

University of Nevada, Reno

Where Do We Go From Here?
Conclusions and Community in the Postmodern American Novel

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English

by

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Abstract

Where Do We Go From Here?: Conclusions and Community in the Postmodern American Novel challenges the orthodox view that whatever is postmodern tends towards fragmentation, an assumption that grounds both primarily theoretical texts like Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* and principle works of literary scholarship like Linda Hutcheon's *A Poetics of Postmodernism*. My argument analyzes four novels that together span thirty-three years of the postmodern American novel: Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), Don DeLillo's *The Names* (1983), Kathy Acker's *Don Quixote* (1986), and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006). The communities each novel presents differ in composition, duration, and location yet share a common feature—the possibility for communication that carries with it the potential for cohesion. Because scholars have not considered the moments of cohesion in postmodern fiction, the prevailing understanding of the postmodern American novel and of postmodern theory remains inadequate. Fragmentation may be an important element of anything postmodern, but so too is community.

Dedication

For the members of my community who helped me to think more clearly than I thought possible, and for Traci who reminded me that even dissertations must end.

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Introduction

Those who study postmodern literature and those who claim that it is nothing more than a latent, and not particularly interesting, form of modernism tend to agree on at least one thing: postmodernism tends to emphasize fragmentation. This focus on fragmentation has led many literary scholars to view postmodernism as Linda Hutcheon does in *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. She argues that postmodernism is “a contradictory phenomenon, one that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts the very concepts it challenges” (3). For Hutcheon, postmodern fiction’s creativity lies in its tendency to disrupt, ignore, and deconstruct literary conventions.

Because literary scholars frequently work from the assumption that the fundamental characteristic of postmodern literature is its propensity to fragment, a curious tension in the literature has gone unremarked. On the one hand, postmodern literature frequently problematizes literary conventions and along with them the potential for stable identities, stable communities, and even fixed meanings. On the other, postmodern literature just as frequently preoccupies itself with interrogating what sort of communities, and along with them what understandings of the individual and what types of meaning, remain possible within a literature that neither wholly accepts nor wholly rejects convention.

Before turning to a more abstract and theoretical consideration of postmodern community, it is useful to consider how these issues manifest in a novel, like Bruce Palahniuk’s *Fight Club* (1997), that is ostensibly anti-social but which preoccupies itself with the possibility of creating a coherent community. *Fight Club* tells the story of an

unnamed protagonist who serves as the novel's protagonist, and who suffers from multiple personality disorder. One of his personalities, Tyler Durden, engages in increasingly deviant behavior while working a number of low-paying jobs. Dissatisfied with a life they find emasculating, Durden and the narrator found the titular fight club and eventually organize a terrorist cell bent on overthrowing corporate capitalism, Project Mayhem, from the club's most devoted members. Employing increasingly brutal tactics, Project Mayhem works to reinvest individuals with the humanity and authenticity American corporate culture has stolen. In particular, the club allows its members to encounter their own mortality and fear by participating in one-on-one, bare-knuckle brawls. This goal (though not Project Mayhem's methods) suggests an abiding interest not in fragmentation but in creating a cohesive community in which its members live self-determined lives.

This fusion of anarchic principles and tactics, with the possibility of a cohesive group, finds its most compelling articulation in the conclusion of Palahniuk's novel. The novel ends with the narrator in a psychiatric ward, apparently cured of his multiple personality disorder though not perhaps entirely sane, as he believes the ward is Heaven. This hallucination foregrounds the narrator's choice between the two possible communities: the community of Project Mayhem and the community of patients in the ward. The closing scene suspends the narrator between these communities. And though the conclusion does not reveal which of the two the narrator joins, it insists on the possibility of some sort of community at the end of a novel that ostensibly celebrates social mayhem. The implication is clear: movement toward community is not only possible in postmodern novels, but may be necessary.

Fight Club is but one of many prominent postmodern novels that end by presenting the potential for community; in addition to the four novels I examine in this dissertation, other examples include Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996), and Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000). Together, such novels suggest the importance of thinking about why communities figure so strongly yet a viable community tends to appear only in the conclusion. Exploring the relationship between communities and conclusions in postmodern novels in part requires answering the question: what is a postmodern community?

The simple question proves difficult to answer. Relatively few works of scholarship examine what a community is, though many treat community as a given term that requires no investigation. This tendency holds true for discussions of postmodern novels, even when the discussion specifically requires talking about community. Krister Friday's "'A Generation of Men Without History': *Fight Club*, Masculinity, and the Historical Symptom" exemplifies the tendency to take "community" as an unproblematic given. Moreover, his argument assumes on the presence of a community in its claim that the narrator's awareness of himself in a particular place and at a particular time shapes his identity. The two elements Friday identifies imply a third: the relationship between an individual and a community. However, Friday does not interrogate the nature of community his theory presupposes and instead focuses on what is for him the central dynamic in the novel: the absence of an overarching hermeneutic to ground and to explain the characters' actions. In doing so, he overlooks perhaps the central concern of the novel: the protagonist's and Durden's desire to be part of some group and their

tendency to regard the group as substantial, no matter how provisional it may ultimately prove to be.

Though Friday never directly considers what a community is, in a footnote on Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* he acknowledges that historical narratives establish continuity by transforming the present into the "tradition." Thus, Friday tacitly endorses the notion that identity is sensible only in terms of a "nation-space" defined not by geography but by rhetoric and ideology. Bhabha makes this connection explicit: "the language of culture and community is poised on the fissures of the present becoming the rhetorical figures of a national past" (142). But Friday fails to consider community as either a historical construct or as a rhetorical device. Instead, community functions as a fixed and known point as he traces his argument.¹

Even exceptionally subtle discussions of communities tend not to consider in any detail what a community is. Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* stands as an example.² Anderson's thesis would seem to foreground questions about the nature of

¹ Friday's assumptions about community bear a striking similarity to earlier modern notions of community, which reach their apex in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels's *The Communist Manifesto* in which they famously analyze history in terms of the economic conflict between classes. These classes function as near absolutes in their famous statement that "the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles." Marx and Engels' assertion articulates two central precepts of modern philosophy: (1) that totalizing definitions are possible, and (2) that, understood in its broadest terms, history unfolds according to predictable and identifiable forces. However, insofar as Friday goes on to analyze the postmodern characteristics of *Fight Club*, Friday appears to draw on two incompatible paradigms. On the one hand, he proposes that community, like Marx and Engels' notion of community, is fixed. On the other, he explores the lack of certainty in the novel and its rejection of absolute certainty.

² Anderson concludes that the spread of the national language in print enabled people to imagine and thereby create a nation out of their shared sense of identity. The power of the imagining lies in its broad appeal. Any nation, he argues, "is imagined because the

community. Anderson argues that a shared imagination ties members of a community together: “in the minds of each [member of the community] lives the image of their communion” (6). This community is a “deep, horizontal comradeship” (7). A closer examination, however, reveals that Anderson’s discussion leaves the idea of community unexplored. His claim that community is an act of the imagination speaks only to how certain sorts of communities are formed. His observation that community engenders certain types of nonhierarchical relationships presents a consequence of belonging to a community. Both discussions omit the fundamental definition of what a community is and how it functions.

Because Anderson does not investigate how a community can be at once both fluid and cohesive, he leaves important implications of his argument unexplored. For instance, what characteristics mark the end of one community and the beginning of the next? Is it possible to imagine a community with fluid boundaries?

At the root of these questions is the recognition that communities must be fluid enough to allow unconventional formations that are still stable enough to be recognized. Nor does Anderson consider the role choice and the potential for making meaning play in alternative communities—which are not composed along the same lines as the more conventional communities based upon gender, class, race, and politics. Rather than offering fixed identities, these communities—which I term “postmodern communities”—offer their members two opportunities: (1) the possibilities of connecting with another, and (2) of making sense of a world that has rejected absolute knowledge and meaning.

members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (6).

Steven Best and Douglas Kellner's *The Postmodern Adventure* partially addresses the mutability of postmodernism and indirectly explores how it applies to communities. Their work seeks to explore "the development of modes of social theory and cultural criticism adequate for capturing salient aspects of our contemporary predicament and connecting them with projects of radical democratic social transformation" (21). Insofar as Best and Kellner's project focuses on "development" and "transformation," it acknowledges that whatever is postmodern is inherently fluid. But Best and Kellner never quite fall prey to the assumption that anything postmodern must end in fragmentation. Instead, they picture postmodern communities as simultaneously invoking and rejecting traditional notions of community.

Best and Kellner's remarks on contemporary societies compel us to imagine a community that is traditional enough to be recognizable and fluid enough to be postmodern. And in striking this delicate balance, postmodern communities provide solutions to the problem posed by narrative by invoking both the "horizontal comradeship" that Anderson refers to and the inherent mutability that Best and Kellner acknowledge. Determining how these communities play out in various postmodern novels occupies much of this study. In particular, it considers the functions communities serve, how communities resolve the problem(s) posed by the narrative, and how they alter our understanding of the postmodern.

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Analyzing postmodern community requires investigating not only the assumptions scholars bring to discussion of community but also the assumptions they bring to discussions of postmodernism. This analysis is complicated by the many perspectives on what postmodernism is. Over twenty years ago, in 1987, Brian McHale noted in his book *Postmodern Fiction* that scholars advanced so many contradictory theories of postmodernism that the term was in danger of losing all meaning:

There is John Barth's postmodernism, the literature of replenishment; Charles Newman's postmodernism, the literature of an inflationary economy; Jean-François Lyotard's postmodernism, a general condition of knowledge in the contemporary informational regime; Ihab Hassan's postmodernism, a stage on the road to the spiritual unification of humankind; and so on. There is even Kermode's construction of postmodernism, which in effect constructs it right out of existence. (4)

McHale's catalog of definitions emphasizes that postmodernism is a "discursive construct" (5). The claim is hardly revolutionary: abstract ideas are notoriously prone to contextual redefinition, though postmodernism does seem particularly susceptible. The problem of deciding what postmodernism means, then, is not simply to select the correct definition from the many alternatives or to work with the definition most suited to the current project. Either solution presents postmodernism as little more than a portmanteau term whose meaning, if it can be said to have a meaning, depends entirely on the idiosyncrasies of a given argument.

McHale's catalog of definitions focuses on philosophers and critics who had most directly shaped notions about postmodern literature through the mid-1980s. It thus necessarily reflects the apparent consensus of the time that the fundamental characteristic of postmodernism is the tendency of postmodern texts to present fragmentation. For obvious reasons, it does not take into account more complex definitions of postmodernism, such as the eleven characteristics Charles Jencks associates with postmodern architecture in his 1987 essay "The Emergent Rules."

Though the subtle differences between the definitions McHale chronicles are significant, a general framework of assumptions organizes them. Perhaps the best way to outline this framework is to examine how two scholars whose work on postmodernism has exercised significant influence on literary criticism, Fredric Jameson and Jean-François Lyotard, characterize the term. Jameson provides his most rigorous analysis of postmodernism in his monumental *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. A thoroughgoing Marxist, Jameson regards postmodernism as a consequence of a particular economics of late capitalism. As his title asserts, postmodernism provides the "logic" for an economy that moves away from industrial and monopoly capitalism and towards both globalism and information production. The fundamental feature of this economy is that images, and not things, become the primary commodity. As things, which in Jameson's analysis include "real" historical events, become less valuable than their images, signs decouple from their material referents and lose much of their

significance.³ The consequence of postmodernism, Jameson contends, is an incomplete understanding of the world:

The last few years have been marked by an inverted millenarianism in which premonitions of the future, catastrophic or redemptive, have been replaced by a sense of the end of this or that (the end of ideology, art, or social class; the “crisis” of Leninism, social democracy, or the welfare state, etc., etc.); taken together, all of these perhaps constitute what is increasingly called postmodernism. (30)

Marked by endings without beginnings, Jameson’s notion of postmodernism arises from exhausted and untenable systems of exchange. More importantly, in his analysis postmodernism stubbornly refuses to acknowledge its debt to and implicit support of late capitalism. Consequently, for Jameson postmodernism is little more than a set of flawed cultural assumptions that arise out of—and try to sustain—late capitalism at the expense of jettisoning the possibility of “real” events. Thus, postmodernism leads inexorably to a flawed understanding of the world.

³ For Jameson, this loss of material referents makes history impossible because history in postmodernity is not about real events, places, and people but about images. Thus, he argues, the necessary referent for establishing history becomes lost. Consequently, history becomes nothing more than a particularly byzantine process of speculation.

Dissatisfied with any conclusion that dismantles the historical analysis that grounds Marxist scholarship, Jameson devotes *Postmodernism: or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* to finding a way through the logic of postmodernism to the history that must, according to his assumptions, lie behind it. Jameson summarizes his project as: “[t]he attempt to see whether by systematizing something that is resolutely unsystematic, and historicizing something that is resolutely ahistorical, one couldn’t outflank it and force a historical way at least of thinking about that” (416).

Like Jameson, Lyotard holds that postmodernism marks a shift in how people perceive knowledge. But where Jameson presupposes that postmodernism obscures truth, history, and the tendency of economy to shape cultural, social, and political practices, Lyotard does not. That is to say, Lyotard's theory in *The Postmodern Condition* differs radically because it does not presuppose some underlying truth or reality that postmodernism obscures.⁴

Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives. This incredulity is undoubtedly a product of progress in the sciences: but that progress in turn presupposes it. To the obsolescence of the metanarrative apparatus of legitimization corresponds, most notably, the crisis of metaphysical philosophy and of the university institution which in the past relied on it. The narrative function is losing its actor, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal. It is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language elements—narrative, but also denotative, prescriptive, descriptive, and so on [...]

Where, after the metanarratives, can legitimacy reside? (8)

Lyotard notes that these once unassailable systems of thought, sometimes referred to as “grand narratives,” no longer enjoy primacy and that people are increasingly turning

⁴ Jameson recognizes the difference between his understanding of postmodernism and Lyotard's in his forward to *The Postmodern Condition* as the acceptance of or rejection of some underlying truth.

This apparent contradiction can be resolved, I believe, by taking a further step that Lyotard seems unwilling to do in this text, namely to posit not the disappearance of the great master-narratives, but their passage underground as it were, their continuing but now unconscious effectivity as a way of ‘thinking about’ and acting in our current situation. This persistence of buried master-narratives in what I have called our “political unconscious,” I will try shortly to demonstrate on the occasion of the present text as well. (xii)

away from totalizing explanations towards ones that are more limited, specific, and provisional—explanations that scholars now commonly refer to as “petite narratives.” The shift is not caused by an exhausted system, or the rejection of some useful mode of analysis, but rather by the “progress” of scientific thinking, which must, according to Lyotard, culminate in the rejection of absolute claims to truth. Put more simply, what Jameson regards as the ultimate failing of postmodernism—its inability to make unequivocal statements—Lyotard regards as its greatest strength.

However different their understandings, Jameson and Lyotard agree that postmodernism is characterized by the fragmentation of once stable systems. For Jameson, this fragmentation assails the connection between the material signified and its signifier that is crucial for historical work. For Lyotard, it marks the movement away from totalizing and normative grand narratives to provisional and specialized petite narratives. These areas of overlap between Jameson’s and Lyotard’s thinking about postmodernism contribute to the widely held convention that postmodernism moves inexorably toward fragmentation.

But another assumption they both share often goes unremarked. Both Jameson and Lyotard recognize the potential for community within the postmodern. In order to present postmodernism as a flawed means understanding of the world, Jameson necessarily asserts its standing as a hermeneutic system with which individuals may or may not ally themselves. Thus, insofar as community represents a shared understanding of the world, Jameson’s notion of the postmodern does not preclude but in fact requires the existence of community, albeit a community that he regards as built around a flawed hermeneutic

system. Thus community serves as one of the premises out of which Jameson constructs his critique of postmodernism.

The community implicit in Lyotard's theory of the postmodern likewise follows from an axiomatic assumption about community. But where Jameson presupposes that the community precedes the act of interpretation, Lyotard's theory holds that it is created through conversations akin to Ludwig Wittgenstein's theory of "language games." Wittgenstein introduces the term in *Philosophical Investigations* to "bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or a form of life" (23). A crucial feature of Wittgenstein's formulation is that to be meaningful an utterance must be heard by another who is capable of playing the same language game. The potential presence of this other who participates in a shared understanding of the world implies the necessity of a community. Because Lyotard's theory of postmodernism draws from Wittgenstein's theory, Lyotard's theory necessarily presupposes community as inseparable from the postmodern, though this conclusion is often overlooked.

Given the emphasis on fragmentation in conventional understandings of postmodernism, it is not surprising that postmodern analyses of literary works usually emphasize their fragmentary qualities. For instance, in *Postmodern Fictions*, Brian McHale characterizes postmodern literature largely in terms of how it approaches the question of knowledge. For McHale, the crucial difference between modern and postmodern texts is that modernism poses epistemological questions whereas postmodernism explores ontological questions (xii). However, he is quick to note that the definition is far from stable:

Intractable epistemological uncertainty becomes at a certain point ontological plurality or instability: push epistemological questions far enough and they “tip over” into ontological questions. By the same token, push ontological questions far enough and they tip over into epistemological questions—the sequence is not linear and unidirectional, but bidirectional, reversible. (11)

In McHales’s view, postmodern fiction does not benefit from a rigorous definition or taxonomy. Instead, scholars must determine if the text tips into the postmodern. Not surprisingly, many regard postmodern fiction as a vertiginous field of study that is unable even to define postmodernism (or postmodern literature) accurately.⁵

Hutcheon’s *A Poetics of Postmodernism* resolves some of the instability of definitions of postmodern literature by introducing the term “historical metafiction,” yet she too leaves the question of postmodern community unexplored (ix). She explains that she introduces the term to highlight the interdependence between postmodernism and the “complex institutional and discursive network of elite, official, mass, popular culture that [it] operates in” (21). Treating postmodernism as an element of contemporary culture, Hutcheon connects postmodernism to communities, both elite and popular, yet she curiously leaves the particulars of this connection unexplored.

Even in her later text, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, which focuses on society and politics, Hutcheon continues to leave unexamined the question of what a postmodern

⁵ Terry Eagleton’s attack against postmodernism in *The Illusions of Postmodernism* opens with precisely this point. He argues that “postmodernism is such a portmanteau phenomenon that anything you assert of one piece of it is almost bound to be untrue of another” (ix).

community is and how it operates. In one noteworthy passage, she argues that postmodern politics runs counter to Roland Barthes's notion of "doxa" as "public consensus" (qtd. in 3). The purpose of postmodern politics, she claims, is not to create or serve a general consciousness but to "'de-doxify' our cultural representations and their undeniable political import" (3). Though the general terms Hutcheon introduces are useful for contrasting Barthes's theory of politics with her notion of postmodern politics, they do little to clarify a more general question. What is the nature of the community through which these politics flow? Clearly, for Hutcheon, postmodernism—and by extension postmodern fiction—is closely tied to the interplay between popular and elite cultures and to a resistance to universalizing norms and theories of power. Yet her analysis leaves unexamined how postmodern communities pull against public consensus and whether, in doing so, they assume relatively stable forms. Instead, Hutcheon presents postmodern communities as inherently fluid and prone to fragmentation.

Hutcheon's formulation of the requirements for thinking about politics in the postmodern era is curious. Politics and culture are taken as dynamic, multiplistic, and worthy of study. Community, an essential element for any sort of politics, does not receive any analysis. It serves instead as a fixed and unexamined term that organizes the other claims. The implication is unclear. On the one hand, communities could be said to be entirely stable and so uninteresting. On the other hand, communities might be just as fluid as the politics that arise out of them, and so to discriminate between the two would do nothing more than redouble the arguments so far. But on their face, neither implication proves entirely satisfying. Something crucial remains to be discussed.

One important element of this discussion is to consider the ways in which Lyotard's notion of petite narrative corresponds to and differs from literary narrative. He introduces the term in *The Postmodern Condition* to characterize what he sees as the essential quality of knowledge, which he claims is at its most basic not a series of indisputable facts but an interpretation of a given set of data presented to a particular audience at a particular time. Knowledge is, in other words, provisional. This idea that narratives are provisional translates well to a discussion of postmodern novels, which frequently problematize most literary conventions of genre and just as often present complex and highly qualified social critiques and develop subtle themes. More importantly, Lyotard's understanding of narrative and that found in the postmodern shares a deeper correspondence. That is, Lyotard imagines knowledge not as an isolated claim but rather as a set of interrelated claims. Just as a literary narrative must introduce the reader to the world it presents, describe a series of events in the world, and conclude by resolving tensions, Lyotard's petite narrative, discusses the fundamental conditions under which it operates, develops a series of interrelated observations, and ultimately presents a discussion of why the narrative itself proves useful. Given these conceptual and structural similarities, Lyotard's understating of narrative proves useful for understanding postmodern fiction and suggests that postmodern texts are as much representations of particular philosophical positions as they are aesthetic constructs.⁶

⁶ Despite these conceptual and structural similarities, an important caveat remains. Lyotard develops his definition of narrative to talk about how systems of scientific or scholarly knowledge operate. Thus, the implications of the claims made in these systems likely carry with them far more significant consequences than those in a particular postmodern novel.

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Thinking about how postmodern novels represent communities requires considering not only the qualities of the communities but also where and how they appear in narrative. While it is true that communities abound in postmodern novels, the stable communities, those that the novels' narratives appear to endorse, often occur only in the conclusions. This tendency suggests that something about the conclusion is particularly, perhaps uniquely, suited for imagining new sorts of community. Aristotle's famous assertion in the *Poetics* that the end of a dramatic work is characterized by "nothing else" being required after it may provide valuable insight into the conclusions of postmodern novels (30). Rather than sustaining, or even adding to the complexity of the narrative, conclusions simplify. In the most reductive terms, where the rest of the narrative presents situations in which one of any number of outcomes might follow and sustains a delicate balance in which it is impossible to determine which outcome will result, the conclusion ends the uncertainty and potential.

Several scholarly studies offer systematic ways of discussing how novels end. René Girard's *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* (1965), for instance, continues to orient much of the contemporary discussion of what distinguishes the novel from other long prose works of fiction. Girard argues that a definitive quality of novels is their tendency to focus on the protagonist becoming aware of the mediated quality of his desires and so too of becoming an analog for the author, who has known all along that the events are contrived. Girard's conclusions are particularly useful for discussing novelists from Cervantes to Stendhal. However, they are of limited use for considering twentieth-

century novels, which commonly transgress the strict boundaries of plot and narrative his analysis assumes and in which truth of any lasting sort is rarely available. Marianna Torgovnick's *Closure in the Novel* (1981) offers a finer-grained analysis of the specific strategies by which novels conclude. She argues there are four general features of how a novel ends: first, how novels relate their "beginnings, middles, and endings"; second, how readers and narrators perceive the endings; third, the relationship readers and narrators have to the endings; and fourth, how aware narrators are of their motivation in writing the text (13-19). Though admirably precise, and certainly useful for taxonomizing how a specific novel concludes, Torgovnick's analysis is of only limited use to my investigation. Whereas it focuses on communities in order to determine subtle and intricate differences between the strategies conclusions draw, I examine what sorts of communities occur in the conclusions of postmodern novels and why they do so. Given my project, works that tend to examine the general qualities of conclusions are more useful than those that parse their differences.

In his preface to *Roderick Hudson*, (originally published in 1875) Henry James offers an astute description of the particular problem of conclusions in novels, and his analysis frames much of the subsequent scholarly discussion of conclusions. Like Aristotle, James claims that the purpose of an ending is to tie up the loose ends of a plot. But the solution remains artificial because "Really, universally, relations stop nowhere," and "the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily *appear* to do so" (469). For James, the discrepancy between the function the conclusion serves and the mimetic elements of the novel is crucial. The problem the conclusion must solve is to preserve the mimetic

illusion of the text while imposing a decidedly artificial end to the sequence of events.

The solution requires artistic innovation and narrative sleight-of-hand because there is not a moment in an unfolding narrative when events stop. Consequently, the conclusion is both related to and uncoupled from the narrative in which the relationships that have driven the novel cease and can be resolved.

In *A Sense of an Ending* (1966), Frank Kermode, too, remarks on the peculiar narrative time that conclusions create and inhabit. To provide a solution to the problems of the narrative, conclusions “move through time to an end, an end we must sense even if we cannot know it; they live in change, until, which is never, *as* and *is* are one” (179). The intricate syntax of Kermode’s description of the conclusion’s location in narrative time mirrors the complex solution a conclusion offers to the problem of ending a narrative. That is, a conclusion reconciles the need to close the narrative with the reader’s knowledge that in the real world, events do not end but continue to progress. Narratives resolve the problem by setting their conclusions outside the rest of the narrative. By doing so, they are able to arrest the flow and logic of narrative time.

While Kermode’s observations about the functions conclusions serve in narrative are useful, his discussion of their psychological meaning is far less so. He speculates that because conclusions offer meaning to the narrative, they also respond to the readers’ awareness of their mortality. The measure of psychological comfort conclusions offer arises through a process of transference made possible by the genre’s verisimilitude. If the complexities of a novel’s plot can be summed up, reflected upon, and given meaning, then, according to Kermode’s analysis, one’s life can as well. Near the center of Kermode’s claim about the psychological satisfaction that conclusions offer their readers

lies an assumption about the relationship between the reader and the text that simply does not pertain to postmodern fiction. While it would be foolish to argue that postmodern novels have no emotional effects on their readers, arguing that the texts offer the sense of resolution Kermode envisions is at best problematic and at worst requires a significant misreading of the novels. Rather than end with a sense of resolution and conclusive meaning, postmodern texts tend to conclude with a series of open-ended possibilities. J. Hillis Miller offers an even broader claim in “Ariadne’s Thread” that conclusions that appear to gather the strands of a narrative frequently unravel. While I demonstrate that concepts of community are common features of these conclusions, their presence does not necessarily provide an overarching meaning for the novel.

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As challenging as it is to chart a useful space within the contested landscape of postmodern theory and the limited scholarship on the conclusions of novels, equally difficult is mapping the landscape of the postmodern novel. Explaining the subtle field of texts that includes styles and concerns as different as Jalal Toufic’s *Distracted*, William Gibson’s *Neuromancer*, and Doug Rice’s *Blood of Mugwumps* is both enormously difficult and, fortunately, not necessary to the project at hand. Rather than explore the edges of postmodern fiction, this project argues that postmodern novels commonly conclude by imagining a community defined by its members’ shared understanding of the world.

The following chapters examine four postmodern American novels to demonstrate the significance of community in them. The chapters do so by addressing not only some of the more influential postmodern texts, such as Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), DeLillo's *The Names* (1983), and Acker's *Don Quixote* (1986) but also how a newer work such as McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) problematizes the conventional understandings of community as well the conventions of the postmodern novel. An examination of their differences reveals that postmodern communities are not defined by conventional characteristics like ancestry, politics, religion, or geography; a study of their similarities, however, reveals that a common thread links the multiform communities. Interestingly, these similarities and differences together suggest that both the conventional understanding of how community operates in novels and the common notion that postmodern fiction tends inexorably towards fragmentation are flawed and require revision.

Chapter one considers Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), which stands among the earliest and most influential postmodern novels. It tells the story of a curious coincidence in which Lieutenant Tyrone Slothrop's sexual encounters predict where V-2 rocket strikes will fall and his superiors attempt to understand this strange occurrence. The narrative thread provided by Slothrop proves slender indeed and is soon lost among the some 400 characters presented in the book. Of course, the novel is less about any one character than it is about an attempt to solve the mystery of a secret Nazi terror weapon that threatens not the characters but the readers at the novel's conclusion. Although the novel's plot defies easy summary, its movement from one location to

another is relatively systematic and organizes the otherwise labyrinthine plot. The organization can be understood not only spatially but also as a series of communities.

Gravity's Rainbow presents (at least) three different large communities. The first is the more-or-less rational world of war-time Britain, the second the fluid space of the "zone." The third is the movie theater threatened by the imminent impact of the rocket at the end of the book—a space in which the passive moviegoers stand in for the reader. Moving from one type of community to another, the novel understands communities in terms of geographic and temporal boundaries—to go to "the zone" is to go to a specific place at a particular historical moment. The novel's conclusion emphasizes the geographic boundaries of community and suggests that to transgress these boundaries is to risk destroying the community. That the novel ends with an artifact, the rocket, from one space suspended over and threatening the destruction of another suggests that the two communities are mutually exclusive. Yet in the moment before the destruction, *Gravity's Rainbow* holds out again the possibility for personal contact, for comfort, and for community.

However, community does not necessarily mark the end of *Gravity's Rainbow*. The novel also offers its audience another choice: to spend their last moments masturbating. Although somewhat schematic in their opposition, the "alternate conclusions" challenge the default assumptions that postmodernism necessarily leads towards fragmentation—though it may very well lead towards destruction, and the assumption that community is an unqualified good. Consequently, they provide a useful starting place for thinking about the interplay between the conclusion of the postmodern novel and community.

Chapter two examines Don DeLillo's *The Names* (1983), which employs the plot of a conventional murder-mystery as a vehicle for a consideration of the relationships among language, meaning, and community. *The Names* centers on James Axton's struggle to uncover the meaning behind the strange, apparently random murders performed by the cult of Abecedarians. Axton discovers that the murders are at once arbitrary and anything but random. Through them the cult Ta Onomata guarantees the relationship between a word and its referent; they murder only when the victim's initials and the initials of the location of the murder are the same. Ultimately, the mystery to be solved in *The Names* is the problem and horror of linguistic meaning.

Like *Gravity's Rainbow*, *The Names* closes by gesturing towards a potential community. But a crucial difference remains. *Gravity's Rainbow* offers almost no insight into the nature of the community and forecasts the community's imminent destruction by the rocket. *The Names*, in contrast, sketches two possible shapes a postmodern community might assume while also holding out the possibility for the survival of the communities.

Tellingly, their survival is predicated on the possibility of communication. In the first, Axton travels to the Parthenon and realizes that he and his fellow tourists compose a community not because of shared beliefs or because they are exterior to some other status-quo community but instead simply because the possibility for communication exists. Ironically, in the second community, the very desire to speak a perfect and unmediated language leads to the breakdown of communication. After entering a state of religious ecstasy, its members begin to speak in tongues. One member of the community finds that he can neither speak in tongues nor understand what the others are saying.

