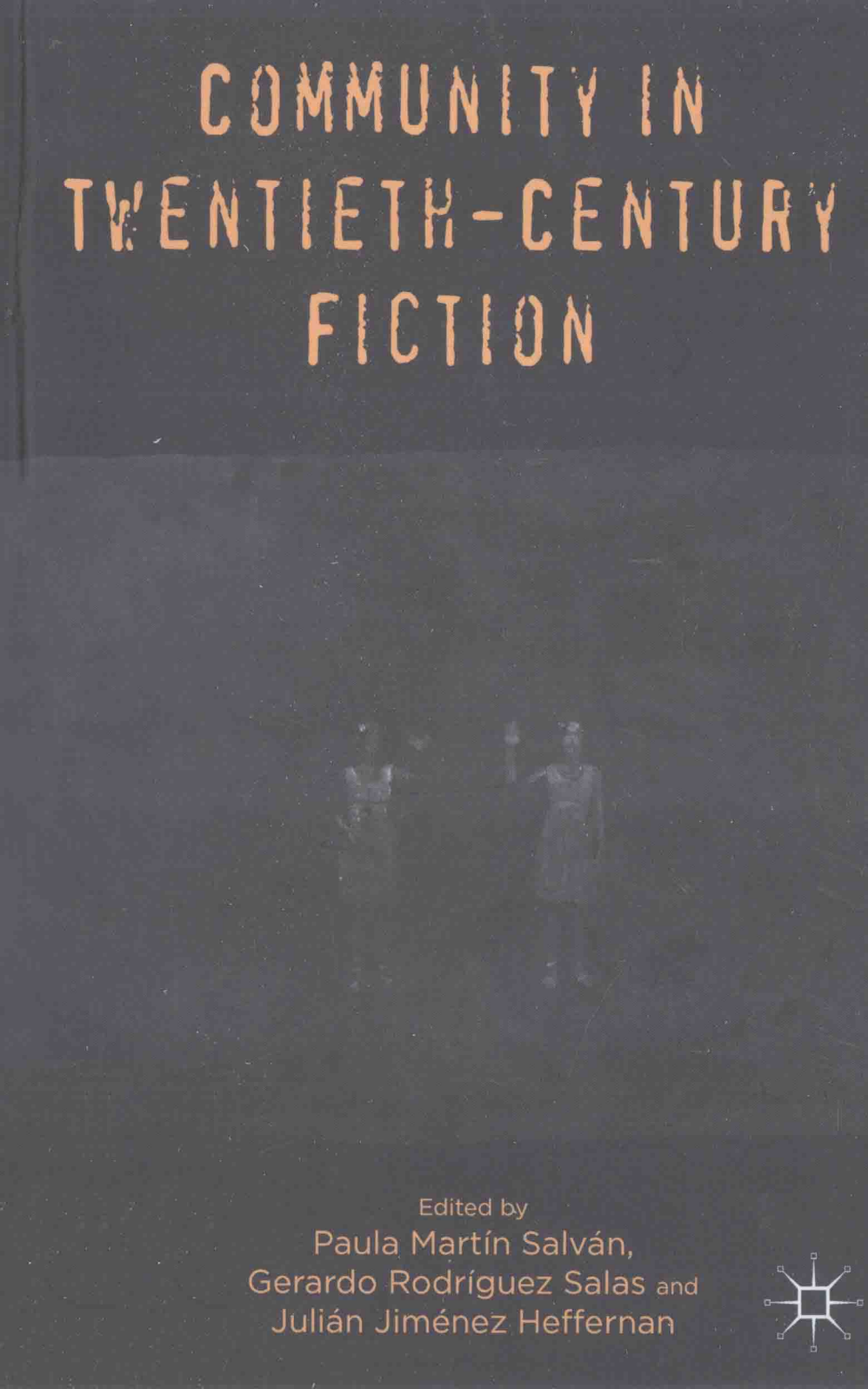
COMMUNITY IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY FICTION



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Paula Martín Salván,
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Julián Jiménez Heffernan

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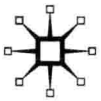

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Community in Twentieth-Century Fiction

