

Jos Hendrixx

5980623

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Supervisor: Kári Driscoll

Second Reader: Birgit M. Kaiser

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“Brûler du même feu”: The Invention of a *Communauté Jouissante* in Éric Vuillard's *14 juillet*

Abstract

Éric Vuillard's *14 juillet* deals with the events of the early French Revolution. In this thesis, I argue that the text is subversive in its interruption of mythic narratives, as well as in its invention of a *communauté jouissante*. The narrative presents the French Revolution in an unconventional way, subverting the mainstream narratives around it, while also being stylistically inventive. Drawing on Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy, with an excursion into queer nihilist theory, I show that *14 juillet* avoids being neutralized as fiction. It does so first of all through its interruption of myth. It is also subversive in its destabilization of language that leaves a space for multiple voices. Finally, by implicating the reader in its inscriptions of *jouissance*, the text is subversive in its invention of a coming community.

*Nous reviendrons foule sans nombre,
Nous viendrons par tous les chemins,
Spectres vengeurs sortant de l'ombre,
Nous viendrons nous serrant les mains.*

- Louise Michel, *Chanson des prisons*

Thus, once myth is interrupted, writing recounts our history to us again. But it is no longer a narrative—neither grand nor small—but rather an offering: a history is offered to us. Which is to say that an event—and an advent—is proposed to us, without its unfolding being imposed upon us. What is offered to us is that community is coming about, or rather, that something is happening to us in common. Neither an origin nor an end: something in common. Only speech, a writing—shared, sharing us.

- Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*

Blessed is the flame that rises from our hearts and burns everything around us.

- Serafinski, *Blessed is the Flame*

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Introduction

In this thesis, I analyze Éric Vuillard's *14 juillet*. The text, from 2016, deals with the beginning of the French Revolution, notably the pillaging of the *folie Titon* and the storming of the Bastille. Vuillard is well-known for writing historical narratives with a political message. Concerning his choice of subject for *14 juillet*, he states that “la Révolution française apparaît comme un terrain apte à répondre aux inquiétudes qui sont les nôtres” (qtd. in Ritz). The text is presented as a narrative (*récit*) rather than a novel. This is a conscious choice of Vuillard, who states he wants to avoid ideas *romantiques* of the author and the novel as disconnected from society (qtd. in Ritz). Vuillard himself is what some would call an *écrivain engagé*, giving interviews on radical left websites like *Lundi Matin*. The little scholarly literature that has been published on *14 juillet* so far seems to conflate the political aspects of *14 juillet* with the views and project of the author (Autin et al; Jacques). In my analysis, however, I take a different approach, drawing on deconstructive theorists Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy.

In *14 juillet*, the events of 1789 are presented in an unconventional way. First of all, the story is told from an often-changing perspective, making use of the indefinite pronoun *on* in order to convey the point of view of the crowd (*la foule*). Through this collective perspective, the text offers a narrative of the French Revolution that is different from the mainstream story surrounding it. Secondly, the use of *on*, as well as the many long enumerations in the text, make *14 juillet* stylistically unconventional. It is these multiple transgressions of convention that I interrogate in this thesis.

What I want to investigate is whether the unconventional aspects of *14 juillet* have political implications. According to Derrida, literature has a peculiar status under democracy, that gives it the power to say anything without being persecuted for it (“Strange Institution” 37). Despite having this power, literature can be “neutralized” as mere fiction (“Strange Institution” 38). A subversive

text would avoid this neutralization; but is this possible at all? And if so, does *14 juillet* manage to avoid it? Does the text connect the French Revolution to the *inquiétudes* that are ours in a meaningful way? Finally, I answer the following question: how is *14 juillet* a subversive text?

I argue that *14 juillet* is subversive in different ways. First of all, the text interrupts mainstream narratives on the French Revolution—narratives that can, drawing on Nancy, be understood as mythic. The text does not just subvert other mythic narratives, but its own mythic aspects as well. In addition, the text is subversive because it leaves a space, it destabilizes language, allowing for the appearance of multiple voices. These voices, then, invent a community. Finally, I show that this is a coming community, or a *communauté jouissante*, which is subversive in its implication of the reader.

Chapter 1

Subversive Texts: Literature and Politics

In this chapter, I will examine Derrida's and Nancy's political conceptions of literature, to provide a theoretical background for my reading of *14 juillet*. In order to understand the presentations of riots in *14 juillet*, I also draw on queer nihilist theory. First, I look at Derrida's ideas on inventive literature, in order to analyze how *14 juillet* can be understood as inventive and subversive in the Derridean sense. Secondly, I analyze how Nancy finds the political dimension of literature in the interruption of myth, and in its relation to community, because *14 juillet* is a literary work on a subject that might be described as mythic, and the collective plays a central role in the work.

