawing upon Marxist feminist, intersectional, and racial capitalism analyses, we can find examples of how a focus on community can throw into relief the complex and multiple ways in which different modes of political oppression intersect beyond any tendency to economic determinism.[119]

Social Reproduction and the Politics of the Riot

As we have seen, the possibility of proposing a 'political community' has proceeded through a series of foreclosures: through the refusal of community as 'project', the 'retreat' of conventional

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[116] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (*New York and London: Routledge, 1999)*, p.182.

[117] See Slavoj Zizek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* (London: Verso, 2000), Saul Newman, *Unstable Universalities: Poststructuralism and Radical Politics* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), Étienne Balibar, 'Toward a Politics of the Universal' *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 29.1 (2008) and Alain Badiou, *The Communist Hypothesis* (London: Verso, 2015).

[118] Zizek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, p.7.

[119] For a discussion of racial capitalism, see Gargi Bhattacharyya, *Rethinking Racial Capitalism: Questions of Reproduction and Survival* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2018).

discursive rendering of the 'political', and the process of 'unworking' community beyond any founding principle of essence of origin.[120] Although Nancy asks us to 'go farther' than his own account, opening up a limit point at which his philosophy could relate to literary or more political accounts of community beyond the field of ontology, he nonetheless also warns against collapsing the political and the ontological. Summarizing the convergent drives which underpin his writing on community, Nancy ends *The Disavowed Community* with the following claim: 'Any ontology is too limited that cannot be traced back to relation prior to being. And all politics that seeks to found itself ontologically is too much.'[121] Seeking therefore to follow Nancy's injunction to rethink ontology along fundamentally relational lines, whilst taking heed of his warning against a politics founded on this ontology itself, we may look to examples of communitarian impulses in political reality which may offer ways to rethink this very relation, taking the operative logic of 'unworking' as our point of departure.

To continue our postulation of a 'politics of community' would therefore require an attempt to unearth forms of community which escape or disrupt the modes of 'work' which Nancy warns against, to find a principle of 'unworking', 'inoperativity' and 'idleness' in material examples, which do not propose or assert a political community as such, but which produce communal capacities that may make present the '*unheard* demand' of a community which is marginal, nascent or *in potentia*.[122] Against reductive postulations of collectivity tied to universalist conceptions of the political such as the 'Proletariat', 'Party' or 'working class', where these terms have been historically deployed to 'substitut[e] the domination of "the masses" for that of the masters' in a move which simply replaces a general mode of 'sovereignty' within the same universal paradigm, the task off political thought today is to imagine a truly 'shared sovereignty' through a pluralized conception of the political and its collective and communal actors.[123]

In resisting any tendency to homogenize the social base of collective action, innovations in recent Marxist theory offer avenues to propose new ways of thinking the interrelated modalities of community and the political. Most notably, increasing attention to the sphere of 'social reproduction' has led to an expanded vision of the space of the political, beyond traditionally 'productive' spaces of work, labour and commodity production, to include a far wider sense of what types of social life are required to sustain and reproduce a politico-economic order. For Nancy Fraser this requires therefore that we 'adapt[…] an economistic perspective [which] understands capitalism

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[120] Nancy*, Inoperative Community,* p.xxvi.
[121] Nancy, *Disavowed Community,* p.75.
[122] Nancy, *Inoperative Community,* p.40.
[123] Nancy, *Being Singular Plural,* p.42.

too narrowly, as an economic system *simpliciter,* rather arguing for an expanded understanding of capitalism, encompassing both its official economy and the latter's "noneconomic" background conditions.' [124] Such an approach would have much in common with an 'intersectional approach', whose 'great accomplishment […] was to expand the framework of discussion—initially to race, gender, and class, and more recently to other relations of oppression, such as those of sexuality and ability.'[125] By taking on the necessity of understanding the complex and interlocking political modalities which make up social life, and the plural set of oppressions which people may experience, theories of social reproduction integrate 'those layered and contradictory experiences as part of a much broader, dynamic, and materialist set of social relation', which they claim are 'created, contested, and reproduced by our labor inside and outside the household.'[126] In this way, such a political vision, which centres capitalist dynamics at the same time as placing within complex mechanism of interlocking modes of oppression, can come to offer not only a renewed sense of the social, but crucially, an expanded notion of 'community' at the heart of the political:

> The community therefore is not an area of freedom and leisure auxiliary to the factory, where by chance there happen to be women who are degraded as the personal servants of men. The community is the other half of capitalist organization, the other area of hidden capitalist exploitation, the other, hidden, source of surplus labor. It becomes increasingly regimented like a factory, what we call a social factory, where the costs and nature of transport, housing, medical care, education, police are all points of struggle.[127]

This account of the social and communal basis of the reproduction of capitalism is strongly analogous to Nancy's own vision, if expressing it in a highly different methodological framework. Mirroring Nancy's desire to pluralize, at root, our conception of political activity, at the same time as insisting on a highly expanded sense of 'work' as an operative modality of the capitalist state that more and more dominates all forms of social life, the collective agent of resistance to such processes can no longer be restricted to a sense of a universal subject in the 'proletariat', or any other unified sense of the productive worker under capitalism. Rather, resistance to processes of capitalist operativity would have to acknowledge the plurality of political dynamics which bring about

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[124] Nancy Fraser, 'Crisis of Care? On the Social Reproductive Contradictions of Contemporary Capitalism' in *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentring Oppression,* ed. Tithi Bhattacharya (London: Pluto Press, 2017), pp.22-23.

[125] David McNally, 'Intersections and Dialectics: Critical Reconstructions in Social Reproduction Theory' in *Social Reproduction Theory,* p.108.

[126] Susan Ferguson, 'Canadian Contributions to Social Reproduction Feminism, Race and Embodied Labor,' in *Race, Gender and Class* 15.1 (2008), p.41.

[127] Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Regulating the Poor: The Functions of Public Welfare* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), p.11.

inequality and subjectivation, finding new ways of collecting such multiple positions into an expanded and more open-ended sense of political community.

Joshua Clover offers an exemplary paradigm for developing the figure of the political in this way, theorizing an important successor to the figure of the 'strike' in the 'riot-form', an underexamined but insurgent political form, which is increasingly 'inextricable from ongoing systemic capitalist crisis.'[128] Beyond the space of the factory and its concomitant history of strike action and collective bargaining, Clover argues these can no longer be viewed as central to Post-Fordist capitalist economies in the Global North. Taking on the figure of the 'social factory',[129] as a setting in which a wider view of the conditions of production and reproduction can be understood, he posits the space of the 'agora'[130] or 'the marketplace' which 'provide[s] the main situation for reproduction' and 'struggles over reproduction '.[131] If the workplace strike is historically 'the setting of the prices of labour power', a space of negotiation between different political actors about their social worth, it is only in the space of the 'agora' and in the act of the 'riot' in which a comparable political power can be enacted, this time as the 'setting of the prices for market goods.'[132] This is because during our current historical period, circulation is more important than production for capital accumulation. The riot offers a wider and more varied collective of actors than the strike, including what may generally be perceived to be non-economic actors: those 'surplus populations',[133] non-valued workers such as those engaging in unpaid domestic labour, immigrants, non-working populations, racialized and prison populations, who engage to some extent in the larger economic environment, but have only restricted access to its major flows of circulation.[134]

Although perhaps a surprising locus for a politics of community, the form of the riot offers a striking example of a political practice engaged in an 'unworking' of the political stakes of community. Its expanded field of political actors, those 'surplus populations' outside of the normative structures of value and labour, and 'dispossessed' by capital, may in a conventionally ideological sense be termed *idle* (that is, non-productive in terms of producing surplus value through labour), and in the riot-form this position leads to a particular form of disruption within the operative economic dynamics in

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[128] Joshua Clover, *Riot. Strike. Riot*: The New Era of Uprisings (London: Verso, 2016), p.1.
[129] This term originally is found in the work of Mario Tronti, 'Our Operaismo' in *New Left Review* 73.1 (2012).
[130] Clover, *Riot. Strike. Riot,* p.176.
[131] Ibid., p.46.
[132] Ibid., p.15.
[133] This term, also referred to as the 'reserve army of labour' is first found in chapter 25 of Karl Marx, *Capital. Vol. 1: A Critique of Political Economy* trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Classics, 1990).
[134] For an account of the racialized dynamics of 'surplus population' see Fred Moten, 'Necessity, Immensity, and Crisis (Many Edges/Seeing Things)' *Floor: Poetics of Everyday Critique* 1.1 (2011).

which it is situated.[135] Mirroring Nancy's call for community without formal project or goal, and expressing modes of being which are fundamentally intolerable, but also often simply unintelligible, to the current order or representation, riots denote a form of political action which is not yet visible as fully political, a form of communal attachment which is not yet knowable as community, and expressive political capacities which disrupt, on a fundamental basis, the operative functions of a capitalist state. If one may object that such capacities in the riot always emerge within an axis of violence that may rightly incite ethical objection, Clover nonetheless reminds us that riots remain an enduring aspect of political life throughout the globe, responding as they do so often to parallel forms of state-violence, and as such, at the very least, 'they deserve an adequate theory.'[136]

Giving the example of the 2011 riots in London and throughout other metropolitan spaces of the UK, we can see how a discursive political matrix worked to obscure the full political function and meaning of the riots, and how retrieving these may lead us to a strengthened sense of a politics of community. Highlighting the forms of universalist community which were deployed in political discourse, coalescing around visions of the law-abiding national community, we can see how community can become work of an exclusionary lexicon of the state which obscures modes of structural inequality. What the discourse around the riots demonstrates is the difficulty in delineating the political *terms* of the riot, which 'cannot be anything but political'[137], but which nonetheless remain incomprehensible within the conventional deployment of political thought. The riot, crucially, is engaged precisely in a form of undoing and unworking, which may shed light on what Nancy termed '*La Communauté Désoeuvrée'*, expanding on the political stakes of what we may term 'idle community' through the examination of surplus populations.

Community and the 2011 UK Riots

In August 2011, riots tore through the UK, starting in areas of London and spreading to cities such as Birmingham, Manchester, Bristol and Merseyside, as well as many other parts of the country. In this eruption the figure of 'community' emerged as a central site of contention, both as part of a state version of events which accounted for the riots as the denigration of community, and through analyses of their causes which exposed deep-seated resentment and anger to policies of segregation, inequality and poverty.[138] The response of the British government consisted in an

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[135] Clover, *Riot. Strike. Riot,* p.179.
[136] Ibid., p.1.
[137] Ibid., p.47.
[138] For a comprehensive study of the riots see the report Paul Lewis, et al. *Reading the Riots: Investigating England's Summer of Disorder* (London: The London School of Economics and Political Science and *The Guardian*, 2011)

absolute refusal to see the riots as anything but an eruption of 'criminality', and as an example of individual moral deficiencies.[139] Likewise any collective identity or foundation to the riots was presented through the prism of 'gangs', which in his statement to the Commons, Cameron claimed 'were at the heart of the protests and have been behind the co-ordinated attack' despite subsequent evidence to that only 13% of rioters arrested were gang members.[140] The effect of this was to establish any communality that preceded or was produced in the riots as simply 'criminal' from the start, serving to thoroughly delegitimize any sense of community of those associated with the riots. In this way, the ties of the rioters to their own communities were effectively negated in advance, they were simply destroying their 'own communities', and the only response appropriate to this was the assertion of a state community of law and national identity against them.[141]

Then prime minister David Cameron's speech on 15th August, 2011, four days after the riots had ended, functioned as a simple and rhetorically repeated reaffirmation of a common identity, a being-in-common of the nation, where '[t]here is no "them" and "us" - there is us. We are all in this together, and we will mend our broken society - together.'[142] Thus community was not being negated by Cameron but rather insisted upon according to a common identity, literally a 'we' which simultaneously demanded the inclusion and constitutive exclusion of the rioters themselves. In effect, although an assertion of an expansive national community, it worked at the expense of certain communities, figuring those engaged in the riots as outside of this identity. Further, Cameron's assertion of an abstract and all-encompassing community though his evocation of a nebulous 'we' was a rhetorical device through which the material processes of community's denigration, which derived in part from policies which he had himself implemented (for example the cutting of funding for youth centres, and community projects), could be eschewed by a co-opted appropriation of the language of communality. Thus the apparently virtuous overcoming of an antagonistic 'us' and 'them' was in fact the strategic denial of how communities can and do operate precisely through logics of antagonism and division, as this is the necessary corollary of asymmetrical power relations, poverty and extreme wealth, and deliberate policies of exclusion and fragmentation in society.[143]

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[139] David Cameron, 'Speech on the Fight-back after the Riots', *New Statesman* 15 August 2011.

[140] Lewis et al., *Reading the Riots: Investigating England's Summer of Disorder,* p.21.

[141] David Cameron, 'PM's speech on the fightback after the riots' https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pms-speech-on-the-fightback-after-the-riots [accessed 15 October 2017].

[142] Ibid.

[143] For an analysis of these policies, see Jeremy Gilbert, *Common Ground: Democracy and Collectivity in an Age of Individualism* (London: Pluto Press, 2013).

This approach worked to obscure how the state-sanctioned denigration of community as a mode of exclusion, regulation and discipline was the clear determining factor in the eruption of the riots. The *Reading the Riots* report draws attention to the persistence identification of 'injustice and inequality' at the heart of the concerns of the rioters, and the significant overlap of the areas involved and cuts to local services, as well as long-term lack of job opportunities and intrusive and aggressive policing of racialized communities.[144] By eliding any reference to this structural context, however, the government response served to ignore the concerns of the communities which produced the riots, simply opposing them to a projected national and law-abiding community of which they were seemingly not part. Despite this, although rioters were presented wholly negatively in relation to legitimate modes of community, there was at least some judicial recognition of their collectivity, which came to the fore in a collective responsibly for the damage caused by the riots, which was posed as the justification for extraordinary legislative measures taken against them, in almost every case leading highly inflated criminal sentences.[145] In this way any commonality that the rioters had was used as a reason to punish them, whilst any legitimate concerns they might have about the exclusion of their own communities was strategically expunged from the national discourse. Community was deployed as a mode of relation that allowed only for the assertion of the regulatory apparatus of the state, constituting all the rioters as communally responsible for the riots, whilst the solidarities, communalities and community that were the context and *effect* of the riots were not recognized by the state or the legal system, with each rioter being tried separately.[146]

Attention to the discursive mechanisms produced in government and media responses to the riots can shed light on a systematic effort to constitute rioting as outside of any sense of legitimate community, whilst also rendering it outside of the political proper. What such discourses enacted was therefore a form of symbolic marginalization of certain communities, which reaffirmed pre-existing modes of exclusion, the conditions of which arguably gave rise to the riots in the first instance. In this way, we can trace a long process of devaluation which such communities experienced, which was compounded in the riot-form itself, producing profound impacts on the those affected in terms of their material conditions, but also their (mis)representation in society in general. As such we may turn to Clover's thesis that the riot is the 'setting of the price of commodities at 'zero',[147] to examine the ways in which riots not only *arise* from 'surplus' populations

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[144] Lewis et al., *Reading the Riots: Investigating England's Summer of Disorder,* p.24.

[145] See Tom Slater, 'The Neoliberal State and the 2011 English Riots: A Class Analysis' in *Urban Uprisings: Challenging Neoliberal Urbanism in Europe,* ed. Margrit Mayer et al. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) for a more in-depth analysis of this.

[146] Nina Power, 'The Only Good Public is a Moving Public,' *TkH* 20.1 (2012), pp.10-14.

[147] Clover, *Riot. Strike. Riot.* p.29.

which are not valued by the general economy, but also the way in which the act of rioting itself is stripped of any political meaning or substance, simply becoming unintelligible to this general environment itself.

We see the logic of non-valuation at work in the interview conducted as part of the *Reading the Riots* project, led by *The Guardian* newspapers and LSE, where respondents who were engaged in the riots, often, as the report notes, from working-class, ethnic minority, and precariously employed sectors of the population, linked their inability to engage in the wider economy through adequate employment to a profound sense of subjective devaluation:

> Like you could work in Tesco but … Tesco could make you feel like you're a valuable worker, and you could be on £5 an hour. But it doesn't matter, yeah, 'cos you feel you're worth something you would never jeopardise that. Because that feeling's better than making £10 an hour. Do you see what I'm saying? And that's what I feel like: people are not worth anything in this area.[148]

The subjectivity which this quotation speaks to is consistently construed through a non-valuation in the economy, such that 'people … in this area' are 'not worth anything', rendered as surplus populations, who are effectively idle. They do not take part, are not seen to take part, and therefore are outside of the general work of the capitalist state, a context which evidently led to feelings of frustration and powerlessness. What occurs in the act of riot therefore may be seen to be inversely related to this process. Having been excluded by the local economy, it finds a new way to take part in the transgression of the very modes of work and circulation which have excluded it. Once excluded from such spaces, it takes control of them through the force of its own collectivity, which builds through a shared affective disposition, tapping into the economic, subjective, and existential concerns of its participants. It is this sense of a shared destiny and purpose which is the source of how many interviewees in *Reading the Riots* express a sense of sheer vibrancy and dynamism of the event:

> What I really noticed that day was that we had control. It felt great. We could do what we wanted to do. We could do as much damage as we can, and we could not be stopped. Normally the police control us. But the law was obeying us, know what I mean?'[149]

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[148] Lewis et al., *Reading the Riots: Investigating England's Summer of Disorder,* p.26.
[149] Ibid., p.23.

The riot is able to produce subjective and collective transformation, that even if effectively curtailed by law, remains in the symbolic imagination of communities and cultures, still open to the possibilities and potentialities that it, if momentarily, exposed for them. In excavating such potentials, clearly there is here a risk of romanticizing the riot and unduly privileging its modes of disruption in their productive rather than destructive, violent, and ethically objectionable effects. What an analysis of community is designed here to shed light on is simply the way in which such capacities were made more or less entirely invisible in the general discussion of the riots, leading to a lack of understanding of their political contexts. More, what may emerge from such an analysis is its affinities with Nancy's notion of 'unworking' and 'idle' community, the way in which such symbolic erasures of the rioter's communal life concealed their exposition of a form of community, precisely as its communality radically disrupted the general operation of the political. The riot-form's consistent refusal to construe itself as project or through clear political demands appear to align it with Nancy's vision of the politics of an inoperative community, exemplifying an unworked politics which consists in unworking the terms of the political such. Moreover, by viewing the two figures in tandem, this may also reaffirm the ambiguity and fragility of Nancy's vision, as in the case of the riot, whatever communal capacities ensue appear to be necessarily ephemeral due to their suppression by the mechanisms of the state.

As such, the overall effect of the riots has hardly been positive, including loss of life and the mass imprisonment of its participants. If the rioters viewed themselves as 'not worth anything in this area' and saw their rioting as a form of rebellion and protest against their lack of stake and opportunity in society, those involved generally find their condition greatly worsened:

> 'Now I regret being involved … now I got kicked out of college, I got a court case coming, I'm wasting my education. I'm just on the streets doing nothing. My friends weren't there that day I got arrested, so they don't know. 'Cos I ain't told them. It's not a good thing I've done; it's nothing to be proud about. If I hadn't been arrested, I'd be living a life of crime every day. If no one's stopping me from committing [a crime] again, I'd keep doing a crime.'[150]

In this account, we see how the government response to the riots, however they were justified, simply served to compound the conditions of social exclusion and alienation which were its overriding ground for emergence. Furthermore, what Cameron's exclusionary vision of national, law-abiding community therefore made invisible, was not only the structural causes of the riots and the communities affected, but also the specific event which led to them. Part of the discourse

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[150] Ibid.

surrounding the riots pivoted around disagreements about the composition of its actors, that is, the question of *who* was rioting and the nature of their collective identity. Variously debated through a conservative discourse of 'pure criminality' and 'broken families', to more liberal insistence on its structural determinations and the ongoing diminishment of the welfare state, part of what became obscured in this debate was its anti-police character, sparked as it was by the killing of Mark Duggan.[151] As we can see in the BlackBerry Messenger (BBM) text message which the *Reading the Riots* report has unearthed as the starting point of the riots, the galvanizing principle of the riots may be found in the antipathy to the police, as brought into focus by recent police violence. In its stating of the geographical locations which were the immediate community of the sender, as its reference to 'yards' we can see the strong sense of a shared feeling of place, as well as a clear antagonist:

> Everyone in edmonton enfield wood
> green everywhere in north link up at
> enfield town station at 4 o clock sharp!!!!
> Start leaving ur yards n linking up with
> your niggas.
> Fuck da feds, bring your ballys and
> your bags trollys, cars vans, hammers
> the lot!![152]

It is vital to note the determination of race in relation to the policing of the communities convoked by this message, which are disproportionately BAME in population and subject to 'aggressive' and 'disproportionate' 'modes of 'over-policing'.[153] The 2012 Runnymede report points out 'pervasive nature of institutional racisms, race inequalities and political disenfranchisement' were 'intrinsic'[154] to the outbreak of the riots, specifically what was perceived as a an example of racist state violence against Mark Duggan. Notably American poet Claudia Rankine takes time in her lyric poem *Citizen* to explore the affinities of the killing of Mark Duggan to those of Trayvon Martin and James Craig Anderson, noting the racialized terms in which the riots where 'labelled' by 'government officials,' where 'images of the looters' continued rampage eventually displaced the fact that an unarmed man

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[151] In this way, we can see a clear resonance with the Brixton Riots of 1981 and the subsequent Scarman Report, which effectively exonerated the police of racism or brutality.

[152] Lewis et al., *Reading the Riots,* p.30.

[153] Carly Lightowlers, 'Let's Get Real About the 'Riots': Exploring the Relationship Between Deprivation and the English Summer Disturbances of 2011' in *Critical Social Policy: A Journal of Theory and Practice in Social Welfare* 35.1 (2015), pp 89-109.

[154] Ojeaku Nwabuzo, *The Riot Roundtables: Race and the Riots of August 2011* (London: Runnemede Trust, 2012), p.32.

was shot to death.'[155] Extending the frame of her 'American lyric' to the British context, Rankine in this moment opens up the frame of her own poem to a shared context between the USA and, where 'because white men can't/police their imagination/black men are dying'.[156] This extension of reference, which has thus far been absent from critical literature on Rankine, points to how such deaths can lead to a collective form of mourning, which draws on a history of racial injustice which can galvanize an expansive community beyond the frame of the nation state. [157] In the case of the London riots, accounts of the rioters themselves attest to a similar process, where the community around Mark Duggan who were mourning his death, opened up to a larger community of the dispossessed, beyond traditional modes of identification:

> Originally, it started off, it was like, yes, it was a group of black people, the family members and friends … But I seen Hasidic Jews from Stamford Hill, who were down there. I seen lots of white people. I seen guys from shops, Turkish, it turned out … it was all like the whole neighbourhood came out. The neighbourhood knew it was all wrong [shooting of Mark Duggan].[158]

In accounts like this, we can see how a shared subjectivating sense of outrage worked as a contagion, building a disruptive new collectivity in the act of protest and rioting. Placed in the 'surplus population', who suffer symbolic and material erasure in relation to the wider economy, as well as, as Cameron's speech shows, a sense of national community, what emerges, at least minimally in this account, is the way that rioters *did* emerge from communities, and their actions were in fact constitutive of a new and emergent community. The act of rioting involved the creation of new relationalities through the very sharing of the act: modes of temporary solidarity, symbolic affiliation, and shared pleasure in the transgression of law as well a binding logic of defiance in the face of perceived injustice and state violence. Following Clover, we can see therefore that 'the riot is not an isolated and singular event; it is both a real fraction of and a figure for *the many* to which it is always adjacent… [a]metonymy 'of the 'people' [and] the many's internal relation externalized under certain conditions.'[159]

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[155] Rankine, *Citizen,* pp.115-6.

[156] Ibid., p.135.

[157] None of the available writing on Rankine's *Citizen* note her reference to the UK context, restricting their analysis purely to the USA. See Mary-Jean Chan, 'Towards a Poetics of Racial Trauma: Lyric Hybridity in Claudia Rankine's *Citizen' Journal of American Studies* 52.1 (2018), Bella Adams, 'Black Lives/White Backgrounds: Claudia Rankine's Citizen: An American Lyric and Critical Race Theory' in *Comparative American Studies An International Journal* 15.1, (2017), pp.54–71 and Andrew Epstein, *Attention Equals Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

[158] Lewis et al. *Reading the Riots,* p.31.

[159] Clover, *Riot. Strike. Riot.* p.73.

This act did not proceed through the usual channels of the political, neither communicating demand or project, and asking nothing of the state, the laws of which it by nature refuted. For some commentators this lack of 'demands' meant that such events fell into apolitical and '(self)destructive violence',[160] as they did not conform to political action as it has been traditionally conceived in universalist thought. A politics of community may intervene here, however, to simply note the presencing of community as such, against and in excess of its operative configurations, unintelligible, unsettling, and unknown in its destination. What is exposed in the riots is therefore a mode of the political which served precisely to unwork the terms of the political as such, drawing on its very idleness in relation to the economy, as well as in relation to politics itself, to make present a mode of community through the eruption of what had been made invisible and even unthinkable in the operativity of the capitalist state. In this way, it follows Blanchot's evocation of May '68, which in his text *Unavowable Community,* is the only concrete political example of community which he finds adequate to his own conception, which exposed the:

> Presence of the "people" in their limitless power which, in order not to limit itself, accepts doing nothing…[through] their instinctive refusal to accept any power, their absolute mistrust in identifying with a power to which they would delegate themselves, thus distrust in their *declaration of impotence.*[161]

Here for Blanchot, and following him Nancy, who points to 'a contestation *of* politics – insurrection, revolution', [162] we find in the apparent idleness of excluded populations, precisely a kind of politics which is an unworking of the work of the political as such. If Nancy expresses concern about the possibility of such a figure in Blanchot, wondering how this could emerge 'in excess of all identification and memory', [163] we may find in the figure of the contemporary riots a way of addressing the possibilities inherent in political acts which unwork the terms of the present, providing a concrete example through which to take seriously the work of unworking we find in both Blanchot and Nancy. Clearly such an approach demands overstepping their philosophical method, reaching beyond what an ontology can offer thought, but in the increasing predominance of riots, as well as the simple question of *work* in politics and community, increasing levels of 'surplus population' who neither take part in productive labour, or the general 'work' of engaging the general

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[160] Slavoj Zizek, 'Shoplifters of the World Unite' *London Review of Books* (August 19, 2011) and Alain Badiou*, The Rebirth of History: Times of Riots and Uprisings,* trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2012).
[161] Blanchot, *Unavowable Community,* p.32.
[162] Nancy, *Disavowed Community,* p.31.
[163] Ibid.

economy of societal reproduction demanded by the capitalist state, it may be possible to see the meanings of *désoeuvrée* (inoperativity, unworking, idleness) gaining renewed significance and prescience.

Conclusion

Through examining the 2011 UK riots and its exposition of communal capacities in the space of 'surplus populations', we see an example through which to carry out Nancy's demand to expand the terms of the 'political'. This allows for a 'politics of community' which is founded on expanding the very notion of the political and political actors, where the structures of the 'subject', 'state' and 'universality' are opened to a process of disruption and possibility. In addressing the figures of 'idleness' and unworking, it may be possible to see how Nancy's philosophical lexicon can translate into material examples, offering fruitful directions for the intersection of philosophical and political thought. The figure of '*la communauté désœuvrée*' thus emerges as of vital importance, its evocation of processes of unworking, idleness and inoperativity, exposing how current configurations of community inhibit our ability to express ourselves politically, whilst offering possibilities for forms of communal resistance. In rethinking community through a disputation of the 'subject' and the 'universal' we can productively envision transformations in our very political being, unworking the terms of operativity to invoke emergent modes of community which may point to new political possibilities at the level of community.

The figure of the 'politics of community' serves as a modality through which our thinking of the political can be opened to interruption, expansion and renewal. It challenges universalism, individualism and monadic conceptions of the 'subject' that restrict our ability to articulate political demands, demanding a conception of political action which is attentive to the disruptive plurality inherent in community. The foundation of community must therefore be made radically without origin and therefore *unstable,* operating through a logic whereby citizens can engage in reworking the foundation of community itself, and for Nancy this process can be found in literature and its relation to *myth.* In the following chapter we can therefore look to Nancy's conception of 'myth interrupted', as a modality through which radical relational possibilities can be found. Literature emerges as vital site for examining relational forms, bringing into relief the complex relation between social and political structures, and their expression in representation and literature. In addressing the figure of 'myth' in relation to experimental modes of literary form, we will see how Nancy's crucial concept of 'myth interrupted' can offer us ways of understanding the interrelated

modalities of literature and the political, and the capacity in each to expose and realize political potentials at the level of community.

'We know the scene: there is a gathering, and someone is telling a story'[1]
(Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*)

'an array of different yous'[2]
(Ali Smith, *Artful)*

Chapter 2: Representing Community: On Myth and Form

Introduction

In the previous chapter, the figure of a 'politics of community' was presented as a limit-point in the work of Nancy, who foregrounds a 'political exigency' at the heart of community, whilst refusing to advocate any political project that would be based on community as such.[3] To propose a politics of community therefore required 'going farther' than Nancy would allow his own writing, pushing toward concrete examples of the political which overstep his own methodology.[4] Through drafting Nancy's ideas into a form of hermeneutic procedure based on the figures of 'unworking', 'inoperativity' and 'idleness' contained in his key term *désœuvrement,* we were able to see how a critical language derived from Nancy can be deployed to shed light on the political stakes of community today. This required seeing inoperative community through a mode of opposition in relation to the capitalist state, whilst being attentive to the ways that *désœuvrement* evokes an ontological register that refuses any form of totalization that the history of Marxist dialectical thought may imply.[5] Returning to Nancy's work on the 'retreat of the political', we can see how Nancy's thinking of community derives from an enduring desire to offer a renewed conception of the political against its 'dissol[ution] in the sociotechnical element of forces and needs' seeking to articulate the necessity of 'inscrib[ing] the sharing of community' at the heart of a renewed political thought.[6]

Despite what Christopher Fynsk terms the 'cautious' approach taken by Nancy to a politics of community, Nancy does offer a paradigm through which this figure may be broached: not the material world of political reality *per se*, but the central, if not enigmatic, figures of 'communication'

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[1] Nancy, *Inoperative Community*, p.43.
[2] Ali Smith, *Artful* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2012), p.49.
[3] Nancy, *Inoperative Community*, p.81.
[4] Ibid., p.5.
[5] Ibid., p.75.
[6] Ibid., p.40.

and 'literature'. [7] Nancy's attempt to salvage a notion of the political beyond its operativity, and in accordance with its foundationally communal function, would mean discovering 'a community ordering itself to the unworking of its communication, or destined to this unworking: a community consciously undergoing the experience of its sharing.'[8] Such a community would therefore derive its function through unworking the terms of its work in the present political order, ordering itself precisely through the unworking of 'communication', which would be its process of becoming, and its 'destination'.[9]

The space of this community is therefore not simply 'to come'[10], as Gregg Lambert has suggested in his analysis of *The Inoperative Community;* as Nancy reminds us, community is not *to come* so much as it is 'always coming, at the heart of every collectivity (because it never stops coming, it ceaselessly resists collectivity itself as much as its resits the individual'.[11] Community is not construed as a utopian space outside of reality, deferred into the time of an idealized future, or beyond the realm of the possible or the thinkable. Rather, a form of unworking community can always be found in the process of its communication, where processes of writing, literature, and other modes of expression bear the trace of being-in-common and its unworking:

> To attain such a signification of the "political" […] implies being already engaged in community, that is to say, undergoing, in whatever manner, the experience of community as communication: it implies writing. We must not stop writing, or letting the singular outline of our being-in-common expose itself. [12]

Community is therefore not simply an absent form, negated wholesale by its incorporation in capital and the state-form such that it ceases in any substantive sense to exist. Its wider ontological meaning and function mean that it is always resistant to such processes, and always present within any mode of communication, inevitably bearing the trace of our essential being-in-common. Community, in its 'infinite resistance to everything that would bring it to completion' is therefore propelled by what Nancy terms 'an irrepressible political exigency, and […] this exigency in its turn demands something of "literature," the inscription of our infinite resistance.'[13] Literature becomes in

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[7] Christopher Fynsk, 'Foreword' in *Inoperative Community,* p.xxvii.
[8] Nancy, *Inoperative Community,* p.40.
[9] Ibid., p.40.
[10] Gregg Lambert, 'Literary Communism' in *Nancy Now,* ed. Verena Andermatt Conley and Irving Goh (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), p.40.
[11] Nancy, *Inoperative Community,* p.71.
[12] Ibid., p.40-41.
[13] Ibid., p.80-81.

Nancy a privileged form in the figure of 'literary communism', which is the sharing of community through and by its literature, which in turn may offer a paradigm of political community as involved in its own 'self-definition', where we may imagine a political community 'destining' itself according to its own 'being-in-common', as the 'opening [of] community to itself.' [14] Literature, in its ability to transform the contours of meaning, the relative freedom of its own expression, and its fundamentally creative capacity as a mode of communication which can express itself singularly, becomes for Nancy a way of thinking a politics of community in an emancipated form, beyond the operative logics which reduce its work to an extension of the capitalist state in modernity.

In this way, we may look to Nancy's crucial term *désœuvrement*, originally borrowed from Blanchot,[15] to locate a foundational affinity between the political and the literary, where 'work' incorporates both its literary and wider socio-political meaning in a shared project in which politics may 'order[..] itself to the unworking of its communication' in writing and literature.[16] As may be seen in his often unremarked on affinity with the work of Rancière, [17] Nancy's work offers a way of reconceiving political reality through a philosophy which draws on the imbrication of the political and aesthetics, refusing the dogma of its containment either in the neoliberal economism that makes politics a technocratic function of an overriding ideology of 'marketization',[18] or within vulgar Marxist analyses which insist on political economy as the 'only game in town.'[19] At the heart of 'inoperative community' is a conceptual movement between community as a part of material reality, interacting with modalities of capitalism, race, gender and other axes of political domination and subjectivation, and its *representation*: where community is bound up with communication, expression and language. It is this complex operation at the heart of *désœuvrement* which may lead us to address the space of literature, examining this intersection to shed light on the role of community in literature as well as the way in which literature can inform a 'politics of community'.

This chapter will address the relationship between community and literature through a close reading of Jean-Luc Nancy's conception of 'myth' and Ali Smith's literary evocation of 'form' in her 2012 text *Artful.* The question of form allows for a framing of literature within its inherently relational character, interacting with political, social and cultural forms, whilst employing its own formal

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[14] Nancy, *Inoperative Community,* p.80-81.

[15] In Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature,* trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982).

[16] Nancy, *Inoperative Community,* p.40.

[17] Nancy, *Disavowed Community,* p.11.

[18] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism; Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), p.263.

[19] Slavoj Zizek, 'Class Struggle or Postmodernism?' in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality,* p.96.

structures of expression. Through Nancy, we can see how specific forms of formal disruption can intercede within the *mythic* character of literary communication, exposing the communal basis and function of literature. The process of 'myth interrupted' can shed light on the disruptive and political possibilities of literature, which, placed in dialogue with literary *form,* can demonstrate how some modes of literary experimentation are engaged in a process of *unworking* which has political effects and significance. Revisiting 'myth' will allow us to comprehend the function of literature in its foundational and inaugural relation to community, allowing for a mode of interpretation which places centre-stage the social and relational basis and effect of literary expression. Ali Smith will be presented as an exemplary figure of contemporary literary experimentation, offering a meta-textual, narrative and philosophical exploration of form, which offers rich resources for interrogating the stakes of community today.

The Politics of Form in Contemporary Critique

Before turning to questions of communication, community, politics and literature in the work of Nancy, we may seek to broadly situate such discussion within contemporary debates about literary 'form' in the recent work of critics Caroline Levine,[20] Audrey Wasser[21], Daniel Hartley,[22] Greta Olson and Sarah Copland.[23] Each writer, in very different ways, shares a preoccupation with the possibility of seeing the development of literary form through a historical and political lens, whilst resisting any reductive tendency to pose such factors as the sole determination of their meaning or value. In attending to questions of literary form, their respective accounts allow for literature to be situated in the condition of its historical emergence, where new styles, genres and innovations in form coincide with the changing strata of sociality, whilst also forming residual and nonlinear histories of development and change. Although it is possible to trace a 'ideology of form' where 'forms of consciousness are shaped […] by their social or historical ground',[24] as has been the long-held presumption of Marxist critique, critics such as Levine have drawn attention to how it is also the case

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[20] Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015).

[21] Audrey Wasser, *The Work of Difference: Modernism, Romanticism, and the Production of Literary Form* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016).

[22] Daniel Hartley, *The Politics of Style: Towards a Marxist Poetics* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2016).

[23] Greta Olson and Sarah Copland 'Towards a Politics of Form' *European Journal of English Studies* 20.3 (2016), pp 207-22.

[24] Frederic Jameson, 'The Ideology of Form: Partial Systems in 'La Vieille Fille'' *Socio-Criticism* 5.15 (1976), p.29.

that 'literary forms participate in a destabilizing relation to social formations, often colliding with social hierarchies rather than reflecting or foreshadowing them'.[25]

In this way we can see that through proposing something like a 'politics of form', as Olson and Copland have tentatively suggested, it becomes necessary to situate literary form between very real processes of determination, and an attention to the specificity and singularity of literature, demonstrating how literature exceeds any simple causal relation between its modes of expression and the social and political landscape in which it is situated:

> Specific narrative and formal structures may function as historically situated bearers of dominant cultural values or as markers of critique that are aimed at uncovering structures that enforce domination and subordination; alternatively, they may express more negotiated and ambivalent standpoints […] where a single text responds in varying ways to different 'dominants', such as class, race and political power. [26]

The deep imbrication of literary form with its social condition opens onto questions about the precise manner of this interaction, most importantly here, the way that the singularity of literary expression may offer ways of rethinking the social constellations and political situations which give rise to it. It is this question which is perhaps at the heart of political readings of form, which for Hartley should lead us to explore the idea of 'literary effectivity',[27] that is, the way that literature may be seen its real effects and function in material reality (as opposed to idealist Bloomian approaches which would place literature 'as floating free of mundane social realities.')[28] In this way, following the work of Ricœur, Hartley offers a characteristically schematic order by which literature may intervene in the world either as:

> a symbolic resolution of real, historical contradictions, thereby enabling the reproduction of the social relations of production […]; the locus of a pre-emergent structure of feeling which embodies novel social relations; or an act of Utopian prefiguration - the joy we experience

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[25] Caroline Levine, 'Strategic Formalism: Toward a New Method in Cultural Studies.' *Victorian Studies* 48.4 (2006), pp.625–657.
[26] Olson and Copland 'Towards a Politics of Form', p.210.
[27] Hartley, *Politics of Style,* p.61.
[28] This is how Rita Felski characterizes Harold Bloom in Rita Felski 'Postcritical Reading' *American Book Review*, 38.5 (2017), p.5.

upon writing and reading fine styles offering us a proleptic sense of the pleasures of non-alienated labour and communication.[29]

Such an account attempts to reclaim literature as an active part of social reality, interacting with dominant 'relations of production', whilst also allowing for 'novel relations' beyond their operativity in the capitalist state. If Hartley's methodology is drawn most strongly to the question of 'style', a mode which he in fact links very closely with 'form'[30] the overall trajectory of his enquiry may be seen to be ordered around a concerted effort to reassert the social and relational basis of literature 'which requires nothing less than grasping the dynamics of our collective life together.'[31] In this way, Hartley's attempt to 'contribute to the contemporary renewal of the Marxist tradition'[32] works precisely as a valorisation of literature ability to produce political meanings and effects. If 'literary styles […] alone [are not] capable of fundamentally transforming social reality', he nonetheless insists that they have a vital role to play in imagining political and collective possibilities beyond the alienation of 'class society' in the present. [33]

Joseph North has characterized such politically minded approaches to literature as 'committed' or 'interested' hermeneutic strategies, which draw on the inherently political and social function of literature in order to foreground particular kinds of interpretative possibility.[34] These he claims work in opposition to a more prevalent trend, which has offered reinvigorations of formalism, close reading, biographical and historical research characteristic of what he terms the 'scholarly turn'.[35] In his account, North explains this developing opposition through a much longer history, contrasting an *active criticism,* which remains faithful to the political history of critique in the Marxist tradition, and what he terms *passive criticism* in the tradition of F. R. Leavis and Cleanth Brooks, where literature is viewed as relatively autonomous from its conditions of production and socio-political context.[36] In contemporary criticism, Caroline Levine's major contribution to the field has sought to reinvigorate formalism in ways which hope to resolve this tension, offering up a form of reading which sees 'form' in a far expanded sense of the term:

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[29] Hartley, *Politics of Style,* p.61
[30] Ibid*.,* p.229.
[31] Ibid., p.10.
[32] Ibid., p.262.
[33] Ibid., p.206.
[34] Joseph North *Literary Criticism: A Concise Political History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017), p.9.
[35] Ibid.
[36] For example, in Cleanth Brooks, 'The New Criticism' *The Sewanee Review* 87.4 (1979).

Here, then, is where my own argument begins: with a definition of form that is much broader than its ordinary usage in literary studies. Form, for our purposes, will mean all shapes and configurations, all ordering principles, all patterns of repetition and difference.'[37]

This expansive use of 'form' is designed to offer a renewed mode of literary critique, which is at once attentive to the structures of meaning, relation and form *immanent* to a literary text (for example, in 'literary techniques both large and small, including […] plot, first-person narration, description, free indirect speech, suspense, metaphor, and syntax'[38]) whilst viewing these in close relation to the social, political, and generic forms which make up its general context. This allows Levine to offer a *formalist* reading of Jane Eyre, which nonetheless places centre stage the affinities and relations between literary form and the wider social and political forms in which the novel is situated. Levine contrasts this approach with the conventional 'literary critic today', who would approach the text with concerns for technique and style on the one hand, and contextual and political concerns on the other, where formalist and historical consideration would be ordered around a fundamental distinction 'between the *formal* and the *social'*.[39] In this way, Levine situates her own intervention through demonstrating how formal and social concerns must in fact be seen as intertwined, generating a theory of form which expands to consider its function through social, political, linguistic, and semantic considerations. Form would therefore come to mean anything which could be construed as 'shapes and arrangements' such that the 'gap between the form of the literary text and its content and context dissolves.' [40]

Although we may certainly agree with Levine that literary form interacts with its context in ways which undermine any formal assumption of their separation, it is not clear that the collapsing of such concerns into the single term *forms* is as politically expedient as Levine suggests. Through privileging a pluralized notion of forms, as 'overlapping, portable, and situated',[41] Levine opposes her account to overly historical accounts, focusing on how the 'residual' and 'portable' nature of form works in excess of any historical determination such that they cannot simply be 'outgrowths of social conditions [as] they do not belong to certain times and places.'[42] In claiming that '[l]iterary forms and social formations are equally real in their capacity to organize materials, and equally unreal in

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[37] Levine, *Forms,* p.3.
[38] Ibid., p.1
[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid., p.2
[41] Ibid., p.6
[42] Ibid., p.12

being artificial, contingent constraints',[43] however, Levine's account may be said to engage in a wholesale collapsing of qualitative differences between social and aesthetics forms, producing a methodology which inevitably flattens her field of vision in regard to the historical contingency of specific forms, as well as the specificity of literary form itself. Indeed, the sheer scope of Levine's claims about form necessitate a very far-reaching and sweeping view of the history of literary criticism, postulating a theory of form at great remove from established traditions.

Although attentive, in some ways, to the historicity of literary form and the development of literary criticism, Levine's account of questions of literary form is often very quick to distance itself from the history of critique itself. Most notably, in her introduction to *Forms*, Levine opposes her methodology to the whole tradition of Marxism, which she encapsulates in a single quotation by Hayden White.[44] Further on in the book Levine makes brief reference to pioneering Marxist theorist Georg Lukacs, only to propose that his methodological deployment of 'a politically integrated wholeness' is putatively commensurable with that of fascist thinker 'Léon Daudet.'[45] Furthermore, Levine goes on to question some of the basic presumptions underpinning the very project of critique, proposing a 'practice that seeks out pattern over meaning, the intricacy of relations over interpretative depth.'[46] In aligning herself with critics such as Heather Love, Sharon Marcus, Stephen Best and Rita Felski in the post-critical and 'surface reading' style interpretations which have been gaining traction in recent years,[47] Levine admits that her political vision of form exhibits a similar 'scepticism about the very project of freedom.' [48] As such, the distance which Levine interposes between her own account of form and more traditional modes of critique mean it is at times hard to understand what political project in fact could arise from her analysis, leading some commentators to conclude that her political perspective is lacking in historical specificity, clear material referent or advocable trajectory.

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[43] Ibid., p.14
[44] Levine, *Forms* p.14. Although Hayden White's text *The Content of Form* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1990) is clearly influenced by Marxist thought, it can hardly be said to be a canonical Marxist text.
[45] Levine, *Forms,* p.30.
[46] Sharon Marcus and Stephen Best, 'Surface Reading: An Introduction,' *Representations* 108 (2009), p.18 cited Levine p.154.
[47] *Critique and Postcritique*, ed. Elizabeth S. Felker and Rita Felski (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017) and Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015); Heather Love, 'Close but Not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn' *New Literary History* 41 (2010), p.375; Sharon Marcus and Stephen Best, 'Surface Reading: An Introduction' *Representations* 108 (fall 2009), pp.11-12.
[48] Levine, *Forms,* p.154.

