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A Reading of Community

The term *communitas* closely refers to a specific discourse in the humanities, ranging from cultural anthropology to political philosophy.[1] Philosophical writing and the conception of *communitas* seem intimately interlinked, as communitarian discourse at the same time tries to fathom and to practice *communitas*, moving towards it while at the same time underlining its liminal character. According to philosophers Jean-Luc Nancy and Maurice Blanchot, writing occupies a special position in relation to community.[2] Both see writing as an ecstatic space in between self and other(s), as community of "those who are without community."[3] In poststructuralist literary theory, the oscillating inter-relations of writer, text,

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[1] For a discussion of *communitas*, see Dorota Sajewska, "Toward Theatrical *Communitas*," in this issue.

[2]   As neither Nancy nor Blanchot mention the term *communitas*, I will refer to the corresponding term "community."

[3] Jean-Luc Nancy, "The Confronted Community a," trans. Amanda Macdonald, *Postcolonial Studies* 6, no. 1 (2003): 29, https://doi.org/10.1080/13688790308110. See also Maurice Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*, trans. Pierre Joris (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill, 1988), 1–26; Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, trans. Peter Connor et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 71–81.

and reader point towards openness and fluctuation, alterity and *différance*[4] within and beyond the normative borders of language. To read a text as a space of contact and contamination unveils the affective textual-bodily entanglement of verbal communication and corporeal engagement in reading and writing.

This image may come as a surprise—especially when we speak not of poetic literature, but of philosophical texts. Nonetheless, I want to examine Nancy's text "The Confronted Community" ("La communauté affrontée") as to its practices of effecting *communitas*. Nancy wrote this two-part essay in 2001 in reaction to Blanchot's response to Nancy's earlier text on community. Apart from its self-reflexivity in terms of the discourse on community, my own past confrontation with this text and the affective reflexes of desperation, urgency and the need to "do" something with this piece of writing will be key in my exploration here. I therefore probe Nancy's essay as to the *compearance* of writing and community, and to the biased interplay of reading and writing.[5] In a poetological reading, I examine the liminal processes of bodily-textual touching in reading-writing as a social and political space of confrontation and interaction, where micro-performances of inclusion and exclusion, of definition and transgression take place. Thus, I argue, reading becomes writing's relevant space of performing *communitas*, in and through the text.

Re-writing Community

Nancy's text "The Inoperative Community" ("La communauté désoeuvrée"), published in 1983 in French,[6] marks the beginning of a philosophical discussion about the understanding and construction of community that extends until to-day, even if on the margins of the discipline. Nancy recounts the context of this "birth" of a discourse as following: "In 1983, Jean-Christophe Bailly proposed a theme for a forthcoming issue of *Aléa* . . . . The proposed theme was, formulated thus: 'Community, number.'"[7] Nancy states that the idea of "community" had not been touched by post-war philosophical discourse due to reservations after the national-socialist conception of *Volksgemeinschaft*; and even today, the concept of *Gemeinschaft*, community, bears a taste of exclusionism and internal constraint. However, the configuration of community with "number" promised a different, deconstructionist look at the looming image of an idealized community, setting instead the stage for simultaneous pluralization and

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[4] Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 1–27.

[5] See Barbara Johnson, "Writing," in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, eds. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2017), 534.

[6] See Jean-Luc Nancy, "La communauté désoeuvrée," *Aléa* 4 (1983): 11–49.

[7] Nancy, "The Confronted Community," 27.

singularization of community.[8] With the shift from concrete communities to an abstract, potential yet "inoperative" community that appeals to everyone equally, the philosophical discourse takes new interest in the question of being-with. The focus of attention is no longer on community in opposition to society, but on an existential being-with that is "co-originary and coextensive" with "being-self."[9] For Nancy, the human condition consists in the exposure to others, "in common and to the in-common,"[10] in the mutual constitution of the self and the common, and in the in-between space of the "with."[11]