Terrified, he runs away from the community and into the night. The breakdown in communication does not immediately result in isolation but in an unmediated encounter with “the nightmare of real things” (243). The novel’s careful distinction between communication and “real things” implies a fundamental dichotomy between the two within the novel’s narrative logic. Moreover, the dichotomy suggests that the community Axton experiences at the Parthenon is perhaps no more real than the choice presented in *Gravity’s Rainbow*. Nevertheless a crucial difference remains—DeLillo’s communities are predicated on language, or more specifically on the potential for communication. The emphasis on language in establishing a community requires not only that we reexamine the assumption that postmodern novels tend, irrevocably, toward fragmentation but also that we reconsider the idea of community both in terms of what forms it and also how it is constituted.

Presenting meaning as separate from community, *The Names* requires thinking not only about the effect but also about the ethics of particular community formations. Kermode suggests that one of the fundamental roles of fiction is to organize our experiences and to make them less troubling, but *The Names* suggests that some organizations, although reassuring, should be avoided and others, although perhaps disconcerting, are somehow better. In other words, *The Names* interrogates the positive connotations of community by failing to present an unproblematic community. Diversity, not homogeneity, seems to be the basis for ethical community and communication—not certainty—its defining function.

Chapter three discusses Kathy Acker’s *Don Quixote* (1986), which explores many themes to those of its namesake by Cervantes, particularly relationships among identity,

imagination, and society. However, Acker complicates these themes by introducing poststructuralist and feminist concerns. Like Cervantes, Acker focuses on “dangerous” ideas and texts that can drive one crazy; however, while Cervantes’s narrator maintains enough of a distance from Don Quixote’s delusions so the reader can recognize them as delusions, Acker’s narrator, and indeed the entire text, collapse into vertiginous fantasies of Kathy, the protagonist. Coerced into having an abortion, Kathy concludes madness is preferable to sanity. Faced with this stark realization, Kathy suffers something akin to a psychotic break and decides to become a knight and begins her quest to find or create a community that will allow her to love.

Acker’s *Don Quixote*, like DeLillo’s *The Names*, closes with an image of a new/different community that develops sometime after the story’s conclusion. In DeLillo’s and for that matter Pynchon’s novel, geography and history define a community’s boundaries. *Don Quixote*, however, presents these communities as imagined spaces that exist in the protagonist’s mind. This transition from community as physical space to community as imagined space carries with it two important consequences. First, *Gravity’s Rainbow* suggests that the postmodern community occupies a “real” space, *Don Quixote*, however, suggests the community occurs, and perhaps can only occur, in the psychoscape of Kathy’s delusions. Second, Kathy’s community remains exterior to the “sane” community. The apparently irreconcilable distance between these two communities and the implication that Kathy’s community remains outside the mainstream community invites an analysis similar to Hutcheon’s claim that postmodern communities are fundamentally “ex-centric” or divorced from the mainstream community. However, such a reading ignores the narrative intrusions that

explicitly comment about the fundamental need for community even among “freaks” and that the community can be constructed by the text itself.

The narrative intrusions collapse the boundary between the “real” and the “imagined” in the novel itself not in terms of psychotic delusion but as an attempt to construct a community, however problematic the community might be. Acker holds out the possibility for community in *Don Quixote* but locates that community in Kathy’s delusions. Consequently, in choosing to belong to a “community of freaks,” Kathy must also choose to isolate herself from the larger “real” community that contributed to her psychosis. Kathy’s choice is not between community and isolation, but rather between communities. Consequently, *Don Quixote* raises questions about how communities are structured, if communities are inherently useful, and why communities in novels often acquire a positive connotation—even when they ultimately prove impotent.

Chapter four explores Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006), which presents the most fully realized image of postmodern landscapes of the novels I examine. Set in a post-apocalyptic landscape, McCarthy’s novel interrogates what happens when all social and culture conventions are stripped aside and with them the traditional means of making sense of the world. The novel’s plot centers on a father and son’s journey from the North to the South in the U.S. after a nuclear strike. As they travel, the father and son carefully avoid other people who are almost universally presented as a threat. However, despite the obvious dangers strangers pose, the boy and, to a lesser extent, the father cling to the possibility of finding and joining some larger community in order to sustain themselves as they hike south across a desolate landscape. This desire for community ultimately

saves the boy after the man's death and causes him to join another group moving across the landscape.

Unlike the other novels I examine, *The Road* presents a detailed description of the postmodern community realized in its conclusion. Defined by many of the same characteristics found in the images of postmodern community in the other novels, McCarthy's depiction also stresses the role community plays in making sense of a world that rejects any possibility of absolute meaning. In this landscape, some notion of community becomes necessary not only for the abstract requirement of making sense of the world but also for the more pressing requirement of survival.

Chapter five draws upon the discussions in each of the previous chapters, in order to offer a definition of postmodern community. The chapter goes on to contend that reading postmodern American novels in terms of community changes the conventional understanding of those novels by demonstrating that while the novels are preoccupied with fragmentation, they also contain significant depictions of cohesion. The conclusion also offers a more far-reaching speculation that attending to the role of community in postmodern thought may alter our understanding of postmodern theory just as it changes our perception of literature because just as it is in postmodern fiction, so too is community central to the development of postmodern thought.

Chapter 1: “A screaming comes across the sky”: Holding Hands at the End

Scholars were uncharacteristically quick to recognize the significance of Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*. Within two years of its publication in 1973, they compared it to some of the most influential novels written in English. In 1975, Richard Poirier observed that:

[a]mong the remarkable facts about Thomas Pynchon is that if we are to believe the best seller list, the selections of the Book of the Month Club, the reviews, and the committee for the National Book Awards, then presumably we are to believe that *Gravity’s Rainbow* is a popular book and, at the same time, that it ranks with *Ulysses* and *Moby Dick* in accomplishment and possibly exceeds them in complexity. (151)⁷

Poirier traces the remarkable success of Pynchon’s novel to the visceral pleasure of “how the sentences sound as they turn into one another, carrying with them, and creating as they go, endlessly reverberating echoes from the vast ranges of contemporary life and culture” (153). However, the echoes Poirier finds sensual disorient others. And the sheer complexity of Pynchon’s writing prompts many to look for ways of “stabilizing” his writing by focusing on specific stylistic, thematic, or allusive elements (153).

⁷ The hesitation in Poirier’s endorsement has more to do with scholarly reserve that it does with any question of the merit of Pynchon’s writing and seems also to be motivated by Poirier’s general distrust of academics who “set about anxiously to pacify Pynchon’s vitality by schemes, structuralist or otherwise” (153).

Like Poirier, I suggest that analyses of *Gravity's Rainbow* have become overly stabilized and conventional. But where Poirier traces the conservative impulse to the tendency of scholars to ignore the novel's unruly elements, I argue that the prevailing practice of reading Pynchon's text as a postmodern work, which is to say as a work preoccupied with fragmentation and rupture, fails to recognize some of the novel's more complex thematic and artistic elements. In particular, *Gravity's Rainbow* articulates a fundamental preoccupation with the possibility of cohesive communities that stand in opposition to the nationalized support for World War II. Moreover, in articulating these communities, Pynchon constructs alternative narratives to the those that support and celebrate the war effort.

Given *Gravity's Rainbow's* complexity, the desire to locate some stable center of meaning or aesthetic technique is understandable. The novel follows Tyrone Slothrop's quest across England and Europe during World War II to find an elusive prototype V-2 rocket. Chosen for the quest because of his bizarre ability to predict where V-2 rockets will strike, Slothrop penetrates deeper and deeper into Nazi-occupied Europe in his search. Along the way, Slothrop discovers that he is a pawn in an elaborate conspiracy by multinational corporations to provoke and to sustain World War II. Though Slothrop's story is the central thread, it is by no means the only one. *Gravity's Rainbow* contains over 400 characters and develops many narratives, following some throughout the novel and abandoning others after only a few pages. Complicating matters still further, the novel presents several distinct narrative voices and employs several narrative techniques. Thematically, the novel is no simpler. It presents extended discussions of behavioral psychology, consumerism, sexuality, statistics, Calvinistic theology, pop culture,

conspiracy theories, technology, and children's fairytales to name a few of the more prominent and recognizable themes.

Gravity's Rainbow's stylistic, narrative, and thematic complexity challenged the assumptions regarding postmodernism with which scholars and reviewers alike approached the novel. Richard Locke's 1973 review for the *New York Times Book Review*, for instance, characterizes *Gravity's Rainbow* as "bonecrushingly dense, compulsively elaborate, silly, obscene, funny, tragic, pastoral historical, philosophical, poetic, grindingly dull, inspired, horrific, cold, bloated, beached and blasted" (377). Other prominent reviews in 1973 echo Locke's description of the novel. R.Z. Shepherd, for instance, describes the novel as "a funny, disturbing, exhausting and massive novel, mind-fogging in its range and permutations, its display of knowledge and virtuosity—a metaphysical, phenomenological, technological Mad Comic." Revealingly, Locke and Shepherd agree about *Gravity's Rainbow's* strengths and weaknesses. Its greatness lies in its poetry, in its inspired presentation of the contemporary world, and in its humor. Its weakness lies in its density, its labyrinthine complexity, and ultimately its tendency to disorient the reader. Apparently unable to reconcile these differences into a coherent aesthetic, the reviewers struggle with an understanding of the genre of the novel that is simply too narrow to contain *Gravity's Rainbow*.

Though later critics and scholars regard *Gravity's Rainbow's* apparent idiosyncrasies as evidence of its postmodern qualities, Poirier never discusses Pynchon as a postmodern novelist, and indeed, it may not even have occurred to Poirier to do so. The MLA database records only seven articles published before 1973 that mention postmodernism, and the first entry to explicitly link the term to Pynchon was published

several years later. It would not be until 1979⁸ with the publication of Brian McHale's "Modernist Reading, Post-Modern Text: The Case of *Gravity's Rainbow*" that scholars considered the unruliness of Pynchon's writing as an aesthetic feature of his prose style and not as something that hid an underlying theme which sufficiently astute scholarship might uncover. McHale's argument rejects the tendency of scholars to fall back on the term "postmodern" as a sort of defensive "fending-off of the embarrassments of intractable fiction by relating it to certain extreme examples of intractability" (87). Instead, McHale suggests whatever is postmodern about Pynchon's text does not amount to complete rejection of narrative but to a rejection of a particular sort of modernist narrative associated with the writing of Balzac—a modernism, in other words, that stresses a unity of plot and of theme in the novel. Thus, by drawing on *Gravity's Rainbow*, McHale provides subsequent scholars with both an aesthetic for Pynchon's mammoth novel that makes sense of its conventional as well as its unconventional elements and a fine-grained analysis of postmodernism itself, an analysis that recognizes that there are not only different definitions of the postmodern but also different sorts of postmodernism.

Drawing on his work almost a decade earlier, McHale published his hugely influential *Postmodernist Fiction* in 1987. In it he argues that what unites the various sorts of postmodern texts and distinguishes them from the modern is a fundamentally different approach to knowledge. Modernism, McHale argues, is concerned with

⁸ Earlier works touch on the question of Pynchon's aesthetics, but few recognize the complex rhetoric he develops. Significant early essays include Richard Poirier's "The Importance of Thomas Pynchon" and George Levine's and David Leverenz's *Mindful Pleasures: Essays on Thomas Pynchon*.

questions of epistemology. Postmodernism preoccupies itself with ontological questions. He relies heavily on *Gravity's Rainbow* to support his assertions and even goes so far as to identify it as a “paradigmatic [work] of postmodern fiction” (16). How much scholarship on *Gravity's Rainbow* takes its lead from McHale's assertions proves enormously difficult to quantify and is perhaps ultimately unimportant. For whether McHale's argument has led scholars to explore the fragmentation in *Gravity's Rainbow* or whether they are both responding to a similar but unvoiced intuition, analyses of fragmentation and disintegration dominate the scholarship on the novel.

Instead of continuing the tendency to focus on the fragmentation in Pynchon's novel, I propose a reading that focuses on the curious moments where the novel extends the possibility of cohesive communities. By doing so, this argument problematizes the dichotomy between Jean-François Lyotard's vision of the postmodern, which stresses discrete and provisional narratives, and Jameson's, which regards postmodernism as the lamentable and perhaps even disastrous rejection of the ability to “do history.” Rather than organize itself along the lines of this dichotomy, my argument examines how *Gravity's Rainbow* both introduces dominant and minor communities, and in doing so sustains the possibility for cohesion, if only insofar as it pertains to community.

My argument joins with a number of scholars, among them Paul Bové, who contends that *Gravity's Rainbow* ought not be reduced to a single unifying theme, point of view, or aesthetic technique. Representative of such work is Bové's “History and Fiction: The Narrative Voices of Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*.” In part dissatisfied with arguments that the novel has no narrative cohesion, he constructs an interpretive framework in which the proliferation of narrative threads and points of view does not

constitute an unraveling of the novel's narrative center but rather an accretion of narrative lines that imply a potential whole (27). Recognizing this whole, he argues, requires accounting for the deep, if sometimes eccentric, engagement of Pynchon's novel with history.

Bové's analysis offers a necessary, if ultimately narrow and indirect, speculation about community in *Gravity's Rainbow*. At the root of Bové's argument lies the assertion that Pynchon's vision of history is one of "entanglement" (659). Bové asserts that the seemingly haphazard fusion of historical events with fictional invention in Pynchon's novel follows a complex and unconventional aesthetic. Moreover, attempts to disengage *Gravity's Rainbow* from history betray a misunderstanding of Pynchon's text. Thus, he locates a species of order in the heart of *Gravity's Rainbow*. To advance his argument, Bové must accept a number of assumptions—among these is a more or less uncomplicated view of community as something stable that does not require, indeed does not permit, theoretical investigation. Without this assumption, his reading of *Gravity's Rainbow* would be impossible.

History and narrative must be placed in the service of an ethics that Creation itself imposes as a duty upon a never innocent and never to be transcendent humanity.

Pynchon teaches us that the poet still has an old function: to keep the Creation in view and sing the justice of humanity's role in sustaining it. The poet knows that humanity cannot maintain its own being alone. The people must hear that truth in the poet's song. (677)

By regarding humanity as a unified, unproblematic group, Bové can imagine that Pynchon's novel conveys a single message to a single audience. Without this notion of a

unified and stable audience, his conclusion falters. Yet despite the central role he assigns to community, his argument never pauses to acknowledge his assumptions, much less to theorize community and how it operates in *Gravity's Rainbow*.

Despite the general tendency among scholars of *Gravity's Rainbow* to overlook the role of community in its pages, the novel returns again and again to the problem of community in the disorganized world Pynchon constructs. Because it does so, *Gravity's Rainbow* provides a rich starting point for investigating how postmodern novels tend to envision communities. In particular, the novel's movement from one community to another reveals that communities are far more dynamic and interesting than the scholarship suggests.

Several questions inform this study, and from these questions a general methodology emerges. Examining the role of community in *Gravity's Rainbow* requires tracing the sequence of communities that lie along it. And in tracing the arc, several questions arise. What motivates the formation of communities in *Gravity's Rainbow*? What causes the communities to fail? And do they fail for the same reasons? Finally, what is the consequence of the novel's conclusion gesturing to a community that remains unrealized throughout the novel?

Discussing *Gravity's Rainbow's* exploration of the postmodern community begins with recognizing that the communities grow more elaborate and less conventional as the novel unfolds. Pynchon's novel imagines two distinct versions of community; of these, the more powerful and far-reaching are the communities that support the war, and the more fluid and far less powerful are the communities erected in opposition to the war. Taken sequentially, five communities serve as major points of inflection in the

postmodern community. The first two communities, the first built around a ritualized breakfast and the second between two lovers, arise early in the novel and establish *Gravity's Rainbow's* preoccupation with community and the war's tendency to unravel them. As such, these communities explore and ultimately demonstrate the fragility of conventional forms of community in a postmodern world. The third community, drawing on the story of Hansel and Gretel stands as the most complex and fully realized within the novel. More significantly, it examines community as a form of narrative. Whereas the first three communities present clear, if ultimately permeable, boundaries, the fourth does not. Representing the vast conspiracy that is responsible for the war, this penultimate community presents fluid boundaries that make cataloging its members perhaps impossible. In doing so, the fourth community draws most explicitly on Lyotard's notion of petite narrative. The final community that must be considered is just as difficult to define as the fourth but for different reasons. Directly addressed to the reader, the question this final community raises is not identifying who its members are—*Gravity's Rainbow* leaves little question—but rather determining if the community ever comes into existence.

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Gravity's Rainbow's opening line, “a screaming came across the sky,” emphasizes the threat the novel's characters face, and the remainder of the opening scene suggests that establishing a community may be the only viable response to the threat, though that response ultimately proves untenable. Drawn from Captain Geoffrey

(“Pirate”) Prentice’s nightmare, the opening image personifies the V-2 rocket by giving it a voice although one initially lost in an inarticulate and terrifying wail. The sentence presents the flight as an incommensurate event; “it has happened before, but there is nothing to compare it to now” (3). Characterizing the flight of a V-2 rocket as something comparable only to itself, Pynchon presents what others have called a postmodern sublime. Marc W. Redfield, for instance, argues that “few scenes deliver more persuasively or economically the sense of a postmodern sublime” than the first two paragraphs of *Gravity’s Rainbow* (160).⁹ In his analysis, Fredric Jameson argues that the sublime is central to thinking about the postmodern because the “glossy skin, a stereoscopic illusion, [and] rush of filmic images without density” of the postmodern image transmits the same feelings of awe and exhilaration conventionally associated with the sublime (77). The connection Jameson draws between the postmodern and the sublime proves useful for thinking about the arresting power of the image of a rocket in flight and its connection to the sublime. The sublime in the postmodern has more to do with image than it does with a concrete referent and so exists in some sense outside the flow of narrative time—a recognition that becomes particularly important in the conclusion of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, which gestures back towards the image of a V-2 in flight.

Prentice’s reaction to the image, however, suggests a concrete and personal fear, not the “free floating and impersonal” effect Jameson associates with the postmodern (64). The intensity of Prentice’s experience points to the difference between what has

⁹ Redfield provides one of the more focused accounts of how the postmodern relates to Pynchon’s fiction in “Pynchon’s Postmodern Sublime” though he devotes only a little space to *Gravity’s Rainbow*.

become the orthodox way of thinking of community, as a stable and unproblematic term, and *Gravity's Rainbow's* portrayal of community as something that is at once both cohesive and fluid. In his nightmare, Prentice places himself among the evacuees from London during, or as a consequence of, a V-2 attack. The evacuees travel deep underground where they enter the dusty hallways, rooms, and caverns of London's foundations. Here, in the unending darkness, Prentice imagines that each evacuee hears a voice, "that the thought was talking only him, say, 'You didn't really believe you'd be saved. Come, we all know who we are by now. No one was ever going to take the trouble to save *you*, old fellow . . .'" (4). Drawing attention to the evacuees' perception of the voice, *Gravity's Rainbow* suggests the fear of being left behind and of isolation is shared by all. Yet even as it presents a shared anxiety, the direct address of the "you," particularly the italicization of the last "you," associates the fear not only with the refugees but also with Prentice and emphasizes Prentice's isolation.

The group that grows around Prentice's communal banana breakfast seems to offer an end to the isolation—if only for a time. Drawing on the trope of a shared meal, Prentice's greenhouse and his breakfast create a refuge not only from the war but from mortality itself. The shelter proves remarkable, "It is not often Death is told so clearly to fuck off," remarks the narrator (10). They come to see "the politics of bacteria, the soil's stringing of rings and chains in nets only God can tell the meshes of, have seen the fruit thrive often to lengths of a foot and a half, yes, amazing but true" (6). Prentice's breakfasts define a space where individuals are not isolated and where meaning is not rent asunder in a primal scream. The foundation of the repudiation of death that Prentice offers stems from his ability to construct a space in which the scent of the bananas may

serve “[a]s a spell, against falling objects . . . ,” which includes the V-2’s as they fall back towards earth (10).

However effective the community proves for others, it fails for Prentice once a phone call from his superiors summons him to inspect a V-2 strike. As it “rips easily across the room,” the ringing phone summons Prentice away from the sheltering camaraderie of his breakfast and thrusts him back into the brutalities of the war. Moments after the call, Prentice again feels isolated as if he is on “some other side of a window, watching strangers eat breakfast” (11). Though the phone call provides the most immediate reason for Prentice’s return to isolation, the fundamental cause is the logic of conquest and appropriation that shape both the war and the opposition the breakfast provides to the war. *Gravity’s Rainbow* draws explicit attention to this shared logic—ironically at precisely the moment Prentice’s community seems strongest, “assertion-through-structure allows this war morning’s banana fragrance to meander, repossess, prevail” (10). Because it evokes the same strategy of conquest as the war—though the tactics of armies and of bananas surely differ—Prentice’s breakfast operates within the conventions of a feast as a time of celebration reaffirming life and ultimately provides at best a temporary furlough from the war. Though the screaming of the V-2 and the derision of the disembodied voice from Prentice’s dream conflate and normalize into the voice of his superior calling him to duty, the implication is the same: “There is no way out” (5).

Though ultimately unsuccessful, Prentice’s breakfast community reveals the profound desire for community that animates *Gravity’s Rainbow*. And though its attempt to imagine an alternative to the war establishes the first point in a thematic trajectory that

carries throughout the novel, Prentice's community also helps define the problem. Postmodern communities must provide an alternative logic to the dominant community and preserve the individual's connection to it. Most interesting, though, the failure of Prentice's breakfast community to shelter its members from the realities of the war underscores that the various communities in *Gravity's Rainbow* exist in a hierarchy. Though not possessing the far-reaching influence of a grand-narrative, the war nevertheless wields enormous influence over the novel's other communities.

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The second community arises between two lovers, Jessica and Roger, and its ultimate failure sheds light on the boundaries and power of this hierarchy. In attempting to escape the war, they interpose both physical distance and a disruptive rhetoric between themselves and the war. Jessica, in particular, also relies heavily on her misunderstanding of statistics to reinforce her feeling that she and Roger are safe when they are together. The ultimate failure of their strategies suggests that the threat the war poses is more fundamental than either its geographical boundaries or rhetorical flourishes suggest.

Like Prentice's breakfast community, the community Jessica and Roger form draws heavily on conventional depictions, and in doing so, their community presents the possibility for cohesion in postmodern novels. Jessica and Roger's relationship is stylized to the point of becoming a stereotype. Presented as an extended flash-back, the self-conscious troping extends even to their initial meeting. "It was what Hollywood likes to call a 'cute meet'" (39). The term refers to a cinematic convention. In a cute meet, an

unlikely couple comes to recognize their mutual attraction in an awkward and humorous scene. Yet the almost exclusive association of the trope with romantic comedies creates dissonance within *Gravity's Rainbow*—a novel certainly given to comedy but one that could hardly be said to be a romantic comedy. But Roger's awareness of the cliché of his meeting Jessica does little to detract from the community they form, a community that resonates with mystical overtones:

And there've been the moments, more of them lately too—times when face-to-face there has been no way to tell which of them is which. Both at the same time feeling the same eerie confusion . . . something like looking in a mirror by surprise but . . . more than that, the feeling of actually being joined . . . when after—who knows? two minutes, a week? they realize, separate again, what's been going on, that Roger and Jessica were merged into a joint creature unaware of itself In a life he has cursed, again and again, for its need to believe so much in the trans-observable, here is the first, the very first real magic: data he can't argue away. (39)

The confused grammar and the elliptical phrases running into each other convey Roger's difficulty understanding his relationship with Jessica. Moreover, the quasi-mystical fusion he discusses contrasts with his deliberative assessment of their meeting—suggesting their relationship cannot be entirely understood within the highly self-aware and ironic world that exists within conventional understandings of the postmodern novel; nor does their relationship fit wholly within the romance genre. The narrator's endorsement of their relationship as the “first real magic” Roger encounters complicates the issue still further. Jessica and Roger's community reduces the postmodern community

to its most elemental. It becomes all but impossible to dismiss the relationship as nothing more than ludic troping on the conventions of romance novels. Instead, the community Jessica and Roger construct responds to a desperate need to find shelter from the war.

Interestingly, their attempts to escape the war derive from an instinctive and unvoiced recognition that their romance provides an alternative to the war and that this alternative is somehow, perhaps indescribably, better:

If they have not quite seceded from the war's state, at least they've found the beginnings of gentle withdraw . . . there's never been the space or time to talk about it, and perhaps no need—but both know, clearly, its better together, snuggled in, than back out in the paper, fires, khaki, steel of the Home Front (42).

The metaphors of inside and outside describe clear boundaries between the reality of the war and the response Jessica and Roger's romance provides.

The language of inside and outside is more than just a convenient metaphor. It refers to the geographic distance Jessica and Roger insert between their tryst and the mechanisms of war. Breaking into a house in the forbidden zone, an area so heavily bombarded that the British government has decided to evacuate it, Jessica and Roger move to the edges of the political and cultural center of the war and onto its periphery. Unable to sleep one night, Jessica reflects on the apparent stability and underlying precariousness of their location. As a result, she begins to think the danger they are in from the war. For Jessica, her community is tied to her fantasy of safety. Jessica recognizes that while they are in the house she feels safe and wishes she could become part of a larger community. She notes that “it doesn't *feel* like danger here, but she does wish there were others about, and that it could really be a village, her village” (55).

Jessica's emphasis on her feelings and her grounding of her fantasy in her feelings of safety underscore the primal function of community for characters in *Gravity's Rainbow*. So powerful is the desire for community that Jessica recasts the war itself as something unavoidable and natural as weather, in which the explosions of V-2's were to "no purpose" and amounted to no more than a distant kind of thunder (55). Thus, the danger she faces is not that of calculated danger but of everyday chance.

Yet Jessica and Roger remain in danger—though in no more danger than the rest of London that is in range of the V-2 attacks. As a statistician, Roger understands that because the rocket strikes are falling perfectly randomly, no area is any safer than another from attack. In a paragraph-long comment on Jessica's dream, the narrator initially retains the scientific detachment of Roger's equations by acknowledging that "[u]ntil something falls here, close enough to matter, they do have their safety" (55). The apparently useless tautological statements, casts Jessica's and Roger's safety in terms conducive to a rudimentary statistical analysis in which safety is one half of a simple binary condition. But however accurate its analysis of their situation, the narrator soon becomes obsessed with understanding the apparent incongruities between the seeming safety of Jessica and Roger's hideaway and the war. Unable to resolve the dichotomy, the narrator begins to talk to itself, "don't you know there's a war on, moron? yes but—here's Jessica in her sister's hand-me-down pajamas, and Roger asleep in nothing at all, but where *is* the war?" (55). Both of the narrator's questions center on a desire to find a place for the war literally within the space of Roger and Jessica's romantic liaison. These questions suggest that as far as the narrator is concerned the war should inform all other

events in the novel. Yet, the mundane nighttime dress of Jessica and Roger appears to offer an impermeable shelter from the war.

Eventually, Jessica realizes that she does not remember a time before the war and asks Roger to explain what it was like. Roger's response indicates how much the war has shaped his perspective. "All *I* remember," Roger explains, "is that it was just silly. Just overwhelmingly silly. Nothing happened" (60). When pressed for more detail, Roger repeats himself before questioning Jessica's claim that she can't remember, "Just . . . Just damned silly, that's all. Worrying about things that don't —Jess, can't you really remember?" (60). Roger's repeated and increasingly emphatic claim that life before the war was silly reveals that the shelter they erect against the war is largely porous. Though it shelters them from some of the more obvious threats of the war and lends them a false sense of security, its logic shapes Jessica and Roger's perceptions.

And so long as it is kept at bay, the war loses much of its power over Jessica. It is no longer "the great struggle of good and evil the wireless reports everyday" (55). Nor does the war function as a paradigm shifting event that colors her perceptions. As she reflects on her memories before the war, Jessica constructs a list of everyday events and concludes that she remembers "nothing that's really gone, that I can't ever find again" (60). So long as they remain safe in their house, Jessica can treat the war as little more than an inconvenience. Jessica remembers static images: "Games pinafores, girl friends, a black alley kitten with white little feet, holidays all the family by the sea, brine, frying fish, donkey rides, peach taffeta, a boy named Robin . . ." (60). As such, her memories reflect a concrete vision of the past and one that is largely unavailable to the shifting intersections that the war brings to bear.

Similar to Jessica's attempt to create an alternative narrative, Roger too remembers the time before the war as a refuge, and in doing so, he, like Jessica, constructs an alternative narrative. Roger's detachment from his memories invites a self-conscious interpretation of them that is absent from Jessica's more concrete memories of the war. He shares the same sense of the mundane as Jessica, but where she remembers static images, Roger remembers actions. "One took lots of aspirin. One was drinking or drunk much of the time. One was concerned about getting one's lounge suits to fit properly. One despised the upper classes but tried desperately to behave like them" (61). Reflecting his earlier statement that time before the war was "silly," Roger's account raises questions about the motivation behind his actions. His repetition of the stiffly formal "one" presents a catalog that is both formally correct and ironically detached from the events he describes. Jessica's self-conscious parody of Roger's tone transforms his litany of actions into a children's nursery rhyme. "And one cried we, wee, wee, all the way—" (61). The events that follow this apparently superficial transformation of irony into parody reveal its significance. Just after Jessica's parody and Roger's attempt to tickle her, a V-2 rocket strikes near the outskirts of the town where their appropriated house lies. The explosion literally blows away the joy that had surrounded the two as the sheer pressure of the blast changes "the entire fabric of the air" and "the time" (61). Confronted by the war's full destructive force, Jessica and Roger find the emotional shelter they have constructed shattered.

The narrator personifies the threat as Death itself which has "come in the pantry door: stands watching them, iron and patient, with a look that says *try to tickle me*" (61). The cataclysmic failure of Jessica and Roger's strategy of avoidance reveals that it is

fundamentally flawed: they have willfully misunderstood the scope of the war's influence. Not only is their shelter within the range of V-2 rocket strikes, in fact its likelihood of being struck is presumably one of the reasons why it was abandoned. More tellingly, however, the war shapes even Jessica and Roger's discourse. For instance, Jessica's questions about life before the war make sense only because Jessica's perceptions are so totally constrained by it. Not surprisingly, Jessica and Roger's attempts to escape the war prove futile because they bring with them the perceptions and assumptions that shape the war. Thus, as the narrative surrounding Jessica's sleepless night suggests, Jessica and Roger are safe only so long as they can continue to deny the war when they are together. Once torn, the entire fabric of their community soon unravels completely.

