

## “I Am Just As Much Dead as He Is”: Community, Finitude and Sibling Intimacy in Katherine Mansfield

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The present study aims to explore sibling intimacy in Katherine Mansfield as an alternative communitarian experiment that emerged after the utter failure of the community of lovers, both in her life and fiction. Thomas De Quincey’s idea of “the palimpsest of the mind” and his trip down memory lane to exorcize his sister’s death in *Suspiria de Profundis* (1845) can be used to shed light on the interplay between autobiography and fiction in Mansfield. The analysis of Mansfield’s short stories “The Wind Blows” (1920) and “The Garden Party” (1922) will show her manipulation of sibling intimacy after her brother Leslie’s sudden passing. Anxiety towards death triggers her desperate search for a primordial self, similar to De Quincey’s, which she camouflages behind the disruptive community of lovers/friends envisioned by Jean-Luc Nancy and Maurice Blanchot. My objective is to investigate Mansfield’s post-mortem relationship with her brother—which has rarely been examined closely in Mansfield studies—to prove a paradoxical yet effective combination of *operative* and *inoperative* communitarian traits—terminology used by both Nancy and Blanchot. Mansfield’s writing of the body, or what Nancy calls *corpus*, will provide an interesting way to channel De Quincey’s palimpsest into a writing model that aims to approach death without symbolic filters.

Keywords: Katherine Mansfield; community; death; sibling intimacy; incest; Jean Luc Nancy’s *corpus*; palimpsest

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## “Estoy tan muerta como él”: comunidad, finitud e intimidad fraternal en Katherine Mansfield

El presente estudio pretende explorar la intimidad fraternal en Katherine Mansfield como una alternativa al experimento comunitario que surgió tras el fracaso de la comunidad de

amantes en su vida y en su ficción. El “palimpsesto de la mente” de Thomas De Quincey y su recreación de la muerte de su hermana en *Suspiria de Profundis* (1845) serán el punto de partida para entender la interacción entre autobiografía y ficción en Mansfield. El análisis de sus relatos “The Wind Blows” (1920) y “The Garden Party” (1922) mostrará la manipulación de la intimidad fraternal que Mansfield lleva a cabo tras la muerte repentina de su hermano Leslie. Su ansiedad frente a la muerte le hará buscar desesperadamente una esencia ontológica, similar a la de De Quincey, que camuflará tras su experimento con la comunidad perturbadora de amigos/amantes, tal y como la teorizan Jean-Luc Nancy y Maurice Blanchot. El objetivo de este trabajo es investigar la relación post-mortem de Mansfield con su hermano Leslie para demostrar una combinación paradójica pero efectiva de rasgos comunitarios *operativos* e *inooperativos*, según la terminología de Nancy y Blanchot. El uso en Mansfield de una escritura del cuerpo, *corpus* en palabras de Nancy, ofrecerá una interesante forma de canalizar el palimpsesto de De Quincey a través de un modelo de escritura cuya intención es acercarse a la muerte sin filtros simbólicos.

Palabras clave: Katherine Mansfield; comunidad; muerte; intimidad fraternal; incesto; *corpus* Jean Luc Nancy; palimpsesto

## I. COMMUNITY IN MODERNIST FICTION. THE CASE OF KATHERINE MANSFIELD

Literary Modernism has been widely perceived as asocial and solipsistic. In “The Ideology of Modernism” Georg Lukács states that, for the leading modernist writers, the human being is “by nature solitary, asocial, unable to enter into relationships with other human beings” ([1962] 1963, 20). Recently, however, seminal studies have contested that, as stated by Michael Levenson, Modernism cannot be fully apprehended if the communal impulse is ignored, as “[a]ny encounter with an artwork occurs within a social world, a world vastly larger than a momentary contemplation” (1991, 8). Jessica Berman, in turn, acknowledges the constant (re)imagination of community in high modernist fiction and the direct engagement of this literary movement with early twentieth-century historical and political transformations of community (2001, 2-3). Berman’s study opens up new avenues of research in modernist fiction by highlighting its “meaningful alternative models of community,” which she meticulously explores through a revision of communitarian theory. This influential book in modernist communitarianism, together with others that exploit the tension between individual autonomy and communal cohesion, will be key to the investigation of Katherine Mansfield’s highly questioned communitarian drive—which, with a few exceptions (O’Sullivan 2008, vii-viii), has barely been discussed in literary criticism (Worthington 1996; Mao and Walkowitz 2008; Martín Salván, Rodríguez Salas and Jiménez Heffernan 2013).

Mansfield’s “sense of unutterable loneliness” ([1927] 1954, 5), which binds her to Modernism as an asocial literary movement, might explain her preference for dual communities—lovers and siblings. Even when she embarks on broader communitarian projects—such as the community of artists—the social drive is ultimately reduced to private binary communities of friends/writers that form a separate, disruptive union inside and outside the artistic microcosm.<sup>1</sup> Mansfield’s binary communitarian drive is problematic, but worth exploring. Her rationale coincides with Jean Luc Nancy’s ([1986] 1991) and Maurice Blanchot’s ([1983] 1988) dichotomy between *operative* and *inooperative* communities. The former comprises self-enclosed individuals, who crave the immanence of a shared communion, and create a contract, society or community based on myths, or what Nancy calls “substance”: homeland, blood, nation, family or mystical body ([1986] 1991, 14-15). The latter rejects essential and communal immanence, and replaces pre-existing individuality with singularity, which is not self-enclosed, but rather exposed to an exteriority that it partakes with the other singularities by their shared mortality (16). Death becomes the defining feature of communities. The *operative* community avoids direct confrontation with death and redeems it through essentialist inflation and mystical tropes, which are fabricated in order to protect the community from death while the *inooperative* community, in contrast, acknowledges the

<sup>1</sup> I have explored binary communities in other studies, which complement the present work on sibling intimacy: the community of lovers (Rodríguez Salas 2013) and the community of women artists (Rodríguez Salas, forthcoming).