An important trace is a note on the publishing context, added by Nancy, stating that Bailly was to close down the journal *Aléa* shortly: "The days of journals built upon an 'ideology' seemed to us to be over . . . . That is also to say the days of journals that generated a 'community,' not that this word was used."[12] Moreover, Nancy diagnoses a "gradual disappearance of groups, collectives and communities of 'ideas,' and thus [an] evolution of the representation of a 'community' in general." The group associated with their newly formed journal was now "a fluctuating one, moreover, did not form a community." It resembled rather a network, "a meeting place for those who distanced themselves from all communities."[13] This observation on the landscape of French journals and editorial groups sheds light on Nancy's concern with community—and with writing (*écriture*), as his 1986 book *The Inoperative Community* marks the point when these two discourses, both working *in* writing and through texts, merge into an explicated "community of writing, the writing of community."[14] Nancy's thoughts on community are thus deeply intertwined with and informed by the practices of writing, reading, of textual co-inspiration, reviewing, editing, commenting, and publishing—practices that formed part of his everyday activities.

It is no wonder, then, that Nancy pays great attention to the specific field of textual community, honoring it with the chapter "A Literary Communism" in *The*

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[8] See Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, trans. Robert D. Richardson (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

[9] Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, xxxvii.

[10] Nancy, xxxvii.

[11] For a detailed discussion of Nancy's and Blanchot's co-evolving concepts of community, see e.g. Gregory Bird, "Community Beyond Hypostasis: Nancy Responds to Blanchot," *Angelaki* 13, no. 1 (2008): 3–26, https://doi.org/10.1080/09697250802156018; Ian James, "Naming the Nothing: Nancy and Blanchot on Community," *Culture, Theory and Critique* 51, no. 2 (2010): 171–187, https://doi.org/10.1080/14735784.2010.496594.

[12] Nancy, "The Confronted Community," 35.

[13] Nancy, 35.

[14] Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 42. See also Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Disavowed Community*, trans. Philip Armstrong (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 4–5; Juan José Martínez Olguín, "La communauté déplacée: Écriture et communauté dans le dialogue entre Maurice Blanchot et Jean-Luc Nancy," *Agora: Papeles de Filosofía* 38, no. 2 (2019): 202, https://doi.org/10.15304/ag.38.2.5610.

Inoperative Community.[15] Both Nancy and Blanchot perceive writing as a specific condition, a kind of fulfilment of *communitas* that lies in writing's fundamental ecstatic and radically communicative nature. They understand writing as the place where an opening takes place, where the I offers itself up for the Other. Writing, as conceived by Nancy, is the appeal that we direct at each other at the border; it constitutes these borders and at the same time transgresses them. In a more general claim in *The Inoperative Community*, Nancy sees the Aristotelian *logos*, the structure of communication that is "being shared"[16] in language, as the very site of exchange, contamination, and constitution. Yet other than spoken language, writing in general lacks a direct addressee and thus qualifies as the more radical exposure of the self and constitution of the common. Because, as Blanchot significantly notes, "'the one for whom I write' is the one whom one cannot know," writing establishes the "community of those who have no community."[17] Writing has to be sacrificed, offered to communication, "that is to say, presented, proposed, and abandoned on the common limit where singular beings share one another,"[18] the site where self and other co-appear ("compear"[19] in Nancy's terms) and undermine each other.

With the attention shifting from the one who writes to writing or literature as a site of exposure and interaction (and back again[20]), both Nancy and Blanchot endow writing with a certain autonomy, decentering authorship and the meaning that is fixed by the author's intention. Writing produces a twofold "body effect": while it often appears as "bounded,"[21] producing an "effect of a closed or finite thing," Nancy stages writing in parallel to his understanding of the body as "something open and infinite, . . . the opening of closure itself."[22] "The text interrupts itself at the point where it shares itself out—at every moment, to you, from him or her to you, to me, to them."[23] The text's practices of interrupting and sharing preclude its conception as an innocent carrier of meaning, as writing's almost creaturely

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[15] Nancy, as well as Blanchot, often write of "literature" when they refer to the community of writing and to the textual practices they describe. However, I argue that their considerations are not limited to "literature" alone. Nancy clarifies that to him, writing (*écriture*) "in its essence touches upon the body," Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, trans. Richard A. Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 11. In other words, what Nancy has in mind when writing of literature, text, or writing is writing that has affective power, regardless of genre or other classifications.