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The observations I have made about Prentice's and Jessica and Roger's communities bear a superficial similarity to some of the scholarship that studies the tensions among the various narratives in *Gravity's Rainbow*. But whereas the previous scholarship assumes a fundamental opposition between the fragmentary and cohesive elements of the novel, I contend that the novel's presentation of community frequently resolves the apparent dichotomy.

Fran Mason implies the possibility for cohesion in her discussion of narrative strategies in *Gravity's Rainbow*. She argues that the novel establishes "two narrative or discursive axes. In one, the text searches for a master narrative, while in the other,

divagating or bifurcating narratives fracture the quest for a final truth or system of meaning by looping away from the master narrative into digression and pure narrativity” (168). In her conclusion, Mason questions the efficacy of the narratives of resistance and even the possibility of resistance in *Gravity’s Rainbow*. Thus, at its most fundamental level, Mason’s argument recapitulates the conventional understanding of the postmodern novel as a site not only for competing narratives but of competing types of narratives.

Mason’s focus on the interplay between the narrative of the war and the many others that surface in *Gravity’s Rainbow* proves useful for understanding how Pynchon’s novel engages with historical events. But in focusing so narrowly on the abstract qualities of the narratives, she overlooks what motivates the characters to create these alternative narratives. She also neglects to consider the specific problem they are trying to solve, which to a greater or lesser extent is to explore what sort of communities offer a viable alternative to the war. As Prentice’s and Jessica and Roger’s communities demonstrate, a viable alternative must go beyond simply hiding from or attempting to move outside the war. In both cases, the characters remain subject to the rules and strictures of the war. What is required is an alternative narrative to the war, and one that is capable of providing its own interpretation of events.

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Katje, Blicero, and Gottfried’s sadomasochistic community would seem to offer precisely the alternative that neither Prentice nor Jessica and Roger find. Yet even its wide-reaching reinterpretation of the war ultimately proves untenable. Sequestered near

the V-2 installation responsible for the S-Gerät V-2, Dominous Blicero, the codename for Lieutenant Weissmann, constructs a sadomasochistic community and enlists two other characters, Katje Borgesius and Gottfried, as members. As the dominant member of the community, Blicero concocts evermore elaborate sexual fantasies and appears to force Katje and Gottfried to participate. Sometimes playing the roles of characters in fairy tales, at others assuming the roles of Nazi officers, and at others made to be nothing more than passive sexual objects, Katje and Gottfried play roles in games whose only overt purpose is to satisfy Blicero. Yet his internal monologues suggest a complex interweaving of desire and power. The consequence of this interweaving is the creation of a narrative that can make sense of the war without falling into the dominant narrative as the earlier communities do. In fact, the sadomasochistic community offers multiple interpretations of the war—some are confined to individual scenes that Blicero stages and others to the overarching plot of the Hansel and Grettel fairy tale.

René Girard's *Deceit, Desire & the Novel* provides a useful lens for understanding the complex interplay of desires and narratives in the community Katje, Blicero, and Gottfried establish. Published twelve years before *Gravity's Rainbow*, Girard's book explains the curious logic at work in Blicero's sadistic sexual scenarios. According to Girard, both masochism and sadism attempt to substitute the mediator of desire for the desired object itself. The substitution occurs once the individuals realize the impossibility of reaching the desired object. This recognition leads to the masochistic identity. Cut off from the desired, the masochist concludes that whatever interposes itself is superior to the individual. More importantly, the individual shifts his rationale for the existence of the desired object. Thus far unable to reach it, he concludes that he fails

because some mediator blocks his path, and in a peculiar logical side-step, the masochist comes to desire the mediator more than the initial object. Not only is the mediator superior to the masochist, but it alone guarantees his desire. Similarly, the sadist hopes to achieve his desire not by submitting to and desiring the mediating power, but by becoming that mediator. Girard's analysis neatly explains why Blicero's fantasy includes becoming the victim of Katje and Gottfried: "The Sadist cannot achieve the illusion of being the mediator without transforming his victim into a replica of himself. At the very moment of redoubling his brutality he cannot help recognizing himself in the other who is suffering" (185). As Girard stresses elsewhere, the sadist's failure to achieve his desire is implicit in his strategy for desire. The best he can hope for is to endlessly defer or displace his desire and thereby maintain the illusion of being the mediator.

Confronting the falling Nazi order, and their inevitable defeat, Blicero erects a barricade not only against the immediate situation of the war but also against the inevitable. His sexual exploits and excesses notwithstanding, Blicero proves ironically impotent. His impotence speaks to the profoundly counterintuitive logic of the sadomasochist community, which, like the others, realizes its desire for community by creating an alternate narrative to the dominant one, albeit the sadomasochistic narrative is both more subtle and complete than the others. To recall Girard's argument, the masochist decides, on some level, to live in perpetual isolation from the object of his desire. Masochists make this choice because they believe they will never have access to the desired. Consequently, they seek to replace it with something else, something that can be attained. Yet by definition nothing is equal to the desired object, and any direct substitution would be incommensurate. At a loss, the masochist substitutes the one thing

that might stand in for the desired object, the masochist's desire itself. Once the transference is made, the object of desire shifts from the external thing to the masochist's desire itself.

The sadist is at an even further remove from the desired object according to Girard. The sadist substitutes not his own desire but the desire of others for the original object. In so far as sadists can organize and control others, they enjoy significant authority, but this power and their strategy of substitution depends on others. The curious passivity Girard's analysis associates with sadists who must wait for others to fulfill their desires is explicit in Blicero:

He can do nothing. Among dying Reich, orders lapsing to paper impotence he needs her [Katje] so, needs Gottfried, the straps and whips leathern, real in his hands which still feel, her cries, the red welts across the boy's buttocks, their mouths, his penis, fingers and toes—in all the winter these are sure, can be depended on—he can give you no reason but in his heart he trusts, perhaps only, by now, in the form, this out of all Märchen und Sagen, trusts that this charmed house in the forest will be preserved, that no bombs could ever fall here by accident. (99)

The narrator's reference to Blicero's "needs," his "belief," and his "trust" emphasize that while Blicero might have initially chosen to participate in the community, he no longer has the choice not to participate. So long as he remains a member of the sadomasochistic community, Blicero can access the narrative that transcribes the apparent chaos of the war into the stable economies of desire and power. However, he remains mystified by the process through which the sadomasochistic community appears able to make events real

and dependable. The community becomes an article of faith: he trusts in its form and in its ability to replace the random with the intentional. Blicero's need for Katje and Gottfried extends beyond the mere substitution of one object of desire for another. Dominance offers Blicero shelter from the war and from its accidents. The empire for which he fights no longer shelters him, its orders have lost their force, and more importantly, its ideology no longer appears able to make sense of the world. Like Katje, he turns away from the abstract vicissitudes of politics and towards the reassuring forms of the fairy tale and to physical sensations. The turn to the physical and to "belief" reveals Blicero's desperation to believe there is a way to understand the otherwise senseless war.

Katje shares Blicero's desire to make sense of the world. Yet unlike Blicero, she appears to understand why the sadomasochistic community is able to offer an alternative narrative:

In a conquered country, one's own occupied country, it's better, she believes, to enter into some formal, rationalized version of what, outside proceeds without form or decent limit day and night, the summary execution, the rousting, beatings, subterfuge, paranoia, shame ... though it is never discussed among them openly, it would seem Katje, Gottfried, and Captain Blicero have agreed that this Northern and ancient form, one that they all know and are comfortable with—the strayed children, the wood-wife in the edible house, the captivity, the fattening, the Oven—shall be their preserving routine, their shelter, against what outside none of them can bear—the War, the absolute rule of chance, their own pitiable contingency, here in its midst ... (98)

How much of the understanding is Katje and how much is the narrator's remains unclear. The parenthetical asides qualify and subtly undermine what at first appear to be unambiguous explanations of why she chooses to participate in the sadomasochistic community. More importantly, the phrases create distance between the narrative description and her rationale. This distance is nowhere more clear than in the shift from reporting Katje's beliefs to speculating about what she, Blicero and Gottfried, believe. Consequently, Katje's thoughts become entangled with the narrator's judgments. The ambiguity carries through the rest of the sentence before exhausting itself and the sentence in the final ellipsis. The implication is clear: all that can be said already has been—and even that has not been said completely. The uncertainty of the ellipses is compounded by the unspecified antecedent of the “it” that is “never discussed among them openly” (98). Functioning as something unnameable, if not precisely unspeakable, the “it” refers to an unspoken agreement to erect a barrier against the chaos that rages in the war. The unspoken agreement is crucial to the sadomasochistic community. Openly acknowledging their desire to participate in the community would reveal the very desires Girard argues must remain concealed and displaced if a sadomasochistic community is to function. Ironically, then, Katje's potential self-awareness may pose the gravest threat to the very community she struggles to support. Moreover, the ambiguous attribution of recognition to Katje reflects the precipitous line she must walk if she is to both concisely participate in the community and to remain distant enough from her own desires to make the logic of a sadomasochistic community viable.

Having decided to belong to the sadomasochistic community, Katje, Blicero, and Gottfried are able to transcribe events from the war into the physical and sexual

domination that characterize the sadomasochistic community. In one scene, Gottfried is sodomized by Blicero while forced to perform fellatio on an Italian officer. Blicero remarks that Gottfried's spine is the "Rome-Berlin Axis" (96). The allusion to the treaty between Germany and Italy in World War II is unmistakable. Because the reference is so obvious, it destabilizes the fairy-tale narrative Katje, Blicero, and Gottfried construct. The realities of war apparently cannot be avoided entirely. But by incorporating them into the sadomasochistic play, these realities can be diffused, reinterpreted, and, most importantly, localized. The abstract and enormously complex nature of political alliances devolves into the more tangible power relationships of the sadomasochistic community. The fetishized version of the treaty identifies Germany and Italy as the ones with the power to impose their will and to satisfy their desires upon Europe. The narrator's acceptance of the metaphor implies a tacit endorsement of the comparison and of the sadomasochistic community as a way of providing an alternative narrative for the realities of the war.

Ultimately, the sadomasochistic community proves fragile. The underlying problem resides in its logic, which tends towards the displacement of the individual's desire and, according to Girard's analysis, ultimately the loss of the individual himself. For Katje, the archetypal role is transitory and rejected almost as soon as she assumes it. Traveling in Europe towards the end of the war, she encounters Enzain, who like her was once Blicero's intimate. Seeing her, Enzain reflects, "but here is the true Golden Bitch. He's [sic] surprised at how young and slender she is—a paleness as of having begun to leak away from this world, likely to vanish entirely at any too reckless grab" (617). Katje's participation in the narrative is no longer mediated by her own desires. Instead,

she becomes synonymous with her role and so indistinguishable from it. Ironically, the very techniques she once drew upon to preserve herself by creating a distance from the war ultimately threaten to overwhelm her and lead to a dissolution into nothing more than the symbol of a narrative archetype—in this case a goddess figure.

However, Katje avoids becoming overwhelmed simply by making a choice. Katje's resolution to avoid becoming nothing more than a symbol suggests that the solutions offered by the sadomasochistic community prove superficial and require the characters to relinquish the opportunities for both self-definition and connection to the world. Katje reclaims both in her conversation with Enzain when she articulates her desire to help find Slothrop. The closing editorial remark in the section, "there are things to hold on to," provides a tacit endorsement of Katje's decision (676). What Katje embraces is equally important. The final image of the previous paragraph presents a simple scene of people going about their work "cafeteria trays and steelware rattle, an innocent and kind sound behind familiar regions of steam, fat at the edge of souring, cigarette smoke, washwater, disinfectant—a cafeteria in the middle of the day" (676). These connections suggest the possibility of creating a community. Moreover, the mundane quality of what Katje connects to implies that sustainable communities need not employ subtle rhetoric or elaborate fantasies. Yet, the more conventional the community, the more likely it has been co-opted by the war. The cafeteria that offers Katje a momentary respite is found within a Nazi base. Yet Katje's imagination of a community, however provisional it is, proves to be of enormous significance because it further dismantles the notion of community as a monolithic entity by showing that communities layer upon one another.

Unlike Katje, Blicero becomes increasingly entangled in narrative roles and, as a result, ever more estranged from himself. The slippage is hardly surprising. About half-way through its narrative, *Gravity's Rainbow* reveals that "Blicero" is a SS codename adopted by Weissmann who, until this point, appears to be another character. Weissmann's alias reflects, he believes, the "sinister cryptology of naming" in which signs themselves become part of some elaborate and dangerous code (327). The relationship between Weissmann's real name and his alias Blicero amounts more to a bad pun than it does to a byzantine plot. Weissmann, from the German, translates roughly into "white man." Blicero, the narrative explains, is a Latinized form of "'Blicker,' the nickname early Germans gave to Death," which the Germans associated with "bleaching," "blankness," and thus the color white (327). These superficial puns conceal a fundamental exchange of narrative identity. Weissmann substitutes, at some fundamental level, his specific identity for the archetypal role of Death. The exchange becomes even more complex in a subsection towards the end of *Gravity's Rainbow* that explains what happens to him after the war titled "Weissmann's Tarot." Explicating a tarot reading meant to divine Weissmann's future, the narrative follows a complex process of the creation of yet another identity out of a constellation of archetypes represented on the tarot cards. Thus, Weissmann loses himself in two distinct ways. On the one hand, he acquires an identity that is composed of the archetypes but is more general still. Rather than becoming synonymous with a well known image from the tarot, Weissmann becomes just one more instance of a general type of character, "If you're wondering where he's gone, look among the successful academics, the Presidential advisers, the token intellectuals who sit on boards of directors. He is almost surely there"

(764). On the other hand, and perhaps more significant, is Weissmann's, and the narrative's, acceptance that he no longer has the ability to determine his own future. Quite literally, it may all be written in the stars. The implication *Gravity's Rainbow* offers about communities both in the novel and in more general terms is clear: if the community is to offer any meaningful protection and any sustainable membership, it must preserve both some trace of the individual's identity and some semblance of a choice. Weissmann has neither.

The end of Gottfried's narrative suggests that the fundamental structure of the sadomasochistic community precludes the type of salvation the characters hope for and reveals the fragility of the alternative narratives his community, along with the previous communities of Prentice and Jessica and Roger, offer. The novel lingers briefly on Gottfried's final moments, and in these moments shows Gottfried to be the perfect embodiment of masochism. In his final scene, Gottfried has already been strapped into the tail section of the S-Gerät rocket and launched. His death is certain. As the rocket arcs across the sky, Gottfried is contorted by the straps and the G-force into a position reminiscent of kneeling. "Pressed down-and-aft in his elastic bounds, pressed painfully [...] till his forehead is bent to touch one knee where his hair rubs in a touch crying or submissive as a balcony empty in the rain" (774). Kneeling is so closely associated with subservience in Western culture that the meaning behind Gottfried's position is chiefly a sign of his ultimate surrender and subservience. Yet even as it describes his position, the narrative signals its own inadequacy to clarify what the posture means. It is a posture either of "crying or submission." The ambiguity does not stop with the narrative's apparent inability to provide the proper interpretation. The "or" insists on a choice

between the two alternatives. A lexical sleight-of-hand in the following sentence compounds the difficulty of choosing. Gottfried, the narrative reports, “does not wish to cry out” (774). That Gottfried does not want to “cry” out would seem to indicate that his posture should be interpreted as one of sadness. However, to cry out is a far different thing than crying. The similarity between the two words is precisely superficial and does little to unravel the ambiguous choice the narrative presents to its readers. The decision is ultimately unimportant. The ambiguity, however, is.

Gottfried is unaware and gives up even his memories. The problem here, of course, is the implicit loss of identity that follows. The very object of protection becomes untenable as one sacrifices himself to preserve the community that is supposed to protect the individual. It appears to be a closed circle. The narrative shelters Katje, Blicero, and Gottfried until almost the last scene of *Gravity's Rainbow*. In its final dozen pages, the novel reveals the mystery of the S-Gerät rocket and with it the mystery of the oven for which Gottfried has been “fattened” (96). Blicero has a tiny speaker implanted in Gottfried’s ear, places him in the rocket, and launches it. Gottfried, however, is given no way to broadcast back to Blicero. Consequently, explains the narrator, “the exact moment of his death will never be known” (766). Gottfried’s death, then, is the ultimate realization of the sadomasochistic impulse to defer and frustrate the encounter with the desired object, in this case the culmination of the narrative of Hansel and Grettle with the sacrifice of one of the children in what amounts to a symbolic oven. Sent beyond Blicero’s reach, sight, and knowledge, Gottfried achieves and preserves the crucial, unbridgeable distance at the root of the sadomasochistic fetishization. He links the deferral of closure with the deferral of death. But in doing so, he erases himself and

becomes simply a representation of a desire never achieved. And in this erasure of the self, Gottfried loses that which the community was designed to protect—an ordered and rational world in which an individual can live.

Taken together, the characters' movements away from community simultaneously point to the crucial flaw of the sadomasochistic community and to the problem that the novel must solve. The problem is to imagine a situation in which the individual's identity is preserved, in which the individual has a choice to participate in or leave the community, and which offers a consistent, if not persistent, point of view for making sense of the vagaries of the postmodern world.

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Of the communities that support the war, none is more far-reaching than the conspiracy that surrounds Slothrop, though even this community has its boundaries. Thus, while its scope differs from the communities I have analyzed previously, it is of the same type. However because of its sheer size and perverseness, the conspiracy raises questions that the others do not. Where the earlier communities preoccupy themselves with the connection between the minor and the dominant community, the conspiracy explores the consequences of an individual actively identifying with a widespread community. In particular, the conspiracy raises a question about what happens to the individual's identity once he becomes embroiled in the conspiracy. The massive conspiracy at the center of *Gravity's Rainbow's* depiction of the war reveals that balancing the various requirements of community is impossible. At the focal point of

these conspiracies lay Slothrop and his peculiar connection to the V-2 rocket. Early in *Gravity's Rainbow*, Slothrop's abilities are just one of the many curiosities studied at the White Visitation, a small, poorly funded branch of England's war effort dedicated to studying the supernatural and paranormal. But when Roger, a statistician at the White Visitation, notices a map Slothrop keeps on which he marks with a star each of the places he has had sex, the improbability of Slothrop's talent becomes clear.

The map on his wall coincides perfectly with the map of V-2 rocket strikes Roger keeps in his vain attempt to discern a pattern. The coincidence is particularly unsettling because it breaks the relationship of cause and effect. Like Roger, Slothrop dates the points on his map. When he compares the two maps, Roger finds an improbable coincidence between his map of rocket strikes and Slothrop's map of sexual liaisons: on which, "[a] star always comes before its corresponding rocket strike" (6). The apparent contravention of cause and effect has already come to the attention of Slothrop's superiors at the White Visitation, and they struggle to make sense of his ability. They launch a crude conspiracy to study Slothrop and ultimately invoke a Pavlovian theory of the trans-marginal state to explain the apparent paradox. According to their reading of Pavlov, the transmarginal state, also referred to as the "ultra-paradoxical" state, marks the culmination of psychological conditioning. Exposed to the stimulus over and over again, the subject will begin to display the conditioned response even before the stimulus is introduced. The conspiracy struggles to understand precisely the nature of Slothrop's condition and eventually uncovers that young Slothrop was conditioned as an infant to have an erection when exposed to Implex-B, a synthetic rubber used in the construction

of the V-2. Given his sensitivity to the peculiar component of the V-2, the conspiracy surrounding Slothrop sends him in search of the S-Gerät rocket.

Initially unaware of the conspiracy that surrounds him, Slothrop finds himself at the center of a community that he has not chosen and which he becomes fully aware of only once he begins the search for the S-Gerät V-2 in earnest. However, Slothrop has been under surveillance and manipulated by the White Visitation since Prentice staged the octopus attack on Katje and arranged for Slothrop to rescue her. Though Katje works for the White Visitation, she alludes to the plot that has already ensnared Slothrop. As they sit alone on the beach, Katje comments that “[p]erhaps, after all, we *were meant to meet...*,” a comment laced with the obvious foreshadowing and allusion to the conspiracy that Slothrop has yet to detect and more subtly with an implicit recognition that the conspiracy has limitations (191). The italics emphasize the passive voice that implies that some unnamed agent organizes the events that would otherwise seem entirely accidental. Of course, Katje is aware there is nothing whatsoever accidental about the meeting. Consequentially, the apparently innocuous phrase acquires a subtle shading of dread coupled with insight. But the two introductory adverbials are in conflict. The first, “perhaps,” mitigates the certainty of the clause “we were meant to meet”; the second “after all,” confirms it. The equivocation inherent in the doubled adverbial opening suggests that those engaged in the conspiracy relinquish some of their individual identity.

The ephemeral connection Katje’s circuitous statement betrays becomes concrete in the character of Sir Stephen Dodson-Truck. Assigned to watch Slothrop as he learns about the V-2, Dodson-Truck becomes increasingly obsessed with his assignment, eventually losing any perspective outside of it. Even when confronted by Slothrop and

told to explain “What’s going on,” Dodson-Truck speaks only of how he and Slothrop serve the conspiracy through their work at the White Visitation: “My ‘function’ is to observe you. That’s my function. You like my function? You like it? Your ‘function’... is, learn the rocket, inch by inch. I have ... to send in a daily log of your progress and that’s all I know” (219). The ellipses suggest a secret Dodson-Truck knows and which he withholds from Slothrop. But the implied secret is a misdirection. Dodson-Truck has already announced the secret in his question, “You like my function,” and its abbreviated echo, “You like it?” The impossibility of answering either question reveals that Dodson-Truck, Slothrop, and, by extension, anyone else involved in the conspiracy become indistinguishable from their roles.

In these terms, the conspiracy surrounding Slothrop extracts the same price as the sadomasochistic community of Katje, Blicero, and Gottfried. Both reduce the individual to his or her role in the sadomasochistic narrative. But a crucial difference remains—the sheer size of the conspiracy seems to rob individuals of the choice to participate or not. Timothy Melley notes that anymore the term “conspiracy” “frequently refers to the working of a large organization, technology, or system—a powerful and obscure entity so dispersed that it is the antithesis of the traditional conspiracy” (8). The difference between the traditional and the modern understanding of “conspiracy” is a matter of scope. The traditional perception of conspiracy is one of a clandestine and select group of individuals manipulating some large system to achieve their own ends. At a more fundamental level, the conventional notion of conspiracy is predicated on the possibility of a choice to participate. But once the conspiracy becomes as widespread as Melley imagines it to be, distinguishing between who is and who is not a member becomes

enormously difficult, for anyone can be co-opted. Consequently, the individuals are deprived of their choice.

The loss results in what Melley refers to as “agency panic,” which, at its simplest, refers to “a pervasive set of anxieties about the way technologies, social organizations, and communication systems may have reduced human autonomy and uniqueness” (7). Yet for all its discussion of the consequence of the universal conspiracy, Melley’s theory maintains a crucial distinction between the conspiracy and the real, or even proper, understanding of the individual as an autonomous being subject to appropriation. Without this distance, the “anxiety” he examines would be unrecognizable.

If the consequence of the conspiracy is a loss of personal identity, its genesis is the possibility of some secret knowledge. Ironically, however, this secret knowledge does little to provide any more meaning beyond recognizing the conspiracy’s existence. This odd disconnect suggests that the fundamental element is the conspiracy itself. Even the “terrible secret” that Dodson-Truck knows, and which he eventually discloses to Slothrop, does little to provide meaning to his function. He remains just a “recording eye” (219). Fully defined by his role in the conspiracy, even Dodson-Truck’s glimpse at the larger truth that the White Visitation is preoccupied with the connection between Slothrop having sex and the rocket strikes does not free him from this yoke. Slothrop, too, proves unable to reassert his identity, continues to be defined by the conspiracy, and remains apparently willingly uninformed about how the conspiracy relates to him.

After Dodson-Truck is killed for having told too much, Katje confronts Slothrop to discover just how much he knows, but Slothrop meets her questions with his own. Later that day, Katje drops increasingly pointed hints revealing that she, too, has a deeper

insight into the conspiracy than Slothrop. But like Dodson-Truck's ellipses, Katje hesitates and does not say all she might; she suggests only that he "remember" (226). Katje soon qualifies her earlier suggestion and encourages Slothrop to misremember their first encounter. Perhaps, she suggests,

[y]ou'll find out. Maybe in one of their bombed-out cities, beside one of their rivers or forests, even one day in the rain, it will come to you. You'll remember the Himmler-Spielsaal, and the skirt I was wearing . . . memory will dance for you, and you can even make it my voice saying what I couldn't say then. Or now.
(227)

Organized around the metaphor of a dancing memory, Katje's hypothetical scenario leads Slothrop from a recollection of objective facts to an unspoken and ill-defined realization of the deeper truths of the conspiracy before inviting him to invent a fictitious past in which she tells him the secrets she presently conceals. Katje's suggestion reveals that understanding the conspiracy is less about uncovering some hidden truth than it is about recognizing and manipulating fantasy to serve one's ends.

Fittingly, Slothrop begins to recognize the conspiracy shortly after Katje's suggestion that he remember their conversation differently. The narrator's animated description of the conspiracy exceeds even Slothrop's fears and emphasize its monstrous dimensions in an organized effort to conceal the conspiracy from him. The narrator characterizes the conspiracy as a "beast in the sky; its visible claws and scales [...] mistaken for clouds and other plausibilities . . . or else everyone has agreed *to call them other names* when Slothrop is listening . . ." (244). No longer intangible, the conspiracy

seems to pose a real and immediate threat. His only choice seems to be to run from the conspiracy and seek refuge in disguises that become increasingly absurd.

Leo Bersani in “Pynchon, Paranoia, and Literature” argues that Slothrop’s decision to adopt archetypal roles is a response to Slothrop’s belief that some powerful other, namely the conspiracy itself, is bent on persecuting him. In these terms, Bersani argues, “Slothrop [...] ‘fight[s] back’ by disappearing into roles that are themselves simulations of comic-book stereotypes and folkloric heroes” (111). But to continue Bersani’s bellicose metaphor, waging such a war comes at a steep cost, namely the sacrifice of Slothrop’s own identity. For if he is to escape the conspiracy, Slothrop must become indistinguishable from the aliases he assumes.

Bersani’s argument would be convincing if it did not overlook a crucial passage in *Gravity’s Rainbow* that explains why Slothrop ultimately disintegrates and, in doing so, undermines Bersani’s conclusion. Explaining a law governing personal density presented by the character Kurt Mondaugen, the narrator notes that “the narrower your sense of Now, the more tenuous you are. It may get to where you’re having trouble remembering what you were doing five minutes ago, or even—as Slothrop now—what you’re doing *here*” (517). The explicit mention of Slothrop as an example of the theory serves as an endorsement of the correctness of the underlying law and dismantles Bersani’s conclusion that Slothrop’s disintegration is the direct consequence of assuming an alias.

Even in his most absurd disguise, that of the pig-hero Plechazunga, which requires Slothrop to put on a psychedelic pig costume, Slothrop remains closely tied to

the present. Moreover, while pretending to be the mythic hero, Slothrop is as closely, if absurdly, tied to the present as he is anywhere in the novel. Cajoled into wearing the costume by the children of the village, Slothrop acts out the ceremonial scene of chasing the marauding Viking army, played by the children, back into the sea. In doing so he, as Bersani puts it, falls into the mythic stereotype. Yet, once the villagers are threatened by the local police who seek to break up the black market trading that follows the Plechazunga festival, Slothrop finds himself in a series of events that are individually quite probable but as a series approach the absurd. Slothrop finds himself first in a street brawl, then in the bed of a teen-age girl who has lost her father, then escaping from the town and finding himself in a ditch, and then decides to raid a chicken coop. That Slothrop does all these things while wearing a pig costume and while being followed by an amorous pig is certainly absurd. However, his focus on immediate concerns like protecting himself and others in a fight, escaping from a group of corrupt police officers chasing him, and of finding enough food suggests a profound and unwavering connection to the present. Ironically, then, the aliases do not cause Slothrop to lose himself, but according the logic of *Gravity's Rainbow*, they are the moments when Slothrop is most himself, when he is most grounded in the present.

Slothrop does ultimately disintegrate. But here again the relationship between Slothrop's identity and the conspiracy depends not as much on his adoption of yet another and final identity but on his peculiar relationship to the conspiracy. Shortly before he dissolves into the Zone, Slothrop begins to find omens everywhere. Even the broken walls, "where facing has been shot away to reveal the brick underneath," reveal "specific shapes that may also be read" (636). Preoccupied with omens of what might

happen and with the possibility that no omens will be forthcoming, Slothrop attempts, in a moment of characteristic Pynchonesque humor, to cement his understanding of the future by reading masonry, brick, and plaster. However, these signs hold merely the possibility that they “might” be deciphered. Unfortunately for Slothrop, they never are.

The problem is not one of literacy. Slothrop has become adept at detecting, or creating, signs that identify the conspiracy and reveal insights into it. The problem is that deciphering the conspiracy forces Slothrop out of linear time and into the “Other Side” where there is “no serial time [...]: events are all there in the same eternal moment and so certain messages don’t always ‘make sense’ back here: they lack historical structure, why sound fanciful, or insane” (637). Slothrop’s problem deciphering the text is exactly the same as the problem that causes him to lose much of his identity. Slothrop loses more and more connection to his past. It becomes either a subject to imaginatively reinvent, or, more damagingly, something that loses any distinction whatsoever. Past, present, and future become the same thing, and in this moment of temporal disruption, Slothrop’s original identity is tied to the past and the unique self becomes untenable, as Bersani argues.

Unable to make sense of the signs that surround him, Slothrop becomes a symbol, and like many of the symbols in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, his leads to yet another story. “He becomes a cross himself, a crossroads, a living intersection where the judges have come to set up a gibbet for a common criminal who is to be hanged at noon.” (637). The immediate introduction of yet another narrative suggests that even in this transformation, Slothrop is bound in some larger and poorly understood narrative. The narrative that

follows ties the hanging man's ejaculation with the conventional folktale that mandrake roots grow at criminal's graves and a bizarre version of the myth of the philosopher's stone in which the mandrake root can increase money ten-fold. The complexity of the narrative and its evocative image invite reading the entire story as a metaphor. The image of the dying man's sperm falling on the ground provides an analog for the conspiracy surrounding Slothrop's erection when exposed to Imoplex-B. Likewise, the magician who harvests the mandrake can be read as Jamf who conditioned Slothrop to respond to Imoplex-B in the first place. But although these and other correspondences are easy enough to draw, they lead nowhere, neither to another well-defined turn in the plot, nor to a clear epiphany. Indeed, the narrative ends with an ellipsis. Perhaps something more is to come in the narrative, perhaps something crucial has been left unsaid, but clearly the story remains unfinished and its meaning undetermined.