Most notably, critic Marijeta Bozovic asks of Levine's account: 'Whither the legacies of Louis Althusser? Of Theodor Adorno? Why are they too missing from Forms?'[49], centring her discussion of Levine's apparently novel formalism with the observation that it is proposed without any serious reference to the Russian formalists, whose 'revolutionary formalism' arguably answered many of Levine's questions over a 'century ago'.[50] For Bozovic, Levine's account of the Marxist aesthetic tradition amounts to a 'historical strawman', inattentive to its richness and historical specificity, and failing to account for material conditions which might lead to radically different ways of interpreting literary form itself.[51] By eliding the Russian formalists, whose revolutionary traditions allowed for a theory of literary form engaged in 'dramatically reimagining aesthetic and political realms alike', Levine's account is restricted to an account of the 'nineteenth- century English novel', and its concomitant tendency to assume 'bourgeois society as the stable norm'.[52] This relative inattention to crucial historical and geographical differences arguably leads to a highly expansive and encompassing theory of form which nonetheless inadvertently disavows the contingency of her own positionality, and with it, the more disruptive fissures, discontinuities and modes of ideological antagonism which underpin the history of formalist approaches to literature. Likewise, Bozovic draws specific attention to how Levine's theory of 'forms encountering other forms' necessitates a rejection of any possibility of that one form (notably here, capitalism), might function as a major organizing principle. This essentially leads Levine's position to a wholesale refutation of the Marxist tradition, one nonetheless made, with very little reference to its actual history:

> The Marxist emphasis on aesthetic form as epiphenomenal - as secondary - has distorting effects. First, it prevents us from understanding politics as a matter of form, and second, it assumes that one kind of form - the political - is always the root or ground of the other - the aesthetic. Let me offer an example of what it would mean to read literary forms not as epiphenomenal responses to social realities but as forms encountering other forms.[53]

As Bozovic notes, Levine occludes here any mention of Marxist theorists who refute the aesthetic as merely 'epiphenomenal' on the one hand, whilst tacitly assuming the impossibility of a totalizing and overdetermining form on the other, producing a dismissal of Marxism which for many is lacking in depth or critical force. Moreover, some commentators have noted how this flattening of historical

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[49] Marijeta Bozovic, 'Whose Forms? Missing Russians in Caroline Levine's Forms' *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, 132.5 (2017), p.1183.
[50] Ibid p.1181.
[51] Ibid, p.1183.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Levine, *Forms,* p.14.

specificity appears to derive from a reductively 'liberal' imaginary of temporal continuity and progress, assuming a transhistorical necessity of free-floating forms, interacting and encountering one another, which works to obscure more disruptive temporalities and the impact of revolutionary acts on the possibility, emergence and function of forms: [54]

> Repetition and difference do not just describe form, they also condition our experience of form in time. Further, as Jung, Freud, Judith Butler, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, and others have recognized, time—as it stutters, swerves, slips, steeps—reforms and deforms form, occasionally moving us toward radical political ends.[55]

Through asserting that 'no form, however seemingly powerful, causes, dominates, or organizes all others', Levine comes dangerously close to offering a strangely conventional notion of aesthetic autonomy, where 'literary forms can lay claim to an efficacy of their own', as any question of the precise nature of the relation between aesthetic and political forms: their mode of interaction as situated within specific histories of power and struggle, becomes difficult to discern. [56] As Tom Eyres, has noted, despite Levine's allusive manoeuvres, where forms interrelate, collide and combine, there must also exist a certain 'incommensurability'[57] between social and literary forms, or what we may term in a more Nancian register, a question of formal *singularity*.[58] Levine's strategic non-attendance to these crucial differences risks diminishing such vital distinctions, undermining their distinctiveness and therefore their legibility. Although Eyres admits 'there is never any fixed trajectory to social phenomena, no absolute pattern set' he nonetheless insists that one must be 'able to identify dominant factors that caused a particular event or made one thing more likely than another,' in order to have any adequate grasp of political reality: 'To insist otherwise is potentially to blunt theory, and disable political action'.[59]

What is needed, therefore, is a way of following Levine's injunction to think literary form within wider patterns of form in its social and political environment, whilst also allowing for processes of determination, causality, and literary singularity. Highlighting the intimate affinities between

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[54] Carla Namwali Serpell 'Weird Times' *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, 132.5 (2017), p.1236.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Levine, *Forms,* p.16.
[57] Tom Eyers, 'The Revenge of Form: Review of C. Levine's 'Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network'', *Boundaries*, 2018) https://www.boundary2.org/2018/05/tom-eyers-the-revenge-of-form-review-of-c-levines-forms-whole-rhythm-hierarchy-network/ .
[58] Nancy, *Being Singular Plural,* p.8.
[59] Tom Eyers, 'The Revenge of Form'.

different forms across the social, political and aesthetic is clearly of importance, but this must be balanced with an account which can locate such relations within their precise political function, as well as within a framework which may account for the significance of such relations themselves. This may lead us to think the modes of relation inherent to literature and its social and material base beyond a frame of reductive determination, but also beyond Levine's arguably reductive imaginary of free-floating and interacting forms. Ultimately, this may allow for a political reading of literary form which is adequately attentive to the specificity of the political and of the literary, utilizing an ontological register to views such relations in their widest possible significance.

The Social Basis of Form: Towards an Ontology

What has underpinned the accounts of literary forms discussed thus far is a binding consideration of the *social and communal basis of literature,* the way in which it mirrors and distorts the structures of relation which give rise to it, and the modes of relation which it may be capable of producing or foreshadowing. If such accounts have grappled with this relation in contrasting ways, offering heterogenous methodologies for navigating the social basis and 'effectivity' of literature on the one hand, and its singularity and formal distinctiveness on the other, what is relatively absent in each account is a more philosophical discussion of what is meant by form in the first place. Most notably Levine's expansive account of form proceeds through an attention to pluralized *forms* of her title, such that her theorization of forms in their multiple and heterogenous character remains in some sense a descriptive one, moving through the theoretical procedure of dissolving distinctions between different social strata of form, whilst never giving it an account in its own right.

In this way, in each of the accounts of literary form this chapter has summarized, the *social basis of literary form* remains tied to an analytic which proceeds historically and empirically, tending therefore to side-line more basic questions of what is meant by literary form, and still less any rigorous account of the 'literariness' of literature itself.[60] By posing the question of form in relation to philosophies of community, specifically through the work of Jean-Luc Nancy, we may approach this question through an alternative methodology, which would take the social basis and function of literature as fundamentally an *ontological* question. This would address literature's communicative capacity as part of a fundamental structure of 'being-with', as well as the often-overlooked question of 'myth' as the linguistic foundation to community, thereby offering a qualitatively different mode

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[60] In using the term 'literariness' I gesture to Roman Jakobson's original 1921 formulation of 'what makes a given work a literary work', cited in *Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views*, ed. Ladislav Matejka and Krystyna Pomorska (Michigan: University of Michigan, 1978), p.8.

of analysis than the often-descriptive mode of literary formalism, and its tendency to contain questions of form within a general history of literary genre, where 'form and genre are synonymous or near-synonymous.'[61]

This may therefore lead us to the work of Jean-Luc Nancy, whose contribution to literary thought begins with his early, but influential text *The Literary Absolute* (1988), co-written with Phillipe Lacoue-Labarthe and originally published in French as *L'Absolu Littéraire* (1978), which comes before *Le Retrait Du Poltique* (1983) and *La Communauté Désoeuvrée* (1983). In this text we can see how Nancy's theory of community is contained in a nascent but distinctive form in his writing about Romantic literature, which will serve as a significant point of reference of his later writings, even if also marked by significant departures. In their thinking on the structure of the 'fragment' as central to the Romantic vision of literature, Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe foreground the vital relation this has to a logic of relationality and sociality:

> Fragments communicate with one another as if in dialogue, in a "chain or garland" or according to a model of sociality. For all these reasons, the fragments implicate not only a thinking of literary form but also, in their plurality, a thinking of genre, and ultimately of the genre of Literature as such. Literature as the most inclusive genre becomes "not the sum but the co-presence of [its] parts, the co-presence ...of the whole with itself.[62]

Nancy's later work on the question of literature in the 'Myth Interrupted' and 'Literary Communism' chapters of *The Inoperative Community* will draw on the thinking of this 'inclusive' and expansive 'genre' of literature and its constituent modes of relation and 'co-presence', whilst occluding the lexicon of 'absolute' or 'whole' central to *The Literary Absolute.* This difference may be located in the shift in temporal perspective: from the specificity of the Romantic tradition, to the condition of modernity which begins *The Inoperative Community,* which goes on to centre literature as a repository for thinking a community 'to come'.[63] This leads to a different conception of literature, one designed primarily to present possibilities of literature in the future, and the impossibility of reclaiming its function in the past; beyond pre-modern 'communion' and regressive and nostalgic reimagining of 'organic community'.[64] For Nancy, the function which literature must seek to capture

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[61] Levine, *Forms,* p.13.
[62] Jean-Luc Nancy and Phillipe Lacoue-Labarthe, *The Literary Absolute*, trans. Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester (Albany: University of New York Press, 1988), p.44.
[63] Nancy, *Inoperative Community,* p.71.
[64] Ibid., p.75.

in the present is a conception of how it may convoke, inaugurate or transform community without simply reflecting a social totality in this very process. Taking up the figures of 'unworking' and 'interruption' as the basic principles underlying Nancy's conception of literature, we may begin to approach the field of literature through an implicit valuation of experimental and disruptive capacities in literary form, where innovations in narrative, voice, and character may work to interrupt and displace dominant modes of sensibility, gesturing toward alternative ways of understanding relationality and communitarian possibility.

Beyond a restriction to *genre,* as we see in the focus on German Romanticism in *The Literary Absolute,* Nancy's later work precisely serves to unwork literature from any such restriction, highlighting the relational logics inherent in the Romantic tradition, and gesturing to their expansion in the contemporary moment. In attempting to offer a theory of literature articulated in its inherent relation to philosophy, Nancy offers a way of addressing literature in a mode which is not restricted to conventions of technique, genre and style as they arise in literary criticism, offering rather what Wasser will describe as an 'ontology of the literary',[65] entailing such considerations, but also greatly expanding their scope to the field of 'relations' which determines literature's capacity to generate novelty and prefigurative modes of meaning.[66] Ultimately these will converge in Nancy's elusive figures of 'literary communism' and 'myth interrupted', which are less analytic procedures attached to specific histories, traditions, or genres of the literary, but conceptual frameworks which open literature to interpretation through exposing their *ontological* function and form*,* foregrounding disruptive and transformative capacities which literature enacts through its wider social, political, and existential dimensions.

Such an approach, although drawing on a philosophical lexicon, is nonetheless commensurable with the work of literary scholars such as Raymond Williams, who have long since drawn attention to the significance of sociality and community as underpinning the essential function of literature. For Williams, although literary criticism necessarily entails a thinking of 'writing' as 'a transaction between discoverable numbers of writers and readers, organized in certain changing social relations which include education, class habits, distribution and publishing costs', more fundamentally, it demands an understanding of literature as 'a sharing of experience which, in its human qualities, is

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[65] Audrey Wasser, *The Work of Difference: Modernism, Romanticism, and the Production of Literary Form* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), p.8.
[66] Wasser, *Work of Difference,* p.30.

both affected by and can transcend the received social relations.'[67] Ultimately, Williams' account closely mirrors that of Nancy, if in a different context and methodological frame, arguing that literature must be understood in its most expansive function as a form of 'art' which functions first and foremost as a mode of '*communication* […]the process of making unique experience into common experience.'[68] This conception of 'communication' as the expression of the 'common' may be seen to have affinities to the idea of 'communication' Nancy takes from Bataille, where it consists in the 'negation of isolated being' toward a form of 'being-in-common', where the humanist investment of Williams' account is supplanted with a Heideggerian formulation of foundationally relational being.[69]

For Nancy, it is the specific force of *myth* which allows us to grasp the precise way in which literature can express being-in-common, not as genre or premodern narrative, but as a generic structure of communication which founds community through its very expression. Literature's function in founding community demands that the scope of literature would be greatly expanded *to include any communicative act* which is expressive of meaning (and therefore being).[70] Likewise, this may allow for an equally expanded notion of literary *form* beyond the categorical enclosures which characterize its deployment in much of literary criticism, functioning less as a technical or historical analytic of literature's internal mechanisms of composition and structure, and rather delineating the mutable shapes which literature forms in its exposition of our communicative capacities. Literary form would not therefore have to address the ways that it might respond or bleed into its social environment, but rather apprehend itself as *already* enmeshed with sociality, expressing and deploying being-in-common as its central, even primordial, function.

This would not preclude an attention to the historical situatedness and formal conventions so vital to literary criticism, but may demand a way of situating these approaches within a less clearly defined field of vision. It would attend to the ways in which form exceeds a purely historical, political, or even *literary* viewpoint insofar as literature cannot be seen as a hermetically sealed and autonomous sphere of production, but rather as part of a general apparatus of relational and communicative life. Mirroring, in some ways, Levine's focus on how 'forms' are engaged in complex networks of affinity, reflection and experimentation *across* the fields of the social, political, and

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[67] Raymond Williams, *The Pelican Book of English Prose: From 1780 to the Present Day,* Vol. 2 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), p.24
[68] Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1965), p.55
[69] Georges Bataille, cited in Maurice Blanchot, *Unavowable Community,* p.18.
[70] Nancy, *Being Singular Plural,* p.2.

aesthetic, a Nancian approach may similarly draw attention to the way that literature's relation to form necessitates a foregrounding of the complex modes of relation which are in effect in literature, locating its specific modes of literary and aesthetic processes within wider, and multiply determined structures of sociality. In Nancy, such mechanisms of relation may be productively viewed through the figure of 'myth', which works both as a literary mode of expression, but also in an ontological function of founding and producing community through its expression of being-in-common. By foregrounding an attention to myth, we may therefore produce an interpretative procedure which situates literary form within an expansive field of its social and political relations, as well as attending to the ontological dimensions of this process, which are foundational, if not more nebulous.

Community and Myth

Despite what may be seen as an apparent novelty or anachronism in Nancy's focus on myth, it is nonetheless something which unites him with other contemporary thinkers. For Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, the challenge of thinking community today resides firmly in the possibility (and indeed impossibility) of its representation, specifically against the myth of the 'subject', which is the 'ineffable' foundation of all conventional narrative and fiction.[71] The function of this individualist myth is to constitute all thinking of our 'being' though an always *singular* 'predication', rendering any thinking of community as secondary to this basic structure.[72] Through the temporal logic of myth, the narrative of the self-sufficient subject must be constantly repeated at the heart of capitalist society, ritually confirming its logic through repetition and difference. This process is part of what Agamben terms the 'punctual' line of the subject, whose foundation is assured through the repetition of a founding myth expressed as a linear line (for example in figures such as progress, the individual and capital), in which we all ultimately share, but by which we are all ultimately separated into individuality.[73] For Agamben, contemporary life is founded on the inexorable myth of the subject, and thinking beyond the subject would therefore demand a rethinking of myth.

Agamben and Nancy both demand a countermeasure to such a process, a break in the myth of the subject, and a renewed project of articulating communal being through a mythic constellation

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[71] Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community,* trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p.82.
[72] Ibid., p.98.
[73] Ibid., p.19.

ordered around multiplicity and an indeterminate horizon.[74] This is not a matter of a simply doing away with myth, however, as a form of Enlightenment thinking has tended to argue, where 'we no longer have anything to do with myth.'[75] For Bataille, this is the ultimate myth of modernity, the myth of the 'absence of myth' which purports to supplant myth with a secular horizon which is itself only a disavowed mythic structure.[76] Rather, what is demanded is a logic of rupture and a disruption: the severing of the linear line not from outside of myth, but as the exposure of all the mythic weight that the postulation of its single, linear line suppresses and makes invisible through its historic force, coming '[a]gainst the hypocritical fiction of the non-substitutability of the individual, which in our culture serves only to guarantee its universal representability.'[77] Agamben's demand for the 'coming community' would therefore emerge not simply as another myth, but as the breaking of the bonds of myth to a linear concept of history ordered around the individual subject, exposing the communal histories and possibilities which such myths keep hidden.

For Agamben, what has been hitherto lacking in contemporary thinking about myth is a proper comprehension of its basic function, which would be as the *foundational scene of irreducible commonality.* In place of the doubtful 'non-substitutability' of the 'subject', singular-being is exposed as necessarily relational, as 'the taking-place of every single being is always already common - an empty space offered to the one, irrevocable hospitality'.[78] Being and myth emerge through a logic of 'incessant emergence', or what Nancy has termed 'compearance', such that each is necessary for the other, laying the ground for their emergence through and by the dual modalities of being-in-common and the constant communication of its mythic foundation.[79] In this way, the structure of myth is always open to mutation and change so long as we understand this logic of 'compearance', where community, although bound to dominant modes of individualizing thinking which derive from the capitalist state, may also disclose alternative trajectories and possibilities through rethinking its mythic configuration.

In this way, Agamben's utopian figure of the 'coming community', which would arrive beyond its configuration as part of the work of the capitalist state, and beyond the dominance of the myth of the individual, necessitates the construction of a mythic foundation to community which would be,

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[74] For an expansive text covering the different approaches to thinking beyond the subject see Nancy's edited collection, *Who comes after the subject?* ed. Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor, Jean-Luc Nancy (London: Routledge, 1991).

[75] Nancy, *Inoperative Community,* p.46.

[76] Georges Bataille*, The Absence of Myth*, trans. Michael Richardson (London: Verso, 1994), p.81.

[77] Agamben, *Coming Community,* p.24.

[78] Ibid*.,* p.23.

[79] Nancy, *Inoperative Community,* p.39.

at root, entirely without essence or origin.[80] For Agamben and Nancy, this would require therefore attention to the capacity of literature to interrupt our conventional understanding of representation, allowing for new modes of thinking our relationality to emerge. Community is theorized through its necessary interplay and interdependence with its representation, at the same time as exceeding representation *per se,* where the representation of community pushes to the limit of community itself. This is as the 're' of 're-presentation' is here cast in doubt, as it would mark not simply a re-petition, a re-doing: the idea that what is present is being presented again, through the mediating form of representation, which would ultimately bring the reality of the present back to itself. Rather, community is not so much re-presenting itself, but simply emerges *as presence,* where every iteration or inculcation of its being is bound to the manner of its presenting.[81]

Representation therefore takes on a new character and function, emerging beyond its secondary status as a supplement to the real, and expressing something more akin to what Nancy terms 'communication', which would be the expression of the essential relationality of being-with, which is not secondary to, but rather constitutive of being itself:

> "Language" is not an instrument of communication, and communication is not an instrument of Being; communication is Being, and Being is, as a consequence, nothing but the incorporeal by which bodies express themselves to one another as such.[82]

In this way, any work that would mark such a communicative function is part of *that which shares*, and therefore takes part in the structure and logic of the 'with' which is never simply a representation, but a modality of being-as-such*.* In order for being-with to emerge as 'the sharing of a simultaneous space-time [...] a presentation of this space-time as such' it must emerge in the very act of this sharing, in anything which moves between subjects to constitute a relation.[83] It is in this logic of *presencing,* where language, literature and other communicative acts establish and uphold a mode of relation through their very iteration, thereby exceeding any conventional notion of representation, that we may be able to understand what Agamben and Nancy seek to establish in their new relation to myth. Reimagining myth as the scene and stage of this sharing, which grounds the social relation in a constant process of repetition, we may see how modes of communication

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[80] Nancy, *Being Singular Plural,* p.25.
[81] Ibid.
[82] Ibid., p.93.
[83] Ibid., p.65.

may function to interrupt this very process, allowing for new relations and communal configurations to arise.

We may therefore readdress the question of representation, mimesis and literature from the stand-point of this mythic and ontological ground, taking representative forms as the residuum and productive matter of the essential relationality of being-with. In this way, representation may be seen to bear the trace of what cannot be mediated, or what exceeds mediation, of what refuses to subsist either in the category distinction of the mediator or the mediated. Following Nancy, we may in fact see that what matters most *is mediation as the form that presence must itself take,* where we are not confronted by a 'subject of representation', but a 'presentation-to […] the realm of coming into presence as coming conjoined, coincidental and concurrent, simultaneous and mutual.'[84] If meaning can only emerge through its mediation in language, it is also fundamentally *constituted* through the function of this mediation, such that the social, cultural, political etc., factors which contribute to its mediation cannot be construed as categories which are simply secondary to its being, contingent or particular modalities of its deeper being, but are the productive matter of its very possibility, the onto-political foundation of being-as-such:

> "We" always expresses a plurality, expresses "our" being divided and entangled: "one" is not "with" in some general sort of way, but each time according to determined modes that are themselves multiple and simultaneous (people, culture, language, lineage, network, group, couple, band, and so on). What is presented in this way, each time, is a stage on which several can say "I", each on his own account, each in turn. But a "we" is not the adding together or juxtaposition of these "I's." A "we", even one that is not articulated, is the condition for the possibility of each "I".[85]

In Nancy and Agamben, this question the function of community *as* mediation, and therefore inculcated in the form of representation itself, is most clearly articulated through their respective re-readings of Guy Debord's 'society of the spectacle'.[86] This crucial shared reference point allows for this thinking of the mythic and communal basis to representation to be thought in the specific historical and political emergence of modernity, pointing to how it is often precisely the relational modalities which underpin representation which are made unthinkable or invisible in contemporary forms of communication. In this way, they follow Debord's insistence on the spectacle as a mode of

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[84] Ibid., p.69.
[85] Ibid.*,* p.65.
[86] Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1994).

representation which no longer simply reflects reality, but which functions itself as a social relation, a form of communicability which 'hampers communication' itself.[87] In this way, the capitalist state inculcates itself in the very linguistic capacities of its subjects, 'attain[ing] the status of absolute and irresponsible sovereignty over all social life',[88] putting the very linguistic and relational being of our 'vital dwelling in language' to work as part of its own operative functions.[89]

Such an analysis does not lead Agamben and Nancy to pose this process as a totalizing or completed project however, taking the 'spectacle' as a purely negative modality of alienation and total subsumption.[90] For Nancy, despite its function in the capitalist state, 'there is no society without the spectacle of society', as society is constituted precisely only through the process of its own communication and mediation.[91] Despite the power of Debord's incisive critique of the way in which capitalism implants itself within this process of community's self-knowledge, he nonetheless must posit some community *prior* to this process of spectacular mediation as the basis of his critique, thereby failing to grasp community in its inherently *communicative capacity,* where in being drafted into the commodified spectacle form, it nonetheless also expresses ambivalence and *resistance* in relation to this structure.[92] Following Nancy, Agamben will argue that if the spectacle works primarily as an 'extreme form of […] expropriation of the Common', the fact that the spectacle, ultimately, 'is language, the very communicativity or linguistic being of humans', means that it therefore, 'retains something like a positive possibility that can be used against it'.[93] Any resistance to the operativity of the capitalist state, would therefore have to draw on this communicative and communal capacity, taking modes of representation and mediation not simply as reflecting modes of domination, *but enacting it* through the form of the spectacle which itself *is* 'a social relation among people, mediated by images.'[94]

Likewise, with myth, it is not possible to simply *do away with myth,* nor is it desirable to simply to produce a new, binding myth through which to reclaim some prior sense of community. Addressing literature's communal basis and possibilities demands rethinking our understanding of meditation,

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[87] Agamben, *Coming Community,* p.82.
[88] Ibid., p.79.
[89] Ibid., p.83.
[90] For example, see Jean Baudrillard for an arguably hyperbolic investment in the power of capitalist spectacle to enact a total alienation of life from its social being in Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).
[91] Nancy, *Being Singular Plural,* p.67.
[92] Nancy, *Inoperative Community,* p.68.
[93] Agamben, *Coming Community,* p.80.
[94] Debord, *Society of the Spectacle,* p.1.

and in this case, the way that literature inevitably takes part in the mythic function of *founding community,* and the way in which a mythic understanding of literature can allow for this process to open up a renewed and future-orientated rethinking of community itself. Community is a necessary part of the mythic work of literature, as 'myth and community are defined by each other, at least in part - but perhaps in totality - and this motivates a reflection on community according to myth.'[95] In this way, it is necessary to address the precise function of myth in Nancy's work, specifically the way in which Nancy will invoke myth *at the level of form* in his own writing on myth, thereby indicating how we can see the modalities of myth and form as deeply co-implicated, allowing for a literary reading of myth interrupted which can open onto the interpretation of literary texts in general.

Myth Interrupted: A New Mythology of Form

The first section of Nancy's essay 'myth interrupted', the second essay in his book *The Inoperative Community,* is written in a narrative style which immediately alerts the reader of its debt to literary conventions of writing. Although the piece is ostensibly a philosophical essay, it becomes immediately clear from its mode of expression it can hardly be called philosophy in the usual sense of the term. Nancy offers instead a text which deploys literary strategies of fiction, story-telling and narration, evoking his central theme of 'myth' through a mode of writing which itself belongs to a mythic tradition. In this unification of form and content, where myth is taken as an object of the essay at the same time as being integrated into its very mode of expression, we may be led to the following conclusion: there is no writing about myth which is not itself tied to the function of myth, just as there is no writing on form which is not tied to conventions of form. In order to understand what is meant by these terms it is not only necessary to read the content of the essay, extrapolating, expanding and unravelling the philosophical development and explication of ideas, but also to examine the formal and mythic functions which underpin their linguistic construction. In this way, Nancy's theory of myth can be seen in its intimate relationship with literary expression, both in its own form, and as its interpretive consequences, in a way which has often been elided in critical responses to his work.[96]

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[95] Nancy, *Inoperative Community,* p.42.

[96] Ian James and Gregg Lambert offer by far the fullest accounts of the function of literature in Nancy's conception of community, but neither pay attention to the literary quality of this writing itself. See Ian James, 'On Interrupted Myth' *Journal for Cultural Research* 9.4 (2005) and Gregg Lambert 'Literary communism' in *Nancy Now* ed. Verena Andermatt Conley and Irving Goh (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), pp.37-58.

The very style of Nancy's chapter stages the terms of his conceptual contention which underpin his chapter, where he argues that myth must be viewed as a mode of speech *prior* to its confinement as a mode of genre or in the post-Enlightenment sense of untruth. Against this, Nancy insists on a far deeper mythic quality of writing, where it must always expose an ontological matrix of being-in-common through the very act of literary communication. By integrating such a view into the formal dimensions of his own text, Nancy interrupts the expected mode of explication proper to philosophy, producing a different set of questions and demanding alternative interpretative procedures. In this way, Nancy's essay 'Myth Interrupted' is not only *about* the interruption of myth, taking myth as the simple object of an analysis; to apprehend myth, Nancy contends that one has to be 'mythic', that is, sensitive to the function of myth in all writing.[97] Nancy's essay therefore demands an analysis which is cognisant not only to his philosophical claims, but which is also aware of what is happening in the language of the text itself.

We may term the expressive modality of Nancy's essay its *form,* where Nancy's disruption of expected formal conventions of expression, and his integration of a philosophical and literary mode of writing, demonstrates how writing which is attentive to myth can interrupt and uproot norms of formal and generic separation. Here Nancy draws the reader's attention to his more general theory of language as *limit:* 'not the limit of communication, *but the limit upon which communication takes place',* where his own interruption of form pushes to the limit of a mode of expression in a process designed precisely to expose our being-in-common.[98] Thus, what is required is a reading of the essay which is attentive to the communicative function of language; a literary reading designed to unearth a more foundational mythic function of the text itself:

> We know the scene: there is a gathering, and someone is telling a story. We do not yet know whether these people gathered together form an assembly, if they are a horde or a tribe. But we call them brothers and sisters because they are gathered together and because they are listening to the same story.[99]

The complex interweaving, juxtaposition and metonymy of pronouns which compose this passage immediately give tell to its literary quality. Its progression may be traced through the performative mutation and tension of voice, primarily seen through the play between the 'we' and the 'they', which exposes the vocality and speaker of the text as structurally unstable and shifting. In both

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[97] Nancy, *Inoperative Community*, p.45.
[98] Ibid., p.67.
[99] Ibid., p.43.

pronouns, Nancy marks a form of assemblage and commonality, the initial 'we' connecting the reader to her generic function as reader with other readers, which is then displaced in the 'they', marking a separation and an 'other'. As such, Nancy's evoked scene is here characterised immediately by a form of collectivity which is necessarily precarious and mutable, where his shifting pronouns denote processes of separation and binding within his own narrative voice, and within the content of the 'scene' which is being narrated. The originally evoked 'we' becomes counterposed to an invoked 'they', only for both to become fused into a new assemblage of newly intoned kinship: 'we call them brothers and sisters'. In this way, Nancy's text moves toward an ephemeral space of community which is made possible through the construction of a mythic scene of literary expression.

The reader becomes implicated in this process through the coercive and inclusionary assertion of the 'we', convoked in makeshift community with Nancy, other readers, and the 'people gathered' in a scene which we 'know', but which is also potentially being expressed as a mode of literary fiction. In this way, the 'we' denotes a communality at the same time as marking its potential opposite; there is in fact no guarantee that that reader *does* 'know the scene' and the vocality of the 'we' is therefore put into crisis at the moment of its assertion, as the reader may in fact feel *excluded* by this interpellation that implicates them in a form of knowing which may in fact be alien to them. The effect of reading the piece may therefore consists in a form of relational and subjective disorientation, putting into focus the modes of affinity which writing can convoke, at the same time as constituting such relations as necessarily unstable and uncertain.

The structural instability of the 'we' should not, however, be simply read as a rhetorical trick: the lie of fiction and of the author. By situating this passage in a work of philosophy Nancy requires that we are attentive to how such a formal device may itself express something like a conceptual or philosophical content. In constructing and deconstructing a 'we' through admixing modes of philosophical and literary expression, Nancy may be seen to be *performing* the very function of myth in its constitutive function with his reader, supplanting any knowledge of myth in an anterior or originary function with its fabrication within the field of writing itself. In this way, we may approach the 'we' evoked at the 'scene' as indicating a primordial form of mythic function which can be captured in literary writing. Through the passage, we are drawn into the gathering, as the 'scene' that we are claimed to 'know' is in fact being played out as we read it. In this sense, we *do* know the scene, not because we have been told this story before - because we have witnessed it, or been present at its telling - but simply as it stages the essential mythic function of all writing, which is

present every time a story is told: 'It is the story of their origin, of where they come from, or of how they come from the Origin itself – them.'[100]

The performative movement between the 'we' and the 'they' therefore stages the work of community itself, the work of binding and of communicating in-common. Through introducing his chapter through a coercive and literary 'we', Nancy indicates the sheer expansiveness of his claims, where myth becomes absolutely central to all being, demonstrating how all communication exposes, at root, a modality of being-in-common. In this way, Nancy is evoking a sense of universality which is not entirely dissimilar from the tradition of anthropological accounts such as we see in Claude Lévi-Strauss, who construe myth as central to the construction of so-called 'primitive societies'.[101] Clearly Nancy is referencing such traditions here, but what is changed is the temporality of such terms, and as such their ontological status and foundation. Here, we are not bound to myth as a stable, universal origin which determines and structures our actions and being, but rather myth returns as that which is common to us in the act of reading and writing, in the specifically literary ability of writing to invent, convoke and imagine renewed modes of communality:

> We do not yet know whether the one speaking is from among them or if he is an outsider. We say that he is one of them, but different from them because he has the gift, or simply the right - or else it is his duty to tell the story.
>
> They were not assembled like this before the story; the recitation has gathered them together. Before, they were dispersed (at least this is what the story tells us at times), shoulder to shoulder, working with and confronting one another without recognizing one another.[102]

Nancy's continuous movement between 'we' and 'they' makes clear the instability and mutability of their relational character, foregrounding the constantly shifting constellations which make up a communal body. Each evocation of character and person, whether through the 'we', 'they', 'he' or 'outside' evokes in this way the mythic and fictive work of literature, where it functions as the fashioning and *assembling* of bodies, 'shoulder to shoulder' in the *topos* of literary expression. Here we are bound even 'without recognizing one another', where the figure of the 'outsider' and the 'other' can become drawn into the 'we' and must do so in the moment of the literary encounter,

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[100] Nancy, *Inoperative Community,* p.43.
[101] Claude Levi-Strauss, *Totemism,* trans. Rodney Needham (London: Merlin Press, 1962), p.97.
[102] Nancy, *Inoperative Community,* p.43.

where we are plunged into a literary space of being-in-common. As with all texts, in a minimal sense, what is evoked for Nancy is 'literary community', the sharing and constitution of community and a 'we' in and through literature: 'the sharing of community in and by its writing'.[103]

In this way, Nancy's chapter on myth locates community within the inaugural function mythic speech which may be found in what we call 'literature'. Literature works here to express myth not as a fixed origin to a stable community, but rather serves as a space where we can track the constitutive role which myth plays within communicative fiction. Nancy seeks to emancipate his reader from any notion of myth as a unifying commonality, rather exposing a literary scene of myth as a something which may be interpreted, unworked, and re-formed in the act of reading. It is this process which is at the heart of what Nancy terms as 'myth interrupted', envisioning a literary mode of displacement and renewal which can reveal the 'unworked community': a work engaged in its own unworking.[104] In 'myth interrupted' we may therefore see something of what Nancy hopes to designate in his binding of literature and the political in the figure of *désœuvrement,* where the unworking of myth through the displacement of literary form can allow for ways of imagining communitarian possibility. Community and writing become for Nancy intimately and ineluctably bound, constituting literature as a privileged space through which to understand community in its mythic function and capacities: 'we would not write if being were not shared…if we write (which might also be a way of speaking), we share being-in-common, or else we are shared, and exposed, by it.'[105]

To comprehend this process of mythic interruption we can therefore return to the question of 'form' as part of a literary and critical language which can shed light on the interruptive possibilities of literary expression. Specifically, it is precisely in modes of formal *experimentation* where such interruptive possibility might be most clearly understood, where myths of the subject and its correlative norms of genre, narrative and form, are displaced by modes of writing which resist and subvert such tendencies. In this way we may propose a thinking of form, particularly here, *literary* form, as that which names the ability of the contours of text to become exposed at their limit, where new interruptive possibilities can come to light. As with the critics discussed at the beginning of this chapter, literary form can afford an opportunity to examine the complex enmeshment of literary in its socio-political context, and through Nancy we may see how such a relation may be productively construed as part of an ontological matrix of being-in-common, where literature exposes its more

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[103] Ibid., p.67.
[104] Nancy, *Inoperative Community,* p.40.
[105] Ibid., p.69.

general communicative and mythic capacity to reproduce, interrupt and even transform community. In seeking to synthesize such approaches, we may now turn to a literary examination of form in the work of Ali Smith's text *Artful*, to see how literary experimentation in contemporary literature can interrupt the myth of the individual subject, supplanting it with new modes of relationality and communitarian capacity.

Literary Form in Ali Smith

The work of Ali Smith belongs to a trend we may tentatively term the 'relational turn': a tendency in the contemporary novel toward modes of narrative relationality which displace the historical centrality of individualizing modes of characterization.[106] Smith's privileging of the relational in her novels mirrors Nancy's imperative to dispute myths of individual and non-relational subjecthood, offering a mythic intervention which indicates more communitarian ways of understanding literature and social formations. The relational turn may be broadly contextualized through the development of the postmodern novel, which responded to the critical decentring of the figure of the 'subject' in deconstructive philosophy,[107] producing parallel forms of dissolution in correlative literary procedures of character, protagonist, and stable narrator.[108] If critics more and more periodize the contemporary novel in terms such as 'post-postmodernism',[109] 'meta-modernism',[110] and theorizations of the 'contemporary' *beyond* the scope of the postmodern, such periodizations nonetheless work as mutations or 'intensifications' of the tendencies *within* the postmodern novel and its modernist legacies, rather than as qualitative breaks which would mark wholescale departures.[111] The relational turn can therefore be traced through its beginnings in the 1980s postmodern novel,[112] and its evolution and increasing prescience in the present era through British

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[106] Such periodizations can only be schematic, but we may follow Emma E. Smith's analysis that the 1980s British feminist novel establishes the 'multiply narrated novel' as a literary trend. Emma E. Smith, 'A Democracy of Voice? Narrating Community in Ali Smith's Hotel World' *Contemporary Women's Writing*, 4.2 (2009), p.83.

[107] Nancy offers arguably the most complete exploration of the dissolution of the subject in *Who comes after the subject?* ed. Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor, Jean-Luc Nancy (London: Routledge, 1991).

[108] For a full examination of this trend, see Daniel Punday, *Narrative After Deconstruction* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003).

[109] Jeffrey Nealon, *Post-Postmodernism*, or, *The Cultural Logic of Just-In-Time Capitalism* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2012).

[110] For example, see David James and Urmila Seshagiri, 'Metamodernism: Narratives of Continuity and Revolution' *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 129.1 (2014), pp.87-101.

[111] For an excellent summary of the perdiodizing force of the 'contemporary' see *The 2000s: A Decade of Contemporary British Fiction*, ed. Nick Bentley, Nick Hubble and Leigh Wilson (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

[112] Linda Hutcheson offers an early account of this in her account of feminist writing of the 1980s arguing 'Women must create and assert their own community, based on their own values'. Linda Hutcheson, *The Poetic of Postmodernism; History, Theory, Fiction* (New York and London: Routledge, 1988), p.63.

writers such as Tom McCarthy, Zadie Smith, Jackie Kay and Jon McGregor, who employ strategies of polyvocality, subjective dissolution, and fragmented narrative structures in order to explore the possibility of literary expression beyond any stable assumption of the subject. For Brian Richardson, this means that 'contemporary fiction is' more and more 'replete with a polyphony of competing narrative voices' where conventions of central protagonists and stable character formations are replaced with split-selves, subjective fragmentation, and the creation of relational modes of narration and literary expression.[113]

Ali Smith is an exemplary figure within this trend, producing 'multivoiced' novels and short stories revolving around what critic Emma E. Smith has termed a 'narrative multiplicity',[114] and 'narrative community'.[115] For many critics, Ali Smith's focus on the relational must be seen as explicitly *political* in character, deploying a form of narrative community in order to incite her reader to explore their entanglement with 'radical democratic relations […] while actively suggesting how we might read them'.[116] For Monica Germanà and Emily Horton it is precisely in Smith's cultivation of experimental and 'self-reflective' literary forms that a turn to relational modes of writing can 'fill the social vacuum left open by the postmodern condition, reasserting the importance of community and communication.'[117] Themes of intrusion, strangers, hospitality and vexed relationality, may be seen across all her novels, from her debut novel *Like* (1997), her exploration of themes of strangers and intrusion in *The Accidental* (2005*), Hotel World* (2001), *There But For The* (2011*),* her attention to queer relational histories in *Girl Meets Boy* (2007) and *How to be Both* (2014*),* and continuing, in different ways, in her ongoing seasonal quartet in *Autumn* (2016) and *Winter* (2017*), Spring* (forthcoming). In such novels, Smith does not offer an idealized or prescriptive valorisation of community, but rather makes present some of the problems facing community in the contemporary landscape, engaging what Emma E. Smith has termed the 'pluralities and affiliations, dissonances and oppressions, competitions for authority, […] which constitute communities'.[118] Likewise, however, Smith's texts 'emphasize how the self relies on multiple connections', producing innovative forms of literary expression in order to affirm counter-mythic, oppositional, and interruptive modes of relational possibility.[119]

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[113] Brian Richardson, *Unnatural Voices: Extreme Narration in Modern and Contemporary Fiction* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2006), p.63.

[114] Emma E. Smith, 'A Democracy of Voice'?, p.83.

[115] Ibid., p.84.

[116] Ibid., p.97.

[117] Monica Germanà and Emily Horton, 'Introduction' to *Ali Smith: Contemporary Critical Perspectives,* ed. Monica Germanà and Emily Horton (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p.7.

[118] Emma, E Smith, 'A Democracy of Voice?', p.97.

[119] Emily Horton, 'Contemporary Space and Affective Ethics', p.20.

Smith's work may therefore be seen to explore the implication of literature and community, working against contemporary modes of alienation and fragmentation in order to cultivate a politically motivated reaffirmation of emergent modes and possibilities of relationality. Against Dominic Head's view that Smith's literary project and political outlook would amount merely to an 'idiosyncratic style and quirky perspective […] on contemporary life',[120] we may rather place Smith within an important trend in contemporary literature, producing serious innovations and experimentations within literary form, which coalesce in a concerted effort to reimagine communitarian possibility in the present. Smith's expansive experimentation with form, through her embracing of postmodern techniques in novels such as *Hotel World,* strategies of narrative dislocation in *How to be Both, The Accidental* and *There But For The,* and her recent analogizing of contemporary events in *Autumn* and *Winter*, is for Mary Horgan 'becom[ing] more political, more experimental, and more modernist'.[121] Indeed, the sheer scale and force of her innovations of form have provoked an ongoing debate as to the correct categorization of her work, pertaining particularly to its complex relation to 'metamodern' tendencies of borrowing from the modernist and postmodern traditions, whilst forging a distinctly contemporary voice of her own.[122] This chapter will take Smith's contribution to literature as revolving around her evocation of the social, the communal and the relational, locating her innovations in literary form precisely in their capacity to disrupt conventional notions of subjectivity, and her imagination of more unruly relational possibilities.

In this way, we may briefly turn to Ali Smith's highly formally experimental *Artful* (2012) in order to demonstrate how disruptions in formal conventions can open onto relational possibility through strategies of subjective fragmentation, splitting and multiplication. In this text, we are offered a collection of lectures, published as essays, which elide conventional forms of the fictive, employing recognizable modes of literary narration that mirror the novelistic work for which she is best known, whilst fusing them with the lecture-form. In this way Smith's book expertly combines two well-known forms in a complex interplay which is designed primarily to put the form of form into question. Smith's collection is in fact based on lectures that she herself delivered and has published more or less unchanged. These lectures however fictionalize and destabilize their origin and status *as lecture*, identifying them not with herself (the usual vocality of the lecture form), but rather through a fictive other, who formally and performatively is part of Smith's own imaginary, as well as

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[120] Dominic Head, 'Idiosyncrasy and Currency' in *Ali Smith: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, p.103.
[121] Mary Horgan, 'About Change: Ali Smith's Numismatic Modernism' *Contemporary Women's Writing* 10.2 (2016), p.165.
[122] For example, see Ibid.

a device through which her lectures can take on an innovative form of their own. Here the title of the essay 'On Form' is projected by Smith onto a fictional other who the narrator refers to in the second person. This fictive text nonetheless shares its title with the one we are reading: 'At the moment the one that was preoccupying you was the one called On Form', and as such the status and function of this very fictiveness is called into question.[123]

In this way there is a formal interrogation of the speaker, the author and the lecturer and right from the outset, a splitting of the subject of the author and the lecturer in two, with resonances with, amongst others things, the split-subject of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* (1972) and *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980).[124] But further, the very form of 'the literary' is itself put into focus through the dual-system of a metaliterary style of narration and delivery, as well as the scattered fragments of literary theory, specifically interrogating literary form, which serve to demonstrate the breaking down of the language of fiction and interpretation through a formal conflation of the two. What emerges from this technically complex, if not aesthetically engrossing text, is the self-reflexive and self-interrupting form of form, which emerges through a considered mode of self-referential writing. Smith's varying modes of experimentation demonstrate that something as elusive and subtle as 'form' cannot be understood simply as an abstract object among others, as its very meaning would consist in the *way* in which any object can be interpreted and understood at all.

Smith's complex interrogation of 'form' hinges in part on a partial etymology of the word, deriving its origin from the Latin *forma,* meaning 'shape', which comes to mean 'the inherent nature of an object' and 'that in which the essence of a thing consists.'[125] Here the interplay of the 'shape', 'space', and 'essence' of literature is consistent with the Nancian sense of the 'body' (or corpus, which in turn can name a body of work), as that which 'makes room' for being as the place of ontological becoming. The contours of the body, its limit and its extremes, emerge here as a productive way of expressing the nature of its form, which can come to be construed as the taking place of 'the being of existence' itself.[126] The nature of form is therefore akin to what Nancy calls the 'body' or the 'corpus' which '*makes room* [donne lieu] for existence [...] More precisely, it makes room for the fact that the essence of existence is to be without any essence[..] the ontology of the

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[123] Ali Smith, *Artful* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2012), p.53.

[124] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia,* trans Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987) and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Viking Press, 1977).

[125] Smith, *Artful*, p.65.

[126] Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus,* trans. Richard A. Rand (London: Fordham University Press, 2008), p.15.

body is ontology itself.'[127] Transposed into the literary frame, this conception of the body allows for its essence to emerge precisely as *without essence,* constituting literary form as the precise modality through which literary can unwork and transform meaning. Literary form pertains not only to genre, but also 'responds to the ongoing protest of bodies in - against- writing', where literary experimentation can give voice to what is lost in conventional writing and speech.[128] In this way we can see how literary form is a crucial component of 'myth interrupted', exposing the limit of speech to its ability to be transformed, allowing for a new relation to myth and new and disruptive evocations of community.

In *Artful* Smith most specifically addresses the question of literary form in the section entitled 'On Form', which addresses its object precisely through a formally experimental destabilization of literary voice. This immediately put us in mind of Foucault's question 'What does it matter who is speaking?' as the vocality of her lecture is complicated through a variety of experimental techniques.[129] Indeed, her essay begins with a poem, more or less non-sensical, which forces the reader to attempt to offer attribution, as each line chimes with a memory of another poem. Indeed each line is a fairly well-known line from a different poem, by Wallace Stevens, Emily Dickinson, William Blake, Samuel Coleridge, (and later Phillip Larkin, Sylvia Plath etc.):

> I placed a jar in Tennessee
> Because I could not stop for death
> To see a world in a grain of sand
> Where Alph, the sacred river, ran.[130]

As the poem progresses, we see that each line is a quotation and a fragment from another poem, but as it takes shape, we see also that this is not simply a series of quotations but in fact has its own, singular, literary and poetic quality. Each line is chosen for its rhythmic effect, with the first stanza, (with the exception of the third line), evoking a poetic hexameter which remains for most lines of the poem. We see also that there is an attempt at rhyme in the half-rhyme of 'sand' and 'ran' and later with, 'man' and 'sang', making each line in itself familiar at the same time as strange, forced into a new formal context in which new effects and meanings can arise.

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[127] Ibid., p.15.
[128] Ibid., p.21.
[129] Michel Foucault, *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology,* trans. Robert Hurley (New York: The New Press, 1998), p.205.
[130] Smith, *Artful*, p.65.

The poem remains however unanalysed and is not referred to directly by Smith's text. It is simply an opening to the essay, and as such its ambivalent and ambiguous presentation may be construed as a sort of question: 'What is the vocality of the lecture and essay, who or what is speaking, and to whom.' Or, more simply, 'who is speaking?' The answer to this question is in no way given. Indeed, the question is hardly itself posed in and of itself. Rather, it may be extrapolated from the formal experimentations that we read therein, throughout the essay, as the speaker of the essay is split between two fictive subjects, each bound up with the identity of Smith herself. Her short story is interspersed with fragments from a lecture that in the story is never given, but through the giving of the actual lecture live on in a similar form, if not now in a different context. Through such complex formal strategies, Smith expertly questions the vocality of the lecturer as well as the lecture-form itself.