Also by Julián Jiménez Heffernan

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THE AESTHETIC CONSTRUCTION OF THE FEMALE GROTESQUE IN KATHERINE MANSFIELD AND VIRGINIA WOOLF: A Study of the Interplay of Life and Literature (*co-authored with Isabel Andrés Cuevas*)

Preface

This book finds its theoretical inspiration in the "Nancy debate." With this name we refer to a conceptual frame of discussion: it is a set of theoretical interventions and responses around a seminal essay, "The Inoperative Community," published by the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy in 1983. Following closely an analytical model abstracted from the Nancy debate, the essays in this book explore the strategies of working and unworking, construction and deconstruction of communities in the short stories and novels of twelve twentieth-century writers. Nancy's argument on community, which revolves around the notions of singularity, finitude, transcendence, immanence and exteriority, have already oriented some interpretations of modern fiction, but we feel that none of them fully succeed in adapting the conceptual articulations of the argument in a systematic manner.[1] Perhaps only J. Hillis Miller has managed to pull together in a number of remarkable essays some of the crucial conceptual threads and hermeneutic possibilities implicit in Nancy's speculation.[2] In fact, the idea behind this book was originally inspired by Miller's groundbreaking applications of Nancy's ideas to English and American fiction. We would be glad if it could read as an homage to his unique example of generous lucidity and unflinching theoretical courage.

The Introduction, titled "Togetherness and its Discontents," intends to offer a critical revision of the controversial modern history of the sociological and philosophical idea of community. It is partly aimed at dissenting from Nancy's contention that there has been no thought of community and at reconsidering the crucial role the Hegel legacy (Marx, Tönnies) has played in the contemporary rise of anti-liberal communitarian projects. The Introduction examines the conceptual articulation underpinning recent interest in the concepts of community and auto-immunity in Anglo-American (Rorty, Laclau, Mouffe) and Continental philosophy (Nancy, Blanchot, Agamben, Esposito, Badiou, Derrida, Hägglund). Next, a description is provided of the ways in which this renovated debate on community may enhance the hermeneutic protocols of contemporary narrative analysis. In this particular respect, we are more confident than J. Hillis Miller in the actual relevance of a category like *inoperative* or *unworked community* both to life and to contemporary fiction.

The first essay by Pilar Villar-Argáiz examines James Joyce's literary construction of organic communal immanence through the identification of five operative communities in Joyce's short story "The Dead:" the Catholic community, the nationalist community, the Dublin bourgeoisie, Gabriel's

family, and finally his matrimony. Despite the pervasive oppressiveness of these five communities, they are however rendered transitorily inoperative—literally suspended—by Joyce's deft resort at the end of the story to a symbolic strategy of unworking based on singularity, finitude and exteriority.

In his essay on Katherine Mansfield, Gerardo Rodríguez Salas also examines the modernist attempt to deflate the watertight immanence of social communities, but in this case the strategies of unworking prove unsuccessful. Binary human relations—materialized in Jean-Luc Nancy and Maurice Blanchot's idea of the community of lovers—are marked by an ardent desire to participate in otherness through "laceration" or the exposure of inner selfhood to the outside. Yet communication, riddled by metafictional consciousness, fails to ensure an understanding between lovers. Unprejudiced corporeity is symbolically suggested as a letout from immanence, but never fully authorized.

The third essay by Julián Jiménez Heffernan reads Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* against the dominant critical tendency that celebrates the coherence and opportunity of its providential design. This new reading explores the ravages of interpersonal disarticulation produced within operative communities sanctioned by the "communion" of Family and/or Church. In this reading, communion breeds incommunication and, ultimately, the conflagration or end of community. Waugh's own definition of his novel as "a panegyric preached over an empty coffin" is placed in sharp contrast with Nancy's contention that an inoperative "community is calibrated on death as on that of which it is precisely impossible to *make a work.*"

Paula Martín Salván's first essay analyzes the notion of commitment in connection to the overlapping and competing communities—national, ideological, professional, friends, lovers—dramatized in Graham Greene's *The Quiet American*. The reading of the novel focuses on the irreconcilable character of the loyalties demanded by each community, and on the impossibility of remaining detached from all forms of operative community. The traditional political interpretations of the novel will be here approached from the communitarian perspective, mainly drawing on Badiou's conception of the faithful subject and Derrida's notion of communitarian auto-immunity.

