Ontologies of Community in Postmodernist American Fiction

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Dissertation Abstract

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Using a number of structurally innovative novels from the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s as a basis for study, this dissertation examines the representation of communities in postmodernist American fiction. While novels have often been critically studied from the standpoint of the individual and society, here the often neglected category of community is put under scrutiny. Yet rather than considering it from a sociological point of view, which can potentially favour historical, economic or political grounds for community, this study focuses on the ontological binds formed between individual and community. On one level this study connects formal qualities of postmodernist novels to a representation of community – especially literary conventions from the past that are foregrounded in the present texts. On another level it interrogates the limits of the individual in relation to others – how we emerge from others, how we are discrete from others, how much we can actually share with others, at what cost we stay or break with the others who have most influenced us. The primary novels studied here, each of which is deeply invested in the community as a locus for ontological interrogation, are Robert Coover's *Gerald's Party* (1985) and *John's Wife* (1996), Gilbert Sorrentino's *Crystal Vision* (1981) and *Odd Number* (1985), Harry Mathews's *Cigarettes* (1987), Joseph McElroy's *Women and Men* (1987), and Toni Morrison's *Paradise* (1997). Despite their varied representations of and attitudes toward the individual in community, these texts share a common spectre of American Romanticism that inflects how we read the possibility of community in the postmodernist period.

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INTRODUCTION

"Perhaps anyone thrown together with anyone else is community," states the searching,
seemingly lacking, male protagonist of Leonard Michaels's 1978 novel, *The Men's Club*
(49). A loose definition, a stab at understanding, showing us just how far we are from
substantial thinking on the topic. We need to head toward a less haphazard understanding
of community than the state of being thrown together, as we are always in a state of
having been thrown together. We need to consider to what degree we can share
experience, what we oppose when we are together, and how one comes to be oneself
among others. At a time in literary history – the 1970s, '80s and into the '90s – when the
great innovative stylists construct layers of irony between us and transparent narrative
and deploy all the other postmodernist meta's and inter's for drawing attention to the
surface of fiction, how are ontological concerns – presumably those deeper, more
universal and more ethical concerns – of community depicted? What do postmodernist
novelists propose community to be?

INDIVIDUAL AND NOVEL

In *The Theory of the Novel*, Georg Lukács defines the individualist theme of the novel in
contrast to the communal theme of epic. Our world view changed with the change of
form from epic to novel, he argues, from an idealized Hellenic world of the epic, in
which individuals experience immersion and unity with their surroundings, to a maligned
modern world of the novel, in which they are displaced from this unity, atomized and
alienated. Lukács's underlying assumption is that community allows for a completion of

being, and therefore that an individual on his or her own lacks something that can be attained in others. The novel's theme at its most general – the rift an individual faces with society, i.e., the alienation of the self – focalizes through the dramatic experiences of the individual, through his or her mind, where it also finds its bias. Totality with the exterior world, which we might consider as community regained, becomes the ideological goal of the novel.

There are of course heroes of epic texts, but they are not individuals in any contemporary sense of the word. They are members of communities – somehow dispersed in them:

> The epic hero is, strictly speaking, never an individual. It is traditionally thought that one of the essential characteristics of the epic is the fact that its theme is not a personal destiny but the destiny of a community. And rightly so, for the completeness, the roundness of the value system which determines the epic cosmos creates a whole which is too organic for any part of it to become so enclosed within itself, so dependent upon itself, as to find itself as an interiority— i.e. to become a personality. (Lukács 66)

For Lukács, a value system founded on the interdependence of its members prevents interiority, thus preventing that species we call the individual from emerging, from becoming a personality, a character, a rounded flesh-and-blood being in danger of walking right off the page. The hero's destiny "connects him by indissoluble threads to the community whose fate is crystallised in his own." (67) The atmospheric completeness of the epic world "is imminently utopian" (77) because of the organic union of the hero and his community. From this perspective, the epic is mythic, utopian, and prehistoric,

because it is the imagined situation from which we have fallen. Taking the epic as a measure of togetherness to look back on is similarly a major part of Jean-Luc Nancy's perspective: "Until this day history has been thought on the basis of a lost community" (9). Nancy's lost community is the ideological background against which the "problematic individual" (Lukács 78) of the novel emerges. Yet this background is often framed not as lost community, but more generally as all forces external to the individual. The external has a vague, amorphous quality, significant for its meaning anything except the atomized individual: any and all things outside the hero's brain, any force contrary to the will of the hero (except internal contradictions). It is constituted by family, friends, business partners, bureaucratic structures, and at its most general, society. The binary that emerges as paradigmatic, as we have tried to define the novel, is individual experience on the one hand and external forces on the other. To give one example, Mikhail Bakhtin emphasizes the individual as a narrative locus of difference in relation to the world: "A crucial tension develops between the external and the internal man, and as a result the subjectivity of the individual becomes an object of experimentation and representation" (*Dialogical Imagination* 37). Thus the individual as novelistic focal point emerges both as that which has lost community and that which opposes forms of human organization, especially highly structured ones such as family and other institutions.

Community, one would think, plays a significant role in the discussion of the individual and society. Yet it is the element that, in my mind, is most conspicuously lost, or dropped from the discussion, precisely because the individual is the primary object of representation, and structured forms such as society are so often the object of opposition. Herein lies the problem: that community which was once, at least in a mythic account, an

integral part of the hero, has been absorbed into the undistinguished mass of exteriority, more often than not as an element of society. One is reminded of Freud's description, in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, of an individual's happiness negotiated in opposition to family, then community, then society, then civilization, as though there is no qualitative difference from one to the next. Each external form is a problem source and threatens the happiness of the individual. The aim of this dissertation is to resituate, or reinstate, community in the domain of the individual – to draw attention to community as an integral part of the individual and not simply one of the structures of opposition that range in size, proximity, and tangibility from family on up to civilization.

WHAT IS COMMUNITY AND HOW IS THE WORD USED?

Community is a contentious term, used and abused to a variety of ends and deeply invested in by those who perceive power in it. Conservatives and liberals alike deploy the term to gather adherents, applying it both to small-scale, grassroots pursuits and global-scale, corporate interests alike. Thus we have corporate communities, sports communities, arts communities, on-line communities, racially based communities, culturally based communities, and spatially based communities. Community is used both as opposition to powerful large-scale institutions, corporations and governments, as Jerry Varsava points out, and in the service of capitalism, as Miranda Joseph suggests. A group is christened community as though laying colonial claim, so that when used to show a common interest, the term metonymically suggests a consensus of interest that makes for easier reportage by the media and easier assimilation into forms of consumption. As Alain Badiou writes, when communities are formed around shared identity they open

themselves immediately to consumerist interests, such as "new products, specialized magazines, improved shopping malls, 'free' radio stations, targeted advertising networks, and finally, heady 'public debates' at peak viewing times" (*Saint Paul* 10).

If we strip away the politics we might see a definition emerge as Alphonso Lingis provides in *The Community of Those Who have Nothing in Common*:

> We rationalists perceive the reality of being members of a community as the reality of works undertaken and realized; we perceive the community itself as a work. The rationality of our discourse lies in the reasons adduced and produced; we perceive reason as a work—an enterprise and an achievement. The rational discourse we produce materializes in collective enterprises. To build up a community would mean to collaborate in industry which organizes the division of labor and to participate in the market. It would mean to participate in the elaboration of a political structure, laws and command posts. It would be to collaborate with others to build up public works and communications. (5)

According to Nancy who, since his publication of *The Inoperative Community*, has become the focal point of discussion on the topic, what Lingis describes is, in the first place, society – the institutional system governed by laws and bureaucratic structures and economic exchange. It also shows the individual subject, as all of the descriptions we've looked at thus far, subsumed in a larger machinery, to the degree that the subject does not seem part of community.

For Nancy, community is not an intentional project in which each member plays his or her part or a network in which roles are enacted. In order to think about community one must begin with relations between people and constitute an understanding of the

subject – the individual – through community (rather than community being constituted through subjects). "[I]t is made up principally of the sharing, diffusion, or impregnation of an identity by a plurality wherein each member identifies himself only through the supplementary mediation of this identification with the living body of the community" (9). Nancy's central work on this topic*, The Inoperative Community*, examines the ontological status of individuals in relation to others from whom they emerge. His argument is twofold: normative and constitutive. Todd May has summarized these categories in two questions: "[H]ow [do we] conceive community in a nontotalitarian fashion?" (the normative question: how it should be) (40) and "what is it to be in a community?" (the constitutive question: what it is) (44). Translated into more programmatic terms, "the requirements ... are two: that community be analyzed in a way that avoids totalitarian conceptualizations, and that it do so while still recognizing that individuality is in good part constituted by community" (51).

The totalitarian fear central to Nancy's thinking comes directly from observing how Nazis gathered power around the idea of a people, and the horrendous results of that power. On a smaller scale it is difficult to imagine group works leading to totalitarianism – a summer camp construction for instance, or some civic project. is not likely to lead to any significant system of repression. Yet Nancy's statement against common work as the basis for community covers all scales, not least because the relations that for him constitute community are not guaranteed in such projects, though there may very often be corrupted or forced versions of them. Identification with a group work is likely identification with a structure of doing and enjoyment from having played one's part. One is reminded of Slavoj Žižek's response to Hannah Arendt's banality of Evil: that the

bureaucratization of the Nazi apparatus allowed some Germans to carry out heinous acts because of a distance created in the fulfillment of a job, but additionally, that some Nazis got pleasure from the operation *because* it was the fulfillment of a task within the apparatus (*Plague of Fantasies* 55). This kind of pleasure in fulfilling a task as part of a larger project happens at any scale and can be mistaken for participation in community. The various forms of "sharing, diffusion or impregnation" that are essential to Nancy's community do not find a place within organized structures, but rather in individual desires. They do not find a place in having something in common, but in relations that exceed societal norms.

The key thinker on the connection one shares with another, who takes the notion of insufficiency beyond the commonly understood need of others, is Georges Bataille. Bataille's work on community (on which Nancy bases his own) is particularly difficult to grasp. As the editors of the recent *Obsessions of Georges Bataille* observe, "[I]t constantly presses toward that which eludes appropriation and resists positive discursive articulation" (Mitchell and Winfree 2). Perhaps what is most useful to us in Bataille, since he does not offer a coherent system of thinking on community, are the multifarious views he offers, and their interpretation in the writings of Nancy, Maurice Blanchot, and Andrew Mitchell and Jason Kemp Winfree. The way Bataille's relates one individual to another through insufficiency on the one hand, and excess on the other, gives us a ground beyond what is visible on which to explore being in community. "For Bataille, the insufficiency of individual life is not just that of a self-enclosed subject that seeks the assistance of others in order to preserve its being. Instead, insufficiency is an opening to the world, a surface of contact with what is other, where one's being spills outside itself"

(Mitchell and Winfree 5). The spillage represents an excess that seeks the other, which for Bataille is the "principle of being" (Mitchell and Winfree 4). Community emerges from forms of shared excess which very much underlie the individual subject.

Determined to underscore the unplanned nature of community (in opposition to, for example, structured society), Bataille sees chance as fundamental to its emergence.

> Inner experience requires a community of chance, a community of lucky beings drawn together, bound together in their excessive movement, in their fall away from themselves. This, then, is 'where' community is located: in the chance movement of insufficiency; in the openness that my being is in exceeding the requirements of homogenization, preservation, and justification—in the movement outside oneself, which falls in love, dies, laughs, cries, mourns, celebrates, suffers. (Mitchell and Winfree 7)

Viewing the movement away from the status quo, through the chance movement with others, we can begin to interrogate the individual as part of something that elevates his or her presence rather than opposing it. We can resituate community as essential to being and becoming.

Anthropologist Victor Turner offers an account of the relation of community to society that is consonant with Bataille's. In his highly grounded yet dynamic conception of community, Turner addresses, in addition to its ontological and organizational properties, the often overlooked, or assumed, temporal property. It considers both the individual and society and finds a definition of community that is distinguished from both. In order to avoid the baggage that the word carries with it, Turner prefers "communitas." He claims that "[C]ommunitas has an existential quality; it involves the

whole man in relation to other whole men. Structure, on the other hand, has a cognitive quality. Communitas has also an aspect of potentiality; it is often in the subjunctive" (*Ritual Process* 127). Turner's communitas describes a formation of unstructured human relations at the centre of structured society, using the following example:

> Here the story of Lao-tse's chariot wheel may be apposite. The spokes of the wheel and the nave (i.e., the central block of the wheel holding the axle and spokes) to which they are attached would be useless, he said, but for the hole, the gap, the emptiness of the centre. Communitas, with its unstructured character, representing the 'quick' of human interrelatedness ... might well be represented by the 'emptiness of the center,' which is nevertheless indispensable to the functioning of the structure of the wheel. (*Ritual Process* 127)

Because of its unstructured nature, communitas tends to be a temporary formation that either becomes structure, in which case it becomes incorporated as part of society, or it transforms or dissolves entirely. What Turner, Bataille and Nancy share in their definitions is, to varying degrees, a foregrounding of ontological concerns – that an individual is existentially connected to others in a dimension above other forms of connectivity, such as working together toward a common goal. By virtue of this, an individual's inextricability from community becomes the backbone of our study.

COMMUNITY IN AMERICAN FICTION

Scholarship in American fiction that focuses on community from an ontological standpoint is rather lean. In an essay entitled "Narrative of Community: The Identification of a Genre" (1988), Sandra A. Zagarell examines fictional accounts of pre-

industrial, pastoral communities, as in Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of Pointed Firs*. Industrialization, according to this account, spells the death of community. Zagarell's term "narrative of community", despite its rich potential, has failed to inspire others to write on the subject, though it is mentioned in passing by J. Gerald Kennedy in "From Anderson's *Winesburg* to Carver's *Cathedral:* The Short Story Sequence and the Semblance of Community." Kennedy describes the prominence of isolation in short story sequences that seem to emphasize a community of characters. The formal division of connected characters or themes into separate stories fragments the narrative. Kennedy emphasizes "psychological distances" and "gaps between characters [that] can never be entirely masked by the semblance of community" (196–97). He also proposes a position of lament towards the loss of local particularity in the wake of "modern mass culture and its transformation of life and language" (202).

Jeremy Green describes a similar effect of atomization of individuals in Evan Dara's fragmentary novel *The Lost Scrapbook* (1995). The "immense collage of voices" (Green 190), many of which remain unnamed, are strung together in disconnected, incomplete scenes, at once yearning for community and emphasizing its unattainability. Like Zagarell and Kennedy, Green implies that there was something which we could safely call community prior to the profusion of mass culture and the media industry, which has overtaken lines of communication among people. For Green, the "net effect of such communicational asymmetry is to reinforce atomization" (204).

 In "Quest for Community in American Postmodern Fiction", an essay that considers works contemporary to (and sometimes grouped with) the ones of this study, including those of Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, William Gaddis and Kathy Acker,

Jerry Varsava suggests that the idea of the loss of community is pervasive in postmodern fiction. This loss is attributed to corporatization, government power and the rise of middle-class individualism. Varsava concludes that the novelists of his study present an opposition to such massive forces, to "ensure that America remains faithful to its liberal foundations, that America remains a place in which minoritarian interests of various communities not only survive, but indeed prosper and proliferate" (8). The loss lamented here is the loss of the power of small groups in the face of large institutions. Thus, community might be defined by Varsava as small-scale political power. It is not unexpected that a liberal stance against larger oppressive forces would be held by major writers of American literature or that their works would be interpreted this way. Though Varsava's community exists as a goal-oriented group – connected for a cause – presumably the underlying fear is that human interaction, the most ideal bastion of which is community, will become fully mediated and controlled by corporate interests. Though the ontological face of community is not explicit, Varsava is obviously interested in this aspect of it.

Community, according to these four examples, is lost at various times in America over the past two hundred years, and lost to bigger, often economically motivated forces – we might say ever-more eroded by an accumulation of power in institutions. What these accounts tend not to emphasize is the play between individual being and community, or the interrelation of community and individual. In what follows , I propose to think about community, not so much as a small-scale collective effort as one that emphasizes the play between insufficiency and excess, one that observes the unknowability of the other, and one that opposes the status quo of structured society.

NOVELS OF COMMUNITY: FROM INDIVIDUAL TO AGGREGATE

Because of the opposition Lukács establishes between the individual and community in the novel and epic, "novel of community" sounds like a formal contradiction. The theme of "the destiny of community," from Lukács's point of view, is not a theme of the novel.

Given the enormous flexibility of the novel as a form – one thinks of Henry James's "large loose baggy monsters" (in reference to nineteenth-century Russian novels) and more recently Steven Moore's widely inclusive definition, described in a book (*The Novel*, 2010) that gathers, among other ancient "novels", Ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian writing, and the novel's tendency to absorb conventions from other genres, we cannot seriously say that it formally excludes community. Paul Ricoeur states:

> Is not the novel an antigenre genre, which by this very fact makes it impossible to fit back together the diegetic mode and dramatic mode under the inclusive term 'fictional narrative'? This type of argument receives impressive reinforcement in the essays that Bakhtin devotes to the 'dialogic imagination.' According to Bakhtin, the novel escapes all homogenous classification because we cannot place in the same set those genres, of which the epic is the perfect example, that have run dry and the sole genre that has been born after the institution of writing and books, the only one that continues to develop but never ceases to rethink its own identity. (*Time and Narrative Vol. 2* 154)

We cannot help but allow for the possibility that the novel could adapt to subjects that seem formally unsuited to it, like community. Following writers such as Nancy, Bataille and Turner, we can even say that the novel is a natural place for the exploration of ideas about community. Turner's recourse to metaphor (recall the chariot wheel) conveys the

imprecise, difficult to define, amorphous quality of community, a quality that the novel should be particularly adept at showing. The novel, in typically focusing on a period of change for something or someone, might also naturally show the passing quality of community before it dissolves or becomes bureaucratically structured or changes form. The existential emphasis on community, shared by Nancy, Bataille, and Turner, also suggests it would be fertile territory for development in novels. That community falls under an existential/ontological aegis for these writers – those who are thinking of a 20th-century situation – shows us that community in contemporary novels will need to reflect modern individualism through which we recognize an existential situation.

An important way that novels formally signal community, and what leads us to our selection for this study, is the foregrounding of the aggregate over individual. Such works tend to represent formations that we are accustomed to calling communities: a small town, a party, a neighbourhood, an art scene. The narratives give more-or-less equal weight to a number of characters, but most importantly shift focus from individual consciousness to intersubjective relations. Though any novel can be approached from the point of view of community and the individual's relation to it, the ones I have in mind here I believe are formally invested in the idea of community.

Novels of this kind are often considered innovative, experimental or antirealist. Those bearing these qualities, from the modern and postmodern periods, come to mind: Sherwood Anderson's *Winesberg, Ohio* (1919), John Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer* (1925), Camilo José Cela's *The Hive* (1953), Robert Coover's *The Origin of the Brunists* (1966), B.S. Johnson's *House Mother Normal* (1971), a number of Gilbert Sorrentino's novels from the 1970s through the 2000s, William Gaddis's *JR* (1975), Georges Perec's

Life A User's Manual (1978), Dennis Cooper's *Closer* (1989), Evan Dara's *The Lost Scrapbook* (1995), and very recently, Christopher Sorrentino's *Trance* (2005), Vanessa Place's *La Medusa* (2008), and Jeremy M. Davies's *Rose Alley* (2009). Are these still novels if they do not set as their primary task the exploration of the disjunction of the individual from his or her surroundings? On many of the book covers they are described as "A Novel", and as Ricoeur claims in the passage quoted above, the novel "continues to develop but never ceases to rethink its own identity." Its perpetual change and development of new conventions allows for the rethinking of its own identity even to the point of undermining of its central characteristic – exploration of the individual.

Definitions such Lukács's, which hinge on the individual's experience, ring truer for the realist novel than for what sometimes takes the name antirealist novel. At the risk of being overly general, the sense of realism in the novel shifts with the changing conventions of representing individual consciousness. If this is true, then the point at which the author denies a character of individuality is the point at which individuality itself is shown to be a fiction. The process of breaking down the individual, initiated by a range of modernist writers, parallels a process of breaking down the form of the realist novel itself. In assessing the destructive relationship between character and narrative, Ricoeur uses as an example Robert Musil's *The Man without Qualities*:

> [A]s the narrative approaches the point of annihilation of the character, the novel also loses its own properly narrative qualities, even when these are interpreted ... in the most flexible and most dialectical manner possible. To the loss of the identity of the character thus corresponds the loss of the configuration of the narrative and, in particular, a crisis in the closure of the narrative ... It is the same

sort of schism ... that affects both the tradition of the plot carried to its ending,

which stands as a closure, and the tradition of the identifiable hero. (*Oneself as*

Another 149)

In light of definitions of community that account for modern individualism, such a breakdown of the character may appear to problematize the possibility of a community. The erasure of the protagonist's identity hardly ensures the foregrounding of community. In the case of Musil's unfinished magnum opus, the form of the novel transforms, as the character and narrative break down, into essay. Yet I contend that putting the individual into question has to play a role in letting community re-emerge in a form that seemed to wipe it out. The peeling away of the protagonist or of character in general seems to allow for the emergence of a community of characters. It also sharply draws attention to questions of ontology.

The novels in this study – all American and featuring various postmodern styles and strategies – share some characteristics: the foregrounding of a network of characters rather than a protagonist; the intentional breakdown of character as a fictional construct; and the self-reflexive play with novelistic conventions. Through such means community is brought to the fore, and a paradigmatic shift occurs away from individual/society to individual in community. An impressive number of experimental American novels from the 1980s and '90s – Robert Coover's *Gerald's Party* (1985) and *John's Wife* (1996), Gilbert Sorrentino's *Crystal Vision* (1981) and *Odd Number* (1985), Joseph McElroy's *Women and Men* (1987), Harry Mathews's *Cigarettes* (1987), and Toni Morrison's *Paradise* (1999) – produce webs of character relations, group interactions, or systemic transformations that multifariously describe community. They explore communal

exchange, relations between people, and the interplay of individual and group, and because of their various postmodern manifestations, some of these communal exchanges are unlike anything in the real world. My contention is that the formally difficult texts dealt with in this study, texts that proceed sometimes arbitrarily from character to character, and whose characters are often intentionally unlifelike – like those of Sorrentino which at times seem to be representative of nothing outside of language – become more accessible when approached with community in mind. They are particularly well-suited to exploring the individual in its relation to community or the individual in emergence within community.

POSTMODERNIST ONTOLOGY

Brian McHale makes the claim in *Postmodernist Fiction*, one that I will build on here, that the questions posed by postmodern fiction shift paradigmatically from those of modernism: if the dominant line of enquiry of modernist fiction is *epistemological*, "the dominant of postmodernist fiction is *ontological*" (10). This represents a tremendous underlying shift, a sea change, from "problems of *knowing* to problems of *modes of being*" (10).

> Intractable epistemological uncertainty becomes at a certain point ontological plurality or instability: push epistemological questions far enough and they "tip over" into ontological questions. (11)

Preempting arguments against his assertion – that it may be too reductive, simplified or illusory – McHale states, "although it would be perfectly possible to interrogate a postmodern text about its epistemological implications, it is more urgent to interrogate it

about its ontological implications" (11). In his seminal work on postmodernism, David Harvey incorporates McHale's assertion into his own wide-ranging list of changes (41), and rephrases his insight as follows: "By this he means a shift from the kind of perspectivism that allowed the modernist to get a better bearing on the meaning of a complex but nevertheless singular reality, to the foregrounding of questions as to how radically different realities may coexist, collide, and interpenetrate" (41).

McHale's book is more an amazing catalogue of postmodernist conventions than an argument, since rather than giving a detailed explanation for the shift, he describes a number of key moments in modernist fiction (in Beckett's trilogy and in Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, for example) when emphasis tips from epistemological to ontological problems. In other words he works from examples and especially from stylistic devices that signal ontology as the dominant object of interest.

McHale's central metaphor for ontological instability, a "flicker" between presence and absence, describes when the postmodernist text offers up a dual possibility of the state of affairs, a simultaneous two-level existence. What makes this assertion so important to us here is that questions and problems of community are fully implicated in the ontological dominant, yet have rarely been looked at in scholarship on postmodern fiction. One example of McHale's flicker in the novels of this study is John's wife, from Coover's novel named for her, who flickers in and out of visibility. She is thus there and not there in a paradoxical coexistence of presence and absence. McHale provides wide-ranging examples of postmodernist strategies to produce ontological flicker – most of which present a kind of doubling – including the roman-à-clef (in which real-world life is doubled in a fictional life), allegory (in which the other reading flickers with the primary

reading), and erasure (in which a word or section of narration is overwritten with another). The general meaning of such flickers is ontological indeterminacy, hinging on binaries such as reality/fiction and presence/absence. If community can be treated as an ontological category we must extend these indeterminacies to reflect in community.

The flicker of ontological indeterminateness must be extended beyond the individual subject to include community. We should thus see in the novels instances of a coexistence of difference in community that cannot be reduced or synthesized into singularity. There should be flickers of being in and not being in community. Questions should emerge regarding the simultaneous coexistence of the presence and absence of community. One such question, as makes these concerns evident in the texts, is posed by Coover's eponymous protagonist from *Gerald's Party*: "[W]hat *is* this 'we' when the I's are gone?"

THE WORKS IN THIS STUDY

Each of the works in this study is formally invested in innovative and often unrealistic narrative, compelled by the difficulties in representing community. At the same time, the content of each work reflects interrogations of what community is, bringing out, I think, a variety of preoccupations with how literary conventions produce a sense of community while producing forms of individual subjecthood. The characters of the novels speak to these concerns: McElroy's ambiguous chorus of *Women and Men* asks near the beginning, with philosophical generalness, "Who is this we"? One of Sorrentino's informants from *Odd Number* says, with an edge of dismissive unpleasantness, "you know small communities." Mathews's Lewis of *Cigarettes*, reflecting on the events of the

novel, dispels a myth of discrete individuality, "[P]retending that you are only you, and I
I." Such comments and questions reveal the very postmodernist concerns of the ontology
of community around which this dissertation turns.

The first three books examined in this study, *Gerald's Party*, *Crystal Vision*, and
John's Wife, bring to the foreground literary conventions that long predate the novel (the
novel seen as a 17th or 18th century invention) as well as more recent popular art forms.
These conventions, some of which are famously described by Bakhtin in his formal
analysis of menippean satire, but also including others taken from fairy tale, burlesque
and pastoral, play a major role in defining the way community is represented. They avoid
the rounded individual character typical of novels, presenting instead multiple, more
flatly drawn characters who enact a grotesquery of human relations, often emphasizing an
exaggeration of desire at work in aggregates. The move away from modern psychological
states to pre-modern "thin" characters (and their very often base desires), via recovered
conventions, gestures towards Nancy's lost community, or at least a prevailing idea that
community is something lost to the past and unrecoverable in any serious way. At the
same time, exaggerations that these conventions produce, especially narrow obsessions of
flat characters, draw our attention to individuals in their excess. The overall effect is often
one of irony that makes it difficult for the reader to take community as something serious
or possible in the present. The specific novels, however, grapple with the status of
individuals in social groups.

In *Gerald's Party*, Coover pairs primitive signs of community with postmodernist
concerns of voided individual subjects. He begins the novel with the discovery of a
murdered woman by a number of partygoers attending a middle-class house party. The

partygoers gather around the corpse of the murdered woman as though she was an object of sacrifice that deserves an act of communion. To some critics of the novel, the behaviour of the partygoers following the murder appears mob-like, yet Coover's narration is more sophisticated in presenting the role group ritual plays in directing the actions of individuals – not as a mob, but as a community perverted by a voiding of individual agency. Thus he takes typical signs indicating a primitive community, such as sacrifice and communion, and empties out their conventional meanings, leaving characters guided by seemingly pointless mechanisms that have no social consequence. The guiding mechanism is well summarized by the character who says, "It is almost as if the parties have started giving us instead of us giving the parties" (305). Seemingly in conversation with poststructuralist thought, Coover poses the question of how a community can exist when there is no stable kernel of identity in the individual. He raises the possibility that without a stable centre of identity we are ruled entirely by exterior mechanisms. Yet Coover leaves open the possibility that voided characters may have something stable in them, and that this something is visible in their excesses. By way of other grotesque and exaggerated events that follow the murder, such as impossible sexual feats and pointless violence, Coover draws our attention to the role individual excess plays in defining the limits of community. This excessive humanity, which is presented through comic conventions, challenges notions that the limit of death is central to our conception of community. It also shows the possibility of a stable core of identity in our most excessive traits.

In *Crystal Vision*, Sorrentino presents a group of men bound to each other in a purgatorial entrapment of their own making. Borrowing from menippean satire,

Sorrentino repeatedly draws the men together to converse, speculate, and share anecdotes, often wildly and cartoonishly, on matters of literature and love. Borrowing from pastoral convention, Sorrentino has his characters use the rhetorical device of ekphrasis – the bringing of images before the eyes – as the primary means for connecting them in a semblance of community. Very often these spoken images depict desirable women of the neighbourhood, recalling how the women appeared in their youth, transforming them into objects of desire, and transfixing the men in a sexualized yet ultimately stultifying reverie. Sorrentino at once celebrates, in a carnival-like atmosphere of rich and absurd linguistic invention, male bonds formed in difference to women, and laments the life of men who never step outside of their safe rhetorical milieu into real love relationships and real-life accomplishment. Community, for the men of *Crystal Vision*, is the obstacle that prevents the emergence of individuals and paradoxically produces an elision of the present.

As in *Gerald's Party,* it is impossible to read Coover's *John's Wife* without recognizing the layers of irony he constructs in his narratives. Coover self-consciously employs antiquated conventions – here those of fairy tale and the serio-comical to produce irony, sending community into the proverbial past. In *John's Wife*, Coover depicts an American small town from the viewpoints of several dozen characters. John's wife, who is given no other name, holds a place at the centre of the narrative as a woman desired universally by the men and women of the town. As the narrative progresses, in spiraling fashion from one character's backstory and present dealings to the next, she begins literally disappearing and is replaced as the town's centre of gravity by Pauline, a woman who rapidly grows to monstrous proportions. Destruction ensues as the manhunt

for Pauline begins. The structure of community presented so strongly resembles a Lacanian model of the subject that Coover invites us to read his narrative as an allegory for the poststructural model. The town's centre, John's wife, who at once is an empty character and holds the community in an organized formation, doubles as the poststructural Master Signifier, the voided term that organizes the floating signifiers (corresponding with the other townspeople) into coherent ideologies or identities. In drawing this relationship, Coover suggests that community, like the individual subject, has no stable grounds and must rely on fantasy to maintain identity – hence the chaos of John's wife's disappearance and the monstrosity of her void (in the form of Pauline).

Sorrentino's *Odd Number*, like *Crystal Vision,* critically interrogates the effect community plays in forming individuals. But if a sympathetic attitude toward the characters in the former mixes lament with laughter, and thus proposes community as a state of carnivalesque limbo, a derisive attitude toward the latter proposes community as a contagious element to the individual. The novel is comprised of three interrogations of the apparent death of poet Sheila Henry, functioning more to disclose the transgressions and self-interests of a community of writers and publishers than to discover the truth of her death. While each informer has a varying degree of connectedness to the community under interrogation, the overall effect of redescribing the relationships and motivations of the art scene is to create a narrative based in erasure – one of the forms of flicker that Brian McHale describes as drawing our attention to ontological questions. In short, the community itself is under erasure, as each new testimony contradicts the facts of the previous. Though it acts as a self-enclosed novel, *Odd Number* reuses characters first described in *Imaginative Qualities of Actual Things* (1972), and is followed by two more

novels also describing the same flat characters – at least recycling their names and some of their relationships – *Rose Theatre* (1987) and *Misterioso* (1989). The sustained attack on the characters of these novels by the narrators, and the progressively more abstract relation the novels have with reality (ending with the mimetically distant *Misterioso*), show the narrators increasing distance from the community they describe. Read as a quartet of novels, they show narrators trying to erase all connection with the community from which they emerged, for fear that they might have acquired the inauthentic motivations of the others.