For Nancy, the form of the speaker or narrator in conventional literature pertains to the structure of the 'hero', the single figure who can narrate the myth of a community for the community as part of their communal being.[131] But in Smith's experimental prose this function is carefully denied, played out through the indeterminate and performatively contradictory vocality of the essay - the contradiction between its giving *as lecture,* and its staging a lecture that never was - where the content of the lecture is only given through the form of a story. This staging of a paradoxical vocality performs a contradiction inherent in the very notion of the speaker *as hero,* insofar as what is made impossible in such a gesture is the identification of a stable person or author for whom the speech can be attributed. Such a performative refusal of a stable of recognizable speaker demands that we question our ability to attribute speech to subjects in general, and we are forced to question, beyond the matter of 'who is speaking'; 'what is happening when one speaks, what is the mode of relationality which makes such a speech possible, and what effects does speech have on these conditions of possibility?' We may therefore see Smith's destabilization of the single speaking subject through Nancy's insistence on speech as opening up the scene of myth and communality:

> Of course the writer is always is some way the teller of the myth, its narrator or fabulator, and he [sic] is also always the hero of his own myth. Or rather, writing itself, or literature, is its own recital; it stages itself in such a way that once again the mythic scene is reconstituted.[132]

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[131] For an account of this trend see Nancy, *Inoperative Community,* p.44.
[132] Nancy, *Inoperative Community,* p.69.

For Nancy, far more than simply authorship underpins the speech-act, as the imaginary and ideology of the author, either 'primitive' or modern, is not compatible with a methodology that is critical of individualistic understandings of subjectivity. What is missing from historically 'bourgeois' explications of the author-subject or auteur, is what moves beyond and through the being of the author, and this a question of social conditions, and historical contingency, as well as more ontological considerations of subjective instability and relationality. What may displace the idealized form of the single writing or speaking subject is the ontological function of myth, which is the ground of possibility for writing as such, and which always locates any 'narrator' or 'fabulator' within the communal scene of story-telling. Nancy writes that although the writer *is* intimately bound up, to some extent, with the myth of the hero, something more is occurring in speech and literature:

> [S]peech has something inaugural about it. Each writer, each work inaugurates a community. There is an unimpeachable and irrepressible literary communism, to which belongs anyone who writes (or reads).[133]

We may see a glimpse of what this 'literary community' or 'literary communism' may look like in the multiplicity of voices in Smith's text, which may be seen to be evoked in spectral form throughout her narrative essay. 'Literary communism' is for Nancy a way of expressing the foundational function that literature may serve in expressing community, suggesting an orientation toward different modes of social interaction and relationality.[134] This would demand a new 'writing practice that would constitute… [a new] praxis of discourse and community', construable as a 'cultural politics' orientated around experimental forms of literature which expose and construct communitarian functions.[135] Here, this process resides in the way in which texts such as Smith's assemble different voices in modes that convoke a wider sense of literary community in the reader herself, as well as in the strange and disruptive affinities which her text creates. In this way, 'On Form' begins with a haunting, of the narrator's former lover 'back from the dead' who our speaker wishes 'could have come' back 'a bit differently': [136]

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[133] Ibid., p.68.
[134] As commentators such as Lambert have noted, 'literary communism' largely works as an extension of 'myth interrupted' in T*he Inoperative Community,* and is not a concept with Nancy returns to. Here Nancy's use of the term is synonymous with literary community. See Gregg Lambert, 'Literary Communism' in *Nancy Now,* ed. Verena Andermatt Conley and Irving Goh (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), p.40.
[135] Nancy, *Inoperative Community,* p.xxvi
[136] Smith, *Artful,* p.49.

> [..] as an array of different yous, like anyone with the originality you had when you were alive would naturally have done; for instance if you'd come back as a dog, a mythical sort of one, one that could speak and would even occasionally do my bidding[137]

The 'you' that is addressed establishes the speech of the text in the second person as a form of address, to a lost lover, who nonetheless is present as a ghost in her life and her writing. Smith signals the 'mythical' character of this presence, here construed as a speaking dog, who would 'do my bidding', the anachronistic nature of this image evoking myth in the magical tradition. Here it is the drawing on a binding myth, a story constituted through and by community which allows for this communication to take place, which forces a seemingly impossible relation between the speaker and this nebulous other. The vocality of the lecture rests on an impossible communication which disrupts the myth of the singular speaking subject, expanding and interrupting its expression through the assertion of mythical community, evoked through this 'array of different yous'.

The Collision of Forms: Literary Community

In addressing the figure of community through the work of Nancy and Smith, we can see that writing about community need have little to do with community as it may be commonly construed and represented. In fact, Smith's essay is a deeply *personal* piece, where its attention to the process of loss and mourning evokes the conventions of confessionary writing, whose attachment to the figure of Sylvia Plath is mirrored in Smith's essay along with much of her other writing. Through destabilizing the conventions of narrative expression, and thereby interrupting the mythic apparatus of individuality, Smith opens up the possibility of a community founded on this very interruption. Community therefore emerges not as a positive form but as this process of disruption at the level of subjectivity. For Nancy and Agamben, what is exposed in writing is therefore a sense of the 'singularity' of being; its irreducibility and uniqueness, which is not formed or constituted through any mechanism of pure self-referentiality, or monadic, foundational oneness, but is rather constituted *as singular,* only through its essentially *plural* character. The exposing of literature's singularity therefore exposes us to the presence of the singular plural or being-in-common at the heart of every act of sharing in and through literature. We can see this process at work in Smith's attention to literary form, which interrupts its conventional configurations through exposing them to relationality, which not only disrupts the myth of the subject but opens the possibility for transformation through literary encounter.

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[137] Ibid.

Ali Smith's interest in form leads her to Czeslaw Milosz's poem '*Ars Poetica?'* which we see is an exemplary evocation of the vexed relation of form to writing, as well how the form of literary address seems always to exceed any attempt at a stable monadic foundation or subject: [138]

> The purpose of poetry is to remind us
>
> how difficult it is to remain just one person,
>
> for our house is open, there are no keys in the doors,
>
> and invisible guests come in and out at will.[139]

Milosz's poem may be seen here as a meditation on the purpose of poetry, a purpose which here subsists in a destabilization of person and self, exposing them to the 'invisible guest' and the figure of 'the other' and community in general. The formally self-contained figure of the 'one person' is here radically refigured. It has contours and form but they are 'open', 'there are no keys in the doors', and as such the singularity of the person and form of poetry are defined in their singularity at the very moment they are exposed as inherently porous, multiple and mutable. Poetic form here opens up to the proliferating 'invisible guests', as an evocation of the literary community, which constitutes itself through the singular plural contours of the text.

Likewise '*Ars Poetica?'*, mirroring the uncertain tone of its very title, begins with a specific attention to form, which through the course of the poem is placed with and against the 'purpose' of poetry in general, as both its generative capacity, and that which potentially fixes it in meaning:

> I have always aspired to a more spacious form
>
> that would be free from the claims of poetry or prose
>
> and would let us understand each other without exposing
>
> the author or reader to sublime agonies.[140]

Mirroring Smith's essay on form and Nancy's text on myth, the object of the text soon overtakes the text itself. The 'poetic art' is here questioned, and in the last instance it is denied: 'What I am saying here is not, I agree, poetry,' but its expression *in form* nevertheless returns it to the shape and

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[138] Czeslaw Milosz, 'Ars Poetica', in *Collected Poems* (London: Penguin, 1988), pp.211-212.
[139] Ibid.
[140] Ibid., p.211.

contours of its literary expression.[141] If Milosz resists the strictures of form, and the 'sublime agonies' of poetry, he can only properly express and resist this through these very structures themselves; the interruption of form makes room for new forms, and it is this incessant and excessive mutability which is its most essential and powerful aspect. Here the 'purpose' of poetry would reside precisely in its formal excess, in this resistance to poetic form, which interrupts and ruptures with itself to bring poetic form back to itself: form, interrupted.

Likewise, Smith's poem starting with the Wallace Stevens line 'I placed a jar in Tennessee', where its formal quality literally *jars* with the expected form of the poem, with each line demarcating an expected progression which in fact never comes. Just as Steven's 'jar' orders the natural landscape around it, taking 'dominion everywhere', Smith's poem enacts a similar reordering, here not of nature, but of the poetic form itself, transposing the carefully balanced poetic form of Steven's poem into a chaotic and artificial assemblage of fragments, which nonetheless constitute a form of literary communality. [142] Such a reordering cannot, in either instance, simply lead to a negation or a rejection of the new form. Steven's jar does not so much destroy the 'wilderness' around it, as simply demand a different 'sprawling', which, 'Like nothing else in Tennessee' allows for new movement and forms, leading to a transformation which nonetheless retains something of that which has come before it. Form is not then about organic harmony or simple, natural beauty, even if such values have been long at the heart of the way that we judge poetry. Form, for Smith, thrives also on plurality and 'dialogue' which can be harmonious, but sometimes tempestuous:

> They'll always be seminal argument between forms – that's how forms produce themselves, out of a meeting of opposites, of different things; out of form encountering form. Put two poems together and they'll make a third.[143]

Crucially here it is the 'encounter' and collision of forms, their turbulent affinities and oppositions which allows for form to exist at all, for it to exceed mere formalism. Just as we have seen with community and myth, form has no essence or universal aspect, but is rather construable only in its own interruption, in its contingency, where it can exceed the confines of its previous inculcations to renew and reorder itself. It is necessarily bound up with experimentation and creativity and in Smith's account *must* have newness, disruption, and alterity to survive. Likewise, community is tightly bound to the form of literature, to the form of literature's own unworking and reworking, and

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[141] Ibid., p.212.
[142] Wallace Stevens, 'Anecdote of the Jar' in *Harmonium* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1923).
[143] Smith, *Artful,* p.69.

it is this process to which Smith is so attentive in her essay. Form is ultimately the mutable matter through which we can access what is in excess of the monadic and the self-contained, exposing it also to the 'array of different yous' opening it up to the literary and material possibility of new collectivities, a new 'we', where '[w]e make form and form makes us'.[144]

The last line of Smith's poem of poetic fragments, 'What will survive of us is love', from the Philip Larkin poem *Arundel Tomb,* brings the transformative formal dimensions of the intimate relationality of love into focus. This may remind us of the narration of *Artful* itself, there the speaker's partner and former lover lingers (survives) in the essays, combining forms of mourning and love in its literary expression. Here love is evoked as a sort of fiction, where living with one's lover was 'like living in a poem or a picture, a story, a piece of music, when I think of it now'.[145] Here love is not evoked by Smith as a stable object or thing; as with form, what abounds are rather relational modalities, here similes - *like* this, *like* that - a proliferation of descriptions and formulations. It is this allusive sense of love and its destabilization of monadic voice, which is at the heart of the formal experimentation of the piece. The intensity of encounter, which here returns as an intensity of mourning, allowing for a presence and a trace of the loved other which survives even death. Just as the text lives on after the death of the author, it is the effects of love which linger in the speaker of Smith's story. We see that love is in fact bound to language itself; 'simile maybe involved love too', and we see that love drives the narrator of the story to fill in, to finish the essay their lover has left unfinished, to 'fill it in for you',[146] just as it has been suggested that form is 'a thing you fill in'.[147]

But here this is not a 'filling in' which has much to do with completion, as though the lover must be construed through 'lack' without the object of their love. The narrator of Smith's story 'fills in', and in a sense completes the unfinished section on the painter Cezanne with an ultimately irrelevant, if not evocative discussion of the colour green in Oliver Twist in relation to the character Artful Dodger, who lends his name to the book as a whole. In the encounter of Dodger and Twist, where we are told that 'Dodger speaks another language altogether [to Oliver]';[148] the encounter in effect fails, as does the narrator's attempt to fill in their dead lover's essay. There is here no chance of it being completed, or at least, not as it was intended. Rather the encounter leads to a fracturing of form, the intrusion of a new text, a new style or writing, which ruptures the continuity of the original

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[144] Ibid., p.72.
[145] Smith, *Artful,* p.50.
[146] Ibid., p.87.
[147] Ibid., p.53.
[148] Ibid., p.90.

text at the same time as adding new meaning through the intrusion of a disruptive and destabilizing alterity and plurality.

The figure of the Artful Dodger can in fact be seen as foundational to the way in which Smith is exploring and experimenting with literary form and literary voice. Her text notes that at the end of *Oliver Twist,* Dickens 'sums up […] what's happened to all the people in the gang [but]… he never directly mentions Dodger. It's like the Dodger's given not just the story the slip, but given Dickens the slip too.'[149] Here what is most 'artful' about the Dodger is not just his skill for 'thievery', but his ability to dodge even the author himself, where he is simultaneously in language and fiction at the same time as eluding it.[150] As with the absent lover who haunts the narrator as a ghost, language evokes what is 'artful', in terms of both aesthetics and deception, which allows for a nebulous and elusive sense of voice and subjects, where literary language plunges both categories into question. Hence, Smith addresses in the last lines of the book the 'you' which has haunted the text as its absent second person, and its expression is precisely evocative of this very ambiguity, this hanging and unsettled sense of person which elides the fictive and the real to implicate the reader:

> (Who did I think I was talking to?
> You.)[151]

This last 'you' appears as a definitive answer to the question, refusing to mirror the interrogative tone of the first line, but rather answering it through the implied modality of another voice, and in this way Smith enacts a crucial disruption of conventional literary form. The self-reflexive tone of the initial question, which implies through its repeated self-referentiality, 'who did *I* think *I* was talking to' that the question is simply posed to the self, seems to indicate that the narrator has essentially been talking to him/herself. But the answer to the question undoes this. This 'you' refuses the self-referentiality of the interior monologue as well as refusing to construe the vocality of the dead lover as a simple projection of self. In the last instance this is a definitive gesture to the 'other' of speech, indicating that this is not simply a subject projecting a phantasmagoric other to their essentially monadic state in mourning, but that this 'you' names something much more real than this. Neither monadic, split, nor stable, the subject of this speech act demands a fracturing of its own vocality, with the 'you' resonating as the apparently impossible, but all too real, presence of the lost lover to

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149 Ibid., p.192.
150 Ibid., p.91.
151 Ibid., p.192.

the narrator. The subjectivity of the evoked 'you' (artfully) dodges any foundation or stabilizing referent, it is essentially liminal: between the space of literature and reality.

Furthermore, this 'you' cannot fail to convoke the reader, the initial audience to the lecture, and in this sense a literary community, who by reading are present to the act of mourning and the impossible communication of Smith's text. The mode of the address, the vocality and communicative capacity of the narrator to speak to, to write of, and make present the dead lover, refuses their presence as a simple fiction or linguistic deception. Rather this subtle invocation of otherness, which emerges precisely through a destabilization of the structure of self/other proper to the subject, produces a relation which is disruptive of the usual terms of relationality. Through the construction of an impossible, literary other, placed in a nebulous space between author, narrative voice, and reader, Smith gestures toward a radically disruptive affirmation of relationality through literature. Smith's experimentation in literary form is therefore deployed to question the very terms relationality itself, exposing it to the infinite possibility of transformation, where the creative freedom of literary expression becomes the paradigm for relationality and community as such.

Conclusion

Smith's gesture to a qualitative *other* of speech demonstrates how representations of subjective fragmentation can open onto disruptive relational possibilities. This function may be traced through Smith's relation to literary *form,* which in its mythic function produces interruptions across our communicative and communal capacities, demonstrating the interwoven structures of literary expression and relational being. In this way, this methodology draws on the theories of literary form discussed at the beginning of this chapter, evincing the ways in which forms interact across cultural, social, and political zones of activity, at the same time as foregrounding how an *ontological* view can allow for these complex affinities and functions to be understood in their specifically communal and mythic character. In the figure of 'myth interrupted' and 'unworking' we can see how Nancy's theory of community can be placed in close alignment with experimental forms of literary expression, where disruptions at the level of literary form can expose disruptive patterns of affinity with important political consequences for our thinking of community.

In this way, a reading of community in literature may prove as an example of what Hartley has termed 'literary effectivity',[152] exposing the social and communal basis of literature through its

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[152] Hartley, *The Politics of Style,* p.61.

evocation of its socio-political environment, and its ability to produce resistant and disruptive modes of relational being through a process of formal disruption. This method therefore has much to do with what Nancy has termed 'literary communism', where a vision of a liberated politics of community may take the paradigm of literature as its basic model of being, in a vision of a 'work engaged in its own unworking.'[153] Without origin, fixed destination or project, but enacting always the 'exigency' 'of a communal being through resistance to any force which would reduce it to a single work, this 'coming community' may in some small way be traced in works of literature which engage in modes of formal unworking and disruption, offering interpretative and political possibilities for rethinking our relational being in the present.

The next chapters will seek to expand on the insights developed in this chapter, looking to often underexamined works of experimental literature in British fiction of the last three decades which may offer precisely this kind of interpretative possibility. In Jackie Kay, Jon McGregor and Ali Smith, we can see three writers engaged in very different literary styles, deploying a wide range of narrative techniques to address a varied set of thematic, subjective and political concerns. What binds each writer, however, is an attention to forms of relation which are historically marginal and politically peripheral, which in their depiction ask serious questions about the political composition of the present. Such themes demand of each writer a form of literary expression which is attentive to questions of their representability, producing formal innovations which are disruptive of conventions in prose writing, and characterizations and modes of narrative voice which attest to renewed communitarian possibilities. This chapter and the first have proceeded through an explication of the work of Nancy, who remains central to our concerns, but the following chapters will take the thematic and formal concerns of the literary texts as their guiding critical principles. Through excavating the themes of 'queer love', 'death' and 'magic' in their ability to expose the relational innovations of each of the authors explored, Nancy's theories will be put in dialogue with a range of critical and literary traditions which will compliment as well as complicate his method. In seeking to develop such approaches in relation to community, this thesis hopes to offer them as underdeveloped but productive avenues for thinking the politics of community in the present.

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[153] Nancy, *Inoperative Community,* p.40.

'Is the breakdown of gender binaries… so monstrous, so frightening,
that it must be held as definitionally impossible?'[1]
(Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*)

'They will find words to fit onto me. Words that don't fit me. Words that don't fit Joss'[2]
(Jackie Kay, *Trumpet*)

Chapter 3: Queer Community in Jackie Kay's *Trumpet*

Introduction

In their landmark work, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (1986)*,* Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari theorize the emergence of what they term 'minor literature'. This is a form of writing 'which a minority constructs within a major language' that has the effect of 'deterritorializing', and transforming, from the margins, the very centre which keeps it marginal.[3] Such a concept serves as an intervention in the categories through which literature might ordinarily be defined in relation to canon, either tacitly or explicitly: British, English, American, Jewish, Black, etc. These distinctions serve to bind literature to national, cultural and religious identities, crystallizing not only certain literary forms, but also subject positions into naturalized and stable categories. The 'minor' intervenes through a destabilization of these very terms, emphasizing that such distinctions are part of complex networks of relationality, multiplicity and power. In this way, we see that as much as there will be processes of identification and marginalization in literary canon-building, there will also be resistance to this. Minor literature embodies this resistance, using its situated voice to expose systems of linguistic, cultural and political domination at the same time as offering a literary space for rethinking these very relations.

For Deleuze and Guattari, it is Kafka, a Jewish author writing in the German language whilst living in Prague, who best embodies this 'minor' quality of this literature to unsettle and destabilize the norms which constitute socially dominant literary and aesthetic forms. Kafka's writing addresses a dual-impossibility, both that of 'not writing', but also of successfully expressing an identity (here, Jewish), where the linguistic and political landscape in which it operates subjects it both to symbolic erasure as well as political 'oppression'.[4] Here literature takes on an inevitably 'political' function, as

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[1] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1999), p.viii   .
[2] Kay, *Trumpet* p.154.
[3] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minority Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1986), p.16.
[4] Ibid.

well as a 'collective' one, as any 'minor' writing must react to, resist and explore its marginal status at the same time as building a community of those who are 'minor', whose identity can become bound to the counter-mythic force that such a writing embodies: [5]

> It is literature that produces an active solidarity in spite of skepticism; and if the writer is in the margins or completely outside his or her fragile community, this situation allows the writer all the more the possibility to express another possible community and to forge the means for another consciousness and another sensibility[6]

As in Nancy, mythic interruption borders the material and symbolic to stage the excessive force of community to disrupt and reorder those operative forces which make community part of 'majority' operativity, and thus writing and literature are vital spaces for challenging these hegemonic forces in their symbolic and constitutive function.[7] This kind of disruptive writing, which directs itself at the centre as a challenge to its very embodied marginality, always speaks to and through a community. Taking on the alienation, fragmentation and division which characterizes marginal lives which are 'simultaneously a part of this minority and excluded from it', the minority works at the margins, in those precarious and 'fragile' places where a notion of an 'other community' or a 'coming community' might be glimpsed.[8] As we have seen in the writing of Ali Smith, it is not only in Jewish writing, but also in identities such as gay, lesbian, trans and queer, where this notion of counter-mythic writing becomes so important. In these 'minor literatures', the aim is not simply to seek recognition within an operative landscape, but to point to the necessity of its reordering by exposing the modes of exclusion which make up its constitutive function.[9]

The transformative potential that a minor literature contains derives from its very marginality, its situation and expression at the limit of the representable, the thinkable and the real. Here the *margins*, more so than the language of the *minor*, make clear the dual-character of the limit, which in most cases delineates the excluded and peripheral: the limit as the border that establishes dominant sensibility. On the other hand, however, the limit-point or margin is also that place in which a whole system of thinkability may be brought into question. As Nancy writes, it is precisely in the writing of community, rupture and passionate encounter where we experience a limit, which is

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[5] Ibid., p.17.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Nancy, *Inoperative Community,* p.43.
[8] Deleuze and Guattari, *Toward a Minor Literature,* p.17.
[9] For a detailed study of the meaning and uses of 'Minor Literature', see Ian Buchanan and John Marks *Deleuze and Literature*, ed. Ian Buchanan and John Marks (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000).

not so much a restraint but a revelation. The limit is here the exposure of relationality and being-with itself: [Writing] is the act that obeys the sole necessity of exposing the limit: not the limit of communication, *but the limit upon which communication takes place*'.[10] For Nancy, writing at the limit or on the margins is engaged in an 'unworking of literature', which here would be the disruption and re-ordering of a dominant order of sense.[11] This is not, however, simply a negative process: literature is not unworked solely as negation, and, likewise, by embodying the margins one is never doing so alone. What matters most in the marginal and the 'limit' is that this position and this speech is necessarily *shared*:

> But what is inscribed, and what passes to the limit in inscribing itself, exposes and communicates itself (instead of trying to accomplish a meaning, like speech): what is shared is the unworking of works.[12]

If here we can see marginal writing as a form of 'unworking', then it is clear that this is exposed '*to* the community, which already *shares their intimacy'.[13]* Literature is a communicative form, and its communitarian function is, as with community, two-fold. A non-marginal literature is not an unworking, but a working: of the dominant, of the operative and of the same. It establishes the real of community and puts it to work as part of the operativity of hegemonic modes of power (capitalism, patriarchy, white supremacy, hetero-normativity, ableism etc.). Marginal literature, by focusing on those bodies which cannot reconcile themselves with these modes of power, exposes a community of those who live in excess of these structures. Not without, but within, marginal literature embodies a non-political excess of that which has been rendered non-political by a system of domination. In writing, we see the possibility of an eruption of the margins, as a disruptive community which becomes political through its interruption and reworking of the category of the political itself. In this way this process shares a core logic with the writing of Jacques Rancière, whose vision for a radically democratic literature would consist in the exposition the 'part of no part' in society, whose inclusion in the wider democratic apparatus would demand a radical 'redistribution of the sensible'. [14]

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[10] Nancy, *Inoperative Community*, p.67.
[11] Ibid., p.39.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid., p.40.
[14] Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus,* p.216.

In the case of Jackie Kay, we see precisely a turn to that which is marginal in the major themes of her novels and poetry, and, crucially, the identities which she explores are tied closely to her own embodied life: as black, gay, and a woman.[15] To assert this 'minor' character is not, however, simply to situate these categories as necessarily marginal, naturalizing the forms of political oppression that have led to this peripheral aspect. Rather, by self-consciously inhabiting these limits in her writing we see the exposure of the system that constitutes itself through rendering some bodies more visible and intelligible than others, as well as a counter-mythic resistance to this very process: the exposition of the limits of the system which calls its entire being into question. In this way, Kay speaks to, from, and through a marginal community, asserting those identities against the grain to establish a literature which embodies a resistance to its own marginality. This writing, speaks to and *with* all those others with whom it occupies this marginal space. If the margins denote a mode of exclusion or alienation in society, the taking of this position in literature also embodies a solidarity, a resistance and communal act of defiance: a literary community of the marginal.

Kay's marginal status may be gleaned most clearly in her complex relation to the shifting dynamics of contemporary canon-formation. Although in many ways an established figure, Kay is often rendered invisible or highly peripheral in accounts of the British canon.[16] In his account of 'a renaissance in Scottish writing in the last forty years', Nick Bentley lists 'Janice Galloway, Alasdair Gray, James Kelman, A.L. Kennedy, Ali Smith, Alan Warner and Irvine Welsh', as his sole examples, leaving Jackie Kay strangely and noticeable absent, despite her considerable contribution to Scottish writing and status as the third modern Makar of Scotland.[17] The significance of this exclusion may reside in the tacit stratification of literary criticism, where Jackie Kay is a quintessential figure in Black British Literature, but far less examined outside this sub-field.[18] In delineating national and ethnic boundaries of Scottish and Black literature, contemporary criticism arguably struggles to apprehend the spaces where such categories blend, leaving Kay's literature outside more clearly

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[15] For example, her first work, Jackie Kay, *The Adoption Papers* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1991), like her later poetry collections, reflects deeply on her personal experience of racism. (Jackie Kay, *Other Lovers* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1993) and Jackie Kay, *Off Colour* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1998).

[16] Most notably, Kay's work, is not given a single mention in Nick Bentley otherwise expansive account in Nick Bentley, *British Fiction of the 1990s* (London: Routledge, 2005) or in Philip Tew *The Contemporary British Novel* (London: Continuum, 2004).

[17] Nick Bentley, *Contemporary British Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008).

[18] For example, in *The Cambridge companion to British Black and Asian literature (1945-2010)* ed. Deirdre Osborne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016). Sara Upstone, *Rethinking Race and Identity in Contemporary British Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2016). John McLeod, *Life Lines: Writing Transcultural Adoption* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015).

representative literatures from across Britain's minority populations.[19] As Valerie Popp has noted, 'intersections of race and national identity become particularly fraught in places such as Scotland', with significant tensions arising between competing notions of national community, which Kay's writing does not resolve but rather exposes in their complexity.[20] Kay's prose and poetry in fact seem precisely to resist easy identification with conventional signifiers of national, cultural, or racial community, cultivating a literary style which resides in uneasy relation to dominant historical and institutional trends in British literary culture. In this way, we may contrast Kay's work to that of Zadie Smith, whose explicit debt to the realist British novel, for example in the work of E. M. Forster, Charles Dickens and Laurence Sterne, has arguably contributed to her unassailable place at the centre the British literary canon, allowing for the novelty of her own work, and its tackling of issues of race, migration and the postcolonial, to be more easily situated within established publishing and critical trends.[21]

For Bénédicte Ledent, Kay's complex status as a literary figure may be understood according to an insider/outsider paradigm, drawing attention to how such statuses, although porous and shifting, may be discerned within mainstream practices of canon-making, where some authors from minority backgrounds are accepted into mainstream literary culture, whilst others remain tangential. Such tacit categorisations do not, however, simply operate as direct delineations of the ethnic, cultural, racial or national allegiance or background of authors, but rather attest to how each author can reconcile themselves with the norms of the 'British literary establishment':

> Salman Rushdie and V.S. Naipaul, in spite of their Indian and Trinidadian origins, can be viewed as 'insiders' of the British literary establishment, whereas Jackie Kay, Fred D'Aguiar and Caryl Phillips, even if they were born or brought up in Britain, can to some extent be regarded as 'outsiders'.[22]

The stakes of acceptance into dominant literary culture for writers of colour entail a broad range of concerns and determinations. For Ledent, Kay's status as an 'outsider-writer' may derive from her

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[19] For an overview of Kay's relation to questions of identity, see Alison Lumsden, 'Jackie Kay's Poetry and Prose: Constructing Identity', in *Contemporary Scottish Women Writers* ed. Aileen Christianson and Alison Lumsden (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), p.79.

[20] Valerie L. Popp, 'Improper Identification Required: Passports, Papers, and Identity Formation in Jackie Kay's *The Adoption Papers*' *Contemporary Literature* 53.2 (2012)*,* p.297.

[21] For a thorough discussion of such debts, see Fiona Tolan, 'Zadie Smith's Forsterian Ethics: White Teeth, The Autograph Man, On Beauty *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 54.2 (2013), p.137.

[22] Bénédicte Ledent, ''Other' Voices and the British Literary Canon' in *Cambridge Companion to British Black and Asian Writing*, p.245.

'political commitment [which] can be linked to her family background - she is the adoptive daughter of communist activists. A feminist and lesbian'.[23] In this way, Kay represents a complex assemblage of marginal subject positions which resist easy classification into the norms of literary categorization. Her 'open and refreshing take on questions of gender and sexuality' therefore straddles categories of political, racial, sexual, and gender-based exclusions, coalescing in a literature which demands attention to the precise relation of their interrelating modalities, exposing not only her commensurability with established conventions in postcolonial, feminist, or queer interpretation, but also the way that she unsettles and combines such approaches.[24] A wide set of biographical concerns therefore account for Kay's status as a relatively peripheral writer, not least the influence of her adoptive parent's Communist convictions, which although consistently invoked in her biographical summaries, rarely inform interpretations of her texts as part of their broader social or political significance.[25] This is despite the fact that Kay's work has often demonstrated deep indebtedness to more radical traditions of political subversion, linking the black Marxist tradition with the anticolonial histories of Scotland:

> I am learning about the Black Jacobins
> From CLR James and the memories of the
> Cheviot and the stag and the Highlanders
> Being forced oot of their crofts
> Came flooding back[26]

In this provocative fusion of two radical traditions, Kay offers a strident poetic image of her own personal growth, drawing on her parent's investment in Marxist anti-colonial histories, and integrating them into her own aesthetic vision. Such an account clearly draws on her subjectivity as an author, but also indicates her debt to communities and collective histories of political expression, demonstrating how her development as a Black Scottish writer was influenced by a wider, international Black community including C. L. R. James, Audre Lorde, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and Maya Angelou.[27] Such figures were central to the constitution of Kay's identity, helping her to

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[23] Ibid., p.249.
[24] Ibid.
[25] For example, in a recent essay Claire Hanson notes this biographical detail, only for it to remain unconsidered in the ensuing reading of the text. Claire Hanson, 'Epigenetics, plasticity and identity in Jackie Kay's *Red Dust Road*' *Textual Practice* 29.3 (2015), p.441.
[26] Jackie Kay, 'Kail and Callaloo' in *Charting the Journey: Writings by Black and Third World Women*, ed. Shabnam Grewal, Jackie Kay et al. (London: Sheba, 1988).
[27] Jackie Kay, 'A Life in Writing' *The Guardian* (April 27, 2012). https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/apr/27/life-writing-jackie-kay [accessed 21 November 2018].

discover she did not have to 'deny her Scottishness in order to be black', allowing her to navigate numerous intersecting axes of identity through an explicitly political framework.[28] The centrality of these literary influences therefore demonstrates how it is not simply Kay's background which is at stake in marginal status as author, but the radical traditions and communities which inform her wider aesthetic and political project.

If there is a tendency to privilege biographical detail in analysing Kay's work, which in its consistent self-referentiality is often aligned with life-writing, such approaches can obscure the wider social meanings Kay ascribes to identity, as well as the complex formal dimensions of her texts. [29] Kay's biographical and autobiographical work in composed through an intricate interplay between autobiographical detail and its fictive recreation in creative and lyrical prose. Notably, at the end of her autobiographical work *The Red Dust Road,* the final scene of the novel resists any easy identification with the documentary or memoir form. Like her earlier autobiographical text, *The Adoption Papers,* it is not rendered in a temporally linear fashion, and is interspersed with crucial literary flourishes which complicate and resist any simple categorization of her writing as straight-forwardly autobiographical. Despite Petra Tournay-Theodotou's claim that the tense relation between 'fiction and fact' which mark the novel eventually 'collapse in a homecoming scene which culminates in the writer's complete appropriation of and identification with the place', Kay's text in fact renders such concepts in a far more ambiguous fashion. [30] Although Kay invests in the space of the 'long and winding red-dust road' as inciting a new sense of subjective attachment, this identification is in fact short-lived, displacing any originary sense of belonging or home. [31] In the final scene of the text, which repeats the trope of the 'magic-tree' which thematically binds her to her father, he is nonetheless absent, echoed only in a symbolic resonance.[32] Her ritual invocation of belonging consists in the placing of 'a pound coin' in an 'old oak tree with a perfect hollow', a gesture which echoes a scene earlier in the novel, where she puts:[33]

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[28] Ibid.

[29] For example, in John McLeod, *Life Lines: Writing Transcultural Adoption* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015) and Emily Hipchen & Jill Deans, 'Introduction: Adoption Life Writing: Origins and Other Ghosts' *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 18.2 (2003).

[30] Petra Tournay-Theodotou, 'Some Connection with the Place' *Wasafiri* 29.1 (2014), p.17.

[31] Jackie Kay, *Red Dust Road* (London: Picador, 2012), p.214.

[32] Ibid., p.170.

[33] Ibid.

> A pound coin into the hollow as an offering, slipping my hand far back, into the tree's dark
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> womb, the tree's tiny cradle; I close my eyes and make a wish. I wish that everything will go
>
> well in Nigeria. […] I'll come back here […] and see if the tree has saved my wish. [34]

This enigmatic act enacts a crucial indeterminacy at the heart of her text. Echoing a Scottish tradition of placing a penny in a tree as either a wish or an offering, which dates back to the eighteenth century, Kay nonetheless displaces this history in her use of a 'pound coin' anachronistic to this tradition.[35] The nature of this ritual is linked by Kay to her tree specialist' father's love of the 'magic tree [called] maringa',[36] which is echoed in the hollows of the emblematically British 'oak tree', producing a symbolic and metaphorical affinity across these different cultures and landscapes, which Kay claims 'brings its own peculiar magic' to her story.[37] Combining notions of belonging, kinship, history and ritual, this image encapsulates the ambivalence of Kay's affirmation of identity in her novel, which consists in a suggestive, but ultimately equivocal relationality. This opaquely symbolic scene denies Kay's text any kind of formal or narrative unity which might be reflected in her own sense of self. She is not captured by the text, and neither does it serve as a simple document of her journey. Rather this final image opens her narrative structure to the crucial process of interpretation: the indeterminacy of its language, and the poetic power of her prose captures specific questions of identity, belonging and family, which are not resolved but simply exposed in their undecidability.

Kay's work can therefore often afford more radical readings than her critical reception has thus far offered. Her complication of crucial questions of identity, belonging and kinship do not directly propose new or subversive modes of orientating the self and community, but they nonetheless emerge as radically incommensurable with the operative ideologies around them, demanding fundamental questions to be asked the organization of identity, community and belonging in contemporary society. For Ledent, Kay's is couched in a prose which in its lyricism and earnestness 'tends to make her radicalism […] look softer than it actually is.'[38] Her focus on marginal communities and their (un)intelligibility in the wider social body, enacts what Tracey Hargreaves has termed the 'ordinary subversive', deploying subtle depictions of everyday reality in an outwardly

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[34] Ibid., p.166.
[35] Mick Sharp, *Holy Places of Celtic Britain: A Photographic Portrait of Sacred Albion* (London: Blandford, 1997)
[36] Kay, *Red Dust Road,* p.154.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Ledent, '"Other" Voices and the British Literary Canon' in *Cambridge Companion to British Black and Asian Writing*, p.249.

straightforward prose that nonetheless produces radical displacements in conventional thinking.[39] As Emma Smith points out, in drawing attention to everyday 'familial and communal structure 'in her 'multiply narrated' texts,[40] Kay be seen to embody a democratic imperative to shift the perspective of a reader onto the oppressed, or what Kay has termed the 'voiceless', who are part of reality, but estranged from discursive mechanisms by the unequal organization of power in capitalist modernity.[41]

Jackie Kay's fiction is therefore an exemplary instance of marginal literature, where the self-conscious taking of the position of the minor informs her literary styles and modes of expression, producing implicitly communitarian and political meanings in her texts. Through focusing on underrepresented, socially marginal and even unintelligible subjectivities, her writing embodies a politically motivated commitment to the peripheral or 'minor' stance in relation to the operative norms of society, at the same time as always complicating and exploring the boundaries of identity, the political and community. This chapter will focus on a single text by Kay, which will allow for the thinking of the marginal in relation to the 'queer' and the 'trans'. These terms can combine with a critique of the 'operative' to offer a new way of understanding the political and philosophical meanings of the real in relation to gender, identity and community. As we have seen with Ali Smith, it is in moments where literature can interrupt and resist dominant modes of subjectivity and personhood, where something like a new understanding of relationality can be found, and in the writing of Kay, this can be productively explored through an interrogation of community, realism and the real.

Writing on the Margins of the Real

In her debut novel *Trumpet* (1998), Kay offers her reader a fictional rewriting of the life of jazz trumpeter Billy Tipton (neé Dorothy Tipton), from the perspective of his ex-wife, son, mother, various officials (a registrar, doctor and funeral director), old friends and band members, as well as an unauthorized biographer and reporter named Sophie Stones.[42] As with the fiction of Ali Smith, the prose form allows for the exploration of multiple perspectives by deploying many first-person perspectives, all conflicting and interacting in complex ways, in a narrative that centres not so much

[39] Tracy Hargreaves, 'The Power of the Ordinary Subversive in Jackie Kay's *Trumpet*' *Feminist Review* 74.1 (2003), pp.2-16.
[40] Emma E Smith, 'A Democracy of Voice?', p.83.
[41] Jackie Kay, 'Jackie Kay Interview' at The Poetry Archive https://www.poetryarchive.org/interview/jackie-kay-interview [accessed 10 Nov 2018].
[42] Jackie Kay, *Trumpet* (London: Picador, 1998).

on a hero but on his absence in death. This rich assemblage of interacting viewpoints involves a conscious relation to questions of authenticity, truth, and the power of representation, as ethical issues of what it means to write about and even *as* a character (here based on a real historical figure) come to the fore. As Jack Halberstam has noted, Kay's text evokes and engages the 'biographical' form, which historically has been highly attentive to truth, authenticity and the real.[43] However, in the case of Joss Moody, who is a fictionalization of real jazz trumpeter Billy Tipton, the question of the real in his identity and life is highly complicated. Kay highlights this issue in her writing of Millie Moody, who is constantly confronted with the difficulty of recognition in a landscape which wishes to instrumentalize her life with Joss Moody as part of a sensationalist exposure: 'No doubt they will call me a lesbian. They will find words to fit onto me. Words that don't fit me. Words that don't fit Joss.'[44]

What happen when words do not fit? Words inscribe social meaning. They are the mode through which meaning circulates and the way that bodies gain recognition. But if the words 'do not fit' then this process is in fact one of *mis*recognition, and this goes far beyond language. To 'not fit' into a social schema or code is to be vulnerable to attack, both symbolic and material. If one's body deviates from socially encoded 'law' on gender, sexuality and body norms then one is outside of law, no longer protected, but marked as outside of it.[45] This process can lead to a strategic retreat from society, to the self and to the fragile communities of outlawed being and resistance.[46] Such communities guard themselves not only from attack but also to exposure; the exposure into a linguistic landscape in which one's body and being does 'not fit', and in this sense, cannot exist without erasure and denigration. As Judith Butler has argued, such bodies are not only misrecognised and denigrated, but also, crucially, can emerge as simply 'unintelligible', such that their exposure to wider community leads to their total symbolic negation, a process that can have serious and violent consequences.[47] This means that in the case of writing trans lives we find a serious ethical issue which needs to be addressed. There is a 'danger in biography', and 'Kay's novel […] produces important questions about the project of transgender history and biography', ultimately relying on a strategic *non-exposure* in the face of social demands for revelation.[48]

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[43] Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place; Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2005), p.60.

[44] Kay, *Trumpet,* p.154.

[45] For a fuller discussion of the role of 'law' in gender, see Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender,* pp.46-49.

[46] Here we may look to Kate Bornstein's influential notion of the 'Gender Outlaw' in *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women and the Rest of Us* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994).

[47] Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limit of 'Sex'* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p.39.

[48] Halberstam, *Queer Time and Place,* p.60.

In the case of the main character Joss Moody, his subjective and identitarian ambiguity and contradictions bring these ethical issues to the fore. Not only was Joss Moody a black man in the earlier decades of the twentieth century, but it was also revealed on his deathbed that he was born a woman. In this way, his identity and its social reproduction and representation is mired in misrecognition, misgendering and mystery. The desire to write him as a figure encompasses the need to negotiate these conflicting narratives in search of some sense of reality, despite the fact that the full facts of his life are not available. Kay's fictive rewriting of Billy Tipton may be seen to capture something real about a life by deliberately distorting and reworking it, and as such the question of its truth or realness is cast in doubt at the very moment that it is brought into focus. The boundary between the real and the fictive is immediately here troubled, as is the representability of a figure whose trans identity would have been largely unintelligible in its symbolic and ideological landscape.

This blurring of the real and the fictive takes place not only in the content of Kay's novel, but also, crucially, in its form, where a sense of realness is carefully constructed through the personal and intimate nature of her prose. Unlike Ali Smith, who employs a self-consciously counter-mythic and experimental relation to literacy form in order to disrupt conventional representations and understandings of the subject and relationality, Kay's approach to writing appears, at first glance, to be rather simpler. She is interested in people and their lives, and her interest leads her to build complex and personal depictions, in a broadly realist style, to bring about a sense of subjective authenticity. Such a process deploys this realism to evoke a strong sense of the authentic and the real in such a way as to expose the singularity and inner psychic life of each of her characters.

As the novel begins, we are drawn into the first person, present-tense narrative voice of Millie Moody, whose short sentences, preceded always by the singular first-person pronoun, create an intimate and emotional intensity to her depiction. This highly personal representation builds itself around a contrast to an always present and menacing outside 'they', whose presence symbolizes the fragility of her authentic inner life, which is always under threat of misrecognition and misrepresentation:

> I pull back the curtain an inch and see their heads bent together. I have no idea how long they have been there. It is getting dark. I keep expecting them to vanish; then I would know that they were all in my mind…Each time I look at the photographs in the papers, I look unreal. I look unlike the memory of myself.[49]

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[49] Kay, *Trumpet,* p.1.

These 'photographs' are the visual markers of her social misrecognition, circulated in an outside environment from which Millie can only retreat. Depictions of Millie in the media are literally felt as 'unreal', and Kay's sensitive evocation of Millie's inner-life stands in contrast to this as a necessary rejoinder. In this way, a realist style, placed within a landscape where the real is in doubt, precarious and peripheral, serves to challenge the processes which lead to symbolic and material marginality. The realist tradition, as well as the philosophical and political significance of 'the real', is strongly evoked by Kay, as is its relation to the novel-form as the prosaic capture of inner psychic life and subjectivity.[50] By focusing on a sense of the real, and using an intimate and personal prose to capture this, Kay's text explores and affirms ideas of realness in relation to her subject-matter. As Millie notes of her relationship with Joss: 'It was real. We just got on and lived it.'[51]

The history of literary realism is at the heart of theories of the novel-form more generally, and has incited a great deal of scholarly reflection.[52] In an early schematic text, Harry Levin and Damian Grant offer a useful encapsulation of realism as 'that effort, that willed tendency to approximate reality', which may be seen to characterize a generally accepted understanding of this term.[53] Nonetheless, in light of the influence of poststructuralist theory and what was termed 'postmodern society', more scholarly accounts have proved to be more suspicious of this tendency, opting often for more ambiguous conceptions of reality.[54] This trend was importantly influenced by Marxist traditions of cultural criticism, which were dismissive of traditional forms of realism, which for Georg Lukács risked replicating the 'closed and total forms which stem from a rounded totality of being'.[55] In short, they end up turning an attention to reality into a form of positivism, where what is *perceived as real,* is asserted as the real without remainder. More recently, Frederic Jameson has consolidated this analysis of the realist novel as playing a reactionary function in capitalist society, drawing attention to its historically privileged class interests and investment in a certain stability in the terms of reality:

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[50] Most notably in the work of Jacques Lacan. For an examination of 'the real' in philosophy see Tom Eyers, *Lacan and The Concept of the 'Real'* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

[51] Kay, *Trumpet*, p.125.

[52] For example, realism is offered a lengthy consideration by Sophie Vlacos in relation to contemporary British literature in the recently published *The Routledge Companion to Twenty-First Century Literary Fiction,* ed. Daniel O'Gorman and Robert Eaglestone (London: Routledge, 2018).

[53] Harry Levin, *The Gates of Horn,* cited in Damian Grant, *Realism* (London: Methuen and Co, 1970), p.19.

[54] Most notably in Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

[55] Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel,* trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971), p.17.