“impossibility of making a work out of death” (15). The community of lovers becomes the perfect alternative to unwork the *operative* model, as it appears as an “antisocial society or association” that has the ultimate goal of destroying society, because “[f]or the community, lovers are on its limit, they are outside and inside” (40).

Mansfield eagerly attempts to question traditional, *operative* communities, and aims to test the potential of the community of lovers. However, as I have concluded elsewhere, the unworked community of lovers theorized by both Nancy and Blanchot—which detaches from the general organic community—is never attained in Mansfield’s fiction (Rodríguez Salas 2013). All the lovers invariably prove to be victims of society’s gender norms, which prevent them from being truly “natural” and spontaneous, and corporeity is always tainted with restrictive societal rules. Mansfield’s pessimism as regards man/woman relationships is, however, alleviated in the more innocent depiction of sibling intimacy. This nexus offers an alternative exploration of the community of lovers that complements Blanchot’s perception of this community as formed by “friends” or “couples” ([1983] 1988, 33). Mansfield’s idyllic connection with her younger brother, Leslie Beauchamp, was truncated by the young man’s accidental death in 1915 during the Great War. In her fiction, Mansfield elaborates an intimate link between brother and sister that is “calibrated on death” and “indissociable from community, for it is through death that the community reveals itself” (Nancy [1986] 1991, 14). The present study aims to explore another binary communitarian drive in Mansfield, which emerged after the utter failure of lovers, both in her life and her fiction, and ultimately displays the disruptive effect of the community of lovers as envisioned by Nancy and Blanchot.

## 2. “LOSE MYSELF TO FIND YOU”: SIBLING INTIMACY AND COMMUNION

In a letter to her father (6 March 1916), Mansfield confessed that her brother’s loss had changed the course of her life “*for ever*” ([1903-1917] 1984, 252; italics in the original). With the exception of a few articles dealing directly with the relationship between Mansfield and her brother, apart from recognizing Leslie’s death as the turning point in Mansfield’s journey to literary maturity, only scant attention has been paid to their relationship (Hankin 1983; Darrohn 1998; Kimber 2013; Mitchell 2011; 2014). This gap in Mansfield studies might be explained by Leonore Davidoff’s exploration of sibling intimacy in literature, which she traces within a historical context. Her conclusion is that, despite its centrality, sibling intimacy “remains strangely neglected, relegated to a fragmentary footnote of the historical record” (2006, 18). This idea is supported by Valerie Sanders in relation to English literature in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, where sibling relations are “an undeservedly neglected guide to understanding the complexity of gender relations at that time” (2002, 2). In Mansfield, it certainly proves to be a central communitarian drive that might offer the key to her original quest for an *inoperative* community.

The interplay between Mansfield's autobiography and fiction is pivotal to understanding her original perception of sibling intimacy and her way of coping with Leslie's death. Thomas De Quincey's resurrective fantasy, *Suspiria de Profundis* (1845), is one of the few literary sources that delves into the exploration of sibling intimacy, as he revisits early memories of childhood, marked by the death of his beloved sister Elizabeth. Rising with a prophet-like halo, he aims to secure her immortality through a series of mystical visions that come from his notion of 'the palimpsest of the brain':

Everlasting layers of ideas, images, feelings, have fallen upon your brain softly as light. Each succession has seemed to bury all that went before. And yet, in reality, not one has been extinguished [...] in our own *heaven-created* palimpsest, the deep memorial palimpsest of the brain, there are not and cannot be incoherences. ([1845] 1850, 217; my italics)

De Quincey's palimpsest is endowed with *operative* traits, following Nancy's and Blanchot's terminology. The writer's prophetic voice uses essentialist inflation and mystical tropes, which are fabricated in order to avoid direct confrontation with death. His palimpsest is a unifying canvas with mystical resonance—'heaven-created'—that "fuses" life's eclecticism into the "harmony" of a primordial self, and does "not permit the grandeur of human unity greatly to be violated" ([1845] 1850, 217). The result is a mystified "resurrection," very much resembling that of Christ, where, "by the hour of death," all the memories in the brain "can revive in strength," since "they are not dead, but sleeping" (219). This palimpsest is De Quincey's way of facing "a crippling metaphysics of absence," which is exorcized through "the hermeneutics of art" (Snyder 1986, 697) and the imaginative possibility of a "rapturous reunion" (704). De Quincey will share with Mansfield the belief in imaginative literature as connecting humans with "the infinite" or a "dark sublime" (Snyder 1986, 691). Thus, art is not "a mere embellishment of life," but "one of its deep-sunk props" and the "shadowy meanings" of the brain activate "the deciphering Oracle within [one]" (Masson 1896-1897, vol. 1, 42; vol. 11, 88). Through an excavation of memory, De Quincey "approaches literature as both a transcription and a transcendence of personal experience" (Snyder 1986, 709).