Expressing quite the opposite impulse, Mathews's *Cigarettes* explores how one how one positively and inevitably emerges from community. In its exploration of the opening up of the self to others, *Cigarettes* shares a number of qualities of community as described by Bataille, Blanchot and Nancy. Mathews bases the relationships in *Cigarettes* in chance meetings that require the sharing of a space of vulnerability outside of conventional societal roles. An underlying literary constraint (making the novel an Oulipan text) ensures that characters interact beyond the roles given to them by society – of parent and child, of business associates, of men and women – in order to show community as an oppositional force to the status quo structures of society. The most striking example of community, resembling Bataille's or Nancy's community of lovers, is the sadomasochistic relationship of two young male characters. By way of their affair Mathews shows community as a radical force that transgresses social norms and state laws, that puts the lives of the individuals at risk while they achieve something resembling ideal community. This relationship and others developed in the novel are given an ethical framework when one of the lovers, in a retrospective glance,

acknowledges the limits in his desire to understand the community from which he emerged. In uncovering these limits, he allows us ideally to see our own, suggesting to us the basis of an ethics of community.

McElroy's mammoth *Women and Men*, which spins an international conspiracy that connects diverse characters across time and space, proposes a number of communal scenarios that can be described as sci-fi and New Age. The basis of these new ways of relating is quantum physics, which visibly manifests in personal relations, such that telepathy and time travel are possible, and that all characters are more connected than would be in a non-quantum, mechanistic world. McElroy challenges our sense of community by suggesting that characters connected in international conspiracy may be in one – a community based defined by difference and caused by the indifferent mechanism of quantum physics. He also challenges common notions of the finitude of human beings by proposing that two people in the future may join to become one, that indeed this might be desirable, and that through a pluralized We character, this may have already happened. Where theorists like Bataille propose human excess as opening a space for the emergence of community, McElroy imagines breaking all barriers between people, which throws into question our ethics that are based in more discrete human limitations. If, as Slavoj Zizek suggests, an ethics of community must recognize the limits of self knowledge and thus of our knowledge of others, what would an ethics be based on a world of limitless knowledge of others? Such a possibility, for a writer like Sorrentino, would be an absolute nightmare, but for McElroy is a potential though radical improvement.

Toni Morrison's *Paradise* is of particular interest to this study because it presents what appears to be an ideal community. Morrison constructs two distinct groups in the

novel: the town of Ruby, a highly patriarchal organization that enforces racial purity and male dominance, and the Convent, a collection of women with diverse backgrounds and formed in an attitude of inclusivity. The women arrive at the Convent out of situations of trauma such as abusive relationships with men and unwanted pregnancies, and are cared for by each other. They empower themselves through rural self-sufficiency, and the passing on of magical knowledge and capability. Because they show an alternative to highly structured male power, the women of the Convent pose a threat to the men in charge of Ruby. Tensions build between the two groups until a number of men wage war against the women, storming the Convent and murdering all the women. While celebrating a community built on difference, suggesting what an ideal community would look like, Morrison reinforces a persistent stereotype along gender lines. Namely, she follows the middle-class ideology that connects women to qualities of care and support and men to rule and individuality. And, strangely, like all of the other books of this study, Morrison gives women at the centre of the narratives mythical powers, here the ability to raise the dead.

This presence of mythic or semi-mythic women at the centre of the novels must be observed as a phenomenon that somehow underpins ontological conceptions of community. On one hand, it draws our attention to a residue of 19th-century American Romanticism's representation of women in which, as Leslie Fiedler explored, mythic archetypes strongly emerged in the forms of Madonna and femme fatale. Like those figures, the women of the present novels are constructed to tell us there is something more to them than is knowable, that they have an excessive presence that will affect the fate of community. While a common association of women to community and men to

individualism may in part explain this phenomenon, I believe something more complex is going on. Narratives setting mythic women at their centre show the women as objects of desire that, as *John's Wife* suggests, give identity to community. The women stand in for community itself, offering, as objects of desire, something with which others wish to merge. Yet, as these novels illustrate, the mythic quality that attracts others at the same time makes such a merging impossible, thereby suggesting the limits of connecting with others in something called community.

GERALD'S PARTY AND THE PERVERSION OF COMMUNITY

Excessiveness, which is a defining quality of Robert Coover's work in general, characterizes the way he represents individuals and community in the 1983 novel *Gerald's Party.* The novel depicts a middle-class house party as it unfolds after the sudden appearance of the corpse of one of the partygoers. A detective arrives to investigate the murder, while numerous characters, most of them flatly drawn, drink and chatter, play party games and ponder philosophically out loud, as at any party. More exaggeratedly, the partygoers participate in violent acts, sexual pratfalls and, with the arrival of the police, sustain a number of deaths. Through a mode of representation that takes much from the burlesque, Coover transforms a typical party into an impossible array of events that, as excessive works often do, wreak havoc on our sense of what is stable in the world.

Perhaps because it flagrantly challenges our senses both of novelistic conventions and of human limitations, critics have focused on these excessive and semantically troubling qualities, as well as the problem of the aesthetic reception of the text. The unending action does not build, the in-your-face clues to the murder lead nowhere, and the fragmented and simultaneous dialogue confuses our sense of narrative movement. Commentary on the novel is filled with complaints of pain and suffering from having read it (or having tried to read it). Jonathan Shaw, for example, admits that the novel's "prodigious stylistic difficulty" (131) can make reading it an unpleasant and even traumatic experience. The testimonies of reviewers are enough evidence for Shaw to posit that it, more than anything else, "in fact seeks to inflict trauma on its readers" (132).

Marek Wilczynski's rigorous if disorienting (he seems to want to cover everything) analysis of the novel puts a positive spin on what some have called the strategy of excess, taking the plethora of signs rather for a "strategy of abundance" (4). For him the novel seems to mimic a Derridean world in which signifiers range and reign, a world full of potential meaning. Pleasure in the text may be derived, therefore, "in the language itself, its materiality, its plural exuberance of dialogues and proliferation of names" (26) – in short, in the reader's play amid the signifiers. Both Wilczynski and Shaw report on there being much (or too much) undigested, unconnected material in *Gerald's Party* thrown at the reader either to play with or submit to being buried in. Both also comment on this effect resulting in part from reader unpreparedness for the demands of this kind of novel.

Kathryn Hume too, takes up this concern for the reader at the end of her essay "Robert Coover: The Metaphysics of Bondage." She states that Coover, because of his "metaphysics" (which presumably challenge our own) and "penchant for irony in all its forms," derails any chances of camaraderie between reader and author: "In most of his novels . . . we struggle on our own, unaided by authorial geniality or encouragement or explanation" (841). She concludes: "[H]e makes few narrative gestures that might invite collaboration between reader and author in enjoying something" (840–41). Most significant here is the judgment that a collaboration between author and reader is what gives enjoyment. Further, that enjoyment is in view yet something has gone wrong, that there are plentiful signs of things we should be sharing and enjoying, but somehow they are short-circuited. Hume assumes that enjoyment comes in a consonance, or at least an

understanding, of intention or word use between the author and reader. Like Shaw and Wilczynski, Hume sees a disturbance in Coover's use of signs.

These destabilizing qualities of *Gerald's Party*, which adversely affect some readers, point to an underlying process in the novel: namely, the perversion of conventional signs which in turn empties out conventional meaning. Coover's primary strategy is, as Wilczynski points out, to provide an abundance of signifiers, all the while dispensing with social and human limitations that the signifiers conventionally convey. Signs that are meaningful to a representation of community, such as sexual practices, communion, sacrifice and death, are exaggerated to the point that their conventional meanings are lost and the framework for judging them is fractured; all consequences of action are seemingly suspended. The kind of world Coover posits through such exaggeration is at once comic for its celebration of implausible and impossible acts, and serious for its ontological implications. At the centre of Coover's ontological interrogation is the interplay between group behaviour, which at its exaggerated ends resembles a perversion of community, and individual agency, which struggles to announce itself. The novel asks to what extent an individual holds onto his or her agency while under the governance of the social machinery of a party.

MOB AND SCAPEGOAT

A literary genre that Hume draws our attention to is the murder-mystery detective novel, from which *Gerald's Party* takes a number of obvious conventions: a party with presumably a set number of people, the central murder, the arrival of a Dupin-inspired inspector who observes everyone as a potential murderer. From detective-novel

convention Hume also identifies the archetypal figures of scapegoat and mob operating in *Gerald's Party*. For her, these archetypal figures help explain the group dynamic that unfolds in the novel, and reveal something of the metaphysics Coover posits in his work in general. If there is indeed a dynamics of scapegoat and mob operating, it must reflect the way Coover represents community in the novel.

Using Northrop Frye's archetypal approach, Hume observes that "any detective story records the attempt to identify a *pharmakos* [scapegoat] and remove that person from society . . . [S]o while the party is a mob scene but not a lynching," she continues, "the sinister mob dynamics are subtly present" (836). The introduction of Ros's body, therefore, calls for an inspector, in this case Pardew, and with his entrance each partygoer becomes a potential murderer. When one of the partygoers is identified as the murderer, he or she becomes the scapegoat to be removed and done away with. Thus the event of a murder transforms one character into a scapegoat, while giving all others a mob-like quality.

Yet Hume's reasoning does not quite explain what happens in the novel because Coover's novel does not fit the archetypal mold. For instance, there would be more than one scapegoat in *Gerald's Party* because after the first, Roger, is killed by the police, others are singled out as being the murderer. Vachel, for example, is later shot. According to the archetypal relationship between scapegoat and mob, the removal of so-called scapegoats should have an effect on the party, freeing the partygoers from their mob function and thus ending their singleminded manhunt that would have second and third removals of scapegoats. Yet in *Gerald's Party* neither killing seems to have a significant effect on the behaviour of the rest of the party. Coover carefully shows in other characters

a series of contrary reactions, from melodramatic remorse for the man killed to obliviousness to the entire situation. The party goes on despite the killing. So if there is a scapegoat in the novel, it does not function in the way that the archetype tells us it should, largely because the removal has no consequences.

In order to fit the novel into this mold, Hume represents Coover's description of the group of partygoers as a mob. The group discovering Ros's body is, according to her, a "teeming crowd" that "swarms around the corpse of a murdered woman" (836). Like bees, seemingly pre-programmed to their function to work under a queen, a mob "swarms" en masse and attacks its victim. Yet a swarm suggests too much intent on violent action. This is the mob of Frye, one that is "essentially human society looking for a *pharmakos*" (*Anatomy of Criticism* 149). Yet this is not the party of Coover. Unlike Hume's description, the book portrays the partygoers already standing around, drinking and talking, when one happens to notice the corpse of Ros in the middle of the room. The room is suddenly interpolated by the corpse. Genre-based expectations that might otherwise lead us to some insight into the text seem to lead Hume to misrecognize what is going on in the text.

Frye's framework is also more complicated than the one Hume suggests, yet it too fails to accommodate the group dynamics of *Gerald's Party*. In the case of detective fiction, Frye seems to assume that the audience focalizes the narrative through the authority of the detective, "a wavering finger of social condemnation passes over a group of 'suspects'" (46), and that the detective's choice of scapegoat reveals a moral superiority that edifies the audience's own moral stance. So while the choice of the criminal/scapegoat is almost arbitrary, the detective enjoins the audience in feeling right

about who is chosen. In Frye's words, through the detective thriller, "we come as close as it is normally possible for art to come to the pure self-righteousness of the lynching mob"(47). The audience is the implied mob. This view assumes that the audience agrees with the detective, and assumes both that the detective is the character through which the narrative is primarily focalized (and therefore who the audience identifies with) and that the detective is an arbiter of moral correctness. Yet in *Gerald's Party* Coover focalizes the narrative through Gerald rather than the detective, and the detective embodies no moral standard of any sort. A moral standard is seemingly lacking in Coover's novel, but if there is one, it likely belongs to Gerald because we are closer to his consciousness.

Despite shortcomings of the archetypal approach in its characterization of roles and group dynamics, I still believe considering the partygoers as a mob is valuable in order to draw some important distinctions between a mob and a community. The behaviour of the partygoers does seem often to be unthinking – the party goes on despite the killing and all the other horrific action. So we shift our approach from archetypal to ontological. If we assume the partygoers to be a mob, then the individuals that make up the mob at some moment lose their discrete agency and are subsumed by the singular and unthinking formation. Rather than being guided by individual desire, those subsumed by a mob formation are led by rules outside of themselves. A machine-like automatism of external, thus social symbolic laws replaces individual thought. As Žižek has it,

> When [. . .] Lacan speaks of [. . .] "the inmixing of subjects," of the moment when the subjects lose their individuality by being reduced to little wheels of nonsubjective machinery [. . .] this machine is of course synonymous with the *symbolic order*. This mode of the crowd is exemplarily depicted in the paintings

of Pieter Brueghel from the years 1559 and 1560 (*Dutch Proverbs, Fight between Carnival and Lent, Child Games*): the subject is here "beheaded," "lost in the crowd," yet the transsubjective mechanism which regulates the process (games, proverbs, carnivals) is clearly of a symbolic nature: it can be unearthed by means of the act of interpretation. In other words, it is the signifier which runs the show—through this very confusion and blind automatism. (*Enjoy Your Symptom!* 23)

If any paintings act as an analogue to Coover's novel, they are those Lowland works by Bosch or Brueghel that Žižek uses for illustration of crowds – not just for William Gass's blurb on the inside cover, which states, "Robert Coover has written a Hieronymus Bosch—just as nightmarish, just as mesmerizing, just as damning, just as beautiful." The simultaneity of action, as often produced in multiple conversations intruding on one another, and exaggerated actions in one room bleeding into or traipsing through another room of the house, give the sense that, like the paintings, all action happens at once, and everyone is doing something with little regard to the rest. And, of course the grotesquery that emerges as Coover's style, the shit and blood and organs, reminds us of the vulgar, strange acts that are visible when we look closer at what the figures in the painting are actually doing. Žižek's transsubjective mechanism equally fits *Gerald's Party*, where the party, with all of its known social codes, appears to guide the characters in their activities: party games such as darts, binge drinking, adultery, chit chat, etc., seem to be running the show, and when something goes awry, such as the intrusion of sudden and unexplained death, the characters react inappropriately.

Coover is completely aware of this line between group automatism and individual agency, and he wishes us to see it: it is precisely what is at stake in the novel. Through Gerald, Coover draws our attention to this power shift from individual to group when he states, toward the party's end, "It is almost as if the parties have started giving us instead of us giving the parties" (305). According to Gerald in this fleeting moment of lucidity, the party, like the kermesse or carnival of Brueghel, is carried by a transsubjective mechanism, the machinery that is a party, that operates the partygoers in cog-like fashion. If parties start giving us then we do risk becoming a mob.

The key difference between a community and a mob is that in a community individuals maintain their agency even when seemingly part of a group. They do not necessarily act according to the codes proposed by conventions, codes that would have them act mindlessly or mechanistically. Yet tied to our sometimes hasty labeling of a group a mob is an issue of perspective. In the Lowland paintings we do not have access to something that might allow us to understand the agency of individuals. We view the group from the outside. Likewise as readers we are observers from the outside—this might prepare us to call a group of characters a mob if we don't have access to the thoughts of individuals. What Žižek suggests of a crowd might equally be true of a mob: that "[t]his 'resistance to being read' of the crowd designates . . . the passage from the symbolic register to that of the Real" (*Enjoy Your Symptom!* 20). What we might gather from Žižek is that community is readable (thus belongs to the symbolic), whereas the crowd is unreadable (and therefore falls into the pre-Symbolic Real). The scenes in Brueghel's paintings that one might naturally call communities, Žižek allows himself to call crowds, because they are assembled from the exterior perspective, in this case of the

ruling class, rather than from within by the peasants: "Their gaze is . . . the external gaze

of the aristocracy upon the peasant's idyll, not the gaze of the peasants themselves upon

their life" (*Sublime Object* 107). The outsider perspective, in both examples, is what

creates the crowd. Because the observer is disconnected from the scene and from the

individuals, the community becomes a crowd, or as is often the case when a difference of

class is involved, a mob. The idea of community would then suggest that there is no

outside perspective, or that if there is one, that it can read from the inside of community.

        Coover purposefully treads a fine line between mob and community, at times

going over to one side or the other. The first-person perspective from within the party –

Gerald's – as well as all the incidental conversation reflecting the thoughts of the other

discrete characters, give us glimpses into individual agency, doubts, desires, questions

about what is happening. Nevertheless action often seems to be run by the transsubjective

mechanism of a party. Because we are privy to Gerald's desires, thoughts and senses,

with regard to crowd versus community we must contend that this is indeed

community—however close to a mob it appears at times. Our perspective, though

outside, operates within the symbolic, within language, and through Gerald's individual

experience. Rather than viewing the partygoers as a mob, I suggest a reversal that

accommodates the strong presence of a social machinery: in *Gerald's Party* we are

witness to a perversion of community.

SACRIFICE AND COMMUNION

According to other thinkers on the topic, the scapegoat, or to be more precise, the

sacrifice of a scapegoat, serves a communal function and does not result from unthinking

mob mentality. René Girard, for example, argues that an underlying principle of community is that violence builds within and needs an outlet. He believes that there can be a transference of the violent energy "that would otherwise be vented on its own members" (4) through substitution of someone else for the community member. The selected person, forced into the role of scapegoat, is typically chosen from marginal figures, in part for his or her lack of ties by which a reciprocal act of vengeance may occur. Girard views his – the scapegoat is usually male, according to Girard – sacrifice "as a deliberate act of collective substitution performed at the expense of the victim and absorbing all the internal tensions, feuds, and rivalries within the community" (7). In other words, "The function of sacrifice is to quell violence within the community and to prevent conflicts from erupting" (14).

If it be objected that we have to travel a long way to get from Coover's contemporary suburban burlesque to some primitive idea of socialization, I should point out Coover's insistent and repeated connection of the current party to a distant past, a past that is defined by arcane social rituals and base animal reflexes. A number of times Coover falls back on an atavistic explanation for a character's or the group's behaviour. In one of his moments of clarity, Gerald states, "Laughter rose lightly above the drone of music and chatter, then ebbed again, throbbing steadily as a heartbeat, as people pressed close, parted, came together again, their movements fluid, almost hypnotic, as though (I thought in my own inebriate and spellbound state) under some dreamy atavistic compulsion" (9). Inspector Pardew also suggests it, and more than once. In this example, he compares the present situation to a previous case: ". . . the motive here was not merely irrational, it was *pre*rational, atavistic, shared by all, you might say . . . Once I recognized

this, my task was eased. It was simply a matter of recalling certain ancient codes" (285). By way of such references to a collective, primitive past, Coover invites us not only to draw a comparison, but see the suburban scene simultaneously as a primitive scene. He invites us to see the murder as a primitive sacrifice – Ros here becomes the scapegoat – as well as a murder-mystery device. To use Brian McHale's term, Coover creates an ontological flicker between the developed present and the primitive past, inviting us to see the coexistence of two impulses.

From the perspective of Nancy and Blanchot, such a sacrifice contravenes the rule of ideal community, which is to avoid a common goal, to avoid a common project, in this case not to make a "work" of death. A community focalized around a common task risks a singlemindedness that could spin off into a totalitarian project (the spectre of the Holocaust is always there in Nancy's *Community*). Their view is thus cautionary and represents a contemporary, civilized prohibition at the heart of a community. "[B]y organizing and by giving itself as project the execution of a sacrificial death" a community would renounce "its renunciation of creating a *work*, be it a work of death, or even the simulation of death" (Blanchot 14). In other words, in sacrificing one of its members, a community would make death a common task, thereby turning its members against a fundamental rule that keeps the community in check. So, whereas sacrifice for Girard plays a communal role in quelling violence, for Nancy and Blanchot it risks becoming a machine of structured violence, like any number of group "works" when they become institutionalized. Thus a machine of structured violence is exactly a community turned mob, a transsubjective mechanism, with a goal to kill someone.

Our calling Ros's death a communal sacrifice is corroborated by Coover's framing of the moment of recognition of Ros's death clearly as a moment of communion. Several characters surround the body of Ros and her "blood seep[s] and climb[s] up everyone" (22). Yet there is something very strange in this event. What in any other work of fiction would be rendered metaphorically – that there is blood on everyone's hands – is here rendered literally. Transforming the symbolic into the literal has a strange effect of undermining what would in another context have strong symbolic value. When the blood passes a physical limit of gravity by flowing upwards onto all in attendance, it corrupts the symbolic meaning (i.e., that all with blood on them are implicated in the killing). Coover's literalism goes too far! Yet we can't help but say that this blood works as a sign of communion, even if we cannot take it seriously, because exaggeration seems to deplete it of its conventional meaning.

Coover repeats this sense of communion after Inspector Pardew has arrived, when the first potential murder weapon, a butcher knife, is passed around for everyone to touch. The passing of the knife appears ritualistic – everyone knows what to do in advance – as though a communal act of sacrifice. From Gerald's perspective, "[S]o it went around the room, passing from hand to hand as though seeking recognition, approval, community, and as I watched, it suddenly and finally came to me: Ros, our own inimitable Ros, was dead" (28). One of their own is dead, seemingly without purpose, except as a narrative sign that at first fuels the plot's engine (if we still have expectations of a plot). Yet this blood that seeps up everyone and this knife passed around like a sacred object tell us that death has a communal purpose; all of the characters are implicated in the death. Though there may not be any murderer at all, sacrifice

momentarily binds the members of this party in a primitive sign of community, as though all had their part in the murder for a common good.

Allowing ourselves this view of Ros's murder as a communal sacrifice, we are left hanging when it comes to finding a particular reason for the murder/sacrifice, or when it comes to seeing what effect it has on the partygoers. Coover gives us no reason why she should be murdered, provides no motivation in other characters, and we even lose interest in the possibility of finding out the guilty party, if we had any interest in the first place. It is an empty sign that swiftly loses its whodunit narrative function. It comes as a sign of community with no significance other than to suggest community by way of atavistic resonance. Observing these signs voided of their conventional meanings, we begin to see how Coover in fact perverts the meaning of the sign by presenting them for conventional content and undermining that very content.

THE BURLESQUE AND THE PERVERSION OF SIGNS

Let us consider *Gerald's Party* as a burlesque in order to see how meaning changes through exaggerated actions and the breaching of conventional limits.

> Neither death nor crime exist in the polymorphous world of the burlesque where everybody gives and receives blows at will, where cream cakes fly and where, in the midst of general laughter, buildings fall down. In this world of pure gesticularity, which is also the world of cartoons (a substitute for lost slapstick), the protagonists are generally immortal . . . violence is universal and without consequences, there is no guilt" (Pascal Bonitzer qtd. in *Enjoy Your Symptom!* 1)

Like this description in almost all of its aspects, *Gerald's Party* presents a form of human socialization and physical limits that stretch beyond the conventions of realism. Most significantly, there is forceful tendency within this form to empty the conventional meaning from action: there is little or no consequence in infliction of pain, or in sex acts in open view to non-participants. Take for instance, the farfetched circumstance of the entrapment of Gerald's penis by young Sally Ann's vagina – implausible, of course. A number of partygoers help pry it out, but there is no social consequence to what under normal circumstances would be viewed as pedophilia, and any other number of social outrages. The party moves forward where in reality it would come to a serious halt. Through such disregard for real consequence, the burlesque pushes onwards and changes the meaning of individual action and human interaction. This emptying of meaning, continuously at play in the novel, is surely one of the aspects that causes such a negative reaction on the part of the critics. The cartoonish rules allowing both for the physically impossible and for the socially repugnant to transpire remove a certain kind of power from the reader; we are left to the whims of the writer, or so it feels. This strategy, on the part of Coover, is to deprive readers of what often matters most to them: some consistency by which to judge characters and a situation. He eliminates limits from which common sense tells us meaning derives.

While the burlesque is an aesthetic form, lowbrow or ridiculous in its clumsiness and cartoonishness, it has underlying it a complicated impulse toward rearranging the world. As it strays from realism in order to propose and enact a new set of limits, the burlesque reveals a disturbance in the symbolic order. As Žižek observes, the intention

behind the burlesque is perverse because it attempts to rewrite the rules that connect language to real-world limits:

> The burlesque is a form of representing the world through the lens of the perverse: What the pervert enacts is a universe in which, as in cartoons, a human being can survive any catastrophe; in which adult sexuality is reduced to a childish game; in which one is not forced to die or to choose one of the two sexes. As such, the pervert's universe is the universe of pure symbolic order, of the signifier's game running its course, unencumbered by the real of human finitude. (*Enjoy Your Symptom!* 262)

Thus where the non-pervert relies on the correspondence between real-world cause and effect in order that meaning be maintained, the pervert lets language reign free and wild, allowing for the representation of what is physically impossible in the real world. At the heart of the pervert's game is, as Žižek states, a disregard for the "real of human finitude," thereby allowing him or her to, for example, represent a penis lodged immovably in a vagina. The impossibility of such an event happening in the real world makes it difficult to assign a meaning and, when paired with an audience's reaction more suited to a clogged sink than to what appears to be statutory rape, voids the sex act of any number of conventional meanings. As Žižek states, it is "reduced to a childish game." Giorgio Agamben goes farther to state that "every content and every moral determination [is] abolished" in the process of perversion (*Man without Contents* 23).

Here we are reminded of Poe – a writer of the perverse *par excellence* – and his "Philosophy of Composition." Poe determines, through a formula that observes the effect certain literary elements have on the emotional state of the reader, that the "most poetical

topic in the world" is the death of a beautiful woman as described by the bereaved lover (548). Ros, Gerald's lover, an actress of B-grade pornographic theatre, and "the flame at which all chilled men might well warm themselves" (39) might have in another kind of story fulfilled Poe's function to affect the reader with beauty. Yet if we are aesthetically moved by, for example, Poe's intensive if unreliable description of an ivory beauty succumbing to a degenerative ailment, as in "Ligeia," we are less likely to be by Coover's graphic and unlikely scene of death. Ros, murdered some time before the narrative of the novel begins, lies with blood "fountaining from a hole between her breasts" (12), having appeared when Roger looks down at the floor and announces the corpse into being. All of the partygoers in the living room look down to see her on the floor, not having noticed her before.

Coover plays a similar game with literary conventions which, like real-world events, are read for a consistent meaning. As scholars – Wilczynski perhaps most strongly – have pointed out, Coover takes numerous signs, gathered from various literary conventions, and throws them together in such a way (often by way of jumbling their contexts) that their original meanings are depleted. For example, because Ros has been stabbed, presumably with a pointed object, we might expect some possible murder weapons of this description to appear. Coover, playing with expectations of detective fiction, goes overboard, filling the text with sharp, hole-making objects: darts from a game in the basement, an ice pick, several knives—all of which repeatedly turn up having transplanted themselves seemingly on their own. Likewise, Inspector Pardew's need to discover the moment of the crime has him collecting all of the wristwatches of the partygoers, as though gathering the sign of time but with no real-world rationale. The

action comes of as a sign of what an inspector does when investigating. Rather than resulting in useful information about the crime, giving the action consequence, it results in simply foregrounding a literary convention in order to steal its significance.

Of greater interest here is how Coover undermines signs of community through the process of perversion, thereby disabling the reader's authority in attributing meaning to them. For example, if we want to take Ros's death, following Girard, as a communal sacrifice made to restore harmony, then there should be some indication in the novel that follows. If we take another route and read it as a "work of death" that founds community or sends it in a totalitarian direction, the novel should lead us in that direction. Yet all that happens, other than the party continuing as is, is the absurd violence inflicted on other characters by the police. Sacrifice as an occasion for communal restoration or foundation thus, in the hands of a pervert, is revamped to become an occasion for all that happens in the novel: for Gerald's recollections of sexual exploits with Ros, for the police to kill some of the partygoers, for Inspector Pardew to ruminate on the nature of crime, for Ros's ghost to perform fellatio on a partygoer, for the film crew at the party to videotape a remake of the murder, among many other events. Perhaps the best way to see the sacrifice here is as the occasion for the party to unfold as chaotically as it otherwise would with perhaps more violence. Or, as an occasion for other signs to proliferate.

The limit of human finitude, so key to Nancy and Blanchot's conceptions of community, also founders under Coover's perversion. For Nancy and Blanchot, one function community serves is to ensure its members face their human finitude. Rather than providing a venue for life after death – "I do not die because the community of which I am a part . . . goes on" (Blanchot 10) – a community presents "its members their

mortal truth" (Nancy 15). Behind such assertions stands the fairly grounded notion that humans do not, through connection to others in a community, become substantially part of something greater so that they might live on in something called community ("a fusional assumption in some collective hypostasis," [Nancy 14]) after their individual lives have ended. We do not live on after death from having been part of a community. In community, rather, one encounters his or her own mortality by witnessing another's death, by being "present in the proximity of another who by dying removes himself definitively" (Blanchot 9). But the major shift in perspective is this: that through the presence of another's death one is able to distance oneself from oneself in order to open oneself to community (Blanchot 9). "Each one of us is then driven out of the confines of his person and loses himself as much as possible in the community of his fellow creatures" (Bataille in Blanchot 15). One becomes open to community in the moment of this self-distancing so that one shares with others in someone else's death. Overall, there is a reciprocal revelation in death: "community is revealed in the death of the others" (Nancy 15) and human finitude is revealed in community.

Of the five deaths that take place in the novel, those that demonstrate a transgression of the limit of human finitude are Ros's and Vic's – Vic's because his death is so painfully drawn out (excessive dying), and Ros's because she shows signs of life beyond death. In the case of Vic's the process of his dying is more significant than his actual death. Let us recall that Vic having heard of his daughter Sally Ann's sexual bungle with Gerald, lunges at Gerald, prompting a police officer to shoot him. His dying, protracted and melodramatic, perhaps overacted (reminding us of a dying scene from a Hollywood movie, but one that refuses to end) spanning 45 pages (224–71), continues

until Gerald, taking a proactive role as best friend, ends his misery with a bullet. For the length of his dying, Vic continues to cough fragmented sentences that interpolate and are interpolated by other conversations. He sputters accusations at Gerald for the kind of party he throws, and declaims on the nature of being human. Coover, by painfully extending his death, gives us the sense that Vic would keep dying without end, if it wasn't for Gerald shooting him. Rather than witnessing his "best friend's" death, rather than sharing the impossible thing to share, which is death, Gerald ends the drama. A different kind of sacrifice is enacted here: putting the community member out of his misery so that no one has any longer to suffer the plaints and unlistened-to philosophizing of his dying. This comic dying without end also suggests a breach of the limit of human finitude that, as it turns out, the partygoers do not want at their party. The reminder of finitude overstays its welcome. The extended death thus acts as a perversion of the death that would in an ideal situation (in Nancy's community) allow others to open onto community.

Ros's afterlife achieves still greater success in breaching the limit of human finitude. Recall, midway through the novel, the film crew gathers other partygoers to encircle the body of Ros. One of the members of the crew kneels by Ros, and those surrounding them chant *"Ros! Ros! Ros!"* (170). Then the impossible happens, when the crew member's pants seem "to have opened up by themselves . . . and his penis [creeps] out" (170). Ros invisibly leaves her body and performs fellatio on the man – the sperm itself seems "to disappear into thin air" (170) – presumably into the body of Ros's ghost. As in de Sade, "the quest for excessive *jouissance* does not have death as a limit, as death given or taken perfects the *jouissance*" (Blanchot 11). In addition to breaking limits of

finitude in an act of excessive pleasure seeking, the act is done quasi-ritualistically, a show for the partyers as though more pleasure comes from the producing pleasure in others.

Ros here, via Coover, is the true pervert, superseding the rules human finitude in order to continue giving pleasure to men and to a gathering of viewers (complying with their chanted request). The pervert's act is, in this final sense, against the ontological signs of community as posited by Blanchot and Nancy, because it denies community of the finality of death. Ros's act signals both a perversion of community, by emptying the communal meaning of death, and a community of perversion, by reestablishing a community whose rules are self-posited – request fellatio of the dead, and you will get it. The suggestion of immortality evacuates the communal meaning of death.

THE COMEDY OF INFINITUDE

While we may not be laughing out loud because the writing itself tempers and exhausts us, and while the exaggerations of slapstick do not appeal to all senses of humour, we cannot deny the comic thrust of Coover's excessive narratives. Coover consistently returns to a highly physical, absurdly violent burlesque (perhaps the most clear example is the Chaplin protagonist in *Charlie in the House of Rue*, but also in *Ghost Town, The Public Burning,* and *Pinocchio in Venice*) in his novels. At times his scenarios are ridiculously funny, but more often than not they go beyond what might be considered funny to what might be considered downright disturbing (let us recall, for instance, Uncle Sam cartoonishly sodomizing Richard Nixon at the end of *The Public Burning*). While Coover's excessive scenarios often act to empty out meaning from conventional signs,

they also posit a particular ontology, via comic excesses, that positively creates meaning in the text. In other words, the excess of characters and scenarios that are most comic in his work are also highly readable for positive ontological truths. In *Gerald's Party* these sharply draw our attention to the play between individual desire and group mechanism.