> [T]he very ideology of realism […] tends to stage it in terms of content and here clearly the realist mode is closely associated with the bourgeoisie and the coming into being of bourgeois daily life: this, I would like to insist, is also very much a construction, and it is a construction in which realism and narrative participate.[56]

For Jameson, '[t]he realistic novelist has a vested interest, an ontological stake, in the solidity of social reality, on the resistance of bourgeois society to history and change', but we may note that this account is not entirely dismissive or fatalistic.[57] This character is in fact contingent, reflecting specific conditions of emergence, as well as an ideology designed to perpetuate this very character. The alignment of realism *per se* with dominant economic interests is *itself* a construction, part of the work of a reactionary political realism as such, and therefore it is possible to trace other trajectories and uses of realism across different modes of literary expression.[58] Indeed, many commentators have drawn attention to a number of innovations of novelistic realism in the present, demonstrating how the era defined by Jameson as characterized by postmodernist irony, ahistoricism and pastiche, has given way to renewed investment in notion of reality and authenticity.[59] For Peter Boxall, there is 'throughout the literary critical sphere, the stirrings of a desire to re-apprehend the real, a desire to find new forms with which to examine reality, now that the postmodern moment seems, in some sense, to have come to an end.'[60]

Likewise, David Shields's influential and provocative text *Reality Hunger* has sought to theorize and exemplify this trend, focusing on what he sees as a 'burgeoning group of interrelated (but unconnected) artists in a multitude of forms and media (lyric essay, prose poem, collage novel, visual art, film, television, radio, performance art, rap, stand-up comedy, graffiti) who are breaking larger and larger chunks of "reality" into their work.'[61] These creative projects are characterized by a 'deliberate unartiness: "raw" material, seemingly unprocessed, unfiltered, uncensored, and unprofessional,' which Shield's own text attests to, composed, for the most part, by unattributed quotations from other authors, only revealing this fact toward the end of the text.[62] Shields therefore demands a response of his reader which seeks to question his status of author, notions of

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[56] Frederic Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (London: Verso, 2013)*,* p.5.
[57] Ibid.
[58] Ibid, p.15.
[59] This trend is extensively explored in *Supplanting the Postmodern* ed. David Rudrum and Nicholas Stavris (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015) and is also exemplified in Peter Brooks, *Realist Vision* (London: Yale University Press, 2005).
[60] Peter Boxall, *The Value of the Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p.45.
[61] David Shields, *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2011), p.3.
[62] Ibid., p.5.

authentic voice, and the boundary between nonfiction and fiction. His desire to develop a depersonalizing process of 'appropriation and plagiarism' as the basic form of his text is, however, ironically undermined by the insistence of his publishers 'Random House lawyers [… that he] provide a complete list of citations', attesting to a reality principle of legal personhood beyond the theoretical claims of his text. [63]

For Jameson, such 'new defences of reality and the factual' that draw on the 'contemporary visual arts, which insist so strongly on our attention to their materials as such', must nonetheless grapple with the continued relative of 'fictionality' and '*Schien'* which despite the innovations of writers like Shields and Kenneth Goldsmith,[64] remain at the heart of the novel form.[65] Fictionality allows the novel to imagine realities and worlds beyond our own, and for Jameson this function is at the heart of literature's political possibilities. The force of the fictive allows the reader to 'breath 'the air of other planets,' allowing for 'even the slightest hint of a radically different future,'[66] which increasingly retreats in the temporal stasis of the 'perpetual present.'[67] If Jameson is highly pessimistic about the realist novel in allowing for such possibilities, he nonetheless notes the endurance of 'a storytelling impulse that precedes the formation of the realist novel and yet persists within it', demonstrating the heterogenous influences inherent in the realist tradition, which can offer contradictory and multiple literary effects in relation to reality. [68]

Kay's work may be placed in characteristically peripheral relation to such critical trends in literary realism. Neither entirely commensurable with Jameson's grandiose vision for a revolutionary and utopian literature, nor fully identifiable with Shield's collapsing of fiction and non-fiction, Kay's work is sensitive to more subtle possibilities in the literary rendering of reality. If Shields' vision for the literary is built around an apparent unsettling of the conception of the single author, he nonetheless quotes Thoreau to note that in 'most books, the *I,* or first person, is omitted …[but] we commonly do not remember that it is, after all, always the first person that is speaking'.[69] The speaking subject, the first person singular and the 'lyric *I',* are in fact the very foundation of his invocation of reality, and the breaking down of non/fiction coalesces ultimately in his own status as individual *curator* of the

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[63] Shields, *Reality Hunger,* p.209.

[64] Kenneth Goldman, *Uncreative Writing: Managing Language in the Digital Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

[65] Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism,* p.190.

[66] Ibid, p.213.

[67] Frederic Jameson, 'The End of Temporality' in *Ideologies of Theory* (London: Verso, 2009), p.28.

[68] Jameson, *Antinomies of Realism,* p.15.

[69] Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Other Writings* [1854] ed. Joseph Wood Krutch (New York: Bantam Books, 1962), p.325 cited Shields, p.6.

fragments his text combines. [70] The wide networks of affinity, relation and debt which might complicate this status are in fact made invisible in his own retreat behind this tissue of quotations, tacitly strengthening the reality-principle of the individual author, rather than substantively questioning it.

Kay's relation to self takes an altogether different approach, highlighting the interplay between reality and *fiction,* and how a fictionalized account of real events can ask ethical and political questions about the possibility of capturing their reality. Likewise, her explorations of self in autobiography attest, in the last instance, to their placement within zones of affinity and community, where the self does not emerge as a self-contained 'reality chunk', but as indeterminate, multiple and always already relational. What underpins her interest in questions of reality and realism is ultimately a political question of what reality excludes and keeps peripheral, where her prose can expose such exclusions in order to question the terms of the present. It is arguably this consideration of the political effects of realism and reality which retreats in visual-arts inspired modes of realism, which take for granted the 'chunks' of reality they enmesh into their texts as self-evidently and unproblematically authentic. By displacing a sense of reality through highlighting what reality keeps marginal or unrepresentable, Kay is able to capture some of Jameson's demand of the 'political novel', not pointing to an 'other planet', but demonstrating hidden aspects of reality and transformative possibility in the here and now.[71]

In this way, Kay's work is ordered around subjective displacements which call into question the terms of reality as they are dominantly perceived. Drawing implicitly on political and deconstructive traditions, her work is conscious of a more indeterminate and complicated relation to reality. Kay's texts may therefore be seen to interrogate this very indeterminacy, not simply asserting or negating any sense of realness, but exploring the boundaries of its being and representability. Kay's relation to realism would therefore consist in her deployment of a realist method which reflects a preoccupation with contestations and contradictions which occur between dominant senses of the real, asserting the reality of lives on the margins of society and the possibility of their representation. In this way, Kay's embodied turn to the margins of the real and that which has often been erased in its representation, deploys an interest in authenticity not as a reification of subjectivity, but as a displacement of the norms of its representation. In *Trumpet* she may be seen to flirt with Modernist and Postmodernist techniques in her mirroring of the rhythms of jazz in the

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[70] Shields, p.203.
[71] Jameson, *Antinomies of Realism,* p.213.

chapter entitled 'MUSIC', where Joss Moody is described through an assemblage of variously paced sentences, evoking the syncopations and complex rhythmic structures of the music he is playing:

> Her. That girl. The trumpet screams. He's hot. She's hot. He's hot. The whole room is hot. He plays his false fingers. Chokes his trumpet. He is naked. This is naked jazz. O-bop-she-bam. Never lying. Telling it like it is.[72]

Jackie Kay structures the literary experimentation of this scene precisely as an aberration from the more conventional and traditionally realist style through which the rest of her novel proceeds. We may see in the strong imagery and powerful metaphorical work of this passage, where the subjective life of Joss Moody moves seamlessly from gender to gender, imparting his 'hot[ness]' from subject to subject, until its metaphorical meaning infuses the 'whole room' as well as the intensity of the writing itself, that Kay is perfectly capable of experimenting with literary form. The rest of the novel, however, may be seen to self-consciously engage a more realist style so as to explore and interrogate the possibility of writing an authentic depiction of a life, addressing the ethical necessity of making this representation 'approximate reality'. Likewise in fact, we see that even in this moment of formal experimentation, the effect is not simply to destabilize norms, but also to assert the real: to 'tell[…] it like it is'.

As a marginal writer, Kay evokes the lives of her characters in a mode which interrupts what conventionally goes under the name of the real, and in this sense, she offers a 'myth interrupted'.[73] The discrete, rich, and evocative lives which she writes offer us a sense of their singularity, their irreducibility to structures of sense which ultimately seek to render all difference operative under the normative processes of identity. In this way, these very personal and particular descriptions take on a social and political function, exposing a plurality to a univocal image which has hitherto expunged them. In fact, Kay's focus is situated between her insistence on the singularity and irreducibility of human life and the communities and relationships which guard and transmit this. Her novel *Trumpet* is not only an exploration of a black trans man's life and the aftermath of his death, but also investigates the communities and familial bonds which are able to preserve and communicate his memory: in short, the pluralities which situate this singularity.

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[72] Kay, *Trumpet,* p.132.
[73] Nancy, *The Inoperative Community,* p.43.

By exposing this singular-plural relation, Kay's novel mirrors Nancy's insistence that literature's communicative form is not limited to a simply symbolic function, but is the taking place of a wider mythic and onto-political structure.[74] Here, 'myth interrupted' is the eruption of excessive and disruptive community; that non-political excess which has been expunged from dominant regimes of sense and myth, which returns as a challenge to their very foundation. In this way, we see the importance of the figure of 'myth', as it is community's very foundation, implicated in literary form, forged through and in writing. This community emerges not only as 'marginal', but also literary, as the reader (and the community of readers), are all implicated in this structure. As readers, we are privy to the intimate bonds which guard memory, we bear witness to events as well as sharing in the secret of the non-normative life which is unintelligible to the community at large, and as such we share precisely in marginal community. The interruption of myth troubles not only the content of the text but precisely opens onto the world we all share: onto the myths of gender, kinship and love which are fundamental to social constructions of the real.

Kay's disruptive and marginal realism focuses on the non-normative life, the hidden, secret identities and relations which make up the peripheries of society and push at its limits in terms of representation and politics. If there is no community which yet expresses this radical political trajectory, then it is nonetheless in relationality where we can find the inoperative and resistant excess of being-with, which, in the 'trans' and 'queer' context pushes at the possibility of a coming queer community. By shifting the perspective of the 'real' to the margins, the very system of material and symbolic social reproduction and representation is challenged. Likewise, by embodying a literary style that has for so long taken part in this very process, the deployment of realism, both literary and political, can take an antagonism right to the heart of a political and representational system. As such, Kay's fiction demonstrates the multiple ways in which 'myth interrupted' can function in symbolic and representational styles, working not to establish new norms in writing, but exposing the multiple and plural ways in which norms can be disrupted and refigured. This marginal and realist writing has deep political and ontological implications, inhabiting a radically interruptive space where the norms and forms of the intelligibility of kinship, community and relationality might be transformed.

Writing 'Trans': A Non-Transcended Body

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[74] Ibid., p.25.

'Trans', 'queer' and other non-normative gender and sexuality subject formations have effected major disruptions and changes in our understanding of subjectivity and identity in recent years, a process that had significant and ongoing effects on our political landscape. This act of claiming new identities does not, however, express a desire to simply be included in dominant systems of intelligibility, and this is not just a claim for recognition within normative deployments of gender.[75] These identities are significant as they function as a challenge to the very foundations of (heterosexual, patriarchal, cissexual) normativity, re-invigorating traditions and histories of non-normativity which the previous symbolic regime has established itself through erasing. If such sexual and gender-formations are demanding recognition, both symbolic and material, in contemporary society, it is not as they have emerged only now, but that they have finally gaining the means of a self-expression which has hitherto been denied them.[76] In this sense, the 'queer' and the 'trans' offer a challenge to a whole history of thinking the body, the sexual, and the natural, as well as broader questions about kinship and the real, the consequences of which are as radical as they are yet to be fully realized.[77]

The still highly peripheral nature of 'trans' subjects and representation means that Kay's text *Trumpet* implicitly questions social and political modes of marginalization, whilst also exposing the relationalities and communities that such processes obscure. In taking up the figure of the 'trans', and affirming its historicity and ethical subjecthood, Kay's text may be seen to enact a form of 'mythic interruption' in conventional understandings of gender, gesturing to new ways of understanding gendered and embodied being. In foregrounding a relationship which was illegible to the social body around it, Kay makes clear the fragile affinities which marginal life affords, demonstrating the subtle, but powerful disruptions that queer community can maintain. By foregrounding the mythic function of this process, we can see how the guarding of marginal life in literature, as well as in real community, can allow for the production of new relational and communitarian possibilities through the disputation of heteronormative patriarchal social structures.

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[75] See Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

[76] For an example of this historical perspective in relation to Billy Tipton, see Leslie Feinberg, 'Transgender Liberation: A Movement Whose Time Has Come' in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York: Routledge, 2006), p.207.

[77] For a summary of this see Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child, Or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

Many readings of *Trumpet* have remained unsatisfactorily unfamiliar with the now sizeable body of Trans Theory, which for many decades has allowed for a more precise and inclusive analysis of transgender subjectivity in relation to queer and feminist theory. For example, Kirsty Williams offers a startling exclusionary account of Kay's text as involving a 'lesbian love within the context of a society still largely constrained by the idea of sexual opposites', eliding the gender identity of Joss through a tacit occlusion of the categorical legitimacy of trans subjectivity.[78] Carole Jones' account of the gender identity of Joss Moody notes that he is '[n]ot definitely lesbian or transsexual, in his doubleness he is a refutation of the naturalized static body/gender relationship and unified and singular model of the self,' in an analysis seemingly unfamiliar with the terminology and critical discourse of transgenderism.[79] In eliding this, Jones tacitly affirms the very binary which is under 'refutation', where 'in betweenness' works as an unsatisfactory placeholder for the specific experiences and histories of trans subjects, who are not offered a stable subject position in their own right.

To adequately address question of trans subjectivity, we may turn to the work of trans-theorist and philosopher Gayle Salamon, who drawing on the work of Judith Butler, offers an expansive theorization of the trans body and subject, seeking to place trans subjectivity in wider ontological concerns about gender and questions of being. In her ground-breaking book *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality,* Salamon describes how the trans subject allows the questioning of sexual difference to be relaunched beyond the biological and categorical confines that for so long reduced it. Against the rigid assertion of clear, determinate and originary identity and difference, the figure of the 'trans' can liberate itself to encounter its own 'sexual undecidability', which 'does not condemn the subject to placelessness, but rather locates difference at the heart of both subjectivity and relation.'[80] In fact we may claim that it is not only the 'difference' of 'trans' that allows it to unwork and rework the entire gender system in which it operates, but precisely its indeterminate 'undecidability', which stands open to its own infinite reworking according to the principle of multiplicity which being-with exposes in subjectivity.[81]

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[78] Kirsty Williams, 'A Different Kind of Natural': The Fiction of Jackie Kay and Ali Smith in Ethically Speaking: Vice and Values' in *Modern Scottish Writing*, ed. James McGonigal and Kirsten Stirling (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), p.157.

[79] Carole Jones, 'Being Between: Jackie Kay's *Trumpet'* in *Disappearing Men: Gender Disorientation in Scottish Fiction 1979-1999* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), pp.98-99.

[80] Gayle Salamon, *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), p.144.

[81] For a provocative intervention into where this indeterminacy might lead, see Paul B. Preciado, *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era,* trans. Bruce Benderson (New York: The Feminist Press, 2013).

Primarily Kay's novel *Trumpet* engages these and other implications of 'trans' for the real of gender and sex through a logic of ambivalence, indeterminacy and withheld relation. In fact, Kay does not name Joss simply as 'trans' in her novel, recognising that this term cannot adequately name a phenomenon that existed far before this process of naming and categorizing. Nonetheless, as Salamon reminds us, 'trans' is a vital placeholder for a multiplicity of non-normative subject positions, and as such it must be asserted as a way of demanding recognition and rights at the same time as being understood as open to change and 'undecidability'.[82] Thus, although Kay does not offer any naming of a category through which Joss Moody's non-normative gender formation might be taxonomized, she nonetheless takes care to make clear that all those closest to Joss Moody recognized him as a 'he'. No character deviates from this use of pronouns except for the journalist Sophie Stones who entirely misrecognizes Moody's subject position, describing him in the palpably erroneous category of the 'transvestite'. [83]

Far from the (all too) politicized landscape of 'trans' today, whose disputations both political and theoretical have risked instrumentalizing trans bodies and identities in a way that is highly problematic, Kay rather offers a subtle and evocative account of a trans subject, his lover, and son. She highlights how despite major contentions and disputes within the symbolic place of 'trans', the life of the non-normative subject goes on regardless, always in excess of, and in some sense, indifferent to, the symbolic landscape for which it is unintelligible. Such a process is not however simply apolitical, but rather, by circumventing a conventionally political approach, highlights the excessive quality that a life has to its political determinations. This may be part of what we may term the 'non-political' excess that community means for politics: the de-politicized life, whose excesses to the political are the means of its potential transformation.

In the case of Joss Moody, who is the absent centre of the novel which begins just after his death, it is the competing accounts of his life and identity which form the condition of possibility for his very intelligibility. Ultimately, as Salamon has noted, this is precisely the place of any subject, who must negotiate her difference according to the multiple accounts that can be given of her.[84] In the case of Joss Moody, however, the racial and gendered ambiguities of his life instil this negotiation with a heightened meaning, both ontological and political. Although open to the 'undecidability' and ambivalence of his subject position, the correct gendering of his subjectivity is nonetheless of vital

[82] Salamon, *Assuming a Body*, p.143.
[83] Ibid., p.142.
[84] Ibid., p.120.

importance. Indeed the intrusion of the sense of an originary 'she' into his writing by Sophie Stones can be experienced only as a serious violence, which seeks to rob Moody's subject of the autonomy to simply *be,* within a symbolic of gender which will not accept him.[85] As such, Kay highlights the onto-political significance of the 'trans', which must claim a realness to its subject position at the same time as foregrounding its own 'undecidability', which resists and disrupts the normative function of the 'real' as an operative mode of subjectivation.

Kay points to this specific mode of 'undecidability' in the only section of the novel that focuses on Joss Moody's lived life, which she encapsulates through an evocative and experimental chapter centred on a description of his jazz improvisation. In this section, we see precisely this tense relation between the necessary 'fluidity' that a 'trans' body can have in relation to norms, and the absolute importance of their sexed embodiment as that which is not only characterized by the fluid, but also the flesh, and what trans-theorist Jay Prosser privileges in terms of the body's 'materiality'.[86]

> When he gets down, and he doesn't always get down deep enough, he loses his sex, his race, his memory. He strips himself bare, takes everything off, till he's barely human. Then he brings himself back, out of this world. Back, from way. Getting there is painful. He has to get to the centre of the whirlwind, screwballing in musical circles till he is very nearly out of his mind.[87]

Music allows for an exceptional and experimental space where the body both retreats and becomes prominent. We see that Moody 'loses his sex, his race' and this has led some critics to argue that this is an image of transcendence. For Aidan Byrne and Nicola Allen this passage privileges jazz as that which 'allows' Joss Moody to 'transcend sexual, racial, and personal categorization', but here we may ask whether this is in fact a form of transcendence. [88] If Joss Moody 'loses his sex' does this mean that in music he is unsexed, disembodied and non-carnal? If there is a loss of 'sex' here, we at the same time see an absolute presencing of his body. It is not just the music in this chapter that is fluid, unexpected and rhythmic, but also Moody's embodied being: 'he is bending in the wind, scooping pitch, growling', and if the music is 'fast' and 'speeding, crashing', this temporality

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[85] Kay, *Trumpet,* p.120.
[86] Jay Prosser, *Second Skins* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p.62.
[87] Kay, *Trumpet,* p.131.
[88] Aidan Byrne and Nicola Allen, 'Masculinity and Jazz in Jackie Kay's Trumpet, Jim Crace's All That Follows, and Alan Plater's The Beiderbecke Trilogy' in *Write in Tune: Contemporary Music in Fiction* ed. Erich Hertz and Jeffrey Roessner (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), p.94.

proceeds from his 'fingers going like hammers, frenzied' and '[h]is leather lips. His satchelmouth.'[89] Music does not transcend or move beyond the body, it moves through and with it, from body to body in a manner akin to but '[b]etter than sex.'[90] Music is in and through the body: 'There is music in his blood', and music proceeds from his bodily extremes, his 'leather lips' and his 'skin'. [91] Music does not transcend but presses at the limit, of being, body and sex. If this passage moves between the categories of gender, 'He is a girl. A man', it does not move to some fantasy of a non-sexed position, but merely exposes the multiplicity of positions and modes of being that sex can encompass, exposing not an 'other' or outside to sexuate being, but its very singularity, its singular-plurality at the scene of bodily and musical exposure.[92]

Joss Moody's life, even in jazz, is in no way adequately captured or aided by a pure assertion of transcendence; how does transcendence help trans people gain specific rights or recognition, how does it address the complex processes of symbolic and material erasure which they have undergone? Transcendence can here mirror the logic of the 'universal', which would bracket out difference as particularity so as to reassert a logic whereby all difference is already included and accounted for. Such a charge has at times been levelled at certain strains of queer discourse, which would privilege a pure and abstracted form of destabilization, fluidity and non-normativity, whilst paying less attention to the real demands and subjective claims that 'trans' lives must negotiate in relation to operative modes of power.[93] If here the 'trans' must assert its 'undecidability', destabilizing those perceptions of the real which would exclude it, there is also here the demand of a new real, which as a lived life must find a means of self-expression and political assertion. Such a demand opens onto the structure of the 'inoperative community', which orders itself precisely through its own self-telling and mything. Here gender (as myth) is not 'false', but the real and constitutive taking up of a position in relation to the world, and this would be the paradigm of a community absolutely open to the onto-political claims of the 'trans', and the marginal.[94]

It is clear from the fluidity that Moody embodies in jazz, that there is 'much about transsexuality that must remain reconcilable to queer'.[95] In the assertion of the materiality of the body, however, which Kay's description of Moody strongly evokes alongside the fluid, we see also a tension between

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[89] Kay, *Trumpet,* p.131.
[90] Ibid., p.135.
[91] Ibid., p.134.
[92] Ibid., p.136.
[93] For example, Susan Stryker, 'Transgender Studies: Queer Theory's Evil Twin', *in GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 10.2 (2004), pp.211-212.
[94] Nancy, *Inoperative Community,* p.45.
[95] Jay Prosser, *Second Skins* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p.59.

theories of gender which would express a queer desire to undo the work of gender as normative and operative, and what Jay Prosser privileges as:

> [T]he specificity of transsexual experience; the importance of the flesh to self; the difference between sex and gender identity; the desire to pass as "real-ly gendered" in the world without trouble […] a particular experience of the body that can't simply transcend (or transubstantiate) the literal.[96]

Transcendence, for Prosser, asserts a process of destabilizing gender and sex in a logic of pure 'elasticity', which can often be a way of precisely negating and undermining the trans identity, privileging the 'queer' over the importance of gaining recognition in a sexually-determined world. The 'real' of 'trans' subsists not simply in an unworking of the norms of genders and sex, but precisely in a reworking which leads to an affirmation. The trans figure claims an actual position, asserting itself as 'real-ly gendered', but this gendered embodiment at once inhabits and disrupts its normative function. This is not so much a negation of the real and neither is it a simply affirmation of a new one. Rather the trans is asserted as real only insofar as any reality to sex or gender can ultimately only be founded on the act of self-expression, the claiming of a position. This would be the new real of sex which accords to the process of 'mything' and 'fictioning', the telling of one's own story, and of the story of those with whom you share an identity: 'For transsexuality is always narrative work, a transformation of the body that requires the remolding of the life into a particular narrative shape.'[97]

Here Prosser links the body, its materiality and carnality intimately with 'narrative' and writing. The relation is one of mutual dependence where we see precisely a 'materiality of transsexual narratives', an intense interplay where the 'real-ness' of the body is asserted through its representation, embodiment in writing, thought and fiction.[98] What is real in gender and sex is transcribed from a language of stable category distinction to one of transition. It is not that gender and sex have a clear or stable identity or being, but rather that they express something like a 'being-toward', and a 'being-with', which would consist precisely in the unworking of the body and its reworking according to its transition and transformation. Prosser therefore describes gender as something like an 'ontological condition', but one that interrupts any sense of a stable or originary

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[96] Ibid.
[97] Ibid., p.4.
[98] Ibid., p.5.

essence. [99] This ontology therefore subsists in a process of transitioning, through and with, from one mode to another. It is not so much a state or identity which constitutes an ontological ground for theorizing trans as an embodied being, but rather this process of becoming. Ontology proceeds not from the noun or category, but its movement and transition, the reworking of the subject according to its inherent relationality.[100] The challenge that 'trans' demands of Queer Theory, however, is to think this becoming and mything of the body not simply as a destabilization, but also as something which must assert its status as 'real-ly gendered' in terms of its subjective and political recognition.

Prosser explores this tension in relation to Judith Butler, who foundational work on gender in *Gender Trouble,* he criticizes for lacking an adequate account of embodied transition in relation to trans subjectivities: 'As Butler exemplifies, queer theory has written of transitions as discursive but it has not explored the bodiliness of gendered crossings.'[101] This claim typifies a strand in trans theory which has been critical of Butler's work, where precisely what is at stake is the perceived 'realness' that gender can embody in theories of performativity and social construction. Butler has responded to these critiques in interviews, writing that she 'did not mean to argue that 'gender is fluid and changeable' or that performativity was a 'fiction' and 'gender was therefore "unreal".'[102] In this way, Butler has accepted some of these 'criticisms as necessary', admitting that they have led her to 'revis[e her] views in response to some of what has been said'.[103] This has involved a more explicit recognition that for some marginal gender identities, what matters most is not simply a process of challenging and undoing norms of gender recognition and identification, but the legal, political and subjective struggle for 'a clear name and gender, and struggle for recognition on the basis of that clear name and gender.[104] Halberstam's recent summary of these debates argues that although 'Butler's concept of "gender performativity," [became] the target of so many trans* critiques', undergoing a great many criticisms, reworkings and revaluations, works such as *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter,* 'did the philosophical heavy lifting that allowed us to rethink bodily ontologies separate from the concept of a stable and foundational gender.'[105] If these books did not offer an account of gender wholly commensurate with the complex challenges facing trans subjects in

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[99] Ibid., p.6.
[100] Ibid.
[101] Ibid.
[102] Judith Butler and Cristan Williams 'Gender Performance: The TransAdvocate interviews Judith Butler' *TransAdvocate* (May 1, 2014) https://www.transadvocate.com/gender-performance-the-transadvocate-interviews-judith-butler_n_13652.htm [accessed 17.01.2019].
[103] Sara Ahmed and Judith Butler 'Interview with Judith Butler' *Sexualities* 19.4 (2016), p.490.
[104] Ibid.
[105] Jack Hallberstam, 'Towards a Trans* Feminism' *Boston Review* (January 18, 2018) http://bostonreview.net/gender-sexuality/jack-halberstam-towards-trans-feminism [accessed 17.01.2019].

contemporary society, they are nonetheless absolutely central to trans theory today: 'We all stand in the space she [Butler] created.'[106]

In a similar fashion, Prosser's dispute with Butler derives its critical force from the strength of Butler's analysis, taking on some of her key terms, whilst questioning their ability to offer a strong account of realness in relation to bodily and subjective transition. Prosser recognises that Butler's theory of performativity has offered a valuable resource for analysis and critique of dominant modes of gender recognition and identification, but nonetheless locates a crucial tension in relation to the precise function that performativity enacts in terms of claiming real, legible, and claimable gendered subject positions. In this way he introduces a crucial distinction between 'narrativity and performativity', arguing that 'Butler's reading [of] transgender demotes gender from narrative to performative', and as such the writing and assertion of the trans body is made secondary to the overarching process of destabilizing gender in general. [107]

Here we may ask a question of what it means to inhabit a position. Does the claiming, taking up or demanding of a position always entail an originary claim, essence, or stable identity? To take the position of a trans man is to demand a male embodiment at the same time as expanding and reworking the very terms of the masculine. This exposes at the same time as foreclosing its meaning. The male is demanded in its presence as embodied position, but the claim itself defers the meaning of the male to the necessity of its reworking, the very contingency and indeterminacy of the category itself. The 'real' of the male is exposed precisely in the moment it is taken up, demanded and narrativized *as male* and this process may be productively viewed through a Nancian conceptual apparatus of mythic disruption, where Prosser's concept of 'narrativization' may be viewed as a mode of 'myth interrupted.'[108]

In this way, we may theorize gender as a form of myth, where the mythic is foundational to all meaning. Myth is that which is shared and communicated in 'being-with'. The trans body embodies and tells this myth, it speaks to and through the mythic voices which have hitherto ordered the gendered body, but its embodiment in transition exceeds this very mythic process as an interruption. In this way, we see not transcendence at work but rather a process of excessive interruption, which functions through a logic of embodiment and trans-ition. The taking up of a gendered or sexed position entails binding oneself to myth at the same time as reworking the very

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[106] Ibid.
[107] Ibid., p.29.
[108] Nancy, *Inoperative Community,* p.43.

terms of its mythic function, supplanting a logic of originary essence with one of becoming. The trans interrupts the myth of gender, exposing not only a new form, but a new way of doing gender, a new way of doing myth: a myth interrupted.

Here the materiality of the transition is of vital importance. In the case of Joss Moody, and the telling of his story through the fictive work of the novel, we can see precisely the male as a 'work'.[109] It is worked, unworked, reworked, and this entails the telling of a 'story', a 'narrative' which is the embodied and material 'real', of a trans life. The masculine is a 'work' that is undertaken and if this is performative in the case of the cis male, there is a qualitative difference between this and the 'work' of 'transition', which is, properly speaking, a *taking up* of a position, entailing will, agency and demand. In this sense, we are not talking about a performativity so much as a more conscious (self)narrativization or mything. In this sense the terms of gender as a mode of relation is changed. The masculine is not presupposed, it is not simply an anterior norm or law which one either abides by or not, but rather the narrating or *mything* of the male, which entails exposing and demanding it as a mode of communication and lived embodiment.

Masculinity exceeds its normative operations at the moment that it is claimed, not only in transition, but also in the *telling of the story of the male; the instance of the masculine which interrupts the linear-line of its development, history and meaning.* Here 'meaning is being', and in the specificity of the male position this meaning is subordinated to the willed and embodied being-as-male such that the meaning of masculinity emerges not as just a norm but as the *presencing of itself.*[110] The male is claimed at the same time as it is ruptured, and demanded as it is destabilized. Masculinity is neither negated as identity, nor subordinated to the prescriptive norm of the queer, the unstable, the plastic. Rather, gender is asserted precisely in its mythic necessity; gender lays the common-ground to sexuate being, it is a mode of relation that allows being to come to itself, for it to be exposed *as being.* But, as Butler asserts, this position is contingent upon a whole history of degradation, misrecognition and asymmetrical power, which means that the mode of relation enacts at the level of being a negation of community, a negation of identity and being as free self-narrativization. What is needed then is a new relation to these norms and the myth of gender, which can be seen in the act of trans self-expression.

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[109] Prosser highlights this through reference to a common joke in trans communities that 'trans' is one's occupation, one's 'career' Prosser, *Second Skins,* p.4.

[110] Nancy, *Being Singular Plural,* p.2.

We can see this process of self-expression, which is at once a claim to realness and a destabilization of the 'real', in the writing of Moody's body. Here we see a sensitive and subtle literary attention to an embodied assertion of selfhood, in all its ambiguity and concomitant necessity:

> His whole body is bent over double. His trumpet pointing down at the floor then at the sky. He plays another high C. He holds on. He just keeps blowing. He is blowing the story. His story is blowing in the wind. He lets it rip. He tears himself apart. He explodes. Then he brings himself back. Slowly, piecing himself together.[111]

In this passage, which is taken from the last paragraph of the chapter named 'MUSIC', which is the only extended description of Moody that the novel affords us, Kay foregrounds the relation between matter and narrative, and the 'real' of gender precisely as a fiction. Here music pushes at the border of speech and self-expression. The 'blowing' of the 'high C' expresses 'the story', which, although intoned by Moody moves beyond him in the definite article, to surround him in 'the wind'. But if the 'story' escapes and exceeds Moody in its telling, it is also absolutely embodied. The force and strain of its expression causes his body to bend 'over double' such that he 'tears himself apart…explodes', and here it is music which brings together this sense of materiality and explosive subjectivity.

Intense relationality, for Nancy, performs a 'shattering' of the subject, which leads to its unworking according to the logic of encounter.[112] But in this passage what is encountered is not 'the other' so much as the indeterminate otherness of one's own body at the limit of its musical expression. This self-expression is foregrounded in the absolute necessity of telling one's own 'story', but, crucially, it is in an expression which is not readily intelligible or comprehensible. This music expresses a 'story' not in relation to any substantive content, but as a communicative form: of self-expression, of embodiment, which, in the logic of communication and sharing, is 'blowing in the wind', moving beyond the subject to the shared space of musical encounter. Here, Moody's trans identity is supplanted into the metaphorical language of 'narrativization', which Prosser locates as so crucial to trans self-expression, and which locates itself in a mythic interruption which pushes at the boundaries of the self to expose a wider mode of relationality. What is demanded is not so much a content to the 'self', but the act of self-expression itself; an act of self-construction through narrative

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[111] Kay, *Trumpet,* p.136.
[112] We can see this logic not only in Nancy's *The Inoperative Community,* but also in Derrida's response to Nancy's own theory, in Jacques Derrida *On Touching, Jean-Luc Nancy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

which asserts a demand to simply 'be', as itself, and in the act of communication.[113] This self-expression asserts an embodied selfhood which is qualitatively irreducible to any structurations of sense in terms of 'the real', myth, or biology. Music appears to undo these categories, 'He loses his sex, his race, his memory'[114] as well as undermining the very structure of the subject. Joss Moody is undone and unworked by his music such that the border between him, his instrument and his surroundings is blurred: 'He gulps on the trumpet. The music has no breath, no air. Small ghost notes sob from his trumpet.'[115]

Kay deploys these poetic negations of the literal to expose a space of metaphorical transition, from trumpet to player, and from the material to the subjective. Rather than 'blow' his trumpet, as later passages indicate, Kay transmutes the act of playing into its very opposite. He 'gulps' in an act akin to sucking, which echoes his former self as a 'tiny baby' which the music has introduced to the scene through 'flashbacks'.[116] This 'gulp' denotes an emotional intensity, a faltering and temporal splitting of self which foreshadows his eventual metaphorical 'explod[ing]' in music.[117] The 'gulp' is then transmuted to the 'sob', which is displaced from Moody to the very music he is playing. These '[s]mall ghost notes' now transmit the emotion of the scene; their expression is a sobbing which proceeds from 'his trumpet', which finally opens onto a communal space of emotional and musical intensity. These 'ghost notes' transmit and elicit a shared musical encounter where the crowd are '[s]tomping, stamping, hooting, whistling, cheering. They want more of him'.[118] Here music enacts a literal and metaphorical transition, from Moody's embodied being, to the opening up of a relation and a community, as the notes pass from the trumpet, to the 'air' and finally a musical being-with, where relationality is evoked at the moment that musical intensity disrupts and reworks its usual function.

If this music exposes an affective intensity which exceeds that boundary of Moody's own body by supplanting and displacing him, the very music appears likewise to move to a disembodied position, it 'has no breath, no air'. This very breathlessness, however, replicates the emotional intensity that has moved from body to body, transmuting Moody's 'gulp' into a moment of shared encounter in the scene of musical experience. As such it expresses a metaphorical embodiment which displaces the trumpet's literal process of musical expression in 'blowing'. In this way, the scene enacts a

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[113] Prosser, *Second Skins,* p.32.
[114] Kay, *Trumpet.* p.131.
[115] Ibid., p.132.
[116] Ibid.
[117] Ibid., p.136.
[118] Ibid., p.134.

process of 'transition' which is here seen in the move from the literal to the metaphorical. This transition takes on an ontological significance as Moody 'is the music'.[119] His being is exposed and asserted in its literary relationality, which embodies this material and subjective duality of 'transition', and as such we see precisely the intimate relation that embodied materiality has to its narrativization.

The 'story' is the site of this transition, which as we have seen, expresses the 'story of the story' that we see in Nancy's explication of 'myth'.[120] Kay's evocation of the relation between embodiment and subjective fragmentation may be seen to mirror Prosser's insistence on the transition of 'trans' as a form of 'narrativization', which is intimately bound to a sense of the 'real', as its unworking and reworking under the logic of becoming. As such, Kay's evocation of Moody serves to unwork the norms of gender through its musical transmutation, asserting a fluidity which allows for the taking up of multiple and seemingly contradictory gendered positions: 'The picture changes with the light. He can taste himself transforming. Running changes. The body changes shape. From girl to young woman to young man to old man to old woman.'[121] This process of 'transforming' does not seek an outside or a transcendence to gender, but asserts its position from within. The real is appropriated from the margins, pushing its logic against the very foundation of a normative and operative structure, exposing its contingency and exclusions, and demanding its radical reworking. This reworking would be akin precisely to the process of 'narrativization', where any sense of the 'real' or the 'truth' of gender would be stripped of any relation to anterior origin, and exposed to its function as a present form of mything and (re)working, a gendered self-expression as the means of making gender mean. As such we see precisely an attention here to the onto-political dimensions of expressing and asserting 'trans' experience, which emerges as a 'non-political excess' through which a radical political expression of gender can be demanded.

'Trans' is therefore neither simply an abstract postulation, nor just an intervention in a discourse on gender. It is first and foremost a mode of being-in-the-world, an embodiment which, if abstracted, absolutely exceeds and resists that abstraction. As we see with Kay in her relation to 'black writing', the taking up of a position is politically important as it speaks to and through a community of the margins, addressing its writing at the centre that keeps it marginal. But its claim is also transformative in sometimes radical ways. The marginal does not just seek recognition but transformation, it exists in excess of the margins, in excess of the power that keeps it on the borders

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[119] Ibid., p.134.

[120] Nancy, *Inoperative Community,* p.43.

[121] Kay, *Trumpet,* p.133.

at the same time as being bound to them. The demand: to live a life without the regulatory and restrictive systems of bodily and subjective taxonomies. This is demanded not as a simple negation, but through the instantiation of a system of communication, community and relationality which would subsist not in the exclusion or marginalization of difference, but in a radically open structure of its own mythic interruption: a coming community, or 'literary communism'.[122]

The Community of Gender

As we have seen, the figure of Joss Moody inhabits a non-normative and ambiguous subjectivity which disrupts the operative modes of gender around him. In this way, his representation produces radical political and symbolic effects at the same time as eliding any explicit evocation of 'the political'. Kay achieves this effect by specifically refusing to locate Joss Moody primarily within any political lexicon of the 'trans', instead focusing simply on the singularity of Moody's life, which is a space of retreat from the pressures of an overtly political and hostile discursive environment. In this way, Joss Moody may be seen to evoke the idea of 'community' in the most part through negation, retreating from social and political exposure to the structure of the 'self', which guards his identity and subjectivity from coming into relation with structures which might seek to repress it.

Such a postulation provokes a question about the relational and political quality of this assertion however, as it is possible to see this subjective affirmation as a replication of the 'individual' form, whose ontological and political disputation is the starting point of Nancy's turn to relationality.[123] Traditionally the 'individual', 'self' and 'subject' can be seen to inscribe an originary monadism into ontological and political thought, and it is precisely this process which leads Nancy to assert the structures of 'inoperative community' and 'being-with' as a countermeasure to this. For Nancy, the 'individual' is simply the 'residue of the experience of the dissolution of community', and as such, its monadic aspect contradicts our foundationally relational being.[124]

Community is not, however, a simple prescription, and its affirmation does not serve to hold in place the category distinction of individual and community, supplanting a domination of one for the other. The form of the 'individual' is neither simply negated, nor supplanted, but rather is transcribed into the figure of the 'singular', as that which accounts for individuated (but not individual) and irreducible being. Community, unlike the individual, does not name an essence or an origin but

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[122] Nancy, *Inoperative Community,* p.26.
[123] Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, p.3.
[124] Ibid.

rather radically reworks this entire structure, opening onto relationality as such, the figure of 'being-with', where what matters is not so much 'being', but the function of the *with,* as the non-substantial essence of being as such; its 'essence without essence'.[125] In this way Joss Moody's 'retreat' to his own discrete life does not replicate the individual form, but simply holds in place the necessity and importance of this very singularity, whose foundationally relational structure resides neither in the structure of the 'individual', nor a readily intelligible community as such, but rather in a disruptive capacity which holds onto a form of being and relating which is not yet here, guarded and preserved in the space of identity and intimate relationality. As such, if Joss Moody is engaged in a 'retreating' of the political, then, with Nancy, this is in no way an apolitical or depoliticizing gesture, but rather seeks to re-treat its object, to reorder and rework it along radically relational lines, to 'replay [the political's] questions anew.'[126]

What emerges in the presentation of Moody in Kay's novel, is therefore not simply an affirmation of Moody's individual self, but an evocation of the space of intimate and personal identity to stage his very singular-plural being. Although the historical context and ethical force of the novel mean that an authentic evocation of Moody is absolutely foregrounded, it is nonetheless the case that Kay exposes the 'self' as first and foremost a problem for representation. Any authentic sense of individuality that we take from Moody must be negotiated first through his fictive evocation of the real life of Billy Tipton, at the same time as coming almost exclusively from *other voices,* the voices of his family, relations and friends, as well as the wider socio-political community.

It is this discursive matrix which Kay offers us as a means of excavating a sense of the 'real' of Joss Moody, and this structure may immediately evoke what we have seen with the figure of the 'trans' in general, as that which demands a 'real' at the same time as foreclosing the 'real' of the present, opening onto its own reworking in the radical transformation of gender norms. Kay is attentive to this highly relational structure, as it is not simply Joss Moody who must negotiate and live the life of the 'trans' and the 'queer', but also his wife Milly Moody, who is part of a structure of relation in which the life of 'trans' takes place. In this sense, we may look to a structure of a 'community of the lovers' as a vital space where the 'real' of 'trans' as a disruptive and interruptive force is guarded and preserved.

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[125] Jean-Luc Nancy and Philip Lacoue-Labarthe, *Retreating the Political*, ed. Simon Sparks (London: Routledge, 1997), p.45.
[126] Ibid.

In Bataille, the figure of the 'community of lovers' [*communauté des amants*] functions as a 'closed community', insofar as the lovers share in a bond which is forged through the exclusion of the community in general.[127] It is precisely this non-relation, or withholding of relation, however, which constitutes the exemplary and pivotal role that the love has for community. For Bataille, community emerges as a politically radical form only in the intensity and extremity of its relationality, in moments of orgasm, laughter and tears, where socially normative modes of relationality falter under the excesses of affective and emotional life. This excessive quality can rupture with relationality and community as they are normatively and operatively instantiated as, following Blanchot, love leads to the 'oblivion of the world: the affirmation of a relationship so singular' that the it exceeds the social bond and our understanding of 'love' in general.[128]

In the case of Joss and Millie Moody, the 'community of lovers' is the space of the marginal life, of socially unintelligible gender, and queer relationality, and the relation which holds these radical vectors subsists precisely in closing itself off from wider social and communitarian forms. As such, a process of withholding or refusing relation, especially in an environment where relationality operates precisely through exclusionary and oppressive mechanisms, operates not as a form of monadism or solipsism, whether through the trans subject or through the closed 'community of lovers', but as *a holding onto a relationality which is not here, but whose absence resounds as nothing but the demand of its own necessity.* The intensity of love, and the extremity of the erotic and intimate relations, can in this sense perform the interruptive rupture from which inoperative community may be glimpsed, a transformative and indeterminate moment, where relationality may be refigured according to its disruptive and onto-political function.[129] This relationship does not therefore 'normalize' a peripheral form of love, as Kanika Batra has argued, deploying a universal signifier of 'love' to apparently transcend heteronormative restrictions, rather it holds onto what is unassimilable in this bond so as to demand a radical restructuring of relational bonds more generally.[130]

It is only in Kay's representation of the lover's intimate and closed community, forged between Joss and Millie Moody, as well as in her depiction of jazz, where the radically interruptive capacities of a

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[127] Georges Bataille, *The Obsessions of Georges Bataille: Community and Communication* (New York: SUNY Press, 2009), p.7.

[128] Maurice Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community,* trans. Pierre Joris (New York: Station Hill Press, 1988), p.34.

[129] This notion of inoperative love can be extended through the concept of 'queer love' which we see in the context of Kay's novel. For a study of this subject see Lauren Berlant, 'Love, A Queer Feeling' in *Homosexuality and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Tim Dean and Christopher Lane (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), p.233.

[130] Kanika Batra 'British Black and Asian LGBTQ *Writing' The Cambridge companion to British Black and Asian literature (1945-2010)*, ed. Deirdre Osborne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p.163.

'trans' and 'queer' identity and community can be glimpsed. Only Millie has been present to Joss Moody's willed exposure as 'biologically female', in a scene where the reader sees this revelation in the 'unwrapping [of] endless rolls of bandages', where 'the first of his breasts reveals itself',[131] and it is largely in Millie's voice that we get any kind of affirmation of Joss Moody's gender as male. But this is not asserted as a social or political discourse. There is no explication of the meaning of 'trans', which, as we have seen, it is not named. Rather, gendering emerges in the space and 'community of the lovers', through their negotiation of difference and sameness, which produces a myth of gender which makes up the non-normative commonality of their relationship. If conventional and dominant myths of gender demand a stability and unity to gender identity, tying it to the imagined origin of biology and sex 'assignment' at birth, Moody's being *as a man,* is nonetheless absolutely affirmed by Millie, who refuses any taxonomy but her own:

> I can't stare at these pictures and force myself to see *'this person who is obviously a woman, once you know'* - according to some reports. I can't see her. I don't know if I'll ever see her. The photographs of Joss on his album covers are the same to me. I can't change him. I can see his lips. His lips pursed when he played the trumpet. His lips open to talk. Him leaning over me, kissing me softly with his lips. All over my face. His dark full lips.[132]

In this passage, Kay subtly asserts gender identity not as part of an alignment with conventional sense or 'myth', but as the revelation of intimates. If 'some reports' wish to confine Moody's gender, to assert its origin through reference to common recognition (he is said to be '*obviously a woman once you know'*), it is clear that many, including all of Moody's close relations, did not 'know', or rather knew something more and different to this. Joss Moody's masculine gender is not simply stated in opposition, but rendered through an evocation of intimacy. Rather than mirror the category assertion of the 'reports', we are offered the evocative memory of '[h]is dark lips', with the rhythmic repetition of short sentences preceded by masculine pronouns; '[h]is lips', 'him leaning', not asserting masculinity as a category to be stated, but rather as an erotic relation to be experienced.

The careful pacing of the prose, which builds an almost poetic intensity with its short lines and rhythmic repetitions, evokes the passionate rhythms of kissing, love-making, and caress, where it is the meeting of skin: here, of 'lips', which produces the repeated affirmation of masculinity. In this

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[131] Kay, *Trumpet,* p.21.
[132] Ibid., p.100.

sense gender is not affirmed as a category, but as a discrete experience, produced not through universal meaning or singular origin (i.e. the noun), but as the lesser pronoun denoting not 'man', but 'this man', 'here', whose exposure is tied not to structures of universal sense but to sensual encounter. Masculinity is not here something which is tied to the universal and originary sense of 'man' as the philosophical and scientific history of the term would demand. In this way, it is precisely outside of this type of discourse (of absolutes and universals), where we find any affirmation of masculinity. Kay's prose indicates a shift to a 'presencing' of the masculine, as something which is constructed, felt and embodied in moments of intimacy, whose origin is not determinate and anterior but produced in the sexual encounter itself.[133] Here, it is the logic and singularity of the sexual encounter and all its infinite possible permutations and meanings which order the structure of gender.

