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# Bonding in Bonden: A Post-Postmodernist Female Community in Siri Hustvedt's *The Summer Without Men*

Sofie Behluli

Some critics have declared postmodernism to be over and are speaking of “post-postmodernism,” a new era generally associated with a “turn to the human” (Timmer) and notions such as coherence, unity, and community. Nicoline Timmer has identified these new trends in literature and fleshed out a list of characteristics of the post-postmodern novel, for example community, empathy, sameness, inclusiveness, storytelling, and a mock-dialogue with the reader. Taking this theory on post-postmodernism and the importance of community as a backdrop, this article analyzes the way in which a transgenerational female community is established and critiqued in Siri Hustvedt's novel *The Summer Without Men*. By singling out Timmer's features of post-postmodernism that appear in the novel, and focusing particularly on four community-establishing and -maintaining elements (gender, mother-daughter relationships, bodily contact, and storytelling), it will be shown that Hustvedt's community follows a typically post-postmodern yes/but logic: Yes, *The Summer Without Men* presents us with a seemingly idyllic transgenerational female community, but it always also questions and problematizes its ontologically unstable basis.

## 1. Introduction

*A Woman Looking at Men Looking at Women* is the title of Siri Hustvedt's newest essay collection, which sets out to bridge the gulf between the natural and the social sciences. Arguing that “all human knowledge is partial” and that “no one is untouched by the community of thinkers or

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researchers in which she or he lives" (xii), Hustvedt pleads for more interdisciplinarity and a critical engagement with the arbitrary boundaries "between concepts such as art and science, truth and fiction, feeling and perception" (Anonymous, *Publishers Weekly* review). As much as her essays are engaged with the deconstruction of binary oppositions, already the title sets up a crucial distinction between men and women and highlights a dichotomy that haunts all of Hustvedt's work, for instance also *The Summer Without Men*. This is a classical example of the problem that poststructuralists and deconstructionists have long struggled with, namely the inability to create a language *ex nihilo* without producing new dichotomies. Hence, even though Hustvedt does subscribe to a fundamental distinction between the sexes (and the disciplines, for that matter), she is *forced* to work with a vocabulary predicated upon binary modes of thinking.

That Hustvedt is anything but a naïve writer or a supporter of clear-cut gender dichotomies can be seen throughout her fictional work, for example in her earliest novel *The Blindfold*, where the protagonist Iris starts to cross-dress as a man, or in her latest novel *The Blazing World*, where the protagonist and artist Harriet creates three male disguises to boost her career. In both novels femaleness is experienced as a societal burden that can be escaped behind a male mask, at least temporarily. In *The Summer Without Men*, published as the fifth fictional work by the Norwegian-American novelist and essayist,<sup>1</sup> Hustvedt picks up on the male-female dichotomy and employs the opposite of a strategy of evasion: confrontation. While attempting to exclude the male half of *man-kind*, Hustvedt's novel shifts the focus onto women and their in-group relations. The array of women presented in *The Summer Without Men* ranges from a three-year-old toddler to a one-hundred-and-two-year-old pensioner, the spectrum being interspersed with teenagers, adolescents, young adults, and middle-aged women. They are daughters, mothers, grandmothers, sisters, teachers, and friends to each other and are thus tightly linked into a transgenerational female community. Apart from their gender, the critical elements of mother-daughter relationships,

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<sup>1</sup> There are few secondary sources on this literary text since, so far, the emerging scholarly interest in Hustvedt has focused mostly on her 2003 novel *What I Loved* and on the autobiographical analysis of her mental illness *The Shaking Woman*. Indeed, apart from the three monographs by Christine Marks, Corinna Sophie Reipen, and Johanna Hartmann, which all focus on the visibility and relational identity-construction in Hustvedt's work, only one recently published edited volume by Hartmann, Marks, and Zapf can be mentioned as a lengthy study on Hustvedt's border-crossing work.