[16] Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, xxxviii.

[17] Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*, 24.

[18] Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 73.

[19] Jean-Luc Nancy, "La Comparution/The Compearance: From the Existence of 'Communism' to the Community of 'Existence,'" *Political Theory* 20, no. 3 (1992): 371–398, https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591792020003001.

[20] Nancy, *Corpus*, 17–19.

[21] Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 36–63.

[22] Nancy, *Corpus*, 122.

[23] Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 65.

agency[24] enters into an "opening" interaction with the reader. Writing thus becomes a liminal space of engagement that separates and connects, standing in for the fabric of *communitas*. In his later writings, Nancy will substitute or parallel the notion of writing (or communication as in his earliest texts) with an unlabeled *between*, a "with" that is its sole marker.[25] Thus, emerging from the image of the "community of writing" and writing as the site of community, Nancy's idea of community shifts towards abstraction, grappling with an eluding *between*, the void that confronts us.[26]

Yet there is another, parallel and oscillating modulation of attention, namely from literature or text to writing (*écriture*), a modulation that leads Nancy towards processual conceptions. The figure of writing destabilizes the notion of the text as a creaturely thing, shifting it towards the interaction of human corporeality and text. Writing understood as the deed of writing of a hand that writes focuses on the notion of becoming instead of being (Being). Writing is at the same time "'relating oneself'" and "being in relation."[27] We can thus understand writing as ambiguous, as a space or agent, and as action or process.

Ecstasy and the Confronted Reader

Writing is always in motion and interconnects corporealities, materialities, deeds, and affects. It repeats the active invocation of its verbial character (*écrire*) in the process of reading: reading reiterates writing, by which writing-reading becomes incessant, relational performing.[28] At this point, my exploration shifts from philosophy to literary studies and poetology, from an abstract notion of writing to the intimate engagement with a text and its "affective valences. These manifest in the rhetoric, the style, the mood of literary texts."[29] A text features its very own practices of arranging repetitions and elliptical spaces, breaks, fragments, currents; practices of ritualization and appointing roles. Trajectories, settings, materials, feelings are arranged in space and time, stirring up a certain atmosphere, evoking bodies moving and being moved, magnifying or hiding details, speeding up or

[24] See Sarah Bouttier, "Creaturely Texts, Texts on Creatures," *European Journal of English Studies* 19, no. 1 (2015): 111–122, https://doi.org/10.1080/13825577.2015.1004917.

[25] See Bird, "Community Beyond Hypostasis," 7, 16–19.

[26] Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus II: Writings on Sexuality,* trans. Anne O'Byrne (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 8; Bird, "Community Beyond Hypostasis," 22; James, "Naming the Nothing."

[27] Nancy, *Corpus II*, 11.

[28] As Neil Vallely suggests, to view literature as a verb helps to understand its elusiveness and the processes of affectation and networking that are "going on." See Neil Vallely, "(Non-)Belief in Things: Affect Theory and a New Literary Materialism," in *Affect Theory and Literary Critical Practice: A Feel for the Text*, ed. Stephen Ahern (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 50–52.

[29] Stephen Ahern, "Introduction: A Feel for the Text," in *Affect Theory*, 7.