As might be expected, determining meaning is no simple matter. Much of the difficulty comes from the problem of differentiating the major and minor plot lines, as all too often a passage that appears to be nothing more than a piece of atmosphere later reveals itself as a vital piece of metanarrative. Recounting the height of Slothrop's paranoia, the narrator describes Slothrop reflecting on his work years ago as a street cleaner. The once apparently innocuous and meaningless trash he picked up acquires a special significance when, years later, Slothrop has "[d]ays when in superstition and fright he could make it all fit, seeing clearly in each an entry in a record, a history: his own, his winter's his country's ... instructing him, dunce and drifter, in ways deeper than he can explain" (638). In his current paranoid state of mind, Slothrop retroactively assigns new meanings to old garbage. Slothrop does not specifically fulfill Katje's

suggestion that he re-imagine their first meeting as one in which she tells him all he needs to know. But here he comes close; he recasts even the most innocuous elements from his past as signs of the conspiracy that surrounds him. And by doing so, he invests the trash with profound meanings that he can only partially understand. However, born of “superstition,” Slothrop’s insights are inherently suspect, even within the enormous and bizarre conspiracies that surround him. As we have seen, Slothrop’s paranoia at first leads him closer to the truth of the conspiracies that swirl around him and provides him with a way of combating the forces that seek to control him. However, here the conspiratorial thinking leads him away from the truth and back into his own fear and fantasy.

Ultimately for Slothrop, the distance between the items he remembers, their meaning, and himself will collapse. Slothrop disappears into the “crossroads” that just a page earlier provides the setting for a story of a criminal about to be hanged (638). But in this ultimate collapse, no narrative explains the symbol’s meaning. Quite the contrary, this second disintegration into a symbol occurs with “not a thing in [Slothrop’s] head” (638). Given Slothrop’s tendency to ascribe meaning to the coincidental and plots to the accidental, the absence of thought is startling, a surprise compounded by the narrator’s explanation that Slothrop was “just feeling natural...” (638). The narrator’s description implies an authentic and unproblematic perception of events, and his final, correct understanding of the conspiracy surrounding Slothrop and the appropriate response, which is to relinquish any sense of identity or agency. He becomes the pure function that Dodson-Truck describes whose fundamental identity exists only in reference to the conspiracy. The ultimate consequence of the conspiracy surrounding Slothrop is not that

it cannot exclude the war or create an alternative narrative, but that in accepting the war so totally, it leaves no place for him precisely because it deprives him of the choice to join or to leave the community built around and out of the conspiracy. Slothrop loses this opportunity precisely because he identifies so completely with the community that surrounds him. More importantly, Slothrop's loss of identity suggests that one consequence of the postmodern communities which are built around narratives is that the individual members can be reduced to nothing more than another aspect of the narrative.

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The community presented in the last page of *Gravity's Rainbow's* conclusion presents a community protected from the pressures that undo the others. The community's resilience depends in large part on the distinctive features Kermode argues are intrinsic to the conclusions of narratives. The conclusion must find a way of resolving the tensions that drive the narrative forward, and to do so, it disassociates itself from the flow of the rest of the narrative.

Pynchon's novel emphasizes this disassociation in its last few pages as the narrative transitions from a recounting of the war to describing a movie playing at the Orpheus theater near the heart of downtown Los Angeles. There, the moviegoers have watched a film that recounts the events in the novel. The audience is even aware of the firing of the S-Gerät rocket. In a paradoxical moment of self-referential narrative, the

audience realizes that the rocket is hurtling towards them. In the moment before the rocket strikes, the narrative shifts its focus again and directly addresses the reader:

There is time, if you need the comfort, to touch the person next to you, or to reach between your own cold legs . . . or, if song must find you here's one They never taught anyone to sing, a hymn by William Slothrop, centuries forgotten and out of print, sung to a simple and pleasant air of the period. (775).

The intimacy of the narrative's "you" implicates the reader in the events that have thus far problematized most of the conventions of the novel even as they have remained trapped within *Gravity's Rainbow's* pages. In the last scene, the novel abandons this distance and implies that the reader faces the same threat as the rest of the observers in the theater. Pynchon leverages the static characteristic of the conclusion to suspend the implicit threat of the rocket's strike and to make the choice the reader faces unanswerable because the novel ends without the choice being made.

In this moment of perfect suspension, *Gravity's Rainbow* emphasizes that the fundamental characteristic of the postmodern community is the possibility of choosing to be part of the community. The choice itself is important only insofar as it establishes, or does not establish a community. The potential for community resides in the choice itself. The final community in *Gravity's Rainbow* becomes, therefore, a sort of formal exchange that does not necessarily convey meaning. Its entire function is to establish the system necessary for community to form. The presence of this community in the novel's final scene implies a different understanding of the postmodern community than we find in the theory. Where theorists present the postmodern community in terms of its usefulness in

establishing some goal, Pynchon presents an idea of community that does not define itself in terms of goals or even the preservation of the individual but merely the desire to connect and to offer its members comfort. In these terms, *Gravity's Rainbow* presents a zero degree community, one that is at home in the postmodern world and that is the foundation of the other notions of community that circulate in works of postmodern theory.

Pynchon's apparently subtle reformulation of community in *Gravity's Rainbow* leads to a radical revision of what communities are as well as how they function. The recognition of the importance of desire in the construction of community is central to Pynchon's observations. Pynchon explicitly interrogates an early and influential discussion of community found in Plato's *The Republic*. In Book V, one of Socrates's interlocutors, Adeimantus, presents an apparently trivial statement and follows with what appears to be an equally transparent request, "community may be of many kinds. Please, therefore, to say what sort of community you mean" (455). Within the immediate purposes of *The Republic*, the statements are important only insofar as they spur further consideration of how an ideal society should be framed. But in doing so they introduce an assumption that Pynchon questions: the individual must select from among the several communities available. *Gravity's Rainbow's* conclusion, on the other hand, suggests that one may choose to remain outside of, or to remove oneself from a community and indulge in self-gratification. In doing so, Pynchon replaces the unquestioned assumption in *The Republic* that the individual will join the community he finds most accommodating to his needs and desires, which finds a distant but clear echo in

Hutcheon's notion of the postmodern community, with a wholly individual choice governed only by considerations of pleasure.

By offering an alternate vision of community, Pynchon likewise revises the conventional understanding of the obligations an individual owes to a community. The duties an individual owes to a community are enumerated in perhaps their most basic and influential form in the Socratic dialog *Crito*. Having lost his bid for freedom before Athens's court, Socrates awaits his execution and is visited by several friends, chief among them Crito, who press him to escape Athens and his death sentence. In typical fashion, Socrates first considers and then refutes the arguments posed against him. Socrates claims he is obligated to remain because he decided to be a citizen of Athens and not some other community. To flee, Socrates argues, would be to break the "commitments and agreements" he has made to live under Athenian law, even when the law proves onerous. Thus at the root of Socrates's argument is an unwavering commitment to a rational choice.

The final paragraph of *Gravity's Rainbow* suspends these obligations, however, by offering the reader a choice to hold hands with another, to masturbate, or to sing (75). In doing so, Pynchon suggests that at the moment of annihilation, the individual is free to choose not only to participate in a community but also to remove himself from it. However, arguing that Pynchon problematizes Plato's theory of community requires finding the community of moviegoers and readers who populate the last pages of *Gravity's Rainbow* and the citizens of Athens to be in some way equal communities. The apparent triviality of the first and significance of the second would seem to make the

comparison enormously problematic. However, the situation that Pynchon envisions elevates the significance of the choice the audience faces by making it the last choice they will ever make. Thus, Pynchon reverses the most powerful of Plato's articulations of social responsibility—that these responsibilities remain even when facing death. Instead, Pynchon suggests that, if nowhere else, in the final moment, obligations drop away and the individual can make an unencumbered choice.

The alternate vision of community Pynchon offers depends upon the flexibility inherent in Lyotard's characterization of postmodernism as the movement towards petite narratives. His framework does not require the adoption of one understanding of community over the other but allows both to serve as viable alternatives. And recognizing the inherent possibility for making a choice likewise calls into question some of the governing assumptions surrounding postmodernism. *Gravity's Rainbow* shows that what has in many cases been taken as doctrine—that the postmodern tends towards fragmentation—is perhaps more a matter of individual choice than of necessity. For as we have seen, several of the more influential postmodern theorists gesture toward some notion of community as part of the foundation of their theory.

I would like to close by returning to a characteristic of the postmodern I have previously discussed. Brian McHale argues that postmodern fiction is characterized by its investigation of ontological questions. It is, in other words, an exploration of what is possible not only within the narrow conventions of literary genres but within the wider scope of philosophy as well. At its best, postmodern fiction causes us to question what

we know about fiction and how we think about postmodern theory. Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, one of the first recognized postmodern novels, does just that.

**Chapter 2: “Our offering is language”: Language as Community in
Don DeLillo’s *The Names***

Like Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Don DeLillo’s *The Names* foregrounds the possibility for community in a postmodern novel. But where Pynchon presets a series of oppositions between dominant and minority communities, DeLillo emphasizes the provisionality of all communities. Thus, *The Names* works with a different set of questions than Pynchon does. Of particular interest in *The Names* are the connections the novel draws between language, community, and narrative.

Gene Lyons draws indirect attention to the interlacing of these three conditions in his ambiguous review Don DeLillo’s *The Names*. On the one hand, the review offers such hyperbolic praise that Random House’s editors selected a passage from it as the first blurb for their Vintage Books edition. Claiming that “almost every page of *The Names* gives evidence of its author’s brilliance and originality,” he leaves little doubt about DeLillo’s skill. However, the rest of the review enumerates several flaws in the novel. He summarizes his criticism concisely in the last paragraph, which refers to the mysterious murders committed by a cult: “What DeLillo’s characters mostly do about the cult is talk” (117). And for Lyons, the conversation is the problem. Lyons argues that characters more given to conversation and contemplation than action create an anemic story that has little inertia. The result is a “void” that consumes “motivation, plot, and character” (117).

Lyons’s criticism presents a traditional aesthetics of the novel, and he finds fault with DeLillo’s novel because by privileging language so highly, it challenges what Lyons

holds to be a central feature of the genre of the novel. And finding his expectations unsatisfied, Lyons predictably rejects *The Names* as a brilliant but profoundly flawed novel that presents dazzling insights and a soporific plot. Lyons is not alone in his tendency to read DeLillo according to this aesthetics. In “Generic Difficulties in the Novels of Don DeLillo,” John Johnston provides a catalog of reviews of DeLillo’s novels that “are troubled by DeLillo’s handling of the novel form” (262). These oversights, Johnston claims, proceed from the imposition of modernist aesthetic on DeLillo’s novel and “run the danger of missing what is most fundamental to his fiction” (274).

In his attempt to fit *The Names* into a conventional notion of the genre of the novel, Lyons overlooks the remarkable challenge the novel poses about the nature of postmodernism and community. At its most basic, *The Names* is a murder mystery. A series of killings in and around the Mediterranean by a mysterious cult, Ta Onomata, captures the attention of James Axon, who works as a risk-analyst for multinational corporations and serves as both narrator and protagonist and tells the story some time after its events conclude.

However, beyond the conventions of the mystery, *The Names* interrogates a central paradox: the mystery, which is of necessity plot-driven, requires both the possibility for absolute truth and a methodology for uncovering and then verifying that truth, yet *The Names* admits only to the potential for uncovering the truth and provides no fixed interpretive schema. Thus, solving the mystery of the cult’s murders is not only about discovering who committed them but what the murders mean. Moreover, what the murders mean becomes a matter of establishing a narrative that can make sense of them. This narrative, in turn, presupposes a community, which is exactly what James lacks.

Forced to travel for his job, James finds himself estranged from his wife and his son. And to a lesser degree, he feels isolated from the world at large. Ultimately, language serves as both barrier and bridge to the connections James desires. His frequent metanarrative interjections distance him from the events as he relates them and introduces an odd distance for a first person narrative. Yet language also provides a means for creating communities through the simple act of communication. Because James serves as the first-person narrator of *The Names*, his recognition of the connection between language and community operates as an endorsement. In turn, this recognition challenges the conventional characteristics of postmodern fiction and conventional assumptions about community.

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In *The Differend* Jean-François Lyotard takes up this problem of negotiating between explanations of the world that lay no claim to absolute truth. He explores how statements made within different and incompatible petite narratives can be made to talk to one another and how these statements might be adjudicated to arrive at some conclusion. In particular, Lyotard frames his investigation in terms of the Holocaust trials¹⁰ and the profound challenges such trials present. At its most basic, the problem is one of finding someone who can testify to being persecuted by the events of the

¹⁰ Lyotard is not a Holocaust denier but regards the Holocaust as one of the more intractable and certainly one of the most important practical examples of the philosophical problem of how to resolve incommensurate positions when neither side recognizes a common adjudicating authority.

Holocaust because the definition of the Holocaust, which Lyotard implies includes the eradication of all victims, precludes even the possibility of witnesses. Lyotard articulates the rationale behind this conclusion in exhaustive detail.

Lyotard begins with a quote from a Holocaust denier and goes on to explain the reasoning behind the claim:

“I have analyzed thousands of documents. I have tirelessly pursued specialists and historians with my questions. I have tried in vain to find a single former deportee capable of proving to me that he had really seen, with his own eyes, a gas chamber” (Faurisson in Piere Vidal Naquet, 1981: 81). To have “really seen with his own eyes” a gas chamber would be the condition which gives one the authority to say that it exists and to persuade the unbeliever. Yet it is still necessary to prove that the gas chamber was used to kill at the time it was seen. The only acceptable proof that it was used to kill is that one died from it. But if one is dead, one cannot testify that it is on account of the gas chamber. The plaintiff complains that he has been fooled about the existence of gas chambers, fooled that is, about the so-called Final Solution. His argument is: in order for a place to be identified as a gas chamber, the only eyewitness I will accept would be a victim of this gas chamber; now, according to my opponent, there is no victim that is not dead; otherwise, this gas chamber would not be what he or she claims it to be. There is, therefore, no gas chamber. (3-4)

Given the premises of the argument as Lyotard articulates it, the very act of a victim accusing another of participating in a Holocaust necessarily precludes the charge. If anyone survives, the act is, by definition, not the Holocaust. It is important to recognize

that Lyotard accepts that the Holocaust occurred. His argument concerns why certain events prohibit certain resolutions. In particular, he focuses on the events that make accusing another of a crime logically impossible. Lyotard presents his argument by drawing on the legal categories of plaintiff, defendant, and victim. He writes, “I would like to call a differend the case where the plaintiff is divested of the means to argue and becomes for that reason a victim” (9). The problem of being unable to argue centers on two questions. He frames the first early in *The Differend*. Introducing a hypothetical situation in which all historical referents are stripped away, Lyotard poses the first problem as one of gathering reliable evidence:

You are informed that human beings endowed with language were placed in a situation such that none of them is now able to tell about it. Most of them disappeared then and the survivors rarely speak about it. When they do speak about it, their testimony bears only upon a minute part of this situation. How can you know that the situation itself existed? That it is not the fruit of your informant’s imagination? Either the situation did not exist as such. Or else it did exist, in which case your informant’s testimony is false, either because he or she should have disappeared, or else because he or she should remain silent, or else because, if he or she does speak, he or she can bear witness only to the particular experience he had, it remained to be established whether this experience was a component of the situation in question. (3)

The structure of Lyotard’s presentation is worth noting. He begins by imagining a situation in which individuals cannot attest to or choose not to attest to a wrong they have suffered. He raises the question of how to determine if a crime occurred if there is no

evidence of it and concludes by wondering if any evidence of the crime is even possible—at least within a legal context. His three-part hypothetical turns on a single question: “How can you know that the situation itself existed?” His question centers on how to discover meaning within the scope of the postmodern world.

Lyotard’s answer must address something akin to the petite narratives at the root of his theory of postmodernism.¹¹ Lacking any absolute authority to appeal to, and so having no means to impose meaning on the various propositions offered in it, Lyotard imagines instead a common place created at the juncture or intersection of the two claims that the crime did or did not occur. Lyotard does not offer a solution to the question “Did the crime occur?” Nor does he provide a rubric for resolving a differend. He concludes instead that perhaps the only thing that is possible is a conversation. The differend “summons humans to situate themselves in unknown phrase universes, even if they don’t have the feeling that something has to be phrased. (For this is a necessity and not an obligation.) The *Is it happening?* is invincible to every will to gain time” (181). Language not only permeates Lyotard’s thinking about the differend, but it remains the only medium through which we can encounter it. And the differend itself calls attention to its linguistic foundations. Although perhaps not as insistent as Derrida’s famous maxim “*Il n’y a pas de hors-texte*,” which is commonly translated as “there is nothing outside the text,”¹² Lyotard’s theory requires that we pay attention to the interplay between language, community, and meaning as it attempts to negotiate solutions to apparently intractable

¹¹ For a further discussion, please refer to my discussion of petite narratives in the Introduction to the dissertation.

¹² Sometimes translated “there is no outside text.”

problems (227).¹³ Most importantly, though Lyotard acknowledges that any particular differend may remain unresolved and perhaps prove fundamentally irresolvable, the necessity of solving these problems is unavoidable: “The differend is the unstable state and instant of language wherein something which must be able to be put into [a] phrase cannot yet be” (13).

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The scholarship on DeLillo’s novels supports approaching his novels through the lens of postmodern theory. Scholars frequently cite DeLillo’s novels as exemplars of postmodern American fiction. David Cowart, who has written extensively on both DeLillo and Pynchon, remarks that while the two authors are the “mythic cousins of postmodernism,” DeLillo alone stands as the “postmodern anointed” (7). Though awkwardly fulsome with its praise, Cowart’s assessment of DeLillo’s abilities parallels the statement that has done the most to establish DeLillo as a postmodern novelist: Fredric Jameson’s description of DeLillo as “the most interesting and talented of

¹³ Though Lyotard says little about the ethical implications of his theory, other scholars draw on the differend to construct a postmodern ethics. Allen Dunn, for instance, argues: Witnessing the discord generated by these incommensurate practices can serve as a protest against ethical hubris and oversimplification. It may even provide the individual with a sublime instance of discontinuity, with the realization that the experiential moment in some way exceeds each of the self’s particular commitments. This, however, does not spell an end to either history or the human subject; indeed, as Lyotard’s examples attest, these discontinuous moments are as full of allegorical portent for our collective future as any of the episodes in the nineteenth-century metanarratives. (29)

American postmodernist novelists.” (117).¹⁴

Jameson is not alone in his assessment. Several of the most influential works on DeLillo’s writing offer fine-grained taxonomies of his writing, and most conclude, like Jameson, that some feature of his writing pulls against the tenets of postmodern fiction. In most cases, the foundation of the argument that DeLillo’s novels are not postmodern rests on a claim of some underlying ethics that is incompatible with a conventional understanding of the postmodern. Tom LeClair, for instance, in his book-length study *In the Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel*, argues that DeLillo’s writing is best understood through the aesthetics of the systems novel and not, as many hold, through a postmodern aesthetics. Creating a space for his argument, LeClair offers a sweeping rejection of the tendency to read DeLillo’s novels through deconstructive and postmodern hermeneutics. In doing so, LeClair frames his argument by drawing on language more common to discussions of ethics than literature. He notes that by focusing so narrowly on the deconstructive and the postmodern elements of DeLillo’s novels, critics come to “value the new rather than the good in all of its possible meanings” (24). LeClair remains silent about what all the possible meanings of “good” literature are. This evasion permits him to sidestep the tricky business of constructing an ethical argument about literature.

Built into LeClair’s ethical argument is an underlying assumption of community. LeClair especially praises DeLillo’s tendency to address both the global and personal

¹⁴ The praise scholars heap on DeLillo as a postmodernist carries with it its own subtle irony; he figures himself not as a postmodernist but rather as a modernist in an interview with Gerald Marzorati. Though the interview does not include a discussion of the rationale behind DeLillo’s statement, the statement does suggest that he notes some crucial differences between his writing and the conventional understanding of postmodern literature.

perspectives in his novels. LeClair observes that “for every global perspective, there are in DeLillo’s novels specific human moments, details that prove his participation in systems small as well as large, in families and in space probes, local fears and wide entertainments that hide those fears” (27). In part an observation that bolsters his claim that DeLillo writes system novels, LeClair’s statement also introduces the groundwork for the ethical claims he introduces. The groundwork lies in the communities he identifies throughout DeLillo’s novels. Ironically, however, while LeClair offers detailed analyses of several of the elements of DeLillo’s fiction, he rarely mentions how communities operate in the novels. And even when he does consider communities, LeClair never investigates what constitutes the communities but rather treats them as an unproblematic whole.

The implied communities in LeClair’s argument emphasizes the important role they play in DeLillo’s novels. In particular, by basing his argument on the assumption that DeLillo’s novels are not properly postmodern, LeClair implies a fundamental tension between the conventional notions of community and postmodernity. However, the rigid line he presents proves problematic. As DeLillo shows in *The Names*, the concepts are far more flexible than they initially appear. In DeLillo’s novel, language defines communities, but then so too does language depend on a particular context—on a specific community—to acquire meaning. Drawing a parallel between meaning and community, *The Names* subtly but powerfully collapses the difference between the two as meaning and community become highly contextualized. And in doing so, DeLillo’s novel offers an unconventional presentation of the postmodern in which communities are implicit.

Analyzing DeLillo's presentation requires attending to two distinct elements. First through the protagonist's, James's, observations about the tourists climbing the Acropolis and his conversations with his wife and his son, *The Names* explores the consequences of a community constructed not only out of the choice to belong but also out of the possibility for communication. Second, though the desperate ritual murders of Ta Onomata, the novel investigates the possibility of meaning in a world where all meaning is self-referential and presented as Lyotardian petite narratives. Taken together, these two components of DeLillo's plot reveal a notion of the postmodern that preserves not only the possibility of community but also the potential for meaning—albeit of a highly provisional sort.

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The novel's protagonist, James, frames *The Names* with two contrasting depictions of groups of tourists ascending the hill on their way to visit the Acropolis, which James regards as a monument not only to classical aesthetics, but also to reason itself. He presents the ancient temple as “what we've rescued from the madness. Beauty, dignity, order, proportion” (3). The differences between his two portrayals reveal his shifting understanding of community as something dependent on a shared identity to one predicated on the possibility of communication and therefore on language itself. Moreover, by framing his narrative with these two scenes, DeLillo underscores the search for community as a central theme in *The Names*.

James follows his initial description of the Acropolis with a self-conscious transition into the rest of the narrative: “One night (as we enter narrative time) I was driving with friends” (4). The parenthetical metanarrative comment announces a disconnection between the tableau of the Acropolis that opens *The Names* and the remainder of the novel. Set off from the rest of the narrative, the opening scene acquires a special significance and does as much to announce the themes that run through DeLillo’s novel as it does to establish the setting. Two distinct images organize the novel’s opening. In the first image, James invests the Acropolis with classical virtues. Regarding the hill for the ancient Athenian temples as something akin to a sacred space, he remarks that any visit imposes “obligations” on the visitor. Perhaps because of these obligations, James maintains even a lexical distance from the Acropolis and relies on largely abstract language to characterize the space he invests with such value.

The sanctified space James associates with the Acropolis stands in marked contrast to his monotonous description of the tourists who actually make the journey up the hill to visit the monument. Unlike his description of the Acropolis, which he invests with classical virtues, James imagines himself among the tourists who climb the old stones to the temple in largely prosaic terms. He pictures the tourists approaching the temple “slowly, out of every bending lane, in waves of color and sound, came tourists in striped sneakers, fanning themselves with postcards, the philhellenes, laboring uphill, vastly unhappy, mingling in one unbroken line up to the monumental gateway” (3). His discussion of the tourists conveys none of the restraint or balance of the Acropolis and presents instead a swirling riot of sound, color, and motion. And though James envisions the mass of people organizing themselves into an unbroken line, he remains literally and

figuratively apart from the pilgrimage to the temples atop the Acropolis as he neither walks with them nor understands the reasons for doing so. The trip he imagines brings neither insight nor appreciation, nor does it satisfy the obligations he associates with visiting the Acropolis.

However, James's isolation is only temporary. In his narrative's final scene (the novel's epilogue is written by his son Tap), James visits the Acropolis and finds not the static beauty he had imagined but "part of the living city below" (330). What he finds atop the Acropolis repudiates not only his initial understanding of the monument as something cut off from the rest of the world, perfect and inaccessible in its aesthetic purity, but as a place "to enter in crowds, seek company and talk" (331). James's description fuses language and community. Imagining the group of strangers as a place where he may find companions, he offers an understanding of community that depends on the desire to come together and on the possibility for communication even among strangers.

The similar setting of the opening and closing scenes of James's narratives encourages recognizing the connection between language and community, inviting a narrow focus on the significance of language. His final sentences elevate language to the level of ritual: "Everyone is talking. I move past the scaffolding and walk down the steps, hearing one language after another, rich, harsh, mysterious, and strong. This is what we bring to the temple, not prayer or chant or slaughtered rams. Our offering is language" (331). However, focusing too narrowly on the role of language frequently leads scholars to forget the importance of the specific contexts. Cowart, who presents one of the few book-length considerations of DeLillo's work, remarks that "DeLillo comes to insist,

over and over, on something numinous and redemptive in language. He trusts the medium in which he works and has his creative life. Conceptualizing language at some frontier of the immutable and the ephemeral, DeLillo seems actually—in this matter and in others—to tease the reader with what might be called intimates of essentiality” (180). The absolute terms Cowart invokes to discuss DeLillo’s work echo James’s initial description of the Acropolis: both passages invoke an aesthetics that unifies beauty and ethics to describe their subjects.

DeLillo ultimately moves away from claims of absolute beauty and introduces instead an aesthetics that arises out of conversation rather than absolute assertion. Cowart, however, remains fixated on the absolute, transcendental notions of beauty. To purify language, Cowart must ignore the very communities DeLillo emphasizes at the end of James’s narrative. However, the problem is not only one of emphasis but also one of the philosophical difference between Cowart’s reading and what the conversations at the end of *The Names* imply. Cowart argues that DeLillo trusts language to transcend the specifics of a given situation and to work at a level of unchanging and undifferentiated truth. *The Names*, on the other hand, emphasizes the significance of context throughout its narrative. Rather than offer a transcendent meaning or an ideal community, DeLillo’s novel emphasizes the provisionality of both. Moreover, while the paired scenes of the Acropolis underscore the role of language in establishing community, it falls to the rest of the narrative to develop the implications of a community formed from language.

James’s conversations with his wife Kathryn emphasize that language does not transcend a particular context but instead depends on the particulars of a given situation. Separated from his wife, who has custody of their son Tap, James recognizes a need to

reconnect with her and remarks that “what she and I need was a way to be together without feeling there were issues we had to confront, the bloody leftovers of eleven years” (20). According to James, the point of the conversations is precisely not what Cowart imagines, to somehow transcend the mundane and offer a universal vision, but rather to avoid. *The Names* emphasizes that language serves as the bedrock for community in James’s description of the conversation he has with Kathryn and their mutual friend Owen Brademas. James foreshadows the epiphany he will have at the Acropolis in his remark about Kathryn and their need for Owen: “We needed a third voice, subject remote from us. This is why I came to put a high practical value on those conversations. They allowed us to connect through the agency of this wan soul, Owen Brademas” (20). Far from the transcendent language Cowart envisions, the conversations among these three serve no purpose other than to create a sense of community through conversation. Moreover, the mediation that Owen provides is crucial as is the remoteness of the highly academic subjects he proposes. This distance enables James and Kathryn to talk, and far from being an impediment to their forming a community, it serves as the foundation of community.

Initially, the discussions between Tap and his father function much like those between James and Kathryn. Tap, a precocious nine-year-old boy intrigued by and comfortable with words and their meanings, frequently discusses language with his father. Tap’s affinity for language becomes apparent in their first conversation. When Tap asks his father for an opinion on the novel he is writing, James notes that while Tap’s story is riveting, he has confused Mackintosh for an Ingersoll. James recognizes that words are important to his son as he watches Tap “store the names and the objects they

belonged to for safekeeping” (10.) James and Tap’s conversation about language highlights the importance of language in *The Names* and draws a connection between language and community.

But while the initial conversation between James and his son emphasizes language’s potential to strengthen their relationship, a later parallel discussion reveals the malleability and fragility of a community composed of language. The revelation evolves out of an apparently insignificant linguistic game Tap plays called Ob. Ob, James, explains, is “a coded jargon” (10-11). The rules of Ob are straightforward: the syllable “ob” is inserted after the first consonant¹⁵ of a word and, by doing so, renders the original indistinguishable to anyone who does not understand Ob. Admittedly, Ob is not properly a language; it does not include a grammar, a semantics, or a pragmatics. However, Tap’s use of Ob presents an elegant introduction to the consequences of defining communities through language which are that communities are inherently permeable and relatively easy to create.

In particular, such communities are defined by the rules that govern the conversations its members engage in. Consequently, anyone who knows the rules becomes a member of the community. James explicitly notes this flexibility in his remark that Tap uses Ob “as a kind of substitute Greek or counter-Greek” (11). When taken with James’s earlier observation that Tap learned Ob from Kathryn who used to speak Ob with her sisters, the child’s simple linguistic code defines not one community but three overlapping communities. The first is the familial community of Kathryn’s blood relationships. She and her sisters speak Ob, so too does Tap. James, however, does not.

¹⁵ *The Names* does not specify how to use Ob to encode words beginning with a vowel.

The second and third communities James identifies (those who speak Greek and those who use Ob as an alternative identity) suggest the political and cultural dimensions of language. Ob is a stand in for a national identity, or perhaps a resistance to that identity. The implications seem enormous for what is after all nothing more than a child's linguistic game, but that they surface here reveals the profound connection between language and community and emphasizes that to speak a language is to be part of a particular community.

More significantly, to invent a new language is to potentially invent a new community. In an apparently innocuous conversation with his mother, father, and Owen, Tap proposes an entirely new medium of communication. James asks Tap, who he knows uses English as his primary language, if he can say "goodnight" in Greek. Tap responds "Greek-Ob or Greek-Greek?" (22). Surprised by her son's inventiveness, Kathryn recognizes Tap's creativity and acknowledges "Greek-Ob. I never thought of that" (22). Tap's apparently innocent question about which language he should respond in radically presents language not only as a medium for communication but also as a medium out of which communities are created.