According to Alenka Zupančič, comically excessive acts that reach beyond the limit of death – like Ros's afterlife fellatio – reveal some core feature in us,

> There is something very real in comedy's supposedly unreal insistence on the indestructible, on something that persists, keeps reasserting itself and won't go away, like a tic that goes on even though its 'owner' is already dead. In this respect, one could say that flaws, extravagances, excesses, and so-called human weaknesses of comic characters are precisely what account for their *not* being 'only human.' More precisely, they show us that what is 'human' exists only in this kind of excess over itself (49).

One might conclude as a result that community as imagined by Blanchot and Nancy lacks the element of humour, that it is insufficient to an analysis of *Gerald's Party*. For several reasons perhaps—but for one precise reason that "the true comic spirit, far from being reducible to [the] metaphysics of finitude, is, rather, always a 'physics of the infinite' " (Zupančič 50). Zupančič's version of the comic opens up a view of humanity defined by symptoms of physical excess (in a very material sense), and "failed finitude" rather than, as in Blanchot and Nancy, mortal (and thus limited) immanence. An excess of idiosyncratic expression – one's difference from others – is what reveals us as human more than the common fate in standing by one another in death. In other words it is a failure of finitude that obliquely allows us to see that the presence of the Real in

ourselves (the facial tic of Zupančič's example, the fellatio of ghostly Ros), rather than

the finite truth (another's death), which is shared and invariable in all. Yet this Real

revealed in the physics of the infinite does more to create individuals and isolate

individuals than to gather them in community. So while the comedy of excess suggests a

dynamic quite unlike Hume's sinister mob dynamic, it effectively creates an unbridgeable

otherness between characters.

This separation from others strongly emerges through what Zupančič calls the

"monological" basis of comic characters. According to her, a comic character, reduced to

a single trait, is "invented for us in the form of a person's passionate attachment to a

singular object or activity" (66).

> [C]haracters are never 'intersubjective.' ... [T]he type of comic characters we are
>
> discussing is fundamentally 'monological.' ... [T]hey are quite content, one could
>
> say, to converse solely with their 'it/id.' ... [T]he characters, technically in
>
> dialogue with others, are in fact absorbed in a dialogue with themselves, or with
>
> their 'it.' (Zupančič 68)

Like the excessive act that reveals a truth about the core of a person, passionate

attachment expressed in the monological shows us an exaggerated centre of identity.

Here, we might recall Vic's dying scene, where he speaks without being heard, where his

own interests are the focus of his struggle. Vic's last words, for example, before Gerald

shoots, are intended as wisdom to be passed on to his daughter. Strung together as a

single, unbroken sentence they not insignificantly read, "[T]ell her for me . . . tell her to

watch out for words like . . . like mind and . . . and soul, spirit . . . [...] All that junk . . .

just . . . just a metaphor, tell her . . . old animistic habit . . . [...] There's nothing in there,

goddamn it . . . no me, no I . . . [...] The brain . . . just makes all that up . . . the first person . . . [...] Is a hoax, an arrogant sham . . . the first person . . . [...] Is no person . . . at all! Tell her . . .” (269–70). On the one hand, Vic is a good poststructuralist, a Derridean, perhaps, erasing the self, passing it off as metaphor (and in one sense taking hold of his death by crossing himself out before Gerald does). But on the other hand, Vic makes clear for the reader just what is at stake in Coover's novel, and what is at stake is many of Coover's novels: the contingency of the self. The irony of Vic's passionate attachment – of that thing that would most characterize him as different from other characters – is that it puts in doubt anything Real at the centre of his being.

Though we may safely consider Vic's final statement as monological in that no one responds to his declamation, other characters independently express similar lines of thought throughout the novel. Inspector Pardew, pondering what he is made of, says, “'I don't feel any personal identity – any 'I'...' ” (134). In another scene, a rather incidental character named Woody states, “[M]aybe ego *is* absence, that bottomless hole in the center that egomaniacs like Roger keep throwing themselves into” (122).[1] And Ros too contributes to the sentiment, with her claim that “Life . . . was nothing but a sequence of interlocking incarnations, an interminable effort to fill the unfillable outline” (120). One of the purposes of the recurring hole image, in addition to parodying Ros's chest wound is to puncture the novel through with the theme of individual emptiness.

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[1] These clips on identity come to us as a greater package of poststructuralist messages Coover sends us through various characters throughout the novel. We might also include statements such as “Language is the square hole we keep trying to jam the round peg of life into” (93) and Pardew's meditation on truth's caprice, “ 'I only meant that truth, when it is no longer pertinent, is not the same sense truth any longer . . .' ” (199).

Zupančič argues, via the limit-breaching tendency of comedy, that there exists something prior to and in excess of the limit, which is a stable core of identity – in Lacanian terms, the Real. Ros's sexuality, for example, is her most human trait, the trait most central to her core, precisely because it extends itself beyond her death. It reveals the unwavering part of her prior to the structure of the party, but also above and beyond the party. Likewise, Vic's quasi-poststructuralist sputtering reveals something central to him that exists beyond the framework of the party. In this way Coover uses the comic as his greatest argument against a complete lack of being.

With on one hand, characters atomized by their own passionate attachments and, at times troubled by a seeming lack of identity, and on the other, characters drawn together under a transsubjective mechanism, Coover ties the individual question to the possibility of a "we". He connects these most explicitly through comments made by Gerald after the partygoers have finally left his house, as Gerald and his wife finally perform intercourse. In the midst of copulating he ponders an underlying problem in community that derives from loss of personal identity. He asks himself, "[W]hat *is* this 'we' when the I's are gone?" (313).

As so often when he lets a serious idea escape, Coover here embeds the question within a physical action that has the potential for slapstick – here in a graphic sex scene. Yet the serious question of being stands as the opposite pole to the perverse rendering of community that characterizes the book. Is he not asking here what the possibility of community is when we understand ourselves as having no stable identity or having lost our identity, as one branch of postmodern thought maintains? Is he not saying that in

order for there to be community, there needs to be individual subjects with something inside them? Is it possible to conclude from this that a stable identity keeps us from being ruled by an exterior mechanism?

Coover suggests as much. The dumping out of meaning that occurs in perversion reveals the danger of unthinkingly living by conventions, and in the case of community, that social conventions have the insidious power to replace actual interactions. Yet Coover has not done away completely with community and with individuals. The excesses show a residue of individuality without which community would be impossible (even if such residue seems more to isolate than to bring together). And, in contrast to the unthinking acts that fill his pages, Coover at times allows his characters to have moments of clarity, moments that seem sincere and that are not signs of some reversal, moments when individual agency has something to say against the mindless flow of actions.

CONVENING IN LIMBO: GILBERT SORRENTINO'S CRYSTAL VISION

Crystal Vision (1981), a plotless novel that derives its form and content from a deck of

Tarot cards, has received almost no critical attention in the 30 years since its publication.

It is kept in print, like almost all of Gilbert Sorrentino's work, through Dalkey Archive

Press. When Sorrentino's name does appear in chapters of books on postmodern

American fiction, alongside Ronald Sukenick, Walter Abish, Harry Mathews, etc., this

particular title is almost never mentioned (if any titles are indeed mentioned—usually the

authors names stand in for the genre of self-reflective metafiction they engage in). The

single essay devoted to it, Louis Mackey's "Representation and Reflection: Philosophy

and Literature in *Crystal Vision* by Gilbert Sorrentino" (1987), offers a discussion, as the

title suggests, of some of the prevailing topics of postmodern literature at the time:

intrusion of elements between discrete fictional layers, abyssal structures of storytelling,

the problematization of mimesis, the undermining of both reality and fiction. His analysis

culminates in statements such as, "In postmodern fiction this specular awareness of its

own fictiveness is self-consciously exploited, so that representation *becomes* reflection"

(218) and "[R]epresentation itself [...] is called into question" (218) among other now-

taken-for-granted sentiments. The kind of metafictional construct Mackey considers is

exemplified when a character attacks the narrator's use of diction, as in the following

passage from chapter 29, "Crazy Talk":

> They are sitting at the bar in Pat's Tavern, although Irish Billy implies
>
> that the Arab and the Drummer most usually employ Gallagher's
>
> Subway Inn as a watering hole.

You're goddam right I imply it, Irish Billy says. His voice issues from a booth in the rear of Vogler's, where he is sitting with Lizzie Mulvaney and Bony Ruth. (174)

Unfortunately, the edges of this scholarly approach to metafiction have rounded somewhat through overapplication. There was a tendency in earlier reactions for numerous works to be viewed as amounting to the same thing, illustrations of various kinds of postmodernist games. (Perhaps the problem lies in few people returning to the work after this initial round of sorting out the layers, frames and mirrors.)

While Sorrentino's playful approach to novel-writing breaks fictional frames, parodies literary styles à la *Ulysses*, and creates a self-consciously hermetic world, as do numerous works of postmodernist fiction, it also presents a range of emotional effects, produced precisely through a complex use of literary devices. So while *Crystal Vision*'s 78 disconnected vignettes, populated by a number of men who congregate at a candy store and a bar in their 1940s Brooklyn neighbourhood, create a bawdy, parodic comedy, they also paint a picture of speech without action, of individual life without meaningful movement, of, as Mackey states, "a timeless limbo between false memories and vain aspirations" (216). Sorrentino's novel from the outset modulates between comic banter and elegiac lament.

Rather than reexamine the text's metafictional devices, I propose to concentrate on Sorrentino's employment of antiquated conventions, which are responsible in large part for the emotional range of the novel and especially the sense of community that emerges in it. As in Robert Coover's *John's Wife* and *Gerald's Party*, Sorrentino uses many strategies taken from Menippean satire, creating a carnivalesque atmosphere that

focuses our attention on the group rather than individuals. This atmosphere that binds the joyful quality of carnival to the temporal stasis of limbo is the backdrop against which the men of *Crystal Vision* repeatedly meet. Sorrentino also counterpoints here the joyful play of carnival with the dark lament of elegy, borrowing much from the conventions of pastoral poetry. He fills the pages of *Crystal Vision* with verbal exchanges and contests, often focusing on objects of desire that have been lost to time or regretfully never attained. His men, like shepherds of pastoral poetry, repeatedly return to the rhetorical device of ekphrasis – the bringing of images before the eyes – powerfully connecting the men to each other. Because these images of exchange frequently depict women in states of undress, they reveal a bond built on not only fantasy but also gender division. Thus a strong sense of community is created through antiquated conventions, and also through the gender division in part inherent in such conventions. Community emerges as something lost to a timeless past, but ultimately lost without regret, for community in Sorrentino ensnares the men's lives so that no individual movement – no mobility – is possible.

LIMBO

Sorrentino offers us the epigraph, "I heard these words with heartfelt grief that seized on me knowing how many worthy souls endured suspension in that Limbo," with his typical heavy dose of irony. We take "these words" to be those that form all the ridiculous dialogue in *Crystal Vision*, rather than their original context of Dante's consideration of Virgil's solemn explanation. Yet knowing the quotation's context in *The Inferno* inflects our understanding of it in relation to *Crystal Vision*, especially for its quality of lament.

Virgil and Dante have entered the first circle of the abyss and hear sounds of sadness emanating from the shadows. The sighs issue from souls kept longing in Limbo merely for having lived and died before the Christian faith was born, and therefore are condemned for having "not worship[ped] God aright." Those in Purgatory's waiting room include Homer, Horace, Ovid, Lucan, Euclid, Ptolemy, Galen, Socrates, and others. According to Eric G. Wilson, "Most commentators have held that the pagans pine for a blessed state they can never enjoy, an impossible future. Yet, as [Manlio Pastore] Stocchi suggests, this yearning could also be directed toward a lost past ... [S]urely the melancholy of these great souls issues from a twofold desire: a yearning for a lost past and an unattainable future. Double, their longing looks backwards and forwards" (10). Dante's pagans are in exactly the same plight as Sorrentino's Brooklynites: they are both afflicted by "a timeless limbo between false memories and vain aspirations" – that all desires are directed to the past and future.

Dante's Limbo and its commentary show us how a common sense of time joins characters in a common circumstance. Yet the time of Limbo, as for *Crystal Vision*, is far from a normal sequential time on which we build a meaningful experience of the world. Wilson defines this conventional type of time as "connected to *kairos*, a period charged with significance because of its relationship to a cogent narrative moving toward a momentous ending" (10). Though some characters of *Crystal Vision* share a past, relating common events from school days, their present lives have lost a diachronic sensibility that would allow them to build on who they are. They are somehow excluded from sequential time. What Wilson says of *The Inferno*'s time might equally be applied to *Crystal Vision*'s:

Exiled from sequence, from the richness of *kairos*, the Limbo dwellers languish

in stagnation, stasis, and discontinuity. The negative space-time is characterized

by disjunction, by space-time as *chronos*—a neutral passage of instants and

points, a bland string of 'nows' and 'theres': 'one damn thing after another'.

(10)

By way of discontinuous chapters in which characters appear and reappear in different

groups, and in which there is no causal link from chapter to chapter, *chronos* emerges as

the defining temporal state of *Crystal Vision*. Sorrentino's hidden formal procedure

produces this state: the 78 chapters of *Crystal Vision* parallel the 78 cards in a Tarot deck,

each of which emerges from the image of a card. Perhaps like the hand of God following

a consistent and unbending set of rules to judge the fates of the deceased, Sorrentino's

proceduralism also creates an inevitable suspension for his characters. When characters

are confined in the disjunction of *chronos*, there seems little possibility of entering into a

more healthy and productive chronology, i.e, of experiencing the present. Thus, it is not

just that the space of Brooklyn defines them as a potential community, but the kind of

time produced by a greater law: the authorial procedure which mimics God's procedure

for confining men and women to Limbo. The trope of Limbo ultimately suggests a forced

confinement, a community produced from above or outside, and that is separated from

reality.

MENIPPEAN SATIRE AND THE CARNIVALESQUE

Menippean satire, famously outlined in Mikhail Bakhtin's *Problems of Dostoyevsky's*

Poetics, well describes the play of literary forms that makes up Sorrentino's novel itself,

as well as the internal working out of philosophies and unveiling of irregular behaviour of characters within each chapter. Sorrentino borrows from Menippean satire "the wide use of inserted genres" that are "at various distances from the ultimate authorial position, that is, with varying degrees of parody" (Bakhtin 118). The discontinuity of plot reinforced by frequent chapter breaks also allows for this array of literary forms: some chapters are letters written between characters, some are poems by characters, some are excerpts from a character's novel, others form lists. Chapter 62, "Big Duck's Valentine," for instance, is solely Big Duck's over-the-top poem of longing addressed to Dolores. Chapter 68, "Christmas News," is primarily the Arab's reading of the holiday edition of a local newspaper, in parody of the descriptiveness of amateur journalism. Chapter 69, "An Epistolary Novel," is a series of letters between Big Duck and Dolores. Chapter 2, "Headlines," is a list of cryptic headlines from newspapers with anagrammatical messages related to the emblematic structure of *Crystal Vision*. In keeping with Northrop Frye's distinction, rather than, as a novelist does, seeing "evil and folly as social diseases ... the Menippean satirist sees them as disease of the intellect" (Frye 309). Within the dialogues that make up many of the chapters, Sorrentino's characters suffer, as products of menippea, "abnormal moral and psychic states" (Bakhtin 116) that create "extraordinary situations for the provoking and testing of a philosophical idea" (Bakhtin 114).

Sorrentino's use of a variety of Menippean conventions leads us to recognize the carnivalesque atmosphere of *Crystal Vision*. For Bakhtin, "a carnival sense of the world draws together the heterogenous elements of menippea" (134). In general, the carnivalesque and mennipea, while suspending conventional hierarchies, bring together

diverse elements, including people of various backgrounds and strata, and high and low culture. Sorrentino chooses his locations in Brooklyn – the candy store, the bar, the newspaper stand – as public places where a diversity of characters may conveniently meet and loiter. Thus Professor Kooba, the Arab, Irish Billy, the Drummer, the Sailor, Major Gentry – men of diverse ethnicities, aspirations and degrees of education – might congregate. These locations act as a kind of "carnival square" free of "hierarchical barriers," necessary to allowing for "free familiar contact" (Bakhtin 123) of the carnivalesque. This space allows for, as Bakhtin says, "*a new mode of interrelationship between individuals*, counterposed to the all-powerful socio-hierarchical relationships of noncarnival life" (123).

Aided by this non-hierarchical atmosphere, eccentricity reigns among the Brooklynites. Any passage from the novel, such as this from chapter 16, "Arab Stew," illustrates this free and eccentric discourse set in a public place:

> While it is not my wont to discuss my philosophy of life willy-nilly and in whatever environings at all—particularly on this offensive and odiously cockaroachish street corner, the Arab says, you tempt me sorely to present a briefly compendous sketch of my basic creedo because of you remarks anent the vague nature of good and evil and their effect upon the homo known as sapiens, in short, us.
>
> Go ahead, Fat Frankie says. Me and Big Duck are all ears. Right, Duck?
>
> Duck grunts into a glassful of vanilla malted. (57)

In this example the Arab's insistently long-winded, wordy, nonsense-talk strewn with ludicrously elevated diction is inevitably accepted by others who, in this case, respond

colloquially, or grunt affirmatively to his "philosophical" meanderings. At the beginning of each chapter Sorrentino inserts such a dialogue, set at one or another places the characters repeatedly return to. And each character, though often apprehensive of or impatient with the talk of another character, goes along with it, responds to it, adds to it, or spurs the speaker on. The important aspect of the carnival here is that "everyone is an active participant, everyone communes in the carnival act ... its participants live in it, they live by its laws as long as those laws are in effect" (122).

What exactly are those laws beyond the "joyful relativity" of open eccentricity and the free life of ideas? The sense of carnival implies a kind of community that divorces itself yet stands in relation to the everyday world that must have as its definitive quality chronological time and ordinary hierarchies. As in Limbo, there is shared distancing from reality. The characters are produced from this community as practitioners of a common fiction in part dictated by Tarot images, and that can only exist so long as belief is suspended. Yet there is something terrible in the pairing of Limbo and the carnivalesque, which involves taking that which is meant to be temporary (carnival atmosphere) and giving it a ceaseless duration (Limbo). There is something absolutely wrong with the community and time in *Crystal Vision*, which Sorrentino makes evident in layering the novel with elegiac overtones.

PASTORAL

Sorrentino produces an elegiac register in the novel, and evocations of people and situations not present through conventions borrowed from pastoral poetry. As in pastoral poetry, Sorrentino's men meet solely for verbal exchange rather than to accomplish

another kind of group activity, or work. And, as in pastoral poetry, the participants orient their dialogues around the absence of something desired, in some cases an object and in others an idea. There are countless examples in *Crystal Vision* of characters calling forth something that is not there and often for the sake of their audience. Chapter 17, "Her Name a Star," to give one example, begins with Richie's evocation of Kooba's past: "In Hungary once, or in Bulgaria or Estonia—somewhere—Professor Kooba was young and the world seemed a less intransigent—good word—place" (62). Here, Richie initiates a lament by raising both youth and a more negotiable world as objects of loss.

The tone of such exchanges that focus on an absent object, Paul Alpers tells us in *What is Pastoral?*, predominantly emerges as emotionally heightened aesthetic engagement:

> Pastoral convenings are characteristically occasions for songs and colloquies that express and thereby seek to redress separation, absence, or loss. The inaugural poem of Western pastoral, Theocritus's first Idyll, brings herdsmen together for the pleasure of hearing a lament for Daphnis [...] Literary herdsmen need each other to hear their complaints and share the sentiment and pleasures that sustain them" (81).

In the safety of other shepherds, the performance of dialogue entertains and provides solace to the speaker and audience. The above example from "Her Name a Star" continues with Professor Kooba's reply, "You speak the truth," and a turn to the subject of love in Kooba's youth, before verbalizing images of a nude woman. Words become surrogates for that missing object of desire. And aesthetic pleasure, in this case, derives

from men convening to share the image of a woman and to share her nostalgically preserved in a state of youth.

More often than not, the object in *Crystal Vision* is not lost through its death but was never attained or owned in the first place. This is to say, nostalgia rather than lament typifies the relationship characters have for past and future objects that would always be out of reach. Mackey suggests that of those directed at the future, most are "wish fulfilling fantasies: erotic, sadistic, or otherwise ego-improving dreams that will never come true" (212). Those directed at the past are of two kinds, "recollections of missed opportunities and nostalgic fantasies" (212). So often these longings emerge as sexual opportunities that never transpired or wishes for love encounters that never would transpire, as in chapter 78, "Red White and Blue": "Let's imagine, Doc Friday says, or recall if you like, I don't give a shit, Isabel and Berta, as they used to be long ago, as lovely young girls, pure and chaste, can be happy, let's imagine or recall them unaffected by what is known as the ravages of time and so on and so forth, unmarried and young forever ..." (287). The atmosphere of nostalgia is evoked through cues like "Let's imagine" and is aided by common knowledge – everyone knows who Isabel and Berta are. After other characters tell Doc that he didn't even know Isabel and Berta in their youth, Doc insists on continuing the construction anyway, telling the other characters, "It's good for you" (287). The others – Fat Frankie, Irish Billy, the Arab, the Drummer – aid in his construction of this idealized past, suggesting changes in word choice ("Perhaps 'skies' instead of 'heavens'? the Arab says"), and questioning his imagery ("Blue haze? the Drummer says. Blue haze and mountains?"). The characters thus share in the construction of the lost objects, at times undermining the nostalgic effect of verbal

images by questioning language choice, but nevertheless caught up in the attempt at verbal recovery.

The missing object of desire is, however, the dead in one chapter, and here the novel more directly takes on the content and tone of pastoral elegy. Chapter 13, "Prescience," as though following from the epigraph of Dante, presents a kind of matter of fact, cold elegy for everyone in the book. The Magician, a character who stands in an unexplained position of authority outside the community of characters, presents an image of Death holding a banner that lists (in a style Sorrentino borrows from *Ulysses*) the cause of death of every character mentioned in the novel:

> Richie, on the beach in Miami in his late seventies, coronary occlusion; Dolores, while a nurse supervisor at Mount Sinai, uterine cancer; Big Duck, killed in action with the Seventh Division fourteen miles south of the Yalu River, North Korea; Gene Phillips, a coronary occlusion as he walks one evening to get the first edition of the *News*; Dorothy Phillips, cirrhosis of the liver [...] (47)

Inverting the typical lament in which death has already happened, Sorrentino intermingles dark literary humour with elegy. Even as a list trimmed to the barest details, or maybe because of its formal starkness, Sorrentino infuses a degree of reality here that cuts through the wildness of his characters' exchanges, giving an elegiac weight to the whole book. This particular weightiness is presented, more obviously than in other chapters, so that the reader can share in this private vision, as no other audience is present. We become the shepherds' witness to this lament, and share in the aesthetic contest, as we do in other chapters too, in which there are many characters present as audience and participants.

As Mackey suggests, lament in *Crystal Vision* is not solely for future death but for a wasted or altogether elided present: "Our memories of the past are so entangled in nostalgic delusions and our hopes of the future so contaminated by wishful thinking that we cannot construct a credible sense of the reality of the present" (213). If anything plagues the community of men of the book it is this stolen present, a present overcome by visions and sentiments and desires of past and future, a present that has become insensible. Dialogue without action fills the present, and the dialogue itself appears as a construct with no foundations in a firm reality and no stable consistency. In other words, dialogue produces reality of the present as a surrogate for action. For instance, chapter 15, "Pittsburgh. The Devil. Yellow Mustard," begins,

> So Mickey's in Pittsburgh, Richie says. What a place to be. I wonder
>
> if he'll stay long.
>
> What? Curtin says. Pittsburgh? You're crazy.
>
> I think he's in Pittsburgh. Why do you say I'm crazy?
>
> Because I saw him yesterday crabbing off the 69th Street pier.
>
> Well, let's just *say* he's in Pittsburgh then. (54)

Chapter 70, "The Bad Joke," begins, "Tania Crosse stands in her garden. It may not be her garden. As a matter of fact, let's make it clear that it is not. She's a weekend guest of the manor house, Richie says" (249). Such invention of the present suggests that the present lacks content, that there is really nothing happening, that reality is suspended.

The Arcadian setting of pastoral poetry, unchanging except for natural cycles – culturally unchanging – produces a suspension of time like that of Limbo. Sorrentino achieves the feeling of suspended time not through an idyllic setting but through

presenting a past that despite being a real place bears little relation to reality. Distance from the present historical moment, as is conventionally attained by locating the pastoral exchanges far away in an Arcadian setting, is an invaluable device for reflection on the immediate world (Iser 111). Wolfgang Iser shows, in an essay on Spenser's *Shepheardes Calendar*, that "such a reflection can never be a mirror image of a political and historical reality; the reflection is, rather, of that which is hidden in the present, of solutions which cannot as yet be seen in the current conflict" (Iser 111). In other words, the work of the pastoral is not to reproduce a state of affairs realistically, with verisimilitude, but to open up, through dialogue, otherwise invisible perspectives – as some would have it, to find the anamorphic view. J. M. Coetzee has spoken similarly of the importance of distance or removal in contemporary pastorals: "The pastoral defines and isolates a space in which whatever cannot be achieved in the wider world (particularly the city) can be achieved" (61). The pastoral process thus enables a variety of attitudes to emerge, from this isolation, toward a real-world situation.

In *Crystal Vision* this isolated space, whether we call it Limbo or Arcadia, abounds in ideas that never seem to address, let alone solve, the present problems of the world. Unlike the *Shepheardes Calendar*, *Crystal Vision* does not direct its dialogues towards a potentially incendiary historical event, or towards potential solutions to the event, but towards personal issues: literary pretension, narrow thinking, hopeless desires, the out-of-reach, ill-conceived American dream. The critical distance that pastoral often achieves is here subverted by the personal desires of those present in the dialogues: though the participants are at a distance from reality, they cannot gain insight because the

topic at issue so often founders as it is discussed. They cannot get away from themselves and from the objects of desire that they raise through their dialogues.

EKPHRASIS

As the title implies, vision is a central trope in stories that make up the novel. Sorrentino translates the card-reader's work of Tarot interpretation into a formal structure and thematic organizer of the novel, yet never tells us so directly. We must pick up on it on our own (or depending on the edition, from the book cover) by recognizing the images from Tarot (78 in total) that are each covertly presented to us through the bizarre fantasies of *Crystal Vision's* characters. In other words, the visual images of the Tarot deck and translated into verbal images. More than any other rhetorical process in the book, then, ekphrasis carries the storytelling, and demands character connection through shared visualization. And, as in the bucolic gatherings of pastoral poetry, it is among the Brooklyn men that these images are shared.

Ekphrasis is defined in ancient Greece and Rome as a verbal conjuring of something absent before the mind's eye. Classical oratory tells us that "an ekphrasis can be of any length, of any subject matter, composed in verse or prose, using any verbal techniques, as long as it 'brings its subject before the eyes' or, as one of the ancient authors says, 'makes listeners into spectators'" (Webb 8). Passages in the novel that most obviously engage the audience to participate in ekphrasis are those initiated by one character's appeal to the others, "Imagine then in your mind..." (174), "Imagine a man..." (150), "We're looking into the past" (204), or through a character's first or third person visualization, "In the eyes of my mind [...] I perceive with clearness myself..." (258) or

"The picture he saw [...] was a color photograph. [...] It shows a scene..." (212). The process is also initialized in numerous passages without the direct appeals or the imperative to "imagine." Often, as in the following examples, Sorrentino works images from the Tarot deck into the vision. Here, a castle:

They stand outside the main entrance to the high school, Richie goes on, a monumental edifice designed to look like a medieval castle, complete with a bridge over the moat. This motif is slightly sullied by the presence of orange peels, candy-bar wrappers, chocolate-milk containers, and a condom in the water of the moat. (115)

Here, a king:

As the kids file in, the slobs, I should say in all their sweaty khaki glory, there's Krigmann on a throne—a big chair anyway, taken from the pastor's office upstairs. [...] He's in some musty and nauseating robes, he's got on a crown made out of oaktag on his head like in a school platy in the third grade, he's wearing his mother's or his aunt's or somebody's necklaces, cheap gaudy shit costume jewelry, around his neck. (86)

In this last example one of the auditors gives the most ideal response to an ekphrasis: "I have got the picture" (86). As an effect of the procedure by which Sorrentino organizes his novel, and especially because dialogue carries most of the text of *Crystal Vision*, ekphrasis connects the eyes and ears of characters in almost every chapter.

Ekphrasis, as a rhetorical strategy, gains its power by implicating the audience in seeing what the conjuror of the image sees. Bernhard Scholz emphasizes the affective nature of ekphrasis (in the language of Classical rhetoric): that it produces *enargeia*, a

seeing before the eyes in the listener. Though it sounds like a straightforward procedure when described in Classical rhetoric, we must remember that the verbal image is intended to bridge an irreducible gap between two individuals. Depending on what theory of language (or ontological-linguistic framework) one chooses to work with, this leap is possible to varying degrees. For Scholz, a practitioner of reader-response theory, "a life-world [is] shared between the text in question and its intended readers" (80–81), or between the orator and his audience. That means that already the producer and receiver must have common points of reference to have the image come before the eyes. Scholz concludes, as we might expect from a reader-response critic, that successful ekphrasis, one in which the listener claims to have seen the objects or events as though a witness to them, shows "proof that one belongs to the relevant community of interpretation" (91). The men of *Crystal Vision* at times state, "I have got the picture," and "Hey [...] How the hell did we manage to see all this?", showing that, in reader-response terms, they too belong to the relevant community of interpretation.

W. J. T. Mitchell takes a much more critical approach to exchange of images than does Scholz. For him, successful ekphrasis would hinge on the possibility of "the overcoming of otherness" (156). Mitchell contends that the process of image exchange described by ekphrasis is truly impossible, and thus dubs it "ekphrastic hope." "A verbal representation cannot," he maintains, "represent—that is, make present—its object in the same way a visual representation can. It may refer to an object, describe it, invoke it, but it can never bring its visual presence before us in the way pictures do. Words can 'cite,' but never 'sight' their objects" (152). From his point of view, there is no such thing as a relevant community of interpretation because an inviolable gap between individuals

cannot be bridged through the language of visualization (or any language), to the degree

that an image truly comes before the eyes and is the same for all involved. "[W]e talk as

if ekphrasis were a peculiar textual feature, something that produced ripples of

interference on the surface of the verbal representation. But no special textual features

can be assigned to ekphrasis, any more than we can, in grammatical or stylistic terms,

distinguish descriptions of paintings, statues, or other visual representations from

descriptions of any other kind of object" (159). Simply stated, ekphrasis has no more

power to conjure words into visible objects than does any other kind of rhetorical

strategy.

Yet, ekphrasis does seem to have a special power as a social gesture in connecting

men in *Crystal Vision*. As the primary form of verbal gesture in *Crystal Vision*, ekphrasis

produces (or perhaps reveals) the same spectrum of feelings regarding the possibility of

connecting with others as it does in writers on Classical rhetoric. Mitchell outlines the

relationship-forming process that ekphrasis produces:

> The ekphrastic poet typically stands in a middle position between the object
>
> described or addressed and a listening subject who (if ekphrastic hope is fulfilled)
>
> will be made to 'see' the object through the medium of the poet's voice.
>
> Ekphrasis is stationed between 'othernesses,' and forms of (apparently)
>
> impossible translation and exchange: (1) the conversion of the visual
>
> representation into a verbal representation, either by description or ventriloquism;
>
> (2) the reconversion of verbal representation back into the visual object in the
>
> reception of the reader. The 'working through' of ekphrasis and the other, then, is
>
> more like a triangular relationship than a binary one; its social structure cannot be

grasped fully as a phenomenological encounter of subject and object, but must be

pictured as a *ménage à trois* in which the relations of self and other, text and

image, are triply inscribed. If ekphrasis typically expresses a desire for a visual

object (whether to possess or praise), it is also typically an offering of this

expression as a gift to the reader. (164)

Mitchell's analysis emphasizes, through his bedding of three components, the intimate

social connections assumed in an ekphrastic encounter. Driving this connection is a

desire for exchange equal to that of gift giving.

It is precisely through a decidedly gendered gift exchange that Sorrentino

produces a community of heterosexual men in *Crystal Vision*. Because the ekphrastic

object is an object of desire, it is no surprise that it manifests frequently and most

potently as the image of a woman. Sorrentino makes use of the women represented in a

conventional Tarot deck for some of these verbal conjurings. In chapter 57, "Pieces of

Spectacle," Thelma Krulicewicz appears as Justice, speaking from her long-gone public

school auditorium. "She is in a long red robe, bound and blindfolded, and fenced in by a

large sheet of oaktag on which Miss Flynn's sixth grade art class has painted silver

swords..." (205). In many instances, the speaker eroticizes his image, presenting the

woman in various states of undress. In chapter 17, "Her Name a Star," Kooba is asked to

explain his experience of love back in his home country somewhere in Eastern Europe.

