On Deconstructing Nostalgia for Community within the West: The Debate between Nancy and Blanchot

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I

The basic thrust of Nancy's discussion of community could not be clearer nor, in terms of the philosophical framework within which he operates, more compelling. According to him, what dominates the concept of community, what constitutes its appeal, is nostalgia (CD, 31; IC, 10): "the natural family, the Athenian city, the Roman Republic, the first Christian community, corporations, communes, or brotherhoods—always it is a matter of a lost age in which community was woven of tight, harmonious, and infrangible bonds" (CD, 29–30; IC, 9). "Until this day," he writes, "history has been thought on the basis of a lost community—one to be regained or reconstituted" (CD, 29; IC, 9). Nancy describes the political form of this nostalgia as totalitarianism, although it should always be remembered that, on his analysis, the label serves equally well for those societies that describe themselves as democratic as those that do not. Provocative though the claim might be, it is not difficult to find evidence for Nancy's view if one looks at the price that the so-called advanced democracies exact, both from their own poor and from other countries, to secure the goal of economic expansion (IC, xxxvii). Furthermore, the history of the political is found to harmonize with the
history of metaphysics. The concept of community is dominated by what might be called in another context “the desire for presence” but is here captured by the phrase “an absolute immanence of man to man” (CD, 14; IC, 2). For Nancy, the fact that the retrospective consciousness of the lost community is constitutive of the West “from its very beginnings” is of itself sufficient grounds for suspicion of the concept of community: “at every moment in its history, the Occident has given itself over to the nostalgia for a more archaic community that has disappeared, and to deploring a loss of familiarity, fraternity and conviviality” (CD, 31; IC, 10).

The deconstruction of community begins with the acknowledgment that community aims at an impossible immanence. Were, per impossible, this immanence ever attained, it would result not in the accomplishment of community, but its suppression (CD, 35–36; IC, 12). There never were communities of the kind whose loss is mourned by those who conceive of community as a work to be produced from out of the space of the loss of community. “Loss” is not an accident that has befallen community; “loss” is constitutive of community (CD, 35; IC, 12). Deconstruction points, therefore, to the formal concept of “a community without community” (CD, 177; IC, 71) in the sense of “a community without communion” (LD, 580; IC, 144). However, this is only a beginning. The attempt to give content to this phrase preoccupies Nancy throughout his subsequent essays on community.

Nancy, therefore, is not content simply to criticize a certain concept of community. A deconstructed concept of community allegedly emerges from out of the metaphysical conception of community. In the second part of the paper I will chart the course of Nancy’s discussion of community, paying particular attention to the sources on which he draws in order to flesh out the notion of a community without communion. Such a study will prove useful when it comes to clarifying the debate about community between Nancy and Blanchot, a task that will occupy the third and longest part of this essay. Their debate helps clarify an aspect of Nancy’s thought that might not otherwise be so clear: his refusal of radical alterity, his refusal of the Other. In the fourth section of the essay I shall suggest that, given deconstruction’s tendency to remain content with highly problematic concepts of the West and of Western philosophy, inherited without sufficient questioning from Heidegger, this refusal of the Other threatens in certain contexts to transform the idea of a community without communion into a community without remainder. The suspicion is fuelled by an occasional but highly revealing essay addressed to the Chicanos, as well as by the tenor of various scattered references to “the West.” The fifth section suggests in conclusion that this is one of the points where deconstruction’s questions recoil sharply on itself.
Nancy first announced the task of rethinking the notion of community at the end of *Le partage des voix,* a text written during April and May of 1982, and published later the same year. The impetus arose from a consideration of Heidegger’s “disarticulation” of hermeneutics, both in *Being and Time* and in “The Dialogue on Language Between a Japanese and an Inquirer.” Heidegger opened hermeneutics to an entirely different dimension of *hermeneuein* (*PV*, 13; *SV*, 212). To a certain extent hermeneutics remained in touch with the traditional Schleiermacherian task of “the understanding of the other,” but only by radically revising the terms: it was no longer a question of “understanding” and the other was no longer the human other (*PV*, 85–86; *SV*, 245–46). “Others [Autrui] cannot be identified as the other [l’autre]” (*PV*, 87; *SV*, 246). *Hermeneia* is, in other words, the announcement of the other by the other, the announcement of finitude by way of finitude (*PV*, 88; *SV*, 246–47). The decisive term by which Nancy sought to retain the language of alterity, while at the same time relieving it of the sense of there being a grand-other (un grand Autre) (*PV*, 85; *SV*, 245), was *partage*: a sharing that was also a division. *Hermeneia* is the announcement of the sharing of voices (*PV*, 68; *SV*, 237). To exist is to be abandoned to this sharing and its “difficult” community: “this sharing is what we are” (*PV*, 83; *SV*, 244). This, Nancy suggests, opens “a new task with regard to community.” However, it seems to me that what one hears in the elaboration of the task has rather less to do with community, at least in any political sense, than it has to do with the conditions for the possibility of a certain hermeneutics. “Perhaps the time has come to withdraw every logical or teleological founder [fondatrice] of the community, to withdraw from interpreting our being-together, in order to understand that this being-together is only, for all that it is, the shared-being of the ‘divine logos’” (*PV*, 90; *SV*, 247–48). Nancy, it should be said, had already taken Plato’s phrase, “the divine logos,” and interpreted it as a “being-outside-of-oneself” (l’être-hors-de-soi) (*PV*, 68; *SV*, 237). It would soon become clear that Nancy understood this phrase to point beyond the ecstatic moment of Plato’s philosophy to Bataille, whose sense of ecstasy and of community was explored in “The Inoperative Community.”