According to Derrida, both in a text and in the mind of a reader, complex social rules are at play when we classify something as literature or not, meaning that we perform this classification not as individuals but as part of a community (Miller 62-63; "Strange Institution" 44). What exactly are those institutional and conventional rules? Derrida considers the Western institution of literature to be tied to the principle of free speech, to "an authorization to say everything, and doubtless too to the coming about of the modern idea of democracy" ("Strange Institution" 37). But what effect does saying a certain thing actually have, if everything can be said in literature? Derrida also raises this question: the ability to say everything is a very powerful one, he says, but it "might immediately let itself be neutralized as fiction" ("Strange Institution" 38).

However, Derrida does speak of ways in which literature can be subversive. He considers that inventive literature has the "power of provocation, transgression or destabilization" even when its content might be conservative ("Strange Institution" 50-51). The concept of "invention" in literature is further elaborated upon by Derrida in "Psyché." He describes how literature, by way of destabilizing language, allows the completely other, *le tout autre*, to appear in it. Invention in this context does not create something completely different but rather lets it in: it is not the writer that

makes the wholly other come, but writing, through its “opening” of language, leaving a space for *le tout autre*. It is the other that calls, always in multiple voices, to come (Miller 69; “Psyché” 343). In this situation, the other, or rather the others, are actually the inventors; they invent the writer, and through the writer’s work invent a new community. This community is a departure from and a disruption of established institutions, it is truly new (Miller 70), and in that sense subversive.

Nancy mainly defines literature in terms of the interruption of what he calls “myth” (*Community* 61-63; Deppman 13). Myth, in Nancy’s thinking, is a narrative that molds a group of people into a unified whole by providing them with an identity based on their shared origin—a shared origin that is manufactured by myth (*Community* 45; Van Rooden 82-83). Myth simultaneously presents and founds the essence of a community, its origin and its destiny (Van Rooden 82-83). Nancy considers the mythic project of founding a community of shared essence to be impossible today. He argues that historical attempts to harness myth and its power have been inextricably bound up with modernity’s most atrocious projects. Using Nazism as an example, he explains how myth today carries the whole weight of fascistic desires to re-establish or appropriate the supposed origins of the West (*Community* 46; Deppman 15-18; Van Rooden 83-84). However, this bankruptcy of myth does not mean that mythic speech has disappeared (Deppman 17-18). It is as the interruption of mythic speech that Nancy then imagines literature (*Community* 61-63).

Nancy explains the relation between myth and literature by stating that where myth reveals a “completed reality,” literature does not reveal a particular thing or reality at all. Rather, literature presents an “incomplete figure” (*Community* 78-79): it is the voice of the “interrupted” or “incomplete” community, which is different from the essentialist community founded by myth (*Community* 62-63; Deppman 15). Where myth seeks to put to work (*mise en oeuvre*) a “Volk” or a “Reich” (*Community* 46), literature does not attempt anything, it is in some way the voice of the community that is inoperative, “*désœuvrée*”—although Nancy goes on to say it is not a representation of the inoperative community either because it cannot be represented (*Community* 63-64). Nancy understands the inoperative community as a “being-in-common.” This refers to his

idea that we do not exist in this world as isolated individuals but rather as finite, singular beings that exist in the sharing of their limit, in the contact between them.¹ Thus, being is always already being-in-common (*Community* 27; 77). Being-in-common, according to Nancy, is not a “common being,” and myth is unable to contain it; it “has no myth and cannot have one.” Therefore, it does not make itself heard in literature, but being-in-common is itself literary (*Community* 62-64). Literature is subversive, then, because it is itself the interruption of myth, and the inscription of the inoperative community. Community thus plays an important role in defining what literature is and how it can be subversive for both Derrida and Nancy.

In *14 juillet*'s presentation of a revolutionary moment, it inscribes political violence. In order to analyze this, I turn to queer nihilism, which is related to both the academic field of queer studies (Edelman), and to the political tendency of anarcho-nihilism (Baedan; Serafinski). I specifically make use of the concept of *jouissance* as it is defined in queer nihilist theory. *Jouissance* is a French term that has proven difficult to translate, that Nancy has also written much about. It originally signified, in a legal sense, the limitless use of an object. The word is associated with both appropriation as well as with (sexual) pleasure carried to its extreme, and it always implies something ongoing, something moving (*Coming* vii).² The queer theorist Lee Edelman, too, recognizes a double meaning of *jouissance*. In the sense of appropriation, it can manifest as the formation of identity around an object and the satisfaction that object is fantasized to provide. On the other hand, *jouissance* “dissolves such fetishistic investments,” rupturing the social order that relies on identities based around objects by the extremity of its pleasure (Edelman 25).³ It is in the latter sense that *jouissance* is found in revolt and resistance by the authors of queer anarchist journal

¹ This contact can quite literally be the touching of the skin, but also a physical or emotional sharing (*Community* 27-28; 78; Deppman 23).