"The vision is before me. A beautiful blond young woman, completely nude, is in a field,

down on one knee. She is my beloved—I know that she is my beloved—but she doesn't

look at me. I feel, as the vision gets clearer, as if we have just made love..." (63). And in

chapter 22, "Willing Suspension of Disbelief," Curtin and Richie form a story in which

Major Gentry comes across a photograph. It is described: "A young woman, her breasts bared, a slight smile on her face, appears to be dancing or running, or hopping up and down on one foot. In each hand she holds a candle, or perhaps a wand" (81). Or, perhaps the most ridiculous of these, the string of desirous fantasies Georgie Huckle offers in chapter 57, "Burning Desire":

> Oh come to me, Georgie says, oh come, Cookie LaNord! With your rich and heavy and thick make-up, especially on your wet lips, with your permanent wave and chubby silver-fox jacket, your satin dresses above your knees, your black mesh stockings and ankle-strap high heels. God! The pearl chokers you wear, the cordé handbags you carry, the way you crack your Juicy Fruit gum and its odor from your big mouth ... And you, Joycie Lunde! I go crazy thinking about your plaid skirts and cardigans buttoned down the back. The clean white collars of your blouses outside your sweaters. Shined loafers! ... Show yourself, Bony Ruth! Show me your flat chest and skinny ass, your acne scars and thin lips, give me a sexy smile with your cigarette-stained teeth, touch me with your yellowish brown fingers with the nails bit down to the raw flesh so you bleed ... And last and maybe even least—come to this vacant lot, Lizzie Mulvaney! I'm going apeshit thinking of your red face and piano legs that can probably break a guy's back wrapped around him, those thick ankles, slobbery mouth, and big ears!... (274–75)

Male-fantasy ekphrasis is far from unique to Sorrentino's work. Mitchell states that "female otherness is an overdetermined feature in a genre that tends to describe an object of visual pleasure and fascination from a masculine perspective, often to an audience

understood to be masculine as well. Ekphrastic poetry as a verbal conjuring up of the female image has overtones, then, of pornographic writing and masturbatory fantasy" (168). I won't speculate here on the gender breakdown of Sorrentino's audience, but judging by the audience within each chapter of the book, I would emphasize that Sorrentino forms his community of heterosexual men in relation to female otherness.

Even when, as in chapter 36, "Group Therapy," Sorrentino gathers together the female characters, a male character, the Magician, arranges the meeting. The Magician also makes the meeting itself visible to the male characters not physically in attendance. As the men do throughout the novel, the Brooklyn women here share in a vision: "I see Donald Halvorsen through the window of a castle, Dolores says. He is on a faraway hillock [...] So do I, Helen Walsh says, Except that I see Red Miller. Isabel and Berta speak. The same dream but with different men appearing to each on the hillock. Cookie, Tania, and Joycie also agree" (127). In this inversion of the norm, the women visualize the men sharing an image through dreamlike ekphrasis. Yet the visions decidedly lack any erotic overtones. Moreover, the male characters oversee the ekphrasis and provide running commentary on the whole scene.

For the men of *Crystal Vision*, the social bond formed through ekphrasis stands in for and replaces real love relationships with women, filling a lack in their lives. Ekphrasis thus allows the men to stand at a safe distance from reality, short circuiting the formation of real love relationships while at the same time elevating their connectedness. As Joshua Scodel suggests, though "the ekphrastic object registers ... the woman that the poet cannot capture in poetry," it also registers "the possibility of another, beneficent relationship between a poet and his male audience" (in Mitchell 165). Scodel's positive

spin is important to acknowledge in relation to Sorrentino's novel: the men do bond through the gift exchange of images. The men freely share masturbatory fantasies with one another in a carnivalesque atmosphere, in which hierarchies seem suspended.

Yet if we acknowledge the beneficent relationship of male bonding, and indeed the formation of a male community, we must do so with a full view of its cost. Ekphrasis so powerfully binds these men that they fail to recognize their limbo except in fleeting moments. They fail to recognize the present in which real love relationships with women might form, and in which a community might form that is not divided by gender. Yet the novel's lament is not for a lost community, one involving both men and women, but for the seeming impossibility of individuals emerging from a kind of pathetic – if also comic – community. The men are bound together in a community indistinguishable from a state of limbo; the live in a kind of prison of mediocrity. Sorrentino leads us to the highly individualist conclusion that a full and authentic experience of life would be possible only for those who escape community. So without losing sight of the full affective range produced by Sorrentino's convening men, from the comedy of its menippean borrowings, to the elegiac effect of its pastoral borrowings, to its postmodern irony, we must also see the unusual inversion of a typical theme of community: here it is not a lost community that is the object of lament, but the lost individual.

COOVER'S EMPTY CENTRE: COMMUNITY STRUCTURED ON THE MODEL OF IDEOLOGY IN *JOHN'S WIFE*

He watched John's boy with his taped-junk 'camera,' bobbing about frenetically with a kind of despairing enthusiasm, a hopeful anguish, and thought: a paradigm for our piteous effort to focus upon the real, to find that center. What was the real, and why was it so elusive? As though in reply, John's wife passed in her knee-length shorts and crisp cotton shirt, all eyes in the backyard upon her, and Lennox thought: whatever it is, it has substance. Form. Body. And bodily parts.

—Robert Coover, *John's Wife*

There is a device that Coover returns to again and again, from *The Origin of the Brunists* (1966), to *The Adventures of Lucky Pierre* (2002), a device so fundamental, it seems, that he has structured his major novels around it: a profoundly empty figure at the centre of the narrative. In *The Origin of the Brunists* this figure manifests as barely sentient Bruno, in *Gerald's Party* (1984) dead Ros, in *John's Wife* (1996) dissipated John's wife, and in *Lucky Pierre* the eponymous porn star. Coover relates this kind of central figure directly to a psychoanalytic model in his short novel from 1987, *Whatever Happened to Gloomy Gus of the Chicago Bears?* Title character Gloomy Gus is said to be "a walking parody of Marx's definition of consciousness, a cartoon image of the Social Product, probably the only man in recent history with what could be called a naked superego" (83). In the other novels, a lack in the central character manifests in a variety of ways, but is always profound and constitutive of the core of the character – that is, of the character's identity and subjectivity.

That Coover names Beckett, author of "characters who are not characters," his "chosen mentor," shouldn't surprise us ("Dying Fathers" 3). We are reminded of Beckett's patriarchal relationship to a generation of American writers, such as Donald Barthelme, who began publishing metafictional works in the 1960s. Coover draws

Beckett still closer to postmodern Americans in naming what seems to be the essential element they extracted from his work: "Between first writing this paragraph and revising it, I came on three different writers who, in speaking of Beckett, had recourse to the same image of parading around a dimensionless core" ("Last Quixote" 133). It is precisely Beckett's unworking of the foundations of the subject as a means of writing fiction that presumably extended the possibilities available to Coover and other writers, or that at least deeply affected their handling of characters.

Though he often returns to characters encountering their own emptiness, making them protagonists in *Pinocchio in Venice* and *Lucky Pierre* – characters that may be critically apprehended as one would approach the singular entities of Molloy or Malone – in other works Coover distances such characters from the reader and places them at the centre of a large ensemble. Because these ribald, at times Rabelaisian narratives are collectively focalized – I'm thinking of *The Origin of the Brunists*, *Gerald's Party* and *John's Wife* – they draw our attention to the community that orients itself around an empty character, and away from the idea of a protagonist.

Disposing of the protagonist and of well-rounded primary characters, thus departing from the subject-centred novel, Coover composes a highly community-focused novel in *John's Wife*. Of all his novels, *John's Wife* best unravels the strange, yet very postmodernist and ontologically invested play between community and empty central character. It would seem that a narrative representing the web of interactions of a communal body rather than an individual consciousness constitutes a major shift from the conventional form of the novel, as defined by theorists diverse as Lukács, Bakhtin and Ricoeur. Yet in his reorientation of the narrative focus in *John's Wife*, Coover does not

dismiss or banish the idea of the subject. Rather, he transposes the very model of the

individual subject, naturally seated in the character, onto the collective narrative.

Integrated in the seemingly endless disputes, deals, couplings and orgies, into the darkly

comic Boschian landscape of the town, the individual subject forms the structure of

character relations that is the basis of the novel. This apparatus, what I will call the

allegory of ideology, directs the characters' desires and also precipitates the main events

of the novel, unfolding the narrative to reveal the identity of community to be analogous

to a specific model of the individual subject – that of ideological formation. But to speak

of allegory is only partially to read community and the novel, as Coover ultimately

ironizes the meaning of this allegory by returning the community to a state of order free

from ideological order. Coover produces many kinds of irony, ironies built on ironies,

what Wayne Booth dubs "unstable" and "infinite" in their tendency to deflect

interpretation. Irony is produced out of several tensions in the novel, but most powerfully

through a recovery and use of pre-novelistic narrative conventions integrated into the

novel form. The heavy borrowing, especially from serio-comical and fairy-tale

conventions casts the entire novel in an antiquated light, distant from a contemporary

reality, and thus threatens to ironize any treatment of community in the novel. In other

words, the very adoption of antiquated generic conventions, in particular those that

bypass individual agency, are in fact what produce community in the novel. In *John's

Wife* Coover represents community, on the one hand, allegorically as a singular organism,

analogous to ideology, and on the other hand, ironically, as an expression of antiquated

narrative conventions.

John's Wife is the narrative of a small town, whose present is the mid- to late-1980s. It is populated by three or four dozen characters of more-or-less equal weight in the narrative, none of which reveals much interior life. As the title suggests, John's wife is a key figure, the wife of the powerful contractor John. Though no protagonist in any conventional sense of the word – we rarely see her – she is the figure around which the townspeople orient themselves, for the reason that she acts as a locus of their desires. The third-person omniscient narration, focalized through different characters by way of free indirect discourse, gives both a global view of the town and direct accounts of each character's desires. On the first page we learn that Floyd, the manager of the hardware store John owns, "covets" John's wife. Gordon, the photographer, obsesses over capturing her image and "Otis the lawman long[s] for the touch of John's wife's hand on the back of his neck" (19).

> Thus the men of the town revealed themselves through their longings... Women too, Lorraine, Marge, Veronica, Beatrice, but in a different way: they were holding something together out here in this vast emptiness, themselves perhaps ... The attention of John's wife, however momentary and enigmatic, was one of the laurels the town's men competed for, while the women, contrarily, often felt threatened by John's wife, yet protected by her at the same time. (19)

By way of the varying perspectives of the townspeople, Coover introduces John's wife as the fixed point that tethers the community, and suggests, even early in the novel, that the community organizes itself through her as a common object of desire.

It is not coincidental that in describing *John's Wife* we go directly to its structure rather than its plot – indeed, Coover uses a highly formal structure that I take to be a

crucial part of the novel. Forced to retell the story, we would say that a prominent woman of a small town vanishes while – we will get to this later – another woman grows to monstrous proportions. These two central events, as the events of the novel that call for resolution, constitute the plot. Yet they happen for no apparent reason, they have no real-world causation to them. Because they just seem to happen out of the blue, or by whim of the author, and because they are outside the realm of realism, the reader assumes that something external guides the characters, that something affects the community at large and is perhaps the very organizing principle of the community itself. This something, which Coover portrays as an excess of desire, together with the emphasis of form over plot, encourages us to pursue an allegorical reading of the text.

The form of the novel looks strikingly similar to a model of the subject posited by poststructuralist philosophers, a model neither static nor idealized, and that has been used with minor structural differences (all rooted in a Saussurean linguistic model) by Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida, among others. Simply stated, this linguistically based model posits an empty core around which floating signifiers organize themselves. I will come to it by way of one of Lacan's most prominent contemporary interpreters, Slavoj Žižek.

Žižek locates the model in the subject, as the linguistic order that organizes one's concept of the world. In short, this is the structure and space of ideology. According to Žižek, "Ideological space is made of non-bound, non-tied elements, 'floating signifiers'" (*Sublime Object* 87). For our purposes here, the most important part of this model of ideology resides in the relationship between the floating signifiers and a central, organizational point:

[T]he multitude of 'floating signifiers', of proto-ideological elements, is structured into a unified field through the intervention of a certain 'nodal point' (the Lacanian *point de capiton*) which 'quilts' them, stops their sliding and fixes their meaning ... The 'quilting' performs the totalization by means of which this free floating of ideological elements is halted, fixed – that is to say, by means of which they become parts of the structured network of meaning. (*Sublime Object* 87)

This nodal point, which Žižek also calls the Master Signifier, unlike the floating signifiers, is empty of meaning. It is the void at the centre, the "'pure', meaningless 'signifier without the signified'" (*Sublime Object* 97), whose purpose is solely organizational and identity-sustaining. Thus in Žižek's model, ideology structures an individual's reality and sense of identity.

The primary elements translate allegorically to *John's Wife* as follows: in her centrality, John's wife becomes the Master Signifier around which other characters of the town become the floating signifiers. In her role as Master Signifier, John's wife should accordingly fix the identity of the town, and the town should understand itself as a community by way of her. This appears to be true. The townspeople consider her pivotal to the town's identity: As Lorraine says, she is "so long in the middle of things here, within the field of visibility" (207). And as Trevor, the accountant, says of her: "John's wife was unknowable perhaps, but she was also unchanging, the very image of constancy, at least in this town" (76). This double sense of John's wife as unknowable and central allows us to view her in this allegorical position.

While John's wife's centrality suggests allegorical equivalence to the Master Signifier, her lack of presence fills out the picture still more. Her lack manifests itself as a particular species, not to be confused with that of Molloy, Malone, the elderly Pinocchio of *Pinocchio in Venice*, or Lucky Pierre, and it further removes her from the role of protagonist. Paul Ricoeur makes a distinction between nothing and "nonsubject", which opens our view on John's wife as a character. Ricoeur's example, Musil's protagonist of *The Man without Qualities,* like Beckett's protagonists, like Pierre, is not nothing, according to Ricoeur, but a nonsubject. The nonsubject is "one figure of the subject", who is compelled to undertake trials at selfhood (*Oneself as Another* 166). Ricoeur goes on to say, "this nothingness [of the nonsubject] is not the nothing of which there is nothing to say. Quite the contrary, there is much to say about this hypothesis" (166). John's wife, in contrast, truly is nothing. She exists as an object of other characters' thoughts and mainly as an object upon which characters land their gaze and nest their desires, and lacks the subjective, existential struggle which is the requirement of the nonsubject. In this way her disappearance reflects being an object. That she is always referred to relationally, as John's wife rather than by a name of her own, and that unlike all the other characters, she never has the narrative focalized through her, suggests this nothingness.

Coover, ever ambiguous in his use of words, employs a language that slides between literal and metaphorical meaning, causing the reader for much of the book never to be completely sure of the true nature of John's wife's lack. Unlike all of the other characters, we are never given her perspective, thus her consciousness remains inviolate but also impenetrable, and even of doubtful existence. The variety of view points of the

townspeople indicates that John's wife suffers problems of presence, from a kind of

social "Who is she, really?" to a metaphysical "What on earth is going on with her?":

> This was the strange thing about John's wife: a thereness that was not there. She
>
> always seemed to be at the very heart of things in town, an endearing and
>
> ubiquitous presence, yet few of the town's citizens, if asked, could have described
>
> her, even as she passed before their eyes, or said what made her tick, or if they
>
> could or thought they could, would have found few or none who would agree.
>
> Coveted object, elusive mystery, beloved ideal, hated rival, princess, saint, or
>
> social asset, John's wife elicited opinions and emotions as varied and numerous as
>
> the townsfolk themselves, her unknowability being finally all they could agree
>
> upon, and even then with reservations, for some said she was so much herself that
>
> she was simply unapproachable ('unreadable,' as Lorraine liked to put it), others
>
> that the trouble was that she had no personality at all, so there was nothing to be
>
> known. (73)

Her metaphorical nothingness transforms, as the novel proceeds, into literal

disappearance. Coover varies the visuals of her vanishing, as though a mental aberration

of this or that character, preventing it from being a shared event that would be verifiable.

Kevin, "who doubled as country club pro and barkeep," (148) notes, while showing her a

golf swing, that "she didn't seem to be there" (149). Edna, considering another

character's remark that "John's wife went well with gold carpets" notes that "she *did*

sometimes seem to melt right into them" (174). Clarissa, John's wife's daughter, notes

that "when they pulled into a parking lot ... there was no one driving the car" (192).

Lorraine notes, "No one was talking about John's wife's tendency these days to come and

go without actually coming or going" (207). Lennox, the Reverend, witnesses her complete disappearance while she is disrobing before him (304). The reader eventually becomes convinced of her literal disappearance, but only through the sum of accounts rather than the isolated observation of any one character. It is by the accumulation of these observations that, as common object of desire for the community, she commonly disappears.

Another Lacanian term unavoidably enters the model, linking the desire of the townspeople to the cause of John's wife's centrality. *Objet petit a* is "the chimerical object of fantasy," within the model of ideology, "the object causing our desire" (*Sublime Object* 65). For the purposes of our allegorical reading, we will limit our definition to this. Still, because of their formal similarity, a distinction need be made between *objet petit a* and the Master Signifier. Coover's technique of narration allows us to see this distinction in the text. There is a double perspective: the first, a voice-from-above omniscient narrator; the second, the ground-level voice of each character. The omniscient voice's global and uninvolved view shows John's wife as the Master Signifier. As the narration slips into the perspective of each character, giving us direct views of their desires, John's wife becomes *objet petit a*. These perspectives in the novel are not as distinct as I draw them here – Coover's narration runs fluidly from the exterior to the interior of a character's head, leaving areas of ambiguously focalized narration – but our distinction allows us a clearer view. Žižek poses the salient question at the heart of the theoretical side of this distinction: "How, then, does *objet petit a* function in this tension between the Master-Signifier and the series of 'ordinary' signifiers that struggle to hegemonize it?" His answer: "*[O]bjet petit a* is the 'sublime object of ideology': it serves

as the fantasmatic support of ideological propositions" (*Parallax View* 41). If in *John's Wife* we take the ideological proposition to be (in one sense because of the way the omniscient narrator forms the story) *there is a common point of identification of the townspeople, which is John's wife,* then John's wife, as *objet petit a,* supports the fantasy of the communal identity. Every character, through his or her desire for John's wife, participates in this fantasy, unconsciously ensuring that communal identity is supported.

But there is a complication within this schema—that of the role of the name in the model. As Master Signifier, a function within the Symbolic (within the system of language in Lacanian terms), the name of John's wife should be, though arbitrary (it could be any name), essential *as* a name. That is, "it is the name itself, the signifier, which supports the identity of the object" (*Sublime Object* 95). Further, "the *point de capiton* [Master Signifier] is rather the word which, *as a word*, on the level of the signifier itself, unifies a given field, constitutes its identity: it is, so [to] speak, the word to which 'things' themselves refer to recognize themselves in their unity" (*Sublime Object* 95). Following this model then, in order for the townspeople to "recognize themselves in their unity," they must be able to grasp this common word. Yet the word is always "John's wife." So, why is her name never given? Why is she known only in relation to her husband? Why is the woman herself, the object of desire, unnamable yet in the position that necessarily need be named? Perhaps the answer is that Coover begins this narrative of community in what is already a state of instability and flux, and that the support of identity has already begun breaking down. If the structure of community is analogous to the structure of ideology, as is the dominant meaning of our allegory, then

we come to it at the point of crisis, the point at which a stabilizing, unifying point begins to crumble.

FROM JOHN'S WIFE TO PAULINE

While these signs of disappearance become more frequent and more dramatic, another woman of the town, Pauline, physically enlarges to grotesque and finally monstrous proportions. Coover creates Pauline as the woman most damaged by and, unlike John's wife, most accessible to fulfilling men's desires. By the age of 14, having been raped by her father since the age of 7, she is described as having surrendered so that she "seemed not to have a self any longer, all that she was, absorbed into a transcendent otherness that penetrated her utterly and lifted her out of herself into something as vast as the night sky and as intimate as pain and sweat" (50). She has sexual relations with any number of the men of the town, all of whom "seemed embarrassed about the past they shared" (283).

Pauline and John's wife intersect by way of Pauline's husband, Gordon, the town photographer. In pursuit of voyeuristic shots of John's wife, he considers, "Even when their paths crossed nowadays, for some reason they did not cross. As at the nursing home, for example: according to the log, they had both, more than once, been out there at the same time, yet somehow he had never caught so much as a glimpse of her" (182). A few sentences later, Gordon considers his wife's body while clothes shopping for her: "Pauline was outgrowing all her clothes, even the new ones that fit yesterday, and she was now largely confined to the rooms above the studio, wrapped in sheets and tablecloths. Gordon was fascinated by what was happening to her body and was photographing it exhaustively, front to back, top to bottom, reluctant though his incurious

wife was in her new enormity to expose herself to his lens" (182). At the mall, Gordon's dream comes true as he snaps some pictures of John's wife trying on a dress in the change room area of a clothing store. When finally he processes the film he finds that the shots of John's wife have been exposed on the same film as the shots of Pauline: "On all of them, Pauline's vast expanses of flesh, that flesh itself washed out an spectral, now bore spectral double impressions of another person who, so faint in features, could be any person, the subject's radiance contributing to the evaporation of her image" (216). In the double exposure of the photographic images, we see the one woman passing through the other, or intersecting at a point. Because this phenomenon occurs solely as an optical trick, and that no material facts of the story link John's wife's disappearance to Pauline's gargantuan change, the double image operates symbolically. Namely, it tells us to see John's wife and Pauline somehow as the same thing, to see them occupying the same phantasmatic space, and thus to see John's wife handing something off to Pauline as in some perverse succession. This moment in the novel is a visual marker for the change in the town's centre of gravity, from John's wife to Pauline.

A second moment of transference occurs at the annual Pioneers Day party, held at John's house and, importantly, hosted by John's wife. This annual event gives us a generic comedy arrangement because it brings together many of the novel's characters in celebration. The gathering, however, is interrupted and broken up when a hunting party, led by Otis the lawman, arrives at John's house (340) and announces that homes and cars are being destroyed. Pauline has torn through town like a movie monster. Otis announces through a bullhorn, "[S]he's got so big she's disrupting traffic and bringing down phone lines and TV antennas!...That's one big piece a meat out there and she's playin' hardball

with us, so now it's our job to team up and take her out! Together, neighbors, we can do it!" (341). Pages later he gets a call telling him, "There's some humungous animal out here, Otis, looks like a nekkid woman, and she just stomped the bejesus outa old Shag, he's flatter'n a day-old pancake! And I can't even find Chester, she musta et him!" (343).

These two transferences represent the pivotal changes of the novel and the events most central to a reading of community in the novel: Pauline's impossible and terrifying, though rendered grossly comic by Coover, emergence from John's wife or, in other words, the overthrow of the Master Signifier by something else. The psychoanalytic model that we have been using does indeed allow for one Master Signifier to replace another. Žižek claims that "radical rearticulation of the predominant symbolic order is altogether possible – this is what his notion of *point de capiton* (the 'quilting point' or the Master-Signifier) is about: when a new *point de capiton* emerges, the socio-symbolic field is not only displaced, its very structuring principle changes" (*Ticklish Subject* 311). This is the mechanism that allows an ideology to be undone, but it relies on "the intervention of the Real of an act" (*Ticklish Subject* 311). For Lacan, "a passage through 'symbolic death'" (*Ticklish Subject* 311), is necessary to the obliteration of the Master Signifier. Thereby the unifying point of an identity is completely destabilized. What Lacan and Žižek require here is a radical act of agency. But in the narrative of *John's Wife*, there is no communal act that brings on a symbolic death. Coover, as elsewhere, shows effects rather than causes, and the feeling of inevitability stands in for any positive acts of agency.

What Coover suggests by the outlandish occurrences that follow – Cornell's panic through a nightmarish Paris subway system (237) and doubling to become two Cornells

(345); Veronica's vision of horrifying slime behind her fridge (240); Lorraine's mind reading; a lost boy's emergence from the Reverend's wife's womb (333); the birth of a cartoonish, cigar-smoking, foul-mouthed baby (372) – is that the fantasy sustaining the symbolic order, John's wife as Master Signifier, has been destroyed, eradicated or has simply gone away, but is not replaced by another. Yet there is no exact cause: the reader can only imagine that the order of the town is unsustainable, or that the desire for a common object eventually wanes or explodes from built-up pressure. The psychoanalytic model tells us "fantasy is on the side of reality – that is, it sustains the subject's 'sense of reality': when the phantasmic frame disintegrates, the subject undergoes a 'loss of reality' and starts to perceive reality as an 'unreal' nightmarish universe with no firm ontological foundation" (*Ticklish Subject* 57). The town-wide nightmare can be read allegorically as "that which remains of reality after reality is deprived of its support in fantasy" (*Ticklish Subject* 57). Kate, the dead librarian who sporadically pipes up to provide a book-learned, philosophical commentary, here stands in as the Lacanian voice from the dead, as she echoes the above: "the imagination, our defense against the abyssal truth of the subconscious, tried to hold it [the real world] still"(334). In this sense, Pauline's enormous growth emerges from reality.

The reaction of the townspeople to destroy this monstrous object makes it clear that rather than becoming a new Master Signifier, Pauline irrupts as an awful void in the wake of the Master Signifier's passing. The void's manifestation as the monstrous is in close keeping with the psychoanalytic model that guides our allegorical reading. The Monstrous Real is exactly what the Master Signifier, and the fantasy that sustains it, hide from view.

Yet, even while rifle shots are fired at her and the Settler's Woods – where Pauline finally ends her rampage – are set aflame, she remains an object of fascination. Even those not there to destroy her want to see her: "That big thing was in there somewhere, ringed about now by a circle of fire, that was what might come out, that was what people were waiting to see: Big Pauline. The word was, she was wounded and dangerous. People should clear the area. Of course, they pressed closer. How big was she?" (391). Whether or not they succeed in killing her remains unclear in the novel: she is gone the next day, and never seen again. She becomes, over time, the material for a myth, until, "in all its retellings, [it] had begun to lose its original contours" (409). Which is to say the ambiguity of Pauline's disappearance precipitates speculation and theories, which turn into communal myth.

Order in the town is immediately reestablished. Those hurt during the wild events of Pioneers Day recover in hospital. "[T]he broken hardware store window around the corner had been replaced, the power had been restored out by Settler's Woods and the phonelines repaired, most of the storm and fire damages had been assessed and insurance claims submitted, *The Town Crier* had reappeared", etc. (407). Desires are reigned in and new people move into town. John's wife regains her visibility but is no longer the central object of desire, more a woman of high social standing. "John's wife, certainly the person to know around here" (410), the newcomers, Garth and Imogen realize. "She threw a big welcoming party for them, introduced them to all their friends and everyone at the church, proposed them for memberships at the country club, took Imogen shopping, helped her enroll her two girls by a previous marriage in the local schools and invited both children to her son's birthday, connected them to doctors, dentists, insurance agents,

and bank managers, coaxed Imogen into joining the church choir and took her to her first

PTA meeting . . . and had her over for bridge nights when the men were out of town"

(410). Coover highlights all the local institutions in order to show the community in a

normal state, shorn of the fantastic, and perhaps, exorcized of its demons.

What exactly happens to our allegorical structure at this point? In other words,

how does the community organize its identity after John's wife loses her positions of

objet petit a and of Master Signifier and in the wake of the void? The allegory no longer

coheres to the text. Though the community frees itself of its ideological structure at the

novel's end, Coover ironizes the tale by leaving those in power at the beginning of the

novel the same as those in power before the life-changing events, and the social

organization at the end resembles the organization of the beginning (unlike in a classical

comedy or tragedy, for instance). The fairy-tale ending shows us John's wife herself has

regained consistency, but in doing so, the novel itself becomes far more community-

centred, as the subject that hung over the town as an allegorical figure has vanished. Yet,

paradoxically, the town must lose its identity. Once the subject vanishes, there is no more

story to tell.

IRONY AND ANTIQUATED FORMS

If we have been led to believe that community is sustained around an empty centre

analogous to the model of ideology (which organizes the subject's sense of identity), then

we are misled by the end of the novel when peace and order are reestablished (or simply

materialize) and John's wife regains substance. In short, the community lives on without

its previous underlying structure of desire. The allegory breaks down. But what does it

mean for an allegory to break down? To begin, we posit that other narrative forces determine the direction of the novel, which to this point I have not attended to, but whose influence forces us steer us away from our allegorical reading. As has already been alluded to, Coover lets form dictate events rather than the agency of characters. The side of form I want to draw into this inquiry is the introduction of conventions of pre-novelistic genres, namely those of the fairy tale and (to use Mikhail Bakhtin's term) the serio-comical. The interactions of older conventions, particularly in their treatment of time, within the form of the contemporary novel inflect our allegorical reading and profoundly redirect a reading of the novel as a whole. The most important effect of the amalgam of conventions is their production of irony. Indeed, the overall effect of Coover's integration of pre-novelistic conventions is to produce a community that can only be viewed at a distance, through layered irony.

Coover begins the novel with "Once, there was," immediately provoking expectations (especially if we are familiar with his other work) that the narrative will unfold in some semblance to a fairy tale. Though he plays with a depthlessness of character typical of fairy tales, more important here is his use of the fantastic, and in particular his use of the fantastic without a logical or realist cause. Jessica Tiffin outlines this convention of the fairy tale as a "refusal to provide any sort of realistic detail or conventional causal logic" (4). One way that fairy-tale logic operates to include the uncaused fantastic, as we see in John's wife's disappearance or Pauline's growth, or any of the localized events that happen during the town's frenzy, is to set up expectations of a teleological narrative outcome. Stephen Benson, who writes specifically of *Briar Rose* (published in 1996, the same year as *John's Wife*), Coover's reworking of the Sleeping

Beauty tale, describes how this convention sometimes manifests in contemporary fiction.

"[T]o speak very broadly, fairy-tale fictions result from a trade-off between two

conceptions of narrative: the conventional or tale-oriented, predicated on an a- or pre-

psychological understanding of character and on a very teleological narrative; and the

expressive or novel-oriented, predicated on a psychologized conception of character and

tending to involve a complication of straightforwardly linear causality" (127). The

events most revealing of the fairy tale in *John's Wife,* those most fantastic and

otherworldly, are those that appear uncaused – which led me earlier in the chapter to read

the events allegorically – and thus support a teleological reading of the novel, one that

retrospectively sees "meaning" in uncaused events as they relate to an outcome. What

goes unexplained in the course of the novel, as in fairy tales, drives us towards the

supposition that at the end the final cause will provide answers. Indeed, there is an

unspoken promise that the ending will resolve the unexplained trail of events that led to

it, whether – following the fairy-tale convention – in stark moral or in unending

happiness. Yet the possibility of a postmodernist novel ending in anything resembling

clear resolution is far from likely (it may even be that what defines the ending of

modernist and postmodernist novels in general is irresolution). And we would not be

writing this essay if there was a clear message in the ending. So when we come to the

final pages in which order is restored and John's wife is regained, we see the convention

of a happy ending but cannot take such resolution at face value. Because the teleological

convention is antiquated the story asks to be read ironically. By the very end of the novel

Coover adds a final twist, one that fatally damages a teleological ending: the novel

concludes with an inversion of the words that begins it, "there was a man. Once..." This

not only distorts the fairy-tale convention through misuse, but more importantly shows time to be circular rather than linear and complete. (Never mind that these words are filtered through a character who has escaped the text of the novel that the town journalist worked on, producing a twist in the loop as in the object of postmodernist fascination or even fetishism, the Möbius strip.)