“The Inoperative Community” was written between August and October 1982 and published in the 1983 spring issue of *Aléa.* It was heavily revised and augmented in 1986 when it was republished as the lead essay of a book with the same title. For the book, two shorter essays were added, “Myth Interrupted” and “‘Literary Communism,’” both of which also focused heavily on Bataille. Following the publication of the book, Nancy continued to pursue the same themes, but he shifted his focus from Bataille to Heidegger. This is clearly apparent from two essays that were first published in
English and then subsequently added to an expanded edition of *La communauté désœuvrée* that appeared in France in 1990: “Of Being-in-Common” and “Finite History.” The following year, in 1991, a short text written with Jean-Christophe Bailly, *La comparution (politique à venir)*, seemed to concede that these discussions, from the outset confined to the level of the political (*le politique*), impinged also on politics (*la politique*). The cherished distinction of the *Centre de recherches philosophiques sur le politique* collapses. In general, any survey of Nancy’s works would reveal the impressive sight of a thought undergoing constant change and a willingness to revise earlier positions.

Alongside Bataille and Heidegger, reference to a third figure is crucial for understanding Nancy’s discussions of community: Maurice Blanchot. The somewhat puzzling word *désœuvré*, most often found in the plural and used to refer to idlers, is explicitly borrowed from Blanchot. Nancy introduces it quite late in “La communauté désœuvrée” to underline the fact that community does not arise from the domain of work, but is something that belongs to the experience of finitude (*CD*, 78–79; *IC*, 31). More importantly still, Blanchot, upon the appearance of “La communauté désœuvrée” in 1983, wrote a short book, *The Unavowable Community*, the first part of which took its starting-point directly from Nancy’s essay. The title of the first part of *The Unavowable Community*, “The Negative Community,” is drawn from Bataille. Bataille’s phrase, “the negative community: the community of those who have no community” (*CI*, 45; *UC*, 24. Also *CI*, 83; *UC*, 50), seems to be an expression of that “community without community,” whose clarification Nancy sought. By offering Bataille’s “negative community” as “the ultimate form of the communitarian experience” (*CI*, 46–47; *UC*, 25), Blanchot can, at least on first sight, be understood as refining and finding further warrant for Nancy’s decision to turn to Bataille as “the one who has without a doubt gone furthest in the crucial experience of the community’s modern destiny” (*CD*, 44; *IC*, 16, cited *CI*, 13; *UC*, 4). Both agree that Bataille’s importance lies in the fact that he identified “insufficiency” (*insuffisance*), “incompletion” (*inachèvement*), or “incompleteness” (*incomplétude*) as the “principle” of community (*CD*, 87; *IC*, 35; *CI*, 15; *UC*, 5).

**III**

Blanchot presented *The Unavowable Community* as simply one further stage in an already long-standing reflection on community and on communism for which the publication of Nancy’s book simply provided the occasion. He was nowhere directly critical of Nancy. In return, Nancy did everything he could to reinforce the impression that Blanchot accepted his position on community. The revised version of “The Inoperative Community” offered no response to Blanchot, although there was a brief acknowledgement of the
publication of *The Unavowable Community* in a note that describes the genesis of Nancy’s own book (*CD*, 105; *IC*, 42). More strikingly still, the essay “Myth Interrupted” adopts Blanchot’s concept of “the unavowable community” without any apparent reservations (*CD*, 147; *IC*, 58). It is this impression of Nancy’s comfortable community with Blanchot about community that I would like now to disturb. Clarifying the difference between them, which to the best of my knowledge has not previously been done, will itself highlight the philosophical decisions that any rethinking of community must make. The debate can also be offered as an illustration of the somewhat discreet forms of criticism that often operate between French thinkers, in marked contrast to the rather more direct approach that is customary in Britain and the United States.

The question that Blanchot’s text raises is posed in the following passage early in *The Unavowable Community*:

> However, if the relation of man with man ceases to be that of the Same with the Same, but rather introduces the Other as irreducible and—given the equality between them—always in a situation of dissymmetry in relation to the one looking at the Other, then a completely different relationship imposes itself and imposes another form of society which one would hardly dare call a “community.” Or else one accepts the idea of naming it thus, while asking oneself what is at stake in the concept of a community and whether the community, no matter if it has existed or not, does not always point to the absence of community. (*CI*, 12; *UC*, 3)

In the wake of a number of theorists, including Nancy, who have exposed how the ideal of immanence has sustained both communism and individualism, what is the force of Blanchot’s “or”? Are these hard alternatives? Or is the language of dissymmetry and of the Other to be judged equivalent to or, less strenuously, reconcilable with, the language of the absence of community? Blanchot does not explicate the phrase “the absence of community,” but he cites its employment by Bataille in *Contre Toute Attente* (*CI*, 13; *UC*, 3–4). Nancy subsequently found the phrase also in Bataille’s 1947 essay “The Absence of Myth” (*CD*, 151; *IC*, 60) and so appeals to it in “Myth Interrupted.” Nancy explicates “the absence of community” in such a way as to emphasize its continuity with what he had already referred to in “The Inoperative Community” as a “loss” constitutive of community (*CD*, 35; *IC* 12). This loss has nothing to do with “the retrospective consciousness of the lost community” Nancy exposes as nostalgia in *The Inoperative Community* (*CD*, 30; *IC*, 10). Rather, the suggestion is that although “the immanence and the intimacy of communion” sustains the idea of community, community assumes “the impossibility of its own immanence” (*CD*, 42; *IC*, 15).