slowing down. Of course, a text's affective valences, let alone something like writing's performance, cannot be established definitely, as its actualization is always situated and thus varies depending on the context that is never "unaffected by a reader's creative engagement."[30] As much as writing is hardly possible without corporeal intervention—a writing-through-corporeality traversed by experiences, affects, and emotions—reading does not take place without the investment of a corporeal reader affectively interacting with the text. "The body is the architectonics of sense"[31]—and the community of writing necessitates the multiple singular gestures of reading and the hands that begin to write.[32] These hands, as we can see, are Nancy's or Blanchot's; they are also the hands of, for example, Gregory Bird, Juan José Martínez Olguín, and mine. Reading writing re-translates into writing as the movement underway. In the repeated reading and re-writing in the discursive space of the unworked community, I realize how my "hand" picks up the gestures of Nancy, following similar paths, using mimetic strategies in replicating to the affective valences encountered in the text. According to Nancy, "writing is a matter of consigning rather than signifying,"[33] and so my reading-writing involves first of all strategies of relating. As writing is touching—"touching the body . . . with the incorporeality of 'sense' . . . , to make the incorporeal touching,"[34] touching others, touching touch itself—this liminal sphere of touching, the *between* of the relation involves reading, too. In this sense, writing is reading and reading is writing, the re-scription of writing; reading emerges as the neglected *compearant* of writing. The notion of reading as a submergent but widely spread practice, which has—apart from deconstructionist, critical readings (writings)—a tint of passivity and ordinariness to it, strongly suggests itself for a feminist exploration of community in writing(-reading). I will therefore read Nancy's writing through the affective process of reading.

According to Nancy, the communitarian quality of a text does not consist in the transmission of a fixed meaning or message. Rather, the communication constitutive of the "community of those without community" works on the level of affect. "The communication taking place between a writer and someone who, for lack of information or instruction, cannot even be his [!] reader, is not the communication of a message—but communication does take place."[35] There can be no correct reading; the reader's interaction with the text will be singular, just like the writing gesture is singular in itself. In order to lay out one singular

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[30] Ahern, "Introduction: A Feel for the Text," 15.

[31] Nancy, *Corpus*, 25.

[32] See Martínez Olguín, "La communauté déplacée," 206–207.

[33] Nancy, *Corpus II*, 5.

[34] Nancy, *Corpus*, 11.

[35] Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 73.

reading that evidently goes amiss in terms of "message," I will now examine my own encounter with Nancy's essay "The Confronted Community," or rather with its first part, a kind of preface initially confronting the reader.[36] Between the first part, addressed at and informed by contemporaneity, and the beginning of the second part, which unrolls the roots of Nancy's own preoccupation with community, a sharp break in temporality and tempo appears. While the first part is almost tumbling over itself, driven to full speed by its eagerness to encompass today's world, the second part's beginning seems almost immobile; sober, ordered, and dignified, like a file in an archive. While the second part is certainly affective, too, it is the first part that features the ecstatic intonation characteristic of several of Nancy's texts.[37]

I recall my initial resistance to the read when encountering this text some years ago. Actually, I never managed then to read more than the first couple of paragraphs; these, however, several times. I state with a certain surprise now that I was not able to bring myself to grasp what the whole thing was about. By means of repetition and ellipse, the text sped up its rhythm, urging me to sprint along without regard to potential losses. To pace down meant to be lost among the words and signs almost instantly. Repeated reading did not ease the dilemma, rather on the contrary—my inner opposition to the exalted text grew. Nancy's "wish to dress the wound with the usual tatters of worn-out finery"[38] made me think of some dubious theater piece. The text seemed to beg for attention, pointing at its literal adornment that made the read both vivid and impossible—an assemblage of objects or situations (e.g. "monstrousness," "tatters," "a gap") that often were paradoxical. "How to think the nihil without turning it back into an all-powerful and all-present monstrousness."[39] How to think the nihil? I got angry because I started to accuse the text and its subject—yes, I did blame the Nancy that had written the text—for deliberately excluding anyone who had not excessively dwelled upon such philosophical concepts ("lack of information or instruction"[40]). The text appeared to me as both a challenge and an insult, lingering on the border of the "community of writing" that had built up its exclusionary mechanisms—literally the confrontation (*affront*) its title suggested, turned against the reader.

Surprisingly, Nancy describes a similar experience in relation to Blanchot's *The Unavowable Community*—it "was simultaneously an echo, an amplification and

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[36] Nancy wrote the second part as preface to the second Italian edition of Blanchot's *The Unavowed Community*; both parts were written between September 11 and October 2001 and appeared together in book form in November 2001 in French. See Nancy, "The Confronted Community," 27, 35.