² Nancy's book *Jouissance* has been translated into English as *Coming*, due to both words' connotations of sexuality as well as of action and continuousness (*Coming* viii).

³ Nancy also notes that *jouissance* is today associated more closely with expropriation rather than appropriation (*Coming* 8).

Baedan (28-29; 33), and I demonstrate that this interpretation of *jouissance* is present in *14 juillet* as well.

Chapter 2

“On dirait qu’on touche quelqu’un”: Myth Interrupted, Singular Lives, Inscribing the Crowd

In order to understand how *14 juillet* is a subversive text, I will first take a look at what it subverts, at the political background it emerges out of and opposes. As I mentioned before, dominant narratives on the French Revolution can be understood as what Nancy has termed myth. In this chapter I will take a closer look at dominant narratives in order to substantiate that claim, paying specific attention to the way mythic narratives on the French Revolution present lives as “exemplary.” It is in the presentation of lives that *14 juillet* clearly differentiates itself from mainstream narratives. In the rest of the chapter, I therefore look at the presentation of lives in the text, paying specific attention to the presentation of the crowd. I argue that *14 juillet* interrupts myth through its inscription of being-in-common.

In mainstream stories on the French Revolution, the Revolution is usually seen as the origin of the French nation, as well as of modern democracy (Münch 2; Rigney 6-7; Schoentjes 412-13).⁴ As we have seen in the previous chapter, one of the defining characteristics of Nancy's concept of myth is that it founds a community by providing a common origin for a group of people (*Community* 45-46; Van Rooden 82-83). Mainstream narratives found the community of the French nation by presenting the French Revolution as the shared origin of all French people. The essence of this community is, in truly mythic fashion, simultaneously founded and presented by dominant narratives on the French Revolution (Van Rooden 82-83); the narratives create a certain story of the Revolution and immediately use this story to define the origin (the Revolution) and destiny (democracy) of the French nation. The French nation is thus a community founded by myth,⁵ what

⁴ In an article combining different well-established historical analyses of the French Revolution, it appears that Philippe Münch himself holds these views: he argues that the popular violence of the Revolution, legitimized by the imaginary of an aristocratic plot, contributed to the “birth” of the French nation (2). Ann Rigney describes how the French Revolution inaugurated the modern age and established the nation as the “symbolic source of political legitimacy” (6-7).

⁵ Arguably, any nation state is a community founded by myth.

Nancy would call a community “set to work” (*Community* 46). It is a community that is supposed to fulfil its destiny, as a democracy with such abstract values as “equality”, presented to it in mainstream narratives (Münch 15). According to Pierre Schoentjes, *14 juillet* does not subvert the mythic narrative of the French Revolution; the book merely shows a different perspective of that same narrative (413). However, I will argue that the presentation, or rather the inscription of that perspective is itself an interruption of mythic narratives.

Characteristic of mythic narratives on the French Revolution is that they all focus on a few “key individuals” (Rigney 105). When talking about “existences,” Nancy differentiates between individuals and “singularities” (*Community* 26-27). A singular being is finite and exists in its contact with other singular beings, in the sharing of their “limit” (*Community* 27-28; 78). Myth, however does not present lives as singular but rather as “exemplary” (*Community* 78). Exemplary lives are not finite, do not stay within a limit, but are communicated and knowable in their entirety, presenting a completed figure; they are legendary, mythic (*Community* 78-79). The key actors in most narratives on the French Revolution are legendary persons, presenting a completed, readily identifiable story. Many of them are quite literally representatives, in the democratic sense of the word (Rigney 105), but also in the sense that they are what Nancy terms exemplary.

Characters in *14 juillet* are presented quite differently from the “exemplary lives,” the “key individuals” of mythic narratives. First of all, the book does not have main characters, it does not represent the story of the French Revolution through a few exemplary lives the way myth would.⁶ Characters usually do not feature for more than eight pages, apart from being mentioned again briefly here or there; they only focalize for parts of chapters. In addition, these characters, rather than being the legendary individuals known from mythic narratives, are what is sometimes referred to as *vies ordinaires* (Sécardin 5) or *innommés* (Jacques). Furthermore, the lives in *14 juillet* are

⁶ There are also some of the “key individuals” that we know from mythic narratives of the French Revolution present in *14 juillet*. However, they are presented quite differently; the mythic narratives are often explicitly interrupted, for example in the scene that focuses on Thuriot de la Rosière (99-105), or Élie (171).

never presented as detached individuals; they are always presented in relation to other lives. One way in which this relation between characters is established is through touch, through the physical sharing of their limit.⁷ Lives in *14 juillet* are thus presented as singular rather than represented as exemplary.