In the next essay, María J. López explores the communitarian dimension of the novels by the South African writer, Alex La Guma, which can be seen as working in two different ways. On the one hand, there is an explicit communitarian concern, informed by La Guma's Marxist-Leninist ideology and his conception of the writer as an historian of the people that must guide the morals and objectives of the community; hence, his realist depiction of the political and racial communities prevalent in apartheid South Africa and of the need for collective political action. On the other hand, drawing on Jacques Derrida's and Ernesto Laclau's reassessment of certain Marxist categories, López argues that there is in La Guma's writings what she calls a

ghostly communitarian dimension: the centrality of the figure of the ghost and the recurrent "messianic" moments destabilize the rigidity and essentialism of racial identities and positions, promising a heterogeneous and undecidable future—"a democracy to come"—and a community beyond racial and social divisions.

Robertson Davies' *The Cornish Trilogy* poses a challenge to the idea of individuation in art. The next chapter by Mercedes Díaz Dueñas examines the community of artists and their trans-finite redemption through art. While artists seek to individuate from familial, national or cultural communities, they become involved in other types of community, like the community of artists (and academics). The ceaseless drive towards several organic—worked and operative—communities is deftly undermined by parody and irony. Part of the irony is bent on exposing the delusion of avowable secrecy presumably grounding immanent and/or operative communities.

Gerardo Rodríguez Salas's second essay analyzes Janet Frame's deconstructive approach to the problem of community in her novel *The Carpathians* (1988). It explores different communitarian conceptions in Frame's novel, from the most organic (national and local) to the least organic—the community of one, linked to the *community of debt*, a category drawn from Derrida and Esposito. Frame's sustained deconstructive strategy leads to the ironic dismantling of the operative community and the fiction of the self-enclosed individual. The result is an *unworked community of one*, with a discredited, exposed, evicted singularity, which is never fulfilled either by a symbolic totalitarian or referential rationalist language.

Pilar Villar-Argáiz's second essay, on Edna O'Brien's short fiction, focuses on her critique of the conventional foundations of rural societies. O'Brien throws the immanence of traditional communities into doubt and tries to devise alternative communitarian forms in which previous marginalized subjects—most notably women—can be more truthfully accommodated. The suggested alternative community would be characterized by "openness" to an irreducible outside. The "openness" of the *inoperative* and *unavowable* community is revealed at three different levels: thematic-dialectic, symbolic and formal.

The next essay by Julián Jiménez Heffernan examines V.S. Naipaul's critique of modern revolutionary jargon in the light of Jean-Luc Nancy's denunciation of a communitarian rhetoric based on ideas of communion or fusion into the "People" or the "Nation." In his novels of the 1960s and 1970s, Naipaul consistently depicts modern revolutions in the Third World as secular and contingent efforts to re-instate a viable community. Still, the essentialist Marxism which lies at the core of many ideologies of revolutionary nationalism can be seen as the "working" of an immanent community in the make. Naipaul views this process with sardonic dismay, as a "parodic performance" (Butler) of words, not deeds. The new politician is thus described as trading in the "empty signifiers" (Laclau) of foreign political traditions.

Paula Martín Salván's second essay explores the textual spaces of communitarian reconstitution in Don DeLillo's fiction. Drawing on Nancy's contention that modern thought of community is marked by nostalgia of communitarian intimacy, this essay analyzes four articulations in DeLillo's novels that emerge from the teleological view of the contemporary as a state of loss regarding past models of organic community: neighbourhood, terrorism, language and crowds. These models of community respond to the etymology traced by Roberto Esposito for the term, according to which the common obligation (the *munus*) is what brings individuals into a communitarian formation, and not what they share or have in common.

