Rethinking Community in Literature and Literary Studies:

The Secret Communal Life of *Paradise*: Rethinking Community in Toni Morrison's Fiction

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Abstract

The aim of my paper is to sketch a theoretical pattern for the analysis of literary texts from the perspective of community that overcomes traditional limitations and terminological fuzziness perceived in the overwhelming body of literary criticism devoted to the topic. My research on the representation of communities in fiction is based on Jean Luc Nancy's distinction between an 'operative' and an 'inoperative' model of community. Of particular interest for this chapter is the potential this distinction creates for the exploration of the role that novels play in the imaginative fashioning of alternative communities, both within the diegetic or fictional universe created within a particular text, and in connection to the relationships established between authors-narrators-readers.

In order to illustrate the kind of analysis derived from this theoretical framework, I will briefly discuss Toni Morrison's 1997 novel *Paradise* as case study. Morrison's work has been traditionally approached by critics in terms of oppressive vs. oppressed communities, through the perspectives of race and gender. It is my contention that Morrison's work actually explores the complexities and contradictions implicit in our use of the notion of community, depicting the crisscrossing of communities, the exclusion mechanisms used for the sake of protection, and the liminal and threshold areas between communities

1 Introduction

In *The Country and the City*, Raymond Williams famously claimed that "most novels are in some sense knowable communities," that is "the novelist offers to show people and their relationships in essentially knowable and communicable ways" (1975,

165). His statement bears witness to how the issue of community seems to be intrinsic to the analysis of fiction. In "Togetherness and its Discontents," Julián Jiménez Heffernan argues that "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" (2013, 2). This approach to community in literature actually points beyond the mimetic understanding of the relationship suggested by Williams, heading toward a utopian perception of the literary as the realm where the attempt to "wrest a realm of Freedom from a realm of Necessity" is dramatised (Jameson 1982, 19).[1]

As noted by Sue-Im Lee, "there are numerous other terms to describe unity – for example, organization, association, membership, collectivity, union, affiliation, group. Yet none of these terms approaches the cultural prevalence, emotional appeal, and political heft of the term community" (2009, 1). Yet, in spite of the omnipresence of the idea of community in literary studies, in most cases it seems to be taken at face value, without an in-depth questioning of what the term 'community' itself means, or the way in which literary texts may engage with the depiction, transformation and creation of communities in real life. As observed by Jiménez Heffernan, "the meaning of community is too often taken for granted, and reluctance to examine its potential logic is widespread" (2013, 3). Hence, the theoretical approach to the issue of community in fiction adopted in this essay emerges from a certain dissatisfaction with common approaches to 'community' in literary studies.

Traditionally, literary critics have tended to approach the question of how fiction represents community in strictly thematic-mimetic terms, considering the novel as a transparent artefact and ignoring the manipulation of language for aesthetic purposes intrinsic to literature. Moreover, common approaches to community in fiction tend to work dialectically, establishing binary oppositions used to identify discursive tensions in

fictional texts: individual vs. oppressive community; oppressive community vs. liberating/true community. These views are strongly influenced by the work of sociologists like Ferdinand Tönnies and Georg Simmel, whose link to literary studies would come via Georg Lúkacs, undoubtedly one of the most influential literary critics of the 20th century. These sociological approaches are often quite limiting in their application to literary criticism because the proposed binarisms tend to be evaluative or hierarchical, using the text as an ideological tool to vindicate a particular subaltern or oppressed community as better or truer than another one. Moreover, the very notion of what a community is has often been taken for granted, assumed uncritically, resulting in terminological fuzziness. Critics normally offer very little specificity as to the nature of the oppressive communities identified, so that terms such as community, society and state become indistinguishable, and the vocabularies of sociology and philosophy get blurred.[2]

Tönnies' distinction between community and society, established in his seminal work *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* (*Community and Civil Society*), has been adopted by literary critics in the attempt to map out the dialectics between forms of social organisation perceived to be restricting or oppressive for the individual and other, more desirable ones. In this sense, the implicit valuation of forms of community draws on Williams' perception, as expressed in his entry on "Community" in *Keywords*, that "community" tends to be regarded as a positively-loaded term. In seventeenth-century usage, "community was felt to be more immediate than society" (2014, 39), establishing a contrast between the two terms meant "to distinguish the body of direct relationships from the organized establishment of *realm* or *state*" (ibid). Most relevant to the use in literary criticism is Williams' observation that "unlike all other terms of social organization […] it seems never to be used unfavourably" (ibid, 40). Along similar lines, Zygmunt Bauman notes that "community, we feel, is always a good thing" (2001, 1), and

notes how it tends to be perceived as “a ‘warm’ place, a cosy and comfortable place” (ibid). His words involve an evaluative understanding of ‘community’ as opposed to ‘society’ that has permeated literary criticism on the representation of communities in fiction.[3]