If Bataille, and by extension Nancy, represent one of the alternatives posed
by Blanchot, the other alternative can be identified with Levinas, in spite of the fact that Blanchot uses the term “dissymmetry” in place of Levinas’ more characteristic “asymmetry.” In “The Community of Lovers” Blanchot evokes the “dissymmetry that, according to Levinas, marks the irreciprocity of the ethical relationship between the Other [autrui] and me, I who am never on equal terms with the other [Autre], an inequality measured by the impressive thought: The Other (Autrui) is always closer to God than I am (whatever meaning one gives that name that names the unnameable)” (CI, 67–68; UC, 40). Blanchot, one senses, is reluctant to face the alternative he himself poses. He prefers not to have to choose between Bataille’s (and Nancy’s) discourse on the absence of community and Levinas’ discourse on the Other. Both discourses are explored, but Levinas’ seems to be favored.

Just as “The Negative Community” offers a restatement of a core part of Nancy’s argument in terms of the Other, so “The Community of Lovers” alludes to a possible Levinasian reading of Duras’ “The Malady of Death.” This is the context of the passage that I just quoted. The far-reaching question it raises is that of the relation between love and ethics, or more precisely, between love and Levinasian ethics. Once one has recognized that, as Blanchot insists, “the fulfillment of all veritable love” would consist in its being realized according to the mode of loss (CI, 71; UC, 42), the parallel with Nancy’s discussion of community is clear. What sounds like nostalgia is not nostalgia at all. “Loss” does not refer here to anything one has ever had: “for the ‘I’ and the ‘other’ do not live in the same time, are never together (synchronously), can therefore not be contemporary, but separated (even when united) by a ‘not yet’ which goes hand in hand with an ‘already no longer’” (CI, 71; UC, 42). The crucial point of difference between Nancy and Blanchot is located at this point where, at first sight, they seem closest: in the course of their discussion of the death of the Other.

On the face of it, there is total agreement between them. Blanchot’s discussion of death culminates in a series of quotations from Nancy’s “The Inoperative Community” from which he does not distance himself. That is why Nancy, in return, can cite in “Interrupted Myth” Blanchot’s brief summary at the end of “The Negative Community” of that discussion of death, as if he agreed with Blanchot’s fuller analysis, which, I shall now show, he does not and cannot.

The discussion of death is crucial to Nancy’s argument. Nancy questions, as did Blanchot also, the idea of a community of death according to which one’s death might be sublated in a future community for the sake of which one sacrifices oneself (CD, 38; IC, 13). This, Nancy observes, was the demand Hitler made on the German people.5 Nancy finds the resources to combat it in Heidegger’s account of Being-toward-death in Being and Time, where the metaphysics of the subject is put in question (CD, 40–41; IC, 14).
If Heidegger in the 1930s took up the question of community in the form of a discourse on the destiny of the people, it was, Nancy explains in a passage added to *The Inoperative Community* in 1986, because Heidegger had not integrated his analysis of Being-toward-death with that of *Mitsein* (CD, 41; IC, 14). It is that integration that Nancy attempts in "The Inoperative Community," although, as he himself is well aware, it necessitates a complete inversion of Heidegger's analysis.

Nancy focuses on Heidegger's analysis of the impossibility of a genuine experience of the dying of Others in section 47 of *Being and Time* (CD, 82–83; IC, 33). The concept of representation or deputizing (Vertretbarkeit), as it functions in the political realm, cannot be extended to the death of others. In other words, I can always represent you at a funeral, so long as the funeral does not happen to be your own. Heidegger, in pages that have received careful attention from a number of thinkers, including Levinas, does allow that one can sacrifice oneself—one's life—for the Other, but that does not "take the Other's dying away from him" (SZ, 240; BT, 284). The fact that death represents a limit to community as it might ordinarily be conceived suggests to Nancy, however, not the existentialist isolation described by one generation of French writers, but another concept of community.

Community is calibrated on death as on that of which it is precisely impossible to make a work (other than a work of death, as soon as one tries to make a work of it). Community occurs in order to acknowledge this impossibility, or more exactly—for there is neither function nor finality here—the impossibility of making a work out of death is inscribed and acknowledged as "community." (CD, 41–42; IC, 15)

This is the introduction of the idea, if not yet by name for a few more pages, of "the inoperative community": "the community that no more makes a work out of death than it is itself a work" (CD, 41; IC, 14). Deconstruction of nostalgia for community is at the same time deconstruction of the future community for which one is required to sacrifice one's life.