Another way *14 juillet* differs from mythic perspectives is by its focus on the crowd. The crowd is an actor that is part of almost any narrative of the French Revolution, but it is most often represented by certain characters (Rigney 105), by exemplary lives. Furthermore, in literary texts, the crowd is usually represented in a negative way (Paul 7). *14 juillet* takes a different approach, depicting the crowd in a positive light (Autin et al. 13-14), and while mythic narratives of the French Revolution depict the crowd through representative individuals, *14 juillet* conveys a collective perspective. This collective perspective is not a unified whole, a fusion of individuals that myth would create; it is the inscription of the sharing of singular lives.

According to Nancy, the presentation of the sharing of the limit between singularities can strongly resemble myth's restructuring of the world (*Community* 78). However, myth "relentlessly announces the passing of the limit," it fuses beings into a whole, while literature inscribes the sharing of the limit, it inscribes singular beings (*Community* 78). *14 juillet* at times seems to present a collective as a unified entity.⁸ Yet, I show that ultimately, the crowd in *14 juillet* is not a fusion of individuals.

When speaking of the crowd, *14 juillet* continuously makes reference to singular lives by way of proper names. The narrative is full of lists, some multiple pages, some a few lines, of the names of those in the crowd. A proper name can be understood in *14 juillet* as an inscription of the limit of

⁷ In the following passages, characters are presented in the (physical) sharing of the limit between them: "Fournier a le cœur qui bat, il se lance à travers la cour. Bras sur l'épaule, il traîne le garçon à l'abri des balles" (67); "Il se réveille un peu plus tard sur les marches de l'escalier. Le suisse le secoue par les épaules, sa blessure saigne beaucoup ; il l'a porté jusqu'ici. Le visage étincelant de sueur, les deux hommes se regardent" (181). In these two passages, characters express the importance of touch in their relating to others: "Et elle remarqua qu'elle ne l'avait pas embrassé ; cela lui fit une peine immense" (26); "Il lui sembla le voir, pouvoir le toucher" (190).

⁸ The crowd could be interpreted as a unified whole because of phrases such as "la foule glisse contre les murs" (17).

a singularity: “C’est étrange les noms, on dirait qu’on touche quelqu’un” (85). Through the naming of the singular beings in the crowd, the text refuses to reduce the crowd to a unified whole or to a representative individual (Autin et al. 4). The idea of the crowd as a unified whole is also complicated by the “biographies” accorded to some of the lives in the crowd, for example that of Fournier (66-71), Cholot (108-15), or Rossignol (115-19). A character is often presented first through the collective perspective, and then subsequently given “un nom et une histoire” (Autin et al. 7). The crowd in *14 juillet* is therefore not depicted as a monolithic entity, due to the presentation of the singular lives within it.

What is the crowd, if it is not a unified mass? When the text asks this question itself, it answers: “D’abord clairesemée, une foule n’est presque rien, ça prend l’air de tous les côtés, on n’a pas peur, l’excitation est encore toute petite. Puis les mailles se resserrent insensiblement, on dirait que l’eau monte, et soudain les coudes se touchent, la rumeur est énorme” (65-66). The crowd in *14 juillet* can thus be understood as singular beings touching elbows: it is inscribed as a way of being-in-common.⁹

Where mythic narratives of the French Revolution represent the crowd through exemplary lives, or mold it into a whole, *14 juillet* subverts these narratives. The text interrupts myth by presenting lives in their singularity rather than representing them as exemplary, and by inscribing the crowd as the sharing of the limit between singularities, as being-in-common.

⁹ The crowd appears as the sharing of the limit in the following passage as well: “Ribeaucourt avance visage contre visage, gueule contre gueule, il croise des centaines de regards, sent la transpiration des hommes, admire la beauté des femmes, jette un mot à la ronde, que l’on n’entend pas” (165-66).

Chapter 3

“Entendre des voix”: The Voices of Community

In this chapter, I analyze how *14 juillet* is subversive through its inscription of multiple voices. While I noted in the previous chapter how mythic narratives are subverted through *14 juillet*'s presentation of singular lives, any text is inevitably exemplary to some extent (*Community* 79). I argue that *14 juillet* interrupts its own exemplarity. To do so, I make use of Nancy's concept of the “interrupted figure,” which is where he locates the voice of community (*Community* 80). I connect this to Derrida's ideas on *le tout autre*, that is allowed to come in multiple voices through the destabilization of language and invents a community that is truly new (Miller 70; “Psyché” 343).