Kay deploys precisely this process of 'presencing' the masculine in her description of the 'community of lovers', where the very terms of gender's mythic function are called into question. Millie Moody has no apparent desire to simply state that Joss is a 'man', still less to offer an explanation of his identity as 'trans', a word which does not appear in the novel at all. This kind of pronouncement is left to reporters, representatives of dominant sense making, and popular myth. Joss is not evoked for Millie as a category, but as a singular, discrete 'life', and thus the universal linguistic notation of 'man/woman' is not so important to her. Rather Joss Moody is evoked simply through her memories, gendered only by pronouns and erotic and intimate images and in this sense, we see that Millie Moody breaks not only with the myth that gender is unchanging and bound to binary biological sex, but also with the drive of myth to render such categories universal at all.

As we have seen, this is the structure of 'myth interrupted', where myth is tied to its own openness to unworking and reworking, according to the constantly mutating world of 'being-with'. Gender is treated by Millie with a certain ambivalence; it is true that Joss Moody was born a 'woman', and now it is true that he is a 'man'. She offers no explanation, no category distinction, no theory for how this happened, only arguing that it is not, as the dominant myth of gender dictates a 'lie': 'I didn't feel like I was living a lie. I felt like I was living a life. Hindsight is a lie.'[134] In this minimal and simple expression of Millie Moody, indicative of Kay's characteristically concise, but subtly profound prose, a great weight and significance is afforded to the word 'life'. Tied to the almost tautological verb 'live' twice in two sentences, Kay emphasizes the significance of gender not as a conceptual

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[133] Jean-Luc Nancy, *A Finite Thinking,* ed. Simon Sparks (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), p.110.
[134] Jackie Kay, *Trumpet,* p.95.

category, or an object for political contention, but rather the simple fact of living, of being; the life that exceeds all structurations of its sense. Here 'life' is emphasized in its very singularity and its continuation as itself; it is *lived* and keeps on living, in spite of and in excess of those categories which seek to order its sense: 'Hindsight is a lie', the retroactive drive to delegitimize and rob a subject of its gendered life is absolutely denied. What matters is that it was simply 'lived', and as such it can never be a 'lie'. A fracture thus appears between two mythic senses of gender, exposing a tension between conventional and non-normative assertions of 'life'. Where the word 'lie' is imposed on the trans subject, evoking, dialectically, its opposite and concomitant sense of 'truth', as the absolute arbitrator of gender through reference to the 'universal' and 'objective', the 'trans' expresses an absolute non-relation to this mode of perception. The 'real' of the trans subject is tied only to its own self-expression, to its relationality as a form of mything, which fractures the 'real', demanding a radical openness to its reconfiguration.

Conclusion

The relationship which Joss and Millie Moody share is absolutely central to Kay's novel. It is the space of sharing, the non-normative, and the 'trans'. But these categories emerge neither as differences to be subsumed into normativity, nor as purely political categories to be argued over and demanded. Rather, the 'community of the lovers' enacts a 'retreating' of the political, a movement away from more conventional ways of framing political relationality in terms of 'movements', 'parties' and 'collectivities', to the simple fact of lives lived in communities on the margins, in spaces of exclusion oppression and misrecognition, whose refusal to become part of political life *as it is,* is part of their embodied resistance to these very exclusions. [135] The non-normative sexual subject embodies a non-normative position at the same time as functioning within norms, often unseen and hidden. Joss Moody and Millie Moody share a bond that is ultimately only legible and comprehensible to them. Their 'queer' lives stand not in direct political opposition to those processes which would exclude them, but as a defiant excess that embodies a strident, if not tacit resistance to them. In this sense, what marks the defiance of the gesture is not just the inhabitation of a non-normative position, but vitally the mode of relating that this thus entails, the networks of interaction and kinship which build on the non-normative to expose a community.

If this community is not already or in itself politically radical, it is a place where the possibility of transformation can be guarded. It does not offer the revolutionary or antagonistic force of a

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[135] Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe, *Retreating the Political*, p.45

collective, but it nonetheless does not foreclose this. The inoperative community, the community of the lovers, and 'being-with' are the space of resistance, excess and intimacy, which guard relationality from its subsumption into the dominant, the majority, and the operative. In this way, they retreat from the overtly political so as to guard a potentiality and possibility which would be the 'coming community'.[136] This, ordered around what the non-normative and inoperative relation preserves, would be the eruption of a community founded not by sameness, inequality and domination, but by plurality and vibrant interruption, a community ordered by relationality and 'being-with' as the community to come. [137]

In this way, Jackie Kay captures one of the paradoxes of community and representation that haunts its political uses. It is only in the relationship of Joss and Millie, as well as the relation of the text to its reader and society in general, (what, in broad terms, we might name the 'literary community') where something like an inoperative community can be found.[138] The 'community of lovers', like other forms of interruptive relationality, express a power *in potentia*, which would be the exposition of a whole form of relationality, kinship, love and community which is only thinkable in the productive interruption of these forms as they currently exist. Literature is a vital part of this process, deploying a mode of mythic and representational 'fictioning' which opens up this transformative capacity at the very level of its form, as well as through its embodying of marginal and disruptive identities and communities. Jackie Kay may be seen as exemplary of this process, but also, crucially, an example of the vast multiplicity of ways in which literature can perform this interruption. It is not possible to account for all the ways in which myth can be interrupted (and this fact is integral to its very structure), but we may now turn to the novels of Jon McGregor and Ali Smith to see the different ways in which this process can be seen.

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[136] Agamben, *The Coming Community.*
[137] Nancy, *Inoperative Community,* p.71.
[138] Ibid*.,* p.64.

'To have lived is not enough for them [...]
They have to talk about it [...]
To be dead is not enough for them[...]
It is not sufficient [...]
Silence.'[1]
(Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot)*

'Have yet to be found. Have yet to be found. Have yet to be found. Have yet to be.'[2]
(Jon McGregor, 'The Remains')

Chapter 4: Community of the Dead: Mourning and Redemption in Jon McGregor

Introduction

Throughout Jon McGregor's work it is possible to detect a persistent, considered, and profound attention to questions of community, which appears both as a thematic component of his texts, as well as built into their enigmatic and experimental forms. This fact has been reflected in commentaries on his work, which although amounting to a relatively small body of literary criticism, have consistently located issues of contemporary alienation, fragmentation and fragile community as central concerns of his prose. For Berthold Schoene, McGregor's oeuvre is a 'perfect case study' for the philosophy of Jean-Luc Nancy, demonstrating how 'the life of the individual is […] generated by as well as generative of community […] and being-in-common.'[3] Community is built into the very narrative form of McGregor's novels, which consist in an 'amalgamation of segments, distinct in tone, tense and perspective', creating a 'deep-structural matrix of communal connectivity and correlation.'[4] This privileging of communal themes and forms, as Neal Alexander has highlighted, reacts to a specific historical conjuncture, 'confront[ing] the steady erosion of meaningful social relations in postwar Britain by imagining alternative forms of community in circumstances of anonymity, abandonment, and neglect.'[5] More recently Daniel Lea has situated McGregor in the neoliberal context, arguing that his prose expresses a 'vision [of] contemporary Britain in which isolation and provisionality have become markers of neoliberal individualism's effects'.[6] By locating his novels precisely in 'small communities in specific locals', McGregor is said to draw attention to

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[1] Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), p.58.

[2] Jon McGregor, *This Isn't the Sort of Thing That Happens to Someone Like You* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), pp.189-90.

[3] Berthold Schoene, *The Cosmopolitan Novel* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), p.170.

[4] Ibid, p.169.

[5] Neal Alexander, 'Profoundly Ordinary: Jon McGregor and Everyday Life' *Contemporary Literature* 54.4 (2013), pp.720-721.

[6] Daniel Lea, *Twenty-First-Century Fiction: Contemporary British Voices* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), pp.202-3.

processes of individualization, alienation and social marginalization, employing a 'humanistic' frame to implicitly critique the organization of neoliberal society.[7]

In this way, critics have shown how it is not only community, but specifically a focus on marginal, peripheral or excluded forms of relationality which are the major thematic concerns of McGregor's prose. His work often serves to shift the perspective of a reader onto what is overlooked, seemingly banal or unimportant, in order to ask questions about implicit hierarchies and exclusions in contemporary British society. In this way, McGregor's choice of subject-matter is implicitly political, entailing a turn to certain communities which are at odds with society at large:

> McGregor's characters form a loose and informal assembly of the marginalized, the silenced, and the uncounted, whose being-in-common is at odds with the distribution of roles and places in the normative community.[8]

Like Jackie Kay, McGregor writes novels underpinned by an implicit privileging of the peripheral. By focusing on often unnamed city and suburban landscapes in the East Midlands, and zooming in on 'mundane and profane' aspects of 'everyday' life,[9] McGregor's texts have often mirrored the marginal nature of their subject-matter, receiving moderate critical acclaim, but remaining 'to some extent […] under the radar' of popular or scholarly attention.[10] McGregor's complex treatment of literary form has produced a body of work which is hard to characterize, moving between a distinctively poetic and lyrical prose and a sometimes deadening attention to detail and descriptive precision. For Lea, this places his 'writing […] somewhere between a northern social realist tradition and a modernist-inspired stylistic experimentation', denoting a literary style at odds with conventional modes of categorization.[11] For Jean-Michel Ganteau, McGregor's deliberately 'non-canonical, opaque - often poetic- form' is part of a mode of literary experimentation orientated toward capturing the 'intensity of a moment and of a voice - or rather voices', where his displacement of literary norms allows for unexpected multiplicities and relationalities.[12]

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[7] Lea, *Twenty-First-Century Fiction,* p.203.
[8] Alexander, 'Profoundly Ordinary', p.743.
[9] Ibid., p.720.
[10] Lea, *Twenty-First-Century Fiction,* p.202.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Jean-Michel Ganteau, 'Vulnerable Form and Traumatic Vulnerability; Jon McGregor's Even the Dogs' in *Contemporary Trauma Narratives: Liminality and the Ethics of Form* ed. Susana Onega and Jean-Michel Ganteau (New York: Routledge, 2014), p.90.

In all these readings, it is clear that McGregor's writing is a rich resource for investigating the meaning of community in contemporary urban environments, but this has nonetheless led to a variety of accounts of its specific political significance. In Schoene's view McGregor's texts work as a form of 'cosmopolitical appeal',[13] allowing for the production of a new 'cosmopolitan imagination' which can productively react to the shifting dynamics of 'globalization' through a valorisation of the 'multicultural'.[14] Building largely on a single short text in which Nancy addresses issues of globalisation, Schoene's analysis is arguably only partially successful, failing to grapple with the more expansive and radical meanings of community beyond the limits (and ambiguities) of the cosmopolitan category.[15] Likewise, although Lea concedes that McGregor's novel must in some way be read as 'political', the stakes of this politics are often diminished in their significance and scope.[16] McGregor's work is described as 'questioning [a] British welfare state system that voids itself of empathy as it grows in bureaucracy' in an analysis which underplays how McGregor's novel asks more fundamental questions about contemporary society, drawing attention to determinations and consequences of urban deprivation, homelessness and poverty that ostensibly exceed issues of 'empathy' or 'bureaucracy'. [17]

Although Lea offers some acknowledgement of the role of capitalism in the forms of urban deprivation which McGregor's texts depict, this is, perhaps counterintuitively, identified with the protagonists themselves. For example, in his analysis of *Even the Dogs,* Lea's account enacts a remarkable reversal of agency, asserting that the 'drug addicts' who make up the novel's narrative focus exhibit the 'unfathomable depths of the libidinal excess in […] modern consumer society,' associating such capitalist excesses not with capitalist production and power, but rather with figures almost entirely excluded from consumer society itself.[18] The 'novel's protagonists' are therefore described as 'first and foremost consumers who maintain an economic system which thrives on the stimulation of individualist desire and which devalues communal, empathic values,' obscuring their far more precarious relation to the wider economy, as well as the modes of communal and empathic relation which they forge in resistance to such processes.[19]

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[13] Schoene, *The Cosmopolitan Novel,* p.174.
[14] Ibid, p.186.
[15] Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Creation of the World, or, Globalization*, trans. François Raffoul and David Pettigrew (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007).
[16] Lea, *Twenty-First-Century Fiction*, p.226.
[17] Ibid, p.225.
[18] Ibid, p.232.
[19] Ibid.

This chapter will intervene in commentaries on McGregor by investigating the confluence of community and death in McGregor's work, the latter of which has not been adequately explored as a concern of his novels. In aligning the concept of community with a philosophical approach to history and death, a more radical figure of community can be offered, binding marginal and oppressed subjects of the past with those of the present, unsettling the operative terms of contemporary reality. Drawing on the work of Walter Benjamin, Michael Löwy and Rebecca Comay, and integrating their accounts with that of Nancy's 'finite community', it will become possible to propose the conceptual figure of a 'community of the dead' which can expose the political stakes of practices of mourning, remembrance and haunting in McGregor's work.[20] This offers a fresh hermeneutic lens through which to interpret McGregor's own texts, shedding light on the trajectory of his whole literary project. By focusing on McGregor's most political novel *Even the Dogs*, and its innovation of a present-tense first-person plural narrative composed of the voices of the living and the dead, this chapter will demonstrate how McGregor offers an exemplary, instructive and prescient example of how the contemporary novel can interrogate the political stakes of community in capitalist society today.

What Remains?

Jon McGregor's short story 'The Remains' is a story without subject. Or, more precisely, we might say that each line of the text is produced syntactically without nominative or predicate, and must therefore relate back to the story's title which provides a central noun and theme which cannot be found in the actual body of the text. In this way the reader is introduced to a narrative which proceeds through a series of descriptive sentences that imply a police search for a missing body, but where there is neither narrative progression nor the introduction of any characters, only the proliferation of details about an object which is never directly named:

> Are believed to still be intact. Are understood to be within an area of approximately seventeen square miles. Are believed to have been concealed. Are either partially or completely buried. Are likely to be without clothes or jewellery or other possessions. May not be suitable for visual identification.[21]

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[20] Nancy, *Inoperative Community,* p.26.
[21] McGregor, *This Isn't the Sort of Thing That Happens to Someone Like You*, p.188.

In this way, the remains which are 'yet to be found' are literally shorn from the very fabric of the narrative which evokes them. Their potential emergence is pulled into the temporality of the repeated 'yet to be', which is deferred into an ending void of reconciliation. The 'remains' around which the story circles are an absent centre, and as such the movement of the text works to elide any sense of telos, serving only to produce a relentless rhythm of loss and lack, where precisely what might remain of absence cannot be found or reported, but is evoked only in the frustration and trauma of non-existence. In this sense, the story enacts a form of performative contradiction, where its central theme of that which *remains,* the traces, bones and ashes of former life, are produced as an *absent absence.* What remains therefore is only this lack, only this non-being which is never quite nothing, but never quite present, a trace which troubles the borders of absence and presence themselves.

Alongside the absented 'remains' is the expunging of any sense of narrative *voice,* which, rendered entirely through proliferating passive clauses - 'believed to be', 'understood to be' - departs from any conventions in the structure of the sentence, offering a language stripped of stable referents and verbs robbed of actors. Not only are the 'remains' of the story absented, but so too is a tacitly invoked 'they' which would be the subject of the 'believing' and 'understanding', establishing a prose which has broken from expectations of grammar and conventional intelligibility. By departing from linguistic norms, the story leaves the reader estranged from any clear sense of reality, as despite the subtly evoked style of a police report, produced through this passive tone, we are nonetheless given no direct reference to the details or context of this. The reader is tasked with excavating and interpreting these partial references and evocations, which are left constitutively and irresolvably incomplete.

If the absent subject of this story is death, the thudding rhythm of non-naming and non-representation leaves the reader with an absence produced through a *force which attends death,* which is constructed through a subtly evoked ethical register. The endlessly reiterated phrase 'Have yet to be found' can produce nothing but this very force, the demand that what remains of death be discovered, accounted for, and brought into the realm of justice.[22] With Derrida, death necessitates our thinking about 'ghosts', 'which is to say about certain *others* who are not present, nor presently living, either to us, or outside us', but who must be evoked precisely in the name of 'justice', which

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[22] Repeated throughout Jon McGregor, *This Isn't The Sort Of Thing That Happens To Someone Like You*, pp.189-90.

in this sense is also still *yet to be found*. [23] This repeated trope is occasionally punctuated with alternate phrases: 'Have been destroyed by water', 'Have been destroyed by earth', 'Will not give you what you need', 'Will not bring her back', 'Are gone', 'Is gone', all of which produce a narrative drive based on the constantly confounded desire to find remains which are also feared to be simply 'destroyed' or 'gone', implying a task which is without end or hope of completion.[24]

The last clause of the story disrupts this seemingly hopeless drive, however, removing the object of 'found', to release the infinitive from this outcome: 'Have yet to be.'[25] In this moment the figure of death and the drive to find its still present traces, the remains of the girl who we can only assume has been lost and is now dead, are freed from this logic of finding and completion, which the repeated police line of the 'yet to be found' instate as the necessary social meaning and outcome of their loss. But neither are they simply let go. What remains of death is released from a logic of recovery, but left radically more open. The task of *remaining after death,* and the traces of death felt and circulated in the tacitly evoked community of mourning, leave the temporality of this work deferred beyond the past and the present, residing entirely *in the future.* The remains are yet to be*,* that is, their be-ing is yet to come into existence, evoking at once the horizon of return as well as creation, the possibility of new life and redemption.[26] In this way McGregor comes very close to Derrida's insistence on the ethical demand of death:

> Without lateness, without delay, but without presence, …[death] is the precipitation of an absolute singularity, singular because differing, precisely, and always other, bringing itself necessarily to the form of the instant, in *imminence and in urgency:* even if its moves toward what remains to come, there is the *pledge …*[which] responds without delay to the demand of justice.[27]

McGregor is attentive to the absent traces of the dead, evincing a lack of presence in a careful practice of non-naming and elision where this literary experimentation and syntactical play allows for the border between presence and absence to be explored and questioned. The *traces* of absence

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[23] Jacques Derrida. *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International,* trans. Peggy Kamuf (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p.xix.
[24] McGregor, *This Isn't The Sort Of Thing That Happens To Someone Like You*, pp.189-190.
[25] Ibid., p.190.
[26] The clear theological nature of this logic can be viewed alongside McGregor's Christian background and self-description as a 'secular Christian'. See Caroline Edward and Jon McGregor, 'The Books Interview: Jon McGregor' *The New Statesman* (April 2010) http://www.newstatesman.com/books/2010/04/novel-politics-afghanistan) [accessed 15 October 2017].
[27] Derrida, *Specters of Marx,* p.31.

are exposed as a form of presence, and their complex literary evocation allow for this paradoxical form to unfold, for non-presence to be made *present* in its very nonexistence, but also in its potential *becoming*. What is evoked is therefore not simply death *as lack,* where its negation of life can mean nothing beyond this negativity. Rather it is also a form of promise or a 'pledge', the space through which the absent figure of justice might appear. Death is never simply over, never just the negation of life, as there are always those who live with the wounds and the traces of death, who are with the dead in their shared demand for what remains of death to be remembered and accounted for. The voices of the dead are preserved and open to infinite renewal in the realm of language and in the shared space of community, which is not simply between the living, but must always draw on the history and voices of the dead, who may speak through the living as part of an on-going process of remembrance and justice.[28]

A literature of community, like a literature of the dead, would therefore be open to this process of haunting, where the remains are never simply present, never found nor fully absent, but rather emerge as the constant promise of new relation to the past, the present and the future. This is the logic of the demand, which is in some sense out of time, as the immanent possibility of the reconfiguration of time itself: the demand for a new relation to the past which allows for new futures to emerge. Remembering the dead is a communal task, and if community in its current incarnation has its own rituals of mourning, then it can also be open to the mourning of the coming community, the community of the 'not-yet', which emerges precisely through its own relation to the dead, which must speak through the voices of the dead that operative community keeps silent. For both, the figure of temporal disruption is justice, which like death and community, constantly emerges through its own non-presence, in the impossibility of its own representation, and in the necessity of its demand.

This attention to death, mourning and community builds on the work of Jean-Luc Nancy, who in *The Inoperative Community* highlights 'finitude' as a central figure in community: its 'limit', and its constitutive modality, which 'exposes' community as an assemblage of finite beings.[29] Drawing on Heidegger, who insists on the 'non-relational character of the experience of finitude',[30] Nancy disputes the idea that death marks a purely singular event, arguing that community is vital to the

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[28] This unsettling of the borders of 'life' and 'death' may be productively viewed through contemporary philosophical and political attention to 'critical vitalism' for example in Frédéric Worms, 'Pour un Vitalisme Critique' in *Esprit* 1 (2015).

[29] Nancy, *Inoperative Community,* pp.27-31.

[30] Simon Critchley, 'Originary Inauthenticity – on Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit'* in Simon Critchley and Reiner Schurmann, *On Heidegger's* Being and Time ed. Steven Levine (New York: Routledge, 2008), p.143.

work of death, serving as the locus of its communication, meaning and in this sense its being:[31] 'Community is revealed in the death of others […] because death itself is the true community of *I's* that are not *egos* […] death as community establishes their impossible communion.'[32] In this way, Nancy gestures toward a figure of a 'community of the dead', founded on an 'impossible' relation which must nonetheless be *communicated* in the exposition of finitude itself. Death therefore emerges as an event which in some sense *establishes* community through exposing its finitude, which would be the basis of community itself, as 'finitude "is" communitarian, and because finitude alone is communitarian.'[33]

Nancy does not expand this communitarian function of death in any more detail, however, and this may partly be due to the fact that this privileging of 'communication' demands a movement away from philosophy to literature, as well as any interrogation of the contingent processes of the communal exposition of death. Nancy indicates the communal function of death only to renege on any analysis of what processes this function might involve. The specific practices of mourning, remembrance, and grieving for the dead are not explored, as Nancy's focus on ontological 'finitude' demands that his exposition proceed only through a highly abstracted lexicon, which arguably works at the expense of these contingent practices. Likewise, McGregor and Blanchot can both be seen to expose a limit in Nancy's own account of death by moving beyond his exposition of 'finitude' as the constitutive modality of community, to figure literature as an expression of death which can *intervene* in communal practices of the dead. In this way, the assertion of a disruptive notion of the 'community of the dead' is a prescient account of the political dimensions of death, demanding a radical reconfiguration of the space of community in the contemporary political landscape.

It is therefore possible to draw on the ontological dimensions of death as suggested by Nancy, at the same time as addressing its attendant social, contingent and *political* dimensions, extending Nancy's own theory to analyse death through the differentiated apparatus of in/operativity. Maurice Blanchot, responding to Nancy in his book *The Unavowable Community,* offers a reading of Nancy which highlights the vital function of *literature* in expressing an *impossible* but *necessary* relation with the dead, and we may take Jon McGregor's body of work as exemplary of this literary capacity.[34] McGregor, like Nancy and Blanchot, moves beyond the notion of death as singular event, instead focusing his texts on the communities which receive and respond to death, which deal with

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[31] Nancy develops his critique of Heidegger's account of death in *Being Singular Plural,* pp.88-99.
[32] Nancy, *Inoperative Community,* p.15.
[33] Ibid., p.27.
[34] Maurice Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community* trans. Pierre Joris (New York: Station Hill Press, 1988).

its aftermath and the process of grieving, mourning and living *with* and *through* finitude. His prose therefore enacts an *interruption* within literary expectation and convention, leaving death unrepresented and only graspable in the ripples and effects it has within community. By eliding any sense of a clear protagonist or hero in his work, and thereby disrupting conventions in the representation of the bourgeois individual, death is torn from its traditional literary modality, demanding a rethinking of the relationality of death itself.[35] In this way McGregor may be seen to expose something like a 'community of the dead', which draws on the voices of the lost, the forgotten, and the erased through the possibility of their *return.* By envisioning a transformation within our relation to the dead through the exposition of its communal and disruptive function, McGregor stages a literary intervention which anticipates a radical reconfiguration of community and the realm of the political, which in this sense, like the 'remains' of his story, is 'yet to be'. [36]

The Impossible Communication of Death

McGregor's short story 'The Remains' typifies a pattern in his work; in each of his major novels the figure of 'death' is the central if not elusive object of his literary expression, inflecting and orientating his prose at the same time as being almost entirely absent as a representable object. Death is the definitive point of departure for *Reservoir 13,* which, based on 'The Remains', begins with the disappearance of a thirteen-year-old girl and an extensive police search for her. The novel spans thirteen years, tracing how her presumed death affects the community from which she disappears. But the actual death of the girl is not represented, either at the start of the novel, or at the end. The case remains open and unresolved, where even the actuality of her death is in doubt, assumed, but shrouded in the mystery of the non-emergence of her body. [37] Likewise in *Even the Dogs,* the novel begins with a death which is not directly represented, only revealed when the police arrive at the scene of its suspected occurrence. The dead body is described in the forensic investigation of the scene, and later in the autopsy of the body and coroner's report, but the actual event of death is foreclosed in the narrative, evoked by state discourses, but never directly described.

In McGregor's first novel *If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things* death also informs the overall structure of his narrative, forming the eventual outcome of a series of dispersed events, where the narrative can be seen as anticipating and responding to the event of death in advance. Although the

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[35] Nancy, *The Inoperative Community,* pp.70-79.
[36] McGregor, *This Isn't the Sort of Thing That Happens to Someone Like You,* p.190.
[37] Jon McGregor, *Reservoir 13* (London: 4th Estate, 2017), p.324.

novel's end, unlike McGregor's later novels, does evoke death through a description of its actual occurrence, this is nonetheless pulled into a structure of redemption. The unnamed 'young man' who dies does so in the place of a small boy Nawaz, and thus what is exposed is not death as a singular, discrete event pertaining to the *individual,* but rather as a mode of redemptive relationality. [38] The beginning of his text enacts a process of narrative enfolding and enclosure, where death is evoked though the expression of its unsayability, exposed to the reader only in its apparent unrepresentability. A female narrator refers to an event that is nonetheless not described, referred to merely as 'it', and evoked as a 'noise I can't forget'.[39] But just as the reader is given this detail, the conversation suddenly stops, replaced only with 'breathing' and a 'tremble […] along the bones' of the narrator's 'spine', and we therefore see that death is evoked always through an apparent barrier to its communication.[40]

For the archivist protagonist of *So Many Ways to Begin,* or the 'archaeologist of the present' in *Even the Dogs,* death is a void which the narrative seeks to fill. [41] In the failed taxonomy of archivist David, who attempts in vain to fill the 'vast gaps' of the past, or the 'archaeology' which collapses all time into that of the 'present', it is clear that these attempts to 'collect' fragments and objects of temporal significance produce a presence which is necessarily shot through with partiality, which constitutes itself only through its relation to what is irrecuperable, escaping and eluding all attempts at unity. [42] In this way death is stolen from the text in a performative unrepresentability, and the task of literature is therefore to deal with the aftermath and the traces, to account precisely for what cannot be represented, a non-presence and non-synchrony which unsettles any stable sense of the present or of linear history. The archivist and the archaeologist (joined in their shared etymological root of 'the beginning' (*archon*))*,* like the author himself, are interested in these remainders and the multiple ways of excavating and unearthing the past, which is presented without resolution or end as a kind of endless haunting. Death is therefore evoked through a refusal of any originary or eschatological certainty, exceeding any clear delineation of its being as discrete evental experience, and this necessitates that narrative conventions of linear time, denouement, and progression be disrupted.[43]

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[38] Jon McGregor, *If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things* (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2003), p.273.
[39] Ibid., p.24.
[40] Ibid., p.25.
[41] Jon McGregor, *Even the Dogs* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), p.153.
[42] Jon McGregor, *So Many Ways to Begin* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), p.100.
[43] For discussion of this literary tendency see *Death in Literature*, ed. Outi Hakola and Sari Kivistö (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014).

The structure of *Reservoir 13* consists in a major narrative extension of the short story 'The Remains', published five years prior to it, indicating a continuing literary investment in the haunting presences of uncertain deaths. In both texts, this basic structure is constructed through different kinds of formal disruption, which produce an affective production of narrative frustration, evoking at once the *expectation of an ending,* which works at the level of literary norms in relation to tragedy and death (namely, the expectation that a culprit will be found), and a more general social demand that the *meaning of death be expressed in mourning,* that the rituals of death and its remembrance in literature offer some sense of death's finality. *Reservoir 13* heightens this narrative frustration almost to its limit, extending an expectation over three hundred pages of narrative description, where this denouement never comes, can never come, where the finality of death is evoked only in its apparent impossibility. Time passes, marking its inerrable rhythm with each chapter starting with the new year and ending with the communal 'dreams' of the village, who expect a return which never comes.[44] In this way McGregor deploys a double disruption, interrupting assumptions of a definitive end to death and the time of mourning that we see at the social level, as well as the literary conventions of crime, mystery, and narrative time; in both what is lacking is any satisfactory or final sense of an ending.[45] Death starts the narrative, but it is left unresolved and unreconciled, and in this way the narrative evinces an unsettling feeling of being unfinished and incomplete.

In this way death emerges as the overarching structure of all McGregor's narratives which nonetheless at no point directly depict it. His prose is pressed up against the limit of death, which in its absence works as an immanent ordering principle of his entire project. There is no blood, no dramatization of death or pathos evoked in the experience of dying. Rather we are left with the remains, the landscape, the ripples which death makes, where his narrative attends to what is left when all dominant narratives are over: the overlooked, the forgotten, 'the dailyness of life',[46] which is the focus not only of his literature but the often extensive research which he undertakes in preparation for his writing.[47] McGregor's prose therefore enacts a literary interruption, which through focusing on the *community which attends to a death,* pulls death away from a simple or

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[44] McGregor, *Reservoir 13,* p.324.

[45] For an extended study of the conventions surrounding the temporality of death in literature and philosophy, see Mark Currie, *The Unexpected: Narrative Temporality and the Philosophy of Surprise* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015).

[46] This is a major theme McGregor picks out in an interview for *The Guardian* (April 7, 2017) https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/apr/07/jon-mcgregor-reservoir-13-novel-interview [accessed 26 October 2017].

[47] For an example of his extensive research, see Jon McGregor, 'McGregor on Coroner's Courts' *The Guardian Newspaper* (January 23, 2010) https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2010/jan/23/jon-mcgregor-coroners-court [accessed 15 October 2017].

discrete event experienced by an individual, hero, or even a single character, situating these events within complex relational matrices where the reader is forced to view death through its effects in a community. McGregor achieves this primarily through refusing a stable or singular narrative voice, moving between different subjects around the cul-de-sac where his novel *If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things* is based, putting *Reservoir 13* in an impassive third-person voice where no character can emerge as more central than another, and in *Even the Dogs* constructing a fictive 'we' which speaks from the position of an impossible collectivity. It is therefore the very *literariness* of McGregor's work, its ability to unwork and rework norms in the representation of community and subjectivity, that he is able to put the question of 'death' into question, moving away from the figure of discrete subjective experience to that of communality.

If death appears as in some way unrepresentable and incommunicable, an event which must pertain in the last instance to singular subjective experience, the effect of McGregor's work is nonetheless to pull death into the discourse and communication of community. As such, McGregor's prose exposes the ability of literature to *communicate the meaning of death* in the very face of its unrepresentability, to highlight its indeterminacy not in relation to its foreclosure in the unity of the individual, but to examine the ways in which this can and must be pressed at its limit, how the apparent impossibility of communicating death, as well as communicating *with* the dead, can become a space for questioning the very boundaries of possibility itself. Literature has the potential to take part in a creative *reimagining* of our relation to the dead, working as an imagined and imaginative space which can put us in relation to what has been lost, is irretrievable or forgotten. Literature has the ability to open up the past to the voiceless as well as opening up the present, putting time 'out of joint' so to disturb the temporal configuration of the 'real' through a 'radically dis-jointed time', allowing for new and radical ways of thinking community, death and relationality.[48]

By focusing on the object of *community* in relation to death, McGregor crucially mirrors Nancy's own turn to the relational, where norms of individualisation and operative sociality give way to the subversive effects of community. By disturbing the expectations around the representation of death, McGregor is tacitly engaged in disputing the *operative* function of death, the way in which we see 'the transfiguration of the dead into some substance or subject', where death becomes part of the *work* of the state, construed as an extension of the category of the 'individual', whose death therefore marks a nonrelational event, one that is private, personal, and inaccessible.[49] In

[48] Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, p.20.
[49] Nancy, *The Inoperative Community,* p.15.

challenging this, the basic function of community is revealed: that of *unworking,* where precisely this operative, state capitalist function of death is brought into question. By moving to the communal scene of death, McGregor therefore exposes how '[c]ommunity is calibrated on death as on that of which it is precisely impossible to *make a work',* that is, community reveals precisely how death can never be a *work,* but is a limit-point at which relationality shatters and is brought back into being.[50] As such, McGregor's disruptions at the level of the *representation* of death can have serious and productive consequences of our thinking of the politics of community.

McGregor's novels reconfigure the representation and meaning of death, moving from a conception of its own individual and singular event, to the communal work of mourning and grieving. If death is maintained as something which throws representation into crisis, then literature nonetheless emerges as a space where its impossible communication can be enacted, where a *singular* experience of death is exposed in its c*ommunal scene,* which emerges *as the only proper field through which this singularity can be accounted for.* In literature the imperative to write about death comes up against its constitutive impossibility, but it is precisely in this 'failure' to account fully for death that its meaning is left indeterminate and open, and where community is opened to its unworking and reworking in the face of death.[51] It is in this gesture, where literature shifts death from a singular to a communal scene, that McGregor (minimally) evokes and disputes a crucial contention in the philosophy of death, that of its radical singularity as *nonrelational:*

> Death is a possibility of being that Dasein always has to take upon itself. With death, Dasein stands before itself in its *ownmost* potentiality-of-being [...] Death is the possibility of the absolute impossibility of Dasein. Thus *death* reveals itself as one's *ownmost, nonrelational, and insuperable possibility.[52]*

McGregor refuses to offer death primarily through the structure of the '*ownmost',* where 'dying' is 'essentially and irreplaceably mine', by shifting his perspective onto the community around death, who experience death precisely as the breaking down of community.[53] In this way McGregor disrupts a received convention in the apprehension of death succinctly expressed by the common phrase 'we are born and alone, and we die alone', attributed to Orson Welles, and emblematic of a bourgeois understanding of death which highlights, with Heidegger, the radical *unshareability* of

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[50] Ibid.
[51] Maurice Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community* trans. Pierre Joris (New York: Station Hill Press, 1988), p.12.
[52] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* [1953]*,* trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York, SUNY Press, 2010), p.241.
[53] Ibid., p.243.

death. For Heidegger, 'death is ontologically constituted through mineness and existence';[54] it is the 'eminent possibility' of *Dasein,* and is therefore intrinsic to any question of being, whilst remaining outside of the structure of *Dasein* as such (which is being-toward-death).[55] Death therefore functions as a limit-point of being where it is thrown back to itself in its telos and fulfilment, but the event of death is framed through a fundamental solipsism which may be seen to undermine the relational character of being itself.

In discussion with Nancy, Derrida highlights the question of *Mitsein* (being-with) in Heidegger's account of death as a crucial problematic, arguing that it is potentially incommensurable with the 'dying of *Dasein,* which is alone in its capacity for authentic being and which is thus, implicitly, the individual, the individual *Dasein*':[56]

> I don't know how to treat Heidegger's discourse on being toward death, his whole description, and then the indissociability of *Dasein* and *Mitsein,* and thus the death of the other, whether simultaneous or not, with the problematic of mourning… I just don't know. What is death for *Mitsein,* not to mention for the *Volk*?[57]

For Heidegger, the figures of *Dasein* and *Mitsein* are co-originary, as *Dasein* is 'equiprimordial with *being-in-the-world:* being-with and *Dasein-with*',[58] and in this way should not be viewed as a self-sufficient individual or a 'worldless […] *isolated* subject'.[59] In Heidegger's insistence on the radically unshareable character of death, however, figures such as Derrida have struggled to reconcile these accounts. Indeed, it is precisely the *nonrelational* character of death which has been thoroughly disputed in much of the reception of Heidegger, not least in Nancy, but also in Critchley, for whom this claim 'is wrong empirically and normatively', as it fails to attend to how 'death is first and foremost experienced in a relation to the death or dying of the other and others.'[60] Death therefore emerges as a fundamental and highly contested concept in Heidegger's thought, opening up wider questions about the very notions of *Mitsein* and *Dasein* as such. For Nancy, it remains the case that 'no one', including Heidegger, 'has radically thematized the "with" as the essential trait of Being and

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[54] Ibid., p.231.
[55] Ibid., p.250.
[56] Jacques Derrida, *For Strasbourg: Conversations of Friendship and Philosophy*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), p.21.
[57] Ibid.
[58] Ibid., *Being and Time,* p.111.
[59] Paul Gorner, *Heidegger's Being and Time; An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p.56.
[60] Simon Critchley, Originary Inauthenticity – on Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit',* p.144.

as its proper plural singular coessence', and it is arguably the inaugural gesture on Nancy's whole thinking on community to address this oversight.[61] For Christopher Watkin:

> The uniqueness of what Nancy is setting forth […] comes into clearer focus when it is compared with Heideggerean *Mitsein*. The major dissonance between *Mitsein* and Nancy's singular plurality is that for the Heidegger of *Being and Time* the *Mit-* supervenes, in terms of the book's composition, upon an already existent *Dasein* whereas Nancy thinks the two as coextensive from the beginning.[62]

If, for Heidegger, Dasein's. . . understanding of Being already implies the understanding of others',[63] for Nancy, 'this surely does not say enough', as 'the understanding of Being is nothing other than an understanding of others', in a structure which already throws into question this very separation.[64] In this way, Heidegger's account of *Mitsein* 'remains nothing more than a sketch' as 'even though Mitsein is coessential with Dasein, it remains in a subordinate position,' meaning that although Heidegger certainly lays the ground for much of Nancy's relational account of being, this possibility is not fully realized in Heidegger's thought.[65] It may therefore be said that there is a 'straightforward incoherence in Heidegger's *Being and Time'*,[66] which drives Nancy to do more justice to the figure of *Mitsein* through an examination of 'the possibility of an explicit and endless exposition of co-originarity and the possibility of taking account of what is at stake in the togetherness of the ontological enterprise', a project which also allows Nancy to envision different 'political consequences' than those found in Heidegger.[67]

One of these 'political consequences' may arise in a rethinking of the ontology of death, which Nancy theorizes against Heidegger as fundamentally communal and social in its character. For Heidegger death cannot be relational as it exposes a fundamentally singular function of the 'ownmost' and 'insuperable' aspect of authentic being-itself: 'In lingering together with him in mourning and commemorating, those remaining behind *are with* him' but only insofar as 'the deceased *himself* is no longer factically "there"', and as such, Heidegger claims that this 'with'

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[61] Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, p.34.
[62] Christopher Watkin, 'A Different Alterity: Jean-Luc Nancy's Singular Plural' in *Paragraph: The Journal of the Modern Critical Theory Group* 30.2 (2007), p.55.
[63] Heidegger, *Being and Time,* p.161 cited in Nancy, *Being Singular Plural,* p.27.
[64] Nancy, *Being Singular Plural,* p.27.
[65] Ibid., p.93.
[66] Simon Critchley, 'With Being-With? Notes on Jean-Luc Nancy's Rewriting of *Being and Time*' *Studies in Practical Philosophy* 1.1 (1999), p.62.
[67] Nancy, *Being Singular Plural, p.*26.

cannot consist in a being-with-the-dead but in fact constitutes only a 'near by', which marks an essential and irreducible separation.[68] But what founds the claim that death is constituted, in the last instance, only as the experience of one's *own* death? And what grounds the ontological claim of its fundamentally nonrelational aspect other than the already established assumption of a singular aspect to being itself? In order to make this claim Heidegger must carefully separate the highly relational fields of death (suffering, mourning, remembrance), from its essential being, rendering the 'loss experienced only by those remaining behind' as a purely secondary modality of death itself. [69] Thus, to be *with the dead and the dying* is implicitly denigrated and rendered ontologically insignificant by his account, and death is thereby torn from the field of community to the idealized space of purely individual being, which is assured by the structurally *unknowable* (and for Heidegger therefore purely personal and solipsistic) experience of death as singular and incommunicable event.

But community may ask in response: Were we not with the dead as they passed, and did we not feel the loss? Did this death not tear and break our community and was this not *shared,* in different ways, by all who were present, whether dying or living, and by all who heard of and thus felt the death after its occurrence?[70] By pulling death into the closed and self-sufficient ideation of a nonrelational and singular mode of experience, these other experiences and modes of being *with* are arguably expunged from the ontology of death. Beyond the postulation of the *experience* of death as inaccessible and wholly one's own, Heidegger cannot account for an understanding of death *precisely as the loss of relationality and loss of community,* which is shared between those who die and those who feel the death as a loss. That which is lost in death is felt precisely and most profoundly by those that remain. It is not only the loss of the person that dies, but the loss of the being-with which their life made possible: to witness the death of another is to witness the loss of something within one's self, the impossibility of the self which is with the other who has died, the loss of the becoming and *potentiality-of-being* that the dying person allowed for.

What retreats in death is therefore not simply a life as *one* but life as always already in relation. Death's effect and occurrence is *within* this relation, taking place at its limit, where death must occur not only in *being* but also in the *with* of its own possibility. As such, community does not work at the

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[68] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p.230.

[69] For studies of the gendered implications of Heidegger's erasure of the figure of birth in this process, see Luce Irigaray, *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger*, trans. Mary Beth Mader (London: Athlone, 1999), Hannah Arendt *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958) and Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection,* trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

[70] In positing this question, we come very close to the central contention of Alphonso Lingis in *The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), but this analysis diverges heavily with Lingis's account in its privileging of the political effects of this.

expense of the singularity of death as Heidegger suggests, but rather is the exposition of this singularity and finitude itself: '*Community does not sublate the finitude its exposes. Community itself, in sum, is nothing but this exposition.*'[71] If Heidegger side-lines the communitarian function of death in his account, seeing community and sociality as spaces where death is robbed of its 'ownmost' character, he fails to account not only for the necessity of relationality to the moment of death, but more, the way in which community is in this moment a *differentiated* modality. Community *does* have the potential to express what Heidegger terms an 'untroubled indifference' to death, (or what we might term an operative and normative relation to death), but must also be understood in its capacity to disrupt this very process.[72]

Community, understood in its proper ontological and political function, is articulated by Nancy, Blanchot and others as the space of the social and political *circulation of the meaning of the dead,* where its ontological exposition allows it to 'expose [itself] to what has gone unheard in community', the voices of the dead which community does not simply pass over, but bears as the very traces of death's communal function.[73] As such it is precisely community which can do justice to the ontological event of death, and *only* in community where death can expose its singularity as ontological limit. Death is incommunicable and unrepresentable in a crucial way, but it also bears the communal *necessity of its expression and sharing,* and as such death must mark the impossible but constitutive limit though which unrepresentability must itself be represented.

In Blanchot we see the absolute exigency of relationality to death through its exposition in representation and literature. Blanchot deploys a philosophy which articulates itself as a poetics of relationality, a literary intervention which brings out a relation through narrativization. In this way, we see the necessity of literature in the figure of death. Death is *unknowable* as singular experience, but literature allows for what is incommunicable to be communicated at the limit and failure of speech itself. This can be seen as a literary *community of the dead*, which is founded on its ability to communicate the 'impossibility' of an adequate representation of death. The moment of death, and this being-with the dying, produces a figure of an 'impossible' 'openness', which is the very paradigm through which community is formed:

> To remain present in the proximity of another who by dying removes himself definitively, to
> take upon myself another's death as the only death that concerns me, this is what puts me

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[71] Nancy, *Inoperative Community,* p.26.
[72] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p.244.
[73] Nancy, *Inoperative Community*, p.26.

beside myself, this is the only separation that can open me, in its very impossibility, to the Openness of a community.[74]

In Blanchot this culminates in a 'mute conversation' with the dead where we '*share* the solitude of the event', and, crucially, it is in this very moment that Blanchot breaks from the style of philosophical exposition, moving his extended (if not unstated) disputation of Heidegger to the realm of the *fictive,* which becomes the only language which can do justice to this constitutive 'impossibility'.[75] Here literature emerges as a form of knowledge which apprehends the necessary failure entailed in communication with the dead. In its literary drive and fictive recreation of the real we can see how language always fails in the communication of death. But this failure does not simply result in a non-relation. It is part of the on-going communing with the dead through mourning, remembrance and writing, which is founded on a relation that must remain forever incomplete. As such Blanchot addresses the dead through a fictive 'you' by citing his own novel (*Le Pas Au-dela*)*,* thus demonstrating the necessary move from the philosophical to the literary in the figure of death:

> Yes, it's true (by what truth?), you're dying. Except that dying, you not only remove yourself, you are also still present, for here you grant me that dying like a granting that surpasses all suffering, and here I tremble softly in what tears, losing speech even as you do, dying with you without you, letting myself die in your place, receiving the gift beyond you and me.[76]

It is the community which must die 'with you without you', bearing the impossibility of the absent presence of death, and spanning the infinite horizon between the living and the dead to be with the dying precisely at the limit of relationality itself.[77] The presence of community therefore resides precisely in this apparently contradictory character, as that which is 'with' and 'without', where absence marks a presence, and relationality is exposed precisely in the moment of its own impossibility. In this way, we see how Blanchot's evocation of impossibility is deployed, in part, through a destabilization of the category of 'possibility' itself. The 'impossible' community of the dead is not simply an evocation of non-existence, but rather expresses a *limit-point* to our very perception of what is possible, where its very *openness* would demand a mutability to the terms of the possible themselves. Thus the community of the dead belongs to the temporality of the 'not-yet'

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[74] Maurice Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community,* trans. Pierre Joris (New York: Station Hill Press), p.9.
[75] Ibid.
[76] Ibid.
[77] Ibid.

which is founded on its disruption of the regime of the present. It is foreclosed in thought but glimpsable in fiction, where literature exposes reality to its own insufficiency, disrupting language, words and thought through their capacity to be radically transformed.