A second effect of "Once," beyond initiating expectations of a teleologically bound narrative, is to suggest the elision of historical markers. As Tiffin puts it, "an illusion of decontextualization or lack of historicity is integral to the effect of fairy tale and help to create its characteristic universality" (16). "Once upon a time" thus "den[ies] the relevance of historical time and place" (16). Following this convention, Coover begins narrating outside of history: the town is not named, there are no dates, historical events are left unnamed. Those things that are named follow old and generic fairy-tale-like diction, as in Settler's Woods and Pioneers Day. Yet *John's Wife* is not set in a mythic far off past, but a modern mythic past, as the erasure of historical signs is only partial: one can easily calculate the present of the novel to be the 1980s. Character names themselves suggest the generations of Americans: the oldest given names are Alf, Harriet, Opal and Ronnie, those of middle age John, Trevor, Bruce, Marge, and the children Jennifer, Clarissa, Zoe and Mikey. The general economic movement from small shops in the town centre to suburban malls gives another indication of the mid-to-late twentieth century. And the death of one of the characters in a "jungle war," undoubtedly Vietnam, allows us to discern the present of the novel. In addition to these historical signs, there are real-world car manufacturers such as Lincoln and Ford-Mercury, American organizations such as Rotary and Kiwanas, and a family whose children are named for Ivy League

universities: Cornell, Harvard, Yale and Columbia. Thus in Coover's indirect suggestion of historical time he seems to intermix fairy-tale convention with novel convention, putting us roughly within a historical situation while at the same time rendering the world timeless as in fairy tales. There is even an effect, produced in Coover's choice of iconic brands and institutions, of a fully mythic America, a space that would exist outside of time. Treating historical markers as coyly as Coover does here can only act to create a rhetorical distance through which irony flourishes.

A second antiquated set of conventions comes out of the serio-comical, a generic categoric defined by Bakhtin. In *John's Wife* the serio-comical manifests itself in the residual glimmering of a deeply buried form, but is foregrounded in the grotesque and highly sexualized, interactions of the townspeople. Bakhtin states, "In all genres of the serio-comical . . . there is a strong rhetorical element, but in the atmosphere of *joyful relativity* characteristic of a carnival sense of the world this element is fundamentally changed: there is a weakening of its one-sided rhetorical seriousness, its singular meaning, its dogmatism" (*Dostoyevsky* 107). A multiplicity of voices defines the serio-comical forms. By extension, the carnivalization of the world and the polyvocality of characters make the serio-comical itself tend toward the communal; community is inextricably tied to the generic form itself.

Where Coover's use of fairy-tale convention affects the expectations of narrative outcome and distances the world of the novel from our world, his foregrounding of the serio-comical affects the spirit of the novel. It foregrounds pre-novelistic conventions, drawing largely from menippean satire (a mode of the serio-comical), the self-conscious use of which inevitably presents a highly unrealistic, cartoonish, exaggeratedly lascivious

town. The community becomes an object of reflexivity distinct from the reality of the reader, and which the reader identifies as something out of date. Adorno describes the turn away from mimeticism produced by conventions and the gap produced before the reader: "By becoming the formal laws of artworks, conventions inwardly shored up works and made them resistant to imitation of external life. Conventions contain an element that is external and heterogenous to the subject, reminding it of its own boundaries and the ineffability of its own accidentalness" (*Aesthetic Theory*, 204). Thus conventions, especially those that present a world more remote from contemporary human experience, affect the reader in exactly the same way as the experience of irony: a gap emerges that separates the reader from immersion in the work, presenting him or her the "accidentalness" of the human predicament. Recovering the serio-comical as a foregrounded mode of expression, Coover assembles community as an object that the reader can only view with irony.

One further effect that runs counter to the allegorical line – the line that would be defined in temporal terms as diachronic – and that seems central to producing a community-centred narrative, is the simultaneity of events. The bulk of the novel's narration, told in leaps back and forth through time from paragraph to paragraph, produces an overall effect of simultaneity, in narrative terms what is described by synchronic time. The synchrony of a community, however, is distinct from that which Paul de Man describes of the individual in his well known essay "The Rhetoric of Temporality." If synchrony in the individual is time experienced in the moment, divorced from a string of causes, and discovered at instances when the individual "strives to move

beyond and outside itself" (de Man 222), synchrony in the community, as a starting point, is expressed in a multitude of simultaneous events.

Stephen Benson nicely defines synchronic time in Coover as the pregnant pause: "a text in which there is little or no plot progression but rather an elaboration, a writing around, a moment (or series of moments) in a plot (or series of plots) that is absent except by suggestion or implication" (130). The pause of *John's Wife* extends for hundreds of pages in order to elaborate the past and present acts of dozens of characters, seemingly giving no more space to one act over any other. It contributes to the reader's sensation of getting lost in time and space within the novel. For the sake of visualizing the effect of simultaneity in *John's Wife*, we can draw on a comparison to a Hieronymus Bosch painting – a comparison that William Gass makes of *Gerald's Party*. The comparison to Bosch is apt in part for its emphasis of the spatial over the diachronically temporal: myriad characters caught in a confusing web of relations, whose direct actions are isolated somewhere amid the actions by other characters, and happening before or after or at the same time as those of others – that is, with no clear chronology and thus no clear cause and effect. Each paragraph in *John's Wife*, in its intentional shift in place, time and focalization – perhaps his greatest innovation here, thus least conventional move – is a libidinous or violent set piece, marked by discontinuity from the previous and following paragraph. Like an archaic, and, in its way, serio-comical painting by Bosch (or Bruegel or other 17th-century Flemish painters such as Hendrick Avercamp), a carnival atmosphere is created that runs in spatial defiance to the allegorical/diachronic narrative.

What we sense is that in the vast ensemble and multiple points of view, Coover produces more a feeling of singularity than of plurality. Through antiquated conventions

like the serio-comical and the fairy tale, *John's Wife* becomes a singular organism framed by the covers of the book. The polyphony that according to Bakhtin characterizes the novels of certain writers such as Dostoyevsky – the competition of world-views given within a formally democratic novel – is not developed here. Quite the opposite. Rather than independent voices "combined in a unity of higher order than homophony" (Bakhtin 21), Coover's world shows independent voices merging into homophonous singlemindedness (as in the adoration of John's wife). Synchronic narrative here produces pre-novelistic characters whose importance lies in their overall interaction as part of a greater whole.

Others indeed have used Bosch to help in imagining the workings of the self rather than of community. Žižek in fact draws on Bosch's paintings in order to help us visualize "the phantasmagorical, pre-Symbolic domain of partial drives" (*Ticklish Subject* 37), by which he means an ancient subject (or part of our present personhood) in a state prior to language, undergoing some passage from nature to culture or from image to law-based language. This self-experience is what Žižek further elaborates as "a pre-ontological universe of the 'night of the world' in which partial objects wander in a state preceding any synthesis, like that of Hieronymus Bosch's paintings (which are strictly correlative with the emergence of the modern subject)" (*Ticklish Subject* 56). Žižek takes an antiquated, highly grotesque image of the communal and figuratively transforms it into an individual consciousness. His aim is to show that language produces subjectivity through the imposition of laws that create a stable reality. Is this not what Coover shows in the endless synchronic narratives that do not add up to an overall diachronic narrative: an identity-less body seeking definition, parts seeking synthesis in a whole? By

resurrecting older genres and twisting them into the form of our contemporary model of consciousness, Coover, like Žižek, takes community to be an old beast of an organism, shrouded in pre-modern darkness, given unity and definition in the multitude of base acts. Our attempt to visualize community, given the aesthetic tones of *John's Wife*, inevitably reduces community to a singular organism, an organism which is linked through those tones to something long past and that can be viewed only at an ironic distance.

ODD NUMBER AND ERASURE OF COMMUNITY

It comes to the point that a man can come from San Francisco or Chicago or Denver or any number of cities and towns in the United States, to New York, and within a week a writer will know just about every other writer in New York City. You know that he has seen your publication somehow. If he hasn't bought it, someone has loaned it to him. . . Most of the people I know are poets—it just happens to be hopelessly true. But I suppose that eventually happens—you live in a hermetic society.

—Gilbert Sorrentino, 1960 interview (in Ossman, *The Sullen Art* 46–47)

So . . . the two urges, the one towards personal happiness and the other towards union with other human beings, must struggle with each other in every individual; and so, also, the two processes of individual and cultural development must stand in hostile opposition to each other and mutually dispute the ground.

—Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*

SITUATING ODD NUMBER

From the first page of *Odd Number* (1985) we are reminded of Robert Pinget's 1963

novel *L'Inquisitoire*, a novel whose English translation Sorrentino wrote the jacket copy

for while working as an editor at Grove Press in 1967 (McPheron 123). Like *The*

Inquisitory, the text of *Odd Number* appears entirely in dialogue, as informants' answers

to an interrogator's questions. We are presented with the transcripts of three

interrogations whose purpose, it seems at first, is forensic – to determine the events

surrounding the death of an aspiring poet named Sheila Henry. The first set of thirty-three

questions is posed to an awkward, near-stuttering character, whose credibility is

weakened by his hesitations and apparent anxiety. He also claims to have no direct

connection to the 1960s New York art scene about which he has collected a mound of

data and potential evidence – photos, notes, accounts, diary entries – the scene of which

Sheila is a part. The second set of questions, comprised of the first thirty-three but in

reverse order, are answered by someone personally involved with the artists and poets, a conversationalist who, while giving lengthy anecdotes about the motivations, desires, dealings of numerous people, claims his knowledge is limited:

> It would probably be better for you to talk to somebody who has access to, you know, real information, I mean hard data, as they say. I certainly knew these people but I was, as the phrase goes, leading my own life during all this time. I had things to do, jobs, I was married for a while, and these people kept moving around, doing this and that, I don't know much more than what I saw, not a hell of a lot, and what I heard, which is always colored, you know how people do that.
>
> (108)

From him we learn that Sheila Henry was killed, and that he might have been the accidental killer. We also learn countless "facts" about the people involved in the scene, often contradicting the information provided by the first informant. The third informant answers an entirely different set of questions, directly and to the point, as though he were actually producing the facts unclouded by personal contact, while giving nothing of his own connection to the community. This final informant, whose information both confirms and contradicts the previous testimonies, states that those given by the other informants are "somewhat distorted by omissions, exaggerations, inventions, fantasies, confusions, prejudices, egoism, faulty memories, contradictions, and outright lies" (157). Most importantly the third informant states that Sheila Henry did not indeed die, thus throwing the whole purpose of the interrogation (and perhaps the novel) into question. The questions in the final pages of the third interrogation spin away from concerns about the art scene, and away from the whole mood, feel, and world of the rest of the novel,

into demonology. The novel ends in mise-en-abyme, self-referential, closed-circuit repetition – "On his desk there is a manuscript, a typescript, to be precise, of a little more than a hundred and fifty pages", and ultimately a colon (presaging the second part of the trilogy). This ending, which seems perhaps cheap or gimmicky to us now – that it is all fiction, that they are all characters from Sorrentino's typewriter with no real-world existence – is nonetheless bound up with the instability that characterizes the whole novel.

In its interrogatory form, the novel produces contradictions in the facts surrounding a group of people and a possible crime that has been committed. The various metafictional strategies it employs, such as self-reflexiveness, intertexuality and mise-en-abyme, draw attention to the way facts are constructed as part of fiction. The novel can easily be read as an assault on the idea of facts in the context of fiction, which, for those who have read other fiction by Sorrentino, will come as no surprise. It is all made up, the characters are all products of the author's imagination, there is no outside to which the novel refers. Not only is it unclear whether a seemingly central character died, the character never lived in the first place.

The abundant contradictory facts about this 1960's New York community of artists and writers does not end here. *Odd Number* is the first of a trilogy of novels Sorrentino publishes in the 1980s, that he follows with *Rose Theatre* and *Misterioso* (eventually reprinted by Dalkey Archive Press in 1997 under the title *Pack of Lies*). *Rose Theatre* and *Misterioso*, according to their dust jackets – parts of which were written by Sorrentino himself (McPheron 66) – continue adding information, misinformation, facts about the characters of *Odd Number*, and about what seems the central event of *Odd*

Number, Sheila Henry's death. No longer in the form of an interrogation, the facts of *Rose Theatre* are somehow (rather mysteriously) "'based on an inventory made by Philip Henslowe of Rose Theatre's props in 1598 in London, when he moved the company to a new location'" (Sorrentino in McPheron 66). The facts of the third book, *Misterioso,* are arranged alphabetically, the characters and book titles and place names ordering the narrative from A to Z. Thus the narrative begins at the A&P where there is a copy of *Absalom, Absalom!* These last two novels also form the extreme end of Sorrentino's attack on the idea that a fictional character could be so real that it "walks right off the page." They are particularly difficult because Sorrentino more determinedly adheres to a Saussurean model of arbitrariness and differentiality of signs. A character's name becomes a signifier with no signified, it holds no stable content. The novels do nothing to answer any of the questions of *Odd Number*, but form layers of new contradictory evidence. In short, one feels at the outer limits of what is possible in fiction before it loses mimetic contact with the world.

ODD NUMBER AND *RASHOMON*

It is worthwhile to distinguish *Odd Number* as a postmodernist work in the terms that Brian McHale proposes in *Postmodernist Fiction*, especially because after an initial reading it might seem to have its interests more in epistemological questions than in ontological ones. It might seem more invested in question of what we know rather than how we are. A work that *Odd Number* shares formal attributes with, for its multiple retelling of the same events, and which will help our inquiry into *Odd Number*, is Akira Kurosawa's 1950 film *Rashomon,* based on short fiction by Ryunosuke Akutagawa.

McHale names *Rashomon* epistemological rather than ontological (100), for the reasons that might lead us to call *Odd Number* epistemologically driven: that a shifting perspective, even on the same event, poses a question of knowledge rather than being. In Kurosawa's film, four characters – a bandit, the wife of the murdered man, the ghost of the murdered man, and a woodcutter – submit to an interrogation. Each tells a version of a crime that takes place in the woods. While all four accounts describe a rape and murder, each emphasizes, adds, or shifts agency to other people involved in the crime. Like *Odd Number,* one version follows the next, the narrative presenting no version to be more true than the others. *Rashomon* asks how one person perceives the world differently from another, and how an audience can determine the truth from competing versions. For McHale these questions strongly suggest modernist preoccupations inherent to perspectivism. Are these not the same questions that Sorrentino asks in *Odd Number?* If we give multiple narratives equal credence, if we give each its truth and believe that it cannot be reduced to a single truth of the narrative this might be the case. Yet the error might be in perspectivism itself, which creates a system of social relativity that should be put under our scrutiny.

For Žižek, a reading such as McHale's misses the "authentic" *Rashomon.* Žižek critically steers us away from perspectivism, which says that there is only a slew of subjective versions, "just an irreducible multitude of subjectively distorted-biased narratives" (*Parallax View* 173). Žižek points out that the problems with this approach is in suggesting "the impossibility of reaching the truth from multiple narratives of the same event" (173–74). But the accounts do not "move at the same level," which is to say they are not equal. The events can in fact be reduced to a shared phenomenon outside of the

subjects, to an adherence to a greater social law (rather than individual/subjective difference). According to Žižek, as each speaker recounts the event, male authority is weakened by the emerging assertion of female desire – the wife of the murdered man emerges both as sexually desirous and morally forceful. What disintegrates in Žižek's version is a "male pact" that would ensure that the truth remains unknown, and, most importantly, that the men involved maintain their nobility. Without going into greater detail we can take a lesson from him: that we must be suspicious of perspectivism as an answer to multiple accounts of the same event, for the very reason that those characters involved are not discrete from their common situation. Žižek shifts our attention from an individual's relation to knowledge to an individual's actions in relation to social law. A bond between men structures the social in order to maintain power, regardless of the truth. This shift in thinking from perspectivism to social rule is particularly important to us because it moves from the individual to the communal.

One of the few scholarly works to mention *Odd Number*, Arthur Saltzman's "Epiphany and Its Discontents: Coover, Gangemi, Sorrentino and Postmodern Revelation," concludes in a perspectivist account similar to McHale's *Rashomon*. He states: "*Odd Number* trades on the old shell game of Truth; Sorrentino shuffles the cups before our eyes but knows full well that there is no pea beneath any of them. Or better still, there are as many peas as there are players to probe for them" (515). In the first part of Saltzman's pea analogy there is no Truth, and in the second there are as many truths as there are readers of the book. Either version supports the irreducible relativist position, that there is no single Truth. We should note in this analogy the near equation of no Truth to a multitude of truths, effectively rendering the multitude of truths truthless. This kind

of moral relativism is under intense scrutiny in criticism of the present. As Žižek has shown, perspectivist readings can be irresponsible in that they mask the social-ideological framework (in this case patriarchal rule) rather than uncovering it.

I would like to follow Žižek's approach here by interrogating *Odd Number* for a more general truth located in the social circumstance. Rather than looking at the inconsistencies in the accounts that do not add up to a firm story, it behooves us to look at what is consistent. Yet we will not find a social bond among the three informants, as we have no idea how they relate to one another and why they have been chosen as informants in the first place. The first informant claims not to know the people involved, the second has had a long history with the people involved, and the third's relationship is not made known from what he or she says. Though we do not know what each of the informants has invested in the community under investigation we do know that each has an opinion on the death of Sheila Henry. Sorrentino presents this death at the beginning of the novel as what we assume to be the reason for the interrogations. We assume the purpose of the interrogation is to discover how and why she died, i.e., was it murder? accidental death? drunken jealousy? scandal? What is consistent is that Sheila Henry's possible death is a topic of the three testimonies. So rather than focusing on the mystery of whether or not she is dead, it is more productive to ask why her death is a topic in the first place.

The second aspect of the novel that might lead us to a non-perspectivist reading is to examine how Sorrentino characterizes the community that surrounds Sheila Henry. When we look beyond a congruence in events from interrogation to interrogation, to something that is shared by all three interrogations, we find a cast of characters engaged

in illegal business deals, production of pornography, plagiary, sleeping around, sexual "perversions," literary ambitions, and a general disdain for the desires and activities of this community. The first informant, for example, states, "this couple would write little plays weird and perverse plays and have friends over to act them out" (55). The second states, "The funniest thing about it all was that at this time, with Karen living with Vance, she was also getting a little on the side from Linc, who was also having an affair with Bart Kahane's wife, Lolita—or it might have been with his ex-wife Conchita…" (70). And the third, "Sylvie Lacruseille worked as a registered nurse for fourteen years, after which she became a very expensive prostitute who serviced clients, both male and female, who had what might be called exotic sexual tastes" (152). The qualities under attack, above all, are authenticity and fidelity. When we dispense with the irreducible perspectivist position some truth can be discovered, and it will inevitably be evident in the focus on a woman's death and community that Sorrentino repeatedly describes.

ROMAN-À-CLEF

Most of the characters of *Odd Number* first appear in Sorrentino's 1972 novel *Imaginative Qualities of Actual Things*. While maintaining the same marriages and occupations – Sheila Henry is still an aspiring poet, April and Dick Detective have still moved to the country and become heavy drinkers, Sol Blanche still publishes books, Lincoln Gom still has a gallery – Sorrentino simply adds more anecdotes, creates alternate scenarios, changes the character-authored book titles, etc. *Odd Number* is very much a return to the New York 1950s and 60s art scene that he first describes in *Imaginative Qualities*.

In a manner that is typical of 1960s and 70s postmodernism – of, for instance, John Barth's and Ronald Sukenick's short fiction – the highly present, overbearing narrator of *Imaginative Qualities* relentlessly reminds his readers that he has created the characters. "Concerning Bunny, I find that I have varied possibilities," the narrator states. "The joys of art. I can send her to any school I want, give her any sort of first date" (92). And a few pages later, "Speaking of Taos, let me invent a story about Bunny spending some time there before she met Guy" (97). And to emphasize the flatness of the characters, "All these people are follow-the-dots pictures" (111). Through persistent reminders Sorrentino presents an ideology of fictional unreality, that fiction is fiction and characters are completely unreal, occasionally inviting the reader to make up the scenario to suit his own fantasies (107). At the same time, Sorrentino maintains a convention of associating the narrator with the characters that he claims to be making up, and implicating the narrator in their lives. "I was not even conversant with the scene at that time. (Now that I think of it, I haven't been conversant with the scene for some years.)" (94).

These metafictional procedures would not seem strange, would indeed seem par for the course, if *Imaginative Qualities* was not, according to Brian McHale, a *roman-à-clef*. McHale's claim, which others have also made, apparently comes from Sorrentino's own statement that the characters are "modeled on real-world persons" (*Postmodernist Fiction* 206). One can easily (or easily want to) imagine that these second-rate literati, dilettante pornographers, open-relationship adulterers have real-life correspondences. If we did some research we would imagine discovering their books of poetry, perhaps published by Black Sparrow Press (as some of the poets he names in passing – Cid

Corman, Tom Clark, Michael McClure – are), or smaller presses that have gone largely

forgotten. One can imagine real-life versions of small-press publisher Sol Blanche, of

aspiring poet Sheila Henry, of alcoholic adulterers April and Dick Detective. McHale's

interest in *Imaginative Qualities* as a *roman-à-clef* arises in order for him to draw to the

surface oscillations between the written world and the real world, of being in print and

being in flesh and blood. The use of real persons names in a fictional context, according

to McHale, creates an "ontological scandal" (206), and the *roman-à-clef*, though

representing real people with made-up names, "preserves much of the ontological force

of transworld identity" (206).

Because Sorrentino's narrator plays with the existence/non-existence of

characters, McHale asks, "So is 'Guy Lewis' modeled on a real-world person, or is he

purely a fictional improvisation of the author's? Logically he cannot be both." Swerving

from one position to the other effectively destabilizes the ontological status of his

characters. The *roman-à-clef* element unmistakably functions here as a means of

intensifying ontological flicker" (*Postmodernist Fiction* 207). Ontological flicker

becomes for McHale an aesthetic category, creating tension and energy in the text, giving

the reader a certain feeling of ontological uncertainty.

This category has implications for more than just individual characters: it affects

the representation of the community and the narrator's relationship to it. An irony I would

like to point out here, that draws us closer to a reading of these books, is that although the

narrator insists on making up all of the characters and their relations, we might equally

view the characters and their relations as making up the narrator, in that, as Nancy puts it,

community produces individuals. Ontological flicker of the *roman-à-clef* then may be

applied to the narrator. The narrator's presence is fully dependent on this community, yet his constant derision of the people he writes about would seem precisely a means of distancing himself from it. What Sorrentino's narrators fear most is becoming one of those artless hacks that they spend their time describing. If this is so, why do the characters return for more in *Odd Number, Rose Theatre* and *Misterioso*? Why does Sorrentino keep returning to this community that he seems to distain? In the acts of returning and rewriting, Sorrentino appears to gain greater distance from those things she least admires.

THE UNCANNY AND INAUTHENTICITY

Sorrentino opens *Odd Number* with an epigraph taken from Freud's essay "The Uncanny":

> Thus we have characters who are to be considered identical because they look alike. This relation is accented by mental processes leaping from one of these characters to another—by what we should call telepathy—, so that the one possesses knowledge, feelings and experience in common with the other. Or it is marked by the fact that the subject identifies himself with someone else, so that he is in doubt as to which his self is, or substitutes the extraneous self for his own. In other words, there is a doubling, dividing and interchanging of the self. And finally there is the constant recurrence of the same thing—the repetition of the same features of character-traits or vicissitudes, of the same crimes, or even the same names through several consecutive generations.

Arthur Saltzman, who seizes on this epigraph as something stable against which to appraise the novel, connects the idea of the "interchanging of self" to the postmodern instability of character. For him, the "trackless vicissitudes of substitution, division, and repetition" that characterize Freud's uncanny well describe the interchangability of Sorrentino's characters. Which indeed they do. Character consistency is unimportant, character names may be switched without affecting the narrative; Sol Blanc appears on the same page as Saul Blanche, Annie Flammard and Roberte Flambeaux may be the same person or alternatively not exist at all. One might also connect the epigraph to the return of characters from *Imaginative Qualities*, concluding that these are "the same names" of "several consecutive generations." Without a doubt, *Odd Number* produces a confusion of interchangability that has qualities that Freud outlines.

Yet the novel itself lacks the power to affect us with uncanniness, since at no time do we attach ourselves to a character or believe in a stable character, in ontological stability and singularity. *Odd Number* is not uncanny in the way that, for instance, Poe's eponymous protagonist is in "William Wilson." We must read further in Freud's essay to discover that certain outward signs such as doubling do not in themselves produce the uncanny. Other literary effects can also prevent the uncanny from emerging. In *Odd Number*, Sorrentino's constant irony trumps any real uncanny effects, and it undermines the literary effect. As Freud says of Oscar Wilde's "Canterville Ghost," "as soon as the author begins to amuse himself by being ironical about it," it loses its connection to feelings of uncanniness" ("The Uncanny" 246).

The more important aspect to take from Freud's uncanny, and the phenomenon of character interchangabilty, is the thematic emergence of inauthenticity. So while *Odd*

Number does not produce uncanniness it takes as its theme inauthenticity, very much like what Poe explores in a truly uncanny work such as "William Wilson."

According to McPheron, Sorrentino dedicated *Imaginative Qualities* to Morton Lucks and Dan Rice "because they were two legitimate painters who were outside the 'artistic feeding frenzy' that IQAT satirizes" (16). This desire to separate the legitimate or authentic from a less authentic social milieu is central to the narratives of *Imaginative Qualities* and *Odd Number*. Yet in *Imaginative Qualities,* Sorrentino sets up a somewhat paradoxical relationship between the narrator and the other characters, where, on the one hand, he claims to know them, and on the other hand, he claims to be inventing them. He creates the inauthentic community in order to distinguish himself from it: "What I would like to do is please you, but I want, even more, to manipulate these inventions. It's really very interesting to make up someone like Anton, and make him greedy" (169). Thus the narrator allows himself to create a community whose reprehensible and artistically inauthentic qualities show his superiority and distance from them as true creator. As a *roman-à-clef*, and in light of the book's dedication, the author himself takes on the qualities of his narrator that would separate him from the inauthentic community.

In *Odd Number*, Sorrentino's narrators make no claims on having created the other characters, yet the attack on them is equally as unforgiving as in *Imaginative Qualities*. Their pornography, infidelities, dilettantism, petty alliances, alcoholism, even their French names, all constitute objects of derision for their inauthenticity. All these social affectations and vices, these attempts at fame and notoriety, seemingly serve to distract from the characters' insufficiencies as artists and as morally strong human beings. These are the very qualities the narrators attempt to distinguish themselves from.

Thus community here means the possibility of being mistaken for or tainted by others, of becoming, like the others, inauthentic. Such inauthenticity, according to the second narrator of *Odd Number*, is a contagion that spreads freely and affects all:

> [Y]ou should understand that most of these people were more or less reasonably all right until odd things started to happen, odd people started to, I don't know. I mean people like Barnett and Pungoe, you know, Roger, Annette Lorpailleur and her two friends, when they suddenly appeared it was as if a kind of disease infected everybody, people got crazy, weird, they got foul and greedy and mean. I told you about Léonie, for instance, who was a lovely young woman and became a drunken bitch. (118)

The feeling of contagion also emerges earlier in this testimony, in the narrator's invocation of Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights* (70) at the vision of some of his least favourite people – Lincoln Gom, Ted Buckie-Moeller, Karen Ostrom and Vance Whitestone – partying in the country. The Bosch painting evokes grotesque sexuality beyond one's imagination, incomprehensible activity, lust, immorality, sex without procreation (there are no children in *Garden*, nor in *Odd Number*), orgy in its most primal form. Imagining oneself in such a scene is to lose oneself in a crowd of the fallen, to be indistinguishable from them and to be engaged in the most contagious activity, to be fully vulnerable and exposed. Even the third informant, who testifies in the most objective style, when asked, "What titles might best describe the study I will undoubtedly write on these people and their relationships?" answers, among others, "Dead Beats," "Parts of the Gangs," "Cults and Coteries," "Little Cabals" (156). Community indeed is Sorrentino's state of infection, a plague against standards which the individual upholds—as the first

narrator snidely states in summary of this sentiment, "you know small communities" (23).

ERASURE

The Freud epigraph not only usefully draws our attention to patterns of inauthenticity, but also leads us beyond the passage in the epigraph to other parts of "The Uncanny." A later passage provides a model we might use in attempting to understand the effect or perhaps purpose of characters returning from a previous novel.

> [I]f psycho-analytic theory is correct in maintaining that every affect belonging to an emotional impulse, whatever its kind, is transformed, if it is repressed, into anxiety, then among instances of frightening things there must be one class in which the frightening element can be shown to be something repressed which *recurs*. This class of frightening things would then constitute the uncanny; and it must be a matter of indifference whether what is uncanny was itself originally frightening or whether it carried some *other* affect. […] [T]his uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression. This reference to the factor of repression enables us, furthermore, to understand […] the uncanny as something which ought to have remained hidden but has come to light. (241)

Freud's well-known observation that repressed feelings are transformed into anxiety, and that they may return in alienated form, gives us a clue to the return of characters in *Odd Number.* In a more conventional novel, characters may return for further adventures, or

minor characters may have their stories told in fuller, fleshed-out narratives. In Sorrentino, the effect is quite the opposite: not to go deeper and further, but to go shallower, to take away from them. Through progressively more abstract narrative treatments, Sorrentino's characters become ever more alienated from their most grounded reality in *Imaginative Qualities.* But it is not so much an interchangability of the same that haunts *Odd Number*, as a return to the thing one wants most to destroy, to erase from memory. That thing, which is most familiar, most homely*,* is community.

If we read from one novel to the next in Sorrentino's series that feature these characters, we find a progressively more distanced role the narrator has in relation to the events of the novels. In *Imaginative Qualities*, as we have already discussed, the narrator knows the other characters first hand, receives letters from them, is part of the scene, and even creates them. He is completely hands on with the narrative: "What I think is that Lou wrote this letter in a kind of subtle and ironic anger, and never sent it. I'll ask him when I see him" (51). In *Odd Number*, the narrators show various distancing from the characters, from the second informant's first-hand knowledge and involvement with them, to the first informant's assertions that he lacks connection to them, to the third's whose testimony exposes nothing of his relationship to them. In *Rose Theatre*, the narrator almost never draws attention to himself, and when he does, once or twice, we discover the plural first-person "we." This "we" is one of distance rather than contact. The "we" claims a distance through not knowing: "The impression was that their lives had been rectified, which goes to prove how little we know" (257). The "we" returns in *Misterioso*, with greater frequency. It is an unstable "we," drifting in its implications between a scholarly "we" ("We should note here that Arthur Rimbaud . . ." [359]), a

"we" that includes the reader with the narrator ("Are we to discover, at last, whether or

not *Construction in Metal* is a translation of *Les Constructions métalliques*?" [325]), and

a more investigative-team "we" ("For one thing, we cannot find a single article on the

crisis in Israeli morality anywhere in the apartment" [408]). The latter two novels of the

trilogy never indicate that "we" directly participated in the art community. Though the

style of narration, with its knowing remarks, derisive assaults and intentional ambiguities

does not indicate a vastly changed narrator, the reduced presence and absorption into the

first-person plural creates a greater gulf from what may have at one time been real

people. The narrator(s) succeeds, over the course of four novels, in creating a massive

gap between himself and the community of characters from which he emerged.

    Sorrentino's narrative return that gains distance with each repetition effectively

places the community under erasure. The process is a thoroughly postmodernist strategy,

producing an indeterminacy that McHale ties to ontology rather than epistemology:

> Narrated events, then, can be un-narrated, placed *sous rature*; and, in much the
>
> same way, projects *existents* – locales, objects, characters, and so on – can have
>
> their existence revoked. The effect is most acute, of course, in the case of
>
> characters, since it is especially through projected people that the reader becomes
>
> involved in the fictional world. (*Postmodernist Fiction* 103)

Sorrentino's work produces his particular kind of erasure through, as McHale describes,

"alternative, competing sequences" (*Postmodernist Fiction* 102).

    The example we can now return to is that of Sheila Henry and her uncertain death

that is repeated in the trilogy of novels after *Imaginative Qualities.* In the first testimony

of *Odd Number*, she, her husband Lou Henry, and Guy Lewis leave inebriated from a

party. She and Lou mess around in the front seats of the car while Guy, sits quietly in the back seat. She at some point steps out of the car, now stopped, and is run down by it. The second testimony is similar, but rather than Lou Henry being in the car, Guy Lewis and Sheila Henry are joined by the informant. In this scenario, following an afternoon of drinking, they are on their way to a party. Sheila is run down by the car after stripping her clothes off and running wildly in front of it. Yet we get two versions from the second informant. In the first Guy Lewis is behind the wheel, and in the second it is the informant himself who is:

> Or it was just before Sheila started to run back toward us that he came back to the car, he asked me to, you know, he gestured, waved his arms, I guess he wanted me to follow them in the car but by the time I reacted, I mean that I had to get into the front seat because I was in the back because I'd got back there when Sheila threw her dress at Lou, at the both of us, to try and stop her from going really, well, really crazy, right? By the time I go in the front seat again Lou was back in the car and Sheila was standing there about twenty feet away in the headlights, laughing and screaming and cursing like a madwoman and giving me the finger, or the both of us, I don't know. Then the car just, Jesus Christ. (139)

Neither corresponds to the third informant's assertion that she is not even dead. The next time we hear of Sheila Henry is in a passage in *Rose Theatre* in which she dies on the beach at Coney Island. A later passage tells us in direct reference to the first two testimonies of *Odd Number* "there was the false news that Sheila had been accidentally run over by Lou" (276). In *Misterioso* she is again dead – "the recently deceased Sheila Henry's maiden name was neither Ravish nor Ravitch" (489) – though earlier in the same

novel she is alive. The effect of the competing accounts of Sheila Henry's life is the sense of erasure that McHale outlines.