First of all, I argue that *14 juillet* interrupts not just the exemplary narratives of myth, but also its own exemplarity. One point where the tension between exemplarity and singularity manifests itself is in the style of *14 juillet*, which has been described as epic by multiple critics (Autin et al. 10; Schoentjes 404). Epic characters are not usually singular: an epic hero is a legendary character, which makes it almost by definition exemplary. Is it thus in its presentation of epic characters that *14 juillet* is, at least to some extent, also an exemplary work? In order to investigate the epic aspects of the text, and how they are singular or exemplary, I look at the scene focusing on Louis Tournay. Tournay is the hero who manages to open the drawbridge from the inside, after climbing into a first courtyard of the Bastille (123-30; Autin et al. 10).¹⁰ The presentation of Tournay differs, however, from mythic representations of a hero. At the end of the scene, we read: “Tournay s'appuie au mur, sonné, heureux, il pleure. Plus personne ne pense à lui. [...] On l'oublie. Il s'évapore. Son épopée n'a duré que quelques minutes” (130). Here, any exemplary presentation of Tournay is cut short. He

¹⁰ The narration makes it clear that Tournay is seen as a hero by the crowd: “Le charron Tournay monte le premier. [...] Huit à dix autres le suivent. [...] La foule les apostrophe, on rigole, on les encourage” (123-24). On the roof, Tournay is “aux yeux de tous” (124).

is no longer an important, legendary character: he is forgotten and has disappeared. The narration even explicitly mentions that his epic lasted for only a few minutes, thereby self-referentially interrupting the heroism of the preceding passage. According to Nancy, the distinction between myth and literature is not one of hero opposed to anti-hero. Literature inevitably creates a “heroic-mythic figure.” The difference with myth, however, is that literature interrupts the completion of this figure, while myth always imposes a complete figure (*Community* 78-79). Interrupting the exemplary presentation of a character or an event is a recurrent move in *14 juillet*, and it often takes place through an admission of uncertainty, which reveals a concern for truth.

The ambiguous relationship of the narrative with historical accuracy or truth is present throughout *14 juillet*, and it is this ambiguity that functions to interrupt exemplary representation. The narrator often mentions that his narrative is based on historical records: archive research and eyewitness reports (83; 92-93; 107; 170-71). This concern for a certain historical accuracy sets *14 juillet* apart from myth, which is, according to Nancy, not interested in truth at all: it presents a completed, incontestable story, and exemplary lives rather than singular ones. Nancy states that singular beings, on the other hand, become truths of their own (*Community* 78).¹¹ Importantly, the narrator does not claim that his story being based on research makes it “the truth.” He emphasizes instead the unreliable nature of the archives and testimonies he draws from, and the uncertainty that results in (83; 92-93; 107; 123; 170-71). However, he does not let this uncertainty stand in the way of the narrative:

Il faut écrire ce qu'on ignore. Au fond, le 14 Juillet, on ignore ce qui se produisit. Les récits que nous en avons sont empesés ou lacunaires. C'est depuis la foule sans nom qu'il faut envisager les choses. Et l'on doit raconter ce qui n'est pas écrit. Il faut le supputer du nombre, de ce qu'on sait de la taverne et du trimard, des fonds de poche et du patois des choses, liards froissés, croûtons de pain. (83)

¹¹ In *14 juillet*, proper names, that I have argued inscribe the limit of singularities, are referred to as truth: “Bien sûr, un nom ce n'est pas grand-chose. [...] Ce sont les syllabes de la vérité” (86).

Rather than trying to impose a completed story, the narrator presents a story that is markedly fabricated and conjectural. Through its ambiguous relationship to truth, the text proposes an incomplete figure, it presents the truth of its own interruption. According to Nancy, the voice of interruption cannot be the voice of any one person: it is the voice of community (*Community* 80). Through its presentation of an incomplete figure, *14 juillet* thus becomes the voice of community.

The text's presentation of its own interruption is subversive, not necessarily because this presentation is controversial in its content, but through its stylistic innovation. It is subversive because it allows something to be said, it leaves a space (*Community* 80).¹² Derrida considers that inventive literature, through its destabilization of language, opens up a space, allowing the wholly other to come. The wholly other, in turn, invents a community that is truly new (Miller 69-70; "Psyché" 343; "Strange Institution" 50-51). In the next part of this chapter, I explore how *14 juillet* allows multiple voices to appear in the narrative.