bodily contact and storytelling are emphasized as community-forming and community-sustaining factors.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “community” as “a group of people distinguished by shared circumstances of nationality, race, religion, sexuality, etc.; esp. such a group living within a larger society from which it is distinct” (*OED* 5.a.), the “etc.” presumably pointing to other significant traits such as gender. The *OED* definition also includes the aspect of “shar[ing] the same interests, pursuits, or occupation, esp. when distinct from those of the society in which they live” (*OED* 5.b.). These shared interests, pursuits, and occupations in *The Summer Without Men* include, for example, the negotiation of the Self as a woman and hegemonically constituted Other in relation to men; the wish to subvert these patriarchic power relations in creative ways; and the occupation and role in society of being a mother, a daughter, a sister, a wife, and a friend. Thomas Claviez would call this conception of “community” “colored by romantic nostalgia for homogeneity, closeness, and sameness” (“Toward a Poetics” 3), a community which hopelessly strives to secure internal stability while preventing the intrusion of external threats. However idyllic and flawed this conception of “community” might be, it is still applicable to Hustvedt’s novel. In the end, the female community in *The Summer Without Men* swings back and forth between a blissful/unitarian and a more critical/fragmented understanding, allowing for the complexities of this notion to shine through.

*The Summer Without Men* is, in fact, a typical example of the recently emerged yes/but logic, which Irmtraud Huber and others view as a fundamental characteristic of the so-called “post-postmodernism.” This term is often used to label the alleged new epoch (e.g., by Nealon) that is both a break with and an extension of postmodernism (similar to the complex relationship between modernism and postmodernism). To put it in Linda Hutcheon’s words: “[T]he postmodern moment has passed, even if its discursive strategies and its ideological critique continue to live on” (181). Postmodernism is by no means dead but has been followed by a form of cultural production that incorporates its ideas, hence the term “post-postmodernism.” Arguing similarly, Josh Toth and Neil Brooks claim that postmodernism “became terminally ill sometime in the late-eighties [with Samuel Beckett’s death or the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989] and early-nineties [as perhaps best indicated by Jacques Derrida’s ‘ethical turn’], [and that] it was buried once and for all in the rubble of the World Trade Center” on 9/11” (3). While Toth and Brooks believe that postmodernism failed because of its inherent contradiction – proclaiming the impossibility of positive truths and master

narratives and at the same time attempting to become just that (7) –, other scholars and cultural critics see the reasons for postmodernism's downfall in its inability to keep up with today's pressing socio-political issues, e.g., religious terrorism, mass migration, climate change, and a global rise of the right wing. With reference to Frederic Jameson's influential essay "The Antinomies of Postmodernity," Peter Boxall even goes as far as claiming that postmodern thought has become "empty, static, constant" (15), unable to capture a rapidly changing temporality and to truly take the material conditions around us into account.

In the wake of postmodernism a new era seems to have dawned, that of post-postmodernism – or so at least some literary and cultural critics argue.<sup>2</sup> As Ihab Hassan stated in his article "Beyond Postmodernism: Toward an Aesthetic of Trust," this era and its aesthetics are primarily concerned with "new relations between selves and others, margins and centers, fragments and wholes – indeed new relations between selves and selves, margins and margins, centers and centers" (6).<sup>3</sup> Put differently, it is a fresh – yet old – approach to the unresolved issues that were discussed during postmodernism. Thus, post-postmodernism, which supposedly covers everything from politics and cultural production to academic discourses, is associated with an apparent "return to ethics, religio[n] and realism" (Toth and Brooks 4; cf. also Claviez, "neo-realism") and a more general return to coherence and meaning. Moreover, concepts of the body and the senses, materiality, empathy, sincerity, trust, and community, have all experienced a revival. The concept of "community" – a distinct research field that has been thriving ever since the early 1980s thanks to Jean-Luc Nancy, George Bataille, Maurice Blanchot, and Étienne Balibar –, is a conspicuously reoccurring feature in these theories of post-postmodernism, even if it is only visible on the periphery.<sup>4</sup>

The theory of Nicoline Timmer, which she presents in *Do You Feel it Too? The Post-postmodern Syndrome in American Fiction at the Turn of the Millennium*, is one such example. Arguing that the post-postmodern syndrome can be summarized as a "turn to the human" (51), Timmer

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<sup>2</sup> "Post-postmodernism" (e.g., Nealon) is the term that has asserted itself against other labels such as "liquid modernity" (Bauman), "digimodernism" (Kirby 2009), "metamodernism" (Vermeulen and van den Akker), "altermodern" (Bourriaud), and "performatism" (Eshelman), to name just a few.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. also Hickman, in which the period of post-postmodernism is associated with a similarly hands-on attitude as in Ihab Hassan's article.

