

# Introduction

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## Introduction

The analysis of community has become an important research topic in the Humanities, literary studies being one of the key disciplines to engage with it in particularly productive ways (see Goldstein; Miller; Blume, Leitgeb and Rössner; Claviez). In late 2016, when the Biennial Conference of the Swiss Association for North American Studies (SANAS) took place, issues of globalization and migration pressed hard on public awareness in many countries around the globe. In the current political climate borders are being challenged or re-drawn, which makes both an everyday understanding of “community” particularly fragile and its academic theorizations all the more important. Given the acute political relevance of the topic of community and the apparent volatility of its meanings, it is necessary to take time and create spaces for contemplation. How can theories of community be usefully applied to various forms of cultural production? How do notions of “*communitas*” affect representations as well as critiques of society and social developments?

In the realm of popular media and culture – performances and strategies of media orchestration which by no means are exclusive to the United States – one ought to remain alert to the United States’ long history of “community” both as a notion and communities in a demographic sense. Canada, too, looks back to a past where communities, their formation, co-existence, and identity politics, have always mattered. As major parts of a continent relying on immigration, both Canada and the United States have traditionally used a rhetoric of multiplicity within their nations, ever since the early days of settlement, colonization, and forced displacement.

The notion of community refers to processes of unification, of joining disparate elements, of creating a whole, but seen in their complexity, this notion is of course also related to unrulier, less homogenizing dynamics, i.e., mechanisms and processes of exclusion, marginalization, re-

sistance, and exile. Communities can empower individuals and their voices, while also serving as reasons for war and conflict. While “community” may bear obvious positive, if not even idealistic connotations of holism, it is not an entirely inclusive concept, but also presupposes difference, otherness, subversion, or even exclusion, particularly in recent times, as Miranda Joseph’s reflection on the term has shown. The arts have always been very susceptible to exactly these more vexed aspects of community. Marginalization, the social ostracizing of the individual, or the repression of entire groups have inspired creative minds at least as much as the promises of communal harmony. To a similar extent that literature and film, for example, are able to produce utopias of human bonding, they can evoke the terrors of expulsion from a community, of having to forsake one’s communal identity as a member of a larger unit.

Within the discipline of American Studies, both facets of the term, its exclusive and inclusive potential, are firmly rooted in the dynamics informing revisionary approaches to literary history: Post-colonial studies, cosmopolitanism, transatlantic and transnational studies, and World Literature are just some of the approaches that over the last twenty to thirty years have produced or embedded relevant research on communities, the role of the individual within communities, and the formation of collective identities, especially in conjunction with work on difference and diversity, e.g., in the work of Homi Bhabha, Gayatri C. Spivak, and Sara Ahmed. Thus, American literature, “constantly repurposed and migratory, mutates into new forms in a global setting” (Levander 11), and as a consequence the grouping of its readers in space becomes as important as their imaginary bonds – defying spatial isolation – that Benedict Anderson had called attention to in the early 1980s and which culture theorists like Frank Kelleter have recontextualized in recent years. Rather than assuming that the nation as a whole swallows its constitutive communities, their co-existence and changing significance with regard to the individual have come to the fore. If one postulates such a thing as an “American” community to begin with, it undoubtedly has to be thought of as extending beyond, and is neither as homogeneous nor as singular as, the geographical borders allotted to it on maps. Accounts of communities today tend to be fragmented, they offer sites for resistance and they shape identity politics. Some of these narratives are familiar, others are new, and many point to the intersections between discourse and practice. Some are taken up in the contributions to the present volume, in various methodological ways, with various focal points, and without making claims of completeness. For this same reason, we

left it to the authors to choose the most fitting adjective, i.e., to speak about North American, US-American/American, or Canadian and Mexican settings.

While focused on “community” in contemporary American Studies, the essays in this collection take account of developments and issues surrounding community at a moment of heightened sensitivity in many countries, certainly far beyond academia. The present collection also brings together and thereby reflects the variety of fields and approaches that have started to feed into American Studies in the past years, be it age studies, popular seriality studies, or ecocriticism. They show that more often than not, literary and other aesthetic discourses are closely entwined with other disciplines, but also bound up with emergent cultural practices as well as forms and media of popular culture, e.g., comics and TV series.

Finally, the essays explore different genres, media (e.g., literature, TV series, performance), industries (e.g., entertainment, urban planning), disciplines and discourses (e.g., literary, political, philosophical, anthropological, environmental), and practices (e.g., translation, communal living), and thus open up a somewhat panoramic view of the various levels of cultural production as well as historical contexts where “community” plays a role in current scholarship. We say “*somewhat* panoramic” with a view towards the development of the volume on the basis of a select few papers given at a specific conference; in other words, if a discussion of several topics that are equally crucial to topical notions of community (e.g., critical race, critical whiteness, critical body studies, politics of global intervention, etc.) in this volume is missing, this is due to pragmatic concerns. All contributors have, however, been willing to engage with concerns beyond their initial interest and focus, enabling a considerable breadth of topics and approaches.

The present volume begins with Eva-Sabine Zehelein’s investigation into a very particular form of communal living: gated communities for privileged, mainly elderly citizens. Looking at two examples, one in the United States, the other in Canada, Zehelein shows to which extent these geritopias redefine privacy. Privacy here becomes a choice of lifestyle: The “Dream Homes” which the author studies promise individuality and the intimate privacy of “home” by beckoning, paradoxically, with the help of a branded commodity. The essay thus gives a first example of the partly contradictory implications of community and its complex relationship with individuality.