One of the ways in which *14 juillet* allows multiple voices to appear is through its stylistically innovative features, such its usage of the indefinite pronoun "on" and its incorporation of lists (Autin et al. 3). These stylistic techniques contribute to the destabilization of language, which allows for the coming of *le tout autre*. Most of the narrative is told from the perspective of "on," which can be partially translated as "we," but can also convey a general, undefined perspective. Where "nous" implicitly refers to a unified group, "on" remains less specific. It therefore inscribes a collective perspective without passing the limits of singular beings, presenting the crowd as a being-in-common. Additionally, it is often unclear who "on" refers to, which destabilizes the narrative. In a sentence such as "À partir de ce moment, on ne comprend plus rien" (123), "on" could be the people present at the scene, but also the narrator and readers who can no longer follow the events—

¹² In Nancy's words: "The singular voice of interruption is not a voice without courage. This courage, however, is not [...] the courage to say something that it would be dangerous to dare to proclaim. [...] the courage of interruption consists rather in [...] *allowing to be said* something that no one—no individual, no representative—could ever say: a voice that could never be the voice of any subject [...] and that is merely the voice and the thought of community in the interruption of myth" (*Community* 80).

or it could even be all of them. The undefined nature of “on” thus opens up the possibility of a community. It does so in its inscription of being-in-common, but also through its destabilizing function. The uncertainty that “on” creates, allows for the appearance of multiple voices: it allows the wholly other to come.

Another important stylistic feature in *14 juillet* is the list. The text incorporates a few lists that continue for multiple pages, one of maps of Paris (78-81), and one of proper names (84-93). Throughout the book, there are also many shorter lists, especially of names (44-45; 86; 138; 195). Autin et al. argue that the list is the way in which *14 juillet* inscribes the crowd, through the placing in a horizontal relation of elements that are similar without reducing them to sameness (5). In the same vein, I say that the lists of proper names inscribe singular beings in the sharing of the limit between them (without assimilating them into a whole). In other words, these lists present a being-in-common. The lists that do not enumerate proper names are understood by Autin et al. as a taking over of the narrative by the crowd (6). By its very nature, a list is an interruption: it suspends the narration and interrupts syntactic structure (Autin et al. 6). This suspension is not a silence but rather an opening up of the narrative, a digression.¹³ The list destabilizes language, and thereby creates a space in the narrative not merely for the appearance of the crowd, but of *le tout autre*.

In addition to the destabilization of language, there are more ways in which multiple voices are inscribed in *14 juillet*. When speaking of the people in the crowd, the text explicitly mentions that through the little information we have about them, it sometimes seems as if we can hear their voices.¹⁴ The narrative also emphasizes the importance talking has to those in the crowd.¹⁵ As I mentioned in the previous chapter, the narrative presents voices of certain persons within the crowd

¹³ There are many other interruptions or digressions in the text, for example a relation of the history of the name of “la rue du Petit-Musc” (110-11). Although these digressions are not necessarily stylistically innovative, they do contribute to the overall effect of destabilization of the narrative.

¹⁴ “même quand il ne reste rien, seulement un nom, une date, un métier, un simple lieu de naissance, on croit deviner, effleurer [...] Et, entre les mâchoires du temps, on croit parfois entendre des voix [...]” (85).

¹⁵ “On parle. On parle. On n’a jamais tant parlé” (45).

(or their relatives) through “biographies”: the text conveys the perspectives of those characters for a few pages.¹⁶ Another remarkable aspect is the usage of vernacular (Autin et al. 14; Jacques). The text presents the voice of the crowd by employing the words those in the crowd would use. On the other hand, the text also makes use of words that those who stormed the Bastille would never have used, because they are anachronistic (Autin et al. 14-15; Jacques).¹⁷ Through these anachronisms, *14 juillet* inscribes yet another voice; a wholly other voice. The text thus presents, in different ways, voices of those in the crowd, but also a voice that cannot be a voice from within the crowd; it inscribes multiple voices, it allows the wholly other to come.

However, there are limitations to *14 juillet*'s inscription of multiple voices, and although the text interrupts mythic narratives, it also reinforces certain stereotypes. Schoentjes has noted that while women are present in the book, they play rather passive roles throughout (405). The text does not enter into their perspective during the riots at the *Folie Titon* or the Bastille, but only afterwards, when the action is over.¹⁸ Women are shown as partaking of the being-in-common of the crowd, but mainly in insignificant acts like the sharing of an apple (Schoentjes 406). Despite the text's stating that “[c]’était un peuple de femmes, d’enfants qui se rebellait” (12), we barely read about these revolting women. The book's depiction of a black man is also often problematic. Delorme is consistently referred to as “le Noir” or even “le Nègre” (69-71; 182). The child he is bandaging “caresses ses cheveux crépus” (70-71); a jarring passage when we consider that the uninvited touching of afro-textured hair is a common racist micro-aggression (Essien and Wood 3).¹⁹ Most

¹⁶ The text conveys the perspective of, among others, Louise Petitenfant (24-28); Fournier (66-71); Cholat (108-15); Rossignol (115-19); Tournay (123-30); Sagault (148-54); Humbert (161-62; 179-81); Ribeaucourt (164-66); Béziers (169-70); Maillard (171-76); Bliard (185-92).