Although Nancy's discussions of death are in an unmistakably Heideggerian register, they are no longer subordinated to a Heideggerian purpose. Nancy finds sharing precisely where Heidegger finds individualization. However, Blanchot, when he takes up this discussion, does so only after he has established a Levinasian register, for example, by employing the section titles, "The death of the other" (La mort d'autrui) and "The Neighbor of the One Dying" (Le prochain du mourant). Blanchot quotes—from Nancy—Bataille's phrase "if it sees its fellow-being die, a living being can subsist only outside itself" (CI, 21; UC, 9). However, Blanchot changes the meaning it had in Nancy by introducing it with the explanation that what places me outside myself is my taking the other's death upon myself as the only death that concerns me.
It is not only Bataille that Blanchot commissions for his own purposes. He also takes certain lines from Nancy and reinterprets them for his own purposes. Blanchot finds the following claim from “The Inoperative Community” to be among the “most decisive” in the essay:

If community is revealed in the death of the Other, it is because death is itself the true community of mortal beings: their impossible communion. (A 24. Cited CI, 23–24; UC, 10–11)

Nancy’s suggestion seems to be that just as my being-towards-death disrupts my sense of myself as a subject or an ego with projects, so also the death of others disrupts community as “a project of fusion” or “a project at all” (CD, 42; IC, 15). This is emphasized in the expanded version of the quoted sentences in the 1986 edition of the essay:

If community is revealed in the death of the Other, it is because death itself is the true community of I’s that are not egos. It is not a communion that fuses the egos into an Ego or a higher We. It is the community of Others [autrui]. The true community of mortal beings, or death as community, is their impossible communion. (CD, 42; IC, 15)

By contrast, Blanchot, who gives the impression that he is doing no more than explicating Nancy’s text, writes that “mortal substitution is what replaces communion” (CI, 24; UC, 11). In other words, Blanchot identifies community without communion as substitution. In case the reference to Levinas is missed, Blanchot underlines it in “The Community of Lovers.” He cites Phaedrus, who said in Plato’s Symposium that only those who love consent to die for others: in the myth best known from Euripides’ version, only Alcestis was prepared to die in place of Admetus, her husband (Symposium 179b). Blanchot comments in parentheses that this would truly be an instance of “substitution” in the sense of “the one for the other” (CI, 74–75; UC, 44), a phrase borrowed directly from Levinas.

Followers of Nancy who are unsympathetic to Levinas have every right to reject Blanchot’s reading as a gross misunderstanding. Nancy’s own response is to impose on Levinas the transcendental symmetry that, according to Derrida in “Violence and Metaphysics,” makes possible the two empirical asymmetries. Both Levinas and Blanchot would surely have to reject another of Nancy’s insertions, when he says that the I’s “are always others [autrui] (or else they are nothing)” (CD, 42; IC, 15). By the same token, what could Levinas understand by Nancy’s phrase “community of others”? In case one is in any doubt as to the direction in which Nancy is leaning, inspired by the hermeneutic considerations that Le partage des voix lent to the quest, consider this sentence, also added in 1986:

Community is that singular ontological order in which the other and the same are alike [sont le semblable]: that is to say, in the sharing of identity. (CD, 84; IC, 34)
Even if one recalls that the context of these lines is the rejection of the idea of an origin of identity, a place now held by "the sharing of singularities" (CD, 83; IC, 33), and even if one allows that the French text is not as flat as the English translation, one can nevertheless see a vast difference opening up between Nancy's account and that offered by Blanchot.

The difference is perhaps most apparent in two areas: their respective discussions of the political and the ethical, and in particular, the relation between ethics and love, which is where Blanchot takes the issue and is followed there by Nancy. In 1983 Nancy had found the political meaning of community in the imperative "we must not stop writing" (il ne faut pas cesser d'écrire) (A, 48). In 1986 it was extended to say that one must also not stop "letting the singular outline of our being-in-common expose itself" (CD, 100; IC, 41). This is in clear continuity with the task set in Le partage des voix that there be an announcement or articulation of finitude. This in turn gives rise to Nancy's idea, drawn from Bataille, of "literary communism." Nancy continued to talk of "writing or literature" as "the call that convokes us" (CD, 178; IC, 71), while at the same time insisting that "it defines neither a politics, nor a writing, for it refers, on the contrary, to that which resists any definition or program" (CD, 198; IC, 81). The imperative seemed to survive the phrase "literary communism" itself. Nancy's "Of Being-in-Common" presents another version of it: "Philosophy' and 'community' have this in common: a categorical imperative . . . not to let go of sense in common" (CD, 233–34; OBC, 11–12). The commitment, therefore, seems to be increasingly to the articulation of an ontology. This is reflected in the way Nancy in 1990 expanded The Inoperative Community's three essays that essentially focused on Bataille by adding two essays on Heidegger.

The trajectory that Nancy has followed and the extent to which he believes that the task to think community can be met only by an ontology, and specifically an ontology of largely Heideggerian inspiration, has served to strengthen the extent to which one is obliged to choose between the alternatives set out by Blanchot at the beginning of The Unavowable Community quoted earlier. Furthermore, this trajectory has given added resonance to a passage in "The Community of Lovers" where Blanchot seemed to side decidedly with Levinas against the dominance of ontology. Having corrected those commentators on Levinas who identify his ethics with a morality of law that is opposed to passion, Blanchot writes in clear agreement with Levinas:

An ethics is possible only when—with ontology (which always reduces the Other [Autre] to the Same) taking the back seat—an anterior relation can affirm itself, a relation such that the self is not content with recognizing the Other, with recognizing itself in it, but feels that the Other always puts it into question to the point of being able to respond to it only through a responsibility that cannot limit itself and that exceeds itself without exhausting itself. (CI, 73; UC, 43)
As one reads this description of ethics as possible only when the Other puts the self in question, one should recall how in “The Negative Community” the death of the Other—“My presence for another who absents himself by dying”—is introduced in answer to the question: “What, then, calls me into question most radically?” (CI, 21; UC, 9). The Other—and that means ultimately the death of the Other—renders community as communion impossible.

