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Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Disavowed Community*, translated by Philip Armstrong. New York: Fordham University Press, 2016. xxvii + 107 pp. Notes. \$90.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 9780823273843; \$24.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9780823273850; \$23.99 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9780823273867.

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Jean-Luc Nancy's *The Disavowed Community* is a response to Maurice Blanchot's enigmatic *The Unavowable Community* (1983). Thirty years in the making, the French original had a large and controversial impact, one critic dividing the reception of Blanchot into periods "before" and "after" *The Disavowed Community*.<sup>[1]</sup> Philip Armstrong's lucid translation is, then, a welcome arrival for those interested in two of France's most notable intellectual figures.

The book is significant for several reasons, not least its complex genealogy. In 1983, Nancy published "La Communauté désœuvrée" (The Inoperative Community).<sup>[2]</sup> Whilst drawing on Blanchot's term *désœuvrement* (unworking, inoperativity), the article principally attempted to rethink the relationship between an anti-essentialist community and a non-exclusive politics via Georges Bataille and Martin Heidegger. As Armstrong's introduction explains, Nancy would soon drop the term *désœuvrement* (distancing himself from Blanchot), but would continue to explore his ideas of community through "a wide range of related terms—the common, communism, being-in-common, being-with, being-together, living-together, we, compearance, appearance-with, co-appearing" (p. xvi). Although it built on his joint work with Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, "La Communauté désœuvrée" thus signalled the start of Nancy's independent philosophical project: the development of a post-deconstructive relational ontology. Often referring to his former self in the third person, *The Disavowed Community* represents a "rare move" for Nancy as he retrospectively retraces this trajectory (p. xix).

Several months after "La Communauté désœuvrée," Blanchot published *La Communauté inavouable*.<sup>[3]</sup> Whilst also drawing on Bataille, Blanchot added references to Emmanuel Levinas and a *récit* by Marguerite Duras to produce a text in both continuation and conflict with Nancy's article. The enigmatic nature of Blanchot's rejoinder spurred an internationally significant debate around the ontological and political definitions of community. Yet the gnomic aspects of *La Communauté inavouable* were also deeply obfuscating; as a result, detailed readings of Blanchot's book remained sparse for years. In *La Communauté affrontée* (2001), Nancy also described being intimidated by Blanchot's response: Blanchot had been close to Bataille, and was seemingly rebuking Nancy for misunderstanding the latter's theory of community.<sup>[4]</sup> Armstrong makes a compelling case that Blanchot's response "haunts" much of Nancy's subsequent work (p. xxiii), despite Nancy feeling unable to respond immediately. The past ten years have, however, seen

scholars returning to Blanchot's text to clarify its enigmatic status. Nancy's intervention, as a central protagonist, has been highly anticipated.

Nancy's book, which reads *La Communauté inavouable* in such a detailed manner that having a copy of the book to hand is almost essential, is divided into five chapters. In "Community, Number," Nancy re-describes the origins of his article and the "confusion and malaise" (p. 5) Blanchot's response produced. He stresses that the book will focus on the second part of *La Communauté inavouable*; whilst the first part, largely on Georges Bataille, was written as a direct response to Nancy's article, the majority of the second was a slightly reframed version of Blanchot's review of *La maladie de la mort* (1982) by Duras.[5] The relationship between these two parts is not immediately apparent, with the second part receiving very little critical commentary. Nancy argues that producing a cogent reading of both sections is key to unravelling the book's enigma.

Chapter two, "Beyond the Political," addresses the roots of the difference between Nancy and Blanchot: chiefly, as, Nancy asserts, that "Blanchot undoubtedly disapproved of the way I had read Bataille" (p. 10). Bataille had been obsessed with creating passionate, fusional communities in the 1930s (including the secret religion Acéphale). Yet, after the war, Bataille acknowledged that these communal experiences tended to produce exclusive communities whose structures were hard to differentiate from fascistic populism. Blanchot's and Nancy's texts initially agree on the necessity of a theory of community that is maximally inclusive and not identitarian; yet, whilst Nancy prefers the Bataille of the 1950s, Blanchot privileges Bataille's pre-war experiences. Scholars such as Patrick French and Michel Surya have also argued that Blanchot pitted a pre-war Bataille against Nancy's post-war reading, and Nancy agrees that this was a central point of conflict between their accounts.