My research on the representation of communities in fiction is inspired by Jean-Luc Nancy’s words: “Community – how are we to think this as a question?” (2016, viii). This essay involves a kind of loop movement, a re-turn, re-flexivity, and re-thinking of a notion that has been central for the analysis of literature, and specifically for the study of Toni Morrison’s work. My intention is to revisit a sense of community that has too often been regarded as *knowable*, and to re-discover a sense of strangeness in it.

2 Theoretical Framework

My own take on the notion of ‘community’ finds its theoretical ground in the intellectual debate started in the early 1980s with the publication of Jean-Luc Nancy’s seminal essay, “The Inoperative Community”.[4] Maurice Blanchot, Roberto Esposito, Alphonso Lingis, and Giorgio Agamben are some of the authors who have contributed to this debate, which finds its origin in the statement made by Nancy in the original 1983 essay, that “the gravest and most painful testimony of the modern world, the one that possibly involves all other testimonies to which this epoch must answer […] is the testimony to the dissolution, the dislocation, or the conflagration of community” (1991, 1). Nancy’s contention about the demise of modern communitarian projects triggered a discussion around the essentialist, organicist claims of traditional models of community, and the search for alternative notions of community. As noted by Esposito: “What brought these works into the same arena was a sort of modification of the previous semantic

category; in the sense that, quite literally, instead of community referring to a property or a belonging of its members, it alluded rather to a constitutive alterity that also differentiated community from itself, evacuating it of any identity-making connotations" (2013, 83). Broadly speaking, the mentioned philosophers have discussed two different models of communitarian relationships. The first is defined as institutionalised and conventional, based on notions of shared identity and common purpose provided by stable discursive and ritual practices, and exposed as a transcendental fallacy. The second "escapes all institutions, all forms of communal consistency" (Nancy 2016, x). It is proposed as a tentative, unstable and inoperative model of community based on "*inessential* commonality" (Agamben 2007, 18), and formulated as the momentary, contingent encounter of singular beings having nothing in common but their own finitude or mortality.

What characterises Nancy's and Blanchot's approach to community, as opposed to traditional takes on the notion that regard it as a "warmly persuasive term" (Williams 2014, 39), is the absence of a systematic proposal for a sustained model of community. As observed by Esposito, it seems impossible to ground any politics of community on the basis of Nancy's *inoperative* community, for his approach focuses on the relational nature of community rather than on how it works on individual subjectivity, thus remaining necessarily "impolitical" (2013, 84).[5]

My interest in the functional distinction between an 'operative' (worked, organic) community and an 'inoperative' or unworked community derives from its potential for the exploration of the role that novels play in the imaginative fashioning of alternative communities, both within the diegetic or fictional universe created within the space of a particular text, and in connection to the relationships established between authors,

narrators and readers. My critical assumptions, in connection to this framework, can be summarised as follows:

1) To the extent that the 'inoperative community' does not aspire to any sociological, descriptive validity, literature may actually be the proper realm for it to be effectively codified as a momentary encounter with alterity beyond recognisable, consistent communities.
2) It is possible to go beyond the thematic realm of representation (story) into that of modes of representation (discourse): creating communal narratives and showing the problematic of communal storytelling.

3 Toni Morrison's *Paradise* as Case Study

In order to illustrate the kind of analysis derived from this theoretical framework, I have chosen Toni Morrison's 1998 novel *Paradise* as a case study. As Lee has argued, Morrison's novels are central to contemporary discussions of fiction and community (2009, 4). Her work has been traditionally approached by critics in terms of oppressive vs. oppressed communities, through the perspectives of race and gender: white American vs. African American; patriarchal vs. female/maternal. This results in a strong tendency to binary readings of her novels, identifying one kind of community as evil or inauthentic and another one as redeeming or essentially good.