Mansfield's case is similar, as she also exorcizes her brother's death through the interplay of life and literature. However, her exploration of sibling intimacy is different in that she combines traits of both *operative* and *inoperative* communitarian impulses. To begin with, the term "fraternity" is a problematic label to explain Mansfield's relationship with Leslie. Jean Luc Nancy and Sarah Clift (2013, 119-120) warn about the negativity of the term, which has been discarded from political theory in the last forty years because it is "closely tied to a romantic sensibility" and has "too many familial connotations." Nancy and Clift explain that Blanchot used it to enhance the affective dimension of community and was reprimanded by Derrida because the term

was “at once familial, masculine and sentimental” with “strong Christian undertones” (Nancy and Clift 2013, 119). In its association with the family, as a traditionally masculine and paternalistic socio-political model, the fraternal privileges “a masculine one-sidedness” that is superseded by the term “sorority,” which moves in the sphere of nourishment and affect (121). Thus, fraternity and sorority intersect and the result is the term *sibling*, which does not necessarily signify a manly brotherhood. Indeed, Nancy and Clift clarify the difference between brotherhood—“subjects that tend to be identical because they are identified by a function, a trade or a role”—and siblings or family—“only the combination of chance (an encounter) and an embrace (desire)” (122). In contrast with this caveat, Mansfield’s relationship with Leslie inevitably begins as a romantic, communal, mystified, familial fraternity, with the Christian undertones described by Nancy and Clift—very close to De Quincey’s prophetic revision of his deceased sister. However, it progressively evolves towards the sibling sphere of chance and embrace with an ulterior and direct confrontation with death that eventually destroys the initial mysticism—as will be clarified in the next section.

Autobiography and fiction in Mansfield are listed in the taxonomy of sibling relations that Valerie Sanders (2002) traces in post-Romantic writers from Jane Austen through to World War I authors, where the brother-sister relationship was given intense emotional significance in English literature and cultural history. It is a contradictory relationship, though. On the one hand, because it is based on the myth of twin souls that leads to gender completion and, on the other, due to an implicit rivalry, which is explained in patriotic terms when contextualized in the period of the war, as is the case with Mansfield.<sup>2</sup> Derrida offers the key to understanding this dichotomy in his essay *The Politics of Friendship* (1994), where he connects the figures of the friend and the brother, who “seem spontaneously to belong to a *familial, fraternalist* and thus *androcentric* configuration of politics” ([1994] 2005, viii; italics in the original). He proposes going beyond the principle of fraternity—or the friend as a reflection of oneself, but never a threat or a genuine other—and explores the potential for enmity in his distinction between the “brother friend” and the “brother enemy” in the process of fraternization (106).

This dichotomy is subtly present in Mansfield and Leslie’s relationship. While gender inequality and the brother’s superiority are not evident between them, there are certain gender positions in relation to the war that might subtly prove this point. Leslie’s patriotism and war duties weighed heavily on him in the months prior to his death, such that the period when he and Mansfield were closest was marked by Leslie’s ulterior motive. In a letter sent to Mansfield on 11 March 1915, Leslie showed his participation in patriotic feeling, therefore displaying glorification through military sacrifice:

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<sup>2</sup> This problematic relationship is not present in De Quincey, who obsessively replicates the myth of twin souls in Elizabeth through mystification. He views “noble” Elizabeth as his “leader and companion” ([1845] 1850, 151) wearing “a *tiara* of light or a gleaming *aureola*” (154; italics in the original).

Today I had a charge of about forty men in field manoeuvres and was congratulated on my work—consequently I am feeling fearfully bucked. Being in command of men is a wonderful sensation—one feels absolutely Napoleonic—and to lead a bayonet charge must be glorious. (Beauchamp n.d. 02, 30-31)

Mansfield's only surviving letter (25 August 1915) to him reveals her indirect involvement in what MacCannell terms "The Regime of the Brother" (1991) through her extolling of military patriotism in Leslie: "It meant a tremendous lot, seeing you and being with you again and I was so frightfully proud of you" ([1903-1917] 1984, 197). This patriotism is enhanced in the same letter, when she mentions several symbols for which she "would cry for joy"—one of them a flag, which she links with the childhood nostalgia that connects them.

The adverbs 'fearfully' and 'frightfully' in the letters of both reveal that, behind proud patriotism, there is real fear of human loss. Behind the general perception of sibling identity as forged through identification, "the double-faced image" can also hide rivalry when the brother is considered "hated second-self or savior" (Sanders 2002, 128). Mansfield might have been left with a feeling of impotence after admiring her brother's patriotism. Her writing, like that of Virginia Woolf, ultimately questions, in Madelyn Detloff's words, "the construction of believing, heroic, sacrificial, even fascist, subjects willing to fight and die in order to belong to a larger collective entity" (2009, 4). Sanders sheds light on literary sibling relations after the war:

The War itself left sisters in a state of permanent moral defeat: unable to claim equality with brothers who had died for their country, they were emotionally immobilized, symbolically adrift. Jealous retaliation was no longer an option in a society where it would be unthinkable to complain of men as the favored sex. The chance to answer back was finally cancelled. (2002, 155)

Mansfield tries to cover her sense of guilt with Christian images of communal fusion—very similar to De Quincey's with Elizabeth.<sup>3</sup> Mansfield thus replaces one substance—patriotism—with another—religious mystification: "I want to write about my own country till I simply exhaust my store [...] because it is 'a sacred debt' that I pay to my country because my brother and I were born there" ([1927] 1954, 93-94).<sup>4</sup> Although she is not apparently looking for patriotic equality with her brother, their "do your remember game" while together in London is part of her attempt to share with Leslie a nationalistic feeling grounded in New Zealand childhood nostalgia. Apart from unleashing her own palimpsest of the brain by excavating memory, this game is ultimately part of Derrida's schematic of filiation.

<sup>3</sup> Speaking about the "old war" she confesses: "its never out of my mind & everything is poisoned by it. Its *here in* me the whole time, eating me away" (1987, 54; italics in the original).

<sup>4</sup> The concept of "substance" is used here following Nancy's idea that in operative communities death is turned into some "substance or subject" that leads to communitarian mystification (1991, 14-15).