Critics have also noted Blanchot's problematic attempt to align Bataille's thought with that of another close friend, Emmanuel Levinas, and this is the focus of Nancy's third chapter. For Blanchot, Levinas represented the law, or love, which demanded "an infinite attention to the other" (p. 40). Bataille, by contrast, represented the passionate writing of the heart, trying, but always failing, to communicate ecstatic experience to the other. Drawing on Bataille's erotic *récits* and their personal friendship, Blanchot nevertheless suggests that writing's failure still communicated *something*, and a community of friendship "exposes the possibility of sharing the nonsecret (which is as such unshareable)" (p. 20). Blanchot seems to pose "the heart and the law" as two competing models of community, questioning "how to raise up together [*relever*] law and passion, politics and writing, solitude and communication" (p. 23) without synthesising them into a third term. Nancy's use of the verb *relever* (Derrida's term to translate Hegel's *Aufhebung*) is key here—in subsequent chapters, Nancy argues that Blanchot ends up presenting clandestine passions as a law unto themselves, an ultrapolitics of the heart that surpasses the law. Critics of Nancy's interpretation suggest that a finer understanding of Blanchot's conception of the *neutre* would produce a different reading, one in which the heart and the law remain suspended as irreconcilable poles of attraction. Armstrong's introduction highlights the centrality of this dialectical *relève* in Nancy's text; although *relève* is variously translated by Armstrong throughout, he signposts each of Nancy's usages to enable readers to ascertain the extent to which Nancy sees Blanchot as either suspending or resolving the dialectic between heart and law.

If the heart "can become the law beyond all law" (p. 23), replacing Blanchot's more familiar, ethical stance, the second part of *La Communauté inavouable* defines Blanchot's "community of

lovers” (p. 10). Whilst the above largely conforms to existing critical readings of Blanchot’s book, Nancy’s fourth chapter is a surprising and inventive reading of the Christian imagery Blanchot deploys, a configuration of references suggesting a “fantasmatic” or “originary” Christian society that would have existed “prior to Judaism” (p. 37). The foundation of this society is found in Duras’s *récit*, in which a woman gives herself to a stranger as a Christ-like sacrifice, offering her body “just as the Eucharistic body was offered” (p. 48). Although the Christian references are dispersed throughout Blanchot’s text, rather than fully developed, Nancy’s reading is strengthened by their specificity: “The complete cycle of the passion is followed—Last Supper, death, resurrection, and the departure from the world” (p. 49). Through the “breadth and precision” (p. 50) of the analogy, Nancy audaciously argues that Blanchot presents us with “Jesus Christ as a woman” (p. 49). Through the woman’s sacrifice (a work), a possible community is glimpsed yet immediately undone (unworked) as she mysteriously disappears. Nancy identifies this as an originary passion, the roots of a clandestine community that precedes the Judaic law of Levinas.

Key questions are raised by Nancy as to the theories of gender and sexuality Blanchot expounds here. Firstly, they rely on an extreme gender essentialism, one in which men and women are so different that even death is “traversed by a radical dissymmetry between the masculine and feminine” (p. 68). Drawing on Duras’s *récit*, and also Bataille’s *Madame Edwarda*, women are presented as the absolute Other to men, who remain impotent and trapped within a narcissistic homosexuality without them. A Catholic register of guilt and shame also pervades the orgasm-centric portrayal of sexuality here. Blanchot’s text pits male impotence against female jouissance, men shamefully observing a feminine pleasure they cannot achieve. Nancy instead posits that pleasure can happen in ways other than “the determinate mode of orgasm” (p. 69), and questions whether the gaze is always “condemned to be voyeuristic” (p. 70). Nancy suggests useful avenues to explore more widely in Blanchot’s thought, but is limited by focusing his reading on *La Communauté inavouable*; do Blanchot’s other works also purvey this extremely essentialist account of gender and sexuality, or to what extent is this a function of his reliance here on texts by Duras and Bataille which have themselves been criticised as, respectively, homophobic and misogynistic? By contrast, Nancy’s own joyful depictions of plural sexuality and intimacy demonstrate how far removed his work has become from both the existential anguish of Blanchot and Bataille’s generation and the disembodiment of deconstruction.