The fundamental connection between language and community does not surface in the creation of a community. Rather, it manifests through Tap's anxiety when he discovers that he does not recognize a word apparently spoken in Ob. In a moment of playful banter, James asks Tap why he taught Ob to his friend Rajiv and if his motivations might be to provoke James's jealousy. "If you become Ob-sessed, I blame her [Tap's mother]. Is that the idea?" (88). This apparently innocent question provokes a startling emotional response. Tap's answer includes none of his father's playfulness nor

the facility with language Tap presents elsewhere in the novel. Instead, he turns to his father “a little wild-eyed” and pleads, “Don’t tell me what that’s called. I’m thinking. Just wait, okay?” (88).

Tap’s anxiety appears to have nothing to do with the subject of his father’s question—the possible manipulation of one parent against the other. Instead, Tap concentrates on the form of the question, on his father’s playing with the Ob code, a use that Tap cannot decipher. The reason Tap cannot understand what his father is saying is simple: James has misused the code. Decrypted according to Ob’s protocols, “Ob-sessed” would become “sessed,” which is a word neither Tap nor his father recognizes. But if the reasons for the misunderstanding are simple enough to identify, its implications are not. James’s moment of playful banter calls his son’s ability with Ob into question. By doing so, James effectively, if unintentionally, threatens his son’s connection not only with his friend Rajiv and the special community they have created but also problematizes his son’s connection with his mother.

Yet, beyond these practical and immediate concerns, James’s comment threatens the deeper connections between language and community for his son. Tap, as I examined earlier, “safeguards” the connection between words and the things they refer to. For him, at least initially, language is important precisely because it creates stable relationships. Yet Tap’s earlier equanimity when James corrects him suggests that Tap is not especially disconcerted to discover that he has made a mistake. What initially appears to be an inconsequential description of a father correcting a son’s minor mistake, a passage that ships little philosophical weight about the nature and importance of definitions, retroactively acquires enormous significance. Tap’s later anxiety highlights the difference

between lacking a few small pieces of a language and discovering that one's command of the language is suspect. However, James's comment distances Tap from Ob, and from the community of Ob-speakers, and thereby threatens the very possibility of a community built around a shared facility with Ob.

Thus, behind James's apparently innocent question lurk three menacing possibilities. First, Tap may be excluded from the community. Second, Tap's relationship with his mother is based in part on the command of a unique, if superficial, code. Third, the entire community Ob encompasses may never have existed. James's playful teasing encodes much more serious questions about the interdependencies between language and communities, and consequently points out the inherent vulnerability of communities defined by language. Indeed, the community remains permeable even when it includes familial bonds.

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The same anxiety over language that Tap experiences drives the mysterious cult Ta Onomata to action. Like Tap, the cult struggles to stabilize the inherent fluidity of language, though the responses are quite different. Tap memorizes words, learns codes, and writes novels. Ta Onomata commits ritual murder to cement the connection between signified and signifiers.

The Names emphasizes the cult's preoccupation with the connection between language and identity early on. James learns of the cult from Owen, though neither of them initially recognizes the group of shabbily dressed foreigners Owen encountered

while hiking in the hills above Kouros as members of Ta Onomata. Owen had been on his way to study carvings of an ancient alphabet housed in an ancient and remote monastery when he discovered a group of people near the mouth of the cave who posed an unlikely question: “How many languages do you speak?” (28). Owen remarks to James that the question was the “[s]trangest damn thing to ask. A formal question. Some medieval tale, a question asked of travelers at the city gates” (28). His answer that he speaks five languages suffices, and Owen is permitted to spend some time with the group though his full initiation occurs on a later encounter. But though not yet a member, Owen discovers that the group shares his fascination for ancient epigraphy. According to Owen, they came to the desolate hills for “[t]he alphabet itself. They were interested in letters, written symbols, fixed in sequence” (30). Owen’s closing remark echoes an earlier observation James makes about Tap’s tendency to “store [...] words and the objects they belong [...] to, for safekeeping” (10). Together, Tap’s and Owen’s statements reveal *The Names*’s preoccupation with issues of language and its unruly qualities. These qualities prompt both Tap and the cult to try to impose some order on language either by studying its most basic alphabetic sequences or by safeguarding the relationship between signified and signifiers. More importantly, a primal anxiety drives the attempt to reify language: the need to define a community’s boundary.

Part of Tap and Ta Onomata’s anxiety arises from the particular sort of community they try to establish: the exclusive community. The existence of exclusive communities requires others recognizing that the community exists but that it bars outsiders from participating. To remain exclusive, communities must satisfy two conditions. On the one hand, both Tap and Ta Onomata struggle to solidify the

boundaries of their communities by utilizing codes to discriminate between who is and who is not a member. For Tap, as we have seen, the code is the linguistic game Ob, for Ta Onomata, the code is a ritual murder performed when the initials of predetermined dispossessed individuals match the initials of the locations they travel to. In each case, knowledge of the appropriate code grants access to the community, and failure to understand the code bars entrance. But keeping others out is not enough. Non-members must recognize their exclusion. And this understanding, in turn, requires some knowledge, however partial, of the code used to distinguish between members and non-members of the community. Without this knowledge, the community remains unrecognized and its exclusivity evaporates. The cult's emphasis on the code embedded in their ritual murders ultimately defines the community. As such, Ta Onomata presents a less complicated version of the postmodern community that surrounds the language Ob—a community defined solely by its members ability to recognize a linguistic code.

The Names focuses on these two conditions and the difficulty resolving them in a conversation between James and Andahl, who serves as a spokesperson for Ta Onomata. Meeting Andahl in a café basement in some small hamlet, James discovers towards the end of their meeting that Andahl would like him to write a book that explains the cult's rationale. The challenge is daunting, for not only does Andahl characterize the cult's actions as "madness" (210) but he suggests that the cult's motivation defies linguistic representation:

Something in our method finds a home in your unconscious mind. A recognition. This curious recognition is not subject to conscious scrutiny. Our program evokes something that you seem to understand and find familiar, something you cannot

analyze. We are working at a preverbal level, although we use words, of course, we use them all the time. This is a mystery. (208)

Andahl's description of the cult precludes precisely the sort of rationale he asks James to write. Presenting the mystery requires James to resolve the paradox of articulating the unarticulateable and of explaining the inexplicable. However, his request presents a deeper irony: some members of the cult, which takes such pains to exclude others, feel a desperate need to explain themselves (212). In short, the paradox James must resolve is not conceptual, how to rationalize the subconscious, but pragmatic, how to stage a conversation when at least one of the members insists on remaining silent. The emphasis placed on conversation in the scene replicates the fundamental concern of Lyotard's theory of the differend: in a situation where two parties recognize no common adjudicator, how can any resolution be possible? DeLillo comes to the same solution as Lyotard. The first step is to find a way to make conversation possible. And once begun, the conversation provides the foundation for a shared sense of community. Set in juxtaposition with Tap's preoccupation with Ob, the task Andahl sets James emphasizes precisely this need to establish a shared community.

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If James is to offer an explanation of the cult's murders, he must find a common ground that allows for both the cult's attempt to create an absolute link between words and their meaning on the one hand and allow for the play in language that shapes every other use of language in the novel on the other. Towards the end of the novel, James goes

in search of Owen, who sequesters himself in a flat near Punjab University. When James finds him, Owen recounts his search for the cult and dwells on a conversation he had with one member, Singh. Like the other members of Ta Onomata, Singh is preoccupied with language, but where others, like Andahl, obsess about the particular relationship between words and their referents, Singh preoccupies himself with the broader implications of shifting referents, questions that include whether absolute meaning is possible.

According to Singh, the world has undergone a fundamental change and become “self-referring” (297). He suggests that while the reasons for the transformation can be ignored,¹⁶ the consequences are dire indeed. So long as the world remained outside of language, something to which language referred but not something that was itself a text, the world offered men a place to “hide from themselves” (297). However, now that the world has become a text, the shelter it once offered is no longer available because there is nowhere and nothing outside of language. This textualization of the world renders distinctions between signified and signifier problematic and, in doing so, destabilizes the boundaries between the object and the subject.

Singh explains that the self-referentiality “has seeped into the texture of the world” (297). Consequently, a fundamental change occurs and the world, which was once separate from the individual, loses its distinction. For Singh, the loss of this distance carries with it significant consequences: “The world was where we lived,” he explains, and, by contrast, “the self was where we went mad and died” (297). By becoming a text,

¹⁶ Singh’s remark about the causes for the transformation, “Why, how, never mind” introduces a curious ambiguity. Either Singh has considered the causes and considers them unimportant or he has been unable to discern the reasons for the transformation. In either case, however, the consequences prove more interesting.

the world collapses the distance between the individual and the world, sanity and madness, and perhaps, in a peculiar way, life and death. The collapse is so pervasive for Singh that it is impossible to say even the “simplest thing without falling into a trap” (297). What these simple things are remains unclear; however, the questions Singh mentions are far from simple. Threatened by a world that no longer permits definitive answers, Singh recites a litany of questions that he believes become unanswerable: “where do we go, how do we live, who do we believe?” (297). Singh’s questions articulate his desperate search for some authority that offers a coherent narrative of the world.

Finding no narrative capable of reinstating the meaning he longs for, Singh substitutes the logic of Ta Onomata’s murders. In his conversation with Owen, Singh remarks that the murder the cult is about to commit is “true to the premise, isn’t it? It follows logically upon the premise” (302). Another cult member, Emmerich, joins the conversation and amplifies the formal qualities of the cult’s rationale, “it’s clean, you know? Nothing clings to the act. No hovering stuff” (302). The point is not to establish meaning, but to abandon meaning altogether and in its place to erect a system that joins a particular event, a murder, to a particular event, the coincidence of a specific person’s name to a location.

Rejecting even the possibility of meaning, other than the ritual significance of the murders, the cult would seem to free itself from any obligation other than to follow the particular system its members have chosen. Owen, who by the end of his stay with Ta Onomata is inducted into the cult, explains, “they mock our need to structure and classify, to build a system against the terror of our souls. They make the system equal to

terror. The means to contend with death has become death. [...] They intended nothing, they meant nothing” (308). His explanation emphasizes the metaphysical terror the cult feels. More importantly, he figures the world of *The Names* in terms of terror and of death. This terror, Owen implies, is the fundamental condition of the postmodern experience—Owen’s conclusion echoes the more vehement critiques of the postmodern consciousness as the abandonment of any sort of meaning. Indeed, Owen’s conclusion differs little from Jameson’s in *Postmodernism*, which is that in sacrificing a historical consciousness, postmodernism loses any possibility of arriving at meaning and can offer instead only a system of contingent relationships.

The provisional meanings James offers, and which Singh and Owen refer to in their comments, are all that is possible in *The Names*. Without an overarching structure, meaning becomes a matter of context and interpretation. Jacques Derrida offers one of the more penetrating analyses of how interpretation remains possible in the absence of an overarching set of assumptions in his essay “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences.” Having acknowledged that one school of interpretation presupposes a grand narrative, what he terms an “origin,” Derrida goes on to discuss what happens when such absolutes are no longer available (292):¹⁷

There are thus two interpretations of interpretation, of structure, of sign, of play.

The one seeks to decipher dreams of deciphering a truth or an origin which escapes play and the order of the sign, and which lives the necessity of

¹⁷ Derrida clarifies his grouping of these three terms to create two categories of interpretation in the following sentence. He suggests an opposition between the structural interpretation, which advances an absolute meaning and that of sign, and play that suggest a fluid system of interpretation.

interpretation as an exile. The other, which is no longer turned toward the origin, affirms play and tries to pass beyond man and humanism, the name of man being the name of that being who, throughout the history of metaphysics or of ontotheology—in other words, throughout his entire history—has dreamed of full presence, the reassuring foundation the origin and the end of play. (292)

Though he goes on to reject the possibility of absolute interpretation¹⁸ that finds its guarantee in the origin, Derrida maintains the possibility of the second sort of interpretation which no longer searches for an origin, but which arrives by “affirming play.” The flexibility Derrida imagines bears a close parallel to Lyotard’s theory of the *petite narrative*. Moreover, the negotiations necessary to bring different narratives into conversation parallel Lyotard’s *The Differend*. However, Derrida’s notion of “play” proves useful for thinking about the interaction among the various narrative threads in *The Names*. In particular, DeLillo’s use of metanarrative in *The Names* creates something akin to the play Derrida envisions. By drawing attention to itself as a story, *The Names* problematizes transcendental interpretations while simultaneously providing a space for limited contextualized meanings. Moreover, because *The Names* is James’s first-person narrative, the metatextual comments foreground the choices James makes in telling the story.

¹⁸ Derrida claims:

For my part, although these two interpretations must acknowledge and accentuate their difference and define their irreducibility, I do not believe that today there is any question of choosing—in the first place because here we are in a region (let us say, provisionally, a region of historicity) where the category of choice seems particularly trivial; and in the second, because we must first try to conceive of the common ground, and of the difference of this irreducible difference. (293)

Even the apparently most trivial of these choices carries with it significant implications. Perhaps the most relevant of these is the tendency of his metatextual asides to shape the story. For instance, in the final paragraph of the opening chapter, James imagines how his son Tap would have written the opening. “A man standing near the edge of the quay lifts his cane to waggle a warning at some children playing nearby. Tap would use this detail in his novel” (18). James’s comment calls attention not just to the construction of his narrative but also to how another story incorporating the same events might be told. By calling attention to the difference between the two narratives, James opens the space for a tangled conversation between the two narratives; the world DeLillo creates is, as Singh remarks, “self-referential.” However, the world James creates is even more complex than the one Singh imagines. Singh, like Derrida in “Structure, Sign and Play,” discusses what happens to a single system of signification that loses its center. James, in contrast, presents three overlapping narrative systems (the story he tells, his commentary on that story, and the novel that Tap writes), none of which includes a totalizing perspective. Consequently, understanding hinges on how an event is interpreted rather than discovering some hidden truth.

DeLillo concisely explores the significance of these choices in a conversation set early in *The Names* between James and Kathryn about Tap’s novel. Learning that his son is writing about Owen’s life, James worries about the accuracy of Tap’s portrayal. James’s concern suggests that he remains tied to conventional definitions of verisimilitude, where the representation creates an absolute link between signified and signifier, that his son’s work sets aside. For James, to write about real people carries with it an obligation to tell the truth. Tap, however, seems to feel no such obligation.

Ironically, it falls to Kathryn and later to Owen, neither of whom see themselves as writers, to provide the proper context of Tap's work. Brushing aside James's concerns about factual accuracy, she remarks, "Don't forget, this is fiction we're talking about, even if the nonfiction kind" (77). Interestingly, though Kathryn recognizes that Tap's novel plays with the conventions of genre, she presents his novel within the same binary of truth and non-truth that leads to James's anxiety. Consequently, conventional notions of genre inform her understanding of Tap's work just as they do James's. Owen, on the other hand, identifies Tap's novel as a radical challenge to conventions of the novel: "If I were a writer," remarks Owen, "how I would enjoy being told the novel is dead. How liberating, to work in the margins, outside a central perception" (77). Owen's observation articulates what both Kathryn, and more ironically James, whose novel itself challenges conventional genres, miss: Tap's novel not only presents a new type of story works outside at the borders of conventional genre boundaries. Offering not only two different narratives but two different sorts of narratives, DeLillo introduces an important question about how the two can be resolved. The implicit need to resolve the two competing narratives again foregrounds a situation similar to what Lyotard describes in the *Differend*. Because *The Names* links the different narratives to different visions of community, the need to reconcile the narratives implies distinct communities that while provisional are nonetheless present.

Issues of interpretation frame *The Names*. At the most obvious level, these questions refer to the translation from one language to another. However, at a more interesting level, the novel explores how the characters make sense of events. DeLillo draws specific attention to this connection in his discussion of James's work as a ghost

writer for an Air Force general and how it led to his job as a risk-analyst. In a long expository passage, James explains that he impressed his employer, Rowser, who “had seen early pages of the manuscript and it was possible he’d been impressed by the way I’d reshaped the general’s muddy thinking” (48). In the next paragraph where James describes his job for Rowser as “structuring” the data that Rowser’s firm collects about the Middle East, *The Names* draws attention again to the importance of finding meaning (48). DeLillo’s diction is significant. James does not find or uncover some latent, perhaps arcane, but nonetheless implicit meaning, which would imply the presence of a grand narrative. Instead, he constructs a perspective from which the data make sense. This emphasis on construction, coupled with the implication that other constructions might be equally viable, reveals that *The Names* is governed by fluid, contingent, and limited petite narratives. In other words, meaning is possible, but of a highly provisional sort.

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Recognizing the process by which the various narratives *The Names* presents work together to create meaning leads to a second question: how do petite narratives acquire authority? Allen Dunn provides a framework for understanding the process in his essay “A Tyranny of Justice: The Ethics of Lyotard’s Differend”:

If (post)modernity is characterized by our inevitable and even unconscious participation in heterogeneous communities and their heterogeneous practices, the conflicts generated by the incommensurability of these practices presuppose our willingness to embrace collective identities. (220)

Dunn works specifically to develop an understanding of postmodern ethics. In doing so he also identifies the process that allows petite narratives to make meaning possible. The crucial element of this process is that the desire for a community mitigates the otherwise highly contextual knowledge of the postmodern communities.

An apparently inconsequential scene in *The Names* of James and Tap watching a weather forecast while they vacation in the Peloponnese succinctly articulates the connection between community and meaning. On their trip, James and Tap take a room over a grocery store. Invited to dinner by their hosts, they linger to watch the weather forecast though neither of them speaks Greek well enough to understand the report. James reflects “possibly to Tap, the strange language exposed the whole idea as gibberish, the idea of forecasts, the idea of talking before a camera about the weather. It had been gibberish in English as well. But he hadn’t realized it until now” (189). In trying to understand why his son laughs, James draws a critical connection between community, language, and meaning. His remark suggests that it is the convention of hearing the weather report in one’s own language that saves the absurd practice from becoming gibberish. By implication, meaning rests neither in language nor in the community alone but in both together. In more basic terms, meaning depends on the signified being tied to the signifier.

Describing the peculiar consciousness of expatriates and frequent international travelers, James reflects on the absence of any stable core of meaning:

it seemed we’d lost our capacity to select, to ferret out particularity and trace it to some center which our minds could relocate in knowable surroundings. There was

no equivalent core. Truth was different, the spoken universe, and men with guns were everywhere. (94)

James's observation reveals his desire to recover a stable center that would allow him to define some context and thereby to discern some meaning. In doing so, James's meditation articulates the threat a world without an overriding system of meaning can pose. However, DeLillo suggests that the problem is not simply of finding a center but of recovering a lost capacity to locate a stable center. The implication is clear, the conventional notions of truth as an absolute and of the individual's capability for accessing that truth do not obtain in *The Names*. Instead, both must be constructed: truth becomes a function of a particular context, and the necessary stable center becomes a function of community. And, significantly, the material by which both are constructed is language.

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To return to a point I have already explored, the most powerful line in *The Names* for understanding the complexity of community in the novel occurs in the final paragraph of James's conclusion. The statement fuses a sense of belonging with simple conversation. In the jumble of languages spoken by the tourists at the Acropolis, James remarks, "No one seems to be alone. This is a place to enter in crowds, seek company and talk" (331). Though the subject of the conversations remains in question, their significance does not. James characterizes the conversations as "offering[s]" (331). To what or whom James makes such offerings remains uncertain, but at the very least,

language provides a connection to others and provides the bedrock necessary for establishing community. These communities possess none of the arcane purpose of Ta Onomata nor the genetic ties of a family. The community James encounters at the end of his story is marked by its permeability.

Tap's conclusion, the novel's second ending, contains none of the optimism that characterizes the end of James's story, though both focus on the connection between language and community. Focusing on Owen's childhood experience with a charismatic Christian sect that speaks in tongues, Tap's conclusion presents the alienation that occurs when one member in a community cannot speak the prescribed language. Tap imagines Owen as a boy being unable to speak in tongues: "The gift was not his, the whole language of the spirit which was greater than Latin or French was not to be seized in his pityfull [sic] mouth" (338). Like the community atop the Acropolis, the community Owen hopes to join speaks a language infused with spiritual significance. Yet where James finds acceptance, Owen experiences only alienation. Not speaking the language, he believes "[h]is fait [sic] was signed" (339). Tap's linguistic games emphasize the connection between Owen's alienation from the group and language. The phonetic spelling of "fait" emphasizes the arbitrary nature of language and linguistic rules. On the other hand, Tap's playful lexical choice of "signed," rather than the more common "sealed," to conclude the phrase emphasizes the importance of specifically linguistic signs. The interplay between these two phrases leads to questions about the inherent power of language.

But however provisional language's power, Tap's narrative leaves little question about language's ability to define communities. Unable to join in the community's

discourse, Owen feels likewise unable to join the community. Instead, he “ran into the rainy distance smaller and smaller. This was worse than a wretched nightmare. It was the nightmare of real things, the fallen wonder of the world” (339). Ironically, Owen’s flight from speaking in tongues leads not to some transcendent knowledge but to a sublime and incomprehensible encounter with a world. In Tap’s analysis, the localized meaning available through language and what Singh might refer to as the “truth” of the world remain antithetical. Language leads not to the world but back again to itself and to community.

Taken together, the two endings of *The Names* map the relationship among community, language, and the world. In so far as *The Names* refuses to admit an easy connection between language and the world, the novel conforms to the traditional postmodern hypothesis that in postmodern texts the media supersede the message. Yet such a conventional reading of *The Names* as postmodern remains problematic. Kermode, as I have shown previously, contends that a novel’s conclusion must resolve the central problem of the plot. The presence of the two conclusions underscores the novel’s central tension: how to provide a sufficiently stable foundation for community in a world that does not permit absolute claims? In these terms, *The Names* is a novel not about the connection between language and the world but rather about the connection between language and community. And within the postmodern world of DeLillo’s novel, the connection is startling. Language itself and the possibility of conversation are the building blocks of community in *The Names*. As such, the novel challenges the naïve assumption that the postmodern explicitly rejects community. Instead, the novel’s preoccupation reveals a need for a different understanding of community. Not only

Hutcheon's goal-oriented postmodern communities but also Lyotard's notion of communities engaged in resolving the differend must be admitted. At the end of *The Names*, the conversation, and not the resolution, is important.

**Chapter 3: “Even freaks need community”: Community
in Kathy Acker’s *Don Quixote***

As we have seen, Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* explores the fundamental elements of a postmodern community and concludes that the element is the desire to be part of a community. Don DeLillo’s *The Names* presents a more detailed examination of the materials out of which a postmodern community might be constructed and how the desire to be part of a community surfaces in these materials. *The Names* suggests that language and the possibility of communication are at the root of postmodern community. Kathy Acker’s *Don Quixote*, however, interrogates the possibility of community by deconstructing two forms of postmodern community and investigating the assumption that unite them.

For Acker, postmodern aesthetics are profoundly tied to questions of community. In her 1992 interview with Rebecca Deaton, Acker acknowledges the postmodern and deconstructive characteristics of *Don Quixote*:

I think *Don Quixote* ended something for me . . . pure interest in certain postmodern techniques, such as deconstruction. Which are very reactionary techniques . . . I mean they’re always reactions to things. And I suddenly became interested in what techniques wouldn’t be reactionary, that wouldn’t be bourgeois. And that’s really the way I’ve been working. (278-9)

Emphasizing its postmodern techniques, Acker’s remark positions *Don Quixote* as a crucial novel that marks a transition from one aesthetic to another. More importantly, in

calling attention to the reactionary quality of *Don Quixote*, Acker suggests a certain dissatisfaction with the possibility the postmodern aesthetic offers her. Though largely silent in her interview with Deaton about what the specific goal of her aesthetics is, Acker provides a clearer discussion in her 1989 interview with Ellen G. Freidman. Acker claims her new project¹⁹ moves away from purely aesthetic and theoretical concerns and towards a fuller consideration of how literary texts interact with specific communities: the project is to “search for a myth to live by” (17). The precise contours of the myth Acker searches for remain vague. When Friedman pressed her to explain, Acker responded with the enigmatic statement, “the myth to me is pirates” (18). Acker’s comment reveals a profound connection between her literature and how people encounter the world.

Understanding the myth that Acker searches for requires understanding her aesthetics, and though Acker speaks of her writing in terms of postmodernism in her interview with Deaton, in an earlier interview with Larry McCaffery Acker discusses why she finds the term “postmodernism” useful:

I suppose the term “postmodernism” has been useful for me personally because now people have a label they can use when they talk about my work. But I certainly had no idea what the term meant when I started out writing, and I’m still not sure I understand it today. When I started out, I didn’t know about the work of Foucault, or—what would be more important to me—Deleuze and Guattari. I know

¹⁹ In the context of the interview, Acker refers to a “new one,” which seems to indicate either a forthcoming or just-published novel. However, she never specifies which novel she refers to. Based on their year of publication, likely candidates include *In Memoriam to Identity* (1990) and *Hannibal Lecter, My Father* (1991).

I wanted to plagiarize, but I didn't have a clear theoretical justification for what I was doing or why. (88)

Acker's statement suggests variously that postmodernism is nothing more than an empty term, that is a useful label, that it has a theoretical basis in the works of Foucault and Deleuze and Guattari, and, ultimately that it is associated with a particular aesthetic of plagiarism. Acker's statements about postmodernism anticipate how scholars will attempt to corral the unruly elements of her aesthetic and to work with her aesthetic of plagiarism by confining these unruly features in the stabilizing terminology of the postmodern.

However, attempts to read Acker's novels within a strict postmodern rubric prove problematic. Leslie Dick speaks to the complexity of Acker's novels in her essay "Feminism, Writing and Postmodernism," observing that Acker's "work effaces the difference between high and low art, it explodes literary hierarchies, so that, in her books you can't tell if you're primarily reading a work of pornography, or soap opera, pulp fiction, or high modernism" (208). In part because of Acker's rejection of literary conventions, critics and general readers alike have struggled to make sense of her writing. Marc Chénétier in his celebrated survey of contemporary American fiction, *Beyond Suspicion: New American Fiction Since 1960*, offers a caustic assessment of Acker's texts dismissing them as "both gratuitously aggressive and ferociously mythological, Kathy Acker's novels are fashionable, modish attacks" (161). And Thomas LeClair's critique proves, if anything, even more ferocious than Chénétier's.²⁰ He typifies Acker's

²⁰ LeClair's rejection is problematic. In the same review, he praises Acker's "scarified sensibility, subversive intellect, and predatory wit" that "make her a writer like no other I know" (10). His ambiguous response is especially significant given his standing as a leading DeLillo scholar. See, for instance, *In The Loop*. His rejection of Acker suggests

work as formulaic juvenilia “much too frequently composed of banal language, the stilted and formulaic high-school passion I thought Ms. Acker had disposed of in ‘*Blood and Guts*’ [sic]” (10). That such preeminent postmodern scholars as Chénétier and LeClair repudiate Acker’s work indicates the significant challenges in both content and execution her novels pose to the conventional notion of the postmodern novel. Nevertheless, the tendency of Acker’s novels to challenge the conventions of postmodern novels by juxtaposing different literary genres and hierarchies emphasizes their similarity to Lyotard’s description of postmodernism as the supersession of what he terms grand narratives, or totalizing systems of knowledge, by petite narratives, or systems of knowledge that are localized and universal.

In *Don Quixote*, Acker constructs petite narrative to juxtapose various communities without suggesting that any is more valid than another. In principle, she deconstructs two general types of community, the romantic pair and the social group. She does so in part by mapping each type of community to one or more distinct scenarios in the novel and in part by equating certain types of community to certain literary genres. Acker’s technique in *Don Quixote* is an extension of her larger creative aesthetic. Her aesthetic transforms the process of constructing a story from an act of pure creation to an act of appropriation. Acker grounds this shift in a still deeper imperative, and, as a consequence of the two:

I make up nothing: I am a reader and take notes on what I read. Whether its good or bad by academic standards doesn’t interest me. It never has. It simply is as it is.

that her texts challenge even those who are supposedly comfortable with the postmodern novel.

Of course, I am interested in learning, in what I don't know, understanding, and if this is the "MAKE IT NEW" that Pound meant, then I subscribe to that tradition.

(13)

Though not directly mentioning the postmodern, Acker's comments echo many of the same concerns, particularly the emptiness of labels and the importance of recognizing textual appropriation as one element of her aesthetic. However, most interesting is Acker's rumination on Pound's directive that artists should make their art "new." Acker presents the motivation behind her tendency to use plagiarism as an aesthetic device and as an attempt to make her novels new. In addition, the technique also offers a new vision of community, as something that tends to be governed by strictures as formal and as abstract as the features that differentiate one literary genre from another.

Acker concludes that all the available forms of community require individuals to accept certain prescribed roles if they are to be a member of the community. Acker constructs *Don Quixote* around a third-person narrator who frequently introduces material from outside the story line, such as ruminations about American politics or literary theory. The narrator bears a remarkable similarity to the protagonist, Kathy, whose psyche is fractured by her decision to have an abortion. Driven into a schizophrenic fugue by her decision, Kathy adopts an alternative identity, that of a knight, specifically Cervantes's Don Quixote, and embarks on a quest to find love.

Acker structures the novel in three sections and organizes each section into distinct episodes. Each section develops towards a specific theme. The first section, "The First Part of Don Quixote: The Beginning of Night," details Kathy's response and her adoption of the persona of a knight. The section ends with Kathy's last will and her

acceptance that destruction, specifically the destruction of narrative cohesion, is necessary. The second section, “The Second Part of Don Quixote: Other Texts,” marks Kathy’s exploration of alternative identities derived from other genres. The section opens, for instance with the appropriation of Lulu, from Frank Wedekind’s plays, a woman who defies social traditions and is sexually promiscuous. The section ends with Kathy reintegrating herself through the persona of Lulu and able to return to her identity as a knight. The third section, “The Third Part of Don Quixote: The End of Night,” presents the process Kathy follows as she moves away from her identity of a knight and towards some other, unspecified identity. In the section’s final episode, Kathy talks with God about the impending changes in her identity. In the apocalyptic final moment, Kathy rejects both as she begins to search for an identity that will allow her to experience the love that animates her quest as a knight.