As stated by Davidoff, the myth of Narcissus is echoed in siblings and leads to the myth of twin souls, where “[t]winship confounds the sense that each person must be unique but also plays to the longing for perfect understanding” (2006, 21), and is frequently linked with cross-dressing transgression.<sup>5</sup> Probably in relation to this myth, G. W. F. Hegel regards the brother-sister bond as based neither on desire nor on dependency (1910, 451). As clarified by May, “[i]n its purity and freedom, the sibling relationship models the kind of voluntary reciprocity that will be embodied in the ideal political community” (2001, 41). Hegel’s ideal community is ultimately modeled after the “fraternity” previously discussed, as he recognizes the imbalance between the brother’s central desire and the sister’s abnegation (1910, 451-454), an imbalance that leads to MacCannell’s “Regime of the Brother” in Leslie’s triumphant military ego. In her approach to Leslie’s death, Mansfield initially replicates the pattern of *operative* communities, thus avoiding direct confrontation with death through essentialist inflation. In Nancy’s words, she *operates* death into some “substance” (1991, 14-15). In Mansfield’s remembrances of Leslie after his death, the predominant image is the substance of blood—“We are of the same blood” ([1927] 1954, 157). It will be after this initial exorcising “operation” that Mansfield eventually discovers that the *inoperative* community is “calibrated on death as on that of which it is precisely impossible to *make a work*” (Nancy [1986] 1991, 15; italics in the original). In spite of an effort to transcend communitarian essentialism, the narrating self in Mansfield ultimately gives in to communitarian delusions—homeland, religion, family. Fabricated to protect us from death, these substances ultimately blur and distort reality through “myth-making.”

Following Nancy and Blanchot, in Mansfield a community is formed when the untimely death of her brother opens her to the exploration of a community of two, in her case a double exposure, since she was diagnosed with tuberculosis two years after her brother’s passing. With Leslie, then, there was an intimate knowledge of death that she never experienced with any of her lovers. Mansfield marks her finite bond with Leslie in contrast to her marriage:

I am just as much dead as he is [...] I want to write down the fact that not only am I not afraid of death—I welcome the idea of death. I believe in immortality because he is not here, and I long to join him [...] To you only do I belong, just as *you* belong to me [...] You have me. You’re in my flesh as well as in my soul. I give Jack my “surplus” love, but to you I hold and to you I give my deepest love. Jack is no more than anybody might be. ([1927] 1954, 85, 86, 89; italics in the original)

In most of her journal entries after Leslie’s death, she idealizes him and the resulting union is not a balanced community of equals, where singularities are respected, but rather

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<sup>5</sup> Antony Alpers (1980, 182) pointed out Leslie’s “strong resemblance” to Mansfield and how he was even mistaken for her at a fancy-dress ball (quoted in Mitchell 2014, 37).



a community of fusion with the sacred image of the dead brother. The end-product is a discourse of abnegation and possession that reveals an immanent ontological position, an artificial communication of Mansfield with herself, where alterity disappears: “Each time I take up my pen *you* are with me. You are mine. You are my playfellow, my brother, and we shall range all over our country together” ([1927] 1954, 96; italics in the original).

Mansfield and Leslie’s alternative community seems an illusory bond that Mansfield ‘calibrated’ on his death following religious essentialism. Indeed, the predominant motif is the religious trope of communion that she elaborates in the poem “To L. H. B.” (1916) dedicated to her brother, where she elevates him to the position of Christ:

By the remembered stream my brother stands  
 Waiting for me with berries in his hands . . .  
 “These are my body. Sister, take and eat.” (1923, 55)

Mansfield’s use of the *ecce homo* motif connects with Nancy’s perception of the body as a cultural product saturated with signs: “our old culture’s latest, most worked over, sifted, refined, dismantled, and reconstructed product” (2008, 7). The Christian motto *hoc est enim corpus meum*—reproduced in Mansfield’s poem—is the source of formidable anxiety, since, as stated by Nancy, “that *the thing itself* would be there isn’t certain,” and “[s]ensory certitude, as soon as it is touched, turns into chaos, a storm where all senses run wild. Body is certitude shattered and blown to bits” (5; italics in the original). Ironically, this is exactly what happens to Leslie’s body after the accidental explosion. Mansfield participates in Nancy’s anxiety, the desire to see, touch, and eat the body of God—her own particular version of God through Leslie. She thus adheres to the sacrificial body, where the effluvia and fluxes sanctify him—in her poem aesthetically inflated with the reference to the berries.

Instead of rejecting the patriotic sentiment that led Leslie to death, Mansfield connects patriotic and religious sacrifice to find solace in her loss, and then channels the resulting substance through her writing. Closely resembling De Quincey’s palimpsest of the brain, Mansfield uses Leslie’s death to ‘*make a work.*’ Although Mitchell aptly provides evidence to the contrary, Mansfield’s reaction to her brother’s death has been considered by several critics as “histrionic” owing to what they perceive as the lack of any real attachment between them (2011, 28). Regardless of whether her feelings about Leslie’s death were truly genuine, there is evidence of myth-making in her fictional reconstruction of his passing. In a letter to S. S. Koteliansky (19 November 1915), Mansfield quotes Leslie’s close friend, James E. Hibbert, from a letter that has not survived. There he stated that Leslie “said over and over—God forgive me for all I have done” and, before he died, he said: “Lift my head, Katy, I can’t breathe” ([1903-1917] 1984, 200). As Mitchell argues (2011, 36), there is, however, no evidence that Hibbert was at the scene of the accident, since he was not mentioned in the incident report

and Leslie was instructing a company other than the one he and Hibbert belonged to. However, four years after Leslie's death, Mansfield still uses Leslie's seemingly final words in a letter to her husband John Middleton Murry (11 December 1919), where she concludes: "they seem *mine*" ([1919-1920] 1993, 154). Mitchell's closing words serve to clarify Mansfield's work on her brother's death: "Leslie was never safer as an object of affection than when dead, but he was also never more useful to her as a writer" (2011, 38).