<sup>4</sup> According to Jean-Luc Nancy "the word *community* was unknown to the discourse of thought" before the early 1980s (20).

shows how it is detectable in the writing of a new generation of authors, who now emphasize the material conditions, feelings, and intersubjective connections over pure thought and isolated selves.<sup>5</sup> In the appendix of this monograph, Timmer has compiled a list of nineteen characteristics of the post-postmodern novel, which reflect this “turn to the human” in more detail (359-61). Six of them need to be highlighted here in particular, since they are conspicuous features in Hustvedt’s *The Summer Without Men*. First, Timmer mentions a “desire for some form of community” or a “structural need for a we” (359). This is linked, second, to an emphasis on “‘sameness’ (instead of the fetishism with ‘difference’ in postmodern texts and theories)” (359) and, third, the “striv[ing] for ‘inclusiveness’” rather than exclusiveness (359). A fourth characteristic, which is crucial for the coherence of narratives and the construction of the self, is the “sharing [of] stories as a way to ‘identify with others’ (and to allow others to identify themselves with you)” (359). This is connected, fifth, to “a direct appeal to the reader or narratee, a ‘you’” (359). And sixth, Timmer argues that “the post-postmodern novel hinges on creating empathy (between characters, between narrators and characters, [. . .] between fictional figures and the flesh and blood ‘real’ reader)” (360-61). The six features stressed here – that is: community, sameness, inclusiveness, storytelling, a mock-dialogue with the reader, and empathy – can all be observed in Hustvedt’s *The Summer Without Men* as defining characteristics.<sup>6</sup>

Needless to say, Timmer’s suggestions and the idea of post-postmodernism itself are highly contested.<sup>7</sup> The tendency to divide history into periods and to ascribe certain traits to its cultural production has always been problematic. Regardless of the doubts over the end of the self-proclaimed “end of history” (cf. Fukuyama), one can still observe a conscious effort in today’s literary production to overcome the endless play of signification, the loss of meaning and truth, the destabilization of the self, and the credo of *jouissance* in favor of pragmatic action and community-oriented thinking (cf. Huber). Noteworthy examples

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<sup>5</sup> Similar to Timmer, Peter Boxall argues that the twenty-first century novel is engaged with a new way of understanding “the relationship between the *material conditions* of the contemporary culture and the narrative form within which such conditions come to expression” (17; my emphasis).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Gabriele Rippl, “The Rich Zones”, where she also draws on Timmer’s theory to explain Siri Hustvedt’s (genre-blurring) practices.

<sup>7</sup> Given that we are already critically discussing post-postmodernism and identifying its features, Danuta Fjellestad and Maria Engberg even suggest that this new era, too, might already be over (in paragraph 30, n. pag.).



include Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*, Jeffrey Eugenides' *The Marriage Plot*, David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*, A. S. Byatt's *The Biographer's Tale*, and finally also Hustvedt's *The Summer Without Men*. Theories of postmodernism are explicitly brought up in Hustvedt's book, in order to be modified and/or overcome in a second step. Among the plethora of intertextual references to philosophy, neurobiology, psychoanalysis, and art in the novel, Hustvedt also emphatically comments on Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, and Roland Barthes. By showing awareness for these thinkers and their ideas and by intentionally deviating from them, *The Summer Without Men* positions itself as a work of art which goes beyond postmodernism. Similar to what Caroline Rosenthal says about Hustvedt's 2003 novel *What I Loved*, *The Summer Without Men* can be viewed as a post-postmodern novel "that returns to a more realistic form of representation, albeit with a postmodern awareness of the fragility and ambiguity of concepts like the self, the body, space, or representation" (63-64). It remains to show how the coherent yet unstable transgenerational community in Hustvedt's novel can be approached with new theories of post-postmodernism, which follow a yes/but logic – in other words, which attempt to reconcile critical thinking and pragmatic life decisions.