Throughout J.M. Coetzee's oeuvre, there is an undermining of the collective projects of national, political and ethnic communities. In a close reading of the postscript to *Elizabeth Costello* and *Age of Iron*, María J. López shows how the act of writing and sending a letter projects a community neither of immanence, nor of fusion, but of contagion and touching, in which singularities are abandoned on each other, at the limit that exposes their singularity and finitude. For Coetzee, the writer is not a herald of a national, political, ethnic or moral community. His only message is the work of literature itself, the being-together that exposes us to others and to our death. Central to this essay's argument is Nancy's and Derrida's approach to the problem of the body vis-à-vis the community.

Margaret Atwood's futuristic dystopias provide an excellent ground to test the hermeneutic reach of the notions of finitude (Nancy) and immunity (Esposito, Derrida). In the final essay, Mercedes Díaz Dueñas reads *Oryx and Crake*, *The Year of the Flood*, and the earlier *The Handmaid's Tale* as dialectical fables of opposition between the immunity provided by operative communities and the exteriority of finite otherness. These novels splendidly portray both the human compulsion to erase finitude and obsession for immunity, while endowing language with the extraordinarily ambivalent power of bringing these communities into existence while exposing their deceitful immanence.

Notes

1. Jessica Berman's *Modernist Fiction, Cosmopolitanism, and the Politics of Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001) is an extraordinary exploration of models of "cosmopolitan community" in the works of Henry James, Marcel Proust, Virginia Woolf and Gertrude Stein, but her readings fall short of exhausting all the theoretical implications latent in Nancy's and Blanchot's writings on community. A similar shortcoming is noticeable in Sue-Im Lee's *A Body of Individuals: The Paradox of Community in Contemporary Fiction* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State UP, 2009), a remarkable book which, despite its ambitious title, only explores novels by Toni Morrison, Richard Powers, Karen Tei Yamashita and David Markson. In *Postcolonial Narrative and the Work of Mourning* (Albany, NY: Suny P, 2004) Sam Durrant brilliantly

analyzes the work of J.M. Coetzee, Toni Morrison and Wilson Harris. His aim is to show that postcolonial literature "invites us to participate in the *creation* of community" (22), as it engages us in a collective work of mourning. We see, hence, how Durrant's argument is limited to the postcolonial community, whereas we intend to point to a community that would go beyond such a historical or political delimitation.

2. Miller had already applied Nancy's seminal meditations on community to the interpretation of Henry James' novels in *Literature as Conduct: Speech Acts in Henry James* (New York: Fordham UP, 2005), but it is in his more recent book, *The Conflagration of Community: Fiction Before and After Auschwitz* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2011), where he offers a selection of some of his recent forays into modernist and postmodernist fiction, where his reliance on Nancy's ideas is more evident. Miller's book focuses chiefly on a modernist canon (three novels by Kafka) while reserving some attention to more contemporary novels by Kertész and Morrison.

Acknowledgements

In the spring semester of 2003, Paula Martín Salván attended J. Hillis Miller's seminar "Models of Community in Victorian Multi-Plotted novels," taught at the University of California at Irvine. The inspiration for this book can be traced back to that occasion. As we mentioned above, Miller's groundbreaking work on community has guided our research. We are grateful to him for his presence, kindness and advice. We would also like to thank the staff of the Library of the School of Humanities at the University of Córdoba, Spain, for their invaluable help; Tana, for finding the books; and José Luis and María for helping implement the framework.

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Gerardo Rodríguez Salas is Senior Lecturer in English Literature at the University of Granada. He has published on literary theory and twentieth-century women's fiction (Katherine Mansfield, Zora Neale Hurston, Gertrude Stein, Janet Frame, Angela Carter, Carmel Bird). He is the author of *The Aesthetic Construction of the Female Grotesque in Katherine Mansfield and Virginia Woolf* (2012). His most recent articles have appeared in *Continuum, Australian Literary Studies, Antipodes, FEMSPEC, JASAL, Bilingual Review* and *Meanjin*.