With Leslie, Mansfield *creates* an alternative community of lovers, where the sexual drive is absent and the purity of love is enhanced by the confrontation with death.<sup>6</sup> However, she explores its disruptive potential by suggesting incest: "I wanted J. to embrace me. But as I turned to speak to him or to kiss him I saw my brother lying fast asleep, and I got cold" ([1927] 1954, 95). Hankin clarifies that, since Mansfield's relationship with John Middleton Murry did not fulfil her expectations, Leslie became "a kind of imaginary companion and lover," who gave her emotional stability and independence from Murry, with almost "incestuous overtones" (1983, 112).<sup>7</sup> This incestuous side points at the destabilizing effect of the *inoperative* community of lovers. However, Davidoff highlights its mystical substantiation for siblings: "While incestuous brother-sister relationships evoke horror with the implication of familial and social chaos, they also hold strong fascination," and are seen as standing for "perfect oneness in a somehow purer and spiritual union" (2006, 23). Hence, together with the myth of twin souls, incestuous overtones operate in Mansfield's narrative to mystify sibling intimacy and to suggest the trope of communion.

### 3. "AN OILY SMILE": WRITING THE BODY AND TRIUMPH OVER DEATH

Nancy's theory of the body in *Corpus* sheds light on Mansfield's ambiguity in her communitarian excursion with Leslie. Nancy's perception of the body as eucharist, foreign and saturated with signs (2008, 5, 7) responds to Mansfield's mystical version of her brother. Nancy rejects the Christian discourse on transubstantiation, and proposes an alternative writing, or *corpus*, which he defines as follows: it touches upon rather than signifies; it is marked by *exscription* of the body, which is not substance, flesh or signification, but is inscribed-outside, the text itself being abandoned and left at its limit; it presents the body not as some kind of fullness or filled space, but as an open space where death is not an essence; it moves from a there to an out-there in the right-here; it does not grasp or take in hand but touches something outside, hidden, displaced, and respects alterity in that contact (9-19). Nancy thus presents *corpus* as a fragile, fractal prose, a *clinamen* or a writing that "would get out and see" (53, 55).

<sup>6</sup> Her perception of this sibling community is similar to De Quincey's with Elizabeth, when he speaks of the "holy love between two children" illuminated in "the hour of death" ([1845] 1850, 163).

<sup>7</sup> Incestuous overtones are also suggested in De Quincey, when he kisses his sister's lips and then "slunk like a guilty thing with stealthy steps from the room" ([1845] 1850, 161).

Indeed, this writing requires ontological doubling, which is central to Mansfield's manipulation of Leslie's death.<sup>8</sup> This departure leads to exposition, "[a] body becoming other" (37). The doubling quality of siblings, both in Mansfield and Leslie and in their fictional representations, can, then, be understood, not as a mere receptacle of the trope of communion, but as Mansfield's strategy to reproduce Nancy's *corpus*, to expose herself not only to the death of another (Leslie), but to her own death, which is then projected, exscribed, onto a strange body which is simultaneously familiar. Thus, in Mansfield, De Quincey's palimpsest of the brain is channeled into a writing of the body, where the interplay between life and fiction veers towards an *inoperative* model of community.

Discussing Virginia Woolf, Detloff describes her style as "radial" or "seismographic" — "able to communicate the experience of pain by tracing its effects" (2009, 25-28). Mansfield shares this radial style and, in writing poetic prose, she explores a lyrical realm where only the great moment exists, and which solidifies into "substance" or "a symbol that is illuminated throughout" (Lukács [1920] 2000, 190). Lukács clarifies that "only in lyric poetry do these direct, sudden flashes of the substance become like lost original manuscripts suddenly made legible" (190). My contention is that Mansfield's lyricism allows her to use a symbolism where alterity—in this case the secret of death—is confronted, although not understood, through a potent and un-signified corporeity. This proves that death's secrecy is unspeakable but not incommunicable—i.e., Laura and Laurie in "The Garden Party" (1922). I disagree with Lukács, because symbols in Mansfield are not merely a hint of substance. They are used to write the body, and serve to project the alterity of death, but its final secrecy rejects any substantiation. Maybe the fact that Mansfield produced the hybrid genre of lyrical prose explains that her fiction ultimately fulfills Lukács's expectations about the novel as "abandoned to its immanent meaninglessness" and "seeking and failing to find the essence" ([1920] 2000, 210-211, 217). Mansfield embraces the "opaque, impenetrable incognito" of death (Lukács [1962] 1963, 27) and smiles and triumphs over finitude.<sup>9</sup>

In her sibling stories, corporeity is prevalent and consciously detached from clothing, which represents cultural signification. In "The Wind Blows" (1920) Mansfield projects Leslie's and her own nostalgia for *les temps perdu* in a phantasmagoric scenario where two siblings, Matilda and Bogey,<sup>10</sup> temporarily connect. The description of Matilda's attendance at a music lesson and the walk with her brother to the esplanade on a windy

<sup>8</sup> Nancy states: "*corpus is never properly me*. It's always an 'object' [...] as soon as *I* is extended, it's also delivered to others. Or again, I'm the extension that *I am* by being withdrawn, subtracted, removed, and ob-jected" (2008, 29; italics in the original).

<sup>9</sup> This is not De Quincey's case. In the description of his sister's death, he speaks of "symbols" that are "pathetic of life and the glory of life" ([1845] 1850, 156). Although he longs for a demystified image of his sister, which is "not spiritual, but human" (166), the opposite effect is achieved, as all the symbols that he uses are artificially devised to turn Elizabeth into a mystified being: "heavenly lips," "solemn wind," "marble lips," "frozen eyelids" (159).