Furthermore, Nancy is sceptical of the “exacting political meaning” (p. 52) Blanchot derives from this passionate law before the law, which seems to produce a hierarchical community founded in “the indefinable power of the feminine” (p. 73). The recourse to Christian (and Greek) mythology is one key concern for Nancy, whose work from the 1980s onwards has been based on the premise that one produces right-wing, if not fascistic, thought “from the moment that one offers recourse to a figure, symbol, or myth” (p. 57). “Civil religion,” he claims, is never far away when myth, worship and sacrifice are “evoked” (p. 74). This is not necessarily so problematic if Nancy’s scepticism of civil religion is not shared—some on the French left openly define Republicanism as a civil religion. However, the passionate heart of Blanchot’s community—a passion that can unleash “the wish...to kill a lover...in defiance of every law, every moral authority” (p. 42)—suggests its more worryingly anarchic or authoritarian leanings.

Blanchot’s political radicalism thus provides the most sensitive aspect of Nancy’s book. Blanchot was an editor, financial backer and journalist for nationalistic and anti-Semitic newspapers in the 1930s. Although forgotten for many years, his past was being newly scrutinised in the early

1980s, contemporaneous with the publication of *La Communauté inavouable*. This exacerbated a growing concern with intellectual complicity with fascism, notably culminating in the Heidegger affair. Right-wing scandals were mobilised to delegitimise a wider raft of thinkers associated with “French Theory,” causing a polarisation of the critical field into two camps: those hoping to capitalise on their exposure to further attack *la pensée* 68, and those feeling compelled to defend Blanchot to also protect this wider intellectual trajectory. “Friends” of Blanchot generally held that he had undergone a total political conversion during World War II, demonstrated by his participation in May 1968 and anti-war movements, and that his subsequent works were uncontaminated by his more unsavoury past. Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe remained uneasy about this interpretation, attempting (and failing) to edit an issue of *Cahiers de l’Herne* devoted to Blanchot’s politics in 1984. A long-planned Blanchot issue of *Lignes*, featuring Nancy, eventually appeared in 2014 alongside *La communauté désavouée*. [6] These texts have been seen to represent the first time that “friends” of Blanchot have most clearly argued that aspects of his pre-war nationalistic journalism remain present in his later political thought—claims which have proved controversial, especially amongst those in the circle surrounding the *Cahiers Maurice Blanchot*.

Though Blanchot never publicly discussed his right-wing past, some statements in the 1980s have been read as oblique acknowledgments of his conversion, notably his statement, in “Les intellectuels en question” (1984), that anti-Semitism (alongside racism more broadly) was pivotal in awakening intellectual responsibility. [7] Assuming that *La communauté inavouable*, written a year earlier, also indirectly addressed his political past, Nancy’s fifth chapter undertakes a new “point of departure” (p. 53); Nancy claims that what was unavowable for Blanchot was not simply his pre-war politics, but an admission that, regardless of the dangers, he persisted in desiring a politics enhanced by a “spiritual, even mythical dimension” (p. 58). Blanchot’s scorn for everyday society from the 1930s does, to an extent, return in the 1980s. Running alongside Blanchot’s turn to Levinasian ethics, a second, subterranean strand to his political thought remained, which Nancy usefully calls right-wing anarchism. Holding the conventions of homogenous society in contempt, Blanchot assumed a certain authority from his outsider status as a heterogeneous artist, placing himself above the mundane and the practical. Notably, Nancy stops short of condemning this attitude, questioning “how many of us are in fact traversed” by such an attitude (p. 60). The impulse to assume that your own, individual judgement is superior to that of received wisdom is widespread. Artists assuming an outsider stance supposedly superior to that of the masses are also common, and Nancy’s implicit critique of the artistic emphasis on heterogeneity has wider critical resonances. Yet it is the persistence of Blanchot’s passionately aristocratic politics in the supposedly more inclusive and ethical texts of the 1980s that is particularly concerning for Nancy.

Nancy’s attempt to understand and empathise with Blanchot’s attitude highlights the curious shifts in tone throughout his book. When contrasted with other contributors to the *Lignes* Blanchot issue, Nancy is clearly less aggressively judgemental of Blanchot’s political past, instead stating “We do not argue in order to be right” (p. 69). Yet at other points he is far less cautious: in particular, a reference to Uri Eisenzweig’s *Naissance littéraire du fascisme* suggests that even the form of Blanchot’s fiction could be intrinsically fascistic, a bold claim that is hard to sustain without further elaboration (p. 101). Armstrong suggests that Nancy’s failure to write about Blanchot’s politics in the 1980s “overdetermines” his response here (p. xxii); Nancy describes feeling intimidated and chastised by *La communauté inavouable*, and ruminating on that for thirty years may explain some of the more overt statements of frustration and annoyance that pepper his book. Some commentators have even suggested that Nancy has become “paranoid” [8] in