Any attempt to summarize Acker’s *Don Quixote* requires addressing Acker’s propensity for plagiarizing not only specific portions of text but their plots, as Nomi Jacobs identifies in her essay “Kathy Acker and the Plagiarized Self.” It is not surprising that her version of *Don Quixote* follows the same general structure as Cervantes’s original. In Acker’s version, as in Cervantes’s, the protagonist is overcome by madness brought on from an excess of reading and a powerful imagination. Both Acker’s and Cervantes’s protagonists undertake a quest to right the world, and in the throes of their madness will come to see the world more clearly than the ostensibly sane individuals they encounter. For Cervantes, the quest is an attempt to return Arthurian chivalry to the world by undertaking a picaresque quest. In Acker’s text, the quest appears far simpler: she tries

to discover if love is possible in the world. Acker's protagonist's quest is creative where Cervantes's is imitative, personal where Cervantes's is public.

Acker's protagonist, Kathy, struggles to create a place where love is possible and to find a way to address her own insecurities about love. Cervantes's Don Quixote, by contrast, need only superimpose his madness on his world, and when that framework no longer works, he is free to return to sanity. Acker's protagonist must create the space necessary to achieve her quest and cannot rely on the conventions of the quest narrative; indeed, Acker's *Don Quixote* can be read largely as a rejection of these conventions and a call to imagine new genres and new sorts of communities where the love Kathy desires will be possible. However, in Acker's novel, as in Cervantes's, the quest for an alternative community proves quixotic. Yet, where Cervantes's novel ends with Don Quixote renouncing his quest, Acker's ends with Kathy setting out again to find the community that has so far eluded her. This difference underscores that while Acker's *Don Quixote* fails to articulate a viable postmodern community the novel nonetheless maintains the potential for such a community.

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The first two sections of Acker's *Don Quixote* interrogate the precepts behind the two most prominent schools of scholarship about postmodernism: Lyotard's notion of the petite narrative and Fredric Jameson's argument that postmodernism is the particular philosophic consequence of late capitalism. Though both theorists explore the consequence of the loss of overarching explanatory systems, their arguments differ

significantly about the reasons for the disintegration of conventional interpretative schemas, and, more importantly, about the consequences. Though Acker refers to neither theory directly, her complex appropriation and disruption of the narratives of other literary works provides a method for reexamining the possibility for a community that does not require its members to accept predetermined roles.

Section one, “The First Part of Don Quixote: The Beginning of Night,” opens with an ambiguous commentary on the persona of the questing knight that Kathy assumes. The subtle combination of analysis and foreshadowing merits particular analysis and presents Kathy’s quest as both irrational and grandiloquent:

When she was finally crazy because she was about to have an abortion, she conceived of the most insane idea that any woman can think of. Which is to love. [...] By loving another person, she would right every manner of political, social and individual wrong: she would put herself in those situations so perilous the glory of her name would resound. The abortion was about to take place: (9)

The narrator’s remarks present a complex analysis of the episodes that follow.

Characterizing Kathy’s quest as the mad goal of an equally mad woman, the narrator foreshadows the failure she will experience both at the end of the section and at the conclusion of the novel. The narrator ties the genesis of Kathy’s quest and the reason for her failure to her gender. Kathy’s madness, the narrator states, is a consequence of her decision to have an abortion—a procedure available only to women. Moreover, by qualifying Kathy’s desire to love as “the most insane idea that any woman can think of,” the narrator draws an explicit connection between Kathy’s desire and her gender. These issues of gender and insanity preoccupy much of *Don Quixote* and have received most of

the scholarly attention. More interesting, though, the narrator suggests that Acker's quest to love another, which would seem to be intensely personal, results in social transformation. The ironic observation that Kathy's quest will cause her to be celebrated speaks to the ambiguous nature of a quest the goals of which are so grand as to make fulfilling them impossible. The paragraph's closing colon indicates that the rest of the novel will work through the themes established in the opening. In doing so, the punctuation marks a transition into the madness of Kathy's delusion.

The remainder of the first section chronicles Kathy's delusional encounter with the world outside the abortion clinic and her attempt to make sense of what she finds in terms of her newly appointed quest to love. Acker structures Kathy's experiences in a series of discrete episodes, each of which explores the possibility of love in a world reconfigured through Kathy's madness as a knightly quest.

Kathy's quest immediately begins to separate her from the world she would save. Precipitated by the abortion, Kathy's delusion begins with her reimagining the medical procedure as a ceremony investing her with knighthood and setting her on a quest to love. In a complex paragraph that draws support from grammar, spirituality, and metaphysics, she constructs a rationale, "this's why I'm having an abortion. So I can love" (10). Kathy's rationale presupposes that love must be directed at another. Ironically, however, the rationale leads Kathy to distance herself from others. "Why didn't Don Quixote resemble these women? Because to Don Quixote, having an abortion is a method of becoming a knight and saving the world" (11). For Kathy, differences of interpretation become matters of identity: "When a woman becomes a knight, being no longer anonymous she receives a name. She's able to have adventures and save the world" (11).

In presenting her interpretation and her newfound identity as a knight as a gateway to adventure, Kathy subtly differentiates herself not only from the women in the waiting room but also from what she, and presumably society, considers normal.

The widening gap between Kathy and the conventional communities that surround her reveals that her goal to love another is incompatible with the society that surrounds her.

Kathy's delusion that she is Don Quixote shapes the majority of Acker's novel, but several scenes suggest that Kathy's apparent madness is more than the result of a psychotic break and reflects her conscious desire to reject normalcy and create a world where love is possible. Having developed an infection from the abortion, Kathy collapses on the sidewalk outside her home. Three of her friends find her and try to care for her. Kathy's madness causes her to transform her friends into stereotypes of various political positions: the Liberal, the Leftist, and the feminist.²¹ Unable to understand her madness, each friend offers a different rationale: the Leftist traces Kathy's madness to her elitism that keeps her from "drinking in pubs," the feminist to her indulgence in pornography, and the Liberal to unspecified social pressures that cause her to go mad. However, the friends all recognize her estrangement from their community and attempt "to make her part of a community" (16). Recognizing their rationales as attempts to define and thereby control her unruly madness, Kathy reaffirms her decision to abandon convention in order to find a way to love. In a moment of lucidity, Kathy remarks, "I had the abortion

²¹ By keeping "feminist" lowercase, Acker implies its subordinate position in the theoretical hierarchy. The narrator emphasizes the subordinate position of anything associated with women when she remarks that Kathy's "friends, aghast at femininity, determined to burn it out." (17)

because I refused normalcy which is the capitulation to social control. To letting our political leaders locate our identities in the social. In normal good love” (18). Her explanation implies that Kathy’s madness is as much a strategy to make her goal of loving another possible as it is a psychotic break brought about by her abortion.

Apparently aware of the licenses her madness provides to re-envision and to reinvent the world, Kathy declares, “I’ll make the world into this love” (18).

However, Kathy’s attempt to reimagine the world as one in which she can love another ultimately proves untenable. However radical Kathy’s revision of the world, she remains unable to escape from a deficit of love that casts women as objects and love and men as the subjects. *Don Quixote* repeatedly challenges the assumption that these are the appropriate roles for men and women, most pointedly when an angry Medusa appears in an episode where Kathy imagines Catholic priests trying to convince her to accept the socially defined role of a passive woman. Echoing Kathy’s initial definition of love as requiring individuals to experience love, to be a subject, to be the recipient of love, and to be an object, Medusa, who here speaks for all women, observes, “I’m your desire’s object, dog, because I can’t be the subject. Because I can’t be a subject: what you name ‘love’, I name ‘nothingness.’ I won’t not be: I’ll perceive and I’ll speak” (10, 28). As Medusa observes, what ultimately bars Kathy, and by extension all women, from experiencing love are the roles the concept assigns to men and women and not the particular details of a given situation nor the attributes of a particular identity. Even the fluid gender roles that Kathy proposes through her madness are unable to resolve the problem. Kathy’s circuitous dialog reveals the paradox she finds in the notion of love. Love requires individuals capable of being both subject and object. Because men cannot

be objects and remain men and women cannot be subjects and remain women, love proves impossible.

Kathy confronts this impossibility in the final episode of the section and concludes that her strategy is flawed. Having decided to die once she realizes love is not possible, she composes a will with three bequests. Of these three bequest, the third proves most interesting for considering how community operates in *Don Quixote*. In an dense paragraph colored by contradictions and puns, Kathy refuses to renounce her quest even as she rejects the binaries of right and wrong that her family has tried to impose:

I was wrong to be right, to write, to be a knight, to try to do anything: because having a fantasy's just living inside your own head. Being a fanatic separates you from other people. If you're like everyone else, you believe opinions or what you're told. What else is there? Oh nothingness, I have to have vision, I can't have visions, I have to love: I have to be wrong to write. (36)

As this paragraph exemplifies, one of the more challenging features of Acker's writing is recognizing that the puns, contradictions, and other rhetorical moves are not linguistic filigree but rather a fundamental part of the meaning. The paragraph's singsong opening, "I was wrong to be right, to write, to be a knight," demonstrates Kathy's recognition that her quest is simultaneously mistaken and necessary. Moreover, in assigning herself a role that differs significantly from those around her, Kathy appears to accept the isolation that goes along with being a fanatic. This separation speaks to both the power and the constraint of social roles, for to choose to be a knight is also to choose to be alone. Ironically, then, her attempt at resistance ultimately reinforces the very conditions she appears to want to weaken.

One of the few scholars to broach the problem of community in Acker's writing, however indirectly, Richard Walsh offers a provocative, though ultimately limited, analysis of Kathy's strategies of resistance. He contends that "the strategies against the dominant sexual power relations that the novel explores—gender confusion, sexual deviancy, lesbianism—are all ultimately failures. Their attacks on the power structure of sexual relations are misdirected: they work not to rectify this structure but to avoid, ignore, or invert it" (59). Correct insofar as he recognizes the futility of Kathy's attempts to confront the established social norms directly, Walsh overlooks the inherent play of *Don Quixote*'s attempt to explore new types of community play, which the last four clauses of Kathy's will emphasize. The paradox of the first two clauses—that having a vision is both required and impossible—and the explanation offered by the last two—that to love requires rejecting conventional narratives and writing new ones—characterizes Acker's project as an attempt to construct some new vision of love and community and not simply to "rectify" some failed vision.

Don Quixote suggests that any attempt to envision a new sort of community is frustrated by a lack of suitable models for Kathy to draw on. Resuming the narrative sometime after Kathy's death in section one, section two, "The Second Part of Don Quixote: Other Texts," marks an elaboration and intensification of the strategy of textual appropriation. Having discovered that *Don Quixote* does not provide her with adequate scaffolding for a community that permits love, Kathy explores the options available to her in a series of textual appropriations. *Don Quixote* presents Kathy's strategy as an act of reading:

BEING DEAD, DON QUIXOTE
 COULD NO LONGER SPEAK,
 OF A MALE WORLD,
 SHE HAD NO SPEECH OF HER OWN,
 ALL SHE COULD DO WAS READ
 MALE TEXTS, WHICH WEREN'T
 HERS. (40)

The series of texts Kathy “reads” include Andrei Bely’s *Petersburg*, Giuseppe di Lampedusa’s *The Leopard*, an unspecified Sci-fi work,²² and Frank Wedekind’s Lulu plays, *Earth Spirit* and *Pandora’s Box*. Jan Corbett in “Words Hurt Acker’s Appropriation of Myth in *Don Quixote*,” offers a compelling analysis of Acker’s aesthetic of plagiarism. She notes that Acker does plagiarize texts as much as she collaborates with them. “This collaboration,” Corbett argues, “is a clever strategy which gives Acker’s intense autobiographical writing additional authority. But it is not meant to deceive: it is a legitimate rhetorical strategy designed to convince Acker’s readers that her experience is universal” (177). As Corbett acknowledges, Acker manipulates the literary canon that would silence her into providing her with a way to speak—albeit indirectly.

Acker’s technique of appropriating texts originates in part from her writing process, particularly the process surrounding her composition of *Don Quixote*. Notions of play shape Acker’s aesthetic. In a brief but revealing discussion of her aesthetic, Acker

²² Although scholars generally agree about the primary sources Acker appropriates in each of the other three sections, there is no consensus about the science fiction text she introduces.

reveals “whenever I engage in discourse, I am using given meanings and values, changing them and giving them back” (4).²³ This process of exchange places enormous emphasis on the reader’s ability to follow not only the text she creates but also the allusions she encodes. Nicola Pitchford offers a compelling analysis of the connection between reading Acker’s novels and a particular sort of agency that results. Pitchford draws on Jameson’s observation that reading pastiche entails the active production of a text in which the revised and the original are both present to the reader (149). She argues that the process Jameson describes and that Acker’s pastiche invokes presupposes two readers:

Acker constructs a reading dynamic that *depends on* a double construction: an implied “insider,” the conventionally right reader who has an insider’s relation to the textual tradition Acker invokes and a more powerfully implied “outsider,” the wrong reader, the freak. This “freak reader” is defined against that other shadow reader. To take up any agency Acker’s strategy might offer you may not need to know the original texts, but you do need to know that another, more authorized way of reading them preceded Acker’s/Quixote’s—and that against that authorized reading you must also define your own. (Pitchford par 24)

²³ Acker clarifies the process of this change in her interview with Rebecca Deaton: A text can be seen as two triangles that come on top of each other. One triangle is the reader’s reaction to the text, the writing of the text, and the text itself. And the text itself is playing with meaning, you know language plays with meaning... you know language is kind of guerrilla warfare between meaning and non-meaning. A sign is signifying something, but it also has its own aspects of sound, sight -- its own materiality. It’s always negotiating between its materiality and what it signifies. A word itself is balancing between meaning and non-meaning. (280)

Pitchford's analysis proceeds from a decidedly political analysis of Acker's text. The opposition Pitchford identifies between "inside" and "outside" readers closely mirrors the polarizing rhetoric of *Don Quixote*, which repeatedly casts Kathy, and perhaps all women, as subservient to men. More importantly, the direct address to the reader, "you need to know," suggests the novel's aesthetic techniques are tied to the world. However, in focusing so narrowly on the aesthetic and political implications of Acker's appropriation of other texts, Pitchford overlooks the consequences of Acker's appropriation of a series of texts in section two of *Don Quixote*.

Admittedly, the second section of Acker's novel presents only its slender preamble mentioning Kathy's reading of other texts as a connection to the preceding or following sections. Moreover, the section provides no narrative logic to connect its various sections. This lack of narrative apparatus has led several scholars to conclude, as does Christopher Robinson, that the second section "breaks" from the previous narrative. Robinson argues that section two is a "non-signifying" break in which Acker explores other methods of writing (115). Richard Walsh offers an even more sweeping assertion about Acker's narrative. "The form of Acker's work in general," he claims, "is not predicated upon narrative, but upon tableaux; she does not offer events but positions" (151). Walsh relies on a peculiar interpretation of a comment Acker makes about the contemporary readers' comfort with fragmented narratives to support his conclusion. "Narrative," Acker observes, "isn't a problem anymore. Even if you use a discontinuous story people will make connections" (10). Walsh's argument depends on interpreting Acker's statement as an admission that she avoids, at least part of the time, narrative, and

with it, progression. However, Acker speaks only of a particular sort of narrative and not of the exclusion of narrative altogether.

Sequencing her textual appropriations in section two, Acker constructs an implicit narrative structure and through it explores a series of established forms of communities. The first section, built around Bely's *Petersburg*, charts an unnamed protagonist's obsession with her lover, Peter. The second section draws its structure from Giuseppe di Lampedusa's *The Leopard*, and like the original discusses the political upheavals during the Risorgimento, but in Acker's version from the perspective of a disenfranchised woman. In the third section, Acker turns her attention to American history and the myth of the American dream by drawing on a science fiction narrative scholars have been unable to identify to discuss the growth of a national identity and the individual's loss of distinctness. The final element of section two, built around Wedekind's *Lulu* plays presents the most complex and structured of the four sections. Acker's appropriation preserves the Wedekind's five-act play structure. While her appropriations alter the themes of some of the acts, the narrative sequence remains largely unchanged.

An analysis of two scenes from section two, the first from the textual appropriation of *Petersburg* and the second from the Wedekind's *Lulu* plays reveals that the various texts not only present their own discrete narratives, but as a whole come together to present an overarching narrative structure. The first scene articulates the problem Kathy struggles to solve. The second appears to offer a solution but ultimately confirms that the narrative Kathy adopts and the communities she pursues ultimately compel individuals to fulfill prescribed roles.

Taking her setting from Bely's *Petersburg*, Acker sets Kathy, now nameless, somewhere in the alleys of St. Petersburg where she composes letters to her one-time lover, Peter. Kathy's desire for Peter manifests itself in self-reflexive and, in many cases, self-negating sentences that work as a unit. Within these sentences, Kathy proposes and then rejects binary positions as she does in her declaration of love to Peter:

I'll wait for you forever if you'll only come to me, for there's no time until I see you. Love makes time and life. I must be blind: you're poor. Your life is shambles. The more you want something, the more you deny it to yourself. You: my nightmare; I don't care. You've conquered me [...] I've made myself into your Rock of Gibraltar in order to capture you but I don't want you, I don't want you to break up your marriage, I don't want you to do anything that'll hurt you: I have to lose. [...] I don't have to lose because you don't love me. So: real love is strange and any simplicity between us has to be a lie. (43)

Though Kathy has clearly lost herself as the conventions of the chivalric romance she explored in section one said she must do, Kathy tries on various identities as she moves through section two. Here referring to the clichéd role she plays, Kathy renounces the independence that she clung to tenaciously throughout *Don Quixote's* first section.

Except for the last sentence, the remainder of her letter to Peter depicts a woman desperate for, defined by, and subservient to a man who has "conquered" her.

Uninterested in the very subjectivity she struggled for while she interpreted the world as Don Quixote, Kathy announces that she no longer "wants" Peter. This rather puzzling admission suggests that she has internalized the role of object and accepted that she does not have the necessary subjective position to function as a subject. Kathy's last sentence,

however, reveals a subtle shift in her understanding of love. No longer searching for and being driven mad by the inability to construct a rationale of love that would grant individuals the possibility to be simultaneously subject and object, Kathy recognizes that love is “strange.”

The final scene of the last section reemphasizes the notion of strange love in the addendum to Acker’s reimagining of the Lulu plays. The plot of the final section is relatively conventional. It owes something to George Bernard Shaw’s *Pygmalion*: a lower class woman is “sold” to an upper-class gentleman who tries to educate her to be one of the upper-class. Acker’s reimagining also owes something to Bataille’s *The Story of an Eye*: a sadist drives a woman to discover her own unconventional sexuality, and through the discovery of pleasure to discover her own identity. The section’s most obvious debt is to Wedekind’s Lulu plays: where a sexually promiscuous woman disrupts social conventions and refuses to behave. Acker’s imagination imposes another element on this already challenging blend of narratives by introducing surreal imagery into the scenes.

The surreal elements transform scenes that would otherwise be prosaic into something of profound, if not entirely clear, significance. In the second-to-last scene of Kathy’s version of Wedekind’s plays, Lulu takes a room at a hotel and is ushered to her room. Along the way, the porter stops at three other rooms. Each of these rooms reflects a different element of Kathy’s life: the first is the room of her childhood, the second is the room of art, and the third is the room of death. Each of these rooms contains phantasmagoric images that reflect her past, her deepest desires, and her deepest fears. However, by the time Lulu is shown to the last room, the room she has let for the night, the hotel has returned to normal. This scene invites obvious Freudian or Lacanian

readings: Kathy confronts the id, ego, and superego, or the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real, are less interesting than the final scene of the play because where an analysis of the rooms along psychoanalytic terms leads to predictable conclusions, the final scene upsets the notion of a totalizing explanation of Kathy's vision and offers possibility.

The last scene of Lulu's story finds her standing before the ocean. Having experienced her own sexuality and encountered her own past and future in the rooms of the hotel, Lulu remarks:

now I must find others who are, like me, pirates journeying from place to place, who know only change and the true responsibilities that come from such knowing
sing to and with each other.

Now I am going to travel. (97)

Perhaps the most striking element of Lulu's final statement is her desire to search for and to join the communities that she has been estranged from by her gender and the disenfranchisement that accompanies it. Though Kathy does not adopt the role of a pirate, the epiphany at the end of the play implies that Kathy's decision to travel resolves the tensions that caused her to lose her identity. However, the conclusion that Lulu imagines does not provide an answer to the problem of finding, or of creating, a community. Rather, it suggests that she has learned the strategies necessary to do so. Even these strategies offer no fixed assumptions and no fixed destinations but imply only the need to travel and to communicate with others.

The Third Part of *Don Quixote: The End of Night* offers the fullest articulation of the community Acker desires. Placing this gesture towards community at the conclusion

affords it a special significance. The final line, “now I am going to travel,” indicates a departure from the strategy that that preoccupies Kathy. While she continues to appropriate texts, the final section of the novel finds her reprising her role as Don Quixote, Kathy’s appropriations are no longer attempts to solidify an identity that allows conventional notions of love and community to be possible. Instead, Kathy’s project becomes to discover a new narrative that will make it possible for her to experience love and to form communities. But these narratives prove impossible within any of the stories she explores. Thus, she imagines, in other words, not a quest or even a revolution, but an apocalypse—the passing away of an old system and the introduction of a new.

Kathy’s reference to traveling suggests a movement away from the conventional forms and themes of narrative and towards something different that would allow her to realize her love. Though, as we have seen, Acker claims that she did not see postmodernism as a significant influence on her work, Acker’s reference to escape calls to mind a passage from the end of Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition*. In the final chapter of his book, Lyotard focuses on the social significance of postmodernism. He concludes that the shift from totalizing to localized systems carries with it the opportunity to escape the “terror”²⁴ of utilitarianism that shaped much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (81). Lyotard argues that the concept of the totalized system, of the grand narrative, remains inseparable from terror: “We have paid a high enough price for the nostalgia of the whole and the one, for the reconciliation of the concept and the sensible, of the transparent and the communicable experience” (80-81). Lyotard’s strategy for

²⁴ Lyotard draws on Kant’s definition of terror. Lyotard’s use of the term “terror” refers to the maxim of an industrialized society to either be productive or to disappear.

avoiding the terror of utilitarianism is to reject the idea of totalizing systems. He offers a manifesto that calls for us to “wage a war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unrepresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honor of the name” (81). Lyotard’s program fuses the philosophical, the war on totality, the sublime, the unrepresentable, the individual, and the name. In doing so, he anticipates Acker’s description of Kathy’s decision, in the persona of Lulu, to leave the conventional narratives that define a woman’s role in society behind and to travel.

However, the revolution Kathy and Lyotard imagine is problematic. The enormous complexity of Acker’s revisions that transform the story of Don Quixote into a story of a woman driven mad by her abortion and the still more nuanced textual appropriations that Acker presents in section two suggest that directionless travel is as likely to lead back to the convention as it is to lead to some new strategy. Likewise, in celebrating the complexities of the postmodern and its movement from totality, Lyotard offers no compass by which such movement can be charted. Thus both Kathy and Lyotard encounter a similar problem: how to ensure the attempt to deconstruct conventions do not reassemble the very philosophic, social, and aesthetic traditions they seek to dismantle.

Acker’s self-conscious appropriation of texts throughout *Don Quixote* suggests she is aware of the difficulty of escaping traditions and the need for some way to ensure that in escaping the traditions she does not reinstall what she opposes. Jameson’s *Postmodernism: Or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* suggests that the problem Acker confronts is endemic to postmodernism. The central challenge of postmodern theory, he argues, is that its incessant play and dismantling of totalizing systems robs it of

any position from which to measure its progress. Examining the problem of developing a political theory from postmodern precepts, Jameson observes that “postmodernist theory seems indeed to be a ceaseless process of internal rollover in which the position of the observer is turned inside out and the tabulation recombined on some larger scale” (64). Without an exterior referent, namely history,²⁵ Jameson argues that the theory of postmodernism becomes nothing more than a self-creating phenomenon, and the very escape Lyotard envisions becomes impossible because there is nothing to escape to or towards.

In *Don Quixote*, Acker’s persistent exploration and revision of the narratives she appropriates suggests her awareness of a similar problem in her attempt to discover a new sort of community. The problem is that Kathy’s madness only makes sense in relationship to the conventional narratives and communities she resists. Without this connection, the tactical withdrawal from the governing conventions is impossible. At a more fundamental level, the problem is one of definitions. By continuing to draw on notions of love and community, Acker remains locked into convention. To move outside of the community, she must first pry loose these terms from their conventional definitions. But such a move requires a point of leverage against which Acker can employ her creativity. Ironically, her aesthetic, which borrows so heavily from the literary canon, forecloses the possibility of gaining leverage against the social and narrative conventions she problematizes.

²⁵ Perhaps Jameson’s most famous statement about postmodernism emphasizes the disjunction between postmodern theory and historical awareness. Jameson writes, “it is safest to grasp the concept of the postmodern as an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten to think historically in the first place” (xi).

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In the last few pages of *Don Quixote*, Acker directly addresses the problem of finding a point of leverage to find a viable alternative to the conventions. In the last few pages of the novel, Kathy encounters God. But the God that Acker presents differs radically from the conventional Christian deity. Instead of being the absolute source of morality and truth, Acker's God is introspective and self-condemning, and in a gesture that is all but inevitable given the sentiments Acker shows in *Don Quixote*, confused about His or Her own sexuality (207). Thus diminished, Acker's God can no longer hold together the various threads of the culture Kathy has been struggling against. Announcing His imperfections, God instructs Kathy to no longer defer to Him, "so now that you know I'm imperfect, night, [sic] that you can't turn to Me: turn to yourself" (207). This direct injunction to no longer rely on God, or for that matter any divinity, but rather on oneself, leaves much unsaid. In particular, the statement fails to clarify why God's imperfections would render Him no longer an appropriate source of authority.

In a staccato burst of preemptory commands prefaced with the announcement of his own dissolution, God directs Kathy to "Forget Me. Forget morality. Forget saving the world" (207). Yet the apparently unchecked spiral into nihilism is checked by the last of God's chain of commands, "Make Me up" (207). The commands to "forget" suggest that the conventional ways of making sense of the world no longer serve and that Kathy should move beyond them. The last commandment complicates the nature of God's existence. Its ambiguous construction implies either that Kathy should reinvent God,

which means that He is mutable, or it means that God never existed in the first place and has always been simply a matter for the imagination. In either case, God ceases to be the absolute basis for authority and transfers His power to Kathy.

Yet what Kathy does after God's abdication suggests that some residue of His authority remains. Kathy continues to remember—and, once more, to obey—God. In fact, the two seem inextricably linked for Kathy. “Obeying these teachings – my last memories, – I said ‘Goodbye’ to God the Monstrous Liar and Monster-Wonder” (207). Ironically, even though she regards God as a liar, Kathy continues to regard Him as a source for truth, even if it is a truth Kathy decides to “never reveal the reality God had just revealed to me about God” (207). Kathy's curious mixture of obedience and belief in God suggests His continued influence and authority. And in doing so, Acker's divine occupies an paradoxical position in which His very authority is required to renounce His existence.

The paradox becomes more complicated still as Kathy finally seems to leave God behind her. Centered around images of stupor and waking, the last paragraph of *Don Quixote* presents Kathy's waking as a consequence of her finally forgetting God. Acker's novel, however, says nothing of what comes after Kathy finally forgets God “and then, drunk, awoke to the world which lay before me.” (207). The presence of this first person account indicates that Kathy discovers something after waking but provides little insight into what she finds. Read in terms of the narratives she interrogates, Kathy's silence is necessary, if paradoxical. Her quest for an alternative to the conventional notions of community lead her towards a new narrative that is not bound by the same issues of authority and conventions that color each of the texts she appropriates. As her

conversation with God suggests, the only viable response is to leave the conventions aside—though doing so requires a new sort of story that cannot be articulated within the deconstructive motif of *Don Quixote*.

Kathy falls into the dream of *Don Quixote* when she has to confront her abortion. This pivotal moment marks the beginning of her creative quest and of her delusions. At the end of the novel, Kathy appears to have found her way out of not only her delusion but also out of what God refers to as the myths of guilt and need. In short, her delusions lead her into a new understanding of the world, and if God's injunction to "make me up" is any indication, a world that Kathy has or will participate in creating.

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The desire for community achieves its clearest articulation in the novel's final six pages. Evoking the scene at the end of section one where Kathy composes her will, near the end of the novel Kathy, still in the persona of Don Quixote, again speaks from a near-death, in fact a post-death, state. Reflecting on her quest thus far, Kathy appears to offer a coda for her quest and to present the organizing perspective that has so far been missing from her highly episodic tale. In this final sequence, Kathy states, "now I'm going to speak directly" (202). But while the observations Kathy goes on to offer are among the more direct in *Don Quixote*, the context of her statements makes even this apparently direct articulation of her goals problematic. Presented under the subsection title "Don Quixote's Dream," even Kathy's promise to speak plainly appears to be colored by at least two levels of fantasy: the first, her madness; the second, her dream. But whatever

coloring Acker's madness and her dream introduce, the thematic consistency and directness of the scene make its unmistakable argument that community is an inherent element of the postmodern.

Kathy's discussion of community can be usefully divided into three components. The first is her insistence that community is a necessity, especially and paradoxically for those who are most excluded. The second component discusses how communities are formed, and the third the consequences of joining a community.

Acker's discussion of the necessity of a community opens not with a claim for solidarity but with an explanation of the radical estrangement of others. Drawing on categories as conventional as they are pejorative, Acker names this community of others "freaks," but although she presents them as more or less wholly isolated from community, she includes every other person within the category of freaks. Acker writes:

It is true that women are never men. Even a woman who has the soul of a pirate, at least pirate morals, even a woman who prefers loneliness to the bickering and constraints of heterosexual marriage, even such a woman who is a freak in our society needs a home. (202)

Acker's second sentence devotes quite a bit of time to arguing that even those women who intentionally and profoundly challenge the assumptions of community require a home, require a community. At the root of these assumptions is the narrative of the romantic pair that Acker appropriates. Because she works from this prototype no matter how much she problematizes it, the key roles of subject and object remain. Thus, the implications are as clear as they are generalized: attempting to imagine a new community and to escape conventional communities does not free one from the need for community

but rather constitutes a rejection of a certain sort of a particularly narrowly drawn community. Although Kathy claims to speak directly, a dream-like ambiguity colors her pronouncements. For while Kathy goes to great lengths to speak of what all women need, her opening statement, “it is true that women are never men,” leaves room for the possibility that men, or certain sort of men, do not share the deep-seated desire for community that tints Kathy’s perceptions.