Nancy’s disagreement with Levinas extends to the question of the relative priority of the Other and of the inoperative community. Nancy rejects the contention that the relation to the face is primordial: “I can, on the contrary, grasp the relation with the face only as secondary and as constituted” (PF, 261; IC, 105). There is a decisive difference between Levinas and Nancy here and Blanchot can be found siding with Levinas, at least insofar as Blanchot proposes that the death of the Other “founds community” (CI, 22; UC, 9). Of course, neither Blanchot nor Levinas, after Totality and Infinity, portrays the order of foundation in simple terms. The Other is an interruption. Blanchot, for example, says that “in the homogeneity—the affirmation of the Same—understanding demands that the heterogeneous appear suddenly” (CI, 68–69; UC, 41). So, in terms of Duras’ The Malady of Death, it is a question of “a movement that cannot abide any name—neither love nor desire” and that tears the community of lovers from ordinary society (CI, 79; UC, 47). The essential end of the unavowable community is therefore “the destruction of society” (CI, 80; UC, 48). It is unlikely that Levinas would ever offer such an example. It is still less likely that he would develop it in precisely these terms. But Blanchot’s account, as he himself was well aware, is in many ways structurally similar to that found in Levinas. By contrast, Nancy declares that Being itself is communal: “Being is in common” (OBC, 1). Or, as “Shattered Love” attests, “the essence of Being is something like a heart—that is to say: that which alone is capable of love” (PF, 234; IC, 88). Something like a heart, a broken heart, which is the only kind of heart (PF, 250; IC, 99). From a Levinasian perspective, Nancy’s own ontological elucidation of the “inoperative community,” by rendering the face to face secondary, obliterates alterity. Nancy’s account thus remains tied to the philosophy of immanence that Nancy himself sets out to avoid.

IV

What is at stake in Nancy’s insistence that alterity is secondary? It is not necessary to speculate because Nancy spells out the implications in “Beheaded Sun,” a remarkable short essay written for the catalogue of an exhibition by Chicano artists held in Barcelona in 1989. It is a text courageous in its foolhardiness, that in some ways recalls Sartre’s “Black
Orpheus,” by virtue of its readiness to take the risk of offering to help others determine their identity. Nancy addresses himself not to the European visitors to the art exhibition but to Chicanos, albeit not without acknowledging the problem of the name (SC, 197; BS, 41). He tells them:

It is no longer a matter of what was called the encounter, or confrontation “with the other.” You are more other than others, both the same as us, and cut from yourselves and from us, as we too are cut. . . . (SC, 199; BS, 49)

Nancy seems to be suggesting that one can no longer talk of the violent encounter between Europeans and Mejicanos, to employ terms that are themselves violent, and then, subsequently, between White Americans and Mexican Americans. This is not because “you Chicanos” have become one with “us,” but because identities and boundaries have become increasingly confused, not least because one form of the encounter, from early on, was sexual: “They are your ancestors, all of them, Indians and Indian-killers. Cut races, mixed blood” (SC, 197; BS, 42. Also SC, 198; BS, 44). It is also, of course, as Nancy notes in passing, because “the West imagining itself in the East . . . only furthered the West, aggravated it, and the same sun set in another ocean” (SC, 197; BS, 41–42). On this basis Nancy invokes “another configuration of . . . community” (SC, 199; BS, 48):

The Community: what if it was no longer the closure that excludes, but the multiple, cut network from which only exclusion is excluded? Neither the integration of nations, nor the disintegration of the masses, nor a “middle” between the two, always threatened by the two: how might we conceive of that? (SC, 200; BS, 52)

Nancy does not answer the question, but the surprise is that it should be asked at all, as if a community without exclusion was not itself another form of immanentism, another form of totalitarianism.

By the same token there is every reason to be nervous about the way Nancy takes up the theme of love in “Shattered Love.” In the course of what seems to be a clear response to Blanchot’s appeal to a community of lovers, Nancy touches on the question of the identity and content of what passes for “the Occident.” In a characteristically bold gesture, Nancy addresses the relation of philosophy to love under the rubric “Thinking is love.” It is said to be “the general epigraph” to all philosophy’s treatises, including those prior to Plato’s Symposium, even though philosophy is said never to arrive at this thinking (PF, 228–29; IC, 84–85). However, it is less Nancy’s provocative exposition of love that concerns me here, than his assumptions about the Occident. Nancy never seems to question the idea that philosophy belongs to the Occident. The only question he addresses is whether the same is not also true of love. However, when he introduces the possibility of exploring the relation of love and thinking “outside of the Occident,” he dismisses it with
shocking rapidity. The reader is simply told that even if "that which is not the Occident is, in fact, no stranger to any of the figures or forms we know as love... what is at issued, outside of the Occident, is not love absolutely" (PF, 239; IC, 91). Nancy emphasizes the point:

Only the Occident designates within love... an ordering (or disordering) principle of the totality of being and of beings, of nature, of the city, of knowledge, and of God. Only the Occident raises with this one name, "love," such a claim to universality. That this claim is continually disappointed or ridiculed, that it is continually found guilty of delirium, of contradiction or of bad faith, only confirms its imperious, demanding, insistent, or insidious character. (PF, 239–40; IC, 91–92)

Nancy's conclusion, then, is that "nothing leads us more surely back to ourselves (to the Occident, to philosophy, to dialectic, to literature) than love" (PF, 240; IC, 92). What makes this more remarkable is that when a few pages earlier Nancy had claimed that he had identified that which structures "all occidental experience and expression of love," he had added in parentheses the observation that "it is not certain that the 'Occident,' here, might not include both Islam and Buddhism" (PF, 232; IC, 87). Although it is remarkable that it appears that Nancy never clearly resolves this uncertainty, it is even more striking that Nancy seems prepared to consider the contribution of Islam and Buddhism only by including them within the definition of the Occident.