## 2. Analysis

*The Summer Without Men*, which the author herself called a "comedy" ("Story" 16), is a retrospective narration by the autodiegetic narrator Mia Fredricksen, who experiences a mental breakdown after Boris Izcovic, her husband of 30 years, leaves her for a much younger French woman, referred to only as the "Pause" (*Summer* 2). The "Pause" has crucial implications for the community in *The Summer Without Men*: She/it represents an interruption to a male-female community – enabling the protagonist to find a female-female community in Minnesota – but not a total break with it. Once the "Pause" is over, the male-female community is resumed. In order to deal with the blow of having been abandoned and to recover from her "Brief Psychotic Disorder" (*Summer* 1), Mia leaves New York City for the summer and goes back to her hometown Bonden, Minnesota. The name of this fictional town already suggests the "bonds" and "bonding processes" that are necessary for and characteristic of a community. Once in Bonden, the 55-year-old poet and scholar reconnects with her mother and four other women from a home for the aged, a group of 90- to 100-year-old widows whom Mia

fondly calls the “Swans.” Mia also gets a glimpse into the lives of seven pubescent girls, to whom she teaches a poetry class. Apart from old ladies and teenage girls, the age spectrum of the female characters encompasses toddlers, young adults, and other middle-aged women – hence the notion of a *transgenerational* female community. Over the course of the summer, Mia recovers from her breakdown and redefines her identity, one that is detached from her partner, Boris.<sup>8</sup> She does it with the support of this varied group of women, and, to her surprise, experiences a pleasant summer within a mostly female community. In reflecting upon her own condition, Mia asserts that “[i]nsanity is the state of profound self-absorption” (*Summer* 8). In recovering, however, self-absorption gives way to an awareness of community which is, as will be seen, established and maintained primarily through four critical elements: gender, mother-daughter relationships, bodily contact, and storytelling. The novel’s strong emphasis on community and these last three elements in particular are clear indicators of what Timmer describes as a “turn to the human,” i.e., the post-postmodern syndrome.

The title *The Summer Without Men* suggests that gender is the main distinctive feature for Hustvedt’s community. However, this seemingly complete exclusion of the male sex is questionable since, first, the word “men” appears prominently in the title and, second, the word “without” includes the word “with” in it. Put differently, the title of this novel encapsulates both the presence and absence of men. For the most part of the summer in 2009,<sup>9</sup> during which time the story unfolds, the male characters are either dead or physically and/or emotionally absent. The most conspicuous absence in Mia’s life – and her narration – is her husband, Boris. His voice is sometimes rendered through e-mails, in which he tries to woo back his wife, but he is never actually physically present. Another male persona only present in the digital world is Mr. Nobody. He appears as but a voice, hailing Mia (and the reader) from the digital sphere. Because his e-mails go from mean provocations to more positive forms of communication in the course of the story, their development being concurrent with Mia’s healing process, Carmen Birkle argues

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<sup>8</sup> Identity and self are important themes in *The Summer Without Men*, as Mia herself says when she plays around with her name: “Mia. I rescrambled it. I am. I wrote it over and over in my notebook. I am. I am Mia” (37). Anna Thiemann has interpreted this negotiation of the (female) self through the story of recovery as a “subversive retelling of [Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper”]” (320).