Paradise invites this kind of reading, as the story is articulated around two communities: The town of Ruby (founded by the descendants of African American slaves in Oklahoma) vs. the Convent (an abandoned house turned into a school for Indian girls and then into a refuge for "lost souls"), a patriarchal community founded and led by seven families vs. a female community of runaway/expelled women (from other similarly

patriarchal communities). Critics have tended to read the novel in terms of a vindication of the all-female community as a liberating force both for its inhabitants and for the women and men from Ruby, as opposed to the repressive, violent community of Ruby. This reading partially erases the complexity of communal life as depicted by Morrison, as it reduces it to a binary opposition and then privileges one of the two communities identified.[6] It is my contention that Morrison's work actually explores the complexities and contradictions implicit in our use of the notion of community, depicting the crisscrossing of communities, the exclusion mechanisms used for the sake of protection, and the liminal and threshold areas between communities.

3.1 Ruby as Operative Community

In my theoretical framework, operative communities would be those understood as instrumental to the self-fulfilment of individuals, granting them a sense of belonging and a larger-than-life meaning to existence. This is basically what Ruby means for its inhabitants in Morrison's novel. As an operative community, it relies on narratives of belonging, of exclusion vs. inclusion. Ruby functions like "some fortress you bought and built up and have to keep everybody locked in or out" (213). The community of Ruby is defined by essence, blood, and land. This essentialist understanding of community is, above all, articulated as racial purity: "The generations had to be not only racially untampered with but free of adultery too […] Unadulterated and unadulteried 8-rock blood" (217). Furthermore, Ruby is a teleological community characterised by transcendence and meaningful death, as evinced by the fact that the town takes its name from the first member of the community to die, Ruby Morgan – "they named the town after one of their own" (17). Finally, being an operative community, Ruby is crucially

defined by fusion, homogenisation, and sameness: “neither the founders of Haven nor their descendants could tolerate anybody but themselves” (13).

3.2 Immunity and Auto-Immunity

Operative communities function through the binary logic of inclusion/exclusion; same/other. In this regard, Jacques Derrida’s ideas about immunity and auto-immunity, as protection mechanisms deployed by all kinds of communities, are central to my theoretical framework as well. In exploring how fiction may depict the risks posited to individuals and communities, these notions underscore the importance of borders for protection and belonging as well as the risk of self-protection destroying community itself, what Derrida calls auto-immunity.[7]

Paradise opens with an act of immunitary violence, as a group of nine armed men arrive at the Convent and start shooting at the women. From there, the narrative goes back to the origins of the town of Ruby, and its development over the past decades. In the course of the story, the attack on the Convent is disclosed as an action intended to protect the Ruby community from what is perceived as an external threat. The Convent massacre can be read as an act of scapegoating, based on the association between the Convent and the problems perceived in Ruby: “the one thing that connected all these catastrophes was in the Convent. And in the Convent were those women” (11).[8] The Convent is thus articulated as Ruby’s necessary Other or its Outside, the “Out There” (16) through which its discourse of exceptionalism is constructed and reinforced.[9] Morrison, in interview with Marcus, notes how the notion of Paradise is normally defined “by who is not there as well as who is” (qtd. in Kearly 2000, 14).

The terms used by the Ruby patriarchs emphasise their fear of what they perceive to be a dangerously free group of women who do not abide by the rules of a patriarchal system: “Bodacious black Eves unredeemed by Mary” (18); “They don’t need men and they don’t need God” (276). We read about the Convent as a space for “women who chose themselves for company, which is to say not a convent but a coven” (276), and the townsmen refer to them as “Bitches. More like witches” (ibid). The suggestions of their practicing black magic (“members, it was thought, of some other cult,” 11) echoes a paranoid discourse deeply imbricated in American culture, prone to witch hunt and scapegoating practices.

The attack on the Convent and its effect on the town, however, is depicted by Morrison as an auto-immunitary action. In using the violence they were supposedly trying to escape, the Ruby patriarchs threaten the very essence of their achievement, the defence of any of their female citizens from any form of violence: “Nothing for ninety miles around thought she was prey” (8). Auto-immunity, as depicted by Derrida in connection to communal life, involves the destruction of the very organism meant to be protected (1996, 51). The idea of auto-immunity was invoked by Morrison herself in an essay from 1974, “Rediscovering Black History,” where she states: “In trying to cure the cancer of slavery and its consequences, some healthy as well as malignant cells were destroyed” (41). And the idea is repeatedly emphasised in the text: “How could so clean and blessed a mission devour itself and become the world they had escaped?” (292); “How can they hold it together, he wondered, this hard-won heaven defined only by the absence of the unsaved, the unworthy and the strange? Who will protect them from their leaders?” (306). The operative community, in its obsession with purity and safety, turns back on itself, ironically opening a breach in its consistency.