The implication that men may not need communities is eclipsed by Acker’s more general claim that “even freaks need homes, countries, language, communication” (202). The adjectival phrase “even freaks” extends what in the previous paragraph could be construed as a need shared only by women into a universal desire for community, for connection to others. Kathy satisfies this need for community through the simple expedient of creating a community through language. As we have seen earlier, Acker discusses the need for community in terms of politics, of economics, and of aesthetics. Here she presents community as satisfying a far more fundamental requirement, for “without love or language, I do not exist” (202). Erasing the conventional difference that treats the individuals who form a community as elemental to a community but ultimately distinct from it, Acker argues that the two are inseparable. In erasing this distance, she carries forward the same line of reasoning she introduced in her discussion about Prince. What is important is not the distinction between the imagined and the real or between the compound and the elements that constitute it.

Ironically, Kathy can only imagine joining a community in terms of the very comforts that she has resisted. Kathy entertains only one means of joining a community—marriage. And that marriage will make her “a prisoner,” “normal,” and perhaps most

significantly will require her to “stop having the dreams by which [she] now act[s]” (202). The problem Kathy faces cannot be solved within the communities available to her in *Don Quixote*. Even her imagined communities prove insufficient to the task, and Kathy feels compelled to acquiesce to the most conventional of communities. Were *Don Quixote* to end with such a vision of community, the outlook would be conclusive: however much the novel may search for a viable community, none can satisfy the requirements of a postmodern world and so none is ultimately viable. To put it succinctly, the quest for community would simply be quixotic.

Considering the options available to Kathy in her search for community, it is useful to return to her discussion with God at the end of the novel. My previous analysis noted the passage was almost entirely opaque about the sort of community it envisioned, and that it offered at best a sketch of what Kathy would have to reject if she continued searching for a community that would allow her to love. Yet, the ambiguity that once seemed problematic transforms into something else entirely when read in light of Frank Kermode’s argument in *A Sense of an Ending*. As I discussed in the introduction to this dissertation, at the center of Kermode’s argument lies the contention that the conclusions of works of fiction must find a way to resolve the central dilemma that drives the story. Such an ending, he notes, must not simply present a static world where nothing happens, for such an ending would violate the laws of verisimilitude that govern all fiction. The world, as we know, never stops, and even fiction that tends towards the apocalyptic will usually leave room for something to happen after the story ends.

Don Quixote’s conclusion compounds the free play Kermode argues is necessary in conclusions with Kathy’s belief that no conventional sort of society will allow her to

form the sort of relationships she desires and with the complementary realization that the present world view will not allow the invention of any other viable systems. Trapped between a need that must be realized and a setting that simply forbids it, Acker's narrative follows the only path left by creating a space where a community of freaks is possible and where Kathy can finally love another as an equal. In doing so, she resolves the quixotic quest.

Though pursuing a significantly different topic than Lyotard in *The Differend*, Acker's *Don Quixote* addresses the same problem in the community the novel's conclusion gestures towards but never realizes. In extremely reductive terms, Lyotard wonders how disputes where the two parties do not recognize either a common authority capable of resolving the problem or that a topic for dispute can be resolved. He takes as his working example the case of the Jewish Holocaust and imagines a conversation between those who suffered the Holocaust and those who would deny it altogether. Working within the legal paradigm, Lyotard concludes that absent some supervening authority that can compel the two parties to accept some third party as an arbitrator so that such a conversation cannot be resolved. It can only be continued. The solution, in other words, is to create a space where the conversation can continue and where a resolution might be possible. The similarity to *Don Quixote* is striking. The conclusion of Acker's novel creates precisely such a space where the community that Kathy has searched for might be realized. That the community is not presented in the scope of the novel's narrative is, then, not a failure of the narrative, but a particular characteristic of a certain type of narrative. To borrow terms from Brian McHale's *Postmodernis Fiction*, because Acker's *Don Quixote* concerns itself with ontological questions that exceed the

conventions of the communities the novel explores, the only possible conclusion is to exhaust the available answers, answers that can be imagined by the narrative, and then create a space where other responses are possible.

Kathy's dismissal of God at the end of the novel, according to Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's theory, does not indicate the loss of the position necessary to challenge convention but is a challenge in itself. They present a useful framework for understanding this line of flight in the conclusion of their chapter on the nomad and the war machine. An "artistic movement," they write, "can be a potential war machine, to the precise extent to which it draws [...] a plane of consistency, a creative line of flight, a smooth space of displacement" (422). Hinging on the metaphor of movement, Deleuze and Guattari envision a movement away from any sort of a totalizing system and in doing so echo Lyotard's understanding of postmodernism as a response to the imperative of utilitarianism.

However, the revolution Kathy imagines exceeds even Lyotard's understanding of the possibility for a radical escape from totalizing systems and approximates the war machine as envisioned by Deleuze and Guattari. "The postmodern artist or writer," Lyotard argues, "is in the position of a philosopher: the texts he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by preestablished rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgment, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work" (81). Clarifying the relationship between the author or artists and the conventions, Lyotard continues, "the artist and the writer, then, are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what *will have been done*" (81). Despite his emphasis on the nearly unlimited creativity available to the postmodern author, Lyotard's theory betrays its debt

to rules, to conventions, which, though they might come only after the work is finished, ultimately surface. Deleuze and Guattari, on the other hand, describe a response that jettisons not only the conventional rules but the notion of rules. They present this opposition in terms of a war machine, which they define as “a nonsubjectified machine assemblage with no intrinsic properties, only situational ones” (353).²⁶ The war machine’s tendency to dispense with rules and properties offers a more complete escape than what Lyotard imagines. Instead of imposing another system in place of a conventional one, war machines “bring connection to bear against the great conjunctions of the apparatuses of capture or domination” (423). Drawing on a theory of opposition that does not reinscribe an alternate hierarchy, Acker gestures towards a theory of community and an aesthetic of the postmodern novel that resolve the problem of constructing a coherent position by taking the idea of fragmentation seriously. The community Kathy is on the brink of initiating at the conclusion of *Don Quixote* does not reinstitute the conventional roles and rules of genre that she sought to escape.

The position of the community Kathy desires beyond the conclusion of the novel reflects, both what Kermode identifies as the characteristics of conclusions and the specific theoretical position Acker’s novel inhabits. Having crafted a strategy of escape that depends on the rhizomatic nature of the war machine, Acker cannot create a totalizing depiction of that community, as Kermode’s theory would suggest, without sacrificing the free play that makes the community possible in the first place.

²⁶ Deleuze and Guattari offer a useful, concrete example of the war machine by contrasting it with the state apparatus. They liken the state apparatus to the game of chess in which pieces have distinct shapes and properties. In contrast, they compare the war machine to the game of go in which the pieces are nondescript and have no inherent properties, only position.

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Acker began *Don Quixote* not as some grand meditation on postmodern communities nor even as an explicitly postmodern work, though it would ultimately come to be both, but rather as a sort of literary therapy to help her cope with her own abortion. This accidental quality of the text and its preoccupation with community may ultimately be the strongest evidence for arguing that community is not only present in postmodern novels but is also one of their more common concerns. Robert Glük once imagined a scenario to which *Don Quixote* is perhaps a viable response: “Generating identity means generating community. If the idea of community began so heterogeneously, I wonder if the reductionist pitfalls could be avoided” (52). Far from abandoning attempts to imagine a coherent community, the episodic madness of Acker’s novel highlights the centrality of the question of what sort of communities are possible within a postmodern novel. In *Don Quixote*, Acker satisfies a hope she once voiced, “May we write, not in order to judge, but for and in (I quote George Bataille, ‘The community of those who do not have a community’)” (*Critical Languages* 91).

Acker’s vision in *Don Quixote* suggests the new world will be an amalgam of the old—to borrow an image common in postmodern scholarship, it will constitute a palimpsest in which the new version turns the materials of the old to new purposes. But what is of most interest is not how the new world will be imagined or created but that it will at all. The curiously creative moment at the end of *Don Quixote* should not be entirely surprising for someone acquainted with Acker’s views on fiction. In “A Few

Notes On Two Of My Books,” Acker discusses the ethical obligations she feels when writing and offers a succinct summary of what she sees as the author’s obligations. “The artist,” she writes, “must find the ways for all of our survival” (11). One of the implications of Acker’s statement is nearly impossible to miss: the author has an obligation to either preserve or create community. And since the conventional communities in *Don Quixote* are clearly untenable, Acker’s job must be to create a new one. The artist’s work is always tied up with questions of community. According to Acker, resolving these questions is not a question of her survival but of ours.

**Chapter 4: “All of it slowing fading from memory”: Post-Apocalyptic Community
in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road***

Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* explores a question that the other novels I have studied address only indirectly: how do individuals continue to form meaningful relationships in a world where truth is not an overarching given, but localized and provisional—a product of discrete and fluid interpretive strategies, what Jean-François Lyotard refers to as *petite narratives*? Set in a post-apocalyptic landscape where the social, cultural, and legal systems have already collapsed under the weight of the simple imperative to stay alive, McCarthy’s novel presents a future beyond the reach of any residue of organizing grand narrative. Indeed, even Fredric Jameson’s rather modest appeal to the possibility of “thinking historically,” as he argues in *Postmodernism or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, has no basis in McCarthy’s ash-choked landscape.

Yet McCarthy’s protagonists retain the basic desire for human contact and cultivate the belief that some sort of community, which in *The Road* is defined by a shared perception of the world, remains possible. Where Pynchon, DeLillo, and even Kathy Acker imagine the postmodern world and the postmodern community in opposition to some other overarching narrative, McCarthy offers only the *petite narratives*. And because the narratives he imagines are supported by nothing except the immediate concerns of relatively small communities, they highlight the paradox of community in the postmodern. As much as the postmodern tends towards discrete and

limited narratives, it also necessitates community in order for these petite narratives to be possible.

Published in 2006, *The Road* occupies a curious place among McCarthy's work. Best known for his re-imagining of genre of the Western and for a Faulknerian prose style, McCarthy takes an apparently radical turn in *The Road* by setting it in a post-apocalyptic landscape on the east coast and by drawing upon relatively simple sentence structures. Absent too are the sublime depictions of the landscape that run through his earlier novels and mitigate the horror his protagonists experience with the promise of natural beauty. Instead, the land and the characters are choked by the ash from the nameless disaster that has all but wiped life from the United States.

Though the immediate destruction seems relatively minimal—cities and towns are left standing—whatever causes the catastrophe also disrupts the ecosystem. And by the time the novel opens, almost all animals are dead, all the plants have withered under a persistent ash that hides the sun and coats everything, and food and clean water are in critically low supply. The novel's protagonists, a father and son, called simply "the man" and "the boy," trudge south following various state roads, driven by their need to find food and water and by the desperate hope that the sea will provide food and some respite from the choking ash that has already caused the man to develop a respiratory problem that will ultimately kill him. Along the way, the pair avoid predatory cannibals, spend an evening with a frail old man who has improbably survived the landscape and the roving bands of cannibals, explore desolate wastelands and still more desolate abandoned cities and towns, and encounter at each point the detritus of an extinguished civilization. Compelled to travel in their search for food, the man and the boy nurture an

unconditional love for each other. This bond sets them apart from almost every other character in the novel—even the man’s wife decides that suicide is the only reasonable response to the utter desolation that follows the catastrophe.

The novel marks a shift in McCarthy’s body of work from the modern to the postmodern and therefore stands as one of McCarthy’s more interesting, if not best-known texts. Much of the interest follows from *The Road’s* tendency to support diametrically opposed readings. For instance, Alex Hunt and Martin M. Jacobsen in “Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* and Plato’s ‘Simile of the Sun’” argue that *The Road* is best understood as a rejection of Plato’s claim that enlightenment is possible because within McCarthy’s novel no transcendent truth is accessible. Consequently, the characters remain hemmed in by the meanness of the day-to-day struggle for survival. In contrast, Thomas Carlson contends that hope remains possible even within the blighted landscape of *The Road* in his essay “With the World at Heart: Reading Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* with Augustine and Heidegger.” What is interesting is that both scholars turn to outside sources to corral *The Road’s* meaning. Moreover, the significant difference between the philosophical texts adopted by Hunt and Jacobsen on the one hand and Carlson on the other suggests that McCarthy’s novel presents not one but at least two different narrative centers and as such implies that it borders on the postmodern.

Lyotard’s theory of the postmodern furnishes perhaps the most useful set of concepts and terms to understand the postmodern elements of *The Road* because the man and the boy find themselves in a situation very similar to what Lyotard describes. Lyotard’s argument, which I discuss at more length in the conclusion, holds that a shift from totalizing to localized systems of explanation and meaning characterize the

postmodern. He contends that the shift occurs because of a growing popular distrust not of the specific strategies offered by a totalizing system, what he terms a grand narrative, but of the possibility for any totalizing explanation to provide an accurate basis for understanding the world. Lyotard argues that the consequence of this distrust is the proliferation of localized and provisional interpretive schemas, which he terms petite narratives. The world McCarthy creates in *The Road* presents a similar situation. In the wasteland, the social conventions have disappeared with the societies they once organized and taken with them most sets of moral strictures. Instead, the man and the boy are compelled to invent their own explanatory systems.

To date, no scholarly work of any significant length has focused specifically on discussing McCarthy as a postmodern author. However, the argument is implicit in several works such as Robert Jarrett's *Cormac McCarthy*. Jarrett contends that McCarthy's fiction is deeply concerned with postmodern themes of self-referentiality, and historicity. This pattern might indicate little more than a tendency to view many contemporary novels as loosely postmodern were it not for the novel's preoccupation with some of the central themes of postmodernism. The novel's focus on these themes invites reading the novel within Lyotard's theory of the postmodern. Thus, when I talk about postmodernism in *The Road*, I refer primarily to the novel's overt appropriation and revision of classical stories, primarily of the Old and New Testament as well as to various quest narratives and more importantly to the absence of any sort of totalizing narrative in the novel and the man and the boy's need to construct petite narratives to make sense of the apocalyptic landscape through which they travel.

The presumption of a shared community lies at the center of the petite narratives the man and the boy create. Unlike the other three novels I have examined, *The Road* provides more than a glimpse of the community. The community McCarthy creates bears the closest similarity to Acker's *Don Quixote*. In both novels, community is not only a way to satisfy the desire to connect with others but also fulfills a specific need. In Acker's novel, the need is to make love possible. For McCarthy, the need is even more pressing: to ensure the boy's survival. Because *The Road* foregrounds the importance of community, the novel ultimately offers a more precise vision of that community than the other novels. *The Road* presents two distinct forms of community. The first is the parental bond between the man and the boy. The second is the larger and largely imaginary community of "good guys" that the man assures the boy may also be on the path the two travel to the sea. In both cases, however, the novel presents a shared petite narrative as the basis for community.

To analyze community in *The Road*, it is necessary to discuss four scenes. The first two scenes explore the possibility for community in *The Road* and the relationship between community and storytelling. In the first scene, the man reflects on his memories of a time before the apocalypse and concludes that such memories are dangerous. The first scene emphasizes the man's need to construct a petite narrative that he and the boy can share. In doing so, the man sets aside his tendency to dwell on what he has lost, which he regards as akin to accepting death, and like the boy maintains some faith in the possibility of community. In the second scene, the boy discovers a dog and later a child in a town he and the man are scouting for food. The boy's obsessive concern for the dog and the child emphasizes his desire for a community beyond his relationship with the man.

After seeing the dog and the other child, the man and the boy engage in an indirect conversation about the relative weight each attaches to community. In the third scene, the man and the boy meet Ely, an emaciated old man who speaks of little besides his own nihilistic philosophy. The man feeds Ely some of their rations at the boy's request. After dinner and after the boy beds down for the night, the man engages Ely in a conversation that touches on philosophy, theology, and the possibility of surviving in the wasteland. Ely's nihilistic philosophy and his refusal to entertain the possibility for anything but meager survival in the apocalyptic world serves as a counterpoint to the boy's naïve belief that community is possible. Ely also throws into relief the man's growing despondency that all he hopes for on the road is meager survival. The two or three competing understandings of what is possible in the wasteland emphasize the presence of petite narratives in the novel. In the final scene, the narrator reflects on a time before the apocalypse and suggests that any order or meaning that might once have been possible is irrevocably lost. The narrator's overt discussion of meaning underscores the necessity of petite narratives in the post-apocalyptic wasteland, for no other explanatory system is available, nor indeed possible. Taken together, these four sections reveal both the novel's rejection of grand narratives and its preoccupation with the definition and construction of community in order to make sense of the post-apocalyptic world.

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The pronounced differences between the man's understanding of the world and the boy's early dreams of community in *The Road* set the stage for the novel's

preoccupation with petite narratives and the connection between those narratives and community. For the man, each day is overshadowed by the possibility that he and his son will not only die but will be first defiled by savage bands of cannibals that comb the landscape looking for the only food left to them. Thus, the man initially looks to escape from the world and when such escape proves untenable, invests all of his hope in his son. The boy, on the other hand, regards the world as a place where some sort of connection with others is possible.

The man finds solace only by retreating into his memories of a time before the apocalypse. Rendered in idyllic terms, these memories offer the man at best a temporary shelter from reality. In one of the more detailed of these memories, the man recalls a day he spent with his uncle harvesting tree stumps for firewood. Crowded with colors no longer found in the post-apocalyptic landscape, life superimposed upon life, and above all the warmth of the sun, the memory is “the perfect day of his childhood” (11). What makes the day “perfect” is made clear by its juxtaposition with a scene of the post-apocalyptic landscape through which the man and boy travel:

They stood and looked out over the great gulf to the south where the country as far as they could see was burned away, the blackened shape of rock standing out of the shoals of ash and billows of ash rising up and blowing down country through the waste. The track of the dull sun moving unseen beyond the murk. (12)

Where life, color, and warmth abound in the man’s memory of a perfect day, all are absent from the near perfect horror of the wasteland: “the blackness he woke to [...] was sightless and impenetrable. A blackness to hurt your ears with listening. [...] No sound but the wind in the bear and blackened trees. He rose and stood tottering in that cold

autistic dark” (13). Within this “cauterized” landscape (12), the promise of that perfect memory that once served as the “day to shape the days upon” (12) evaporates. The man is reduced to simply surviving. Any hope for better times abandoned, the man retreats still deeper into his memories:

He could remember everything of her save her scent. Seated in a theatre with her beside him leaning forward listening to the music. Gold scrollwork and sconces and the tall columnar folds of the drapes at either side of the stage. She held his hand in her lap and he could feel the tops of her stocking through the thin stuff of her summer dress. Freeze this frame. Now call down your dark and your cold and be damned. (16)

Isolated and alone in the world, the man conjures an intimate and sexually charged image as shelter against the cold, the darkness, and the despair that permeates the landscape. Realizing that the apocalypse has consumed even the possibility of another ideal day, the man relinquishes hope and relies instead on the slender comfort of memory.

Any respite the man gains from these memories proves fleeting. Speaking to his son, the man acknowledges that memory does not offer a viable escape, for “you forget what you want to remember and you remember what you want to forget” (10). The perverse paradox of memory that causes the man to recall what he most wants to leave behind is not the ultimate problem the man faces in seeking comfort. Consciously stripping himself of the protection of memory and fantasy, the man devotes himself to the harsh reality of the wasteland he and his son inhabit:

He mistrusted all of that [all of his dreams]. He said the right dreams for a man in peril were dreams of peril and all else was the call of languor and of death. [...]

He dreamt of walking in a flowering wood where birds flew before them he and the child and the sky was aching blue but he was learning how to wake himself from just such siren worlds. [...] He thought if he lived long enough the world at last would all be lost. Like the dying world the newly blind inhabit, all of it slowing fading from memory. (15-6)

The man's rejection of the comfort his dreams bring him is nearly absolute.

Characterizing any thought that does not focus on the danger that he and his son find themselves in as a dangerous distraction, the man sets aside even his dreams. And when the man does recall images of beauty and vitality, they carry all of the nostalgia of the earlier memories but introduce none of their sense of salvation or shelter. The man's subsequent comments, which I explore later in this chapter, present a more complicated understanding of memory.

How the boy copes with the realities of the road is as different from his father's as it is elegant, and the difference indicates the presence of two subtly distinct narrative narratives that place a common value on community but have yet to share an understanding of what that community is. Born after the apocalypse began, the boy has no memories of a time before the apocalypse to provide even a psychological shelter. And instead of the complex psychoscape his father constructs as a retreat from the world, the boy focuses on a narrative his father has created for him and the possibility of discovering other "good guys" as they travel along the road. Instead of succumbing to the reality of a world made infertile by actions and actions beyond his understanding, the boy envisions a world where it is possible to help others. The boy's steadfast insistence on this possibility of forming more extensive communities than the one he shares with his

father, even when the help imperils his own life, acquires increasing significance throughout *The Road* as he transitions from what appears to be a childish naïvety to a deeply held conviction that will ultimately save him after the man's death.

The boy's desire for community is especially apparent in two episodes. In the first of these scenes, about a third of the way along their journey, the boy entertains the possibility of folding not only another child but an animal into the community he and his father form. Surprised as they camp for the night, the man and the boy are forced to abandon their shopping cart full of the meager supplies they have gathered. About two days later and beginning to feel weak from starvation, the man and the boy happen upon a village and decide to explore its apparently abandoned houses for food, clothing, and anything else that might be useful. Born of necessity, the decision to enter the town is carries significant risk, for cannibalistic tribes are scattered across the landscape and will sometimes set traps for unwary travelers, as the man and boy encounter later in their travels. But while no physical danger threatens the man and the boy in this episode, a psychological trauma does imperil the boy as he first glimpses the possibility of an extended community only to have the opportunity stripped away by the harsh requirements to survive on the road.

These requirements do not, however, preoccupy the boy. Instead, he imagines the world as a place where it is not only possible but also appropriate to behave altruistically. As the man and the boy inspect the town in which they will search for food, they hear a dog bark. It is the only live animal the man and the boy encounter during their long journey to the sea. After hearing the dog, the boy immediately becomes concerned for its safety and asks his father if they are going to kill the dog. The man promises not once but

twice not to hurt the dog. The first promise is little more than a declaration that the dog will be safe. “No,” the man promises, “We’re not going to kill it” (69). The narrative juxtaposes the man’s pledge not to harm the dog with his profound love for his son. “He looked down at the boy. Shivering in his coats. He bent over and kissed him on his gritty brow. We wont²⁷ hurt the dog, he said. I promise” (69-70). The promise, then, becomes an important token exchanged between the man and his son, for it signals the father’s willingness to see the world as his son does—not only as a pitiless landscape in which survival is the only thing he can reasonably hope for but as a place where mercy, generosity, and most importantly, some version of community remains possible. More than a child’s naïve hopes, however, the boy’s vision of community presents an alternative to his father’s understanding of the world. As such, it calls attention to the multiple petite narratives about community that circulate through McCarthy’s novel.²⁸

The Road demonstrates the boy’s desire to create a community by having the boy glimpse another child in the same town where he and his father discover the dog. The boy pleads with his father to allow the other boy and the dog to join them as they travel south; the boy’s desire for community collapses the child and the dog into a single vision of

²⁷ In *The Road*, McCarthy uses apostrophes in contractions only when their omission would create another word. For instance, he uses apostrophes in “we’ll” to distinguish the contraction from the word “well.” But because “wont” is not a word in common usage, he omits its apostrophe.

²⁸ Two prominent works of scholarship on McCarthy’s fiction establish McCarthy’s repeated use of the image of the boy and his dog to signal community. Isabel Soto devotes a significant portion of her essay, “The Boarder Paradigm in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Crossing*,” to this question. She argues that the protagonist’s decision to save a she-wolf from his father introduces an alternate understanding of humanity’s relationship to nature. Alex Hunt offers a similar reading in “‘Right and False Suns’ Cormac McCarthy’s *The Crossing* and the Advent of the Atomic Age” but suggests that the protagonist connects not only with nature but does so in response to the threat of nuclear holocaust.

potential community. The conversation contrasts the father's practical concerns with the boy's decidedly idealistic view of what is possible.

We should go get him, Papa. We could get him and take him with us. We could take him and we could take the dog. The dog could catch something to eat.

We cant.

And I'd give that little boy half of my food.

Stop it. We cant.

He was crying again. What about the little boy? He sobbed. What about the little boy? (73)

Interestingly, the community the boy imagines mirrors his relationship to the father. With the boy placing himself in the role of protector and the other child assuming the dependent role. The boy's closing questions about the other child reveals his obsession to be a member of a larger community than the one he forms with his father. The father's comments, on the other hand, present an awareness of their limited supplies and the likelihood that both he and his son may soon starve. For the moment, this practical concern supersedes his son's idealism.

Yet though he apparently recognizes his father's authority to decide the best course of action, the boy continues to cling to his idealized vision of community even after he and his father have left the town to continue their journey. So powerful is the boy's desire for community that it orients him in a landscape that has until now interested him only for the miles between himself and the sea. "He sat studying the twisted matrix of routes in red and black with his finger at the junction where he thought that they might be. As if he'd seen their small selves crouching there. We could go back, the boy said

softly. It's not so far. It's not too late" (73). The last three sentences of the paragraph, which are the only ones where the boy speaks in the paragraph, reveal his growing desire for community and of his belief in second chances. Unlike his father, who presses onward in what we discover is a futile attempt to find some respite by the sea, the boy envisions a world in which it is possible to save another, even as he remains aware that the opportunity to help another is finite—available only so long as the other is not “so far” away and that they are not “too late.”

Set in contrast to the boy's idyllic vision of the future, the man's final thoughts about the dog emphasize the differences between the narratives each draws on to make sense of the world.

The dog that he remembers followed us for two days. I tried to coax it to come but it would not. I made a noose of wire to catch it. There were three cartridges in the pistol. None to spare. She walked away down the road. The boy looked after and then he looked at me and then looked at the dog and he began to cry and to beg for the dog's life and I promised that I would not hurt the dog. A trellis of a dog with the hide stretched over it. The next day it was gone. (74)

The father's betrayal of his promise to his son here seems absolute. He considers how best to snare the dog and even considers using one of his bullets to kill the animal. The man ultimately relents and renews his promise to his son not to kill the dog. But given his evident willingness to promise one thing and do another, the significance of the promise remains in question.

Yet, the man's decision to keep his plans secret from the boy indicate that while the immediate need for food outweighs the importance of preserving his son's vision of

the world, that vision is also useful. The narrative permits the boy to assign meaning to their journey through the wasteland and, more importantly, to trust others after the man dies.

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The complexities surrounding the narrator in *The Road* further emphasize the connection between the stories the man and boy tell and their preoccupation with community. What is particularly interesting is not just that the narrator intrudes but what that intrusion reveals about the story. The narrator is visible in the first sentence of the novel, “When he woke in the woods in the dark and the cold of the night he’d reach out to touch the child sleeping beside him” (3). Here, as is often the case in *The Road*, the narrator is content merely to describe the events as they unfold and does so with an almost journalistic detachment. When the narrator offers a bit of color, usually through metaphor, the figures of speech tend to focus on the characters’ experience and do not pass judgment on the events. For example, in the novel’s opening paragraph, the narrator describes a dream in which the man and his son wander in a cave “like pilgrims in a fable swallowed up and lost among the inward parts of some granitic beast” (3). Though alluding to Jonah in the belly of the whale, the narrator proves more interested in establishing an image than in assigning some meaning to the text.

However, the same is not true for the last two lines of the episode with the dog: “that is the dog he remembers. He doesnt remember any little boys” (74). Here, the narrator interrupts the father’s account and describes what the boy thinks in a way that

effectively comments on the passage. The narrator refocuses the reader's attention on the dog and reasserts its importance in the novel. The narrator also calls into question the boy's fixation on the other little boy whom he forgets so completely. *The Road* offers several reasons why the boy might forget the other child: it could be nothing more than a matter of verisimilitude; it could be that the boy has learned to accept loss.²⁹ It could be that his father's observation that one forgets what one most wants to remember and remembers what one would most like to forget is at play here; finally, and most interestingly, it could be that the boy does not forget at all.

In any event, the boy clings to the possibility of establishing community both as a way to orient himself in the world and as a sort of ethical compass. Toward the end of their journey together, the man, who is aware of his impending death, offers to tell his son a story. The boy, however, rejects the offer, providing as a reason "in the stories we're always helping people and we dont help people" (225). Though the boy's observation that they do not help people does not necessarily mean that he remembers the child he and his father left in the town, it does indicate just how important helping others and establishing some sort of community is to the boy. Moreover, the boy's explicit reference to the difference between the stories his father tells him and the man's and his actions indicates the boy's preoccupation with the possibility of community. Community for the boy is not merely a theme in the stories his father tells him. Instead, he sees it as something which should be manifest in the world. Like his father who set aside the dreams that did not contribute directly to his survival, the boy rejects the stories of which

²⁹ Sometime before the events in *The Road* occur, the boy's mother walks off into the night and presumably commits suicide. Waking to find his mother gone, he accepts her absence with no comment.

he no longer accepts the underlying premise. His rejection echoes an earlier passage in which his father encounters a library and takes a similar—though distinct—response to the stories:

Years later he'd stood in the charred ruins of a library where blackened books lay in pools of water. Shelves tipped over. Some rage at the lies arranged in their thousands row on row. He picked up one of the books and thumbed through the heavy bloated pages. He'd not have thought the value of the smallest thing predicated on a world to come. It surprised him. That the space which these things occupied was itself an expectation. He let the book fall and took a last look around and made his way out into the cold gray light. (157-8)

For the man, the stories evoke anger because of the “lies” they tell. Why he regards these stories as lies is not entirely clear, but his rejection of dreams of comfort, which we have already examined, provides some insight. For the man, all that is important is keeping his son alive. Everything is turned towards this utilitarian purpose, and that which cannot be made to do so he discards—just as he abandons the shelter that dreams bring him, however illusory that shelter may be. In both cases, he chooses the “cold grey light” in which he might be able to protect his son over any comfort.

The son, however, seems less concerned with the “lies” the stories tell than with his father's and his choices not to live up to the values expressed in them. Having had his offer of a story refused, the man asks his son if he would like to tell a story. Once again the boy refuses, and in so doing presents a complex rationale to his father who asks:

Why dont you tell me a story?

I dont want to.

Okay.

I dont have any stories to tell.