<sup>10</sup> Mansfield used the pseudonym Matilda Berry while working for the journal *Signature*, and Bogey was one of the nicknames she used to call Leslie. The autobiographical connection is evident.

day leads to a fantasy of the siblings sailing away and revisiting their lives through memories. When the narrative voice opens the story with “Something dreadful has happened” ([1920] 1981, 106),<sup>11</sup> it appears to confer Mansfield with visionary power as the story was published two days prior to Leslie’s death. The imagery used to describe the siblings suggests ontological fusion and complementation, highlighted by their projected image in the mirror: “Bogey’s ulster is just like hers”; “they have the same excited eyes and hot lips”; “they stride like one eager person through the town” (109-110). This fusion is completed in “The Garden Party” (1922), where even the names of the siblings, Laura and Laurie, suggest symbolic twinship. The basis for Mansfield’s relationship with her brother, therefore, is communal fusion tainted with nostalgic and religious overtones: “Lose myself, lose myself to find you, dearest” ([1927] 1954, 98). An *operative* communitarian drive and religious mystification are thus the predominant notes in Mansfield’s initial approach to her dead brother.

In “The Wind Blows”—as will be explored later—the wind signifies an uncontrollable death force. At the beginning of the story, the wind is connected with death through the symbol of the chrysanthemum. When one of the neighbors runs into the garden to pick the chrysanthemums before they are ruined, the wind exposes her corporeity beyond what is acceptable within the cultural taboo, thus suggesting that with death there is no possible substantiation: “Her skirt flies up above her waist; she tries to beat it down, to tuck it between her legs while she stoops, but it is no use—up it flies” ([1920] 1981, 106). As a general rule, hats in Mansfield’s fiction represent cultural artificiality. In the story, both siblings “pull off their hats” and, through a vivid corporeal sensation, Matilda experiences death, associated with the wind and the ocean, without the filter of cultural signification: “her hair blows across her mouth, tasting of salt [...] the inside of her mouth tastes wet and cold” (110).

In “The Garden Party” corporeity and the significance of hats are more thoroughly developed. The story exposes bourgeois frivolity, as the Sheridan family is preparing a garden party that is not interrupted in spite of receiving news that their working-class neighbor has died. After the success of the event, Laura, the protagonist daughter of the Sheridan family, is sent to the neighbors’ house with a basket of leftovers. She confronts death with her exposure to the corpse, and tries later to share that unique experience with her brother Laurie, but she cannot find the right words. Both siblings wear hats: Laurie’s is linked to the social sphere of work—“the office” ([1922] 1981, 248)—and Laura’s to feminine delicacy and sophistication—“the big hat with the velvet streamer” (259). Corporeity is highlighted: “Suddenly she couldn’t stop herself. She ran at Laurie and gave him a small, quick squeeze [...] he squeezed his sister too and gave her a gentle push” (248). The wind motif also appears in this story. Although the placid atmosphere of the preparation of the party is initially located in a “windless, warm sky without a

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<sup>11</sup> All references from Mansfield’s short stories are taken from the Penguin edition, *The Collected Stories of Katherine Mansfield* (1981).

cloud" (245), the reference to "little faint winds [...] playing chase, in at the tops of the windows, out at the doors" (249) foreshadows the imminent death of the neighbor and points at Laura's embracing of the alterity of death. An excess of corporeity is projected onto the imagery of flowers ("Nobody ever ordered so many," 249), an excess of "pink lilies" bought by the mother that provokes the following super-sensorial effect in Laura: "the sound was like a little moan. She crouched down as if to warm herself at that blaze of lilies; she felt they were in her fingers, on her lips, growing in her breast" (249).

Right before Laura's exposure to death through her viewing of the corpse, the confrontation of singularities is enhanced in her meeting with the neighbor's sister. Laura is presented as "a stranger," an assertion that seems to go beyond class differentiation. The woman's exposure to her dead brother leads Mansfield to use a synesthesia to describe it—her face "tried an oily smile" (260). This rhetorical device reflects another level of corporeity, where societal signification—represented by Laura's hat—is not possible. Right after this confrontation with death, Laura meets Laurie in a final scene where their corporeity is enhanced: "She took his arm, she pressed up against him"; "Laurie put his arm round her shoulder" (261).

In *Corpus*, Nancy links the body with the mysterious *epopteia*, or complete revelation of a transcendental truth, which is "properly and absolutely a vision of death, an absolute, mystical desire that cannot be fulfilled without blasting bodies apart" (2008, 45). Nancy points at an aspect which is central to understanding Mansfield's ultimate revision of her sibling intimacy as an example of the *inoperative* community: the impossibility of understanding the secret of death, and her triumph over finitude by finally confronting it without mystification. In his *Gift of Death* ([1992] 1996) Derrida elaborates on the notion of secrecy and death. Using Jan Pato ka's ideas, Derrida makes a distinction between "demonic mystery"—where the sacred as enthusiasm or fervor for fusion leads to the loss of the sense of consciousness and of responsibility, what Pato ka calls "orgiastic irresponsibility"—and the "*secretum*"—which "supposes the constitution of this liberty of the soul as the conscience of a responsible subject" ([1992] 1996, 20). In other words, responsibility and freedom—the gift of death in Derrida's words—are achieved when the demonic or orgiastic fusion is channeled into responsibility. There is an ulterior secret about death that cannot be apprehended—what Derrida calls the "*mysterium tremendum*" (6). This mystery cannot be revealed, but responsibility and, along with it, freedom require triumph over death or, as Derrida would have it, the triumph of life. For Derrida, the exercise of responsibility leaves no choice but "paradox, heresy and secrecy. More serious still, it must always run the risk of conversion and apostasy: there is no responsibility without a dissident and inventive rupture with respect to tradition, authority, orthodoxy, rule or doctrine" (27).