¹⁷ For example, the text refers to the building of barricades and the gathering of makeshift weapons on the 12th of July 1789 as “l’intifada des petits commerçants, des artisans de Paris, des enfants pauvres” (48); it also speaks of “[u]n peuple de chômeurs” (12), “chômeur” being a recent term for unemployed person (Autin et al. 15).

¹⁸ The text conveys the perspective of Louise Petitenfant (24-28), and that of Marie Bliard (185-92).

¹⁹ My reading of this passage is obviously anachronistic; the concept of a micro-aggression is quite modern. However, my application of a modern political concept is justified because the text itself often makes use of anachronisms, which position it politically very much in the 21st century.

importantly, the narration does not convey Delorme's perspective, unlike other persons on which the text focuses for multiple pages. The text attempts to show Delorme in the same way as the other characters in the crowd, but it ultimately fails.²⁰ While *14 juillet* opens up space for many voices to appear, Delorme's voice remains unheard.

Despite these limitations, *14 juillet* allows for the coming of many different voices. Through the text's subversion of its own exemplary aspects, it presents an incomplete figure, making the text the voice of interruption. This voice is never the voice of an individual or a representative; the text is thus the voice of community. The voice of community, then, is constituted by the multiple voices that are allowed to come in it, through the destabilization of language. These multiple voices are the voices of the wholly other, that invents a community. In the next chapter, I show that this community is a coming community.

²⁰ From things the text says about Delorme, such as "le Nègre n'est pas n'importe qui non plus" (69), it appears that the text wants to present him as a character like any other in the crowd. This fails, however, because of the lack of focalization he is accorded.

Chapter 4

“Nous sommes de la paille”: The Coming Community

The invention of community in *14 juillet* is signaled by the shift from “on” to “nous” that sometimes takes place in the text. According to Derrida, the wholly other “invents me, and through what I do invents others, a community” (Miller 70; “Psyché” 343). Where “on” already opened up the possibility of a community, “nous” goes further than inscribing the crowd; it inscribes *us* into the narration. “On” remains vague and impersonal, creating the possibility of adherence without necessitating it; “nous” implicates the reader. By way of implicating the reader, the text invents a community that transcends the crowd. I show that this is what makes *14 juillet* subversive, what makes it impossible to neutralize as fiction.

The change from “on” to “nous” in *14 juillet* occurs clearly in instances of what I will call *jouissance*. In queer nihilist theory, *jouissance* is located in riots and acts of resistance more generally: *jouissance* is understood as a type of ecstatic pleasure so extreme that it ruptures a social order upheld through identities based around objects (Baedan 28-29; Edelman 25; Serafinski 52). I show that *jouissance* in this sense is present in *14 juillet*, and that it is *jouissance* that allows the community to “come.”

The following passage from *14 juillet* inscribes *jouissance* extremely clearly:

Que c’est bon de défaire et de démolir ! Personne ne pense à demain. On désire tout renverser, tout jeter, sacquer, révoquer, flanquer par terre ! Et ça fait plaisir, un plaisir inouï. On ne peut pas payer le loyer, eh bien foutre ! voici un fauteuil éventré, une table cul-de-jatte, un miroir éborgné, un chandelier manchot, un vase de nuit plein de fèces. On n’a pas assez de ronds pour bouffer, eh bien foutre ! on danse pieds nus, on se serre la ceinture, on se baise, on picole. (195)²¹

²¹ In this passage, the usage of vernacular is apparent; in addition to an inscription of *jouissance*, it is an inscription of the voices of the crowd.

The text inscribes pleasure carried to its extreme through acts of destruction. These acts are *jouissants* in the sense that the limitless use of an object often implies its destruction (*Coming* 4), but also because these acts subvert the social order that is attached to and maintained through objects. The society that demands rent to be paid and food to be purchased is reduced to meaninglessness by way of the destruction of its symbols, but also simply through excessive pleasure itself. By dancing barefoot, kissing—or having sex, which brings us back to the more everyday meaning of *jouissance*—drinking, and by the unprecedented enjoyment found in destruction, the structures of everyday life are disrupted. One more indication of the interruption of the social order is that “[p]ersonne ne pense à demain.” This is precisely what happens in *jouissance*, which is always located in the present moment: it is without end (*Coming* 112), and destroys any ties to the future (Baedan 29).