Age also plays a role in the intergenerational group of women that Siri Hustvedt’s *The Summer Without Men* creates, and which Sofie Behluli

discusses in her essay. Published in 2011, Hustvedt's novel counts as contemporary, for sure, but the more vexing question for Behluli is where such novels ought to be positioned with regard to postmodernism. The essay argues that the novel's representation of an all-female community reflects the torn loyalties of the post-postmodern, i.e., an affirmation of a value-based understanding of community as well as the nagging awareness of the instabilities brought about by postmodernism. Like notions of selfhood and authenticity, the claim for "community" operates with assumptions whose deconstruction it at the same time presupposes.

The third essay included in this volume, A. Elisabeth Reichel's and Philipp Schweighauser's discussion of Edward Sapir's French-Canadian folk songs, introduces a different genre, i.e., poetry; a different period, i.e., modernism; and it examines the intersection between literature and a different discipline, i.e., anthropology. The essay highlights modernism as a transnational phenomenon as well as its concomitant intercultural dimension. The authors also discuss periodical publishing as an influential platform for the success of modernism by studying works contained in *Poetry* and elsewhere. Considering aspects of translation, communication, and the folkloristic, the authors argue that the encounter between the categories of "modernist primitivism" and "salvage ethnography" resulted in a fusion – what they refer to as "salvage primitivism."

Language features prominently in Pierre-Héli Monot's contribution, which elucidates community as a "philological problem." Placing community at the heart of philological debates taking place in Europe and North America in the first half of the nineteenth century, Monot examines a transatlantic conversation between Continental hermeneutics, for example in the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher and Johann Gottfried Herder, and Transcendentalism. The nineteenth century's philological debates on community, particularism and bi-partism, intricately connected with politics of race, have shaped ensuing intellectual traditions and present-day uses of the term "community," as illustrated, for instance, by the work of Jean-Luc Nancy.

Dustin Breitenwischer's essay also focuses on nineteenth-century philosophy and aesthetic discourse by investigating the relationship between individual existence and community in the works of Ralph Waldo Emerson. With the help of a close reading of several central texts by Emerson, Breitenwischer lays bare a dense network of interconnections between creativity, utopian visions of social reform, and the crucial question of how the individual relates to the communal. In Emerson, Breitenwischer argues, the individual's place in society is experiential

and processual rather than spatially rooted. Paradoxically, communal existence unfolds itself exactly in the abandonment of social relations. The self and community are thus closely entwined, but in ways that are not immediately transparent.

A famous experiment equally dating back to Emerson's time is Brook Farm, which stands at the beginning of many experiments that have sought to provide alternative models for communal life in North America. As Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet shows in her essay, religion and spirituality have, ever since the Puritans, been powerful motives to drive individuals into such alternative communities, yet they are not the only ones. A concern with environmental issues and the land has also affected the formation of intentional communities. While not always successful and indeed often romanticized in retrospect, the history of intentional communities in North America may well offer suggestions for how, on a pragmatic level, the relationship between humans and their environment can be recreated in more sustainable ways – thus the author argues.

Christian Arnsperger's contribution to the volume can be read as a companion piece to Soltysik Monnet's essay. It traces the development of bioregionalism in the United States, especially in California, in the 1960s and 1970s and beyond. Inspired by Native American practices and the idea of "inhabiting" territory that was not aligned with administrative borders, bioregionalism today refers to a practice of rethinking community as both culturally and naturally defined. The movement has always sought to avoid associations with politically dubious concepts of "soil" or homeland, Arnsperger argues. Quite the contrary: It centers around a progressive idea and may even serve as a "blueprint" for an understanding of community as biotic, and landscape as home to a variety of species.

With Roxane Hughes' piece on Brian Sousa's *Almost Gone*, a novel from 2013, the focus shifts back to literary reflections of community. Set in a Portuguese-American context, the novel depicts the challenges of communal life in relation to migration. Processes of identity formation, alienation, fragmentation of the self, and intergenerational confrontation loom large in this novel, which centers on communal existence in the face of collective dislocation and unresolved conflicts of belonging. Hughes provides a close reading of the novel's rhetoric and images with an eye toward the issue of trauma. Within the setting of the novel, she argues, community shows its ever-shifting basis and contradictory claims of (dis)connection on the individuals.

Philipp Reisner explores similar conflicts in complex and diverse social settings, but he puts the notion of exile center stage as a unifying theme that brings major contemporary plays together. His discussion of contemporary Anglophone plays by David Adjmi, Marcus Gardley, and Young Jean Lee demonstrates how religion may shape the depiction of communities. The Bible serves as a foil, adding an extra nuance of meaning to notions of “home” and “exile” that are so prominent in these plays. A theological reading of these texts, Reisner argues, enhances their philosophical concerns but also sheds light on the everyday problems and experiences which are equally fuelled by a search for answers.

Sabin Jeanmaire’s essay centers on an explicitly self-reflexive text: *Headhunter* (1993), a novel by the Canadian author Thomas Findley. While other essays included in this volume exploit the utopian appeal of communities, *Headhunter* presents a dystopian vision of a psychiatric hospital in Toronto. Jeanmaire connects her observations on communities within the tense institutional setting of the hospital with a reflection on the acts of reading and story-telling and the role of the reader. She thereby alerts us to our own fragile position in a community of readers and listeners, and to how we are constantly implicated in negotiations of power.

Since the 1930s, superhero comic books have gradually become major, and exceedingly popular, forms of storytelling that invite an engagement with social and political issues. Thomas Nehrlich and Joanna Nowotny start out by tracing the development of heroism around such figures as Superman in relation to their communities, from the early twentieth century to our days. They then discuss how the conflicts depicted in contemporary superhero comic books point to deeper clashes of opposing ideologies. The representation of the relationship between superheroes and their communities as depicted in the post-9/11 United States is a mirror of social and political debates, they contend; it asks readers to diversify their conceptions of the “heroic” and to question several of the beliefs and values superheroes have classically stood for.

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