<sup>9</sup> In addition to the ambivalence of the title discussed above, the definite article in front of “*Summer*” suggests a limited time period for the physical absence of men and the constellation of a predominantly female community.



that he “comes across as a second voice within [Mia]” who verbalizes her opinion of herself (214). This is also why Birkle interprets him as the personification of Mia’s id (216). It’s no surprise then that Mia eventually wonders “if Mr. Nobody couldn’t just as well be Mrs. Nobody” (206), which would mean that one of the strongest male voices in the novel could in fact be female, too. Indeed, the ambiguous figure of Mr. Nobody – as marginal in the story as he is – reveals cracks in that seemingly homogenous female community. Yes, it is a female community and the role of gender is crucial for the formation and maintenance of it, but men are not as neatly excluded as it appears. To the contrary, their ambivalent position between presence and absence is a powerful driving force behind the female community in *The Summer Without Men*.

Apart from these ambiguities, the community around Mia is predominantly female and straddles all ages from the 3-year-old Flora to the 102-year-old Georgiana. These characters give a microcosmic version of females in all life stages, that is, being an infant, a teenager, a young woman in her 20s, a mother of adolescents, a menopausal woman, or a woman in old age. Through her role as a narrator, Mia, being 55-years-old and thus more or less in the center of the age range, is the one who brings all these different women together, both literally and symbolically. She is the node on which the transgenerational female community in this novel hinges. Moreover, her bitter, mocking, and sarcastic tone (e.g., “The magic of authority, money, penises” [*Summer* 8]), her inclusive and coercive gestures toward the reader (e.g., “Even you, Dear Reader, can easily be persuaded that [. . .]” [*Summer* 77-78]), combined with a rather male-excluding title and a book cover design that is more likely to appeal to women,<sup>10</sup> make it rather probable that the implied reader is female, too.

It would be wrong, however, to interpret this intentional dominance of women in and around the novel as an idyllic state, as an unreflected version of a perfect community. To the contrary, Hustvedt uses this focus on women to discuss poststructuralist identity politics. In line with Butler’s contestation of gender difference, Mia claims: “It is not that there is no difference between men and women; it is how much difference that difference makes, and how we choose to frame it” (*Summer* 152). Aside from Mia, who mounts a critique of gender inequality by listing the relatively absurd reasons for male dominance throughout his-

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<sup>10</sup> The original 2011 Sceptre editions feature a) a yellow cover with the illustration of a fragmented woman leaping through the title of the novel and b) a somewhat romantic photograph of a prostrate woman reading on top of a wardrobe in a forest.

tory (e.g., *Summer* 146-53), the 94-year-old Abigail represents a subtler form of subversion and rebellion. Her embroideries, “secret amusements” that depict masturbating and raging women (*Summer* 39-43, 190), represent “female rage at society, at being relegated and reduced to housework and sexuality” (Birkle 214; cf. also Thiemann 321). Conveniently enough, these secret pleasures are rendered through ekphrasis, an Ancient mode of writing that is known to problematize power relations in a creative way, as argued for example by David Kennedy or Gabriele Rippl (“Postcolonial Ekphrasis”). Even in the non-ekphrastic passages Hustvedt manages to show how our perception influences and constructs reality, especially when it comes to gender.<sup>11</sup> Perception creates difference and this, in turn, contorts perception again. The transgenerational female community in *The Summer Without Men* has come together not only by choice (Mia chooses to leave New York) but also because its members are the perceived Other in a patriarchal society. It is an assembly of those denied access to the larger (male) community. In this respect, the unity and coherence of this female community is both reinforced and subverted. This particular yes/but logic reveals that *The Summer Without Men* goes beyond the postmodern paradigm.

Though the concept of gender is socially constructed, sex is a slightly different matter, classically exemplified by the ability to give birth. The women are linked to each other through this ability in general, and through the resulting mother-daughter relationships in particular. These mother-daughter relationships can be either genealogical blood relations, as in the case of Mia, her mother Laura, and her daughter Daisy, or non-genealogical, symbolical relations, as in the case of Abigail and Mia or Mia and Lola, where the former woman acts as a “foster mother” to the latter, respectively. Motherhood, as an overarching theme in the novel, creates spaces for expressions of empathy between characters, which is in turn one of the traits of post-postmodern literature, as defined by Timmer. Despite certain conflicts, these women deeply care for each other and form a tight community of love, trust, and empathy. Mothers are associated with feelings of security, shelter, and love and presented as near-mythical creatures. Mia, for example, says that her “mother was a place for [her] as well as a person” (*Summer* 13), thereby evoking the symbolism of space and (physical) origin. Indeed, the turn to the human is expressed as a turn to the origin of every single human: the mother.