That the focal point of this erasure comes in the form of a woman rather than a man is not insignificant to our reading in which community itself is under erasure. In conventional middle-class thinking, community takes on qualities connected to women, whereas individualism is connected to men. Iris Marion Young states,

> [Bourgeois] culture identifies masculinity with the values associated with individualism—self-sufficiency, competition, separation, the formal equality of rights. The culture identifies femininity, on the other hand, with the value associated with community-affective relations of care, mutual aid, and cooperation. (306)

It is no stretch, then, in the context of a series of novels that form an assault on the possibility of authenticity in community, to find a symbolic scapegoat in a female character who in our middle-class imagination represents community. And, further, to make a spectacle out of the death by repeatedly returning to its uncertainty, by writing over top of it, by obliterating it through erasure. As I will show in a later chapter, this identification of women to community appears to be central to all of the works of this study. In this particular case, we can view the male informants of *Odd Number* in contrast to Sheila Henry, as those who would separate themselves from the idea of community in order to solidify themselves as individuals.

It would be easy here to psychoanalyze the author, Gilbert Sorrentino himself, because this chain of recurring characters begins as a *roman-à-clef*, and because it comes out of the author's direct experience as he indeed stated. One cannot but see the repeated

return to community in Sorrentino's work – through malicious redescription – as a return to a moment of trauma. The process reveals, whether or not we attribute it to Sorrentino's personal feelings toward community, or if we see it as a flicker between Sorrentino and his narrators, a determination to detach oneself from one's origins. From one book to the next, we see a process of emptying out and erasing events surrounding them, rewriting the events, as though to obliterate any original connection to them, any part of that community. In other words, each testimony of *Odd Number* erases the previous testimony which in turn erases the narratives of *Imaginative Qualities*. In the increasing more abstract versions of these characters and events in the novels *Rose Theatre* and *Misterioso*, this community is further erased. Most importantly, the influence this community has on its narrators is further broken, dissolved, and destroyed, which serves the narrator as an effective means of preserving his own authenticity.

By this point in this essay we are well beyond the conventional perspectivist reading. The narratives of each of the informants, though comprised of diverse facts, show a common attitude towards community. They do not compete to show the coexistence of a number of truths but rather corroborate an unsympathetic picture intended to separate themselves from a community they want to distance themselves from. If Žižek's version of *Rashomon* reveals a male pact intended to preserve male power, we can say that *Odd Number*, especially when seen as part of a series of novels that returns to the same community, seeks to preserve the authenticity of the narrators. By erasing the ties to the community from which they emerge, the narrators participate in an illusion of individual authenticity. So when the narrator of *Imaginative Qualities* states, "I

have a feeling that Lou is getting away from me—and about time, too" (51), we now

have the full sense of what is at stake.

HARRY MATHEWS'S *CIGARETTES* AND CHANCE IN COMMUNITY

With the exception of an issue of *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* dedicated to

Harry Mathews's writing, which includes a few short essays on *Cigarettes* (by Edmund

White, Joseph McElroy and others), published the year the novel was released, little has

been written on this extraordinary work. Why? Perhaps the work is overlooked because it

is not "about something," or that it is not an active participant in the more aggressive, in-

your-face postmodernist ploys – spotlighted conventions, overstated intertextuality, self-

reflexivity (though there does appear, in the final section, a mysterious figure whose

appearance matches the author's). Or that it eludes classrooms because it evades literary

trends, because Mathews's body of writing is not unified by a consistent and urgent

interrogation of a specific politics or American experience.

The themes of *Cigarettes* are indeed elusive, perhaps because they are common

human concerns, which Mathews himself names in an autobiographical piece:

"childhood, parenthood, friendship, and love" (*The Way Home* 208). The hints of literary

game playing that Mathews embeds in the narrative might make the text more opaque or

draw our eyes to the surface, thereby leaving us puzzling over possible hidden structures.

That the title, for instance, is simply the sound of a train, "cigarettes, tch tch, cigarettes,

tch tch" (*Cigarettes* 96)– one sound mysteriously written out as a word or a series of

letters among a number in the book, makes us suspicious that something else is going on.

Yet Mathews makes clear on the first page what drives the novel: the desire to tell the

whole story of these people in order to understand them (3) – in other words, to tell the

story of a community.

Recall, at the novel's beginning, a company is gathered in the driveway of a great gabled house for reasons unknown to us. A letter, penned by Allan to his mistress Elizabeth, whose intention and meaning is not completely clear, is passed from person to person among those gathered. The first-person narrator (whom we later determine is Lewis and who does not return in his first-person form until the final few pages), considers the gap in meaning left by the letter, and thinks, "I wanted to understand. I planned someday to write a book about these people. I wanted the whole story" (3). Despite the backdrop discussed above, in which something is going on that cannot fully be known, the desire behind the novel and point of the novel is clear before our eyes. From the narrator's point of view, it is nothing short of telling the whole story of a community – though he never names it "community" per se.

The strategy Mathews, via Lewis, takes in telling the whole story is to show the web of interconnections by focusing on two-person relationships. Thus the novel is divided into fifteen chapters titled for the pair of characters central to the chapter. In each chapter some significant negotiation happens between the title characters. This strategy does indeed produce a complicated web in which almost every one of the 13 main characters is substantially connected to all of the others. A summary of the connections is complicated somewhat by the events taking place in two discrete periods separated by about 28 years – 1936–38 and 1961–63. In any case, it is possible to map out all of the connections a character has with the others. The artist Walter Trale, for instance, paints a portrait of Elizabeth in her early twenties, has a chance meeting with Oliver Pruell (who at the time is dating Elizabeth), has an affair with Pauline Dunlap, is in love with his gallery representative Irene Kramer, has an affair with Priscilla Ludlam, is an

acquaintance of Lewis Lewison and Morris Romsen, and employs Phoebe Lewis as a studio assistant. Pauline Dunlap, to take another example, is Maud Ludlam's sister, lover at various times to Allan Ludlam, Owen Lewison, Oliver Pruell, and Walter Trale, and consults Barrington Pruell on a matter of finances. Owen Lewison, for another, is married to Louisa Lewison, is a lover of Pauline Dunlap, a conspirator against Allan Ludlam, father to Phoebe Lewison and Lewis Lewison, admirer of Walter Trale's work, and involved in insurance deals with Irene Kramer. Each of the main characters may have his or her connections traced in this way – connected by love affairs, family ties, insurance dealings, friendship and art buying.

The whole story as Lewis tells it also means perspectival shifts, not only from Lewis's first-person narration that bookends the novel, but among the free-indirect discourse of main characters within each chapter. In effect, the narration allows us glimpses of first-person thinking even in third-person narration – enough to observe motivations, but with a third-person distancing that feels less like a trespass on the character's consciousness. When Owen visits his daughter Phoebe at Walter's studio, and sees other guests there, for instance, we enter his unmediated thoughts: "Apparently they all led busy lives, in activities Owen could not recognize. What was, or were, sociolinguistics? Where was Essalen? Was a concrete poet a writer or a sculptor?" (61). Thus, Mathews uses free-indirect discourse as a means of showing the whole story.

In these perspectival shifts from chapter to chapter, and in the pairing of characters that has them reappearing in a different combination, two distinct narrative effects occur: scenes occasionally repeat, but are viewed from an alternate angle, and scenes are altogether omitted. Of the former, for example, a conversation that Allan

overhears between his wife, Maud, and his lover Elizabeth (13), in "Allan and Elizabeth,"

recurs in "Maud and Elizabeth" (239), but goes on longer and is shown in the second

account to be histrionics meant to mislead Allan. Mathews draws attention to instances of

the latter by way of Oliver's realization: "Events had taken place when his presence had

not been missed. Elizabeth and his father, Elizabeth and Walter..." (28). Other events are

summarized or expanded depending on the character framework of the chapter title. The

whole story then appears to be best told in examining significant relationships, and

allowing for overlaps or omissions when necessary.

What is the purpose of telling the whole story? In short, Mathews's framing of the

individual in relation to community is an overwhelming affirmation both of community

and precisely, *because of community*, of the individual subject. Unlike one dominant

postmodern take on the individual, in which he or she is emptied of essential significance,

stability, consistency – in which the very idea of the individual is questioned, as in

Coover, or in which telling the whole story is an ideological impossibility – Mathews

equips the individual subject through the narrative affirmations of community, and

through reflection upon it after it has (presumably) long dissolved. Mathews proposes a

construction of the self through others in an accidental or arbitrary way, through the

experience of them, through relationships that are both positive and difficult, and that

change over time. Community itself seems only visible at a retrospective glance and by

way of its story, in this case as told by Lewis. And it is only in this retrospective glance

that the novel takes on the more conventional novelistic quality in which a single

individual's consciousness rises above the other characters, and a protagonist is formed,

through reflections on his earlier relationships.

If Mathews proposes that the individual is formed by community or out of community, the particular aspect of community he emphasizes in the novel's form is chance or arbitrariness. *Cigarettes*, indeed, cannot be fully discussed without reference to its structure.

Mathews is typically framed by his membership to the Oulipo – a group which at this time should be so well known as not to require further explanation – whose works operate on and explore literary constraints, and include virtuosic and profoundly innovative European novels such as Italo Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveler*, Jacques Roubaud's *The Great Fire of London*, and Georges Perec's *Life A User's Manual*. The Oulipo framework sends discussion directly to form and play and near-mathematical feat, perhaps drawing attention away from content.

Yet like those other Oulipan works, the content of *Cigarettes* is indeed produced in part by the guiding constraint, by the structural law that assembles the narrative from beneath the surface. We sense Mathews's constraint in the assemblage of names in the table of contents and in the strange textual occurrences that form the novel. Mathews has been very secretive about what this constraint is – it is in no way obvious, like the missing e lipogram in Perec's novel *La Disparition* (translated to English as *A Void*). He has revealed only that he used a "permutation of situations" (*Oulipo Compendium* 126) Precisely how the permutation works we will come to later, but for now it should be said that it seems to produce encounters between characters and a repetition of the kinds of interactions that define various relationships. The importance of discussing the constraint is that it shapes how community is represented in the novel, and, moreover produces a

group of people that has far more resemblance to a community than to a structured, status quo society.

We could treat Mathews's proceduralism as incidental, as though it had no bearing on our reading. Because we do not know exactly what effects it has on themes, for instance, it might seem best to leave it alone, for there would be much speculation built on weak ground. Yet, it is there, and if ignored it would seem a blind spot in an analysis, especially if as here, we are interested in linking the form of the text to the way community is represented. Where we can begin, in our assumption of a permutation of situations, is in the repetition of certain kinds of relationships. Certain kinds of relationships recur, chapter to chapter, regardless of whether the foregrounded characters are lovers, siblings, children and parents, business, in youth or in adulthood.

The important effect of Mathews's proceduralism is that it creates chance: the permutation of situations appears to force characters to encounter one another and create relationships out of adherence to procedure. A permutation of situations is indeed the method *par excellence* of ensuring characters interact: it works against the grain of individual-centred cause and effect, because, rather than relying on the seemingly natural progression of a relationship, it forces the relationship into less expected territory. Chance, indeed, dictates the direction of relationships.

READING THE SELF FROM COMMUNITY

The imperative or desire to tell the story of community has at its other end, in the case of *Cigarettes*, the drawing of meaning from the death of its members. In Lewis's retrospective glance in the final pages of the novel we have the drawing together of death

and community. Via the occasion of his lover Morris's death, Lewis begins the long

process of understanding how the dead remain in us. Twenty years later, as Lewis reflects

on that death, and on his earlier attempt to make sense of it, he believes, "We take the

dead inside us, we fill their voids with our own substance; we become them" (291).

Mathews elaborates this idea, which is so central to his understanding of community:

> Your father dies, you hear his laugh resounding in your lungs. Your mother dies:
>
> in a store window you catch yourself walking with her huddled gait. A friend
>
> dies: you strike his pose in front of an expectant camera. Beyond these outward
>
> signs, we take up the foibles, the gifts, the unrealized failures and successes of
>
> those we have watched and watch die. (292)

Rather than suggesting that we do not die because of some continuity through community

– rather than guaranteeing and afterlife through community – Mathews writes that the

dead live through the living's involuntary imitation of them, through recognition of this

imitation, almost as a kind of involuntarily mimesis of dead community members. The

dead are embodied insofar as we are reminded of them, and recognize them in our

actions, responses, desires. Mathews emphasizes the living rather than the dead, that the

dead give strength to the living while at the same time leaving voids within the living:

"The longer we live, the more numerous the inviting holes death opens in our lives and

the more we add to the death inside us, until at last we embody nothing else" (292). He

dismisses as fantasy the discreteness of individuals from each other, that all of what we

say and do is proper to us. Rather, we can only pretend "that you are only you and I I"

(292). In other words, an overlapping occurs between individuals. We somehow embody

each other.

Here it is important to raise a distinction in the term favoured by writers on community – which is being-in-common. To be-in-common is not to share a common essence, "there is no common being" (Nancy *Community at Loose Ends* 4), as in, we are not a single extensive organism. As Nancy has it, "existence is only in being partitioned and shared. But this partition ... does not distribute a substance or a common meaning" (5). Nancy, in other words, avoids the exchange of tangible or material things between people as the basis of community. It is in the sharing itself, in the act of relating to one another, that community begins. Rancière, too, avoids substantial exchange as a basis for community, and in avoiding a metaphysical connection, aims for a feeling of connection via a sharing of the sensible. "The consensual community [which is the true community according to Rancière – one sharing a distribution of the sensible] is a community in which the spiritual *sense* of being-in-common is embedded in the material *sensorium* of everyday experience" (*Dissensus* 81). In these demanding (yet open) definitions of community, how things are shared is of particular importance. Rancière's definition perhaps best reflects what Mathews fashions through example and feeling: the spiritual sense of being-in-common emerges precisely from the material sensorium, in the father's laugh, in the friend's pose for the camera.

Through Bataille we might also see this connection with others that appears at times to be one person embodying an aspect of another, as in Lewis's description. A kind of fusion with others, yet with well-defined parameters. "Fusion is neither the result of appropriation nor an expropriation of oneself into identity with the world. In laughter we do not identify with others, but we are suspended together without distinction, I in you, you in me, carried beyond ourselves" (Mitchell and Winfree 8). Thus fusion with another

comes through an excess of oneself, and is beyond mere identification with another—more a meeting of two in a place outside of themselves in a moment of mutual excess. When Lewis feels his father's laugh resounding in his lungs it could be understood as an echo of such a fusion, understood as embodiment.

These final two pages of *Cigarettes*, in which Mathews returns to the first-person narration of Lewis, are remarkable in part for their thematic divergence from the rest of the novel and for drawing a global theme out of the novel. That is, 13 chapters of the novel are explorations of particular relationships that when viewed as a whole allow us to see the boundaries of community. The major themes might fall under categories that Mathews himself states in an autobiographical piece: "I knew, long before *Cigarettes* was conceived of, that my next book would have to realise my desire to express in fictional transformations particular experiences of childhood, parenthood, friendship, and love" (*The Way Home* 208). The theme of the relationship of the living to the dead does not enter Mathews's list, and does not emerge in the novel until the final chapter. The chapter in which Morris dies gives only a few lines to Lewis's mourning, which are distanced by the third-person narration. Mathews's techniques of jumping between time periods and between character relationships, and of telling the stories quickly and often through action and immediate thought, militate against his taking us through lengthy reflections. Reflection is only given to the character who announces his desire to write community, and who has 20 years to reflect on it.

COMMUNITY AS A MECHANISM OF CHANCE

If the desire to know and to tell the whole story of a community is the impetus behind *Cigarettes* – the desire itself perhaps coming out of community – the chance nature of relationships ubiquitously permeates the telling. Mathews's insight is chance itself: that this web of human relationships is grounded and real, but grounded in accidental meetings. He states:

> I had the desire to deal with what are called relationships, and as we all know relationships are often the opposite of that. People will go to any lengths to deny the true nature of the relationship. For example, the assumption is that parents cannot choose the children, and to the same extent children cannot choose their parents, so that parents and children find themselves in a relationship over which they have no control, and which they cannot escape. A great deal of energy is expended by all of us in demonstrating that we "can" choose the relationships we want, even though it's clear that this is not the case. It's not all that different with lovers and friends. You can only become friends with someone if you meet them and your meeting them is accidental and arbitrary. With lovers, even more so. The reason attraction takes place is because, for example, you saw a purple curtain when you were three months old, or you knew someone who spoke the same way—little things like that lead to years of complications and pleasures. But all through this the human being seems to want to proclaim his right to make his or her own choice, and clearly this hasn't happened. For me this was a new ground for exploration, a new place to ask questions, and by asking questions to invent a narrative. (Ash "A Conversation")

In the school of thought on community that follows from Bataille, there are various

distinctions between the kinds of relationships Mathews mentions. Family, for instance,

falls under the category of traditional community whereas friendships and relationships

of lovers fall under elective communities. As Mathews states, we cannot choose our

parents nor parents their children but what is less accepted is that we do not really choose

our friends. The term elective communities indeed suggests that we have a choice of who

our friends and lovers are – indeed it sounds precisely as if it means full choice – but in

Bataille and his interpreters it is more in consonance with Mathews's assertion. At the

root of contact in an elective community is the desire to open to others, to open through

their insufficiency. As Bataille states, "'[T]he desire in us defines our luck'" (in Winfree

40) and as Winfree explains, that desire "shapes the chance constellation of beings and

events wherein it finds itself, and it does so by risking itself and by virtue of the risk it

itself is" (Winfree 40).

> Community is not, therefore, an extant division or willed unity within the social
>
> order, but a configuration of luck and chance where one being opens onto another
>
> and is what it is only through this opening. The language of exposure and ex-
>
> position goes a long way in articulating the structural conditions of this
>
> occurrence, but it is nevertheless insufficient to characterize the contact here at
>
> issue. Bataille insists rather that this opening is a wound and elective community
>
> the affective attraction of one lacerated insufficiency by another. Community is
>
> constituted in the overlapping of wounds, the sharing not only of what cannot be
>
> shared, but the sharing of suffering that is neither mine nor yours, a suffering that
>
> does not belong to us, but which gives us to one another, and in doing so both

maintains and withdraws the beings so configured. In community, the other does

not complete me but completes my insufficiency, shares the luck which is never

only mine. Elective community is like a lovers'[sic?] kiss—an exhilarating

affirmation of chance, the will to be what befalls it but that its will could never

produce. (Winfree 41)

Mathews emphasizes the arbitrariness of encountering someone, of meeting or not

meeting, in the final chapter, "Maud and Elizabeth." Maud, recall, has a growing

fascination that becomes an overwhelming desire to meet the mysterious Elizabeth, who

at the time his having an affair with her husband, Allan. Maud at first relies on Barrington

Pruell to arrange the meeting, and when this falls through, when Elizabeth never shows

her face, she contemplates the possibility of never meeting her. "After four days, she

grew so discouraged that she actually gave up all hope of knowing Elizabeth. They were,

she still felt, linked by destiny: but their destiny was to never meet – 'a conjunction of

their minds, an opposition of their stars'" (253). But because they do meet – Elizabeth

does arrive—they become fast friends, despite the adultery with Allan (and in some sense

because of the adultery). After Elizabeth falls from a horse, acquiring a head injury, and

becoming incapacitated, Maud becomes her conduit to the living: "Maud came to

understand that, if she lived her life completely, Elizabeth's would not be wanting" (283).

Thus they share both in this crippling "overlapping wound" that Elizabeth suffers and in

the life that Maud attempts to maintain, even if such sharing is indeed impossible. As in

the other love affairs of the novel, this relationship required an openness on the part of

both characters so that they immediately begin speaking "like schoolmates making up for

half a lifetime's separation" (254).

In many other of the love relationships the risk of opening oneself to the other is essential: Allan's desire for Elizabeth has him abandoning his wife and putting at risk the stability of his life; Lewis's desire for Morris puts both of their lives at risk; young Priscilla seeks out her idol the much older painter Walter Trale; Owen's desire to know (or perhaps own) his daughter Phoebe better has him up all night partying with her young friends, etc. Thus, the risk of disclosing one's insufficiency, of opening up, of making oneself vulnerable, is essential to chance's process of forming community among people.

Yet others have a role in instigating such meetings. In most cases a third party introduces the would-be lovers, acting as intermediaries for their desire. Mathews seems to make such introductions via a third party a systematic part of his novel. But this is just one of many recurring mechanisms through which characters interact. Character interaction indeed seems regulated by a hidden system that ensures both chance meetings of strangers and unusual interactions between family members. Though Mathews has never revealed precisely what this underlying structure is, he names it in the *Oulipo Compendium* a permutation of situations – an Oulipan constraint developed by him and elaborated in the essay "Mathews's Algorithm." The algorithm is simply a number of sets (1, 2, 3, 4, etc.) each of which contains a standard number of situations (a, b, c, d, e, etc.). By way of a regular pattern the situations of each set are shuffled (usually in a cascading fashion – somewhat parallel to Phoebe's aural hallucinations:

I b.s.t.q.l.d quest s.t.

I b.s.t.q.l request d.s.t.

I b.s.t.q. bequest l.d.s.t.)

with the situations of the other sets, thereby recombining a chain of situations. A natural outcome of the algorithm is the recurrence of certain situations but in shuffled orders and involving different characters. One imagines that in *Cigarettes* a set would dictate the events or situations of a whole chapter. After a careful examination of the text, we may posit what some of these recurring situations are: a character returning after a period away, a character acting maternally toward another character, a character introducing another character to a third at a party, a character gambling, etc. For example, we can trace the incidents of one character having maternal feelings for another: in "Allan and Elizabeth" (first chapter) Elizabeth "felt motherly" (11) toward Allan ; in "Oliver and Elizabeth" (second chapter) Elizabeth says, "You'd like me for a mother?" to which Oliver replies, "You bet I would" (22); in "Oliver and Pauline" (third chapter), Maud "acted as a kind of foster mother" (30) to Pauline; in "Owen and Phoebe: 1" (fourth chapter), Owen "imagined being old and widowed: Phoebe would take care of him" (64); in "Allan and Owen" (sixth chapter), Allan imagines himself as a little boy having acted disobediently, attempting to "recapture his mother's attention" in his wife (130). In each case the situation that revolves around mothering is brief and seemingly of minor significance to the overall chapter. Other situations, such as a character introducing another to a third, have greater narrative consequences.

Mathews's rules supersede any conventional role that a character might have. Considering the above example of feelings of the maternal or the desire to be mothered, we see that in the first chapter a middle-aged woman feels so towards her lover, in the second a young man wants to be mothered by his young lover, in the third a girl acts motherly to her younger sister, in the fourth a father wants to be mothered by his

daughter, and in the sixth a man imagines being mothered by his wife. Being an actual

mother has nothing to do with having the capability to be motherly, and being a child has

nothing to do with the desire to be mothered. Characters behave seemingly outside of

hierarchies that traditional roles define, thus freeing them to a wide range of emotions

and behaviours, such that negotiation with others or with themselves always is possible,

and characters are vulnerable to the open possibilities of others and themselves. It is

precisely the moment that a character steps outside a societal role that he or she opens

him- or herself to the possibility of community.

In the opposition that Nancy and others such as Victor Turner set up between

community and society, Lewis's telling of the whole story falls on the side of community,

in that it shows relationships contrary to societal roles. Relationships of community

indeed "appear from within the unquestioned dominant social order as a rogue element"

(Mitchell and Winfree 6). The permutation of situations, as Mathews constructs it in

Cigarettes, therefore acts as a narrative mechanism that produces community as arbitrary

or chance in opposition – as a rogue element – to structured society. And the self, as

Lewis determines in the final pages, emerges from such contingent situations. The

permutation of situations, if I have correctly perceived it here, allows for identities of

characters not to be based on what Nancy calls relationships of society – the rather reified

roles/positions of mother and son, employer and employee, artist and viewer, husband

and wife, mistress and husband, benefactor and recipient. The permutations, indeed, seem

to force characters to act outside of any well-defined and rigid role. We might go so far as

to say that Mathews's rules are a kind of convention of community: characters are forced

to have relationships with a number of other characters, are forced to act outside of their

societal roles, and are given more or less equal time on the page.

MORRIS AND LEWIS

Amorous love is one kind of relation repeated chapter after chapter, among youth and

adults, and including intergenerational love and adultery. Mathews typically – perhaps as

a permutation – begins a love relationship through one character introducing a second to

a third at a party. The community of lovers, or closed community of two, which seems to

burst forth into existence, both shares much of the qualities of open communities and

shows some of those qualities intensified.

One such example is the affair of Lewis and Morris. Lewis, having graduated

from college, feels uncertain what to do with his life until his sister Phoebe gives him an

essay to read. It is from an art magazine and authored by Morris Romsen. The essay

bewilders and excites Lewis, it opens his mind to a world of possibility, so much that he

believes that writing should be his direction. Phoebe, who knows Morris, has Lewis come

to a party and introduces the young men to each other. Morris is 28 and carries a sort of

authority as the older and more accomplished man. They become friendly, have lunches

and discuss writing. When Morris discovers, while reading newspaper coverage of a

scandal, that Lewis has a secret life meeting with men and giving himself over to

sadomasochistic scenarios, he initiates a series of like encounters with him. Thus their

love affair begins, played out as painful meetings in which Morris treats Lewis like dirt,

ties him up, tells him he's worthless, all thoroughly sexualized. In a final meeting, Morris

casts him in cement. The exact nature of their relationship is complicated by the sexual

inequality of domination and submission and the lack of details provided in the narrative of Morris's feeling toward Lewis. What Morris truly feels for Lewis teeters in his words that accompany his collapse from heart failure: "No matter what I've said to you, no matter how I've turned you out, the truth is, and I'm singing it out: I lo—..." (152). Lewis only later determines the word Morris failed to finish, contrary to what the sentimental reader would have filled in: "The truth is, I loathe you" (154).

In philosophical literature on community, at least that which follows from Bataille's writing, lovers illustrate the chance nature of communities. "Lovers are exemplary of elective community, finding one another by chance, attracted by one another with a momentum and intensity indifferent to the demands of work and social cohesion" (Winfree 40). They upset the social order by dispensing with their day-to-day responsibilities, by disrupting the vision of order and rational control in the world, and by making themselves vulnerable beyond what is considered reason. In short they abandon themselves to the possibility of something more.

> Lovers are exemplary . . . because of the way they give expression to the desire of chance. Only a chance being could fall in love propelled by the anarchy of its desire. To fall in love is to be lucky, to find oneself delivered over to another being that is subject to the same excessive movement and to find one's desire and ecstasy confirmed in contact and contagion with the other. Lovers' love is the exponentially compounded inertia and expenditure of a wounded, lacerated, cracked being; it is the exposure of one life to another . . . And it is obsessive, driven beyond itself without reason, satisfied by nothing short of total possession, consumption, and loss . . . They love without respect for the rest of the world,

whose tasks and efforts are cheated and disregarded in favor of wasting the day in

bed. (Mitchell and Winfree 7)

The love described in the above passage, in the extreme vulnerability and excessive

expenditure of feeling without reserve, which risks both emotional and bodily harm,

resembles an affair based in sadomasochism. Indeed, it makes the love affair of Morris

and Lewis seem an exemplary case for its grounding in acts of sadomasochism. Without

a doubt their brief and intense relationship transgresses numerous societal norms and

laws and puts at risk their relationships with others, in Lewis's case his family and his

reputation in general (the results of which play out in the chapter that follows, "Lewis and

Walter"). Both characters put themselves in physical jeopardy, to the extent that one loses

his life while the other remains helplessly encased in cement. The one who survives,

Lewis, feels that he will be forever tormented by the one who dies, but not in the way that

gave him so much pleasure during their relationship.

Without risks of personal exposure there could be no community of lovers.

Lewis's uncertainty with regard to Morris's feelings towards him – the flicker between "I

loathe you" and "I love you" – emphasizes the risk in leaving oneself vulnerable to

another. For Lewis the cost is uncertainty as to the nature of his lover's feelings toward

him, an uncertainty exacerbated in the inequality of the sadomasochistic relationship.

Indeed Lewis's submissions to Morris present an extreme version of what Blanchot calls

the need to be contested (*Unavowable Community* 6). Even before he begins his sexual

relationship with Morris, Lewis seeks the punishment of others to fulfill his desires. The

striking scene in which Lewis is crucified by a group of men in the back room of a bar

(which Mathews handles tonally like any other scene of the book) shows a need to make

the very grounds of his existence uncertain. The pleasure/pain he gains through these scenarios is extended in his relationship to Morris, where among other things, Morris annuls him by calling him by a variety of women's names, including his mother's: "'Louisa, you're crazy anyway'" (145). "'Ella, such a sad route to go'" (145). He takes a beating both physically and mentally, which surely serves to put his sense of self in question: "In his guise as tormentor Morris will enshroud Lewis's life. Lewis will never want to forget him, and he will have no choice in the matter. A rosary of mourning, shame, and isolation has begun entwining him more finally than thongs and chains" (154). In Blanchot's words such a relationship shows how the individual, in this case Lewis, emerges from community.

> A being does not want to be recognized, it wants to be contested: in order to exist it goes towards the other, which contests and at times negates it, so as to start being only in that privation that makes it conscious (here lies the origin of its consciousness) of the impossibility of being itself, of subsisting [...] itself as a separate individual: this way it will perhaps ex-ist. (Blanchot 6)

In more political terms, the self left exposed and vulnerable to change, even as it incurs damage through the loss of a lover, is a powerful "mode of resistance to forces of homogenization" (Mitchell and Winfree 7). The process of leaving oneself vulnerable to others, leaving oneself open to contestation, contradicts and confounds societal norms. In this sense the community of lovers of Lewis and Morris radically proposes other ways of being against the grain of society, showing community to be a disruptive force.

LIMITS OF TELLING THE WHOLE STORY

Perhaps there is no better character to tell the whole story of these people than Lewis, who has left himself so vulnerable to the other characters—recall, for instance, on the second page of the novel he tells Allan he'd been blamed for Morris's death. Yet there being a single storyteller shows the limits of telling the whole story. Mathews, through Lewis, ultimately draws attention to this limit by relating all of the stories that make up *Cigarettes* to Lewis's later realizations concerning the role the dead play in our lives. The implication is that, though he may not play an active role or even appear in the stories that precede his thoughts from twenty years later, the stories nevertheless enter Lewis and allow him to articulate the world he emerges from. His need to understand these people, as he states on the first page, is seemingly unfinished if left unrelated to himself. The whole story becomes his whole story insofar as it defines those years of his life and demonstrates the effects it had on his life to follow.

His reflections warn us that unless we recognize the people who make us up, unless we recognize community, we are blind to the world and to ourselves, that we live in a state of delusion unless we recognize the we in I. He implies that we must actively work for this recognition to hold fast, that it is utterly against the grain of conventional thought:

> I shall deny it to you and to myself as long as I speak, still pretending that you are only you, and I I. In this way I can become altogether blind and go on groping my way through sunlight and darkness, with only my uncomprehending complaints to furnish names for the things I trip over and for the other sightless bodies I stumble against. (*Cigarettes* 292)

It is also worth pointing out here that the language of seeing and blindness Lewis uses in his reflection is almost the same as the language Allan uses in a letter to Elizabeth, a letter that is passed from character to character at a gathering on the first page of the novel. Allan's mysterious letter – the spark that ignited Lewis's desire to tell the whole story – describes the moment of drunken and impassioned delirium as he is kicked out of a gambling club and he first sees Elizabeth: "… the state I was in—barely seeing you when they were taking me away… Darkness, blinding light" (3). Lewis adopts Allan's language of inebriation to show how we live if we do not acknowledge the people from which we come (and perhaps Mathews deliberately reuses the words to show how other people make us through shared language). Allan, in a way, operates as a foil to Lewis, as someone who lives without recognizing others in us. Indeed, the whole narrative that Lewis, as narrator, tells, seems in response to Allan's line from the letter that Allan himself could never answer: "I suppose you want an explanation" (3).