A further development of the auto-immunitary dynamic may be observed in the context of intergenerational relations within Ruby. While the adults perceive Ruby as a community sealed off from the rest of the world, where black people can be exempt from the evil influences of a white society and its violence, the younger generation see it as a suffocating, limiting self-enclosed place from which they aim to escape. Billie Delia and KD best embody this impulse, as do the Beauchamp brothers who try to give voice to their ideas about communal life. The patriarchs' position reveals how their obsession with immunising Ruby may provoke a self-destructive generational chasm: "He wondered if that generation – Misner's and K.D.'s – would have to be sacrificed to get to the next one" (94). As Jennie J. Joiner has claimed, the patriarchs of Ruby try to exert on their youngsters the same kind of control their elders suffered as slaves, limiting "the younger generation's access to masculinity" in a way that "mirrors [the] white oppression of black masculinity" (2010, 61).

3.3 Liminal Areas and Inoperative Communities

The operative community of Ruby, however, is not as immunised or separated from the Outside as its inhabitants would like it. One aspect Morrison's narrative style and structure reveal is that the contact between both communities has been constant in the past, and that they are interdependent. On the surface, the relationships between the two communities are mainly commercial. The women at the Convent "sold produce, barbecue sauce, good bread and the hottest peppers in the world" (11). Upon meeting her, Connie tells Mavis that "[a]lways come. Somebody always come. Every day" (40), which evinces that the contact between Convent and town takes place on a daily basis. As the narrative unfolds, the stories of Ruby and the Convent women are interwoven in a series

of chapters that take their titles from the names of different female characters belonging to both realms.

The Convent, I contend, is not depicted as a stable, consistent community which can be articulated as an alternative to Ruby in any sense. Rather, the narrative emphasises repeatedly its transient nature, its status as a liminal space where damaged subjects can temporarily stay to reconstitute themselves.[10] Whereas Ruby is clearly articulated by Morrison as an operative community, the Convent, which is not a community in itself, is rendered as the space where inoperative communities may spring.

An inoperative community, as theorised by Nancy, is based on its members' constant recognition of otherness, finitude and death. Both Nancy and Blanchot take their cue from Georges Bataille's notion of "the community of those who have nothing in common" (Blanchot 1988, 1). This is proposed as a tentative, unstable model of community formulated as the momentary encounter of singular beings having nothing in common but their own mortality (Nancy 1991, 26-27).[11] These communities would be characterised by the overriding of all inscriptions of belonging to other (operative) communities, and they do not provide meaning to life, or the sublation of death into transcendental narratives. Moreover, they cannot last in time, but happen only as momentary encounters (Blanchot 1988). That is to say, the kind of community they envision does not have as a goal the establishment of an identity, communal or individual, for its members. Both Agamben and Esposito insist on the idea that this kind of community is free from the demands of commonality based on the identity of its members.[12]

Rather than articulating a solid and permanent community that can work as an alternative to Ruby's patriarchal community, Morrison's novel offers a varied exploration of moments when the borderlines of operative communities give way and allow for the

momentary encounter of singularities in the text. These are transversal (involving members of either community), asymmetrical moments, including:

- Dovey's encounters with her "Friend," a stranger who appears near her house (90-93), which are kept secret: "Dovey kept forgetting to ask Steward, or anybody else, who he might be […] perhaps that alone made her keep his visits secret" (92). Their relationship, whose terms are established by Dovey in the narrative, depends on their lack of knowledge, the keeping of their talk at the level of the anecdotic: "Thing was, when he came, she talked nonsense. Things she didn't know were on her mind […] By a divining she could not explain, she knew that once she asked him his name, he would never come again" (ibid). In time, Dovey comes to be jealous of anyone who potentially shares her secret: "Her only fear was that someone else would mention him, appear in his company, or announce a prior claim to his friendship. No one did. He seemed hers alone" (ibid).
- Arnette going to the Convent to ask for an abortion, which Connie refuses to practice. Later, she returns to give birth to a baby who dies after a few days because her mother had tried to provoke the abortion herself in a violent way. As the baby remains in the Convent after she leaves, he establishes a lasting, undesired link to the Convent women (249-50).
- The secret exchange between Soane and Connie, prompted by Soane's gratitude after Connie saves her son Scout from a car accident by "stepping in," a magical practice Lone has taught her (245). This initiates a secret exchange between them that will last for decades: "They traded that basket back and forth for years" (247). Their relationship is grounded on their contemplation of Scout's near death and his salvation.