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<sup>11</sup> At one point Mia states that “[p]erception is never passive. We are not only receivers of the world; we also actively produce it” (*Summer* 77). Cf. also Böger.

Moreover, mothers are also ideal examples for Hustvedt's emphasis on relational identity-formations as proposed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty,<sup>12</sup> and the "recognition of the self-other entanglement, that is, the intersubjectivity without which human beings would not be human" (Birkle 212). As Christine Marks argues: "One reason why women have always held a special position with regard to the boundaries of the self is their ability to become two in one during pregnancy. [. . .] Mother and child are indistinguishably connected, which results in an insoluble enigma of interconnected subjectivities" (138). Hence, choosing mothers and daughters as the focus of her novel is an ideal way for Hustvedt to make her point about intersubjective formations of identity and also community. That this interconnectedness does not end with birth can be shown in the following passage when Mia recounts the birth of her daughter Daisy:

there is the sudden slide of her body from mine, me/she, two in one; and between my open legs I see a red, slimy foreigner, with a little bit of black hair, my daughter. I remember nothing of the umbilical cord, do I? Nothing of the cutting. (*Summer* 211)

The actual cutting of the umbilical cord is omitted to highlight this continuing bond between mother and daughter. The women and girls in *The Summer Without Men*, who are all mothers and/or daughters, are inextricably linked to, and their identities are shaped by, each other.

These close bonds between mothers and daughters, whether they are genealogical or not, are not only dependent on corporality, but also expressed through it. The looks and touches that these women exchange sustain the bodily connection after mother and child cease to share the same body. There is no need to go into detail on the function of "looking," since most publications mentioned above have dealt with this aspect in Hustvedt's work (cf. Marks; Reipen; Hartmann). In short, "looking" is not only a way to create these intersubjective identities but also, according to Astrid Böger, to "allow[ ] for an extraordinarily rich spectrum of embodied visual experiences challenging readers to 'enter into the picture'" (292). In *The Summer Without Men*, this stance towards the connection between perception and identity formation, this "find[ing] ourselves in the faces of others" (37), as Mia puts it, basically boils down

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<sup>12</sup> Hustvedt herself counts Merleau-Ponty among the most fundamental thinkers informing her work (*A Woman Looking* xix). Even her fictional character Mia is strongly influenced by his ideas (cf. *Summer* 71).

to the following utterance: “I want you to *see* me, see Mia. *Esse est percipi*. I am” (81). To be is to be perceived.

This embodied experience is furthermore highlighted through touch, between the characters but also between Mia and the implied reader. There is an abundance of passages where women simply touch each other to express empathy, support, and love (cf. *Summer* 30-31, 55, 96, 157-59, 204, 210), as in the following instance when Mia is about to say goodbye to Abigail: “Then, lifting my hands to her lips, she [Abigail] kissed them, turned her head to one side, and pressed her cheek hard against the skin of my knuckles” (*Summer* 80). Another notable instance of bodily contact occurs in the following scene, right after the thirteen-year-old Alice confesses to Mia and her mother how the other girls from the poetry class bullied her:

Ellen had managed to coax her big girl onto her lap. Mother and daughter were enfolded in the beanbag chair [. . .]. Alice buried her head in her mother’s neck [. . . while] Ellen’s hand was moving up and down her daughter’s back, slowly and rhythmically. (*Summer* 128)

This is a remarkable scene because, among all the generations within Mia’s female community, the teenage girls constitute the group within which bodily contact practically never occurs. This can be explained by the fact that these girls are in the most pivotal phase of identity construction in their lives, and that their unstable selves are also more difficult to be brought into corporal, intersubjective relations with others. Moreover, the missing bodily contact between the girls is a clear indicator of the disharmony in and instability of their community.<sup>13</sup> As soon as these tensions are resolved at the end of the novel, Mia immediately recounts a scene in which the girls hug her (*Summer* 202). Thus, bodily contact is crucial in Hustvedt’s novel when it comes to establishing and maintaining a tight community.