Allan's inability to explain himself, and Lewis's attempt to explain everyone he knew, draws our attention to another important limit in telling the whole story: that we must be open to the limitations of the storyteller. According to Žižek, a limitation is built into social context of the telling of any narrative:

> The impossibility of fully accounting for oneself is conditioned by the irreducible intersubjective context of every narrative reconstitution: when I reconstruct my life as a narrative, I always do it within a certain intersubjective context, answering the Other's call-injunction, addressing the Other in a certain way. This background, including the (unconscious) motivations and libidinal investments of my narrative, cannot ever be rendered fully transparent within the narrative. To

fully account for oneself in a symbolic narrative is a priori impossible.

("Neighbors" 137–38)

Rather than relating opening up to insufficiency and contestation, Žižek frames it in terms of recognizing the limits of self-knowledge. What we can take from the passage from Žižek is that Allan's inability to account for his actions is built into the social circumstance, that he would have to know himself in order to explain himself, and further that he would consciously and unconsciously edit his explanation to the circumstance. But the same goes for Lewis as narrator of *Cigarettes*. There are aspects of the story that, no matter who Lewis's audience is, are left untold. Lewis recognizes these very blind spots in the final passage of the novel, letting us know that he has some knowledge of these limitations. Ideally, according to Žižek, through recognizing his own limitations we recognize our own. "This mutual recognition of limitation," Žižek continues, "thus opens up a space of sociality that is the solidarity of the vulnerable" ("Neighbors" 139) – a space which we shall call here community. The difficulty in the present example is that we are positing a community of reader and writer (just as Bataille himself considered his relationship with Nietzsche). If such a community is possible, it would suggest one kind of ethics of reading. For, as Žižek states, mutual recognition of limitation presents the basis for ethical relationships.

> [F]ar from limiting my ethical status (autonomy), this primordial vulnerability due to my constitutive exposure to the Other *grounds* it: what makes an individual *human* and thus something for which we are responsible, toward whom we have a duty to help, is his/her very finitude and vulnerability. ("Neighbors" 137–38)

We might infer that community of this kind marks the beginnings of being ethical. Even if this vulnerable opening does not occur between fictional narrator and real-world reader, Mathews's approach is suggestive of such an ethics.

Telling the whole story is thus limited both by there being a single narrator, and by the limitations built into social exchange in every situation. One further limitation is the very idea of the extent of a community: what is a whole community? A community is not containable, within a physical space or within the space of a narrative. As Nancy says, "[T]he totality or the whole of community is not an organic whole" like a single organism with a singular goal, but "a whole of articulated singularities," whose wholeness is bound by the limits of communication. "*[T]he totality*," he continues, "*is itself the play* of the articulations" (76). The significance of a work like *Cigarettes* is that by focusing on so many characters, and focalizing through them (if only via free-indirect third-person), Mathews suggests a totality of articulation, even if actually representing each singularity would be impossible. The whole story implies an attempt on the part of the teller to be true to the events and people involved, true to the feelings felt at specific moments and complexities of reactions, and a belief in the singularities that are produced by community. The key to these articulations in *Cigarettes* is Mathews's focus on individual relationships, chapter by chapter, never reducing experience to anything less than what it is, never reducing characters to roles, and not endowing his narrative with a device that brings all the characters together at a single event (that would give community the feeling of an "organic whole", as in the generic form of a comedy that ends in a wedding or, in Hollywood movies, a competition). *Cigarettes* indeed seems like an

ethical rendering of a whole community, leading the reader to recognize both his or her

own limits and the possibility of chance openings in encountering others.

JOSEPH McELROY'S *WOMEN AND MEN* AND THE LIMITS OF OTHERNESS

I was led to *Women and Men* by Harry Mathews's introduction written for the Joseph McElroy issue of *Review of Contemporary Fiction*. Mathews's title, "We for One," sounds like a call for community, yet ambiguously suggests both an ideal of collectivity and an invitation to what might be New Age territory. Either way, it announces a novel that desires to confront the topic of community with full narrative force, emphasizing a "we" over an "I". And so the novel does, as through 1192 pages of smallish print with little white space, McElroy constructs a mind-bending interrogation of the possibility of a we. Within the first twenty pages he poses two most important questions: "Who is this 'We'" (16) and "What is it? some community?" (11).

An attempt to summarize the plot would seem futile for two distinct reasons. The first is that McElroy engenders the text with a high degree of uncertainty. One finds oneself asking while reading *Women and Men*, and even after finishing it, because of the shifting nature of facts in the novel, what do we really know for certain? As Yves Abrioux points out:

Many of these pages and most of the particulars they contain are marked by a manifest degree of instability. This does not only affect the identity and function of the novel's protagonists. It also applies to the narrative voices, which move back and forth between personal and impersonal (i.e. third person) modes or again, within the personal pole, between first person singular and plural or first person and second person. Finally the events narrated veer from past to present or indeed to future, from the intimate to the world-historical, from historical veracity

to historical fiction, from the putatively realistic to the self-evidently fabulous or

incompossible. (1)

The journalist Jim Mayn, for example, who emerges as the main character, is at times

written in third person, and at times in second (a strategy breaking the fourth wall,

thereby implicating the reader, reminding one, for instance, of Juan Goytisolo's *Marks of*

Identity). At times McElroy disperses Mayn through other characters and reveals that he

may be the result of another character's reincarnation. Mayn may gain a brother whom he

thought was a constant enemy. He may also be the same person as the character Grace

Kimball. In other words, he and his world are in constant flux. The very notions of

centrality and consistency of character McElroy aims to deconstruct, or at least to reveal

as an old convention of convenience that reduces the complexity of reality.

McElroy indeed belongs to a kind of postmodern category of writers that Joseph

Conte dubs "disruptors" (29). These writers

surrender themselves willingly to, and just as often exploit, the inevitable debris

of culture and decay of systems in narratives capable of incorporating the wholly

unpredictable. They disdain readerly conveniences of linear narrative, with its

neat proportionality of cause and effect, which is deemed inadequate to the

complexity of the postmodern condition. (Conte 29)

Yet of course we can enumerate things that do happen in the novel, that seem to have a

recognizable cause and effect, even if we, over the course of reading it, see multiple

versions of an occurrence in parallax with the others. The events centre in Manhattan

around 1976, but reach back in time through Mayn's grandmother Margaret's encounters

with Native Americans in the late 19th century. The plot in the present involves Chilean

exiles' entanglement with American journalists (and others) and an attempt to free an anti-Castroist Cuban from prison in order that he kill a Chilean leader. Another central vein involves Mayn's engagement with his family history, and in particular the reason for his mother's mysterious suicide. These comprise some lines of the plot for which the reader expects some resolution even though one senses while reading the novel that McElroy intends to resist resolutions. All ends might remain loose and suggest never-ending relations.

The flip side to the high degree of instability in *Women and Men* is the overwhelming connectedness of everything. In other words, the determined lack of consistency of objects or events – their lack of order – is countered by a web that brings everything together in a kind of order. As Mathews points out, "[A] discussion of almost any detail will lead to another and eventually involve the whole book" ("We for One" 284). At times McElroy draws our attention to this dense web of involvement, as in this excerpt concerning telephone lines.

> [B]ut wondering now, a decade and more after the chat with Ted, if Spence had acquired data Mayn knew nothing of, he phoned Washington to find that old Ted had just left San Antonio, and in the gap of this phoned also in Washington his own daughter, who was not home; phoned the Albuquerque woman here in New York to get Spence's number if any and she had left her hotel; phoned Norma for the other woman's number but hung up in order to phone Amy about the Chilean economist, who Mayn had never stopped knowing was there at the foundation, had acquired the opera tickets Mayn and Amy had used from the diva Luisa in person, only to hear *Larry* answer . . . (876)

Brian McHale suggests that the web of character relations, indeed, "the world of *Women and Men*," is best described as contiguity and by extension as metonymy, "the trope of contiguity" (228). (We will leave aside a discussion of metonymy, which he introduces for the sake of determining *Women and Men* as a work of realist fiction, with elements both of modernism and postmodernism.) McHale outlines Grace and Mayn's role as central hubs, and from those hubs a network extends as concentric circles across Manhattan and enveloping the world. McHale also shows how a number of more minor characters, such as a company of bike couriers, connect other characters. Material objects such as a pistol, a parcel, and radioactive dust circulate through the network, drawing attention to the network itself and, of course, information tied to the plot circulates and recirculates through the minds and lips of the multitude of participants. The contiguity of the novel is based on exchange, from imperceptible particles, to thought, to speech, to everyday objects. McElroy posits, in writing a 1200-page novel, that a narrative revealing this web of connectivity, over generations and across continents, is truer to the way things are than one focused on more discrete individual action and psychological changes.

Though McHale strongly binds contiguity (via metonymy) to the representational strategy of the realist novel, contiguity in *Women and Men* is that of an altogether different system which treats characters like sub-atomic particles, drawing a reality that completely disrupts and redefines the one our senses are accustomed to. All this obliges us to ask: what is metonymy without correspondence to our senses, and how can *Women and Men* be a realist novel if it does not describe a mechanistic universe which is that of our senses?

McElroy adds a narrative layer which rarely enters literary fiction, perhaps because it is unintuitive, unromantic and feels unliterary: quantum physics. Joseph Conte's argument in *Design and Debris: The Chaotics of Postmodern American Fiction* (2002) is that the postmodern writer, unlike his or her modern predecessor, does not attempt to order a world that modern physics (of Einstein, Heisenberg, Bohr) calls "disorderly, random and inchoate" (7). Rather, because of a "'break' in the condition of knowledge arising from a renunciation of several foundational myths of western culture, it follows that the postmodern artist expresses an affinity for—rather than an aversion to—forms of disorder" (8). Indeed, McElroy's strategies, from Conte's point of view, would seem to be the dominant of postmodernist writers. "The postmodernist writer proposes a text and a world engaged in the continual process of invention and disruption, the making of meaning and the free play of signifiers, and an ever-shifting interpenetration of figures of order and chaos" (9). That may work well as a definition for postmodernist works in general, but need not be attributed to physics, since it may equally derive from Saussurean linguistics and its poststructuralist interpreters. Heisenberg of course is in the air, but so are Beckett and Borges and Lacan. Few novels that I know of have applied quantum physics to human relations so overtly as *Women and Men*, but, strangely, Conte does not discuss it in his study. In McElroy's novel, humans thus not only occupy a mechanistic world of cause and effect, but a world of matter and energy, where sub-atomic collisions affect and connect us, and cause events that run counter to what our senses tell us. Human relations become exchanges of energy or exchanges of particles.

The most important effect of the quantum reality is that it redefines communication and human interaction, and thus completely alters our conception of community. Community is thus imagined not through the edification or consistency of self in relation to others, or the opening up of sharing the self to others, which we might categorize as ontology, so much as the dispersal of self through contiguity, connectivity, even collective consciousness, precisely because exchange is possible in and through both visible and invisible mechanisms. Thus in the world of *Women and Men,* community does not produce individuals so much as individuals are inevitable vessels of community, carriers of energy and matter whose bodies are porous and in motion. Community manifests as communion insofar as the physical exchange or exchange of energy ensures that we are spread out to be more than I.

McElroy conceives of community as distinctly more physics-influenced than other texts of this study, and gives no single explanation to the question of being-in-common. His novel is dialogical and thus there are many competing, or perhaps coexisting, versions of how humans, women and men, communicate, come together, become other humans, and separate. On the surface these appear to be forms of community, yet they remain intensely problematic manifestations of community, for their sci-fi futurity, and at their greatest risk, for their becoming New Age.

These versions of what community might be in a quantum universe come to us by way of a number of the primary characters. What unifies the disparate theories of togetherness in the novel is their speculative nature: that there is a physics that can explain what we traditionally believe to be mystical or paranormal ways of communicating. McElroy

shifts a master signifier from something more common to the humanities, such as Identity, Self, and Relationship to Energy or Quantum Communing (c.f. quantum entanglement and many-body theory). Thus, James Mayn imagines a future scenario in which a man and a woman stand together on a metal plate, and on their trip to a Moon colony their matter becomes a single entity. The prisoner Foley, given a vast monologue in the second half of the novel, imagines and participates in a connected system of thought energy he dubs the Colloidal Unconscious. Larry, a young polymath whom Mayn takes under his wing develops the notion of Simultaneous Reincarnation. And Grace Kimball, leader of the Body-Self Workshop that gathers women together to learn masturbation and other means of spiritual self-satisfaction, produces a community of women to the greater separation from men. And there is the choral We, a nebulous contingent that posits generational connectivity, angels becoming human, and a community based on contiguity.

McElroy poses in a general and nebulous way, very early in the novel, the question of the plural voice and of community. A plural voice, seemingly disembodied, speaks out of nowhere, "Speaks . . . we understand, in this 'we' that we have heard. What is it? some community? Ours. . . . And what is this community—this large We we ourselves voice?" (11). Simply stated, McElroy introduces early on and interpellates the novel with a choral voice which at times asks the question we are meant to ask, and which we assume McElroy himself poses to the reader, "Who is this 'We'?" (16). Mathews distinguishes a change from beginning to end, where at the beginning "There are women and there are men" and at the end "We are women-and-men," ("We for One" 249) hyphenated to indicate a coming into singularity.

The "We are" in the final "We are women-and-men" includes "I am," but long

before, "I" had been gently and inexorably co-opted into a community called

"we." "We for one..." a passage casually remarks, suggesting that the distinction

between "I" and "others" is, at least in this book, an inaccurate one. ("We for

One" 249)

Mathews states that McElroy undertakes an erasure of the world of binaries, perhaps of

the mechanistic world altogether. Yet, from his perspective,"[t]he shifts from women and

men to women-and-men, from I to we, are not wishful or sentimental or theoretical. They

are the result of a generalized reduction and destruction of dualities, separations,

distinctions, hierarchies: in history, in physics, in ethics, in the uses of language and

literature" ("We for One" 249). He asserts that it is through the erasure of these

boundaries in the writing/reading of the text, more than anything else, that McElroy

achieves his women-and-men – in essence, that the formal processes somehow escape

wishfulness, sentiment, and theory. Perhaps Mathews means that McElroy's description

releases us from a dominant way of ordering the world, inherited from the

Enlightenment, so that we see what is really there with greater clarity: "it is not

prescriptive but descriptive, an account of our reality as a one-ness multiplying into

stupendous variety, variety dissolving into one-ness" ("We for One" 290). However, it is

hard to think of a way that this could be done without the political point of view inherent

in wish, sentiment and theory. The desire for this we is a desire for community which in

our imagination used to be but is now lost. (One thinks of Yves Abrioux's opening up of

Women and Men via Deleuze, where he sees the break down of hierarchies and limits to

be anti-Oedipal, thus against patriarchy, and therefore highly political, to give one example.)

McElroy does indeed propose, through his most important characters, a number of speculative versions of community that perhaps respond to the question "Who is this we?" One response is Mayn's science-fiction vision of two people, a man and a woman, literally becoming one. As was mentioned above, in one version of this two people stand on a metal plate and undergo a dematerialization process that turns them into a frequency, sends them to the moon, and rematerializes them as a single entity. In another version, some kind of dome is used, so "that two persons perhaps without even a vein of bias as to religious or sexual origin might one day disappear literally into one."

> [U]nder some latest utility dome two persons stood Indian file content because awaiting transport to another section of their future: there, having been reduced to frequency and thus transmitted hence, they would reconstitute and see each other at once in their new home which would be an Earth-Moon-space colony . . . When in reality through the matter scrambler utility dome the union of these forward-looking couples was to be sealed literally in a one-for-two ecoswitch dreamed up by population consolidation programmers who cover with the old romance of loved union a new unknown singlehood: that is, the Earthling couples demattered domeside turn out, when reconstituted thousands of miles forth in space in one of the colonies, to be one person now, no longer two. (335–36)

This idea is so fundamental to Mayn's thinking that he indeed has visions of its materialization, and receives a passing news flash, source unknown, that he will fall in

love again only if "he finds a formula joining his uncontrollable power to witness two persons transferred by frequency into one" (92) to other important and seemingly unrelated aspects of his life (namely, international conspiracy and his inability to dream).

Lincoln, one of the female participants in Grace Kimball's Mind-Body Workshop, who is told by Mayn of the two-becoming-one, considers what would happen if she and Mayn became one. "Did it mean each person would be even more than the song of its parts, but where would Jim Mayn be? Would he be internalized in her and she would have to live with *that* fo' th' rest of her days in space?" (337). Though it represents a commonsense response to the idea, Lincoln's line of questioning seems to miss the point or the impulse behind the vision, which is probably manifold for McElroy, as for Mayn, but centred on an attempt at joining the sexes beyond what we are naturally capable. McElroy states, in an interview that predates the publication of *Women and Men* by four years (though would have been in the middle of the period when he was writing the novel), that "the most important thing in my life [is]. . . the possibilities . . . for men and women living together" (McElroy in Walsh 264). Mayn's separation from his former wife Joy, to which McElroy devotes a large section towards the end of the novel, is just one important manifestation of this dialectic of togetherness and separation.

But why the moon? Why should we need to be aided by science (fiction) in order to better commune? That Mayn is separated from his mother, who disappears in an apparent suicide by drowning, and from his son Andrew, who has estranged himself, and from his wife Joy, who could no longer live with him, tells us only that separation is a defining part of Mayn's life. That science should save us the trouble seems at the same time radical and deeply conservative, and is probably a dangerous response to personal

trauma. Mayn imagines an interaction one step beyond what is often considered the ultimate form of togetherness, the orgasm.

Grace Kimball's approach to community may have similar results to Mayn's vision, despite its opposite intention. Grace places herself at the centre of a kind of community by running Body-Mind Workshops, which gather women together in a carpeted, mirrored room in order to teach them how to masturbate and become closer to and at one with one's body. As the interrogator, a mysterious figure that slides in and out of the text asking critical questions seemingly for the reader, describes it:

> Grace Kimball's workshop carried on naked, with visual aids, "glass, rubber, plastic" (a modern variant of an old game played with hands), and in a living unit rented as residential within the articulate structure we have gradually seen built up by partial pictures, accommodating (on faith, perhaps) a multiplicity of small-scale units, when in reality Kimball takes money from her workshoppers and is even now planning not only Eros, a nationwide system of women's health "houses" which will serve fresh foods subject to selective boycott and which will aim at further rearranging of man and woman in terms of checks and balances by supposedly establishing healthier and more permanent separation between the sexes . . . (586)

Though a community of women gathers around Kimball for her workshops, the goal of the workshops is divisive in more than one way. This enabling of the self to satisfy the self is at the root of the one version of the New-Age endeavour. Žižek describes this

phenomenon (in a passage on the bestseller *The Celestine Prophecy*) in the following

passage:

> After spiritual renewal . . . we shall learn to find in ourselves what we were
>
> seeking in vain in others (one's male or female complement): each human being
>
> will become a Platonic complete being, delivered of exclusive dependence on
>
> another (leader or love partner), delivered of the need to draw energy from
>
> him/her. When a truly free subject enters a partnership with another human being,
>
> he is thus beyond a passionate attachment to the other; his partner is for him only
>
> a vehicle for some message [that has filtered through from the "Energy of the
>
> universe"] (*Ticklish Subject* 473)

From Žižek's point of view, the thing stolen from us in this scenario is our proper

encounter with the Other: "the Other is no longer an unfathomable abyss concealing and

announcing that which is 'in me more than myself', but the bearer of messages for the

self-sufficient consumerist subject" (*Ticklish Subject* 474). So though Kimball brings

together women in a situation of vulnerability requiring openness to one another, and

through this forms a community of women that branches out into other parts of the

narrative, her ultimate goal is self-sufficiency through masturbation. And masturbation

appears to be one step beyond using the Other as an instrument for channelling energy

from the universe – rather, a form of direct access.

The prisoner Foley, a major figure connecting various people in the possible plots that

involve an exiled Chilean economist, an anti-Castroist Cuban, and Swiss-Chilean opera

singer, posits another theory of communing through communication. Foley's situation in

prison acts as a foil to Grace's in her apartment complex. Like the apartment complex,

which houses a number of the characters in the novel, including Mayn, the prison plays

off the theme of "small-scale units" that brings a number of characters in close contact.

When Mayn visits him in a maximum security facility outside of New York City, we hear

a near-hundred-page tortuous monologue disclosing what he knows and what he

seemingly should not be able to know about people and relations on the Outside. Indeed

he knows more about Mayn's thoughts than Mayn himself could know. We also hear

what he has had time to develop while behind bars: most importantly, a practice of

communication called the Colloidal Unconscious, and a utopian system of economics he

names Foleynomics. Mathews states, "When we read Foley's account of his 'naive'

theory, we are halfway through the book. By then we are prepared to find it more than a

little convincing. Not only have members of the various clusters established indirect and

direct links between them and turned up repeatedly in each other's stories, but a less

traditional kind of overlap has begun subverting our notion of characters as discrete

units" (254–55). Foley describes the Colloidal Unconsciousness as an interface through

which people, in prison and on the outside, mentally communicate. Those in jail "in blind

talk like African termites who in their forty-foot-high termitaries work like secrets all

together" (709) form a common consciousness through which speaking out loud is

unnecessary for communication. Foley explains that colloidal particles

> with billions of unseeable faces and more all the time if we could only economize
>
> and move at random unless you commence the centrifugal, which is only in
>
> emergency unless you can make yourself either it unconscious or find the
>
> neighborhood of messages that's meant for you and for you to grain in on 'cause

it's impossible not to give when you receive, you might lend your ears but there's

no lending there's only giving, and you better live with your particles so you know

how to work with them and their feeling for all other particles and so send what

you want to send and only to whom it may concern. . . (743)

Underlying his assertion of the Colloidal Unconsciousness is a belief in a collective

human spirit, a group consciousness binding men together—nothing short of "an endless

community of minds" (710). The Colloidal Unconscious thus participates in the New Age

idea of "the magic powers of ancient collective consciousness" (*Ticklish Subject* 77),

which presupposes an ancient communalism now lost, perhaps waiting to be unlocked.

The Foleynomic plan he proposes, which expands on the capabilities of the

Colloidal Unconscious, constitutes "a utopia dissolving interface between inside and

outside" (760) – inside and outside the prison walls. Foley imagines a manufacturing

centre started in parallel with the formation of a brother- and sisterhood. Foley's plan

even plays off Mayn's own fantasy of togetherness, such that "guard and con" would not

be dissolved "into one non-individuated mass" (as Mayn imagines) but, well, we lose his

train of thought at this point and he does not pick it up again.

That he expands a capability for an endless mental community into a utopian

social plan shows us the boundary at which informal, unstructured community becomes

structured utopian society. Such a project suggests that utopian society wants it both

ways: the spontaneity and purity of community based in communication and existential

ties while at the same time expanding this to include vast numbers as a structure to gain

political power. Foley's plan gains some support through other real-world examples of

utopian ventures mentioned in the novel: Valparaíso, Chile, where Mayn's lover Mayga is

murdered; Greeley, Colorado, linked to Mayn through his friend Ted; and Esalen, California, where one of Grace Kimball's workshoppers attends another workshop. Yet Foley's version of the utopian community remains at the planning stage, and McElroy seems less interested in exploring structured or intentional communities than chaotic quantum-inspired ones.

A phenomenon like Colloidal Unconsciousness, straddling quantum physics and New Age spiritualism, is reincarnation. The particular kind of reincarnation that McElroy's characters feel implicated in tie them to each other in a living present as well as to people of the past. Like all concepts in *Women and Men*, reincarnation has shifting capabilities. There is a more traditional transference of self from past person to present, as both Mayn and Grace feel at one time that they became reincarnated from the Navajo Prince that haunts Mayn's grandmother's stories. More important and in keeping with the quantum theme is the possibility of "Simultaneous Reincarnation," a notion developed by Larry, a polymath university student whom Mayn befriends. It is described as "sort of a parallel" (665), "somehow all here and now, with no past" (669), " for maybe being in Two Places" (672). Such reincarnation, we find out hundreds of pages later, may be enabled through "non-lethal radioactivity" (1082). Through this radioactive ingestion people may be divided in two without knowing it (1107). The idea leads Mayn to believe "that this Grace Kimball person and he were some same person perhaps in life right now as an ant community he'd heard was one organism in effect but he and she probably *not* larger than the sum of themselves" (668–69). By the end of the novel we understand that Mayn may be Grace Kimball as well as the semi-mythic acquaintances of his grandmother, the Anasazi and the Hermit Inventor of New York. (The Hermit himself is

"among other things multiple" [648]. In one instance he is seemingly Nicolai Tesla, for example. The Anasazi too is dispersed among his contemporaries [829].) Mayn realizes, in answer to a question posed in the narrative, "What is in others yet has others in it" (which also has the answer Manhattan, the place and the drink, among others) "how far these relational structures . . . are something he's in, since evidently they are in him" (867). Individuals, here, no longer constitute the base unit at which a division stops. An individual is no longer constituted by singularity, but is made of particles, matter and energy, "multiple small-scale units" that move osmotically between others voluntarily and involuntarily.

Though these various possible communities overlap they remain distinct. There is never a point in the novel when a synthesis defines a single mode of communication or communion. As Robert Walsh states, "McElroy allows his characters and perspectives their independence" (270). The novel appears to be dialogical, in the way that Bakhtin characterizes Dostoyevsky's: McElroy does not clearly impose a dominant voice that we might read as his own. Yet we return to the question posed by the outsiders to the narrative, whose role seems more direct to the reader – "Who is this 'We'?" – having looked at various versions of speculative communication and communing. McElroy labours to show a universal connectedness, a global contiguity that operates at the quantum level and that ensures community, a kind of community always already there and that we cannot help but be a part of, both physically and psychically. An individual is always in excess of itself because it extends beyond its physical and mental parameters into others through space and time. And yet, as a result of this dispersal, there appears a loss of agency. The belief in agency is shown to be delusional.

Such a broad vision of community challenges more discrete and ideal definitions that we have explored in Bataille and Nancy. The one-to-one relationships favoured in their discussions of community, in which opening up to another or being vulnerable to another is an act of will, runs counter to the deterministic version of community produced in a quantum universe. A community based in quantum communication leaves everyone vulnerable to each other, like it or not, to the point of paranoia (which is perhaps prescient given contemporary social media). One wonders whether, perhaps, we have made a fatal leap beyond contiguity to community (and whether McElroy makes this leap too), and whether indeed an existential commitment, which seems central to any definition of community, is implicit in contiguous relations in a quantum universe. In other words, what are the ontological ramifications of always already being in a global community?

Many scholars focus on and are drawn to McElroy's texts because of the descriptive dynamism with which he constructs them, specifically his rigour in showing a world in motion. Attempting to define his narrative aesthetic, some scholars have employed a geographic metaphor – like McElroy himself uses in the essay "Neural Neighborhoods" – to encompass this sizable materiality of things in their movement across a visible field. Tony Tanner, for instance, writes of "the move toward an 'ultimate topography', with the scrupulous delineation of surfaces and lines and intersections which make up the perceptual field, or simply the particular 'place', for some person at some point in time" (219). (Tanner also criticizes McElroy's style for its overabundance: "the 'fields' and 'vectors' are just too thick on the ground, or rather page" [226].) Such metaphors are

meant to encompass the psychic exchanges as well as the physical itineraries even when they are far-reaching. Thus the metaphor might cover the telepathic communication between Mayn and his wife, the routes bike couriers take through Manhattan, and the journey of the tapeworm that is removed from a fish dwelling in a Minnesota lake later to be administered by a doctor to Luisa the opera diva (as a weight-loss program).

Yet I believe there is an important gap not being acknowledged in descriptions such as Tanner's. The two realities cannot be resolved into one, because quantum physics posits occurrences that are simply impossible in our sensory world, impossible because they are undetectable. As Žižek states, "[Q]uantum physics confronts us with the gap between the Real and reality at its most radical: what we get in it is the mathematized Real of formulas which cannot be translated into ontologically consistent reality" (*Parallax View* 172).

> [I]n quantum physics, it is the noumenal [pre-perceptible] Real which can be grasped and formulated in a consistent theory, while the moment we try to translate this theory into the terms of our experience of phenomenal reality, we get involved in senseless contradictions (time runs backward, the same object is in two places at once, an entity is a particle and a wave, and so on). (It can be claimed, however, that these contradictions emerge only when we try to transpose into our experiential reality the "Real" of the quantum processes—in itself, this reality remains the same as before, a consistent realm with which we are well acquainted.) (*Parallax View* 173)

This last, parenthetical comment of Žižek's does not apply to McElroy's narrative, because McElroy layers the quantum Real with the perceptible reality and smoothly runs

them from one to the other with disregard for the gap. He constantly transposes into our experiential reality the "Real" quantum processes.

The narrative itself produced through fictional devices allows for the collapse of one into the other, and makes possible those very characteristics that Žižek names as inconsistent with our experience: that Mayn and Grace may be one and the same person, that the Navajo Prince may be in two places at once, that people may involuntarily communicate Colloidal Unconscious, that Mayn may be receiving messages from the future, etc. There are several sections of more straightforward realistic fiction, isolated from the greater narrative, that seem to reflect the mechanistic world: Gordon's description of his life in "Gordon's Story: The Year He Skipped" (504–33), the story of John and Linda and the "Departed Tenant" (267–84), Dobbie and Freye's climb up a mountain in the Berkshires in "the unknown saved" (492–503). Even within these sections there are impositions of the speculative, such as "black telepathy" (498) and the belief that a lover is the character's "other body" (269). Yet what dominates *Women and Men* is the quantum activity which ultimately seems to support a New Age world view, because it "points towards the self-sublation of the mechanistic view in the direction of the holistic universe dominated by a hidden pattern of the 'dance of life'" (*Ticklish Subject* 77). When these hidden things at work are shown to us there is a sense of something mystical running the show behind the scenes, beyond our comprehension. Yet reading *Women and Men* as a New-Age novel reduces what is an incredibly complex work of literary art and surely misrepresents it. Though New Age elements run strongly through it, not solely in Grace Kimball's workshop, something more important and paradoxical is conveyed.

In counterpoint to the New Age progression towards singularity (and perhaps immortality through contiguous life) McElroy plays out a political conspiracy, which threatens to bring characters together in a move towards premature death. More than just driving a mysterious plot, conspiracy both connects people who otherwise wouldn't be connected, and weakens links between individuals by breaking trust. One becomes paranoid in sensing a greater power at work, which in its positive form is a "dance of life" but in its negative is a corporate or government plot. As Jerry Varsava points out, conspiracy in works by Pynchon, DeLillo and Gaddis breaks communal links by atomizing individuals.

> In many postmodern novels . . . paranoia and suspicion are the direct consequences of governmental and corporate conspiracy, and in such a sociopolitical environment the like-mindedness needed for the constitution of politically oppositional communities cannot take shape. And, as Jameson has pointed out, "the conspiracy wins . . . not because it has some special form of 'power' that the victim lacks, but simply because it is collective and the victims, taken one by one in their isolation, are not." ("Quest for Community" 2)

Though McElroy touches on similar sentiments in a line from a character brunching with Mayn—"professional intrigue is anti-family" (265)—he doesn't overstate the feeling of paranoia that conspiracy typically produces. Rather, that thing which in other novels has a great power to atomize community in *Women and Men* seems to create a strong sense of community. The quantum varieties of communication that mentally connect people, and which are for a number of characters a goal, are also those that put characters most at risk. So though Mayn may gain an uncanny sense of togetherness with his former wife

Joy through telepathy, he also helplessly participates in mental exchange with the inmate (and hub of conspiracy) Foley. Because Foley knows Mayn operates in and "move[s] and relate[s] in the Colloidal Unconscious" (730), Mayn is at risk of having his mind breached by those who might harm him. And indeed a number of characters whom Mayn loves are put in danger, such as his one-time lover Mayga, who is killed, his daughter the journalist Flick, his father, and his young friend Larry. Such risks go beyond stealing information through mental pathways. It is possible, Foley asserts, that from the centre of the Colloidal Unconscious might come "a wild shot in the dark" (747) that assassinates someone. Another extraordinary power he proposes is that one may be able to reverse the flow of an alternating current directed at you, as in the case of an electric chair (775). These kinds of mental superpowers would surely create a state of paranoia and risk atomizing people, yet in this novel there is a sense of risk/benefit that gets played out—the benefit being some future assimilation of minds for good. (One thinks by analogy to Marx's theory that capitalism is a necessary step towards communism.)

One of McElroy's challenges to the conventional meaning of community is not in the speculative propositions of characters, and not in the evidence that such communications are not just speculative but rather real, but in the possibility that conspiracy (if at times aided by telepathy) is the greatest connecting force. Fredric Jameson implies something to this effect in his work on conspiracy, stating that where "traditional narratives have never been much good at conveying the collective", conspiracy narratives do draw our attention to characters as collective (*The Geopolitical Aesthetic* 9). The kind of community that McElroy's conspiracy produces is of particular interest to us for its basis in difference rather than similarity; it is unclear what these

characters have in common (except those related by family), other than to be caught up in something greater than themselves that they may not be able to name, that they might not even know they are part of.