- Connie breaking her “thirty celibate years” (228) after being “lovestruck” (ibid.) when meeting Deek. Their relationship may be seen as an illustration of Blanchot’s idea of a community of lovers (1988): self-fulfilled, detached from any reference to the outside world or to language. In its depiction, the narration becomes unstable, tentative rather than descriptive: “What did he say? Come with me? What they call you? How much for half a peck? Or did he just show up the next day for more of the hot black peppers? […] Did she really drop to her knees and encircle his leg, or was that merely what she was wanting to do?” (ibid); “On the way back they were speechless again. What had been uttered during their lovemaking leaned toward language, gestured its affiliation, but in fact was un-memorable, -controllable or -translatable” (229).
- Connie’s meeting with the mysterious green-eyed man, a stranger appearing at her door who claims to have met her before – “Come on, girl. You know me” (252). The exchange between them is brief, but it illustrates momentary attraction, first expressed through communication – “Consolata was beginning to slide toward his language like honey oozing from a comb” (ibid) – and then through physical proximity: “Suddenly he was next to her without having moved” (ibid). The encounter is characterised as “full of secret fun” (ibid).

Other similarly momentary communities include encounters between characters from the Convent and Ruby, like Dovey and Connie, KD and Gigi, Lone and Connie, and many others. These encounters are normally happening in secret, behind the backs of Ruby’s patriarchs, and they constitute a breach of the town’s self-enclosed order. As the Convent symbolically represents the town’s ‘Out there,’ whatever happens there may be said to be erased from the official record of Ruby, from its public history. Thus, Soane’s abortion, Arnette’s traumatic childbirth, Deek and Connie’s relationship, etc., all happen as part of

Ruby's underhistory, things which have officially not taken place. They constitute the subaltern communal history of Ruby. In the patriarchs' perception, the Convent is "dark and malevolently disconnected from God's earth" (18), but this is precisely why it can function as a non-place where the town can hide its sins away. The described momentary communities are based on vulnerability, in the sense that they involve individuals whose situation puts them under threat in the Ruby community and who can only go to the Convent as the place where such vulnerability is not going to be punished or used as a tool for chastisement. As Romero claims, "[the Convent] women have seen the people of Ruby at their weakest: as adulterers, drunk, liars, would-be murderers…" (2005, 419). And we could add, they have kept silent about it, acting as Ruby's secret sharers.

3.4 Communal Narrative Structure

As mentioned above, the complex crisscrossing of unstable, momentary communities depicted in *Paradise* is imbricated in the narrative technique used by the author in the writing of the novel. Morrison's work is often constructed as a communal narrative structure in itself, showing the storytelling process, the reconstruction of truth and history as a communal effort made of competing, fragmentary narratives, a technique inherited from William Faulkner and other Modernist writers.[13] The truth emerging from communal life is incomplete, fragmentary, often contradictory, as opposed to the smooth, myth-like unified truth emerging from operative communities as observed by Nancy (1991, 50-51).

The novel is divided in nine chapters (Ruby, Mavis, Grace, Seneca, Divine, Patricia, Consolata, Lone, Save Marie), each one titled after one of the women appearing in the novel (the first and last are titled after deceased characters: Ruby, the first to die

and after whom the town is named, and Save Marie, the first one to die after 20 years, disabled daughter of one of the founding families). Of these, five belong to the women from the Convent, and the other four to the Ruby women (Ruby, Patricia, Lone, Save Marie).