In Mansfield, the demonic or orgiastic mystery of communing with her brother's transfigured body leads to Derrida's *secretum*, and it is her responsibility, which becomes literary responsibility in the face of Leslie's and her own death—"only a mortal can be responsible" (Derrida [1992] 1996, 41). Religious essentialism gives way to

Mansfield's own creed, which is her fiction. She becomes a dissident and inventively disrupts orthodoxy and tradition in her search for an (artistic) ethics of truth, which converts her into a "resistance figure," borrowing Alain Badiou's words. For Badiou, resistance figures do not belong to any social group and break away from dominant opinions, thus suggesting a subtraction of these figures from the community (2009, 9). On numerous occasions Mansfield admitted that her fiction was her religion and, although her first impulse was to channel childhood nostalgia through Leslie's passing, in the face of her own imminent death she underwent what Judith Butler theorizes as subject formation through reappropriated and displaced melancholic rage. In other words, a survival that "requires directing rage against the lost other, defiling the sanctity of the dead for the purpose of life, raging against the dead in order not to join them" (Butler 1997, 192-193). Mansfield's reaction to death shows her survival instinct justified by her responsibility as a writer: "Oh, yes, of course I'm frightened [...] I don't want to find this is real consumption [...] and I shan't have my work written. *That's what matters*" ([1927] 1954, 129; italics in the original). Beyond her initial religious and patriotic transfiguration of Leslie's finite body, she eventually learns the lesson of death: "dying can never be taken, borrowed, transferred, delivered, promised or transmitted [...] [T]herein resides freedom and responsibility" (Derrida [1992] 1996, 44). The certainty that Mansfield was looking for in Leslie's mystified body gives way to heresy and secrecy, which materializes in her fiction and her role as a literary deity who replaces the god-shaped void: "my love of work—my desire to be a better writer—takes the place of religions—it is religion—of people—I create my people: of 'life'—it is Life" ([1927] 1954, 161). In spite of being death-stricken, her survival instinct is used to triumph over the two deaths: Leslie's and her own—"Then why don't I commit suicide? Because I feel I have a duty to perform to the lovely time when we were both alive. I want to write about it, and he wanted me to" (90). Rather than panicking before the *mysterium tremendum*, she does indeed tremble at "what exceeds [her] seeing and [her] knowing" (54).

In "The Wind Blows" the protagonist's trembling is conveniently linked to the image of the wind: "It is only the wind shaking the house, rattling the windows, banging a piece of iron on the roof and making her bed tremble" ([1920] 1981, 106); a tremble that anticipates the ending, where she confronts death directly by touching the wind: "The wind is so strong that they have to fight their way through it, rocking like two old drunkards" (109-110). The moment of confronting death belongs to the unspeakable, although in this story it manages to be communicated when the siblings escape their cultural signification—represented by their projected images on the wall, which they abandon temporarily: "Good-bye, dears; we shall be back soon" (109). Language is useless to express this exposure: "Bogey's voice is breaking"; "The wind carries their voices—away fly the sentences like little narrow ribbons" (110). Exposure to death can only be expressed through direct corporeity, without any signification—as when Matilda tastes the wet, salt water of the ocean



and feels the wind so strongly on her body—and through lyric symbolism—which didactically directs the reader to death, but there is no other signification beyond this, nor any attempt to make a work of death.<sup>12</sup> The story is scattered with imagery that, in showing the effects of a rough wind, points at the violent impact of death, without mystification: “Leaves flutter past the window, up and away; down in the avenue a whole newspaper wags in the air like a lost kite and falls, spiked on a pine tree” (106). The final image of the big black steamer suggests the siblings as subjects-in-process. The lights that magically illuminate the boat making her “look so awfully beautiful and mysterious” (110) point to the nostalgic, saturated vision of Mansfield’s childhood and mystical bond with Leslie. However, this mysticism—highlighted by the idea that the boat is not stopped by the wind—is interrupted by the information that it leads to somewhere although the direction is not provided in the original text. The ideal image is engulfed by the repetition of “[t]he wind—the wind” (110), which closes the story. Death is ultimately confronted by Mansfield through her literary responsibility and her *corpus*, where the body is exscribed and death is offered as such through radial imagery.

In “The Garden Party” Laura, who is described as “the artistic one” among the sisters ([1922] 1981, 246), evokes Mansfield’s *corpus* with a subtle reference to writing—“the inkpot” highlighted by a sunspot—and how “[s]he could have kissed it” (249). Laura’s being confronted by her neighbor’s corpse displays Mansfield’s ambiguous approach to death. The girl’s vision is filtered through her adolescent eyes, so that she cannot help making a work out of it—just like the rest in the room, who think he “looks a picture” (261):

There lay a young man, fast asleep—sleeping so soundly, so deeply, that he was far, far away from them both. Oh, so remote, so peaceful. He was dreaming. Never wake him up again. His head was sunk in the pillow, his eyes were closed; they were blind under the closed eyelids. He was given up to his dream. What did garden-parties and baskets and lace frocks matter to him? He was far from all those things. He was wonderful, beautiful. While they were laughing and while the band was playing, this marvel had come to the lane. Happy [...] happy [...] All is well, said the sleeping face. This is just as it should be. I am content. (Mansfield [1922] 1981, 261)

The girl tries to come to terms with death through reductive, *operative* images that alleviate the sudden impact of confronting finitude directly: the dead man’s mystic dream rather than his unpleasant inert presence as a corpse. Even the dead man’s corporeity is presented to cover the dark reality of death with the reference to his blind eyes. She perceives this mystified image of death as a ‘marvel’ in contrast to the everyday

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<sup>12</sup>This symbolism linked to direct corporeity differs from De Quincey’s in the description of his deceased sister (see above).



routine of the neighborhood. It seems that the transcendental moment, filtered through covert religious substantiation, offers the limitation proper to an adolescent girl, as her maturity is questioned through her childish sob.