Large-scale community based in difference rather than in assimilation has been proposed by many contemporary thinkers, and is perhaps one of the current ideals for community. Iris Marion Young, for example, looks to difference because assimilation, for her, is an impossible fantasy. She describes that in the fantasy-of-communal-assimilation scenario "[p]ersons will cease to be opaque, other, not understood, and instead become fused, mutually sympathetic, understanding one another as they understand themselves" (309). On one hand this fantasy describes precisely the aim frequently articulated in *Women and Men* in the movement towards humanity's merging. Yet the reality of *Women and Men* is that difference reigns. Though there are moments of mutual understanding caused by telepathic forces, and suggestions of various kinds of merging of discrete bodies, McElroy writes about a fascinatingly diverse array of characters who more often than not remain mysteries to one another, whose trajectories collide and diverge but do not become one.

This tangle – the aim of assimilation and the reality of difference – is expressed in the paradoxical statement delivered by the choral voice, early in the novel: "We have worked on our collective awareness of [. . .] similarity between us, which is liking, and difference between us, which is loving, in order as a long-range project to become single" (34). But why should, if loving is difference, the long-range goal be to become single? (Never mind that the statement is spoken by a We, presupposing that assimilation has already occurred.) That assimilation into singularity as a goal runs completely against the

grain of Young, for instance, who is even skeptical of the kinds of sharing that philosophers like Bataille posit to be central to community. Her ideal starting point, rather than in individuals encountering each other through insufficiency, is in the variety of encounters that strangers have in cities. "The unoppressive city is thus defined as openness to unassimilated otherness" (319). The state McElroy describes (rather than the ideal his characters aim for) is perhaps not unlike this. Mayn, for example, is never transported on a metal plate with a woman to the moon where he becomes one with her. The social utopia that Foley imagines, that dissolves the inside and outside of prisons, is never realized. Rather, we have very different characters encountering one another in their unassimilated difference: bike couriers mixing with Grace Kimball as well as conspirators, Navajo mixing with Mayn's grandmother, Mayn mixing with Foley, an opera diva mixing with a Chilean official.

Yet another angle *Women and Men* seems to propose is neither assimilation nor difference, but indifference – indifference for the fact of physics, which in McElroy's universe will have us all in community whether we like it or not. We see this in his scaling of an idea from the level of invisible particles to the level of human relations to the level of historical narrative. So when history in one scene is described as "haphazard collisions" (387), we might also think of particles colliding, or people running into one another. We think of the famous image of a butterfly flapping its wings in Patagonia causing a tsunami in Japan. McElroy proposes the premise "there are only relations in motion" ("Midcourse Corrections" 16) – a statement of physics on the one hand, and human becoming on the other – and takes it seriously in his description of the world by way of it, from mindless particles to human endeavors. Physics, like conspiracy and the

New Age atmosphere, is a power beyond the individual, and also prior to the individual. When relations in motion are proposed over and above individual bodies, a deterministic physics seems to be at the root of community. This power, which when left to physics seems undirected, when recognized by characters such as Mayn, Larry and Foley, might ultimately be read as a teleology of community: an indifferent mechanism that brings characters together in their difference.

Framed in ontological terms, the greatest challenge McElroy poses to being and community is in obliterating the limit between human excess and human infiniteness; through obliterating this limit, in presenting the teleological aim of two becoming one, he goes beyond the comfortable range of contemporary ethics of being and community. If in human excess – for thinkers like Bataille – we find the possibility of community, in infinite being we would have to reconsider the basic ontological categories of self and other, and individual and community. We find in McElroy the abyss or void between people as the limit or obstacle to overcome rather than the limit that allows us our humanity. If we follow Žižek's idea, "[W]hat makes an individual *human* and thus something for which we are responsible, toward whom we have a duty to help, is his/her very finitude and vulnerability" ("Neighbors" 138). Or, via Blanchot: "In the relation of *myself to the Other,* the Other exceeds my grasp" (*Writing of the Disaster* 19). In procedures of reincarnation and self-doubling, telepathy and Colloidal Unconscious, McElroy obliterates the line between the self and the other, obliterates our finitude, and thus, in Žižek's view, obliterates our humanity. In other words, our ethics is derived from the recognition of limits of the self and the other, we cannot really imagine a scenario in which we understand the other fully and thus know ourselves fully. The aim of sameness,

or oneness, has an unsettling resemblance to the worst kinds of community, such as totalitarian versions of communism, or literary dystopias, scenarios in which we might be forced to believe we are assimilated into a greater whole. In the pages of *Women and Men*, however, sameness is a kind of angelic substance, sometimes language, and sometimes light (1113), that speaks in the first person plural. There is no way to judge this by conventional ethics, but nevertheless it disturbs us.

CONCLUSION: TONI MORRISON'S *PARADISE*, MYTHIC WOMEN, AND THE
CRITIQUE OF ASSIMILATION

The question of the ontological status of sexual difference is one of the most central
issues facing feminist theory today [. . .] If feminists take patriarchy as a given term in
feminist analysis, the questions can always be asked—what is the origin or source of
patriarchy? Is it men's natural strength, aggression, and competitiveness that produced a
system of patriarchal domination over women; or did a system of patriarchal domination
produce men's strength, etc., as the relevant explanatory factor in the devaluation of
women's attributes?

—Elizabeth Grosz (*Space, Time, and Perversion* 70)

"Like female and male, returning to the one they used to be. The Hermit said No, he drew
the line there—though community might have much to gain from such a transformation"

—Joseph McElroy (*Women and Men* 835)

I was led to the texts of this study on the intuition that postmodernist novels representing

an aggregate of characters would be a fruitful place to study narratives of community.

That the selection under analysis here is by men must have a significant effect on the

representation of community that I have been so interested in exploring. Precisely what

effect would be impossible to determine because there is no uniform representation of

community in the works of this study – the works present possible outcomes of various

kinds of social formations ranging from the ironized to the utopian. At one end there is

the fear of the loss of individual agency, as in *Crystal Vision* and *Odd Number*, and at the

other the acknowledgment of community's power to produce the individual, as in

Cigarettes. That community unavoidably influences what it is to be a human individual is

perhaps the unwavering constant common to these works, but this is a very general

conclusion.

What comes as a surprise, however, because it draws together each text of this study, is that the authors of these novels all place a mythic woman, with some sort of elevated power ranging from exceptional desirability to otherworldly metamorphosis, at the centre of the communities. Coover's are perhaps the most obvious. At the centre of the party in *Gerald's Party* he places the porn star Ros, who rises from the dead as a fellating ghost. Likewise he mythically endows the women at the centre of *John's Wife*, one with invisibility and the other with monstrousness. Through the ekphrastic women of *Crystal Vision*, Sorrentino binds the men in spells of hopeless desire, elevating the women to the mythic through the dream images of the Tarot deck. In *Odd Number*, somewhat like *Gerald's Party,* Sorrentino structures the interrogations around the possibly dead, possibly alive woman, Sheila Henry. Like Schrodinger's Cat, she is both dead and not dead, and thus occupies an exceptional position in the way community is represented. Mathews's exceptionally beautiful Elizabeth of *Cigarettes* takes on a mythic quality through the intrigue and desire around a portrait made in her youth that becomes forged and secretly traded. In *Women and Men*, McElroy presents Grace Kimball as guru-like through her New Age workshops, and mythic through the highly improbable fact that she never encounters John Mayn, despite having countless common acquaintances and living in the same apartment building. Why should female characters occupy such a uniquely mythic position at the heart of these novels?

The treatment of women as mythic has deep roots in American fiction, particularly in the mid-19th-century Romanticism that flourished in Poe and Hawthorne. In his 1960 study *Love and Death in the American Novel*, Leslie Fiedler devotes much space to describing and explaining this Romantic phenomenon in terms of the interplay

between the archetypes of the "Fair Maiden" and the "Dark Lady." The Dark Lady is what might also be called a femme fatale – a woman who, exuding a dangerous sexual energy, attracts and entraps the male protagonist even in his full knowledge of her sinful and otherworldly offerings. The prototypical example that Fiedler provides is Hawthorne's Beatrice Rappaccini from "Rappaccini's Daughter": the young woman who, having been raised in a poisonous garden, secretes poison from her lungs and skin. Connecting her toxicity to sexual potency and the danger of the chase, Hawthorne would have the suitor risk his life to attain his lusty ends. The Fair Maiden, on the other hand, is elevated beyond the norm by a virginal nature, recalling the Christian purity of Virgin Mary. This embodiment of saviour and ruin in key female characters evolves through the literary genres that follow Romanticism, losing their overt religious connotations, yet the residue of these archetypes persists, and emerges in contemporary figures. Writers continue to represent women as objects of desire that embody, as in the figures of motherly saviour and sexual destroyer, more than what is possible, something mythic or otherworldly.

It is a little surprising that despite waves of feminism and other cultural movements this paradigm has persisted into the postmodern period, at least in writing by the men of this study, and persisted with varying degrees of self-consciousness on the part of the writer. Yet some would argue that this is precisely one of the habits of postmodernism. As Žižek states, "[P]ostmodernity is not the overcoming of modernity but its fulfillment: in the postmodern universe, pre-modern 'leftovers' are no longer experienced as obstacles to be overcome by progress towards a fully secularized modernization, but as something to be unproblematically incorporated" (*Living in the*

End Times 283). Another postmodernist novel that could be added to our list, Donald

Barthelme's 1968 novel *Snow White*, falls perfectly into the pattern the other books of this

study produce. At its centre a woman shows traits typical of the pre-Modern, Romantic

tradition, elements from the well-known fairy tale, such as Snow White's mythic beauty,

her entourage of seven males, and the villain who would have her dead. A number of the

seven men in Barthelme's version fall for Snow White, are "in her power" (177), and

"*want the beautiful snow-white arse itself*" (101). Following to the T the pattern that

Fiedler describes (in the archetype of the "immaculate savior"), one character addresses

Snow White as "Madonna" in his letter to her (108). Yet, like Coover, Barthelme is self-

conscious in his reproduction of the mythic woman at the centre of community. Other

resemblances to the fairy tale (which most people know through Disney) dissipate in

favour of a mix of overtly normal and absurd urban scenarios, the conflation of high- and

low-brow language and references, along with metafictional self-reference. Both

Barthelme and Coover are so aware of the generic conventions and the general meaning

of patriarchal power produced by them that they use layers of irony to subvert them.

Barthelme has Snow White hanging her ebony hair out a window for several consecutive

sections of the book, playing on her otherworldly beauty and the power she possesses

because of it, yet elsewhere grounds her in the domestic labour of a "horsewife,"

reminding the reader of the construct of stereotypical roles. In *Snow White* as in *John's*

Wife, fairy-tale convention produces the mythic woman that doubles as a Romantic object

of desire and postmodern object of irony.

Despite the critique of the ongoing inequality of men and women embedded in

this self-conscious imitation of generic conventions, this approach has its problems. For

theorists of the 1990s and after this kind of irony and the ideology associated with it became a mask behind which writers simply reproduced (with perhaps dubious critical intent) the same biases that others in the past wrote for their effectiveness as narrative conventions. In other words, reproducing antiquated archetypes or stereotypes, though drawing attention to how ridiculous or dangerous they are, nevertheless reproduces them, and sometimes happily so. David Foster Wallace, who shot to literary heights in the 1990s, was a leading figure in a generation of American writers who questioned the effectiveness of the irony so prevalent in the preceding decades:

> This is because irony, entertaining as it is, serves an almost exclusively negative function. It's critical and destructive, a ground-clearing. Surely this is the way our postmodern fathers saw it. But irony's singularly unuseful when it comes to constructing anything to replace the hypocrisies it debunks. (67)

The bind of postmodern irony—that it is critical yet supplies no alternative—and its relation to ideology is the subject of Peter Sloterdijk's *Critique of Cynical Reason*. He describes that this self-conscious reproduction of ideology – here the reproduction of gender inequality – writers enact through irony, is unavoidable. In response to Sloterdijk, Žižek reappraised the effectiveness of such strategies that had been so prevalent in the 1980s. In *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989) he writes:

> Does the concept of ideology as a naïve consciousness still apply to today's world? Is it still operating today? […] Peter Sloterdijk puts forward a thesis that ideology's dominant mode of functioning is cynical, which renders impossible – or, more precisely, vain – the classic critical-ideological procedure. The cynical subject is quite aware of the distance between the ideological mask and the social

reality, but he none the less insists upon the mask. The formula, as proposed by

Sloterdijk, would then be: 'they know very well what they are doing, but still,

they are doing it.' Cynical reason is no longer naïve, but is a paradox of

enlightened false consciousness: one knows the falsehood very well, one is well

aware of a particular interest hidden behind an ideological universality, but still

one does not renounce it. (25–26)

Cynicism rejects the simple sarcasm that would imitate a visible ideology. Rather, it is a

"negation of the negation," a double layer "ironic detachment" (Žižek, *Sublime Object*

27). The cynicism that Sloterdijk outlines is exactly the mode of irony practiced by

Barthelme, Coover, and Sorrentino, which allows them to be seemingly critical of a

dominant ideology, such as inequality of the sexes, all the while reproducing it, indeed

making it a topic of some of their novels.[2] So when we look at the representation of

communities with mythic women at their centres, we see the bind of the ironic treatment

that cannot function without reproducing the Romantic archetype and often revelling in

it.

A book whose structure bears similarities to those of this study, yet lacks the

foregrounded irony of Coover, Sorrentino and Barthelme, is *Paradise* (1997) by Toni

Morrison. Compared to the other texts of this study, *Paradise* appeals to a broader

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[2] Žižek believes that there is still room for critiquing ideology without self-consciously reproducing it, that there are routes available other than through ironic detachment. In fiction there seems a parallel response: since the 1980s writers seem to have dispensed with the overbearing irony of the first wave of postmodernist American writers in favour of more sincere explorations of alienation and of radical differences in subjectivity, while at the same time re-examining the possibility of universality. I'm thinking of writers like David Foster Wallace, Diane Williams, Gary Lutz, Chris Kraus, and Ben Marcus.

market—it is an Oprah's Book Club pick, though a challenging one—and is more realist in its conventional characterization, its historical markers, its use of symbolism and its structuring of readable meaning.

Rob Davidson, Philip Page, and Rafael Pérez-Torres argue that Morrison's novels, including *Paradise,* can be considered postmodernist (Davidson 362). Davidson makes this claim based on a misunderstanding of the term pastiche, which for him describes Morrison's use of multiple perspectives—having a number of characters tell a story from various points of view (362). Of course this is not the meaning of pastiche in postmodern terms. Page articulates Morrison's postmodernist emphasis more accurately in claiming that her novels are polyvocal, non-linear and aim to dismantle binaries that typically underlie Western ways of thinking (Davidson 362). This kind of postmodernism that follows from Jean-François Lyotard's well-known definition is more inclusive than the one McHale defines and draws our attention to the idea of an irreducible coexistence of a variety of ways of being (rather than self reference, ludic spirit, layered irony, and free reference to high and low cultural, etc., which characterize McHale's variety).

Paradise tells the story of the Oklahoma town of Ruby, and the formation of a small community of women at an abandoned convent outside the town. Much of the narration of *Paradise* is backstory—what causes each of the women who arrive at the Convent to leave their former lives and what causes the men of Ruby to carve out a new town founded on draconian prohibitions. Through backstory and personal history, Morrison demonstrates an overt concern for the sociological basis of human action and the formation of community, at times favouring a socially deterministic basis of

characterization—religion, economic circumstance, race, gender—over individual agency.

In the case of the Convent women, a number have run from traumatic situations with men, situations of near enslavement, and unwanted pregnancies. Mavis, for example, flees her home and aggressive lover after a journalist visits asking about the babies she left to suffocate in a car; the elderly Consolata is a street urchin, and raped as a child before being "kidnapped" by sisters and taken to the Convent; Seneca moves around foster homes in her youth and in the present has a boyfriend imprisoned for running over his child; and 18-year-old Pallas, otherwise called Divine, is severely bitten by her boyfriend before hiding in a lake and fleeing him barefoot and pregnant. The women at the centre of *Paradise,* damaged by male violence and the trauma of reproduction, turn to each other for support and empower themselves, performing abortions, raising the newly dead, performing exorcisms, and ultimately rising from the dead after being murdered.

Morrison sets up a clear contrast between the free-loving, independent, difference-based community of the Convent, and the close-minded, purity-based male governance of the town of Ruby. Ruby is a racially exclusive town founded by black men in response to the oppression they and their forebears experienced. Underlying their fervour for racial purity, the reader discovers late in the text, is the promise that immortality be achieved through such purity. The presence of this community of women who practice a variety of unconventional, at times illegal, at times magical activities, who also have sexual relations with men of the town, gives rise to action on the part of the leaders of Ruby to eliminate the difference which is deemed threatening to them in a variety of ways.

Channette Romero's "Creating the Beloved Community: Religion, Race, and Nation in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*" analyses communities through the major social issues that produce them—a spectrum of racism, inequality of the sexes, and power doctrines in religion. Romero reads *Paradise* in precisely the way Morrison seems to have assembled it to be read: as a critique of exclusive communities that are produced by an inflexible religion, a racist history, and a patriarchal governance. When Christianity is adopted by an oppressed group that same group sees in it a form of empowerment that in turn oppresses another group. In Ruby, living a sin-free life means enforcing social norms that give men power over women and the authority to prohibit difference. The worldview of vertical transcendence as typified in Christianity's heaven and hell gives false credence to violent enforcement of rules on earth. Ultimately this leads to the most extreme erasure of difference, in the organized murder of the Convent women by the men of Ruby.

Morrison's scenario, which explains gender inequality by way of sociological forces, creates a binary picture of gender in *Paradise*: Ruby is run by men and it is ultimately a number of the narrow-minded town leaders (who have become demented by religion) who decide to strike out against the inclusive and diverse community of Convent women. Romero believes that Morrison is careful to show some diversity of thought in Ruby, in order to avoid equating men with evil and women with good. She states that "[t]o avoid a division based on gender, *Paradise* assures readers that not all men of Ruby agree with the town's leaders' decision to harm the Convent women" (419). Romero is, however, careful to point out the obvious dissymmetry, stating that Morrison "clearly privileges the nurturing, communal space of the Convent" (419). To say privilege is to understate the bias in *Paradise* of a community of women over a

community of men. The sociological basis of the novel seems to excuse this bias. In other words, there are many good reasons why women create a racially diverse (including a white woman and a Brazilian woman) community in opposition to a patriarchal community.

Romero further argues that Morrison, beyond exploring a particular fictional community, presents us with an ideal or exemplary community. Playing off Morrison's novel *Beloved,* which in turn borrows from a speech by Martin Luther King, she claims that "*Paradise* includes many versions for creating and sustaining beloved communities" (424). Romero implies there is something in *Paradise* beyond a fictional representation of an ideal community—that Morrison's Convent is prescriptive, that it provides methods for creating ideal communities in the real world. In addition to basing community in historical and material circumstance, "[s]ome of these methods," she goes on to say, "are abstract and mythical" (424):

> *Paradise* points to the necessity of a complex dialectical relation with history, a relation that requires at once an immediate, intense connection with the spiritual and mythical. Thus, the text does not privilege either method for creating beloved communities over the other. It suggests the importance of holding both of these methods open as a means of creating an earthly paradise, of keeping one eye firmly rooted to the local/material/historical and another looking beyond to the spiritual/mythical/imaginative. (425)

It is by virtue of this adoption of the mythical and magical through women that *Paradise* reproduces a major archetype. The Convent women, like John's wife and Pauline, like Ros and Snow White, like the Brooklyn women and Sheila Henry, like Grace Kimball

and Elizabeth, have mythic powers. One raises a young man shortly after his death. After

the men murder them they themselves rise from the dead. They appear mythic to the men

of Ruby: as witches, as daughters of Eve, as whores. They are sexually liberated. In short

they are pure evil. It is as if Morrison wants to assert that the romantic version of women

as witches, as temptresses and supernatural creatures has a useful or even necessary

function in producing an ideal community, perhaps because magic is a form of the

spiritual without being religious, or because the mythic is a horizontal form of the

spiritual rather than a vertical (and thus hierarchical) one. *Paradise* differs from the other

books of this study by endowing the women with a community of their own and self-

sufficiency and empowerment in the mythic that threatens the rules of men. So while they

are still objects of desire for some men of Ruby, they are also objects of fear because of

their solidarity in community. Thus Morrison plays off two stereotypes: firstly that,

following 19th century American Romanticism, women have magical powers (women are

witches and temptresses), and secondly that, following bourgeois ideology, women

embody the idea of a caring community.

Some feminist theorists suggest that community in our popular middle-class imagination

is indeed feminine, and is opposed in this equation to masculinized individuality. Iris

Marion Young puts it this way:

> The opposition individualism/community receives one of its expressions in
>
> bourgeois culture in the opposition between masculinity and femininity. The
>
> culture identifies masculinity with the values associated with individualism—self-
>
> sufficiency, competition, separation, the formal equality of rights. The culture

identifies femininity, on the other hand, with the value associated with

community-affective relations of care, mutual aid, and cooperation. (306)

This constellation of qualities extends the simpler dichotomy of genders portrayed in

19th-Century American Romanticism, a dichotomy in which, Leslie Fiedler states, "the

female had always symbolized in bourgeois fiction the 'heart' as opposed to the 'head,'

feeling as opposed to intellect" (279–80). The contrast in genders described by Young

and Fiedler comes as no surprise because they remain an ideology, despite attempts to

dismantle them by intellectual movements such as feminism and poststructuralism.

Though, as Romero and others point out, Morrison attempts to break down simple

binaries such as black/white by showing racism among African Americans, she also finds

power in the dichotomies of gender. (In some cases Morrison does disrupt gender

stereotypes, as when the men of Ruby storm the Convent the woman physically defend

themselves rather than submit powerlessly. And, it should be noted, the communities of

Ruby and the Convent are not so separate that an affair cannot take place between a

Convent woman and a Ruby man. But the idealized community of women overshadows,

in my mind, the complexities that Morrison is careful to present.) *Paradise* thus

exemplifies literature's role in perpetuating and reinforcing the bourgeois dichotomies of

head and heart, order and care, competition and cooperation. Young describes how this

discourse of gender difference produces an ethics, which resembles that which Morrison

seems to favour:

Carol Gilligan has recently posed this opposition between masculine and feminine

in terms of the opposition between two orientations on moral reasoning. The

'ethic of rights' that Gilligan takes to be typical of masculine thinking emphasizes

the separation of selves and the sense of fair play necessary to mediate the

competition among such separated selves. The 'ethic of care,' on the other hand,

which she takes to be typical of feminine thinking, emphasizes relatedness among

persons and is an ethic of sympathy and affective attention to particular needs,

rather than formal measuring of each according to universal rules. This ethic of

care expresses the relatedness of the ideal community as opposed to the atomistic

formalism of liberal individualism. (306)

Morrison is perhaps the easiest writer of this study to critique on the basis of perpetuating

this opposition because she is the only one who appears to propose an ideal community.

Sorrentino's and Coover's communities, for instance, steeped in irony and transgression,

show in a simple reading the illness of American communities rather than idealizing

them. The narrators of a number of Sorrentino's novels would like nothing better than to

dissociate themselves from their communities. And it should be pointed out that the

disconnection or atomization among Sorrentino's or Coover's women in fact seems equal

to that among men in their novels, and therefore the novels shirk perpetuation of the

above stereotypes from male or female perspectives. Mathews's community in

Cigarettes, neither idealized nor rendered ironic, is the most powerful among these

novels in breaking down binaries and gender stereotypes, by proposing relationships

unaffected by conventional roles that are often defined by gender. *Cigarettes* presents a

community that seeks to explode the binary qualities that Gilligan proposes, rather than

reinforcing them. McElroy's speculative communities of the mind in *Women and Men*,

though idealized in proposing higher connectivity among people, and though showing, to

some degree, a state of difference some might see as ideal, also presents serious potential for negative manipulation among its members.

Women and Men requires special mention here, as more than the other books of this study it makes the separation of the sexes its topic (as boldly stated in the title). McElroy represents women and men as a distinct binary, an either/or of separation of the sexes on one hand and extreme convergence in one being on the other. John Mayn's divorce from his wife, for example, emphasizes the difference that cannot be overcome even as he and his wife take on telepathic capabilities. For another example, according to the interrogator, Grace Kimball's workshop for women aims "at further rearranging man and woman in terms of checks and balances by supposedly establishing healthier and more permanent separation between the sexes" (586). This separation that strictly defines the sexes also presents the possibility of its opposite, the assimilation of sexes into a single being. Though McElroy peppers the texts with suggestions of assimilation in the present – sometimes through love relationships, as in the John and Linda chapter where "he was her other body" (269) – he more firmly situates assimilation both in the mythic past and in the sci-fi future. The Navajo mythology of First Man and First Woman (260) who emerge from corn leaves, for example, shows an origin in sameness. The Hermit-Inventor elsewhere says there will be a mergence of some kind in the future, just as there was in the past: that "it or they would be *all* 'one'." To which the Anasazi replies, "Like female and male, returning to the one they used to be" (835). The most literal example of future assimilation is in Mayn's own dream of a man and a woman on a metal platform sent through space in order to become one—what Harry Mathews reads as the movement, through the breakdown of binaries, from "women and men to women-and-men" ("We for

One" 249). We must point out that while McElroy does not attribute stereotypical

qualities to the genders, he focuses on the assumed sexual division itself. Unlike

Morrison, McElroy doesn't gender community, but rather proposes forms of community

that would render sexual difference meaningless, which to my mind is equally

problematic—another form of bourgeois ideology but rooted in New Age fantasy rather

than, as Young might characterize Morrison's work, "capitalist patriarchal society" (307).

Why should such an opposition like the one Morrison describes be so tenacious,

when the relationship between individual and community is so complex a knot?[3] If we

open up community as an ontological category—rather than a gendered sociological

category as Gilligan proposes, and as Morrison's fiction favours—we may more easily

avoid the trap of this opposition. But we must do so while acknowledging the authors

treat genders differently in centring communities around mythic women. Beyond merely

following from the Romantic tradition in presenting us with mythic women, I believe

these novels' use of the mythic woman tells us something about the ontological situation

of communities in postmodern fiction.

It is worth recalling here that the shift from a modernist to a postmodernist

paradigm, as David Harvey states, foregrounds "questions as to how radically different

realities may coexist, collide, and interpenetrate" (41). Brian McHale's ontological

flicker defines this coexistence of difference, which manifests in fiction in the

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[3] And flashing forward to our present decade, Kenneth Reinhard points out via Jacques-
Alain Miller that "the new globalism expresses […] specifically feminine qualities". As
he quotes from Miller, there is a "rise in society of values said to be feminine, those of
compassion, of the promotion of listening practices, of the politics of proximity"
(Reinhard, "Toward a Political Theology of the Neighbor" 70). This observation can be
viewed as a scaling up of the same qualities from local community to global community.

simultaneous presence and absence of characters, parallel worlds, etc. The effect is generally an unstable, shifting ground on which characters negotiate versions of themselves. There are plenty of examples of these kinds of destabilizing flicker in the novels of this study, such as in the semi-deaths Sheila Henry of *Odd Number,* Ros of *Gerald's Party*, and the Convent women of *Paradise*.[4] Other women, such as John's wife and Pauline undergo metamorphoses that suggest multiple states of a single self, also supporting McHale's ontological paradigm. Snow White of Barthelme's novel flickers between fairy-tale myth and modern urban woman. And the women of *Crystal Vision* who transform between images of the Tarot deck and recalled ekphrastic images also suggest multiple states of being. The central mythic woman of *Cigarettes*, Elizabeth, plays a smaller role than the women of the other novels, and is less transformational. Yet Mathews purposefully surrounds her in mystery, elevating her status to the mythic through intrigue produced in the desire for her portrait. As Warren Leamon observes, while Elizabeth "is the person we know least about as regards heredity and environment" (76), her portrait is what connects the disparate worlds of art, finance and horseracing within the novel. Via her most desirable iconic substitute, she gains centrality and rises to mythic status, even in her mysterious absence. So not only is there, as McHale suggests, an individualized ontological flicker, there is a draw to this flicker by members of a community. That desire surrounds a "flickering" woman suggests that ontological uncertainty is of communal import, that ontological flicker somehow underlies community.

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[4] These flickers often involve the death of a woman who was and continues to be sexualized, reminding us of the observation that Leslie Fiedler made that "necrophilia [...] has always so oddly been an essential part of the American romance" (290).

We might now link the presence of such mythic women to Bataille's ontology, which posits insufficiency as a basis for community. As Winfree explains, "the ontological task that takes community as its object struggles against ontological totalization and requires an altogether new conception of the ontological—an ontology of insufficiency rather than ground" (Winfree 34–35). Though suggested in transformations at the material level, such as presence and absence, the flicker I would like to propose would extend to the psychological register and include what Bataille describes as insufficiency: it must account for the desire of the community, which makes the women central. The flicker (or coexistence of difference) here exists between a desire for something more (community) as concentrated in the mythic woman, and a latent knowledge that she, as an object of excess, is unsustainable as that object of pure fantasy. Like John's wife, the other women of the novels function as the *objet petit a*, the object around which community unconsciously and to various degrees organizes itself, the object that promises to be more than what it is but which always deflects approaches. This is precisely where those novels steeped in irony transcend the criticism that they at times deserve: in presenting the thing that can never be merged with but which sustains a fantasy of merging. In other words, the mythic woman promises community by offering (knowingly or unknowingly) herself as a centre of gravity around which the community recognizes itself or projects its desires, but does so at the price of exposing the unassimilable nature of communal relations. This flicker has the dual function of reinforcing the American Romantic tradition while showing the void at the centre. The mythic women thus function to destabilize the ground on which we imagine community. Like other kinds of flicker, this one is insoluble and irreducible – there can be no

synthesis or resolution of elements into singularity, only the coexistence of difference enforced by a gap between individuals and an object of fantasy.

This is perhaps the postmodernist paradigm of community, that which limits the degree to which one may assimilate with others and limits the degree to which one may share in experience with another in something called community. The favouring of difference comes at the cost of the realizing the impossibility of fully sharing oneself with another. Both Young and Žižek acknowledge this limitation, which is based in the self but affects the ability of one to share with another. According to Young, the interplay between the self and others first depends on knowledge of the self: "that persons can know other subjects in their concrete needs and desires [. . .] presuppose[s] that a subject can know himself or herself and express that knowledge accurately and unambiguously to others" (310). Žižek echoes this position, though rather than emphasizing self-knowledge and accuracy, as Young does, emphasizes the insurmountable twofold limits—oneself and the other—affecting the articulation of one's narrative:

> The impossibility of fully accounting for oneself is conditioned by the irreducible intersubjective context of every narrative reconstitution: when I reconstruct my life as a narrative, I always do it within a certain intersubjective context, answering the Other's call-injunction, addressing the Other in a certain way. This background, including the (unconscious) motivations and libidinal investments of my narrative, cannot ever be rendered fully transparent within the narrative ("Neighbors" 137–38).

Žižek derives an ethics from this exposure and vulnerability to others – that recognition of the limitation of our knowledge of ourselves and each other opens us up to a

"solidarity of the vulnerable" (139). This is perhaps Žižek's definition of community, though he tends to avoid the term for all of its popular connotations. It is not far from Bataille's, also based in vulnerability but with less of a sense of the tragic that Bataille figures in an "overlapping of wounds" (Winfree 41). Young's position is similar to Žižek's, as she ultimately favours what she believes a more radical "politics of difference," "an openness to unassimilated otherness" (319). Morrison's Convent well illustrates these ideals of difference on a small scale – the women open themselves up to each other in vulnerability without pressuring one another to conform in any way to some vision of community. A rich difference thrives under the openness to diverse beliefs. Yet when looked at with reference to the town of Ruby, we see the gender bias that is tied to status-quo beliefs about community, in particular the limits of difference for this particular community based in gendered exclusion.

We return to Nancy's provocative statement "Until this day history has been thought on the basis of a lost community" (9). The representation that emerges in these novels genders to various degrees this lost community, proposing a mythic centrality in it that most theorists would like to avoid. Yet, while the novelists construct community as a fantasy that has no stable ground, revealing our deep desire for the communal, they also show it as an ontological necessity even in its diminished and troubled forms.

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