The Impossible 'We' as Impossible Community

Jon McGregor is an exemplary writer of what Blanchot terms the 'impossibility' of community, combining a complex attention to the unrepresentability of death with an affirmation of its communal function. In this way McGregor is faithful to the disruptive effects of death in community, gesturing toward the necessary reconfiguration of community in relation to the inoperative function of mourning and remembrance. As such, 'what has gone unheard of in community', that is, the dead, the oppressed, and the vanquished, are given an impossible voice precisely as an impossible community: a 'community of the dead', made possible in the space of literature.[78] In this way, the literary instantiation of an impossible community functions through the demand for a reconfiguration of reality, exposing an impossibility through a destabilizing of the figure of 'possibility' itself. It is therefore not at the level of content that we might find a politics of mourning and a community of the dead, but at the level of literary form itself, in what we may term its 'literariness'. If death is in some ways inaccessible to literature and experience, an event defined by an absolute singularity, Blanchot demonstrates how it is precisely the function of the literature to *transgress this law.* Literature has the capacity to fictively invent, invoke and *demand* a mode of relationality and communicability, which would be nothing less than the imperative of community itself.[79]

McGregor's main literary achievement in his novel *Even the Dogs,* arguably his most accomplished text, is the construction of a narrative voice consisting in an impossible 'we': a nebulous, unstable, and 'homodiegetic [...] first-person-plural narrative voice', which makes present a form of relationality and a community which is strictly speaking not possible, but which is nonetheless the mode of articulation through which the entire novel is formed.[80] The voice radically breaks with conventions in literary narration, disrupting the figure of the protagonist as well as any stable third or first person singular voice, embodying and *instantiating* a mode of expression which is founded

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[78] Nancy, *Inoperative Community*, p.26.
[79] Blanchot, *Unavowable Community,* p.9.
[80] Neal Alexander, 'Profoundly Ordinary: Jon McGregor and Everyday Life' *Contemporary Literature* 54. 4 (2013), pp.740. Daniel Lea erroneously refers to the narrative voice of *Even the Dogs* as a 'third-person-plural narration' in his otherwise rigorous account in *Twenty-First-Century Fiction*, p.215.

on a complex multiplicity.[81] This 'we' encompasses the community which attended to the life of Robert, and we see that they are present to the finding of his body, his autopsy and the coroner's report all the while going unseen, and inhabiting these spaces through the interruption of the usual laws of reality. In this way, they are present as a *literary modality and as a literary community* at the same time as being absent from the social landscape they invoke. The narrative voice is made possible and present in the context precisely of its own impossibility, and in this way McGregor draws attention to this literary capacity, interrupting the structure of the present with an impossible and transformative presence.

McGregor describes his novel in an interview as a 'realist story told from a nonrealist perspective', and it is precisely in this tension, between the 'real' and unreal', where we can find the political force of his evocation of the community of the dead.[82] The collision of these two forms unsettles our sense of reality through a kind of haunting; at the same time the collision moves beyond this, making present an unreality which is placed in contradistinction with reality itself, where the dead not only unsettle a stable sense of the present but are figures of its necessary transformation. Beyond the arguably more straightforwardly political readings of this literary expression, such as we see in Schoene, Lea and Ganteau, which focus on the invisibility and social alienation of the narrative voice through the lens of contingent thematic concerns of homelessness, poverty and social fragmentation, the effect of this literary expression is also of 'myth interrupted', where the basis of our very thinking of community and its possibility is called radically into question. By violating the law of life and death, present and absent, real and unreal, it offers the emergence of a community which is posited beyond any conventional notion of its possibility, seemingly open to no law but the law of relationality as such, where community is ordered only by the radical mutability of its indeterminate becoming.[83]

The relationality of this 'we' is rendered constitutively impossible through its convocation of characters who are either in close proximity to their own death or simply dead. For example, toward the end of the novel we see the character Danny, who is part of the narrative voice of the novel, in

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[81] This distinctiveness of this narrative voice has also led to a linguistic scholarly examination in Catherine Emmott, 'The Observing We in Literary Representations of Neglect and Social Alienation: Types of Narrator Involvement in Janice Galloway's 'Scenes from the Life No. 26: The Community and the Senior Citizen' and Jon McGregor's Even the Dogs' in *Pronouns in Literature* ed. Alison Gibbons and Andrea Macrae (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

[82] Jon McGregor, '"An Interview with Jon McGregor" Conducted by Caroline Edwards' *Contemporary Literature* 51.2 (2010), p.240.

[83] In this way, the narrative 'we' of *Even the Dogs* is highly analogous to what Nancy terms 'Literary Communism'.

an image which strongly suggests the possibility of his death: 'he drops the needle to the floor and presses his hands to the cold glass and slides to the floor and curls up on the floor'. Preceded by the ominous and deathly figure of 'the black star-pierced sky', the chapter ends with this image, whose repetition of 'cold' and 'dark' strongly implies the spectre of death.[84] As we might expect, McGregor elides any actual representation of death, but leaves its possibility hanging clearly in his suggestive prose. We do not see Danny again in the present tense of the novel, and thus we must speculate as to what has happened to him, understanding that his increasingly reckless and nihilistic heroin addiction marks him as a kind of doomed life. When Danny returns toward the end of the novel, his presence in time and space is called radically into question. The passage evokes his presence alongside the other characters which make up the 'we', but the effect of the passage is to collapse the novel's own temporal frame, listing different events synchronically:

> Is it this. Is this what happens. In the last moment. Is this what's happening to us now. Is this what all this is. Like We are gathered here today […] Is this what all we are seeing now […] Danny standing in the yard and calling up and throwing stones through the window […] and the policeman saying Even the Dogs'[85]

The passage which follows consists in a list of seemingly random events from the novel and the temporal synchrony of this sequence assembles Danny within the matrix of the narrative voice, even after his apparent death. It is in fact this assembling through and across the border of death which constitutes the possibility of the narrative voice at all, and it is from this standpoint that the 'we' is ultimately constructed, where temporal linearity gives way to a time configured in a moment of simultaneity, where the enfolding of events is held in a single moment of narrative expression. We are told that the scene is taking place in 'the last moment', which can be read as the time of death, where time seems to rupture, marking an end whilst also encompassing all of time itself. It is perhaps here that we see most clearly death as a *limit*: to life, time, community and communication, where an apparent eschatology denotes not only an end, but the constitution of an object itself. If death marks the impossibility of a community, its absencing and absence, then it is precisely at this moment and through this impossibility that this voice emerges; the voice of impossible mourning, impossible presence, as the communication of impossible community.

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[84] McGregor, *Even the Dogs,* p.120.
[85] Ibid., p.192.

The 'we' evokes a relationality which traverses time and space, dispensing with the structure of the stable, unified subject to expose a linguistic multiplicity. This voice is constituted through its violation of the borders of self and other, life and death, and presence and absence, constituting a community founded precisely on this process of traversal. The 'we' of the novel therefore has access to memories of the now dead Robert, which they see in the traces of his home. Their consciousness is opened to the temporal field where they can mingle with the voices of the dead, but, crucially, this allows them to reinterpret the present, to unearth its secret and overlooked histories:

> We never met Yvonne but we see her now. We see things differently now. We see them clearing away the traces of whoever lived there before, painting and papering over the cracks. Throwing out the things left behind, the stacked magazines and hoarded tins, the rusted mousetraps in the cupboard under the sink. The simple acts of two people making a home together[86]

In this way, we see how this innovative literary form is engaged in a temporal and spatial reconfiguration. This perspective allows for the community to 'see things differently', and in fact, the entire space has changed, opened up to the past in a memory which was previously inaccessible to them and reclaimed from the oblivion of death which would otherwise be its fate. The memory is not in itself highly significant or remarkable. Indeed, McGregor's entire oeuvre is disinterested in ordinary objects of 'remarkability', which he construes as expressing a hierarchy of representation which works at the expense of certain communities and subject matters. Rather, what is significant about this memory is precisely its *mode of expression* and the effect of its disruptive literary force, both at the level of representation, but also beyond this. From the standpoint of the dead, the hierarchy of the real as it is normatively configured is collapsed into a single perspective and a single moment. In this way McGregor's 'we' shares a crucial characteristic with Benjamin's figure of an open history of emancipation:

> The chronicler, who recounts events without distinguishing between the great and small, thereby accounts for the truth, that nothing which has ever happened is to be given as lost to history.[87]

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[86] Ibid., p.9.
[87] Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), p.254.

Like Benjamin's 'chronicler', the 'we' of McGregor's narrative refuses the place of the insignificant and the 'small', exposing secret histories through a process of unearthing and revealing which saves them from the process of historical forgetting. In this way, the effect of this narrative voice tacitly invokes a process of temporal and political antagonism, where the vocality of the 'we' can only jar with the constitution of the real. By exposing gaps and erasures in history and remembrance, the narrative voice serves to unwork the social processes of remembering and mourning, exposing their constitutive exclusions and hidden possibilities. We see this logic most starkly in McGregor's painstakingly realistic passages on the official documentation, taxonomy and accounting of the state, in the autopsy, police crime scene, and finally the enquiry into Robert's death. In all these scenes the 'we' are both present and absent, evoking that which is elided and made invisible in the bureaucratic mechanisms of the capitalist state, at the same time as haunting these processes with the possibility of a renewed configuration of community and time.

If the literary 'we' of the novel makes present the voices of the voiceless, the last chapter of the novel pulls this process into the context of law and justice, offering the transcription of a court scene where an enquiry into Robert's death is taking place. In this scene, we see the ways in which this 'community of the dead' relate to law, where the language of law fails to do justice to their voices, rendering them as effectively silent and unintelligible in the very act of recording them. The enquiry is designed precisely to account for the dead, to unearth their traces, 'to investigate the facts, and to record them', but it is only from the perspective of the narrative 'we' that these facts can be fully known, a perspective which is entirely absent from the court record. [88] In this way McGregor stages a conversation founded on an apparent impossibility, where the proper subjects of addressal are constitutively unable to answer, where their answer can only come from a figure of community which is inexistent and impossible: 'What do we do now. Where do we go'.[89] The narrative voice replies to the coroner with its own questions, but in their absent presence and invisibility this speech-act cannot warrant the use of a question mark. Their questions are closed in on themselves, unintelligible to the court and inexpressible in the space and language of law. Ultimately this voiceless state of the absent community is staged by McGregor as a constitutive and structural failure. The coroner's report cannot account for the 'exact mechanics and circumstances' of Robert's 'death', which 'will remain a mystery', and in this way the narrative voice fills the scene of absent justice and history with its own impossible vocality, unsettling the temporality of the scene with an impossible presence.[90]

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[88] McGregor, *Even the Dogs*, p.164.
[89] Ibid.
[90] Ibid., p.190.

We can therefore see how the figure of justice is evoked through a constitutive impossibly, as its emergence relies on the disruption and transformation of law itself. If the 'we' cannot be made fully visible or intelligible in the scene, the effect of its presencing is precisely to address the absent figure of justice, to press at the borders of the present, the possible, and the real through the necessity of their rupture and reconfiguration. Laura, who (unlike the narrative 'we') is literally present at the scene of the trial, nonetheless shares their condition of speechlessness. She cannot reconcile her voice with this scene of justice, which appears to bar in advance the possibility of an adequate account of the dead and her community:

> CORONER: And who were these people? Was it always the same group of people?
> LAURA: (inaudible)
> CORONER: I'm sorry, could you repeat that?
> LAURA: Thing is like, I'm not being funny or nothing but I've already said all this to the police. Haven't you got their report or something? Can't you just like refer to it and that?
> CORONER: Well as I said before, this is a court of public record, and –
> LAURA: Yeah, I know but -[91]

Called on by the court to give an account of the dead, to speak for and through a community which is both present and absent, Laura can only offer a speech punctuated with its own unintelligibility: 'inaudible', 'laughter'[92] or 'expletive'.[93] Her words are rendered as non-speech, documented only as lacunae and sounds which are illegible in the language of law. The 'public record' therefore appears as a structure based on a constitutive barrier to full self-expression, where certain voices and communities are rendered always unintelligible, and where justice is constitutively foreclosed. In this way, the narrative voice invokes an absent and impossible community of justice, embodying an antagonism which goes beyond the presented reality of sociality, pushing at the borders of the category of the 'real' and the 'possible' themselves. Only in this literary modality can we see the possibility of this community, which does not correspond with reality as it is operatively configured, but which is the very possibility of its radical reconfiguration. At once *within* and *without,* it is the *presencing of an absence* whose emergence would consist in a temporal *rupture*: the gap from which the coming community might enter.

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[91] Ibid., p.180.
[92] Ibid., p.183.
[93] Ibid., p.184.

The Politics of Mourning

In positing the notion of an 'impossible community', the question arises as to how we might assert this in presented reality, how literature can not only demand the necessity of community but can take part in an *intervention* within the realm of the political. The temporality of 'impossibility' that we see in Blanchot is not certain, and risks situating radical change in purely hypostatized and abstract terms, reneging on the demand to offer a substantial account of community in the present.[94] In this way, we may look to *Even the Dogs* as a literary object which not only exposes a community *in potentia,* but which in a certain sense *makes present* a community through the mode of its own literary instantiation. Thus 'impossible' community moves toward an assertion of its *actual presence*, not only as disruptive potential, but also as a real community. We can situate this process in McGregor's affirmation of *mourning community,* where the contingent process of mourning reveals contradictions and antagonisms in our political landscape. In this way, community emerges not only as inexistent and yet-to-be, but as *already here,* a site of contestation and struggle.[95] Nancy gestures in his philosophy toward the possibility of reworking relationality according to the singularity of death, but what is nonetheless absent in his work is any real sense of a *politics of mourning.* Through focusing on the temporality of mourning and its ability to contest capitalist time, we can therefore examine how attention to the dead can produce not only disruptive, but revolutionary and redemptive vectors of thinking.

If McGregor's novel is articulated from the standpoint of an absent community of justice, we can see how this absence appears most acutely in the impossibility of certain kinds of grieving and mourning. For the narrative voice of *Even the Dogs*, expunged from the official modes of public memory and record, its social invisibility disallows the possibility of an effective mourning. Barred from the practice of state sanctioned remembrance where its memories of the dead might be captured and preserved, its ability to figure the meaning of death *as a community* is made structurally impossible. For Judith Butler, this process of erasure is part of the social production of 'grievability', where if certain 'versions of reality are excluded or jettisoned to a domain of unreality', the effect of this process is to 'institute an interdiction on mourning', where 'there is no destruction, and there is no loss', as the *operative* function of mourning and grief works to exclude those lives and experiences which exceed its frame.[96] Mourning therefore becomes a differentiated modality, determined by values ascribed in advance by the state, where marginal lives and communities risk 'never [being]

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[94] Blanchot, *Unavowable Community,* p.23.
[95] Nancy, *Inoperative Community,* p.71.
[96] Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2010), p.xiii.

counted as a life at all',[97] as their remembrance would unsettle the state violence of war, managed poverty, and precarity, where certain citizens are 'sustained' 'on the edge of death […] as the norm of everyday life'.[98] In this way the communal function of death must be attentive to the politics of mourning, exposing its tacit exclusions as well as how mourning community can disrupt this process.

We can see this logic working clearly in McGregor's novel, which begins with the finding of the body of the character Robert. The police undergo a forensic study of the scene, looking for traces and clues as to what has transpired, filling the room with 'a bright white light which erupts out of each corner and fixes every wriggling detail into place.'[99] In the verb 'fix' and the word 'white', which returns always as a figure of coldness and lack in the novel, McGregor stages the way in which this unearthing is constituted by its own inadequacy. [100] The figures of the police, the coroner, and the court are all engaged in an account of the dead *without mourning.* There are no tears, no intimacy with the dead, no remembrance, and as such no properly communal function of death, save for the bureaucratic procedures which account for death only at the expense of its ontological significance. As we have seen, the social processes of death can work at the expense of its wider ontological meaning, eliding the full ethical weight of the dead, and here we see them proceeding in the absence of its *communal function.* In this way, McGregor exposes how death can often occur in the absence of the 'community of the dead', where the dead can be counted and 'fix[ed]' in time, but not mourned.

Drafted into the bureaucratic procedures of the state, Robert risks becoming obscured and forgotten, lost in the process of ungrievability. His story is not fully present to the police; it is not written as there is no community which is present to give an account for it. The objective, cold and distant language of the police works at the expense at the possibility of mourning, and their reporting on the scene establishes an official record of the event which nonetheless cannot fail to evoke a sense of deep loss, the absence of an adequate political response to his death. This is intensified by a narrative voice which at once evokes the *presence* of a mourning community, which is pressed up against the very reality it describes, unsettling its apparent stability. In fact, the voice puts the very notion of *presence* into question, moving between a sense of presence, absence and haunting, but never according fully with any clear category. It is the modality through which the story is told, but it is not seen by those around it, constituted only through an apparent invisibility:

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[97] Ibid., p.38.
[98] Ibid., p.xix.
[99] McGregor, *Even the Dogs,* p.8.
[100] For example, in the later autopsy scene scattered in ibid., pp.121- 161.

> They call out, something like Hello, police, hello. They glance at each other, and they move further into the flat […] They don't speak. They wait. They look at the body. We all crowd into the room and look at the body. The swollen and softening skin, the sunken gaze, and oily pool of fluids spreading across the floor. The twitch and crawl of newly hatched life, feeding.[101]

Despite its indeterminate presence, however, the narrative voice 'crowds' the room, evoking a materiality and embodied spatial being which is nonetheless not registered by the 'police' around them. The law bars their entrance to the scene, cordoned off by 'blue and white tape', but nonetheless they are absolutely and impossibly present, registering the smallest detail in the decaying body of their friend. [102] McGregor's prose moves between the police language of objective reporting, offering a description which proceeds as a list of details about the body, seemingly unmoved by the abjection of their facticity at the same time as registering a parallel *literary* quality. This emerges in the subtle alliteration of 'swollen…softening skin' and the rhythmic intensity of his short sentences and phrases, with the final verb 'feeding' postponed to the end of the paragraph, accentuating the viscerality of the image of death.

In this way McGregor stages the founding tension at the heart of his novel: that between the operative community of the state tasked with accounting for the dead, and the community of mourning and justice. Through the juxtaposition of the state language of the 'police' and the 'court', the presence of the literary 'we' cannot simply be construed as an absence, but rather as a modality engaged in breaking down the borders of presence, defying the temporal and spatial logic around them. [103] The voice troubles the borders of the present and the absent, threatening to simply break down the distinction, to denote an emergence of the excluded, the dead, and the defeated through a presence founded on radical transformation. In this way, we can see how the presencing of this mourning community is produced not only through its apparent impossibility, but is deployed precisely as a challenging of the terms of the possible itself, engaged in an antagonistic relation to the real. Thus mourning is exposed as a social process which bears this antagonism: between the co-optation of death into the work of the state, and the practices of communal mourning which can challenge this process.

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[101] Ibid., p.5.
[102] Ibid., p.6.
[103] Ibid., p.5.

Mourning is a way of holding onto the past, of clinging to the remains, and constituting a community through this very relation. As Freud has written, this process can involve a breaking away from reality, a refusal to let go of a lost libidinal attachment,[104] which beyond this clinical analysis also may be seen through a broader frame of how political communities deal with losses, failures and trauma.[105] Mourning can therefore have very different conceptions of the past and can produce many different kinds of community. Mourning attends to the limit point of death through the differential modalities of operativity, either becoming part of a mourning which is *put to work,* that is, where death marks the return of community to its operative configuration, or marking a limit to community which demands a mode of relation which calls our very being into question. These mourning communities are differentiated by the way they invoke death, the past and history, where they can either become part of the operative work of the state to *erase the voices of the dead,* conscripting them into its own linear logic of history, or where they can forge a community precisely through the 'impossible' bond with the dead, destabilizing relationality itself, and allowing the dead to speak in all their disruptive multiplicity. For Derrida, the work of mourning must attend therefore to an ethical and political question of death, that is, it must proceed from the elusive but foundational standpoint of *justice.*[106]

The mourning of the *unjust death,* the death which still lingers as an unfulfilled demand for justice, is not simply an evocation of the past. Rather, through holding onto the unjust death, mourning works to unsettle a whole temporal and historical frame through a demand which seeks to break with a linear line of history. This is what Rebecca Comay describes as a mourning which mourns not only the dead, but the possibility of certain futures which died with them and the potentialities which were also lost in their passing. Modernity viewed from a revolutionary perspective, that is, one which seeks a break with a line of history seen to be headed for catastrophe (be that one of class oppression, nuclear holocaust, ecological disaster), must be seen as 'a repetitive failure of actuality and action', and more, a failure of community to attend to its dead: the failure of politics, philosophy and humanity to instantiate a mode of being beyond the inequality, indignity, and degradation which it suffers in capitalist modernity and operative community.[107]

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[104] Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia' in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV (1914-1916)* trans. James Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001), p.243.

[105] See Walter Benjamin's influential essay 'Left-Wing Melancholy' in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings: 1931-1934, Vol. 2, Part 2,* ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 423-427.

[106] Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, p.xix.

[107] Rebecca Comay, *Mourning Sickness: Hegel and the French Revolution* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), p.3.

In this way Comay privileges a politics of mourning, one in line with Derrida's notion of 'impossible mourning', as a mourning which breaks from the operative frame, which mourns the dead not through a crystalline image of their lost being, solidified in memory or the social process of forgetting. Rather the temporality of this mourning is necessarily disruptive, breaking with the time of capitalist production, to open onto a temporality of grief and remembrance which threatens to renege on the land of the living. It is associated with madness, and 'gendered' female in the image of excessive emotionality.[108] This *excessive* function of mourning is therefore opposed to the subsumption of death into the work of community, where capitalist time insists that we break from the time of mourning, that we *carry on* and get back to work through letting go of the past and our mourning of the dead.[109] In this way, revolutionary mourning refuses to let go of the past and refuses any finality to the work of death, offering a different sense of the community as well as a different relation to history itself:

> History no longer reveals itself as the progressive actualization of potentials within the causal continuum of time; it presents a minefield of counterfactual possibilities that become legible only retroactively in the light of their repeated nonrealization. Possibility can appear only as a lost possibility, a lapsed possibility, a ruined possibility, even an impossibility, and the future as already passed.[110]

The line of history as it is operatively inscribed carries the traces of its own erasures, constituting itself precisely on the negation and disavowal of these 'counterfactual possibilities', and placing itself on a seemingly inescapable tide of progress from which there can be no deviation and no other. The past may be seen as a repository of 'ruined possibilities', the hidden remains of the dead that can be unearthed and recuperated by the revolutionary perspective. Community therefore becomes the space of the past's potential reconfiguration and recuperation, offering an ontological and disruptive *excess* in relation to capitalist time. Here memory, remembrance and mourning expose history not as simply *over*, but as a vibrant and uncertain space of forgotten, 'lapsed' and overlooked possibilities which community can reclaim and retrace in the work of mourning. Thus mourning is a process of opening up the past and the present to what Walter Benjamin terms moments of 'chance', where potential ruptures and alternative futures can be glimpsed, and where history can

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[108] Ibid., p.11.

[109] For more extended discussions of the relationship between femininity and mourning see Elizabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992) and Greg Forter, *Gender, Race, and Mourning in American Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

[110] Comay, *Mourning Sickness,* p.3.

be asserted 'against the grain'.[111] This is what he terms 'hope in the past', where the revolutionary and utopian drive of Marxism must be forged through a rethinking of history and time itself:

> The only writer of history with the gift of setting alight the sparks of hope in the past, is the one who is convinced of this: that not even the dead will be safe from the enemy, if he is victorious. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious.[112]

Although Benjamin is referring in this passage to the task of the 'historical materialist', it is clear that Benjamin's reconfiguration of our sense of the past relates to the wider field of community, who engage the dead not simply as historians, but as those who take up the communal work of remembering. In the final image of the theses we are offered not only an image of the historian, but of 'the Jews', who are given the task of 'remembrance' as a communally assigned theological duty by the 'Torah and the prayers' which they all share.[113] The task of remembrance is close to but distinct from the process of mourning, where the latter can be seen as tied to a transient time of adjustment from the time of death to that of the living. Remembrance is, however, the continued practice of the community, who remember the stories of the dead because they are in fact *founded by them:* the myths upon which commonality and community must be constituted. Comay's own conception of mourning in this way resembles this Benjaminian sense of 'remembrance', where a relation to the dead is held in place as the condition of community and its transformation.

In Benjamin's postulation of messianic time, the gaze of the *Angelus Novus* becomes a figure of temporal break, where 'homogenous, empty time' gives way to the time of the Messiah, who may enter at any 'second', and whose coming would be constituted through a radical configuration of the time of the present.[114] But Benjamin is not simply offering a theological conception of time, and this 'Messiah' is not presented with any sense of literality. Rather, this evocation of temporal disruption borrows from the theological lexicon, transmuting it into a secularised form, so as to produce a sense of history which is open to unthinkable and seemingly impossible change. In this temporal reconfiguration it is arguably the *voices of the dead* which become the figures of messianic disruption, which, like the *Angelus Novus,* are gathered in relation to time which is constitutively *outside* its linear progression as progress, and whose return would mark only an absolute break from this temporal structure itself:

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[111] Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', p.257.
[112] Ibid., p.255.
[113] Ibid., p.264.
[114] Ibid.

This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such a violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.[115]

The community of the dead, the space where we speak with the dead and where the dead speak, is the condition of possibility for the moment of rupture, for an intervention which would allow humanity a new course. If the tide of human 'progress' blasts the angel of history forward, producing a line of history reduced to a single moment of 'catastrophe', then it is the dead who may intervene in this process. *Even the dead* are not 'safe from the enemy', as the tide of progress which Benjamin calls catastrophe works across all time, putting the dead to work as part of the relentless work of human productivity and subjection, and in this sense the community of the dead is constituted through this very lack of a distinction. The condition of being 'blasted' on a wave of human progress (capitalist modernity) is *shared between the living and the dead,* and its interruption is necessary for the voices of those who have already suffered its consequences. In this way Benjamin evokes this community by demanding that in a subtle, but important sense, the dead are still *with us:*

Doesn't a break of the air that pervaded earlier days caress us as well? In the voices we hear, isn't there an echo of now silent ones? [...] If so, then there is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one[116]

In this echoing, or 'haunting' of the present with the absent presence of the dead, is the potentiality of a rupture which would finally allow the dead to speak, to expose their death to the immanent principle of 'justice' which is the inescapable horizon of their being, as well as the constant demand of a life lived communally. Justice, if it can come (and only if, as nothing is certain except the fact that up till now, the 'enemy has not ceased to be victorious'),[117] must come not only for the living, but also for and through the dead. In fact, Benjamin writes that this would in fact be the condition of

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[115] Ibid.
[116] Walter Benjamin, cited in Michael Löwy, *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin's On the Concept of History*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso, 2005), pp.29-30.
[117] Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', p.255.

happiness itself: the 'conception of happiness, in other words, resonates irremediably with that of redemption', and redemptive justice can only be demanded through its inherently temporal being, as justice for the dead and the living. [118] In redemption, it is not only present generations who are redeemed, but all the previous generations who have suffered the same fate, and only this unity between the living and the dead is consonant with the name of justice. The present can only seek redemption through a resurrection and redemption of its past. In fact, Benjamin calls the 'past' the 'temporal index' of 'redemption', a repository of hope and disruptive force which is the only condition on which the tide of human progress as it is operatively configured can be broken. 'There is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one',[119] and it is only in this 'secret' and impossible pact that a new future can be wrought.

If the figure of 'justice' is to be found in an absolute temporal rupture, where the dead and the voiceless speak through the instantiation of a new politics and community based on a new relation to time itself, we may ask in what spaces this is possible and where this process can be affirmed as a concrete praxis. The messianism of Benjamin is shrouded in a complex theological expression, demanding this revolutionary relation to the dead and to history only in a highly abstracted and speculative form. In its secularized theology, the question remains in Benjamin of where we might find or cultivate messianic potential, where we might unearth resources for resistance, disruption and a secular 'redemption' of radical political transformation. For Michael Löwy this secularization of messianism must be seen simply as an expression of a revolutionary collective politics. The 'messiah' is refigured as the possibility of a revolutionary subject whose function will be to break with 'homogenous empty time' to establish a radical temporal break:

> Messianic/revolutionary redemption is a task assigned to us by past generations. There is no Messiah sent from heaven: we are ourselves the Messiah; each generation possesses a small portion of messianic power, which it must strive to exert.[120]

In this way, we may assert that the exertion of this 'messianic power' which is the 'task assigned to us by past generation', and the tacit demand of the voiceless dead, must reside in community. Löwy argues this secularized Messiah must be 'collective', construed either as 'humanity itself', 'or more precisely …oppressed humanity', which would be the collective subject and community of a politics

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[118] Ibid., p.254.
[119] Ibid.
[120] Löwy, *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin's On the Concept of History,* p.32.

to come.[121] In this way, the revolutionary subject is drawn from history as a collectivity formed of the 'defeated, the excluded, the pariahs' where precisely what is *excluded,* derided and made invisible in humanity is what must come to redeem it.[122] It is through this logic that we must understand the meaning of the word 'even' in Benjamin's phrase 'even the dead', as denoting the privileged subject of redemption, which at once expresses the full violence of its expunging from capitalist time, and the absolute necessity of its return.

What Löwy overlooks in his account, however, is that this revolutionary and Messianic subject is not just constituted in the land of the living, residing only in the spaces of social dispossession and economic oppression.[123] Redemption must come *even for the dead,* as even they are subject to this process of temporal and political erasure. In fact, we may say that it is the dead who are the most emblematic of the violence of capitalist time, the most at risk from erasure, defeat and forgetting, and thus they are a crucial figure for understanding the full radical force of temporal disjunction. Löwy spends much time accounting for the figure of *Angelus Novus* as an expression of revolution, but he overlooks that the function of the Angel of History is to 'awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed'.[124] The angel is in fact indifferent to the distinction between the living and the dead, faced only with a 'single moment' of 'catastrophe', where time collapses in on itself, collecting the living and the dead into a shared position of mutual obliteration.[125] The collective subject of this revolutionary process must therefore be situated *across* the border of death, joining with the dead in the demand for justice, and as such it must be situated in the *community of the dead,* where the voices of the dead are kept in the process of mourning and remembrance. This community is therefore articulated through the possibility of a sense of their return, where time is opened to the figures of rupture and redemption.

It is through this logic that we can understand the political significance of McGregor's novel, which deploys an experimental narrative voice that unworks the boundaries of presence and possibility. A Benjaminian sense of redemptive possibility emerges in his novel not in relation to plot or content, but by becoming deeply implicated in its literary form. What is shared between McGregor and Benjamin therefore is a mode of *expression* that evokes the non-existent through the absolute

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[121] Ibid., p.35.
[122] Ibid., p.55.
[123] At times Löwy seems to be at risk of replicating a limited and dogmatic conception of the 'proletariat', which arguably restricts the revolutionary subject to an overly Western and labour-based mass, working at the expense of the wider community which might contribute to this process. See Nancy, *Being Singular Plural,* pp.41-42 for an expansion of this argument.
[124] Löwy, *Fire Alarm,* p.257.
[125] Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History'*,* p.257.

exigency of its emergence, where redemption is the determining force of its entire mode of articulation, even if it is unpresentable in a positive form. We can see this convalescence of expression between Benjamin and McGregor in their highly similar evocations of the word 'even', which in both cases evokes a specific political perspective on the dead:

> There is nothing for you there. There, even the dogs are dead. Ant shuffled across the floor, rolled up Steve's sleeve, and looped a belt around his arm. Steve watched him. Even the bloody dogs, he said, shaking his head.[126]

In McGregor's 'even the dogs are dead' and Benjamin's claim that 'even the dead' are not 'safe' from the temporal violence of capitalism, the use of the word 'even' suggests an expansiveness, the extension of a category toward greater inclusion. It denotes the adjectival sense of 'even' where an extreme or exceptional case of a general assumption is nonetheless affirmed in its likeness and categorical belonging. In this sense, the more common meaning of 'even' as 'on the same level' from its root in Old English '*efen*' which has the meaning of 'level', 'equal', or 'like', works alongside the sense of 'even' as exceptional and extreme, enacting an *equalizing* of what has hitherto been excluded or made peripheral.[127] The work of *even* is therefore to include *as the same* what is otherwise thought of as anomalous or separate. In fact, we might argue that in both phrases this gesture also implies that it is *precisely* in the extreme sense of a word, where its meaning is pressed at its very limit, that we find its strongest articulation. The exception becomes emblematic of the cohesivity of a category of meaning in general, a form of synecdoche that enacts a transformation of the very set it denotes.

What binds both phrases is their implication of this dual-sense of 'even' in the category of death. If McGregor's title is somewhat ambiguous, coming before and demarcating his work with a phrase only uttered twice in the novel, it can nonetheless be read as a vital indication of the politics his novel enacts. McGregor's focus on the 'realist' themes of the dispossessed, the marginal, and the homeless clearly accords with this sense of 'even', tacitly asserting that even peripheral and overlooked people demand representation. In this act of *even-ing* we see a process of equalization which challenges what McGregor sees as the undemocratic hierarchy of representation in literary culture, which privileges representations of middle-class scenes such as 'bankers playing squash.'[128]

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[126] McGregor, *Even the Dogs,* p.113.
[127] All etymologies and definitions can be found at www.oed.com [accessed 19 October 2017].
[128] Jon McGregor, 'Jon McGregor talks about *Even the Dogs*' *Bloomsbury Publishing*, January 2010. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nBMERKTpH7Q&t=2s [accessed 15 October 2017].

We can also see the function of the 'even' in relation to death, as an exceptional or peripheral concern of community which nonetheless is constitutive of its being. The 'even' can be seen as embodying a transformation at the limit of community itself, marking the inclusion of the marginal, but also privileging this very marginality as the exemplary modality through which an intervention must be staged.

By focusing on the margins, the effect is not to simply ratify the centre, or to demand a mode of inclusion whereby representation is seen as adequately redressing the complex structural determinations which led to their very marginality. Rather, the limit-point of death which the phrase 'even the dogs are dead' evokes also *undoes and unworks* our understanding of community and death. The peripheral and the exceptional can be made 'even' only through the transformation of reality, through the destruction of the barrier which 'even' denotes in its act of inclusion and privileging, and through this process we can see McGregor's subtle evocation of a revolutionary and egalitarian politics at the level of the linguistic. McGregor's seemingly ambiguous and inconsequential phrase 'even the dogs' becomes a way of understanding the complex political operation that his novel's narrative voice deploys, opening up the structures of the real, the possible, and the present to the figure of return. Here McGregor evokes a justice which demands the inclusion of the dead, the dogs and voiceless people, whose bodies are marked as outside of the capitalist system of value, and whose condition of return would mean nothing but the radical reconfiguration of society itself.

In this sense 'even' enacts an affirmation of what Adorno terms 'unity' with the dead, a community fostered between the living and dead who share in an obliterated future. For Adorno, the task of remembrance must address history through the figure of the 'horror of destruction' which modernity has inflicted not only on our lives but on time itself.[129] Borrowing from the highly evocative imagery of Walter Benjamin, who evokes history simply as 'one single catastrophe, which unceasingly piles rubble on top of rubble', memory of the past is faced with an almost unfathomable and infinite mourning, of the countless, voiceless dead who pile up as we are blasted toward a similar future. [130]

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[129] Theodor. W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment,* trans. John Cummings (London: Verso, 1997), p.215.
[130] Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History'*,* p.257.

> Only the conscious horror of destruction creates the correct relationship with the dead: unity with them because we, like them, are the victims of the same condition and the same disappointed hope.[131]

In this strident articulation, the infinite gap between the living and the dead is foreclosed as the separation collapses through the figure of the *same,* shared 'condition' of 'disappointed hope', where all are pressed up against the same future in the fact of its nonrealization. We, the living, have unity with the dead as we share a community based on a common enemy and a common fate, which we resist together, in different ways, from the vantage point of the present and the past. The collapsing of this temporal distinction evokes the figure of the angel of history in Walter Benjamin, who sees the past not through its linearity or any causal structure. There is no line but only a single 'moment', a single 'catastrophe' in which there is no distinction between the living and the dead as we must mutually understand our shared destruction. If the dead *live* through their own frustrated justice, inhering in the present as a constitutive lack, then so too are the living in some sense *dead.* As such the collective subject of justice is founded on this *shared death:* 'we, the dead' demand justice in the face of our obliterated future.

It is precisely in this formulation of 'we, the dead' that we must situate the full political force of McGregor's novel. The impossible mode of narration, which makes present a 'community of the dead' by assembling bodies of marginal, diminished and doomed lives, must be seen as a subtle but potent demand for redemption. Ultimately, this literary 'we' takes on the meaning of the absence of community, but in its ability to gather the voices and bodies of the forgotten it also carries a radically subversive quality, pushing itself against the strictures of the present and the real as the presence of revolutionary possibility itself. In fact, McGregor gestures toward this function at the very beginning of *Even the Dogs*, which is preceded by an epigraph from Dante's *Inferno* that unambiguously evokes the voices of the dead, figuring the 'we' of his novel precisely through the necessity that the dead speak: 'Cut off from hope, we live on in desire.'[132]

This quotation is taken from Canto IV of the first part of Dante's epic poem *The Divine Comedy*, a section which takes place in 'The First Circle of Hell, known as Limbo, where the sad shades of the

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[131] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment,* p.215.
[132] Dante Alighieri*, The Divine Comedy: Inferno, Vol. 1: Inferno,* trans. Mark Musa (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1984), p.99.

virtuous non-Christians dwell'.[133] In this scene, the protagonist Dante the Pilgrim comes across 'groups, diverse and teeming/ made up of men and women and of infants' who died without sin but also without 'Baptism', and therefore cannot reach the kingdom of Heaven.[134] It is from this position, of having 'no other guilt' than unhappy circumstance, that they are 'Lost […] and are only so far punished,' and in this way they speak not only from a position of the liminal space of the dead, but also with the weight of withheld justice.[135] Placed in this liminal space, the voices of those in purgatory are cut off from the future, as the violence of the present bars them from all hope of redemption. We are told however that the dead 'live *on'*, that death has not marked a finality, but has assembled a form of impossible community. The modality and expression of this community, its ability to exist, is founded on *desire*, that is, on a will which allows for impossible life, where 'desire' serves precisely to rework the terms of the possible itself. Through this disruptive desire, founded on a contention of the border of life and death, we see the possibility of return, where doomed life might reclaim its future. The 'we' of McGregor is therefore a presence that marks the possibility of renewal and new futures, which must be salvaged from the tide of 'progress' and brought into the realm of the present through the demand of redemptive transformation.

Conclusion

But what would be the time of justice where death could be accounted for, where mourning and remembrance could do justice to the dead? We see in Adorno that the function of forgetting, where the dead, the excluded and the dispossessed are subject of erasure, is a condition shared *between* the living and the dead. In this sense, McGregor's juxtaposition of the absent justice of the present with the impossible community of mourning evoked in the narrative 'we' produces a fissure from which a new conception of time can be glimpsed, an impossible time, which is nonetheless the necessary outcome of the contradiction between the two modalities. Ultimately this nebulous and impossible time can only be that of redemption, where the dead return, and where time is thrown onto a new course ordered by a principle of unfathomable justice. Beyond conventional conceptions of haunting, where the dead echo in the space of the present, but never truly return, McGregor's inverted haunting implies an always present *presence* of the dead in the time of revolutionary messianism. It is this time which presses at the borders of Laura's speech, in mourning community

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[133] Ibid., p.97. Jean-Michel Ganteau overlooks this detail in his account, failing to note this scene in fact takes place in purgatory. See Jean-Michel Ganteau, 'Vulnerable Form and Traumatic Vulnerability; Jon McGregor's Even the Dogs' in *Contemporary Trauma Narratives: Liminality and the Ethics of Form* ed. Susana Onega and Jean-Michel Ganteau (New York: Routledge, 2014), p.92.

[134] Dante*, Divine Comedy,* p.98.

[135] Ibid*.*

and the narrative 'we'. It inheres in the absences, the silences and the incoherence which they direct at reality, working as a mode of antagonism which pushes against the structure of the real itself. It speaks to a redeemed time, where death is finally mournable and the community of the dead return in the instantiation of impossible justice. Only in this time would the figure of history (and the story and death of Robert) be fully citable and knowable: '[O]nly a redeemed mankind is granted the fullness of its past – which is to say, only for a redeemed mankind has its past become citable in all its moments'.[136]

As we see in *If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things,* the principle of death in McGregor's work is orientated precisely toward a secularized sense of this 'redemption', demanding a complex ethical and political response which anticipates a (sometimes impossible) notion of an absent but necessary justice. Through Benjamin and his revolutionary thinking of Messianism, we can come to understand the full weight of McGregor's ghosts of the excluded, voiceless and oppressed, as not simply denoting an impossibility; a community of the dead constituted only through its non-existence, fictively evoked in the *atopos* of literature, but rather as a deeper and more unsettling challenge to the terms of reality as there are operatively configured. Holding onto the dead through an implicit demand of justice necessitates and maintains a relation to the past which exposes multiple temporal possibilities within an otherwise linear frame. In this way it subtly evokes a more utopian register, anticipating a time of justice and return which operates outside of the ability of the present to imagine it. Benjamin's secularized conception of redemption draws on Marx's achievement of a 'secularized […] messianic time' in the vision of a 'classless society'.[137] This substantive demand for political community, ordered around the egalitarian inclusion of hitherto marginalized and oppressed groups, would not be achieved through religious belief, however, but rather through the process of class struggle.[138] But such a society 'cannot be conceived as existing in the same time as the struggle for it', and in this way it is an outcome which is unrepresentable and seemingly impossible within the imaginary of the present. [139]

McGregor's presencing of an impossible community of the dispossessed, made up of voices of both the living and the dead, enacts a crucial unsettling of the temporal dynamics of the landscape which he describes, haunting its spaces with disruptive presences and possibilities. In his text we can

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[136] Löwy, *Fire Alarm,* p.34.
[137] Benjamin, *Illuminations,* p.218.
[138] *Walter Benjamin: Critical Evaluations in Cultural Theory* ed. Peter Osborne (London: Routledge, 2004), p.199.
[139] Ibid.

therefore glimpse the possibility of rupture with the terms of the present, and the coming of a community ordered around a radical equality and justice hitherto withheld from his protagonists. The subtle but powerful disjunction effected by McGregor in his innovation of the first-person plural narrative voice attests to how forms of literary experimentation in the contemporary fiction have reacted to problems of representation, justice, and meaning in relation to community in the present, offering up radical and powerful resources for reimagining community beyond its operative configuration in capitalist society.

'What contradictions does dreaming not bring to deceitful reality?' [1]
(Claude Cahun, *Disavowals*)

'(What's the magic word?)' [2]
(Ali Smith, *Girl Meets Boy*)

Chapter 5: Magical Community in Ali Smith's *Girl Meets Boy*

Introduction

Despite the broad range of critical responses Smith's rich and varied *oeuvre* has provoked, it is possible to locate a central tension in her reception in the varying emphasis and meaning ascribed to her literary style. For some, Smith's work is characterized by the unexpected, the comic and the eccentric, with her distinctive prose accentuating and transmitting a writerly quality which reflects her enigmatic status as an author. Alternatively, other critics have viewed Smith's experimentation with form and style as more explicitly politically motivated, where disruptions in literary conventions ask challenging questions about the world she responds to. In this way, Smith's critics may be roughly divided into two very general camps, with each employing varied and overlapping methodological approaches, with nonetheless distinct emphases. The former camp may be more strongly identified with biographical, author-focused analysis, utilizing interviews, public lectures and other intertexts to locate her work, whilst the latter deploys more theoretical approaches, looking further afield to critical, social and political ideas to situate her work in its wider context. Such methodological approaches not only deploy differing techniques in analyzing Smith's work, but also arrive at different conclusions about its significance, with a broad line of difference forming between those critics who align her experimental prose with a concerted politically motivated project whose formal innovations give rise to 'subversive'[3] possibilities, and arguably more depreciatory accounts that locate such innovations as extensions of Smith's stylistic 'idiosyncrasy'.[4]

Monica Germanà and Emily Horton's edited collection *Ali Smith: Contemporary Critical Perspectives* (2013), the only book-length critical engagement of Ali Smith's work, offers a broad intersection of such approaches, through its incorporation of an interview with Smith, various critical readings, as well as reflections on her relation to British literary culture. Dominic Head's contribution is exemplary of the more biographical style of criticism, with his chapter seeking to place Smith's work

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[1] Claude Cahun, *Disavowals or Cancelled Confessions*, trans. Susan de Muth (London: Tate Publishing, 2007)*,* p.34.
[2] Ali Smith, *Girl Meets Boy* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2008), pp.146-147.
[3] Monica Germanà and Emily Horton, 'Introduction' in *Ali Smith: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. Monica Germanà and Emily Horton (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), p.6.
[4] Dominic Head, 'Idiosyncrasy and Currency: Ali Smith and the Contemporary Canon' in ibid., p.103.

within the contemporary landscape through a reflection on her 'idiosyncratic' character as an author, and the way which this impacts her canonicity. In this way, Head takes on some of the changing dynamics of the contemporary literary criticism, examining explicitly the role of the critic of contemporary literature, who more and more must 'respond[…] to the canon that emerges from the predilections of agents, publishers and reviewers, all of whom are pre-empting the current emphases of literary prize culture'.[5] Indeed, for Head this changing landscape heralds a 'new era of critical practice'[6] which increasingly plays a largely passive role: anticipating and negotiating its function in relation to the determinations of 'commerce and the control of cultural capital.'[7] Through foregrounding the difficult question of how a critic may ascribe value to a contemporary author, Head's own contribution reflects how many commentators see their function less as drawing out hidden, surprising, or subversive meanings within a texts (in the critical tradition associated with political and deconstructive readings of texts), and more as offering accounts of the increasingly commercialized world of literary culture itself.[8]

This 'new era of critical practice' foregrounds accounts of authors and their literary environments, and in this way questions of literary form and experimentation are increasingly framed as reflections of an author's individual personality, rather than as extensions of wider movements or communities of literary or sociopolitical commitment. Head's chapter does not therefore interpret Smith's innovations of literary form and genre as aesthetic procedures that reflect and engage their social and political setting, rather describing Smith's 'often satirical […] commentary on contemporary life' merely as a reflection of her 'idiosyncratic style and quirky perspective'.[9] In a strikingly similar tone, Daniel Lea consistently links Smith's literary expression with her identity as author: Smith's 'style [...] is characterized by a quirky roundaboutness',[10] and she is said to personally 'relish […] the argumentative grist of another's perspective'.[11] In each case, the experimental force of Smith's work is identified with her personal attributes as an individual, and this identification enacts a tacit personalization of her literary project which arguably diminishes its wider social, relational and political engagement. Ultimately, Lea's appraisal of Smith as having 'established a reputation for

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[5] Head, 'Idiosyncrasy and Currency', p.102.
[6] Ibid., p.114.
[7] Ibid., p.102.
[8] Ibid., p.114. Head's account anticipates and strengthens Jeffrey's Nealon's influential argument that critical readings are increasingly non-viable research model in academic publishing trends. Jeffrey T. Nealon, *Post-Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Just-In-Time Capitalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), p.133.
[9] Head, 'Idiosyncrasy and Currency', p.103.
[10] Daniel Lea, *Twenty-First-Century Fiction: Contemporary British Voices* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), p.26.
[11] Ibid., p.27.

narrative of wit, perception, and vocal virtuosity',[12] may be read simply as a description and extension of her commercial reception in literary culture, demonstrating a style of criticism with little discernible distinctness from wider discursive trends.[13]

In contrast to the arguably diminutive approaches of Head and Lea, feminist critics have taken more seriously Smith's innovations of the novel form through rigorous attention to the feminist, queer, and political themes which her books engage and her experimentation with literary form. One of the major lines of difference which more critical accounts exhibit pertains to the significance of the Modernist tradition for Smith's writing. In highlighting Smith's indebtedness to Modernist modes of experimentation, her prose can be situated as extending the sociopolitical commitments which often characterized this movement, allowing for her formal innovations to be understood beyond the individualizing and politically ambivalent language of irony and postmodernism, and rather as referencing and continuing Modernist histories of future-orientated, politically committed modes of aesthetic production.[14] In this way, Monica Germanà and Emily Horton have drawn attention to how 'Smith's work reflects a Modernist sensibility, particularly in its concern for formal consciousness and experiment,' highlighting how Smith's Modernist allusions in her novels align her work strongly with this tradition.[15] Such commentators often highlight Smith's partial completion of a doctoral research project at Cambridge University on '[t]he importance of ordinariness and reality in three modernist writers: James Joyce, Wallace Stevens, and William Carlos Williams, via texts by them and others written between 1922 and 1923' as a crucial biographical detail, demonstrating her consistent interest and familiarity with the Modernist period of experimentation in the European and American context.[16] In highlighting the figure of the 'ordinariness' and 'reality' in Modernist literature, Smith demonstrates an interest in the ability of experimental forms of prose to draw on and unsettle the terms of quotidian, social and political reality, a trait that arguably characterizes much of her own work.