V

At the beginning of this paper I quoted Nancy's claim that "nostalgia for a more archaic community" has accompanied "the Western world" from its beginnings (CD, 31; IC, 10). In "Myth Interrupted" the same idea was presented, but with a finality that is wholly disarming. Having recalled the Nazi myth, Nancy suggests, in a somewhat sweeping gesture that now seems to be somewhat characteristic of his attempts to diagnose the present, that "we no longer have anything to do with myth," or at least those myths that stage or set to work a Volk (CD, 117; IC, 46). However, what Nancy has encapsulated in the figure of myth is what he calls "the entire pretension on the part of the West to appropriate its own origin, or to take away its secret."

The idea of myth alone perhaps presents the very Idea of the West, with its perpetual representation of the compulsion to return to its own sources in order to re-engender itself from them as the very destiny of humanity. (CD, 117–18; IC, 46)

The philosophy classroom may well be the place where the ritual that sustains the mythical idea of the West is most passionately repeated. No doubt such gatherings differ from the ancient assemblies where people
gathered to hear again the stories of the assemblies from which they derive, but are they essentially different (CD, 109–13; IC, 43–45)? Nancy’s description of a compulsion to return to the sources of the West “in order to re-engender itself from them as the very destiny of humanity” might serve as an adequate account of the standard reading of what Heidegger means by deconstructing, which is, of course, the immediate source of Derrida’s conception of deconstruction.

Furthermore, it becomes increasingly apparent that the idea of the West, on which deconstructing and also to a certain extent deconstruction depend, is itself a myth. It is a myth usually constructed by the twofold movement of including under the title of the West whatever is valued while dismissing everything else as worthless. It is, in other words, sustained by a singular denial of alterity in favor of what might today be called a totalizing community. Levinas might share all those tendencies in his own conception of the West and of philosophy, arguably with much greater violence than Nancy. Even so, the tendency is best questioned by an event that Levinas has outlined better than anyone: the encounter with the Other who puts me in question.16 Although deconstruction recognizes that “a radical trembling can come only from the outside,” and that this trembling is played out “in the violent relationship of the whole of the West to its other,”17 deconstruction has remained attached to a received idea of the West. It has, with few exceptions, not heretofore exploited the encounter with what is often referred to, somewhat inadequately, as other cultures. The focus has fallen on the complex relation of Hebraism and Hellenism that has been so highly distorted by philosophers in recent centuries. It has fallen also on the margins of Western philosophy, but not, for the most part, on the philosophies that have been consigned to the margins or have been denied the name of philosophy altogether, for no better reason than that the identity of philosophy has been decided in advance.

It is true that in addition to the passages cited in which Nancy seems to accept uncritically a notion of the West that derives from Heidegger,18 there are texts which might be mined for evidence of a more complex relation to the West.19 However, when it comes to thinking about community, what is most surprising is Nancy’s lack of an historical engagement. Aside from Nancy’s general insistence that the West is characterized by a certain nostalgia for community from its beginnings, he fails to offer a detailed engagement with the history—thought as “Western” or otherwise—of the concept of community. Although Nancy is attempting, as he says, a deconstruction of “the system of communion” (CD, 46; IC, 17), one looks in vain among his writings for the serious historical account of the metaphysical conception of the community that would necessarily underlie any such deconstruction. Elsewhere, in the context of a discussion of the deconstruction of fascism and
democracy, Nancy insists that "words and concepts have a history and we can hardly understand them if we do not take that history into account" (OH, 102). The same must surely also be true of community. It is not hard to find evidence of the problems that await Nancy simply because he does not attend to this work of remembering.

The few historical references that Nancy offers tend to be problematical. For example, his brief history of the concept of community in "The Inoperative Community" names Rousseau. Rousseau is described as "perhaps the first thinker of community, or more exactly, the first to experience the question of society as an uneasiness directed toward the community, and as the consciousness of a (perhaps irreparable) rupture in this community" (CD, 29; IC, 9). This is a fairly widespread characterization of Rousseau, but it is one not readily supported by Rousseau's texts. Rousseau employs the word "community" sparingly; for example, only once in the First and Second Discourses. His remarks about the festival notwithstanding, the kind of society Rousseau was nostalgic for was a rural society where the people had very little contact with each other. Even Hegel, who Nancy also mentions in this regard (CD, 29; IC, 9. Also OH, 109), tended to address community (Gemeinde) as a religious rather than a political concept. Nancy is on firmer ground when he refers to Tönnies' distinction between Gesellschaft and Gemeinschaft (OH, 109n), but Nancy chose to emphasize Tönnies' Hege- lian training at the expense of his indebtedness to Otto Gierke. If one is looking to locate within the tradition the roots of a political philosophy based on nostalgia for community specifically, then it is to Gierke that one should look. The reference is important because it suggests that nostalgia for community perhaps began as nostalgia for the medieval guilds, rather than as nostalgia for the Greek polis, such as one finds it, most notably, in Hannah Arendt's The Human Condition. Nancy is therefore correct insofar as he links the concept of community to the Greek family, the first Christian communities and the medieval guilds, but it is far from clear that nostalgia is constitutive of those communities. This nostalgia arises only subsequently within certain determinate contexts that themselves need to be carefully analyzed in order to understand what is being sought. But the fact that, as Nancy recognizes, "the breakdown in community" is decisive only quite late within the modern era (CD, 28–29; IC, 9), creates a tension between what Nancy acknowledges as historical and what he wants for the sake of his deconstruction of Western philosophy. Nancy wants nostalgia for community to be constitutive of the West from its very beginnings (CD, 31; IC, 10). One cannot solve the problems that arise within Nancy's attempt to deconstruct both the metaphysical conception of community and the nostalgia it evokes simply by relying on a stronger historiological analysis, important though that may be. The tension between Nancy's historiological account of
nostalgia for community and the history of the West to which he relates it reflects a tension that is characteristic of deconstruction more generally.