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Introduction: Togetherness and its Discontents

Julián Jiménez Heffernan

The question of community

"Airlifting the IM-99A missile, like marriage, demands a certain amount of 'togetherness' between Air Force and contractor" (par. 1), so runs the opening of Thomas Pynchon's first published text, an article titled "Togetherness" which appeared in the December 1960 issue of the journal *Aerospace Safety*. This short piece foreshadows one of the lasting concerns in the narrative work of this postmodernist master: the problem of communal life. How, whether and why to live together: these were the questions that mattered then, right before the libertarian explosion of the 1960s, when an attempt to redefine *authentic togetherness*—Martin Luther King famously spoke of a "marvelous new militancy" sponsoring the "beautiful symphony of brotherhood"—was urged in all areas of civic and private existence; the questions that keep vexing us today, inhabitants of a global world one of whose most visible leaders once worked as "community organizer" in depressed urban areas of Chicago's South Side.[1] Pynchon recommended togetherness (team action, joint effort, error-proof communication) as a means to increase safety in a very restricted area of human experience. But the advice stretched to all potential areas of social life, as most successful inter-personal agreements are predicated, "like marriage," on "a certain amount of togetherness." It is unlikely that Pynchon's trope, the ironic yoking through simile of the public (commercial contract) and the private (marital contract), helped in any discernible way to increase aero-spatial safety, but it certainly managed to determine his subsequent novels, often read as ironic fables of improbable togetherness.[2]

Indeed Pynchon, a cynical realist with a stake in Machiavelli, is never totally persuaded of the natural need to commune. Why, then, togetherness? Or why community? The problem is not that of justifying community. Actually, in a pragmatic society like ours this justification seems pointless, as togetherness is invariably regarded as useful and uniformly accepted. Indeed, as Georges Van Den Abbeele has observed, "a minimal claim of

transpersonal relevance must be made if there is to be *any* politics at all" ("Introduction" xi). The problem is rather that of grounding such justification on a metaphysical order. This grounding was indeed attempted by scholastic and natural-law advocates of *communitas*, but modernity had other priorities on the agenda. And among the moderns, Thomas Hobbes was probably the first to fully de-legitimize the community by uncovering its ungrounded status: "Closer observation of the causes why men seek each other's company and enjoy associating with each other, will easily reach the conclusion that it does not happen because by nature it could not be otherwise, but by chance" (22). It is a savory paradox that it should be Ferdinand Tönnies, one of Hobbes's most committed interpreters, the thinker that has most fiercely disputed this claim: "we forget that living together is a primal fact of nature; it is isolation, not co-operation, that needs to be explained" (38). In one of Europe's earliest novels, Marivaux's *La Vie de Marianne* (1731–1742), we come across an identical realization: "Nous avons tous besoin les uns des autres; nous naisons dans cette dependence, et nous ne changerons riens à cela" (280). Indeed, to think the community is to shore it up with a reason—a justification that can be historical ("primal"), epistemic ("fact"), metaphysical ("of nature") or the three at once—and not simply to appoint it a function. Admittedly, moreover, both operations—finding a reason for and appointing a function to the community—do not fall exclusively within the epistemic domain of philosophy and the social sciences. Western fiction has also proved an invaluable platform where community-models have been relentlessly tested, discarded or confirmed. There is even a case for arguing that the very rationale of Western fictional narrative discourse is political, and it consists on the exploratory enactment—the experimental dramatization—of imagined communities. In answer to the question "How novels think?" Nancy Armstrong has recently argued that the British novel "came into being as writers sought to formulate a kind of subject that had not as yet existed in writing" (3). This view betrays a concern with individualism which is partly inherited from the Marxist tradition (Lukács), partly from the liberal tradition (Leavis), largely from a blending of the two (Watt), and no doubt powered by post-structuralist debate over the material production of subjectivity. A related yet slightly divergent view would focus rather on the production of community, arguably a prerequisite for individualist subjectivation. In this logic, the modern Western novel could be said to have come into being as writers sought to formulate a kind of community that had not as yet existed in writing.[3] The uninterrupted continuity of the narrative tradition, ever capable of reinventing itself, bears witness to the impossibility of finding the right formulation to the enigma of community. In fact, contemporary English fiction is still troubled by "the question of 'community' as it haunts us, as it abandons us or as it embarrasses us," (Nancy, *Finite* 27) and invariably dissatisfied with the communitarian formulations it provides in order to stabilize it.