In seeking to understand the significance of Modernism for Smith's literary vision, Joel Evans has argued Smith's complex literary mode of engagement with political reality works as a reinvestment in 'a Grand Narrative' associated with the Modern era, deploying a range of literary techniques to reimagine our place in global networks, where 'contingency is elevated to the level of necessity' in

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[12] Lea, *Twenty-First-Century Fiction,* pp.26-27.

[13] For an examination of this problem for contemporary criticism, see Robert Eaglestone, 'Contemporary Fiction in the Academy: Towards a Manifesto' *Textual Practice* 27.7 (2013), pp.1089-1101.

[14] This is the general argument of Mary Horgan, 'About Change: Ali Smith's Numismatic Modernism' *Contemporary Women's Writing* 10.2 (2016), p.165.

[15] Germanà and Horton, *Ali Smith: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, p.5.

[16] Tory Young and Ali Smith, ''Love and the Imagination Are Not Gendered Things': An Interview with Ali Smith' *Contemporary Women's Writing* 9.1 (2015), p.135.

the developing demands of an increasingly globalized world.[17] In a similar vein, Emma Parker has argued that Smith's consistent deployment of Modernist allusions in her work 'exemplifies a postmillennial shift to post-postmodernism or metamodernism – a philosophy that blends aspects of Modernism and postmodernism to privilege affect and engagement over irony and detachment.'[18] For both, Smith's deployment of modernist allusions is interpreted as a mode of 'engagement' with the world which displaces any strong identification of her work with postmodernism, signaling a resurgent literary investment and continuation of the Modernist tradition which reasserts its importance in the contemporary environment.

Although much of the recent scholarship on Smith's work has explicated her Modernist vision of aesthetic experimentation in terms of intertextual allusion, what has been less emphasized is the way that this debt may also inform a deeper understanding of her literary project, which in aligning itself with the turbulence and processes of societal upheaval of the Modernist period denotes a specific vision for the function of art and literature in relation to the world. As Leigh Wilson writes in her authoritative account of her period, the 'aesthetic experimentation in modernity' sought primarily 'to challenge representational practices in order to remake the world', and it is this investment in the disruptive and transformative power of literature which may also be seen in Smith's formal experimentations.[19] In this way, the Modernist period produced a style of committed literary writing, which saw literary production as itself a political actor, and it is precisely this function of literature which Smith may be seen to channel in her own writing. This tendency in Smith's work may be traced back to her important early short story 'Text for the Day' where a proliferation of 'Books and books, blocks of books' work as a literal and material blockage in the environment around them, 'shifting infinitesimally in the night as the renovated tenement foundations sent shivers through the building.'[20] This vision of a literature which has real-world effects is arguably developed most fully in *Girl Meets Boy,* where the protagonists engage in a feminist graffiti project, which galvanize their local community into political consciousness and action. In both, what is evoked is a form of textual militancy, which in its extra-legal and surreal quality invites a radical perspective on political change which arguably exceeds more modest accounts of this process. Against Ben Davies's claim that Smith's work may be see to 'invit[e] […] our current politicians […] not to exacerbate endlessly the conditions that harass our ability to think,

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[17] Joel Evans, 'Ali Smith's Necessary-contingent, or Navigating the Global' *Textual Practice* 32.4 (2016), p.636
[18] Emma Parker, 'Re-Envisioning Feminist Fiction' in *The Cambridge Companion to British Fiction Since 1945* ed. David James (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p.91.
[19] Leigh Wilson, *Modernism and Magic: Experiments with Spiritualism, Theosophy and the Occult* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2013), p.12.
[20] Ali Smith, *Free Love and Other Stories* (London: Virago, 1995)*,* p.20.

read, and be,' where politics is tacitly confined to its intuitional forms of mediation and representation outside of the cultural sphere, the politics which emerges in Smith's work may be seen as beholden to a Modernist project where aesthetic experimentation prefigures and engages political action itself.[21]

In seeking to highlight the often-under-explored political investment of Smith's literary project, it will be productive to build on theories which locate the combination of aesthetic and political experimentation of the Modernist period with an investment in the enigmatic but critically rich figure of 'magic', through which Smith's work may also be productively viewed. In so doing we may follow Wilson's view that the legacy of the modernist tradition must contend with its central preoccupation with spiritualist, theosophical and occult traditions, which remain underdeveloped in much of the secondary literature on the topic, despite being inextricable from the history of its development.[22] For Wilson, what is overlooked in Modernism is the way that its aesthetic practices often drew on a specifically artistic and political vision of magical language, which sought not simply to describe, reflect or represent the world, but to act as a constitutive agent in its re-creation. In recent years, we may trace an increased interest in magic precisely as a totem of a reinvestment in a politically committed and formally experimental literature, through accounts of 'enchantment' in New Materialism,[23] to the work of contemporary British poets who have innovated the form of the 'spell-poem' as a 'vehicle[..] of change that take us beyond the borders of the rational into a place where the right words can influence the universe.'[24] The figure of magic may develop our understanding of Smith's Modernist-inspired experimentations with literary form, demonstrating how such innovations can expose latent transformational possibilities at the level of relationality, kinship and community.

Since the Enlightenment, magic had been systematically expunged from dominant rationality, construed as 'anathema to contemporary 'civilization' which established its Modern self-identity through the 'systems of anthropology, as in E.B. Taylor and James Frazer' which became complicit in the development of the capitalist state and its 'instrumental rationality [which espoused the] domination of the natural world.[25] Despite this, magic has endured as an on-going subject of

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[21] Ben Davies, 'The Complexities of Dwelling in Ali Smith's *There but for the*' *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 58.5 (2017), p.517.

[22] Leigh Wilson, *Modernism and Magic: Experiments with Spiritualism, Theosophy and the Occult* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2013), p.12.

[23] See Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

[24] Sarah Shin and Rebecca Tamas, 'Introduction' in *Spells: 21st Century Occult Poetry* ed. Rebecca Tamás and Sarah Shin (Ignota: 2018), p.xi.

[25] Wilson, *Modernism and Magic,* p.7.

fascination, not only in popular consciousness, but also in the world of avant-garde art, where it took on its very abjected status in dominant forms of rationality to counterpose itself to the world as it was operatively configured. Most notably in Modernist artistic movements such as Surrealism, we can see how magic took on an especial significance as a mode of disruptive speech, expressing modes of resistance to dominant ways of thinking reality which opened up radical transformational horizons of possibility.

Likewise, Smith's periodic use of magic in *Girl Meets Boy,* combines with her explicitly politically motivated envisagement of a disruptive queer community, 'complicating', as Fiona Doloughan argues, the 'relations between reality and imagination; social and textual activity; myth and truth; change and continuity'.[26] This blurring of the lines between reality and fiction, as well as literature and its socio-political environment, exposes Smith's debt to Modernist and Surrealist traditions, working at the level of intertextual allusions but also as a more fundamental component of the formal composition of her work. Despite the crucial structural repetition of the enigmatic refrain 'what's the magic word' in *Girl Meets Boy,* magic is otherwise not an immediately visible concern of Smith's project, neither constant as a thematic concern, nor as common lexical referent.[27] An examination of its function as a style of literary speech may, nonetheless, offer a productive avenue for grounding her literary project in its relation to the Modernist tradition. The repeated reference to magic in *Girl Meets Boy* may therefore serve as a guide to its wider significance across her *oeuvre*, offering a productive way of interpreting how her work imagines the relationship between language and communal transformation. Mirroring Emily Horton's claims that *Girl Meets Boy* 'gestures towards some better future' which may be described as 'queer utopianism', we can see how this utopian vision might be further developed as a reinvestment in the Modernist period's attempt to salvage the magical function of literature.[28] By viewing Modernism in relation to Queer Theory and gender transformation, it will be possible to offer a fuller account of Smith's literary and political vision, which coalesces in an optimistic and occasionally magical investment in literature as a means of reimagining communitarian and relational possibility.

This chapter will put Smith in unlikely but productive collaboration with the Surrealist photographer Claude Cahun, examining how each artist, in different but crucially overlapping ways, deploys a sense of communitarian transformation through the figure of magic, envisioning an intimate relation between artistic expression and political capacity for change. For each it is the transformative and

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[26] Fiona Doloughan, 'Bottling the Imagination: Writing as Metamorphosis in Ali Smith's Girl Meets Boy' *New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing* 7.3 (2010), p.249.
[27] Smith, *Girl Meets Boy*, pp.146-147.
[28] Horton, 'Queer Metamorphoses: *Girl Meets Boy* and the futures of Queer Fiction', p.74.

magic power of the 'queer' in challenging gender norms and heteronormativity that is central to their aesthetic and political visions. Magic allows for new relational forms to emerge, and likewise disruptive and transformative modes of queer community, locating in subjective transformation the seed of wider communitarian change. In highlighting such affinities, this chapter seeks to demonstrate that Smith's work is most productively seen as an extension of trends which appeared in Modernism, where a Modernist belief in art as an active social force becomes renascent in her own literary project. A focus on a Modernist conception of magic may therefore be located within the emerging auspices of the 'metamodern' turn, which has sought to move contemporary literature studies beyond concerns with the irony and (to some critics) apolitical play of postmodernism, reasserting the legacy of Modernist traditions, legacies and tropes as core components of literary culture in the present. In focusing on Modernist conceptions of magical community in the work of Cahun and Smith, it will be possible to understand the mythic disruptions they enact from within the relational mechanisms of artistic and literary production, demonstrating how magical forms of subjective transformation open onto renewed and insurgent possibilities for community.

Magic in Ali Smith

At first glance, the figure of magic does not emerge as a strong thematic component of Smith's work; her oeuvre is largely interested in the everyday life of the contemporary world, its rhythms and patterns of affinity and connection, and as such does not often engage directly topics of magic, witches, spells, or other supernatural phenomena. Nonetheless magic may be seen as a precept which underpins her more visible tropes: the disruption of the domestic, the figure of the outsider, queer love, the mutability of language, and ghostly presences. In each case magic may be seen as a tacit principle which links such motifs with a form of transformative power, where her prose subtly unsettles the terms of reality and experience. For Monica Germanà, who analyses Smith's novels *The Accidental* and *Hotel World* through the lens of the 'gothic' and the 'fantastic', the figure of the 'mysterious stranger' in *The Accidental* may be understood through the 'trope of the female demon' who unsettles 'the boundaries of the real and the foundations of 'truth'.[29] The otherworldly figure of Amber, who interrupts the settled life of the middle class family of the Smarts, leaves their world radically changed after her exit, but the characters find it hard to remember 'exactly what Amber looked like.'[30] Her ghostly appearance occurs in a manner which unsettles the terms of the real as they are experienced by the family, and her 'own story' as Germanà notes is 'told in the magical

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[29] Monica Germanà, *Scottish Women's Gothic and Fantastic Writing: Fiction Since 1978* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), pp.87. We may also find the figure of the disruptive stranger in Smith's *There but For The* (2011) and *Winter* (2017).

[30] Ali Smith, *The Accidental* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2005), p.226.

realist, postmodernist style of first-persona intersections', highlighting her 'uncanny blend of unfathomable, evanescent qualities',[31] and what Philip Tew has described as her 'multifarious power'.[32] The effect of Amber's unreal spectral presence is therefore to be found in its transformative capacity, channelling what Germanà ascribes to the figure of 'the modern witch [who] is invested with the devastating power held by the traditional Calleach; the seeds of a different kind of knowledge can only germinate in the aftermath of her destructive force.'[33]

Likewise, the ghostly narrative perspective of *Hotel World* makes clear its Gothic and supernatural resonances. For Germanà, it is indicative of Smith's overarching literary interest in 'spectral ontology - and hauntology',[34] where Smith's text 'unravels as a postmodern reflection on the uncanny voids of the "real": the ghost disintegrates the subject's unity, blurring the boundaries between the semiotic and the symbolic and compromising, with its inherent anachrony, linear time.'[35] This process of subjective disjunction reveals the possibility of affinities and relations in the fictive awakening of ghostly presences, utilizing the figure of the supernatural to imagine alternative ways of inhabiting the world. In both *The Accidental* and *Hotel World,* Smith's use of the otherworldly is designed to unsettle reality at the same time as casting it into critical focus, exposing the ''unreal' core of the character's hyperreal worlds'.[36] In *The Accidental* this allows the character of Amber to expose 'the exciting epiphany of a potentially new world' beyond the bourgeois stasis of the middle-class which she infiltrates, whilst in *Hotel World* Smith's 'playful deconstruction of literary conventions' may be seen to challenge the 'simulated real' convoked by the alienated capitalist hyperreality in which it is situated.[37]

In her foreword to *Ali Smith: Contemporary Critical Perspectives,* Marina Warner links the spectral quality of Smith's 'haunted prose' to a characteristically magical lexicon, where her novels can 'reanimate those who have gone before […] in the magic lantern of desire'.[38] Magic here denotes the ability of literature to make present figures of absence, whether in death, in history, or in that which presently only exists as a willed potentiality. The formal experimentation of Smith's 'kinetic prose', culminates in a fiction which acts as a 'a dance of the dead; but also, in its dance, a conjuration against lifelessness'.[39] Echoing what we have seen as the ability of literature to convoke a

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[31] Germanà, *The Scottish Women's Gothic and Fantastic Writing,* p.88.
[32] Philip Tew, *The Contemporary British Novel* (London: Continuum, 2007), p.212.
[33] Germanà, *Scottish Women's Gothic and Fantastic Writing,* p.93.
[34] Monica Germanà, 'Contemporary Fiction' in *The Edinburgh Companion to Scottish Women's Writing*, ed. Glenda Norquay (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), p.159.
[35] Germanà, *Scottish Women's Gothic and Fantastic Writing,* p.162.
[36] Ibid., p.68.
[37] Ibid., p.168.
[38] Marina Warner, 'Foreword' in *Ali Smith: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, p.vii.
[39] Ibid.

'community of the dead' by traversing the borders of reality and fiction, producing impossible relations through which to address the present, Warner points to the transformative function of the extra-worldly in Smith's work, which through distorting the contours of reality, awakens her reader to radical possibilities of change. Julia Breitbach similarly has analysed how Smith's 'self-reflexive' literary style may be seen to be 'foregrounding and recasting literary conventions, genres and traditions', engaging in modes of formal disruption which shed light on 'how language is a constitutive force, rather than a transparent medium, in the building and shaping of contemporary realities and identities.'[40] Likewise, Kostkowska's account, which focuses on the ecological significance of Smith's work, has demonstrated how her 'stories are […] ecosystems [which use] rhetoric as a means of refiguring the world'.[41] Echoing Wilson's claims about the use of 'magical language' in the Modernist period, Smith's literary language is seen beyond its reflective or representational function. By engaging in a metamodern resuscitation of a Modernist form of literary engagement in the world,[42] Smith's novels follow the injunction of Modernism to 'challenge representational practices in order to remake the world', a process which 'can only work conceptually if it uses, relies on and has at its heart an idea of magic.'[43]

Magical Language: Claude Cahun's Magic Mirror

In order to appreciate this theoretical step, we can turn to another imaginary which illuminates how magic works as an aesthetic and political principle through which new modes of agency, subjectivity, and community can be articulated, namely that of Claude Cahun. If Smith's Modernist tendencies work in conjunction with themes of gender, sexuality and magical transformation, it may be instructive to briefly relate this to a Modernist antecedent of this project, whose own queer Surrealist and political practices offer a productive synthesis of these modalities. The artistic and political project of Cahun closely resembled Smith's in its positioning of gender transformation at the heart of its wider political vision, deploying evocations of 'magic' in a specifically queer context,

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[40] Julia Breitbach, *Analog Fictions for the Digital Age: Literary Realism and Photographic Discourses in Novels After 2000* (Rochester: Camden House, 2012), p.115.

[41] Justyna Kostkowska, *Ecocriticism and Women Writers: Environmentalist Poetics of Virginia Woolf, Jeanette Winterson, and Ali Smith* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p.144.

[42] Here I deploy the term 'metamodernism' not as the 'neoromantic… modern enthusiasm' as described by Akker and Vermeulen, but as the re-emergence of Modernist imaginaries in contemporary fiction as detailed by David James and Urmila Seshagiri. Timotheus Vermeulen & Robin van den Akker, 'Notes on Metamodernism' *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* 2.1 (2010) and David James and Urmila Seshagiri, 'Metamodernism: Narratives of Continuity and Revolution*' Publications of the Modern Languages Association of America* 129.1 (2014).

[43] Wilson, *Modernism and Magic,* p.12.

where it took on a meaning according to the social illegibility, disruptiveness, and potentially transformative experience which queerness can afford.

Cahun's project derived from and developed a sense of 'magical community', where the combination of her lesbian relationship and political outlook reimagined conventional notions of relationality and community. Magical community became a putative place where relationality could be convoked in conditions which otherwise established its impossibility, leading to the development of artistic expressions which pushed at the limits of relational imaginaries. In the marginal, militant and disruptive space inhabited by Cahun, whose gender and sexuality constantly acted as barriers to sociality, magic allowed for the development of a language through which to orientate a peripheral and unruly subjecthood, which, produced in the intimate space of her artistic relationships, was generative of disruptive and transformational relationalities. In the vibrant and disruptive affinities which Cahun maintained throughout her life, a broad vision of revolutionary transformation may be detected, where magical community serves as the general basis and trajectory of this aesthetic and political vision. Drawing attention to Cahun's remarkable biography and theoretical writings can therefore help to develop an understanding of magical community as an interpretative and political frame, setting the ground for our reading of Smith.

Claude Cahun was a highly enigmatic figure in the French avant-garde, most likely due to her gender and sexual identity, which were difficult to reconcile with the 'acute homophobia' and domination by men which characterized the Surrealist community of Paris in the 1930s.[44] It is arguably only recently that her work has been adequately recognized in its full significance, not only for Surrealism, but also as a significant early articulation of proto-queer aesthetics.[45] Cahun's photographic and montage art practice, as well as her writings, attest to a marginal subject position which was able to produce work of startling force and power, not only artistically, but as an active agent in the political world around her. Following the Nazi occupation of the Channel Islands in June 1940, Claude Cahun and her life-long lover Marcel Moore used their artistic and literary skills to fight a 'spiritual warfare' on their invaders, dressing up as soldiers to secretly deploy carefully targeted pamphlets and messages in order to undermine and erode their morale. [46] So successful was Cahun's campaign of counter-propaganda that when it led to her eventual arrest in 1944 she found herself in

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[44] Tizra True Latimer, 'Acting Out: Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore', in *Don't Kiss Me* ed. Louise Downie (London: Tate Publishing, 2006), p.67.

[45] For example, see Jennifer L. Shaw, *Exist Otherwise: The Life and Works of Claude Cahun* (London: Reaktion Books, 2017) and the exhibition at the London National Portrait Gallery 9 March – 29 May 2017.

[46] Kristine von Oehsen, 'The Lives of Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore' in *Don't Kiss Me*, ed. Louise Downie (London: Tate Publishing, 2006), p.19.

prison alongside German soldiers who had tried to desert their positions, at least in part, due to the influence of her textual offensive.

In Cahun's work her aesthetic and political militancy was always entangled with the disruptive nature of her gender position, which exhibited striking features of androgyny (she would often shave her head and cover it in gold paint);[47] she described herself as 'an asocial rebel, and a revolutionary dreamer,[48] who although not belonging to the social body proper due to her socially marginal queer status, engaged in acts of rebellion and resistance on behalf of the wider community alongside her lover and co-conspirator Marcel Moore, fighting as 'Surrealist writers with weapons of chance.[49] As Claire Folan has noted, it is the queer kinship and community which Cahun shared with Moore which underpinned and sustained the power of their shared aesthetico-political vision:

> [Spiritual warfare was] the end-logic of the couple's career of theatrics: from the photo play of two defiant lovers, to the collective act of cultural subversion, to the (fragile) dream of political community, to acting as one (acting as if they were many) in resistance to domination.[50]

Cahun's enigmatic evocation and embodiment of gender resonates which much of Queer Theory today, although preceding it by many decades and in a highly different context, and as such it also offers instructive differences in its vision. Despite an evident interest in deviant gender and sexuality in her work, Cahun showed little desire to theorize her own position clearly; she offers no avowal of one position or another, and still less an affirmation of the kind of deconstructive destabilization of gender that we see in Queer Theory.[51] Her photography is largely dominated by self-portraits that distort and multiply her own image, introducing figures of extreme femininity, masculinity, and androgyny, which move between parodic embodiment, irony, and affirmation, but never with a clear sense of real self or gender identity. Her attention to self, affirmed in the figure of 'narcissism', expresses only an indifference to convention, a desire to disrupt it with joyous multiplications,

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[47] Ibid., p.65. Her appearance was said to have been very disturbing to Andre Breton, who despite being intrigued by Cahun, did not invite her into the inner circle of his Paris community. François Lerperlier, 'L'Exotisme Interieur,' in *Claude Cahun photographe* (Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 1992), p.149.
[48] Claude Cahun cited in Michel Löwy, *Morning Star: Surrealism, Marxism, Anarchism, Situationism, Utopia* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009)*,* p.79.
[49] Claude Cahun, 'Confidences au Miroir,' in *Ecrits,* ed. Franciois Leperlier (Paris: J. M. Place, 2002).
[50] Claire Follan, 'Lucy Schwob and Suzanne Malherbe – Resistantes' *in Don't Kiss Me,* p.69.
[51] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble; Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990)*.* The claim is not here that Cahun would be hostile to such a system, rather that she embodies a very different methodology and vision in relation to gender embodiment and its aesthetic possibilities.

disruptions and radical transformation.[52] Rather than asserting a category, whether 'male', 'female', or 'queer', she simply stages and affirms transformation and metamorphosis: the seamless and free movement from one category to another, where the realness of this position is torn from any sense of stable essence or origin, ordered only by its embodied articulation in the moment of its expression:

> I am woman. Compassion puts me in the mood for consoling: making love. But since I am, after all, a man, and quick to attack, beware: this sort of thing doesn't happen without some brutality involved![53]

The speaker is at one moment 'woman' and in the next instant 'a man'. This oscillation and transformation blends these gendered attributions, from 'compassion' to 'brutality', and the speaker embodies these contradictory characteristics, moving effortlessly from one gender to the next. The effect is not so much a questioning of these (dubious) gendered characteristics, nor even a destabilization of gender through a deconstruction of the histories and modes of social construction that lead to these identifications (although Cahun clearly has some relation to this). Rather, Cahun simply asserts a vision of indifferent transformation, indifferent to this apparent (im)possibility, and indifferent to the more general social meanings that this would entail. Gender, in the image, and in the realm of language, is something which can be infinitely and vibrantly disrupted and transformed. Each moment of expression and the presence this evokes exposes a potential transformation: 'Postscript: At present I exist in another way.'[54]

In this transformation of categories (the blurring of self/other, I/we, and man/woman) we see the figure through which this metamorphizing linguistic process can be understood, a returning trope of Cahun's whole text, and a totem for the transformation which is both a thematic and formal aspect of her work:

> Pink Magic.
>
> Absolute egoism is a safety device. I will often return to it. But with these games I intend to lead lovers into treacherous harmonies, to the perilous pact of those who go about in pairs.[55]

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[52] Cahun, *Disavowals*, p.12.
[53] Ibid., p.110.
[54] Ibid., p.12.
[55] Ibid., p.102.

It is 'magic', no less, which expresses this transformative moment, where categories blur, and radical change can occur. Magic is here asserted through the figure of a kind of 'love' that is torn from its normative and conventional romanticism ('Declarations of love: sincere lies!'),[56] expressing something more complex and subversive, which, in the figure of 'treacherous harmonies', evokes fusion but also disruption. Cahun situates such love, that 'perilous pact of those who go about in pairs' as a consequence and result of an 'Absolute egoism', which has allowed for this course and this 'game' to take place. The space of the 'subject', the 'ego' or a narcissistic tendency is asserted only insofar as it is a 'game', and a 'safety device'. It is not asserted as a foundation or origin; there is nothing foundational about the 'self' and the ego, rather it is a strategy for a certain type of love. The space of self-reflection and self-love is therefore not affirmed as a simple solipsism but asserted through its ability to provide a space to develop and propose renewed and subversive relationalities. The ego is in this way not the assumed centre of thought or being, nor is it a stable or foundational analytic or ontological kernel. Rather, it is a space of retreat; it pulls away from its social circulation such that it can re-treat and refigure its conventional meaning.[57] Relationality, community and love as social bonds must be withheld in order to be transformed, they must be stripped down, refuted, ironized and critiqued so as to erupt as radical potentialities.

In this way, Cahun's combination of a proto-queer form of community with magic offers a potent figure of relational and subjective possibility, where magic becomes an emblem for radical process of transformation. Magic stands in place, an enigmatic placeholder, for what has been lost, what is inexistent, fragile or peripheral, but which can be reclaimed and produced in the act of retreat and radical transformation. Magic is arcane, forgotten and refuted, but its assertion in the present can nonetheless produce crucial disruptions and fissures. If magic has been lost to the process of Enlightenment, purged in a process of disenchantment and rationalization, then it stands as an insistent remainder of what is lost in this process, what exceeds or resists dominant rationality, offering a different sense of the present, the past and the future.[58] It is this very sense of magic's loss which aligns it with similar modalities, where it can stand in place of a whole host of figures which are lost and alienated in capitalist modernity. Cahun's political vision and her aesthetic drive is tied to these very figures, bespeaking modes of beings, relating and loving which are negated in the present, which come to be asserted anew through the transformative and utopian vision of her project. Her enigmatic embodiment of an impossible and disruptive self, love and relationality opens

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[56] Ibid.

[57] This process pertains to Nancy's strategy of 'retreating' the political and community so as to find way of reasserting and reconfiguring their significance and function. Jean-Luc Nancy and Phillipe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Retreating the Political*, ed. Simon Sparks (London: Routledge, 1997).

[58] Wilson, *Modernism and Magic,* p.12.

onto the figure of impossible community, which, like magic, has been alienated, negated, and lost to capitalist modernity, supplanted by the alienating figure of 'the worker' and 'surplus value' which overtake the 'spontaneous' base of sociality that Marx terms 'natural community'.[59]

Magic therefore produces a sense of a possible impossibility, of a different future, a different self, and a different community. It is present in every transformation which seems impossible, in every demand that seems unachievable, but which asserts itself as the insistent and necessary outcome of desire and politics. For Cahun, any sense of a queer self or a queer community that could be socially articulated, sensed and asserted is not readily available to her. But this does not bar expression, rather it demands a particular kind of disruptive communication, one that pushes at the very borders of the real. It means that forms of dreaming, imagining or creative reflection are privileged over reality as it is readily perceivable, not as idolatrous irrationality, but precisely through a recognition that reality itself hinges on certain exclusions, irrationalities, and falsities which must be taken into account: 'What contradictions does dreaming not bring to deceitful reality?' [60] In this way, Cahun's magical and dreamy Surrealist style presses figures of possibility, rationality and reality to their very limit, exposing their tacit exclusions and contingency and thereby glimpsing the possibility of their transformation. The space of this process is the realm of writing, literature and photography, where representation *re*-presents, that is, where representation produces a different effect in which the world is not simply mirrored, but transformed.[61]

The mirror and the eye are central figures in Cahun's photographical montages, as well as in her text *Disavowals,* where she describes her photographic practice as a kind of mirroring, which 'trace[s] the wake of vessels in the air, the pathway over the water, the pupils' mirage'.[62] She is, however, quick to contrast this absolutely with the conventional focus of the mirror and the photograph, which claim to show 'the concrete and the real', but which '[s]how a part of it only, in a narrow mirror, as if it were the whole.'[63] As we see with in the montage frontispiece to *Disavowals*, which offers various forms of mirrored image of her own face as well as of her partner, her shared practice, working in the space of her artistic and personal intimacy with Marcel Moore, is interested in producing a radically new conception of the 'mirror', a new representation and function, which will entail an 'invisible adventure', a political and artistic practice which will direct itself against the closed and restrictive forms of self, love and community that have come before:

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[59] Karl Marx, *Grundrisse* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973), p.472.
[60] Cahun, *Disavowals,* p.34.
[61] Nancy, *Being Singular Plural,* p.25.
[62] Cahun, *Disavowals,* p.1.
[63] Ibid.

I want to hunt myself down, struggle with myself. Who, feeling armed against her own self, be that with the vainest of words, would not do her very best if only to hit the void bang in the middle[?]'[64]

At once Cahun evokes the mirror as a kind of a problem, where the difficulty is finding an image, a representation, or a mimetic function that could do justice to her subject position. The 'invisible adventure', which she cites at the start of her text, appears as a journey from a form of invisibility, where the 'narrow mirror' of dominant representation cannot provide a visual language for her own self-expression. This leads to the necessity of a new mode of re-presentation and expression, which breaks with dominant norms of self and image. This entails not only an assertion of self, but grappling with a subject-position which simply is not evident in the mirror form as it is operatively configured.[65] A whole system of representation must be distorted to allow for a 'self' which must be 'hunt[ed]', 'struggle[d] with', and 'armed' in order to disentangle itself from the order of the 'narrow mirror', to assert a mirror of a different order entirely. Crucially, when this mirror emerges it does not simply reveal her own image, but an image of 'fusion', where the magic mirror stages not only the self, but its melding in relationality:

Sweet enough, beneath a candle stuck in an old bottle of Bass, the moment when our two heads (ah! That our hair would meld indistinguishably) leaned together over a photograph. Portrait of one or the other, our two narcissisms drowning there, it was the impossible realized in a magic mirror. The exchange, the super-imposition, the fusion of desires. The unity of the image achieved through the close friendship of two bodies, for the sake of which they send their souls to the devil.[66]

The 'magic mirror' functions to produce the 'impossible', reflecting the unimaginable back at the world, its image serving as a demand for this very impossibility to become possible. For marginal figures who suffer precisely a systemic underrepresentation and erasure, the magic mirror *allows for and precipitates transformation.* To see an image of an (im)possible self or an impossible relation is to bring into question the very terms of their impossibility, undermining a sense of 'reality' which is conceived as barring their existence. Indeed, this is the very function of the Cahun's crucial verb 'realized' [*réalisé*], which in both the English and the French has the dual-meaning of 'to make real', as well as to 'to grasp clearly'. To 'realise' something is to *make it real,* and this is what the magic

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[64] Ibid. Cahun's original French version of this text ends the last sentence with a question mark, and its omission in the Susan Muth translation I take to be an error.

[65] Luce Irigaray offers an extensive theorization of the 'mirror' as that which denies the subject position of 'woman' in Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman,* trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).

[66] Claude Cahun, *Disavowals,* p.12.

mirror of artistic and literary practice wishes to do, to produce images of a reality such that they might come into being. This reality is *made real,* at the same time as being *grasped clearly*, that is, its reality is not only *created* but *unearthed,* as the transformation is not simply one of a supernatural magic creation, but through distorting dominant *perceptions* of reality and disturbing the naturalizing effect of operative processes of intelligibility, it exposes hidden and immanent potentialities and possibilities, opening the way for their eruption as radical transformation.

Although writing within the Surrealist community in 1930s Paris, responding to the encroaching threat of Nazism and drawing on the utopian and communist projects which characterized her intellectual scene, Cahun's 'magic mirror' nonetheless emerges as an enduring conceptual figure for envisaging the continued capacity of literature to engage in a form of world-making, which, drawing on the intimate, the personal and the literary, produces disruptions and interruptions which can inspire radical change. As Michael Löwy has argued, although it has often been the function of contemporary criticism to consign such drives to their historical situation, characterizing temporal figures such as the 'postmodern' and the 'contemporary' as fundamentally *after* these Surrealist, Romantic and Utopian drives which are therefore construed as *over,* it is the task of a certain kind of criticism (what Benjamin has termed 'magical criticism'),[67] to excavate these aesthetic and political impulses, asserting their continued and enduring relevance to the present. Löwy believes that it is vital to unearth hidden histories and myths which can offer us a way of thinking beyond the constraints of the present and its ability to 'colonize' our thought such that we cannot think outside of it, ultimately arguing that it is only in this process that we can imagine a 'postcapitalist' future:

> As unprecedented, previously unforeseen means of capitalist violence and degradation make themselves manifest around us daily and continue to colonize ever deeper layers of social and mental space, people must not shy away from looking back on history to help them imagine an unimaginable postcapitalist future.[68]

This evocation of Cahun's biography and expansion of her theoretical method may allow us to address how the figure of magic can haunt the present with the trace of its continued possibility. If the 'Romantic' drive recognizes what is lost in capitalist modernity, asserting against the grain traditions and myths which we are told are essentially 'over', we can turn likewise to 'magic' as that which was purged from Enlightenment reason, but which endures as a totem of what is excluded from both history and our understanding of the future, producing fissures and disruptions in

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[67] Christopher Bracken expands this idea from its original deployment in Walter Benjamin's writings in *Magical Criticism: The Recourse of Savage Philosophy* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2007). Here he explains that 'magical criticism' does not 'decipher' meaning, but 'brings it back to life' (p.17).
[68] Michel Löwy, *Morning Star,* p.xxx.

operative and dominant modes of reasoning.[69] As Adorno tells us, 'magic' is 'utterly untrue', but 'in it domination is not yet negated by transforming itself into the pure truth and acting as the very ground of the world that has become subject to it.'[70] In the near total-subsumption of capitalist modernity, which for Nancy is structurally speaking 'totalitarian', representation largely works precisely to limit and suppress our capacity to think beyond it.[71] Magic therefore emerges as a vital aesthetic force, which erupts only through and by the disruption of dominant modes of representation through its impossible and anachronistic character.

Neither idolatrous superstition or fantasy, nor a simple matter of plot or supernatural content, magic necessitates a literary or aesthetic form which embraces and embodies magic's unruly temporal aspect, unsettling the norms of Enlightenment logic which figure it as forgotten and 'savage' to demand a language which intervenes in the world, which names new forms in order to bring them forth, to break with the whole weight of human history to produce new ways of being in the world, new subjects, and communities to come.[72] Magic unearths a power of language and literature which Enlightenment had sought to bury, as the act of self-constitution drove it to bar the possibility of any other future or present at the very level of thinking and representation itself:

> The world of magic retained distinctions whose trace have disappeared even in linguistic form. The multitudinous affinities between existents are suppressed by the single relation between the subject who bestows meaning and the meaningless object, between rational significance and the chance vehicle of signification.[73]

Enlightenment leaves us with a language which fails to comprehend its proper relation to the world, which reduces possible relations between 'existents' to the operative logics of dominant rationality, to a 'single relation' which is a symptom of our total domination. What is lost in this process is precisely the 'multitudinous affinities between existents', the possibility of a multiplicity of relations between words, between language and the world, and the ability of language to step outside of Enlightenment reason. In short, Enlightenment logic robs us of our relational being, alienating us from any community other than that which accords with the 'single relation' to state capitalism, reducing all communal life to the endless work of perpetuating and reproducing this structure. In

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[69] See Michel Löwy, *Romanticism Against the Tide of Modernity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001).

[70] Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* trans. John Cumming (London: Verso Editions, 1979), p.9.

[71] Nancy, *Retreating the Political,* p.86.

[72] Freud influentially refers to magic as a 'savage philosophy' in Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo,* in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud,* trans. James Strachey et al. (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), pp.13-18.

[73] Adorno and Horkheimer*, Dialectic of Enlightenment,* pp.10-11

this way, we become unable to imagine other possible worlds, unable to produce a language which can break from its operative strictures, and finally unable to speak meaningfully of ourselves in terms of 'community', where language itself carries the trace of our alienated and monadic being.

For Walter Benjamin, we need to look to the world of literature, which can lead us to pay attention to 'language itself', its indeterminate relation to the world of things, which disrupts dominant rationality and its concomitant mode of representation.[74] What is lost in contemporary language is its ability to see language as that which 'communicates itself in itself […] in the purest sense the 'medium' of the communication',[75] that is, where language moves beyond what Cahun terms the 'narrow mirror' of operative and exclusionary thought to its own *'immediacy',* its ability to enact meaning and intervene in the world of things precisely against and *in excess* of operativity:

> if one chooses to call this immediacy magic, then the primary problem of language is its magic. At the same time, the notion of the magic of language points to something else: its infiniteness. This is conditional on its immediacy. For precisely because nothing is communicated through language, what is communicated in language cannot be externally limited or measured, and therefore all language contains its own incommensurable, uniquely constituted infinity. Its linguistic being, not its verbal contents, defines its frontier.[76]

Enlightenment reason seeks to 'define' the 'frontier' of language, restricting its function to the circulation of 'verbal contents', which operate according to its own pre-established limitations and 'measure[s]'. As such it must always suppress the ability of language to express its own 'linguistic being', which is not only incommensurable with structurations of its function and meaning, but must operate precisely *in excess* of its situated being due to its intrinsic and 'uniquely constituted infinity'. The 'infinite' is precisely the foundational capacity of language, its ability to name and communicate meaning in the boundless possibility of semiotic multiplicity. Language is therefore never just a supplement to existence, but its constitutive modality, which, for Nancy, is part of an ontology that takes place precisely through a 'communication', which grounds all being through its ability to be expressed:

> "Language" is not an instrument of communication, and communication is not an instrument of Being; communication *is* Being, and Being *is,* as a consequence, nothing but the incorporeal by which bodies express themselves to one another *as such.*[77]

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[74] Walter Benjamin, 'On Language as Such and on the Language of Man', *Selected Writings Vol. 1: 1913-1926,* ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), p.65.
[75] Ibid., p.64.
[76] Ibid.
[77] Nancy, *Being Singular Plural,* p.93.

Benjamin gestures at this essentially communal ontological ground to language in a short fragment written in notes for 'On the Mimetic Faculty', which unfortunately is not developed further in his writing.[78] Through exploring the singular capacity of language to 'name', a process which serves to bring existence into being through its inscription in language, he argues that the foundation of this kind of writing must be construed only through the apparently infinite capacity of language to produce relationality, stating, in the following theses, that:

> The foundation of the name: communication of matter in its magic community […]

> The communication of matter in its magical community takes place through similarity[79]

What is this 'magic community' which accords with the structure of the name? For Benjamin, the 'name' is the 'translation of the mute into sound and of the nameless into the name'.[80] It brings 'mute nature' into the world of words, and as such it is part of the constitutive work of language itself, which not only represents being, but is the means through which it *comes to be.* Magic stands for this function of language which is still intimately bound up with 'creation', where words stand not outside of reality, but are the means by which its relational being can take place, where words appear to summon forth reality through their very incantation and inscription. Here, communication *is* being, and as such, linguistic mediation is not supplementary but originary.

'Magical community' expresses this drive to relationality through the structure of 'similarity', where 'being' cannot be monadic, cannot simply stand for itself, *as itself,* but is tied up with a relational ontology where it can only be grasped or asserted *in its resemblance to other forms,* that is, in its fundamentally relational being: its 'magic community'. The magical capacity of language is to infinitely produce relations (or what Adorno terms 'multitudinous affinities'), and to move beyond the realm of language as a supplementary or simply reflective form. Magical language produces itself through constitutive transformation, through the rupturing of its situated being and the operative structure of the 'sign', to brace what is 'incommensurable' in language, its ability precisely to move beyond and in excess of the world it describes:

> Through the word, man is bound to the language of things. The human word is the name of
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> things. Hence, it is no longer conceivable, as the bourgeois view of language maintains, that

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[78] The editor of the collection informs us that 'Antitheses Concerning Word and Name' is a 'preliminary study for the essay 'On the Mimetic Faculty' in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings,* p.718.
[79] Ibid., p.717.
[80] Ibid.

the word has an accidental relation to its object, that it is a sign of things (or knowledge of them) agreed by some convention. Language never gives mere signs.[81]

For Cahun the task of a queer revolutionary art is precisely to produce a language which moves beyond the supplementary form of the 'sign', constituting her aesthetic project through the figure of the 'magic mirror', which does not simply reflect reality, but distorts and transforms it. The political force of this process is thus found in the multiplicity which emerges from the interruptive rupture, where norms are exposed in their constitutive exclusions, and where language and representation are pushed to the limit of their operative function to reveal the possibility of transformation. Mimetic magic works precisely through the exposing of relationality against the grain, in the constitution of its own transformational form of association as 'magical community'. This evocation of magical community, as we can trace it in Cahun's queer relationality, and in Benjamin's conception of language, can therefore offer a paradigm through which to understand the function of magic in Smith's work, demonstrating her investment in transformational forms of queer community.

Ali Smith: Literature as Magic Community

As we have seen, magic is a mode of speech and language which serves to disrupt orders of representation, pushing against its supplementary status as the 'narrow mirror' to produce visions of radical transformation. If it was the Surrealist movement, in its proximity to precisely these kinds of transformations (political, historical and aesthetic), which most powerfully grasped this 'magic' function, it is clear that this is an enduring capacity in literature which many authors, in varying ways and traditions, remain faithful to in their work. In Smith's oeuvre, we can see similar magical logics at play, where Modernist tropes and techniques are deployed in the contemporary context, resuscitating a kind of a literature which reacted to turbulent political times, and which saw its function as comprehending and even intervening in them. Most recently, Smith's novel *Autumn* marks a literary project clearly aimed at engaging the political realities of the contemporary world, and we may take its subtle but important evocation of magic as key to its ability to mark a literary intervention in discussions around questions of identity, community and belonging as they have risen to increased prominence and importance. By using an experimental literature to subtly question dominant conceptions of community, Smith's text also gestures to their potential reconfiguration. *Autumn* can therefore be seen to engage in something like a magical function to convoke and propose disruptive and transformative modes of political community.

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[81] Benjamin, 'On Language as Such' in *Selected Writings,* p.69.

Taking the British referendum on membership of the European Union in June 2016 as its guiding context, Smith published her novel *Autumn* only soon after in October of that year, suggesting a concerted effort to constitute her book as an active intervention in the discourses which overtook the country after this event. Her book works in intimate dialogue with the effects of the vote, evoking a bleak Dickensian Britain in the 'worst of times'[82] and 'split into pieces'[83] where '[a]ll across the country, people felt like they counted for nothing',[84] her own text seemingly reverberating with a similar affective shock. *Autumn*'s inaugural reference to Dickens situates the novel in a long lineage of the socially-conscious British novel, evoking the numerous crises and continuities in British history, offering for critic Petra Rau 'a long and slow contemplation [on the] "structure of feeling" that is "now",' in a literary perspective that takes on an almost therapeutic function.[85] Smith is not, however, simply offering a space to reflect on the political detail of the British referendum in her text. *Autumn* is not explicitly a 'Brexit' novel, nor an intervention which seeks to directly inform political action around the event of the referendum and its aftermath. As a number of commentators have noted, direct responses to the referendum have often fallen into the trap of forming self-contained discursive echo chambers, whose ideological projections have undermined serious attempts to interrogate the underlying socio-economic determining factors which precede and determine the social divisions made hypervisible according to the Leave/Remain divide in complex ways.[86]

Smith does not directly tackle such issues, rather retreating into the specific function which literature offers through its own singular evocations and displacements of reality. In embedding the aftermath of the referendum in an intimate and personal story of an unlikely relationship between an aging man, Daniel Gluck, and a young girl Elisabeth Demand, interspersing a fragmented narrative with dream-like landscapes which Gluck's deteriorating mind has conjured, Smith gestures to an indirect, but nonetheless potentially powerful function of literature in its relation to its political context. In interview, Smith draws attention to the increasingly constructed character of contemporary reality, locating the ways in which literature can 'ask questions of the construct and [...] suggest ways to change the construct.'[87] If the constructions of national community and the

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[82] Ali Smith, *Autumn* (London: Hamish and Hamilton, 2016), p.3.

[83] Ibid., p.61.

[84] Ibid., p.60.

[85] Petra Rau*, '*Autumn After Brexit' in *Brexit and Literature: Critical and Cultural Responses* ed. Robert Eaglestone (London: Routledge, 2018), p.125.

[86] For a detailed examination of racial and economic causality in the referendum see Gurminder K Bhambra, 'Brexit, Trump, and 'Methodological Whiteness': On the Misrecognition of Race and Class' *The British Journal of Sociology* 68.1 (2017), pp.214-232.