[37] For example in Nancy, *Corpus*; Nancy, *Corpus II*.

[38] Nancy, "The Confronted Community," 24.

[39] Nancy, 23.

[40] Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 73.

a riposte, a reservation, and, for that matter, in some ways a reproach."[41] He did not feel "either capable of or authorised to shine a light on the secret that Blanchot clearly designate[d] with his title"[42]—the unavowable. Even in his later *The Disavowed Community* (*La Communauté desavouée*, 2014), Nancy still notes his ambiguous insecurity as to the appeal of Blanchot's book to "go further," directed at him and the "community of writing" in general.[43] Something in these writings almost demonstratively escapes and eludes cognition, just like the unoccupied (*desoeuvrée*) community that "does not let itself be revealed as the unveiled secret of being-in-common. And, consequently, it does not let itself be communicated, even though it is the 'common' itself and doubtless because it is."[44] With this probing into the "unworked" (*désoeuvrée*), the texts on *communitas* almost inevitably seem to oscillate between euphoria and anger, motivation and frustration.

Yet, the text communicated with me, just as Nancy was "gripped by this reply"[45] by Blanchot. It touched me that *communitas* might have something to do with ecstasy, as the text administered an ecstatic oscillation, a kind of thrill suggesting that something extraordinary was about to happen. Yet despite repeated attempts, my understanding seemed to be trapped between the lines, falling between the characters, drifting off in diverse associative directions. I meditated over specific terms instead of grasping the whole; the stroboscopic effects of my reading disallowed me to put together the pieces. Pictures instead of flowing motion; my general reading technique failed. Nancy's oracle in the first paragraph seemed to fulfill itself: "At its limit, a concept breaks, a distended figure shatters, a yawning gap appears."[46] I seemed to hover somewhere in liminality, unable to go on, but unable to turn back either—after all, who could meditate on *communitas* without having read Nancy?

Stuck in this purgatory, I became more aware of the text's structure. Helmar Schramm described this shift in reading thus: "Normally, the kinetic factor as a technical means of ordering attention remains in the background. Only in the break, the disruption, do we recognize the interplay of language, perception and motion."[47] The fabric of Nancy's text itself, its structure and dynamics that allowed and disallowed me to grasp it, pushed me to consider its valences. The text's atmosphere of ecstatic excitement, an excitement that confronted me but that I could not locate, was what made me stumble and grope. I do not know whether I had

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[41] Nancy, "The Confronted Community," 30.

[42] Nancy, 30.

[43] Nancy, *The Disavowed Community*, 4–5.

[44] Nancy, "The Confronted Community," 31.

[45] Nancy, 30.

[46] Nancy, 23.

[47] Helmar Schramm, *Karneval des Denkens: Theatralität im Spiegel philosophischer Texte des 16. und 17. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1996), 38, translation—NS.

reached the "limit" of the concept; whether I had transgressed this limit or veered off in a completely different direction, staying firmly inside the boundaries of the "concept" (the norm?). How was I supposed to react to or interact with the text when to me it was a sort of Bakhtinian carnival or Turnerian *communitas* itself, a "world of topsy-turvy,"[48] and at the same time a retracing of the hierarchies and normative *dispositifs* of academic texts?[49] Would these hierarchies topple for more than a short, liminal while—or would the textual exposition and wrestling end with a restoration of the well-known order?

What did happen, then, was that I decided to refrain from trying to understand, and I shifted my interest in the text to the task of finding exalted phrases that our band could mash up into lyrics for a song. I reckon this came up because Nancy's writing, with its repetitions, speed patterns and general structure already presented something like a choreographed rhythm. "Whoever speaks is also singing beneath the words spoken, is beating out rhythm beneath the song,"[50] writes Michel Serres—and that is certainly true for writing, too. Nancy's text confronted me in its choreographic arrangement of ecstatic meaning and rhythm; but my reading body managed only to cope with the "valences" of the rhythmic, sensual order, ruling out the semantic structure of the text. The re-writing in musical terms was additionally favored by the fact that our music and Nancy's writing had certain parallels in its repetitive fragmentarization, in the tendency to diverge into disharmonies and asymmetry—tendencies that emerge even more intensely in Nancy's "corporeal" writing in *Corpus* and *Corpus II*.[51] The pictorial but bewildering sequences of the preface ("the gaping hole of the world," "stammering a strange uniqueness"[52]) also invited musical appropriation in their poetic lyrics. Thus, some of the text almost came to performance on a different level than the silent read; it was promised a musical body to encompass and transform it.