sensing personal slights throughout *La communauté inavouable*—was Blanchot, for example, making indirectly “scathing” comments about the “communal life” Nancy was then living with Lacoue-Labarthe and his wife, as Nancy states (p. 29)? Such claims can only be judged by those involved, and, although they make voyeuristically compelling reading, some of these wilder claims have left Nancy’s book open to criticisms over small details of interpretation by devoted Blanchot scholars. Yet Nancy justifies the recourse to personal anecdote and psychological interpretation by arguing that Blanchot deliberately included oblique references to clandestine social encounters for which, unknown to them, “the reader must discover or imagine a scenario or intrigue for which one hardly knows if it plays out on a psychological or in a symbolic order” (p. 54). Furthermore, Nancy is not alone in arguing that Blanchot’s text is not just wilfully obscure, but also features deliberate “dissimulation” (p. 54). His astute analysis of the strategies of intimidation and coercion Blanchot seems to be deploying may read as exaggerated to some, but will also be welcomed by readers who have intuited their presence.

Many of Blanchot’s detractors have complained of his obscure style for years; part of the significance of this book is therefore that it provides a close reading of Blanchot’s discursive strategies by someone considered to be an intellectual sympathiser. Alongside other recent publications—particularly Michel Surya’s *L’Autre Blanchot* [9] and *Sainteté de Bataille* [10], books singled out by Nancy as “eminently important” (p. 89)—Nancy’s book is also part of an important revisionist moment in the reception of Maurice Blanchot, one in which continuities between his 1930s journalism and later texts are being openly examined by those previously reticent to discuss them. Coupled with Nancy’s staggeringly inventive (and contentious) reading of *La communauté inavouable*, *The Disavowed Community* is essential reading for those interested in the political and philosophical thought of Maurice Blanchot.

For those principally interested in Nancy, the book’s value is perhaps more limited. Its retrospective and personal dimensions are fascinating, and the book contains some of Nancy’s most concise summaries of his own ideas. Yet the Blanchot debate concluded here may otherwise function somewhat as a distraction, as Nancy has often argued that Blanchot was never a pivotal influence on his thought. Instead, for Nancy, in both the 1930s and the 1980s Blanchot was a “remarkable witness” (p. 2) to the limitations of liberal democracy, one perhaps asking the right questions but giving the wrong answers. Since the 1980s, Nancy has been arguing that politics is doubly disappearing, firstly as it is largely subsumed by global financial management, and secondly as everything has become political, prompting “a common, widespread and thoughtless use of the word ‘politics’” (p. xi). Nancy introduces this book by asserting that Blanchot serves as an example of the distress caused by the disappearance of politics, and a warning of the responses it can provoke, but provides little in the way of positive theoretical guidance. Similarly, Blanchot’s gender essentialism here is utterly opposed by Nancy’s anti-essentialist, relational ontology. For those wishing to explore Nancy’s political and ontological theories in more depth, his other book-length excursions into these domains may prove more instructive.

## NOTES

[1] Danielle Cohen-Levinas, “Notes et contre notes sur *La Communauté désavouée* de Jean-Luc Nancy,” *Cahiers Maurice Blanchot* 4(Winter 2015/2016): 111.

[2] Jean-Luc Nancy, “La Communauté désœuvrée,” *Aléa* 4(February 1983): 11-49.

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- [3] Maurice Blanchot, *La Communauté inavouable* (Paris: Minuit, 1983).
- [4] Jean-Luc Nancy, *La Communauté affrontée* (Paris: Galilée, 2001).
- [5] Marguerite Duras, *La maladie de la mort* (Paris: Minuit, 1982).
- [6] *Lignes* 43, “Les politiques de Maurice Blanchot, 1930-1993” (March 2014).
- [7] Maurice Blanchot, “Les intellectuels en question,” *Le Débat* 29(March 1984): 3-28.
- [8] Jérémie Majorel, “Parler en son nom propre—*La Communauté désavouée* (2014) de Jean-Luc Nancy,” *Cahiers Maurice Blanchot* 4(Winter 2015/2016): 145.
- [9] Michel Surya, *L’Autre Blanchot* (Paris: Gallimard, 2015).
- [10] Michel Surya, *Sainteté de Bataille* (Paris: Eclat, 2012).

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