You could tell me a story about yourself.

You already know all the stories about me. You were there.

You have stories inside that I dont know about.

You mean like dreams?

Like dreams. Or just things that you think about.

Yea, but stories are supposed to be happy.

They dont have to be.

You always tell happy stories.

You dont have any happy ones?

Theyre more like real life.

But my stories are not.

Your stories are not. No.

The man watched him. Real life is pretty bad?

What do you think?

Well, I think we're still here. A lot of bad things have happened but were still

here.

Yeah.

You dont think thats so great.

Its okay. (225-26)

The conversation breaks into three distinct sections: the boy's initial refusal of his father's request to tell a story; the boy's assertion that the stories he might tell do not

meet the appropriate characteristics of stories, and the assertion that his life does not provide suitable material for making his own stories because it is not happy enough. Woven through this structure is the man and the boy's realization that some sort of story is necessary. Storytelling, in other words, is not an empty aesthetic exercise but something necessary for survival.

The importance the father and the son attach to the story echoes a comment the mother had made just before she left them to commit suicide. Rejecting the man's pleas to stay with him and their son, she pauses to offer one piece of advice:

The one thing I can tell you is that you wont survive for yourself. I know because I would never have come this far. A person who had no one would be well advised to cobble together some passable ghost. Breathe it into being and coax it along with words of love. Offer it phantom crumb and shield it from harm with your body. (48)

The mother's comments apply both to her husband and to her son. For the man, the advice is straightforward. If he wants to survive, he will need to keep his son alive so he has something to live for. However, the boy's refusal to treat his own vision of community as fictional, reveals his investment in a cause beyond his own immediate survival. The son, however, does not invest himself exclusively in another person but rather in a certain understanding of the world in which helping others and, ultimately community, is possible. His despondency underlines just how important these ideas are for him. And just as the father routinely shelters his son from harm with his body, absorbing cold, hunger, and even wounds so long as they help to keep his son safe, the boy likewise offers to sacrifice his own comfort and well being for his dream of

community. Initially, these sacrifices are frustrated by the man who prioritizes their immediate safety over the possibility of community. However, after the death of his father, the grieving boy places himself at risk in hopes that he will find the community he has searched for. Standing by the roadside, the boy waits while another group of travelers approach in an implicit gamble that they will allow him to join their community. The gamble pays off, and the group folds the boy into their community. And as the mother predicted, survival requires believing in something beyond oneself. Though the boy never hears her advice, his faith in the possibility of community serves the same purpose as the “ghost” his mother refers to.

The boy’s faith in the possibility for community underscores the presence of petite narratives in *The Road*. Here again, I turn to Brian McHale and his succinct summary of the conventions of postmodern fiction as a movement away from epistemological concerns to ontological ones. In this shift, *The Road* steps across the boundary distinguishing the modern from the postmodern. Indeed, David Holloway, in *The Late Modernism of Cormac McCarthy*, argues that McCarthy inaugurates a new sort of modernism, one informed by some of the key aesthetic features of the postmodern—such as the elevation of popular and self-referential narratives—that remains focused on the political implications of art and so never devolves into the nihilism he associates with the postmodern. Bernard Schopen advances a similar argument, but where Holloway introduces the extra-literary concerns of politics, Schopen concentrates on the formal characteristics of *Blood Meridian* and finds that the effects are not “that of a metafictional discourse that foregrounds its own artifice, or of a postmodern language that lucidly takes

itself as subject” (188). According to Schopen, the absence of ludic play keeps *The Road* from being postmodern.

Though I question the critics’ one-dimensional views of postmodernism, I agree with Schopen that postmodern novels are characterized by particular sorts of play. Interestingly, games figure prominently in *The Road*. Other scholars have noted the role games play in McCarthy’s novels.³⁰ Games in *The Road* rarely follow conventional rules and are as much created as they are played. In two scenes, the man and the boy play games with each other, and these games help establish the bond between the man and the boy as well as to emphasize the presence of petite narratives in *The Road*. On the one hand, the games help the man and the boy reinforce their sense of community because in order to play the game both must agree to the same set of rules. They must, in other words, agree to be bound by the same sort of narrative. On the other hand, the differences between the two games point to the proliferation of petite narratives in the wasteland. When they are safe, the game they play is about tactics and foresight. In a game of checkers, all the variables are known and the players have perfect information about the state of the board. The games of cards the man and the boy play in *The Road*, however, introduce an element of chance and the knowledge the players have is therefore imperfect. Moreover, the narrator acknowledges that the rules the of these games are provisional. The narrator emphasizes that the man “tried to remember the rules of childhood games [...] He was sure he had them mostly wrong and he made up new

³⁰ Perhaps the most extended discussion is of the game of chess in *Blood Meridian*. In “Chess in the Border Trilogy,” Marty Priola argues that the game provides an extended metaphor for organizing the disparate events in the novel. Thus, for Priola, chess with all its intricacy and clearly delineated moves and rules, introduces a sort of order onto the unruly novel.

games and gave them made up names” (45). The narrative’s explicit attention to the fabricated and idiosyncratic games the man and the boy play emphasizes the absence of organizing structures on the road while simultaneously suggesting that some set of interpretive schema is necessary.

On the road, all that can be done is to invent new ways of understanding the world and of assigning oneself a place within it. Thus, *The Road* presents specifically the sort of play Schopen finds missing from *Blood Meridian*. Not only is ludic, directionless play an integral, albeit minor element, of the man and the boy’s travel down the road but play is important enough to even claim some space for toys in the shopping cart the man uses to transport their meager possessions before the cart is lost in a desperate attempt to escape a savage band of cannibals. Moreover, because the games the man teaches the boy require two players, the games reinforce the community between the two.

The stories the man and the boy share, the games they play, and most importantly their shared willingness to imagine a world in which a community larger than a father and a son is possible bind the man and the boy together. This shared perception of the world allows them to assign their actions a meaning beyond the immediate need to survive, and in doing so, constitutes a petite narrative that shelters the two from a wasteland utterly devoid of any overarching meaning.

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McCarthy addresses the replacement of grand narratives with petite narratives through the religious imagery and allusions in *The Road*. These allusions occur in two

general scenes. In the first scene, the man dreams that he and the boy are pilgrims in a land where there is no divine. In the second scene, the man and the boy encounter Ely, a starving old man, who, like his namesake Elijah, serves as a prophet, but where Elijah conveyed God's will, Ely's message is that there is no God. *The Road* opens with a description of a dream the man has that fuses elements of classical philosophy with Judeo-Christian mythology. The description recounts that in the dream the man and his son had wandered in a cave "like pilgrims in a fable swallowed up and lost among the inward parts of some granitic beast" (3). The specifically religious language of "pilgrims" and the allusion to the story of Jonah in the whale effectively tint the novel with Judeo-Christian overtones. Yet almost as soon as the man alludes to the myth of a Judeo-Christian god, the narrator notes that the land is "godless" (4). A paragraph later, *The Road* presents a more complex view of God that is predicated on not only universal truths but on immediate particulars. Alluding to John 1:1,³¹ the man remarks that if his child is "not the word of God God never spoke" (4). By tying God's participation with humanity to a single action, the birth of the man's son, the man recasts the divine not as some transcendent universal but as something immanent and understandable by a single physical being. Moreover, the man's comparison creates a parallel between the New Testament promise of eternal salvation and the apparently more meager existence of a single child. And in this parallel, the grand narrative of God's creation as the origin and reason for all things falls away and is replaced by the more provisional story of the birth

³¹ "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (*The New Oxford Annotated Bible* John 1:1).

of a single, ordinary child and amounts to a subtle deconstruction of the Christian mythos.

The Road does not even provide the stark comfort of a world in which grand narratives, and with them concepts of the divine, are simply set aside. Instead, the divine, or rather its absence, haunts the charred landscape and taunts the survivors with the impossibility of assigning any absolute meaning or purpose to the world. In the absence of these universal meanings, the man and the boy are compelled to construct their own interpretive schemas for understanding the world. McCarthy's novel explores the implications in an extended meeting between the man and the boy and an old man named Ely. As the only character in the book whose name we learn, Ely stands out among the other archetypal characters like the man and the boy and the static depictions of animalistic hunger represented in the cannibals that man and the boy avoid whenever possible.

As a diminutive of Elijah, an Old Testament prophet, Ely's name foreshadows his philosophical and religious conversations with the man. The differences between Ely and the man and his son begin to crystallize almost as soon as the three meet on the road. Ely is partially deaf and even more physically unkempt and emaciated than the man and the boy, but these physical differences prove insignificant when compared to the philosophical differences between Ely and the man and his son. As the man and the boy approach, Ely believes they have come to rob him and tries to assure them he has nothing of value. Learning that they do not intend to steal from him, Ely asks "What are you?" (136). The man reflects that he and his son have "no way to answer the question" (136). His statement carries at least two implications. Most obviously, it refers to Ely's failing

hearing and that there is simply no means of communicating with him. Yet, the man's insight also acknowledges the profound differences between their actions and those with which Ely is familiar. The hospitality the man and the boy show Ely lacks precedent in recent memory and is therefore an answer that has neither context nor meaning. It is, strictly speaking, anomalous. In contrast to Ely, who neither understands nor attempts to understand the world around him, the man imagines a scenario partially drawn from classical mythology. He wonders if Ely might perhaps "turn into a god and they into trees" (137). As improbable as the scenario the man envisions is, it nevertheless signals his ongoing attempt to make sense of the world he inhabits and to construct an interpretive schema that allows him to discern meaning even in the desolate landscape of the wasteland. In doing so, the man appropriates and recasts a story from classical mythology and continues his practice of creating stories that allow he and his son to make sense of a world no longer bound by any other requirement than the need to survive.

Ely serves as a foil to the man's beliefs—a foil that demonstrates not that one belief is more correct than another but that some belief is necessary. He stands, in other words, as the embodiment of the nihilistic worldview the man appears about to embrace. Though popular understanding of prophets associates them with the ability to forecast the future, the traditional biblical understanding of prophets associates them with a special understanding of the past and how the past failures of God's people lead to the present problems. McCarthy's familiarity with Catholicism³² suggests that he would be aware of this conventional understanding of prophets.

³² For an analysis of Christian ceremonies in McCarthy's fiction, see Jason Ambrosiano's "Blood in the Tracks: Catholic Postmodernism in *The Crossing*."

In a conversation rare in *The Road* for its extended exploration of abstract and ethical questions, Ely and the man discuss predestination, the implications of wishing for death, and their desperate drive to survive even when life is nothing but fear, pain, and the certainty that death will be cold and brutish. The conversation soon turns from the epistemological questions of ethics and what responses are most reasonable to more difficult and more enigmatic questions about what can be known. Turning from a discussion of what it would be like to be the last man on earth, Ely and the man find themselves in a discussion about God as the man asks, “how would you know if you were the last man on earth?” (143). Presupposing some source for knowledge and therefore some foundation upon which to build his understanding of the world, the man grasps at a vision of the world that will allow the divine to exist even though the world seems devoid of all order, that at least God would know when the last man dies. Flatly rejecting God’s existence, Ely makes one of the most powerful and enigmatic statements in the novel. “There is no God and we are his prophets” (143). Reversing the conventional relationship between prophets and the divine, Ely characterizes survivors as having a special knowledge of the divine: simply put, survivors know there is no God. Consequently, Ely’s comments dismiss any possibility of a divinely sanctioned grand narrative that could guarantee meaning and purpose.

Ely’s conclusion arises out of a complex intersection of two assumptions. The first is that there is nothing to talk about on the road and the second is that because there is nothing left to talk about, isolation is better than community. Ely indirectly acknowledges conversation and community in his initial refusal to tell the man and the boy his name. However, instead of directly explaining why he withholds his full name,

Ely offers a hypothetical situation in which conversation would be appropriate: “If something had happened and we were survivors and we met on the road then we’d have something to talk about. But we’re not so we don’t” (145). Ely identifies two conditions that would be necessary for a conversation to be appropriate. First, something would have to happen. Second, they would have to be survivors. Moreover, in refusing to talk about how he survived, Ely suggests that both conditions are left unfulfilled.

Isolated not only by the conditions of living on the road but also by the philosophy he develops in response to those conditions, Ely renounces even the attempt to find meaning in the world and waits only for the moment of his death. When prompted by the man to consider the possibility that the boy might be a god, a hypothesis which preserves the potential for some meaning to remain in the world, Ely emphasizes not only his nihilism but also his rejection of community:

The old man shook his head. I’m past all that now. Have been for years. Where men cant live gods fare no better. You’ll see. It’s better to be alone. So I hope that’s not true what you said because to be on the road with the last god would be a terrible thing so I hope it’s not true. Things will be better when everybody’s gone. (145)

Notwithstanding his earlier claim that he has nothing to discuss with the man, Ely presents a remarkably dense set of philosophical premises. Yoking humanity and the divine together, he claims that they thrive or wither together. In doing so, he characterizes the traditionally transcendent Christian God as an immanent divine who occupies the same general geography as humans, and who, like humans, finds the barren landscape difficult to survive. Yet as resolute as his assertions about the absence of God appear to

be, Ely acknowledges that his philosophy is a matter of faith and hope rather than reason. His isolation, then, is not a necessary or natural consequence of being on the road but just one possible response. Tellingly, toward the end of his discussion with the man, Ely imagines a personified Death sitting alone on the road asking “Where did everybody go?” (146). Death’s question underscores the difficulty and necessity of making sense of the post-apocalyptic world.

Even Ely’s extreme nihilism proves insufficient. Ely closes his interpretation not with the unequivocal “that’s how it will be” but with a question that invites commentary and opens a space for revision (146). Asking “What’s wrong with that?,” Ely reveals that his vision of the end is little more than a coping mechanism. As such, it provides no more accurate a view of the world than the man’s or the boy’s does. Moreover, Ely explicitly asks for commentary on the usefulness of his vision, and because he does so, invites comparison between its view of the world and the visions the man and the boy cling to. The narrator answers Ely’s question about what is wrong with his theory. In the final scene with the old man, the narrator depicts him walking away like “some storybook peddler from an antique time, dark and bent and spider thin and soon to vanish forever” (147). Carl James Grindley’s “The Seeing of McCarthy’s *The Road*” emphasizes the connection between Ely and the prophet Elijah and argues the man ultimately misses the second coming of Jesus Christ, who, ironically enough, may be the man’s son. The image robs Ely of the grandeur Grindley’s association of Ely with the prophet Elijah provides and reduces Ely to someone no more consequential than a minor character in a fairy tale. More importantly, Ely will soon vanish into the apocalypse he accepts. His philosophy dooms him in part because it offers him no hope.

But if Ely's philosophy is ultimately wanting, *The Road* affirms no clear alternative. Indeed, the apocalypse has weathered away not only physical objects but language as well. Even before meeting Ely, the man reflects that in the ash and dust of the wasteland, the entire system of signification has begun to unravel:

The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. Colors. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believed to be true. More fragile than he would have thought. How much was gone already? The sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality. (75)

Signs for the abstract ideas fall away only after references to what was once concrete and perceived have been lost. But first or last, the loss of names carries with it a disintegration of the fundamental requirements for human communication. The disintegration exceeds even what Jacques Derrida proposes in his theory of language in "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the human Sciences." Problematizing Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of language, which posits arbitrary but socially determined links between signifiers and signifieds, Derrida argues that language always includes a slip or trace of other meanings such that claims of primary and secondary meaning are at best problematic and even apparently unambiguous statements carry far more meanings than they initially appear to.³³ Yet, Derrida maintains that it is still possible to hold discussions and indeed argues not for the diminution of language because of slippage but, on the contrary, for an ongoing and creative play, which bears a striking similarity to Schopen's characterization of the postmodern in terms of ludic play. For the man, however, meaning

³³ Central to much of his work, Derrida first articulates the basic tenets of his theory of language in "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences."

is not slipping but evaporating, and the evaporation takes with it the sacred. And in that loss, the man and his son lose recourse to any interpretive schema that might make their suffering meaningful.

Focusing narrowly on the biblical allusions leads to a one-dimensional analysis of McCarthy's text and proposes a teleos that the rest of the text rejects, a point I will explore in more detail in my discussion of *The Road's* conclusion. Yet, Grindley is certainly correct to suggest that the one named character in the novel is significant. But rather than being a prophet and enjoying some privileged relationship to the divine that is elsewhere missing, Ely personifies the absences of any possibility of universal meaning.

Left alone in the bleak landscape, the man and the boy confront the same choices that face the wife and Ely, but choose differently. Where the wife chooses suicide, and Ely to reject all attempts to make sense of the world in an attempt to discard even hope, the man and his son create a narrative of their own. Fashioning what amounts to a mythology out of remembered stories of "courage and justice" (41) and surrounding them with a recurring motif of carrying the fire,³⁴ the man crafts a way of engaging the bleak landscape and recognizes the threats inherent in it but does not capitulate to the despair that overwhelms the others. The man's decision to create a new narrative to replace the outmoded precepts of Christianity signals the growing presence of petite narratives.

Though the boy discovers the community he has longed for, *The Road* stops short of providing an interpretive schema that leads to some absolute meaning. Having joined

³⁴ Barbara Bennett argues in "Celtic Influences on Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road*" that the motif of carrying the fire can be traced to a Celtic practice of passing a burning brand from one hearth fire to the next. This tradition was prevalent in the south where McCarthy's father worked, and so she argues McCarthy was likely aware of it since his childhood.

the second community of travelers after the man's death, the boy learns about God from the woman in the group. The narrator explains that the boy "tried to talk to God but the best thing was to talk to his father and he did talk to him and he didnt forget" (241).

Fulfilling a promise he made to his dead father, the boy keeps his memory alive—despite his father's observation that one will remember what one hopes to forget and forget what one hopes to remember. Perhaps more significant, though, is the boy's decision to talk to his father instead of praying to God. By doing so, the boy maintains the individualized mythology that his father crafted and does not substitute a more conventional understanding of the divine. Admittedly, the woman's comment that the boy's impulse to talk with his father was "all right [... because] the breath of God was His breath yet though it pass from man to man through all of time" seems to suggest that the boy's understanding of the divine is far more conventional than it initially appears to be (241). Within such a reading, *The Road* becomes an allegorical story of an everyman's journey through the wasteland in a quest to find communion with the divine.

Yet *The Road's* last paragraph ultimately dismantles any attempt to read the novel as an instance of a totalizing narrative even though the final paragraph presents a narrator who is no longer confined to presenting events in which the man and the boy participated or their dreams and memories. In the final paragraph, the narrator addresses the reader directly and explains that while totalizing explanations might once have been possible, the order necessary to ground such a narrative is now absent.

Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see them standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. They smelled of moss in your hand. Polished and muscular and

torsional. On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery. (241)

Like the father's memory of the perfect day he spent with an uncle gathering wood, the final image is awash with a lyrical nostalgia for a lost time when man could encounter the natural world. More significant than the eidetic image of a mountain stream is the narrator's unrelenting use of the past tense. By moving the image into an irrecoverable past, the novel transports the reader into the wasteland through which the man and the boy have struggled to move. In doing so, the narrator emphasizes the everyman qualities of its narrative. Even as the novel speaks directly to the reader and thereby presupposes a more or less universal experience, it refuses to present an alternative to the highly localized interpretive schemas on which the man and boy rely. Though it suggests that it was possible to represent the world's true form at some moment, that moment and the mysteries that were available in it are irrecoverable. The ultimate consequence of the image of trout in a mountain brook is to vitiate even the possibility of an all-encompassing order and to firmly establish *The Road* as a postmodern novel preoccupied with the construction of petite narratives in order to make sense of a world that otherwise may prove senseless.

Once again, Kermode's discussion of how stories end proves useful for recognizing that the concept of the postmodern presupposes community. In *The Sense of an Ending*, Kermode argues that well-wrought conclusions provide a sense of closure to the narrative by at once offering a position at which the narrative can reasonably stop and

gesturing towards a time after the limits of the story where events continue to unfold. Kermode argues that this gesture towards a future is crucial if the narrative is to have any hope of verisimilitude because readers know that events do not simply stop. In each of the other novels I have examined, these gestures towards the future have included the promise, however provisional, of a moment in which some new sort of community might emerge. *The Road*, however, does not. Instead, its conclusion speaks of a past in which patterns might be determined, and by implication, it speaks of a present in which such order is impossible. Thus, if Kermode is correct, the question the novel must resolve is not to find a way to reintroduce a grand narrative in its last few pages but to offer some other time of conclusion. The focus on community that pervades the novel suggests that this solution will center on the sorts of community that remain available in the post-apocalyptic wasteland that McCarthy envisions. The answer *The Road* provides is as elegant as it is apparently easy to miss. In it communities are not founded according to the conventions of family lines or great philosophical propositions. Instead, what unites people is nothing more than the hope that community remains possible even in a world of ash. As with the other novels, McCarthy's locates community at its center and suggests that attempts to understand the postmodern worldview without noticing the role community plays are incomplete. The postmodern landscape, McCarthy implies, is characterized by an imperative to keep moving and by a profound uncertainty of how to make sense of its shifting boundary, yet it is also a place where the possibility for community remains. We may have to stay on the road, but we do not have to travel it alone.

Conclusion: After the End

This project demonstrates the presence of community in American novels across some forty years of postmodernism and explores the various presentations of community in each of these novels. Doing so required me to pose two significant questions to which I now return: what are the general characteristics of postmodern community? and how does reading postmodern novels in terms of community alter our understanding of postmodern fiction?

Recognizing the significance of these questions requires beginning with the conventional notions of postmodernism. As I argue in the introduction, analyses of postmodernism tend to follow either Jean-François Lyotard's argument that the postmodern is marked by the proliferation of petite narratives and the abandonment of grand narratives or Fredric Jameson's assertion that postmodernism is the consequence of primacy of the image over the thing and the subsequent forgetting of how to do history. Because both theories stress the fragmentation of explanatory systems, and with those systems the possibility of totalizing definitions, scholars who draw on Lyotard's and Jameson's theories tend to look for and to find fragmentation in whatever they regard as postmodern. Differences about the reasons for and consequences of this fragmentation distinguish the two positions: for Lyotard, postmodernism is the consequence of the West's growing distrust for institutional and ideological claims to absolute truth; for Jameson, the postmodern is a lamentable detour in the ongoing development of history. But the underlying assumption remains: whatever is postmodern fragments.

The underlying premise that postmodern works tend to fragment occurs in some of the earliest and most influential works on postmodernism, notably Ihab Hassan's "Towards a Concept of Postmodernism." Working to differentiate the postmodern from the modern, Hassan constructs a chart that schematizes differences between modernism and postmodernism, and in doing so, influentially framed many subsequent analyses of postmodernism. Three elements of his schema are particularly relevant. Hassan opposes modernist characteristics of "hierarchy," "centering," and "determinacy" with postmodern features of "anarchy," "dispersal," and "indeterminacy" (89).³⁵ However, an earlier remark Hassan makes complicates this schematic understanding of postmodernism. Hassan notes that

we can not simply rest [...] on the assumption that postmodernism is antiformal, anarchic, or decreative; for though it is indeed all these, and despite its fanatic will to unmaking, it also contains the need to discover a "unitary sensibility" (Sontag), to "cross the border and close the gap" (Fiedler) and to attain [...] an immanence of discourse, and expanded noetic intervention, an "neo-gnostic im-mediacy of mind."³⁶ (89)

Hassan's schema, though useful, also leads to a relatively reified understanding of postmodernism that is shaped by a stark contrast with modernism. Ironically, while Hassan's schema provides a cohesive definition of postmodernism, he presents

³⁵ Though the three juxtaposed qualities I have chosen most succinctly illustrate the rigid boundary Hassan draws between modernism and postmodernism, the remainder of his chart emphasizes those differences.

³⁶ Hassan's final quotation comes from his own essay "The New Gnosticism."

postmodern texts as being inherently fragmentary, thus allowing little, if any, possibility for cohesion.

The communities that surface in postmodern novels, however, suggest that postmodern novels not only permit but may often tend toward some form of cohesion. For Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, community arises in opposition to a narrative that the characters struggle to avoid. In Don DeLillo's *The Names*, community arises out of a desire to stop the free play of language. In Kathy Acker's *Don Quixote*, community arises first as an impediment to the relationships Kathy desires and later as their necessary precondition. In Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, community functions as a way to make survival itself possible and to provide some sort of meaning for a world that would otherwise be simply chaotic. These several depictions of community proceed from a common desire: namely the desire for community itself. Tied by this one thread, together these novels emphasize that postmodern communities are built upon the desire to connect with another and arise through shared perceptions of the world. From these two foundational ideas, many different forms of community can follow. None of the communities in these novels presents itself as the only form of postmodern community. The presence of multiple communities emphasizes the possibility for certain sort of cohesion in postmodern novels without creating a universal formula for postmodern community.

But we have yet to answer the more complex question of why these novels defer the potential for community until their final few pages if not after the narrative ends. Answering the question requires considering what the deferral signifies. In the introduction, I discuss Frank Kermode's observation about the relationship between

conclusions and the novel's central concern. But we need not rely only on Kermode. Peter Brooks offers a similar observation about how novels tend to work in his *Reading for the Plot*. Although Brooks frames the issue in terms of play rather than meaning, his assertion that "the reader is invited to play with and against traditional novelistic devices, constructing a model that denies narrative's privilege while it confirms narrative's necessity" closely mirrors Kermode's assertion that conclusions answer perhaps the most common question a reader might ask about a novel: what is it about? (315). Both critics agree that the conclusion of a novel identifies the work's central concern. In the case of these four novels, their conclusions suggest that the realization of postmodern community may be a central tension in postmodern fiction.

The emphasis the novels place on drawing on other narratives extends beyond simply appropriating classical plots. Lyotard's notion of the *petite narrative* hinges on the assumption that in the absence of an universalizing truth explanatory systems enter into competition with one another. For Lyotard, the competition leads to a new understanding of knowledge, which he characterizes as postmodern. Working from Lyotard's observation, I argue that not only do the competing narratives introduce new forms of knowledge, but they also mark out new forms of community. In particular, they reveal notions of community that are built upon a shared understanding of the world that makes no pretense to "truth," or grand narratives, but is instead freely chosen and inherently fluid. Construction of a community out of these fluid assemblages requires constructing and then participating in these provisional communities. McCarthy creates the space necessary for these fluid communities by imagining a post-apocalyptic nightmare, in which the conventions of politics, of economics, of morality and ethics that so often

orient characters in novels are absent. Moreover, that McCarthy's recent novel provides the fullest articulation of the alternate communities implies a significant shift in our understanding of postmodernism.

In 2010, some forty years after the publication of *Gravity's Rainbow*, postmodernism has become synonymous with fragmentation not only for academics but for the larger reading public. The tenets for fragmentation that once placed postmodernism on the cutting edge have been integrated into the consumer culture.

More interesting, however, is the tension that these images of community entail. Marianne DeKoven offers one of the few extended considerations of the intersection of postmodernism and utopia in her essay "Utopia Limited: Post Sixties and Postmodern American Fiction." Having read Morrison's *Beloved* and Doctorow's *The Waterworks* in terms of their presentations of community, DeKoven observes that postmodern fiction exists in a peculiar tension. She identifies two sources for this tension. The first is the postmodern realization that "we are beyond the moment of imagining that revolutionary political/aesthetic intentionality can produce such utter rupture with the past and the present" (91). The second is the lingering desire for the "elimination of domination, inequality and oppression" and desire for "transcendence" (91). By presenting utopian moments in its conclusions, postmodern fiction finds a way out of the apparent impasse that DeKoven describes. The peculiar logic of the conclusion permits the novels to end with a scene that is not directly bound by the conditions the rest of the novel describes. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, for instance, the conclusion imagines a moment separated from the pressures of the war; in *The Names*, the conclusion imagines a time when language is freed from the conventional imperative to communicate; in *Don Quixote*, the conclusion

images a time when Kathy's madness becomes not an impediment but a necessary element of community; and in *The Road*, the conclusion presents a moment when others share the man's and the boy's image of community.

However, the solution the conclusions present introduces other questions. In particular, does the gesture to community imply a yet-to-be-realized aesthetic that will replace the postmodern. Raymond Federman, who in the 1970s was one of America's most influential postmodern authors, in his novel *Aunt Rachel's Fur* (2001) stages a conversation between an author and his publisher about the what aesthetic might follow postmodernism:

So you find my novel too postmodern, wrong again Gaston, you've arrived too late, we are already beyond postmodernism, it's dead, dead and gone, don't you know, it's been buried, where have you been, and that's precisely the problem for literature today, now that postmodernism is dead, writers don't know how to replace it, the disappearance of postmodernism was devastating for the writers, but it was not surprising, it was expected to happen for some time, the last gasp happened the day Samuel Beckett changed tense and joined the angels, I can give you an exact date if you want, postmodernism died because Godot never came....

(245)

Brian McHale agrees in principle in his essay "What Was Postmodernism?" but differs about the cause and the consequence of the movement away from postmodernism. For McHale, the critical moment was the 9/11 attacks on New York. These attacks, he contends, produce a change of perspective that Pynchon realizes in his novel *Against the Day*. According to McHale, *Against the Day* offers a sort of coded representation of the

experience of 9/11, displaced onto the Great War of 1914-18. Or, if that is too limited and simplistic a reading, then Pynchon is at least trying to capture what it means, what it feels like, to “change tenses,” as Raymond Federman puts it – or instance, to change tenses from “What Is Postmodernism?” to “What Was Postmodernism?”

It is equally likely that postmodernism has been not superseded but rather over a period of forty years has transformed and has transgressed another boundary, this time of the limits set by early and now clearly reductive definitions. To allow for the reading of postmodern texts in terms of some limited cohesion permits us to see things we might otherwise miss and to recognize the complex negotiations inherent in postmodern novels. In particular, revisiting the conventional assumptions about postmodern literature allows us to interrogate what sorts of meaning, community, and cohesion remain possible in postmodern world.

Lyotard remarks toward the end of *The Postmodern Condition* that artists may be leading the philosophers of postmodernism, that the cutting edge would be found not in analytical but in creative work. Here again he appears to be right. It is time to attend to the fiction rather than the relatively dogmatic assumptions that have shaped literary analysis of postmodern American novels. Doing so will help to uncover the subtle gestures towards cohesion that have until now been lost in the obsessive search for fragmentation in postmodern fiction. Thus, more interesting than the debates whether the postmodern literary period is over and the discussions of what comes next is the fundamental question: why is the term so difficult to define?

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