[87] Olivia Lang and Ali Smith, 'Interview with Ali Smith: "It's a pivotal moment... a question of what happens culturally when something is built on a lie"' *The Guardian* (October 16, 2016).

political around the time of the referendum were for both characterized by 'lies',[88] Smith's novel foregrounds the constitutive role of fiction in finding new stories, mythic and communal foundations through which to live by, leading Rau to conclude that 'If they [millennials] care enough about a global, European Britain to want to change the course of the ship Britannia, they had better start writing a story they can believe in - and vote for.'[89] Likewise, Sara Upstone, in perhaps a less dogmatic and politically prescriptive tone, notes a similar injunction at the heart of Smith's text, where the reader is not so much enjoined to reinvest in traditional institutions and mechanisms of democratic representation, whose failures arguably set the ground for the political discontent galvanized by the Leave campaign, but is furnished with a political exigency to reimagine and recreate a cultural imaginary of European identity as 'creative practitioners'.[90]

This positive vision of the function of literature may be seen in the various figures of redemption which end Smith's novel, most notably in the subjective transformation of Elizabeth's mother Wendy, who takes up a disruptive form of political action against the encroaching presence of a local detention centre for asylum seekers, '*bombarding the fence* […] with junk missiles'.[91] Crucially she describes her subjective change using a language of magical metamorphosis: 'It's like magic has happened in my life, Elisabeth's mother whispers to Elisabeth when Zoe's left the room'.[92] Wendy's discovery of a new 'love' in a lesbian relationship coincides with her call to militant activism, strongly mirroring the political and sexual transformation of the protagonist of *Girl Meets Boy,* whose extra-parliamentary and extra-legal forms of political defiance in precipitated by a magical metamorphosis in the subjectivating power of queer relationality. The dreamy surrealist style which Smith engages, where such possibilities invade her texts unexpectedly and often without clear cause, arriving 'like magic' in subjective transformations perceived as impossible before their actual occurrence, may relate to the oneiric landscape in which the novel begins, where Daniel Gluck revisits an old photo in a sliding and confused interpretation:

> Remember that postcard he bought off a rack in the middle of Paris in the 1980s, of the little girl in one of the parks? She looked like she was dressed in leaves, black and white photo dated not long after the war ended, the child from behind, dressed in leaves and trees ahead of her. But it was a tragic as well as a fetching picture. Something about the child plus the

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[88] Ibid.
[89] Rau, 'Autumn After the Referendum', p.13.
[90] Sara Upstone, 'Do Novels Tell Us How to Vote?' in *Brexit and Literature: Critical and Cultural Responses* ed. Robert Eaglestone (London: Routledge, 2018) p.164.
[91] Smith, *Autumn,* p.255.
[92] Ibid., p.238.

dead leaves, terrible anomaly, a bit like she was wearing rags. Then again, the rags weren't

rags. They were leaves, so it was a picture about magic and transformation too.[93]

In this passage, the 'little girl' in the postcard foreshadows the central narrative line of *Autumn* in Daniel's own friendship with Elisabeth. His musings on the metaphorical affinity of 'leaves' and 'rags' makes clear the unsettling effect which art may produce in our experience of reality, displacing his perception in order to produce different meanings and interpretations. In many ways, it is this ambivalent but multiplying effect which art can induce in the world which is at the heart of Smith's story, where it is not only their friendship but its mediation through works of art, which transforms the life of Elisabeth and Daniel together. Daniel's final words of the novel 'what are you reading?', repeat his original question to Elisabeth at the start of the novel, reminding the reader of his persistent injunction to 'read' not only books, but the world around her. [94] This demand to imaginatively and inquisitively perceive the reality culminates in the imperative tone of the final line of the novel itself: 'look at the colour of it'.[95] The effect of this enjoinder, which mirrors the last line of *Artful* in its disruption and exceeding of the norms of narrative voice, opens its address onto the reader herself, demanding a form of perception and presence which is not possible from the text alone. Precisely the colour of the 'rose' as it has been presented is not available to the reader, but the injunction to 'look', to behold or to contemplate its colour, evokes a space of aesthetic and imaginative reflection. As with Daniel's interpretation of his photograph, the function of this aesthetic reflection is to interrogate the meanings and effects which literature can evince from its reader, foregrounding the displacements of reality through metamorphosis and metaphor, where literature, like all art, is ultimately about 'about magic and transformation.'[96]

If *Autumn* gestures toward a magical community to come, then the hope of this transformation lies woven into Smith's earlier work. One striking case of this operation emerges when one turns to Smith's *Girl Meets Boy,* a novel that is exemplary of the ability of contemporary fiction to envisage impossible political and personal transformations, and particular attention to the figure of 'magic' offers a fresh perspective on not only her novella, but also on the continued relevance of this critical trajectory. Smith has written that literary style 'proves not just individual human existence, but communal existence',[97] a principle which is echoed at a formal level in her novella *Girl Meets Boy,*

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[93] Ibid., p.9.

[94] Ibid., p.258.

[95] Ibid., p.260.

[96] Ibid., p.9.

[97] Ali Smith, 'Style vs Content' in *The Guardian* (August 18, 2012), https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/aug/18/ali-smith-novelists-approach-art [accessed 15 October 2017].

which begins with a personal and intimate scene of queer sexual encounter, only to move outward to the realm of community and the political. When the protagonist Anthea sees the character Robin she mistakes her for a boy, thus experiencing a paradigmatic unsettling of her sense of self, sexuality, and gender. She quits her marketing job at a water company named 'Pure' and enters into a romantic relationship with Robin, whilst also sharing her political work of social agitation, replacing the marketing of bottled water with the production of feminist propaganda. Their love is bound precisely to textual unruliness, as Anthea joins in with Robin's feminist graffiti project, which is designed to question gender not only inter-subjectively, but within the wider social and political frame in which they are operating. Smith's evocation of political change is embodied not only in this initial, personal transformation, but becomes political, social and communal precisely through its embodiment in *language* as well as literary form, where a textual practice is the bridge between the personal and the social, and where literature enacts this transformation as a kind of magical possibility.

The book is structured around the central figures of myth and radical transformation. These forms are in fact tied indelibly together, with Smith directly referencing Ovid's myth of Ianthe and Iphis from his collection *Metamorphosis,* which centres on the figure of a divine magical transformation. The book's publisher Canongate Books frames the story as part of their ongoing series entitled '*Myths',* informing us that Smith, like the other authors in their collection, 'retell[s]' a story, which is 'universal and timeless'.[98] Through focussing on the figure of magic, however, it will become clear that Smith does not seek in any simple sense to just offer a rewriting of the myth, replicating its essential content, and transplanting it into the present so as to demonstrate its continued relevance and meaning. Smith's text is radically different from Ovid's, and thus we must interrogate the exact manner in which she engages myth, not only noting what she repeats its narrative and thematic content, but also the way in which she is engaged in transforming the figure of 'metamorphosis' itself. The specific evocation of myth which Smith presents in her novella is precisely not 'timeless', but is in fact 'interrupted'.[99] It is a historical excavation which does not so much expose a linear line of progress or a universality, but which exposes its 'magical' and anachronistic potentiality, where its unruly and disruptive character can be unearthed.[100]

Likewise, we may question the claim that Smith's interest in this history 'compares with earlier essentializing projects that sought to identify and celebrate homosexual individuals and subcultures

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[98] Smith, *Girl Meets Boy*.
[99] I use to this term with specific reference to Nancy's figure of 'myth interrupted', which previous chapters have examined in detail.
[100] This is the methodology which Benjamin minimally develops in the figure of 'magical criticism'.

throughout history'.[101] If there is a queer potential in Ovid's myth it can hardly be said to be immanent within its own narrative logic or structure. Indeed, in a crucial sense, it is decidedly *not queer,* written as it was at a time when lesbianism was absent from a sexual imaginary subject to the absolute symbolic ordering of the 'phallus'.[102] Classicists have sketched an aggressively patriarchal sense of sexual politics in Antiquity, which they claim was ordered around an 'active' (penetrative, masculine) and 'passive' (receptive/penetrated, feminine)' model, where feminine same-sex intimacy was symbolically unimaginable and 'impossible', even if it might be fair to speculate that it may have been present in rare and secret practices.[103] If Ianthe and Iphis share something like a 'lesbian' love, then it is nonetheless described as unnatural and 'monstrous' (from '*monstrum'*),[104] and the divine 'metamorphosis' of Iphis from a woman into a man serves precisely to rob the story of its lesbian narrative, bringing the transgression of the story firmly back into the realm of social conformity and heteronormativity. As such, rather than simply 'retelling' the myth of Iphis and Ianthe, it is more proper to state that Smith's novella violently disrupts its core meaning. If her version of the myth embodies a queer politics, this emerges in absolute antagonism to the original myth, transplanting a 'metamorphosis' of reaction and normativity into one of radical interruption. Against the insidious norms of a patriarchal community, Smith's interruption of Ovid's myth imagines a community which is disruptive of any operative logic of domination, a community open to vibrant interruption through its relation to myth.[105]

Smith already draws attention to her disruptive relation to myth in her title, which evokes the heteronormative narrative paradigm of 'boy meets girl' in a playful inversion. Likewise we see this logic repeated in the first line of her novella, which not only sets the scene of myth, but makes clear that it is invoked in the first instance through a structure of interruption: 'Let me tell you about when I was a girl, our grandfather says'.[106] The sentence breaks with any sense of a clearly gendered speaker, producing an unresolved slippage which evokes the possibility of a non-normative subject identity to the 'grandfather' at the same time as staging a gendered embodiment which subsists in

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[101] Martin Dines, 'Gay and Lesbian Subcultures from Stonewall to Angels' in *The Cambridge History of Postmodern Literature,* ed. Brian McHale and Len Platt (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p.250.
[102] For a full exploration of the way in which female sexuality was largely symbolically unthinkable in Antiquity, see Eva C. Keuls, *The Reign of the Phallus: Sexual Politics in Ancient Athens* (London: University of California Press, 1985).
[103] See Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure; History of Sexuality, Vol. 2 (*London: Penguin, 1987).
[104] Ovid, *Metamorphosis – Book IX,* trans. Brookes Moore (Francestown: Marshall Jones Company, 1978), p.907.
[105] Kaye Mitchell's essay 'Queer Metamorphoses: Girl Meets Boy and the Futures of Queer Fiction' in *Ali Smith: Contemporary Critical Perspectives* argues '*monstrum'* is capable of being 'queered' beyond its common translation as 'monstrous', but this arguably elides the strong patriarchal context of Ovid's poem and underestimates the full force of Smith's intervention.
[106] Smith, *Girl Meets Boy,* p.1.

disjunctive articulations of transformation, indifferent to the terms of their own possibility. This indifference is in fact part of the very way in which our storyteller relates to myth, as the story which he has told from the perspective of a woman is soon revealed not to be, as its previous narrative framing has implied, autobiographical:

> Your grandfather like to think that all the stories in the world are his to tell, she says.
>
> Just the important ones, our grandfather says. Just the ones that need telling. Some stories always need telling more than others. Right, Anthea?[107]

Smith's storyteller engages in the relating of stories and the sharing of myth whilst performatively undermining their relation to truth and the real. The point of the story is not that it is, strictly speaking, true, but rather that it expresses a 'need', which subtly places an evocation of the *political* at the foundation of myth, and likewise at the heart of literature and fiction. A story may not be *true,* it may be repeated with great infidelity to its source, or entail violent acts of appropriation, but precisely in this unruly relation to the real a different mythic logic is produced. This logic is hostile to a representation which seeks to simply mirror reality, to render it accurately, and reflect it for a reader such that they might gain insight into the present. The task of a story-telling which braces its wider 'need', that is, its *function* in the space of social that produces real effects and has real consequences, is to speak to and through a mythically interruptive form of community. In this way, Smith's novella serves precisely to foreground the wider political and communitarian function of literature, and, through the staging of an impossible simultaneous embodiment of 'male' to 'female', she places this function clearly within the realms of magical transformation.

For Smith, the possibility of realizing radical transformation in community and relationality is centred not only on the figure of the 'self' and personal transformation, but also in the very structure of representation itself, where the symbolic distortion of these structures is the basis of imagining new worlds. The desire to realise impossibility is tied to the to the scene of the mirror, which no longer simply reflects reality, but serves to produce disruptive distortions and magical transformations:

> And in the corridor of the big old house I saw myself in a mirror, except it wasn't a mirror, and it wasn't me. It was someone else dressed exactly the same, it was a fine-looking boy wearing the exact same clothes. But he was very very handsome, and that is how I knew he wasn't me and I wasn't him.[108]

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[107] Ibid., p.17.
[108] Smith, *Girl Meets Boy,* pp.14-15.

Smith's mirror produces an unexpected effect and an enigmatic subject, which in both instances moves between the figures of existence and non-existence, asserting two contradictory states in the space of a single sentence. Neither affirmed as male or female, mirror or non-mirror, nor 'me' or 'him', this mirror serves simply to stage impossibility, fusing contradictory positions into a single image and a single reflection. The effect of this simultaneous recognition and *non*-recognition, which moves beyond any sense of 'misrecognition' toward a figure of indifferent impossibility, is to refuse any resolution. If there is transformation here, it does not operate according to a telos, it does not resolve into a final or clear position, but simply operates according to a pure logic of transformation itself. Properly speaking, the image is magic; it cannot accord with dominant rational schemas, but rather disrupts and re-forms them, producing an excess to 'the real' which cannot be accounted for through conventional modes of reasoning.

The character of this transformation is characterized only by a lingering sense of beauty and erotic desire, which in the figure of this 'fine-looking boy', who was 'very very handsome', expresses in the gratuitous emphasis of the repeated 'very' an exuberant and humorously transparent libidinal attachment. In this sense, the gender transformation of the 'magic mirror', which reflects reality in the impossible coalescence of seemingly contradictory modalities of being, moves between a form of 'narcissism' and queer relationality. As with Cahun, the 'magic mirror' allows for marginal subjects to constitute themselves against dominant relationality in a form of disruptive self-love, which is a necessary process in the affirmation of the non-normative. Likewise, this narcissism is already part of a wider matrix of meaning, where the ambiguity of the impossible image stages the possibility of multiple selves, where erotic attachment would be tied to a specifically queer libidinal economy.

The central romance of the novella replicates this logic, emphasizing the manner through which 'queer' relationality must be forged through the disruption of gender categories and the vision of impossible transformation. When Anthea sees her future lover 'Robin', her language stages a certain gender confusion, where normative modes of recognition are at once evoked and distorted. Again, as with the myth of her grandfather's life as a woman, the effect of this is not quite resolved, but simply evokes the excessive libidinal and aesthetic investment of erotic attachment:

> It was a beautiful day.
>
> The boy up the ladder at the gate was in a kilt and sporran. The kilt was a bright red tartan; the boy was black-waistcoated and had frilly cuffs, I could see the frills at his wrists as I came closer.[109]

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[109] Smith, *Girl Meets Boy,* p.43.

As the description continues the details of the 'boy' become more precise. We learn that he is 'long-limbed' and later we see that his writing is 'arrogant and expert'.[110] In this way Smith evokes how Anthea 'came closer', integrating this movement into the immanent trajectory of her writing. The effect of this is to produce a subtle sense of anticipation and intensity, as the gaze of Anthea is literally staged in the dramatic tension of the prose itself, with each detail revealed delineating the encroachment of her stare. Ultimately this tension breaks and the prose jolts into a different pace as the external movement of Anthea turns inward. An eruption of emotion overtakes her and we see this in the breaking up of her sentence structure, which places the object of her 'head' before the verb which acts on it, disrupting the conventions of subject/object to form a syntactical disruption: 'My head, something happened to its insides.'[111] Likewise, the repetition of the phrase 'my head' at the end of the next sentence, 'It was as if a storm at sea happened, but only for a moment, and only on the inside of my head,' which reduplicates the trope of 'inside', enacts a form of poetic *epanalepsis* in the mirror-like symmetry between the start and end of each sentence. The careful balance of syntax in the two sentences stages a transformation in which the 'head' of the first passage emerges as qualitatively different from the one which ends it, but the terms of this transformation are left unclear in the indeterminate figure of 'something' and the opaque simile of the 'storm at sea'. The linguistic break is simultaneous with subjective disruption; both express a shattering emotive intensity that the apparently unremarkable precipitating events have produced, highlighting their explosive effects whilst leaving open the full effects of the transformation which has unfolded.

The scene continues through a subjective fragmentation where Anthea is transmuted into the form of a 'ship' in the moment of its collapse in a violent encounter, 'hitting a rock', and seemingly being opened to the infinite: 'the ship that I was opened wide inside me and in came the ocean.'[112] Finally the poetic intensity of Smith's prose subsides, as we see that Anthea has resolved and reformed her sense of self in a moment of clarity, where the chaos and violence of the previous passage give way to a pristine and clear formulation, which, rather than being torn apart by contradiction, internalizes and formalizes it as the modality of the encounter itself:

> He was the most beautiful boy I had ever seen in my life.

> But he looked really like a girl.

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[110] Ibid., p.44.

[111] Ibid.

[112] Ibid., p.45.

> She was the most beautiful boy I had ever seen in my life.[113]

There is an almost dialectical logic to the progression of these three sentences, offering a thesis, antithesis and an impossible synthesis, which seamlessly integrates a contradiction into the internal gendered logic of her final formulation. The structure of the mirror which distorts the 'self' through the production of an unexpected reflection is here expanded into the reflective quality of the encounter, as its magic quality produces transformation not only in the subject but also in the nature of its relationality. The forms of operative representation, the 'narrow mirrors' which order the aesthetic and symbolic quality of the 'beautiful boy', are exposed at the limit of their function, in the moment of their reflection they are made to produce a contradiction, where the very terms of their meaning are disrupted and challenged. This 'beautiful boy', who looks 'really like a girl' pushes each category to the very border of their separation, throwing both categories into question. This occurs through the disruption of their operative intelligibility, where the pronoun attached to 'boy' reverses its implicit gendering within the confines of a single sentence. Neither simply a boy, nor a girl, the purpose of the sentence is to produce an embodied and unreconciled transformation, which neither settles nor solidifies into any category.

In this way, Smith's entire text embodies a radical sense of personal, political and aesthetic transformation. Taking on the vision of Ovid's 'metamorphosis', Smith transforms the very form of this transformation, going beyond Ovid's divine metamorphosis of a girl into a boy to stage gender disruption as a form of radical world-making. Smith's title is crucial to her mythic interruption of Ovid, replicating the 'meta' of 'metamorphosis', with the weakly homonymic 'meet' of her title (*Girl Meets Boy)*, where the allusive encounter of their contrasting meanings produces a transformation in each term respectively. In 'metamorphosis', definable as to 'change form', the etymology itself produces a certain ambiguity as the prefix 'meta' can refer to both 'form' and 'change'.[114] The very sense of a 'form' or 'shape' is therefore bound to the act of changing; forms *form,* that is, they *exist* precisely through their own *forming*. Neither originary, essential nor anterior, a 'form' produces itself through an act of self-constitution, which, like Smith's own vision of transformation, is on-going, infinite, and without telos.

Smith places this sense in dialogue with the Germanic word 'meet', which means 'to come into contact'. It implies a relation which in the title takes on a double meaning, both implying an *encounter* between two different persons, but also implying a fusional subject constituted through the impossible synthesis of the two modalities themselves. As each term, like the categories of 'boy'

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[113] Ibid.

[114] All definitions and etymologies in this chapter may be found at http://www.etymonline.com/ [accessed June 2017].

and 'girl', is pressed at the very limit of its meaning, opening out onto their ability to transform in vibrant, unexpected, and seemingly unimaginable ways, we see the exposure of a form of relationality implied by the 'meet'. From the German word '*mit'*, meaning 'with', (the root of *Mitsein* which Nancy reformalizes as 'being-with'), the meaning of this 'with' is constituted precisely by its relation to 'metamorphosis'.[115] That is, this very 'meet-*ing'*, this encounter and relation, is characterized and constituted, in the first instance, by its foundationally and reciprocally *transformational* force. To come into relation is *already and necessarily* to be transformed, and this is precisely what having a 'form' means: to 'take place', as oneself, in one's foundationally *relational* and mutable being.[116]

Bracing this infinite capacity to change, as well as the contradictory and seemingly impossible figure of gender transformation, Smith's novella produces a form of relationality which operates as a form of magic, where this magic is the core modality through which literature can intervene in the world in its constitutively communal and onto-political function. This process clearly has some similarity to the methodology of Nancy, replicating his desire to establish literature and language as spaces where we can rethink relationality. But Cahun and Smith offer magic as a *particular* modality of language which has the ability to *actually enact* this process. If Nancy's philosophy of community evokes this literary capacity, it is nonetheless clear that he at no point offers any clear sense of what this might look like, or what its relation to real political change might be. Indeed, although Nancy's theory lays the foundation to many kinds of communitarian thinking, his inattention to modalities such as magic and gender transformation may be seen in part due to the way in which this ontological speculation has a reticence about the magical demand: that is, it reneges on the responsibility of community as *real and contingent demand,* instead drafting its function into a realm of ontological speculation where it is hard to imagine it as a positive form. Although magic is not literally a figure of the real, its function as language is to *make real and bring forth change,* and it is in this capacity that it may be seen as an intervention in political thinking about community and literature. In this way we can see 'magic' as a figure which can offer a substantial and prescient sense of transformative politics*,* redressing the lacuna of positive forms of communitarian struggle in Nancy's work, and demonstrating how an exploration of literature can redress this.

Ali Smith: Magical Encounters

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[115] See Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural,* p.27*.*
[116] We may relate this sense of embodied transformation to Nancy's sense of the body as that which 'takes place' as is expounded in Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, trans. Richard A. Rand (London: Fordham University Press, 2008).

Magic emerges for Smith when we find ourselves at the limit, the border, or what in *Artful* she terms the 'edge', and this, she writes, must 'involve extremes':

> Edges are borders. Edges are very much about identity, about who you are. Crossing a border is not a simple thing'.[117]

An edge can be a dangerous place, as it 'suggests sharpness, it can wound',[118] but its crossing is absolutely central to Smith's vision for literary form and its transformational potential. If the 'edge' can entail something like a violence (or at least a vulnerability to the possibility of this), this is because edges are places of disruptive and unruly transformation. A limit exposes an object in its contingency, its mutability and its insufficiency. It is the surface which touches, which 'meets' and which can shudder and shatter in the intensity of encounter and relation. For gender, the 'edge' of its body and meaning is the space through which its infinite potential embodiments are exposed, and this is precisely the sense of gender which Smith offers in the vision of its magical transformation, which is most effectively presented in the novella's 'pivotal sex scene … [where sexual] intercourse is shown to be infinitely transformational'.[119] Sexual pleasure and encounter is the point where gender and sex are made porous and fluid, each seeping across the borders of the body, where relationality emerges precisely through a constitutive *unworking and reworking of the body* in the shattering intensity of love and the erotic as a minimal form of community:

> I was a she was a he was a we were a girl and a girl and a boy and a boy, we were blades, were a knife that could cut through myth, were two knives thrown by a magician […] were the feather that mastered gravity were high above every landscape then down deep in the purple haze of the heather.[120]

Here the border between 'girl' and 'girl', 'girl' and 'boy', and 'boy' and 'boy', proliferates possible positions in relation to gender, staging precisely a (im)possibility of becoming and infinite relationality by extending her sentences over a vast number of possible arrangements and positions. Formally the sentences produce a kind of inexhaustibility, pushing the possibility of their content over seemingly endless modes of being and relating, syntactically breaking with a subject/object relation (such as we see in the title *Girl Meets Boy*) to render the sentence a space through which a multiplicity of relationalities is exposed and asserted. If here the sentence is forced to a limit, pushing at the border of its conventional syntactic relations, then it is clear that Smith unifies form

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[117] Smith, *Artful*, p.125.
[118] Ibid., p.126.
[119] Martin Dines, 'Gay and Lesbian Subcultures from Stonewall to Angels' in *The Cambridge History of Postmodern Literature*, p.250.
[120] Smith, *Girl Meets Boy,* p.103.

and content in this passage to stage the interconnected modalities of queer, embodied transformation and the literary possibilities of representing these through a similarly transformational prose. The crossing of the border, or the 'edge', transgresses a sense of the possible, and thus evokes a kind of magic:

> Edges are magic, too; there's a kind of forbidden magic on the borders of things, always a ceremony of crossing over, even if we ignore it or are unaware of it.[121]

Magic may be seen as a figure that we often 'ignore' or are 'unaware of', but as Smith implies, magic is a crucial component of literary experience, standing as a historical but also contemporary repository for the ways in which language has often exceeds the borders of its conventional use, intervening in the world through unexpected and seemingly impossible transformations. The multiplicity of impossible embodiments proliferates like a list in her description of transformative sex, at times departing even with conventions of grammar through omitting prepositions: 'I was a snake. I changed stone to snake in three simple moves, stoke stake snake'.[122] This logic of embodiment works in indifference to material possibility, operating only through an immanent logic of poetic alliteration and linguistic resemblance, where magic figures as the literary staging of transformational relationality. The scene of shattering interpersonal sexual encounter thus moves outward, having forged its singular and disruptive relationality the perspective of the passage opens to a much wider scene, exposing the possible perspectives and transformations it can effect in the world:

> I looked out at the hills at the backs of the town, at the trees on the hills […] and I wondered if everything I saw, if maybe every landscape we casually glanced at, was the outcome of an ecstasy we didn't know was happening, a love-act moving at a speed slow and steady enough for us to be deceived into thinking it was just everyday reality.[123]

The foundational event of queer intimacy moves to the 'hills' and the 'town' with a gaze constituted by the transformative effects of sexual encounter, and thus the whole world appears as an 'outcome' of erotic 'ecstasy'. What has appeared as simple 'everyday reality', with all its norms and gentle quotidian rhythms, is magically re-enchanted as a 'love-act moving at a speed slow and steady'. The moment of sexual encounter thus operates precisely through its shattering of the personal and subjective confines of its own occurrence. Its effect is nothing short of a form of world-making, where it multiplies itself as the originary modality through which the whole 'landscape'

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[121] Smith, *Artful,* p.126.
[122] Smith, *Girl Meets Boy,* p.102.
[123] Ibid.*,* pp.104-105.

might constitute itself. The inter-subjective movement of transformative love thus works precisely through its own pluralization and expansion, serving as a template for a world forged anew.

The last chapter of Smith's text encapsulates the aesthetic and political drive of her entire novella by staging its final, all-encompassing, magical community. Coming after the previous chapters entitled 'I', 'you', 'us' and 'them', the final section is a form of synthesis entitled 'all together now', where all the characters of the book convene in a final scene. It imagines a fantastical wedding between Anthea and Robin at the foot of a 'Presbyterian church', moving from a purely inter-subjective moment of vow-making, where they 'thought they were alone', to suddenly expose a wider, multiplicitous community, where people combine across the border of the real and the fictive in vibrant and impossible assembly.[124] The chapter is preceded by Anthea's hanging and unanswered question: 'What's the magic word?',[125] and in this sense it may be seen as a form of answer. Indeed, the chapter foregrounds precisely its magical and disruptive quality from the outset, staging a 'queer' marriage which is nonetheless 'still impossible after all these centuries', and 'still-miraculous', as it is the enactment of a civil union which would have been illegal at the time of Smith writing the text, and which is still not fully possible in a religious context today.[126]

In this way the scene evokes its operative setting, making clear the heteronormative structure of marriage at the same time as directing its 'impossible' quality against this, foregrounding not only its transgression of law, but the wider transformative disruption this enacts:

> Reader I married him/her.
>
> It's the happy ending. Lo and behold.[127]

This highly recognisable line evokes at once the playful breaking of the fourth wall which Charlotte Brontë famously deploys in the concluding chapter of *Jane Eyre,* whilst disrupting its gendered operation and expressing an absolute ambivalence to the gendered terms that normally order this operation.[128] 'It's the happy ending' self-consciously replicates a social and narrative expectation, where the conventional telos of kinship is replicated in literary dénouement, exposing, like Brontë, the way in which a novel can reproduce norms at the same time as subtly challenging and transforming them. *Jane Eyre*'s dénouement accords with social expectation on marriage whilst also

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[124] Ibid., p.50.
[125] Ibid., pp.146-147.
[126] Gay marriage was legalized in 2013, six years after Smith's text was published, but it is still legal for religious bodies to refuse a marriage based on the sexual orientation of the couple https://www.gov.uk/government/news/same-sex-marriage-becomes-law [accessed June 2017].
[127] Smith, *Girl Meets Boy,* p.149.
[128] Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 1992), p.397.

offering a feminist disruption of this, reconfiguring the power relationship between the two protagonists so as to establish a union based on a newly found equity and female agency.[129] Likewise Smith may be seen to evoke marriage precisely in this interruptive and transformative way, highlighting social conventions and restraints at the same time as working in excess of them. Thus a literary formula is produced only through its ironic disruption and the effect of this is precisely to frame the borders through which queer excess and magic transformation must occur. By setting out the social, legal, normative, and narrative frames through which love and romance are ordinarily configured, Smith's mythic interruption can be felt both in its destructive and its productive force.

Jane Eyre's unexpected marriage and reunion to Lord Rochester is itself precipitated by a form of magic, where she hears his 'mysterious summons' over an impossible distance in a 'coincidence' which is 'too awful and inexplicable to be communicated or discussed' due to its 'deeper shade of the supernatural'.[130] But it is only the very impossibility of this occurrence that can lead to the reforming of their bond, and thus their marriage occurs precisely only through and by its magical (im)possibility. Likewise, Smith's final marriage 'ceremony' takes place only through its suspension of the social and political strictures of the real. In fact, the marriage, in all its apparent impossibility, excessively implausible size, and spectacularness is ultimately, like the grandfather's tale in the first chapter, exposed as a lie. But, mirroring her grandfather's unfaithful and interruptive relation to myth, the staging of a marriage which transgresses the heteronormative and homophobic laws of a society is thus asserted in all its ethical and political necessity, expressing an absolute indifference to its apparently impossible character. Written at a time when it was not legal for homosexuals to marry, where a marriage was, legally speaking, 'impossible', the self-conscious fictionalization of the marriage ceremony thus stages the political limits and demands immanent within queer kinship. By making *present* a political *absence*, by expressing a gay marriage *as a fiction,* the effect of this is to press this unreality right up against the reality which excludes it, inhabiting not only an antagonism, but also an excessive demand for a mode of kinship built on an egalitarian relationship of free and open exchange, beyond the confines of oppressive normativity:

> We crowned each other with the garland of flowers. We stamped on the wine-glasses wrapped in the linen. We jumped the broomstick. We lit the candles. We crossed the sticks. We circled the table. We circled each other. We fed each other the honey and the walnuts from the silver spoons; we fed each other the tea and the sake and we sweetened the tea

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[129] For an analysis of the feminist currents in *Jane Eyre* see Cora Kaplan, 'Heroines, Hysteria, and History: Jane Eyre and Her Critics' in *Victoriana: Histories, Fictions, Criticisms* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007).
[130] Brontë, *Jane Eyre,* p.397.

> for each other; we fed each other the borhani beneath the pretty cloth; we fed each other a taste of lemon, vinegar, cayenne and honey, one for each of the four elements […][131]

Smith forges an impossible and magical marriage through an excessive proliferation of its cultural and historical mythical roots, and as such something like an international community is evoked, where the scene of marriage stages the vast plurality and multiplicity of rituals which can attend this cultural practice. Thus a moment of interpersonal connection is convoked only through the great historical and social weight that gives it meaning, where the act is *spoken through* the myths and rituals of community which ultimately assure a union through its communal witnessing. As such, the marriage moves beyond the dyad and the expected vows change, as does the conventional scene of their incantation:

> Into thin air, to the nothing that was there, with the river our witness, we said yes. We said we did. We said we would.

> We'd thought we were alone Robin and I. We'd thought it was just us, under the trees outside the cathedral. But as soon as we'd made our vows there was a great whoop of joy behind us, and when we turned round we saw all the people […][132]

The well-known 'I do' of religious ceremony, which performatively enacts a union through the initial separation of monadic 'I's, is replaced by 'We said we would' where the bond is simultaneous, not separate. The scene is first asserted as an *atopos*, described as 'thin air' and 'nothing', but in the moment of the forging of the bond through the assertion of the 'we', the scene is radically transformed and magically populated. The absent community of heteronormative marriage, that is, the impossibility of community *as it exists* to attend and witness a structure of kinship beyond exclusionary norms is nonetheless made present. It is evoked, therefore, necessarily as the *non-place* and 'nothing' of 'thin air', that is, as a fiction which reflects an inexistent community in the magic mirror of its impossible transformation. This moment gives way to the community which is, foundationally, the community to come, which is evoked only through the excessive ability of fiction to assert its unreality in all its vibrant and magical quality.

The guests commune and convalesce through impossible relations, their relationality is formed precisely on its constitutive impossibility, where the 'Inverness Police Force'[133] are present alongside 'Venus, Artemis, and Dionysos',[134] where reality and unreality blur and mingle. Apologies are sent

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[131] Smith, *Girl Meets Boy,* pp.149-150.
[132] Ibid., p.151.
[133] Ibid., p.152.
[134] Ibid., pp.153-154.

from the mythical 'Loch Ness Monster', 'who'd sent us an old rusty underwater radar scanner, some

signed photos of herself' as well as from John Knox, a sixteenth century Scottish writer, who sends a

'black-edged telegram-poem'.[135] Finally, even Anthea's grandfather and grandmother, 'Robert and

Helen Gunn arrive'[136] and 'younger than the day they left',[137] despite the fact that we have

previously learnt that they are dead.[138] This is a community founded on its own impossibility, which

forms its bonds over great expanses of time and space, between life and death, where there is no

limit to a relationality which abounds with vibrant and insistent inexhaustibility. This impossible

community attends an impossible wedding, and as such, both speak to terms of possibility of

marriage as such, as well as a wider sense of queer kinship, which still is largely unrealized beyond

the world of this very unreality.

Crucially, however, Smith is not simply making a demand for gay marriage, her political vision

precisely serves to go beyond this and thus the marriage, in all its mythic and magical quality, is

nonetheless disrupted and forced back to the normative frame of its unreality:

> Uh-huh. Okay. I know
>
> In my dreams
>
> What I mean is, we stood on the bank of the river under the trees, the pair of us, and we
> promised the nothing that was there, the nothing that made us, the nothing that was
> listening, that we truly desired to go beyond ourselves.[139]

The staging of this impossible community serves not as a simple demand for marriage to be equal,

nor as a pure fantasy of a community which is necessarily impossible, a merely fictional supplement

to the facticity and immutability of 'the real'. The demand is precisely to go *beyond* this, beyond its

unreality to its magic realizability, and beyond marriage as an emblem of queer kinship and queer

politics, to think the magical and indeterminate ability of literature and queer life to transform the

very terms of the real. As such, we are left with the imperative to 'go beyond ourselves', to move

beyond the self to community through radical disruption, to go from love to a form of world-making,

and from literature to the realization of the impossible in presented reality. This imperative accords

clearly with the surrealist drive to 'ensure that the world conform[s] to our desire' and may be seen

in Smith's final section of prose. [140] The end of her novel serves simply to stage the infinite

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[135] Ibid., p.154.
[136] Ibid., p.158.
[137] Ibid., p.159.
[138] Ibid., p.116.
[139] Ibid., p.159.
[140] Andre Breton, cited in Lowy, *Morning Star,* p.14.

potentiality of literature and language to produce relationality, constucting an evocation of a literary community that produces seemingly inexhaustible relations:

> Nothing more than what happens when things come together, when hydrogen, say, meets oxygen, or a story from then meets a story from now, or stone meets water meets girl meets boy meets bird meets hand meets wing meets bone meets light meets dark meets eye meets word meets world meets grain of sand meets thirst meets hunger meets need meets dream meets life meets end meets beginning all over again [...][141]

Community, in the last instance, is exposed as 'nothing more' than the moment when 'things come together', when they 'meet', and the proliferation of these relations is exposed as seemingly infinite. This is what Benjamin terms as 'magical community', where language is staged in its constitutive function as 'the communication of matter' itself, that 'magical community' which 'takes place through similarity'.[142] The function of literature is precisely to expose the infinite possibility of this logic of 'similarity' and the capacity which all language has to stage our 'being-with' as the constitutive modality through which all being takes place. This is a community ordered only by this indeterminate capacity for transformation, by this radical openness which allows for a sense of 'the real' to be founded on nothing but its potentiality for change:

> [...] the story of nature itself, ever-inventive, making one thing out of another, and one thing into another, and nothing lasts, and nothing's lost, and nothing ever perishes, and things can always change, because things will always change, and things will always be different, because things can always be different.'[143]

Conclusion

Ultimately Smith's evocation of magic offers a vision of personal and individual metamorphosis, envisaging with Benjamin's 'magical community' the capacity of literature to forge and demand new relations, new kinships, and new communities. In the vibrant space of magical transformation, these oppose themselves to the world *such as it is,* as well as producing positive and creative visions for emergent communitarian possibilities. In its disruptive recasting of Ovid's tale, *Girl Meets Boy* is a concrete instance of 'myth interrupted', producing an interruption ordered around queer expression and magical transformation. The figure of magic, which is a repeated trope in Smith's novella, but which has not yet been offered any consideration in the secondary literature, can therefore be understood not as incidental to her text, but rather as an aesthetic principle which underpins her

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[141] Smith, *Girl Meets Boy,* p.160.
[142] Benjamin, 'Antitheses Concerning Word and Name', in *Selected Writings,* p.717.
[143] Smith, *Girl Meets Boy,* p.160.

literary project. For Cahun, magic is a crucial figure in the thinking of queer life, allowing for figures of impossibility, unrepresentability, and transformation to be reconciled with a hostile present, through an art aimed at the transformation of society itself. Magic allows for a sense of temporal asynchrony to be unfolded, attesting to the metamodern tendencies of contemporary literature where Modernist techniques are deployed alongside many others through the anachronistic logic of contemporary time.[144] Magic may be seen as a symptom of the ambivalence of the contemporary, enacting a weak belief in change through logics of indifference and purposeful impossibility. As we see in Smith's work, however, it may also be seen to echo more concerted and committed political and aesthetic investments of the Surrealist and wider avant-garde projects, demonstrating a serious avenue for understanding the representation of marginal subjects and fragile possibilities of a more just world.

In focusing on how authors such as Smith are resuscitating modes of aesthetic expression which unearth Modernist visions of art and literary designed to produce concrete changes in the world, the contemporary can be exposed as a time which contains many hidden possibilities. Queerness and magic can combine to engender a potently disruptive form of this potential, emerging from their very positions of marginality, unrepresentability and disruption to envisage new modes of being and relating beyond the operative confines of heteronormative, capitalist modernity. Magic remains unreconcilable, unassimilable and subtly antagonistic to dominant modes of rationality, and therefore resists the flattening vision of a capitalist present, which purports to contain all multitudes of possibility.[145] Magic is a way of imagining a future made increasingly indiscernible by the terms of the contemporary; by embracing a form of anachronism, an aesthetic practice ordered around magical language and community may be a powerful way to interrupt the myths of the present, disrupting and exposing modes of relational operativity so as to expose new communitarian possibilities.[146] If the terms of such futures may be obscured by the recalcitrance and pessimism of the present, then magic precisely braces this impossibility, putting us in mind of Cahun's vision of

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[144] This thesis is most notably put forward by Giorgio Agamben, 'What is the Contemporary?' in *What is An Apparatus? And Other Essays*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), pp.39-54.

[145] Sarah Shin and Rebecca Tamas, *Spells: 21st Century Occult Poetry* ed. Rebecca Tamás and Sarah Shin (Ignota: 2018), p.xi.

[146] The introduction to *The 2000s: A Decade of Contemporary British Fiction*, ed. Nick Bentley, Nick Hubble and Leigh Wilson (London: Bloomsbury, 2015) offers an excellent summary of the problem of thinking the 'future' in the contemporary.

magic, which through political and aesthetic action, sought to change the terms of the possibility itself.[147]

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[147] For an analysis of 'recalcitrance' as an emergent paradigm of the contemporary, see Elenore Long *A Responsive Rhetorical Art: Artistic Methods for Contemporary Public Life* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, 2018).

Thesis Conclusion

This thesis has proposed the 'politics of community' as a conceptual and hermeneutical figure which can open up numerous possibilities in the study and interpretation of literature, as well as providing new avenues for political thought. This thinking of community has responded to the contemporary crisis in its representation and political being, which we see not only in processes of neoliberalism, but in the wider political economy of capitalism, which 'negates community' as a core function of its operation. Such a landscape has demanded a thinking of community which goes beyond its contingent appearance, as the crisis of community consists not simply in its repudiation, but in its *putting to work,* where its function is subsumed into the work of the capitalist state. In this way community emerges as a figure that needs to be rethought against its dominant usage, and this has required that we proceed not only through philosophy and political thought, but also through an exploration of literature.

This thesis has shown how literature and representation are vital to our thinking of community, as they express what Nancy terms 'communication', a concept which has demanded that we see representation and literature beyond their conventional confinement as secondary modalities of being. 'Communication' demands that we see all representation, be it literature, art, or writing as more than mere mediation, functioning rather as the *taking place and sharing of being-with itself.* In this way the representation of community is part of its very being, and literature offers not only a site of its general function, but through its 'literariness', puts its own processes into question. Literature is part of the 'work' of community as it expresses relational being in its very expression, and through experimentation, interruption and disruption in literary form, literature has also been seen to enact an *unworking* and *reworking* of community, where its function is not only destabilized, but reimagined in radical new ways. Literary representations of community are in this way a vital source for the project of rethinking community, which in the operative frame suffers not only from political marginalization and impotence, but the wider process of becoming *unthinkable* beyond its naturalized form. Literature has therefore provided us with contexts in which this very *unthinkability* can be challenged, where the fictive recreation of community can open onto a wider horizon of political transformation

We have therefore been led to marginal and under-researched authors, where 'myth' can be 'interrupted' through representing marginal lives which challenge dominant expression of being, but also in their literary experimentation, which enacts these disruptions as the core modality of their expression. Through pluralizing our conception of politics, Nancy's theories have been taken into new contexts and horizons and placed in dialogue with 'queer' and 'trans' politics, where 'myth interrupted'

has served as paradigm through which these political trajectories can be understood in their ontological and literary function. In this process we have seen how the figures of the 'queer' and the 'trans' also challenge Nancy's original conception of community, including vital aspects of being and politics which he does not consider. Nonetheless, this intersection has allowed for Nancy's ideas to be opened to these possibilities, were his concepts of 'operativity' and 'myth interrupted' have been made to productively engage these emergent political discussions. In this way we have seen how the political assertion of 'identity' always takes place within community, as this is the site of its emergence, and what is produced in the assertion of identitarian politics. The figure of 'gender transformation' has therefore emerged as a crucial contemporary instance through which we can find the disruption of operative norms, where it exposes new ways of thinking politics, relationality and communality.

Through the study of these particular texts, this thesis has brought philosophies of community into close dialogue with literature, where community has provided a highly effective hermeneutic approach, allowing for original readings and interpretations which depart in different ways from much of the literature criticism they have thus far inspired. In each, community has provided a way of drawing out radical political potentials which have not been fully articulated in the reception of their work, producing new avenues in approaching these three authors. Likewise, these literary texts have offered crucial new horizons for our understanding of community, with the figures of 'gender', 'death' and 'magic' allowing for a reworking of Nancy's theories, as well as opening onto a wider sense of the political aspects of community. In this way, we have seen how an interrogation of the politics of community must ultimately go beyond Nancy's philosophy, moving to wider territories of critical theory, queer theory, and trans theory, as well as in many other directions.

In particular the elaboration of 'queer narcissism' which we see in the intersection between Cahun and Smith indicates a rich area for new research, where Cahun can offer a fresh perspective on the figure of the 'queer' within a Surrealist and revolutionary sphere, which has not been adequately addressed in queer theory. In the playful distortion of the figure of 'love' that we see in 'queer narcissism', we can see new trajectories in thinking the queer relation to kinship and 'love' as normative attachment. Furthermore, Cahun's book *Disavowals* is yet to be fully examined in a literary context, despite its rich theoretical and literary potential, thus demonstrating the need for further research beyond its reception in the artistic sphere. The figures of 'narcissism' and 'magic' which emerge as so central to her conception of the function of art and politics, open up new avenues in understanding identity, relationality, and community. Cahun's focus on the 'self' as site of political transformation may be

opposed to philosophical assertions of 'community', which have so far overlooked the power of queer self-fashioning to unwork normative and operative structures. In the figure of queer 'narcissism' and 'magic', there is still much work to be done in our thinking new relationalities and understanding of community. The disruptive relationality of 'self' can also be seen in much of the work of Kay, who has many other texts for which further research could greatly expand and interrogate this function.

In our reading of McGregor, we see how the affirmation of community in relation to death offers a number of avenues for further research, particularly in relation to what Blanchot exposes in the ability of 'literariness' to transgress the unrepresentability of death, where literature challenges the very concept of 'impossibility'. The figure of the 'community of the dead' has been demonstrated as a productive tool in understanding the political and literary function of death, asserting the inherently relational modality of death in all of its disruptive and transformative capacities. Our reading has put death at the forefront of McGregor's project, offering a productive new avenue for literary criticism which has thus far been overlooked in his work. Likewise, the 'community of the dead' has offered a new perspective on Benjamin's 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' shedding light on his elusive evocation of the revolutionary subject. In this way it is clear that focus on the communal function of death, in mourning, grieving, and impossible communication exposes the need for further study in this area, which could move beyond McGregor to find many comparable instances of this process.

In all of the readings presented in this thesis, part of their function is to bring to fore authors who have hitherto been on the periphery of literary criticism. Our privileging of community has exposed how these authors are engaged in complex experimentations in literary form, which as part of what we have termed the 'relational turn' deserve more critical attention in their consequences for literary criticism and politics. Part of the guiding principle of this thesis has been a turn to the figure of a 'marginal' or what Deleuze and Guattari term 'minor literature', which although briefly explored in chapter three, warrants far more critical attention. This theory would allow for a renewed interrogation of British literature, exposing the processes that lead to marginality, and challenging them as part of the process of literary criticism itself. In deploying the conception of 'inoperative community', we have been led precisely to literatures and subject positions which are marginal, and this has allowed for challenging and unexpected perspectives on the political significance and potentiality of community. More work is required to interrogate how literary criticism can gain insight from the figure of 'minor' and 'inoperative' literatures, to challenge how canon formation can tacitly exclude certain texts and how this process can be transformed in literary practice.

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