However, our bass player cut this attempt short by commenting that as a feminist music project, we should avoid crossing our songs with text fragments written by an old white well-educated man. Despite Nancy's focusing on the *between* or *with*, his emphasizing the community of those who have no community, the relation across the most abyssal gaps, despite his deconstructing the sexual difference as "not the difference between two or several things" but as "differing from itself . . . as 'relating oneself'"[53]—in this moment claims of subjectivity and

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[48] Thomas Postlewait and Tracy C. Davis, "Theatricality: An Introduction," in *Theatricality*, eds. Thomas Postlewait and Tracy C. Davis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 10.

[49] See Schramm, *Karneval des Denkens*, 251.

[50] Michel Serres, *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies (I)*, trans. Margaret Sankey and Peter Cowley (London: Continuum, 2008), 120.

[51] Nancy, *Corpus*; Nancy, *Corpus II*.

[52] Nancy, "The Confronted Community," 24.

[53] Nancy, *Corpus II*, 11.

identity turned full circle. Authorship re-entered through the backdoor into the ecstasy of communitarian touching; the dis-contained subject of community was re-contained through the process of reading.[54] The space of reading-writing, on the one side erasing hierarchies in the acknowledgement of the embodied *différance* of all singularities, was on the other side confronted with the situatedness of reading-writing and troubled by questions of privilege.[55] How could the text deal with this sort of cross-reading, the jamming of its opening strategies?

"We": Situated Reading-Writing

"It is with these elements that work must be done: with community confronted by itself, with us confronted by us, the *with* confronting the *with*."[56] Despite Nancy's focus on the *with* and his movements towards opening and discontainment, the issue emerges that if we speak of "us," we must also ask who "we" are, and where "we" are.[57] Nancy's text produces community on several levels, creating and shaping and dissolving multiple "wes." For example, it stages community or being-with on the axis of education and academic initiation—who is able to follow Nancy's argument, who gets stuck in the wilderness of concepts and terms?[58] To whom does the text speak, and how does it do so on different levels? What does the text communicate, if the vast majority of human beings of the world has neither the possibility (linguistic, educational, financial, technological) nor the intention to enter this communion of reading-writings? Whom does the communitarian ec-stasy of the text concern, if it haunts humankind as a disregarded, rejected space that itself works on mechanisms of intersectional exclusions centered on the domination of *logos*?[59] "The Confronted Community" also invokes community on the scale of geographic and cultural spheres, discussing Western hegemonic tendencies, "a civility . . . in the process of fanning out to the very limits of the world."[60] The textual "we" wavers between the internally broken occidental per-spective and an attempt at globality by incorporating the non-Western outside; yet

[54] See Greg Bird, *Containing Community: From Political Economy to Ontology in Agamben, Esposito, and Nancy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016), 31.

[55] See Donna J. Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 183–201.

[56] Nancy, "The Confronted Community," 34.

[57] See Jean-Christophe Bailly, "'nous' ne nous entoure pas," *Vacarme* 69, no. 4 (2014): 172–195.

[58] See Elaine Showalter, "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness," *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 2 (1981): 179–205.

[59] Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, xxxviii.