Historiological concern for the past is never entirely free from concern for the future. This is quite apparent, for example, in the case of Gierke, whose investigations were by no means unconnected with German nationalist sentiments of the late second half of the nineteenth century. Similarly, Heidegger's *Destruktion* could easily be mistaken for simple nostalgia if one relied solely on the formulations from section six of *Being and Time* without regard for the discussion of historicality undertaken in the book's Second Division. Even once one has acknowledged that destructuring takes place, not out of nostalgia for Greece, but for the sake of certain "positive possibilities of the tradition" (*SZ*, 22; *BT*, 44), it remains the case that the identity Heidegger gives to that tradition, the unrelenting privileging of Greece, remains problematic, not least because it is intimately connected with the privileging of Germany. Nancy, like Derrida, is well aware of this issue in Heidegger. The analysis of Nazi myth that Nancy gave with Lacoue-Labarthe provides an excellent analysis of the role of Greece in Aryan mythology. Their analysis culminates in the demand that "an analysis of Nazism should never be conceived as a dossier of simple accusation, but rather as one element in a general deconstruction of the history in which our own provenance lies." Nevertheless, however successful an analysis of "the provenance and meaning of deconstruction" (*OH*, 101) might be in distinguishing Heideggerian *Destruktion* from Derridean *déconstruction*, however decisively it separates nostalgia from the positive intention that is directed to "the meaning of the future-to-come (l'a-venir)" (*OH*, 104), so long as the identity of "our history" is not seriously put in question, the attachment of a certain kind of deconstruction to what it knows as the history of Western metaphysics remains questionable. Perhaps Nancy knows this too. One could argue that, even if Nancy seems more concerned to establish the claim that "condemning the West is only the reverse of glorifying it" (*OH*, 113), the very title of the essay, "Our History," reflects the extent to which Nancy is prepared to question the identity on which the deconstruction of Western metaphysics rests. The question, however, is not simply whether he is sufficiently sensitive to this issue, but whether he is not obliged to reflect a certain ambiguity between questioning the identity of the West, while at the same time always depending on it, that appears to be constitutive of deconstruction.

There is something haunting, in this context, about the fact that "Violence and Metaphysics," one of Derrida's very first exercises in deconstruction, began by marking a community of remembrance at the same time that it posed the question of the Greek and the other of the Greek. He wrote of a cluster of questions about the end of philosophy that he later collected under the title "the question of the closure":

ON DECONSTRUCTING NOSTALGIA FOR COMMUNITY WITHIN THE WEST 17
It may even be that these questions are not philosophical, are not philosophy's questions. Nevertheless, these should [devraient] be the only questions today capable of founding the community, within the world, of those who are still called philosophers, in remembrance [par un souvenir] . . .

Would this be a community constituted by loss or would it be a nostalgic community? Perhaps it can never entirely avoid the latter, however hard it attempts to be the former, and perhaps because it cannot avoid trying so hard. To put the question more bluntly, does not deconstruction tend at a certain moment to be threatened by nostalgia for so-called Western metaphysics, securing Western philosophy's identity at the very moment that it questions it? I would, in any case, acknowledge that this seems to be reflected in some of my own earlier efforts at deconstruction. And I would humbly suggest that Nancy also is not always as intent on trying to avoid nostalgia as he might be, in his incessant insistence on recalling and reconstituting the West as the destiny of humanity.

ABBREVIATIONS

CI M. Blanchot, La communauté inavouable (Paris: Minuit, 1983).

English translations have occasionally been modified for the sake of uniformity and precision.
NOTES


2. Nancy cites Bataille as saying: “If it sees its fellow-being die, a living being can subsist only outside itself [hors de soi . . .]” (OC 7: 245–46. Cited CD, 43; IC, 15).

3. The distinction was set out in the opening address to the Center by Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe in November 1980 (Rejouer le politique [Paris: Galilée, 1981], 15–19). It was already questioned by Nancy Fraser in 1984 in “The French Derrideans: Politicizing Deconstruction or Deconstructing the Political,” Unruly Practices (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 69–92. Whether or not Bill Readings’ defense of the distinction works against Nancy Fraser’s alleged misunderstanding of it as a reinscription of the theoretical and the practical, his attempt to defend it by modelling it on the ontological difference is ultimately doomed to fail because it is deconstruction above all that has shown how the ontic invariably “contaminates” ontological purity: “The Deconstruction of Politics,” in Reading de Man Reading, ed. Lindsay Waters and Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 242–43. There are already at least three excellent presentations in English of Nancy’s texts on community; they have each used the distinction between le politique and la politique as the grid in terms of which those texts should be approached: David Ingram, “The Retreat of the Political in the Modern Age: Jean-Luc Nancy on Totalitarianism and Community,” Research in Phenomenology 18 (1988): 93–124; Christopher Fynsk, “Foreword: Experiences of Finitude,” in The Inoperative Community, vii–xxxv; Simon Critchley, The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 200–219. It is in this context that I have chosen to minimize the role of the distinction in my presentation of Nancy, in the hope of finding another approach that does not suffer the same fate.