The technique used by Morrison is tremendously complex and intricate, ranging from free indirect speech to narrated monologue, and changing the focalisation frequently within each chapter. This allows her to infiltrate the consciousness of most characters in the novel, without ever resorting to a traditional omniscient narrator. As Christiansë observes, omniscient narration, typically considered as an "unimpeachable mode" (2013, 3), is consistently challenged by Morrison's narrative style. The result is a narrative full of overlaps, partial truths, competing versions of the same events, which underscores the *process* rather than the result of narration. As observed by Davidson, *Paradise* examines the importance of collective narrative in the reconstitution of community (2001, 355-6). However, the voice and consciousness of all characters taken collectively cannot produce a unified story about their own history, their fragments can be stitched together but they do not fuse into a single myth of origin, as is common in operative communities (Nancy 1991, 49). Therefore, the novel invites readers to engage in the effort to construct a communal narrative out of these fragments and perspectives, who become thus an "interpretive community" (Fish 1976, 483), joined around the literary text and its secrets. This process is meant to remain unfinished, incomplete, just as the communal encounters between characters fall short of constituting a consistent, renewed community.[14] Ultimately, Morrison challenges the idea of a *knowable* community by producing a text which addresses the constructed nature of every community as a storytelling process.

4 Conclusion: Deconstructing Communities in Fiction

My research on the representation of community in literature takes its cue mainly from J. Hillis Miller's work on the notion of community over the past decade, in the books *The Conflagration of Community* (2011) and *Communities in Fiction* (2015). His seminal research into this topic combines insightful close readings of specific texts with a sophisticated theoretical approach inspired by Jacques Derrida's and Jean-Luc Nancy's philosophical investigations into ethics and community. An early example of how he has been able to advance a model for literary analysis from Nancy's and Blanchot's ontological approach to the topic of community can be found in the essay "Unworked and Unavowable: Community in *The Awkward Age*" from his book *Literature as Conduct: Speech Acts in Henry James* (2005). In this regard, Miller stands, together with Derek Attridge, as one of the few contemporary critics who have been able to truly incorporate deconstructive philosophy into literary analysis.

Their work may be perceived as part of a burgeoning field of study, concerned with analysing the representation and creation of communities within the field of literature, and critically deconstructing traditional, essentialist notions of community. This is a truly interdisciplinary enterprise, which often draws on different fields of study such as postcolonialism (Hall, Bhabha), sociology (Bauman), political theory (Anderson, Hardt & Negri), or trauma studies (Alexander), in its search for a critical vocabulary which may contribute to the redefinition of community.[15] In their study of cosmopolitanism, authors like Jessica Berman in *Modernist Fiction, Cosmopolitanism, and the Politics of Community* (2001) or Berthold Schoene in *The Cosmopolitan Novel* (2009) have found the grounds for the deconstruction of identitarian notions of nationality in a way that I find exemplary of contemporary approaches to the issue. Both use Nancy's

idea of the "singular plural" to redefine national community as imagined in modernist and contemporary works respectively.

It seems impossible to provide a detailed account of recent literary criticism on fiction and community, though Su-Im Lee does offer an interesting, if somewhat incomplete, list (2009, 167, n. 1). To this list, I would add recent work which has specifically applied the ideas proposed by Nancy, Blanchot and other deconstructive philosophers, including Lee's own monograph *A Body of Individuals: The Paradox of Community* (2009), as well as Ana Luszczynska's *The Ethics of Community: Nancy, Derrida, Morrison, and Menendez* (2012), Martín-Salván's *The Language of Ethics and Community in Graham Greene's Fiction* (2015), Kaoru Yamamoto's *Rethinking Joseph Conrad's Concepts of Community* (2016), Jesús Blanco Hidalga's *Jonathan Franzen and the Romance of Community* (2017), and Bettina Jansen's *Narratives of Community in the Black British Short Story* (2018). The growing volume of scholarly work devoted to the analysis of the ways in which literature may articulate alternative models of community, bears witness to Nancy's thesis that "being as being *in* common is (the) being (of) literature" (1991, 66).

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[1] My research on community and literature is part of a collective effort, carried out by scholars from the Universities of Cordoba and Granada. Research for this essay was funded by the research project "Secrecy and Community in Contemporary Narrative in English," funded by the Spanish Ministry of Economy, Industry and Competitiveness.

[2] A case in point may be found in Lee's survey on the notion of "dissenting community," in which Laclau and Mouffe's affirmation that "society is imposible" is taken as the grounds on which to argue about the crisis in postmodernist thinking about community (2009, 11).

[3] See also Bennett et al. (2005), on how community has traditionally been "felt to be more 'organic' or 'natural', and therefore stronger and deeper, than a rational or contractual association of individuals, such as the market or the state" (51).