However, in spite of continuous calibration on death in Mansfield's fiction, "The Garden Party" offers her ultimate—or at least, desired—view on death, firmly accepted as unworkable. No operation can be done on death because there is no way it can be transfigured into an immortal or transmortal truth. Right after this significant confrontation, Laura meets her brother in the closing scene. Prior to this encounter, the story suggests the siblings' liminality,<sup>13</sup> which joins them in their openness to exteriority: "But still one must go everywhere; one must see everything. So through they went" (254). After the confrontation with the neighbor, the expectation in the final scene is that Laura will find solace in Laurie's arms, since both of them were previously able to step outside communal immanence. However, the family—as one of the substances pointed out by Nancy and reflected in the siblings' bond—is not the ultimate solution. Despite the siblings' similar identities, their connection through death is clearly unsuccessful and they end up failing to communicate their confrontation with death beyond corporeal contact.

"Was it awful?"

"No," sobbed Laura. "It was simply marvelous. But, Laurie—" "She stopped, she looked at her brother. "Isn't life," she stammered, "isn't life." But what life was she couldn't explain. No matter. He quite understood.

"Isn't it, darling?" said Laurie. (Mansfield [1922] 1981, 261; italics in the original)

Being aware of the autobiographical incursions in the story, we realize that this dialogue is actually a monologue that Mansfield is having with herself, while pretending to converse with her dead brother. The neighbor's death is projected onto Leslie/Laurie, who seems to understand because Leslie himself is dead and is supposed to know. However, Laura is unable to explain her confrontation with finitude. The very emphasis on the final negation is a way to show that death cannot be operated on, but simply confronted without substances. Although Laura is unable to escape substantiation—principally religion and family—we have the impression that the understanding between brother and sister ultimately happens intuitively beyond essentialist shaping, accepting the *secretum* that endows Mansfield with literary responsibility.<sup>14</sup> In Mansfield's relationship with Leslie, the trembling before death is clear, as stated in this annotation of her notebook from January 22, 1916:

<sup>13</sup>Laura and Laurie's liminality is represented by their meeting "at the corner of the lane" (Mansfield [1922] 1981, 261) and their childhood rebellion against the family prohibition to cross the borderline that separated their upper-class world from the poverty-stricken neighborhood.

<sup>14</sup>Christine Darrohn's opinion differs. For her Laurie no longer understands Laura because she has been irrevocably changed by her encounter with the corpse (1998, 521).

I want to write poetry. I feel always *trembling* on the brink of poetry. The almond tree, the birds, the little wood where you are, flowers you do not see, the open window out of which I lean and dream that you are against my shoulder [...] but especially I want to write a kind of long elegy to you—perhaps not in poetry. No, perhaps in prose. (2002, 33; my italics)

Here Mansfield has performed an act of reoccupation. By transferring the trembling before death at the end of “The Garden Party” to the trembling before her art, she has accommodated Leslie’s death to her own through an act of replication reflected in the symbolism of the window as a liminal place connecting the two dead(ly) bodies. Even though Mansfield mentions an elegy, with its nostalgic and mystifying undertones, the reference to lyrical writing and symbolism is key to completing her communitarian enterprise with Leslie through a writing of the body and an ultimately undecipherable secret.

#### 4. CONCLUSION: “OUT INTO THE OPEN”

In her poem “The Butterfly” (November 1918), Mansfield imagined her embracing of death, just like the butterfly that wanted “to go out into the open” ([1927] 1954, 151). The present study has discussed Mansfield’s initial construction of Leslie’s death by combining the saturated discourses of patriotism and religion. However, she ultimately pursued an ethics of truth, which converts her into a resistance figure. In her communitarian exploration with Leslie, Mansfield goes beyond the mystifying discourses of patriotism and religion. Does she subtract herself from the community as a resistance figure? Does she use Leslie as a tool to create an alternative literary community of one with a dialogical mirage through sibling intimacy? The answer, if any, might be traced in her approach to love. Mansfield seems to follow Nancy’s perception in “Shattered Love” that “[l]ove is not a feeling. Rather it is a simultaneous opening and obliging of the self: an opening of the self to something that exceeds it and an obliging of the self to that excess” (1990, quoted in Abbot 2011, 144). If we understand the community of lovers or siblings as envisioned by Nancy and Blanchot, Mansfield’s communitarian experiment disrupts organic communities in her perception of love as “the indefinite abundance of all possible loves” (Nancy [1986] 1991, 83). As she remarked in a letter to Murry (8 November 1919), her artistic (de)construction of love—sibling, incestuous, pure, vindictive, finite—allows her to make of it her religion (Mansfield [1919-1920] 1993, 80). Unlike Catholics, whose duty is to “a personal deity,” hers is “to mankind” (71). She thus proves her communitarian drive and her final triumph over death by looking it directly in the face, rather than through the *operative* symbolism used by De Quincey in his description of Elizabeth. Speaking about the unavoidable presence of death—“the big snail under the leaf, the spot in the child’s [sic] lung”—Mansfield denounces “WICKED WICKED God” and concludes: “it is more than useless to cry out. Hanging in our little cages on the awful wall over the gulf of eternity we must sing—sing” (37; italics in the original). She manages to open the cage and, singing, she flies away.

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