4. I tend to refer to the two parts of The Unavowable Community by their respective titles not so much to maintain their separate identities as to make readily apparent how intertwined they are.

5. “So the Aryan is essentially the one who sacrifices himself to the community, to the race; that is, the one who gives blood for Aryan Blood. He is thus not only ‘the one who sacrifices himself,’ he is, in essence, sacrifice, the sacrifice” (“L’insacrifiable,” in Une pensée finie [Paris: Galilée, 1990], 95; translated by Richard Livingston, under the title “The Unsacrificeable,” Literature and the Ethical Question, ed. Claire Nouvet, Yale French Studies 79 [1991]: 33).

6. What Heidegger actually says is that “the great multiplicity of ways in which one person can be represented by another, not only extends to the more refined modes of publicly being with one another, but is likewise germane to those possibilities of concern which are restricted within different ranges, and which are cut to the measure of one’s occupation; one’s social status, or one’s age” (SZ, 239; BT, 284).


10. It would be disingenuous to dismiss the sense of the obligation here in the context of Nancy’s own insistence on Derrida’s il faut, even if Nancy’s approach to the latter suggests that it also need not be understood as ethical in the conventional sense (“La voix libre de l’homme,” in Les fins de l’homme, Colloque de Cerisy [Paris: Galilée, 1981], 163–82).

11. Nancy was never very happy with the phrase “literary communism.” The 1983 version of “The Inoperative Community” introduced the expression as only very provisional (Aléa 4
Although that observation was dropped in 1986, Nancy at the same time made the comment that it was a "clumsy expression" (CD, 67; IC, 26) "named thus only as a provocative gesture" (CD, 197; IC, 80). The phrase was rejected because of its equivocal character ("I am not speaking of a community of letters") in "of Being-in-Common" (CD, 230; OBC, 10).

12. This corrects David Ingram's otherwise excellent article, where the similarities between Levinas and Nancy are emphasized at the expense of the differences ("The Retreat of the Political in the Modern Age," 108. See also 114).

13. See also CD, 207 and 224; OBC, 4 and 7.

14. "Being-in-Common" is a phrase that appears only once in the 1983 version of the essay (CD, 68; IC, 27), although a number of further references were subsequently added in 1986.


16. See R. Bernasconi, "Who is my neighbor? Who is the Other? Questioning 'the Generosity of Western Thought'," in Ethics and Responsibility in the Phenomenological Tradition, Ninth Annual Symposium of the Simon Silverman Center (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University, 1992), 1–31. It would seem that Nancy would be able to recognize this experience. In "Divine Places," he writes of how in place of communion there is the exposure of all and of each, such that "in our great metropolises" different "communities" exist side by side and risk the face to face encounter: "Before whom, at this precise moment, am I writing? Before what Arabs, what Blacks, what Vietnamese, and in the presence or absence of which of their gods?" (LD, 579–80; IC, 143–44).


19. For example, L'oubli de la philosophie (Paris: Galilée, 1986). Or, as I shall suggest later, the brief essay occasioned by the scandal of Paul de Man's journalism, "Our History" (OH).

20. More promising from a deconstructive point of view is the suggestion that the in-common is "no doubt enigmatically volunteered between the lines of the Social Contract despite Rousseau" (CD, 232; OBC, 11), thereby opening up the possibility of a double reading of that text from the point of view of the question of community.


24. A. Black, Guilds and Civil Society, 216-17.


26. It is perhaps worth noting in this regard the observation of Timothy Clark that "the thought of Blanchot and Derrida is limited by being preponderantly a debate with one phenomenon, namely fascism and questions of Jewish identity" (T. Clark, Derrida Heidegger, Blanchot (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 141-42. Without deciding one way or the other about Blanchot and Derrida, I would suggest that Clark's criticism that "the possibility of heteronomic thought still seems overly schematic and abstract in this field" [of racism] might well apply to Nancy.


28. "Violence et métaphysique," 118; "Violence and Metaphysics," 79. Nancy quotes these lines in "La voix libre de l'homme" (169) stopping, however, just before the words "in remembrance." This is insignificant except perhaps in the present context of this question of deconstruction as a community of remembering that seems itself at times to border on nostalgia.

29. Earlier versions of this paper were given at the Collegium Phaenomenologicum, Perugia, in July 1992, and at the University of Texas, Austin. I am grateful to the participants of both occasions and above all to Michael Newman for persuading me to go further in differentiating Blanchot from Levinas, and to Kelly Oliver, for showing me that I needed to develop and integrate my scattered remarks on history. Christine Harris and John Drabinski helped me revise my text for publication. I am also grateful to Tim Walters, who sent me a copy of his paper "Jean-Luc Nancy's 'Infinitely Finite' Community," and Simon Critchley who allowed me to see an advance copy of the revised and extended version of the discussion of Nancy that can already be found in The Ethics of Deconstruction. Under the title "Re-tracing the Political: Politics and Community in the Work of Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy," it will appear in Violence, Struggle and the Political, ed. M. Dillon and D. Campbell (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press).