While postmodernist literature often focuses on the failure of communication and the insurmountable solitude that comes with it, Hustvedt tries to show that our bodies are the bridges to each other, moreover, that our selves can only be constructed in relation to one another.

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<sup>13</sup> This group of seven teenage girls, who are at a critical, identity-negotiation, transitory phase from being children to becoming young women, is dominated by tensions, jealousy, and mind games. Eventually, one of the girls, Alice, ends up being bullied by the other six, most probably as an attempt to stabilize their fragile community by selecting an outcast through which their own group can be asserted. This clique unity crumbles as soon as it comes to distributing the blame for the bullying.

This idea is so far-reaching that it even crosses the ontological border between fiction and reality, or, put differently, this community-formation through bodily contact goes as far as to include the implied (female) reader.<sup>14</sup> Throughout the novel, Mia directly addresses this implied reader, a practice which at first only appears to be a colloquial, oral style of narrating, for example when she says “I was afraid of her, you see” (*Summer* 2). This soon turns into a direct dialogue with a “you” (*Summer* 87) or even “you, Dear Reader” (*Summer* 34, 77). The narrative is also littered with little asides, which refer back to something Mia has already said and which function as insider jokes, creating an intimate relationship between her and the reader (cf. *Summer* 108, 119, 123, 134–35, 143, 148, 173–74, etc.). One could even say that these direct addresses and sometimes bitterly ironic asides coerce the reader into agreeing or sympathizing with Mia, creating a strong feeling of complicity between her and this implied reader. Moreover, these instances integrate the reader in Mia’s female community, as Mia treats the reader with as much trust and empathy, seeking a similar form of bodily contact as with her mother, daughter, or female friends. The following passage illustrates this point perfectly:

But before I get to that, I want to tell you, Gentle Person out there, that if you are here with me now, on the page, I mean, if you have come to this paragraph, if you have not given up and sent me, Mia, [. . .] then I want to reach out for you and take your face in both my hands and cover you with kisses, kisses on your cheeks and chin and all over your forehead and one on the bridge of your (variously shaped) nose, because I am yours, all yours. (*Summer* 105)

Mia figuratively “reaches out” of the pages,<sup>15</sup> transgresses the boundaries of fiction, touches the reader’s face, and showers her with kisses – a gesture of affection that occurs multiple times among the female characters, too. Fittingly, this passage can be found at the exact middle of the novel, a clear formal sign of the centrality of bodily contact for community formation. Along with the corporal aspect for communal bonds, this passage also highlights the fact that Mia is telling a story to the reader, as indicated for example by the temporal marker “before I get to

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<sup>14</sup> This metafictional strategy could also be interpreted as a postmodern one. This goes to show again that postmodernism continues to persist, albeit in different shapes which can be called post-postmodern.

<sup>15</sup> Hustvedt herself sees writing as a symbolical reaching out to the reader, as a “reach toward another person” (*Living* xiii).



that.” Mia recounts what happened to her during the summer of 2009 in Bonden and emphasizes the difficulties of storytelling. One time she asks the reader “How to tell it?” (*Summer* 134) because of the incommensurable simultaneity of life and linearity of a story; or differently put: “It is impossible to divine a story while you are living it; it is shapeless; an inchoate procession of words and things, and let us be frank: We *never* recover what was” (*Summer* 38). Mia also refers to her own life as “[t]his story of Mia and Boris” (*Summer* 99) and compares it to the stories of one of the most famous literary storytellers, Scheherazade from *Arabian Nights* (*Summer* 99). Despite the challenges of storytelling – problems, which seem to be countered by four simple illustrations that recount Mia’s journey visually –,<sup>16</sup> Mia concludes: “there are NO RULES in art” and “[t]he enchantment is in the feeling and in the telling; that is all” (*Summer* 181).