[60] Nancy, "The Confronted Community," 23.

this wavering movement of exposure and contraction cannot help but to unveil its occidental center.[61]

The way Nancy's text performs community is not innocent; it is marked by its position of writing and specific strategies of integration. The performance it initiates is rooted in a certain locality in the socio-cultural cobweb. Where is Nancy, where am I, and how do we touch in reading-writing? Despite my hand following Nancy's writing in reading-writing, the affective sharing out of this "community of writing" veils structures of hierarchization that I am uncomfortable with, structures I feel both complicit in and subjected to. I emerge as a "third person" to the text, the unknown other who, despite claims and assurances, lacks the expected refinement. The initial discomfort keeps me at a distance from this "community of writing" I'm confronted with; it urges me to write about its scaffolding, to try to grasp its affective management. I become a reader-intruder with a half-blind eye and an uncouth hand bringing disarray into the dematerialized discursive architectures of a community that strives for utopian universality but, at the same time, only half self-consciously exposes singularity, situatedness. I feel detached in this community. Nancy sees the body as the exscription of writing, as that which remains indecipherable in writing and can be read only through touch.[62] And yet, it is this touch that I'm lacking, the feel for Nancy that goes amiss in my reading, as if he was hiding behind the veil of textual ecstasy.[63] It is a strange feeling, especially because others seem not to experience it when "touching" Nancy;[64] when Shaj Mohan confesses to Nancy: "I can feel you feel me,"[65] all I can do is wonder at this difference that assumingly stems from their having known each other in person. In his writings, Nancy puts claims to corporeality as well, for example when referring to "our" "White Man's body"—but he simultaneously withdraws from writing this body as his own, withdraws from touching it; it signals a collective, paradigmatical body, looked at as if from the outside.[66]

The way in which "The Confronted Community" shapes my reading makes me more aware of my situation and my limitations, because the text performs its non-situatedness well—and not well enough. Even though Nancy conceptualizes community as an abstract commonality, as encompassing "being-with,"[67] in the folds of his essay linger yet other communities or collectives, entities that

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[61] See Nancy, 23.

[62] See Nancy, *Corpus*, 87.

[63] See Hélène Cixous, "Savoir," in Hélène Cixous and Jacques Derrida, *Veils*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 9.

[64] Jacques Derrida, *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy*, trans. Christine Irizarry (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), ix.

[65] Shaj Mohan, "The Marvelous Births of Jean-Luc Nancy," *Crisis and Communitas*, project website, October 22, 2020, https://crisisandcommunitas.com/?communitas=the-marvelous-births-of-jean-luc-nancy.

[66] See Nancy, *Corpus*, 7.

[67] Nancy, "The Confronted Community," 31.

terminologically claim the space of the community and challenge the zero position of *communitas*. Thus, Nancy's staging of "us confronted by us" takes on not only a self-reflexive character, but also involuntarily mirrors the multiple identities that shimmer through the textual fabric. The textual figure of the "one" (French *on*), appealing to the reader as "you," representing the writer's "I," signaling the common "we," stands in for the very verbalization of subjective objectivism, of the neutral human.

> Let us remember that "one = nothing," nothing that has any sort of stability or solidity. "One" consists in withdrawing from itself, if every self implies being caught up in some relation that differentiates it both from others and in it-self (in order for it to be "it/self "). Relation designates what goes from "one-nothing" to or toward another "one-nothing."**68**

"One" favors the hypothetical philosophical self-in-relation over the political subject, the abstraction of nothingness instead of "existing creatures."**69** And this "one" is, nonetheless, the subject of "The Confronted Community." Yet I cannot follow this textual suggestion; my corporeality, my tired brain forbids me. This is where I loose contact with the text, where concretion and abstraction detach: I am here, but where are you?

I can dance to Nancy's words, but there is a discord between my reading and his writing; a discord that goes beyond the opening of the self to relation. I will not be the "man [who] completes the task of becoming human (it is in this sense, too, that he becomes 'the last man')."**70** I will not become the man (*l'homme*) who resides at point zero, because even in my most philosophical writing, I cannot abstract from the location I am writing from—as the position from where relations relate. This position is intersected by social, cultural, gender, ethnic, age, ability and sexual differences that disallow me to stage it as neutral. Nancy in writing, however, is neuter, a "one" that occupies a non-position—but it forgets that this non-position is male, European, white, literate to say the least, "the very identity of the world."**71** A forgetting that haunts the text like "background noise . . . : it's like the other side of thought, but also like rumblings in the coils of the body."**72** It is precisely this obscured background noise that talks to me from the depths of Nancy's text(s). If I dip into any spacing of community, it is the abyss of exasperation: exasperation, say, in view of Nancy's "The Birth of Breasts," retracing

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68 Nancy, *Corpus II*, 99.