[4] See Esposito (2013, 83), on the authors who participated in this intellectual dialogue through a number of books. Nancy himself briefly recounts the story of this debate in his 2003 essay "The Confronted Community" (30).

[5] This problem has been recently addressed by Nancy in *The Disavowed Community* (2016).

[6] Among the critics who have articulated this view are Kearly (2000, 12), who describes the convent as "a strong maternal space for community that poses a stark contrast to the patriarchal lineage and architecture of Ruby"; Davidson (2001, 372 n. 1), who separates the "patriarchal" and "matriarchal" storylines in the novel; Romero (2005, 419), who claims that the novel "clearly privileges the nurturing, inclusive communal space the Convent has become"; Michael (2006, 156), identifying the Convent as "an alternative community of women"; and O'Reilly (2004, 142) and Wagner-Lawlor (2013, 153), who see in the Convent a utopian space for community through female hospitality and maternal bonding. Geoffrey Bent identifies

this binarism as endemic to the novel itself, contrasting "male intransigence" and "female vulnerability" (1999, 146), and claiming that "in making her point [Morrison] resorts to the very didacticism she condemns" (ibid., 149): "Virtue and vice seem to have been rigorously sorted along the convenient divide of gender; all the women are good, all the men bad" (ibid., 148).

[7] Derrida defines auto-immunity as "a principle of sacrificial self-destruction ruining the principle of self-protection (that of maintaining its self-integrity intact), and this in view of some sort of invisible and spectral sur-vival" (1996, 51).

[8] Kearly identifies the scapegoating process enacted by the patriarchs, when talking about their "sins that are imagined but nonetheless made real by the quick association of objects in the Convent with problems in the community" (2000, 15). Similarly, Mellard sees the women at the Convent as an ideological fantasy of the Ruby community, which identifies them as "the conceptual Jew" figure, following Žižek (2010, 351).

[9] See Dalsgård (2001, 241): "By insisting on the inextricable connection between the exceptionalist striving for perfection and a repressive and ultimately violent isolationism, Morrison emphasizes the process of supplementarity at work in exceptionalist discourse: An apparent plenitude, the paradisiacal (African) American community is revealed by the imperfection outside and/or beyond its limits and against which it seeks to define itself."

[10] Fraile-Marcos (2003, 23) analyzes the Convent as a Purgatory, a liminal area or "Third Space." Dalsgård rejects the possibility of considering the Convent as alternative to Ruby's exceptionalist model of community: "she does not offer an exceptionalist alternative. To do so would imply a reinscription of the community's political rational belief in holistic categories […] Rather than being posited as exceptionalist Ruby's binary opposite, the Convent functions as Morrison's most radical dramatization of the 'transitional social reality' inscribed by the nation's 'cultural temporality'" (2001, 243).

[11] The term 'singularity' is opposed to a traditional understanding of individuality as independent consciousness in a Romantic sense. It involves a giving up of control over identity creation processes and, according to Blanchot and Esposito, is not grounded on the subject as a "full being," but rather on a "principle of incompleteness" (Blanchot 1988, 5). This principle of insufficiency is precisely what allows the inoperative community to emerge: "A singular being does not emerge or rise up against the background of a chaotic, undifferentiated identity of beings, or against the background of their unitary assumption, or that of a becoming, or that of a will. A singular being *appears*, as finitude itself: at the end (or at the beginning), with the contact of the skin (or the heart) of another singular being" (Nancy 1991, 27-28).

[12] Agamben talks about "an *inessential* commonality, a solidarity that in no way concerns an essence" (2007, 18), whereas Esposito defines community as "the totality of persons united not by a 'property' but precisely by an obligation or a debt" (2010, 6).

[13] Morrison had already practiced a similarly complex narrative technique in some of her earlier novels, particularly in *Beloved* and *Jazz*, and would continue using it in later ones like *Love*.

[14] Wyatt interprets the textual instability in terms of displacement (2017, 93), while Page has underscored how this is exemplary of Morrison's novels "in their privileging of polyvocalism, stretched boundaries, open-endedness, and unraveled binary oppositions" (1995, 34).

[15] See, among others, Stuart Hall, "New Ethnicities" (1989); Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (1994); Zygmunt Bauman, *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World* (2001); Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (1983); Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude* (2004); Jeffrey Alexander, *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (2004).

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