Indeed, difficulties of storytelling are irrelevant since it fulfills its community-strengthening function anyway. The transgenerational female community in Hustvedt’s novel depends on the stories the women tell each other; whether that is to give advice on relationship problems that the storyteller is familiar with (*Summer* 29–31); to pass on secrets about one’s own past, thereby emphasizing trust and empathy (*Summer* 191–92); or simply to pass the time and bond with each other even more (*Summer* 86). These stories are only so effective in building and strengthening the community because of one crucial factor: repetition. These women can only empathize with each other so much because they have heard, seen, and lived these universal stories before. Each story is merely a repetition of a previously told one and each act of listening to these stories mirrors previous such cases. Here we can observe the “sharing [of] stories as a way to ‘identify with others,’” as Timmer puts it (359), and furthermore a typically post-postmodern creation of coherence – both in Mia’s story and in the more general experience of being a woman.

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<sup>16</sup> *The Summer Without Men* includes four illustrations, presumably drawn by Mia to express her emotional state. These four illustrations always occur after a decisive moment in the narration: after her mental breakdown (*Summer* 6); after bonding with Lola (*Summer* 70); after the first signs of Boris’ regret (*Summer* 115); and finally, after Mia feels in control over her (love) life again (*Summer* 207). While the first image depicts a woman within a box reaching helplessly towards the sky, the last one shows a smiling woman floating outside of that box. They visualize Mia’s emotional and mental progress towards health.



Storytelling also comes into play when Mia's poetry class has to work through a bullying incident by writing down what happened from the various perspectives:

The trick was, we would have to agree, more or less, on the content. [. . .] The story they all took home on Friday was not true; it was a version they could all live with, very much like national histories that blur and hide and distort the movements of people and events in order to preserve an idea. (*Summer* 183-201)

By imagining themselves in the body of someone else, the girls finally come to a consensus and find closure. Mia's statement that the story they created "was not true" hints at the poststructuralist underpinnings of the novel. As Ihab Hassan argues, however, the truth that was debunked in the period from Nietzsche to Derrida was an "absolute, transcendent, or foundational" one (6), not however a pragmatic truth which "rests on personal, social, cognitive trust" (7). This Habermasian and post-postmodern idea of truth being that which has been pragmatically established through rational consensus, is clearly at play in *The Summer Without Men*. Mia and her poetry girls construct a satisfying story by putting themselves into the shoes of each other, which yet again demonstrates Hustvedt's understanding of an intersubjectively created identity and community. Just like storytelling itself, Hustvedt's female community is constructed – in spite of the naturalness being evoked through mother-daughter relationships – and far from coherent.

### 3. Conclusion

The growing interest in ideas of "community" since the 1980s seems to go hand in hand with the wake of postmodernism and its radical critique of a coherent, unified self. In spite of a worldwide resurgence of nationalism and the tendency toward nation-based insularity, the wish for a type of community has asserted itself. In fact, major theoretical concerns are intentionally pushed to the background in favor of a more pragmatic approach. Some theorists have called this trend "post-postmodernism" and have argued that it is characterized by a return to realism, coherence, meaning, empathy, and especially community, while the discursive strategies of postmodernism still live on.

Following Nicoline Timmer's theory on the characteristics of the

post-postmodern novel – community, sameness, inclusiveness, storytelling, a mock-dialogue with the reader, empathy, and a general turn to the human –, it can be argued that Siri Hustvedt's *The Summer Without Men* is such a novel. The intensity with which (a transgenerational female) community is established and critiqued here – primarily through the key features of gender, mother-daughter relationships, bodily contact, and storytelling – is symptomatic of the balancing act that post-postmodernism attempts to manage. To use the yes/but logic of post-postmodernism: Yes, *The Summer Without Men* presents us with a seemingly idyllic transgenerational female community, but it always also questions and problematizes its ontologically unstable basis. Given the extremely destabilized notion of “self” that postmodernism has left us with, it seems that any conception of “community” today has to live with one or the other inconsistency. In a way, both the contemporary obsession with community and this so-called post-postmodernism express a yearning for that which seems forever lost.

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