69 Susan Buck-Morss, "A Commonist Ethics," in *The Idea of Communism 2: The New York Conference*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (London: Verso, 2013), 59, http://susanbuckmorss.info/text/commonist-ethics/.

70 Nancy, "The Confronted Community," 24.

71 Nancy, *Corpus*, 105.

72 Nancy, 115.

women's breasts being looked/gaped at and touched/grabbed by mostly male writers, without even bothering to imagine the infringement and violence that are written into these centuries-long textual moves.**73** I feel subjected and exposed due to the silent discursive complicity of the text in retracing directions of gaze and definition, shaping a discursive picture of female corporeality. My reading installs me in the ambiguous and unsettling double position**74** of the exhibit marked by identity *and* of the unmarked viewer aspiring to invisibility: "one = nothing."

My embodied situatedness thus *compears* with my reading, when snippets of identity jump at me from behind ecstatic words. The installation of a zero position in writing in the end entails hyperidentity in my reading, unbalancing the horizontal space of the communitarian *with*. The proclaimed "we" inevitably still *compears* with disruptions, as not only *différance*, but also veiled hierarchies trouble the reading and writing of community.

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73 See Jean-Luc Nancy, "The Birth of Breasts," in *Corpus II*, 32.

74 See also Mieke Bal, *Double Exposures: The Subject of Cultural Analysis* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 1–2.

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Abstract

A Reading of Community

The thinking about the idea, forms and practices of *communitas* has developed a specific discourse in political philosophical writing since the 1980s. This paper retraces the ways in which Jean-Luc Nancy established a "community of writing [and] the writing of community," how in his view community *compears* with philosophical writing. Taking Nancy's discussion as a ground line, the author modulates the perspective on writing—as both text and practice—and focuses on the confrontation with community in reading. By poetologically tackling Nancy's essay "The Confronted Community" (2001), she investigates into the text's performing of community and the affective interaction between text and corporeality. Her reading of Nancy's writing thus activates not only its ecstatic valences leading towards the proposed community of those who have no community; it also uncovers the aesthetic, social and political implications that emanate from Nancy's writing in this situated reading. Therefore, this paper analytically retraces the textual micro-performances of community in writing as a performative confrontation entailed in reading.

Keywords

philosophy, community, writing, reading, Jean-Luc Nancy, performance, affects, identity

Abstrakt

Czytanie wspólnoty

Rozważania dotyczące idei, form i praktyk *communitas* tworzą od lat osiemdziesiątych xx wieku osobny dyskurs filozoficznopolityczny. Artykuł jest refleksją nad tym, w jaki sposób Jean-Luc Nancy ustanawia „wspólnotę pisania [i] pisanie wspólnoty", jak w jego ujęciu wspólnota „współ-zjawia się" z pisarstwem filozoficznym. Wychodząc od refleksji Nancy'ego, autorka modyfikuje spojrzenie na pisanie – zarówno jako tekst, jak i praktykę – by skupić się na konfrontacji ze wspólnotą w czytaniu. Poprzez poetologiczny rozbiór eseju *La Communauté affrontée* (2001) bada tekstualną inscenizację wspólnoty i afektywną interakcję między tekstem a cielesnością. Jej osobista lektura nie tylko aktywizuje ekstatyczny potencjał pisarstwa Nancy'ego prowadzący ku postulowanej wspólnocie tych, którzy nie mają wspólnoty, lecz także ujawnia jego estetyczne, społeczne i polityczne implikacje. Artykuł analitycznie rekonstruuje zatem tekstualne mikroperformanse wspólnoty w pisaniu jako performatywną konfrontację wpisaną w czytanie.

Słowa kluczowe

filozofia, wspólnota, pisanie, czytanie, Jean-Luc Nancy, performans, afekty, tożsamość

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