As I mentioned, the shift from “on” to “nous” inscribes a community in *14 juillet* in a moment of *jouissance*.²² This shift takes place in the following passage:

Et dans la nuit de la grande ville, il y eut alors une étincelle, cri de mica. L’octroi fut incendié. Puis un autre. Encore un autre. Les barrières brûlaient. Ce qui brûle projette sur ce qui nous entoure un je-ne-sais-quoi de fascinant. On danse autour du monde qui se renverse, le regard se perd dans le feu. Nous sommes de la paille. (49)

The destruction of buildings can be understood as *jouissance* in the same sense as the destruction of objects (*Coming* 4). Dancing around the overturning world is even more obviously an act that is *jouissante*, it is extreme pleasure found in the rupturing of the social order. Furthermore, nihilistic *jouissance* is often located in the act of setting fire (Baedan 28-29; Serafinski 54).²³ In this passage,

²² Autin et al. also note an “actualisation” of the “nous” in *14 juillet*, an attraction and a continuity between us and the crowd in the book. They attribute this link largely to what they term the enthusiasm in the text (14). Enthusiasm does not seem to me like a strong enough term to describe the affective dimension in *14 juillet*, however.

²³ (Parts of) the body being on fire is also often used as a metaphor for nihilistic struggle and *jouissance* (Serafinski 54); we could understand statements in the text such as “nous sommes de la paille” in the same way.

the fascination of the burning building leads beyond “on,” to an inscription of the reader as part of the moment. It is still “on” who dance around the rupturing of society, but the *jouissance* of this act turns *us* into straw. The inscription of “nous” in the moment of *jouissance* is subversive, because it implicates us, it is no longer possible to neutralize the text as fiction. We are *all* about to go up in flames.

Where “on” functions as an inscription of the sharing of the limit between singularities, the shift to “nous” marks a confusion of this limit. The confusion takes place in a moment of *jouissance*, because *jouissance* is limitless. According to Nancy, the passing of the limit is a property of myth (*Community* 78). However, as we have seen, *14 juillet* is a narrative that is both interrupted and interrupting, it does not become myth; I argue that it is in fact through limitless *jouissance* that the text inscribes a community in the interruption of myth. First, it is important to note that “nous” is used only occasionally in the text. It does not necessarily refer to those in the crowd alongside the narrator and reader, as it does in the passage cited above; and after the shift from “on” to “nous” has occurred, “on” is still the most used perspective by far. This indicates that “nous” does not create a community of shared essence. In the following quote, “nous” does not refer to the crowd:

Ah ! nous ne pourrons jamais savoir, nous ne saurons jamais quelle flambée parcourut les cœurs, quelle joie ; nous pourrons peut-être brûler du même feu, mais pas le même jour, pas la même heure, nous pourrons bien interroger minutieusement les mémoires, parcourir tous les témoignages, lire les récits, les journaux, éplucher les procès-verbaux, on ne trouvera rien. (64-65)

This passage interrupts the idea of a shared essence between those in the crowd and the narrator and reader, through the undefinable nature of *jouissance*. Baedan note that *jouissance* cannot be

captured or understood in a rational way; it can only be experienced (28-29). The *joie*²⁴ that runs through the hearts of those in the crowd thus cannot be known or found in archives. *Jouissance* functions, then, as an interrupting force. At the same time, *jouissance* is the possibility of a connection, it is what implicates *us*: it might be possible for *us* to burn with the same fire. While *jouissance* interrupts shared essence, it offers the possibility of a being-in-common of us and those in the crowd.

The transition from “on” to “nous” also takes place in the final paragraph of the book. In this paragraph, however, the shift happens in a different temporality: “Oui, on devrait parfois, lorsque le temps est par trop gris, lorsque l’horizon est par trop morne, ouvrir les tiroirs, briser les vitres à coups de pierres, et jeter les papiers par la fenêtre. Les décrets, les lois, les procès-verbaux, tout ! [...] Ce serait beau et drôle et réjouissant” (200). Here, “nous” no longer refers to those in the crowd, but solely to narrator and readers. The narrative, in the *conditionnel*, speaks of a possible event. “We” are here not implicated in a moment of *jouissance* of the crowd but offered the possibility of a (*ré*)*jouissance* of our own; it is the possibility of “brûler du même feu.” However, because the text is presenting a possible event, we are no longer in the moment. If we are not in the moment, there can be no *jouissance*, which is always in the present. The text, in this final passage, tries too hard to link its narrative to the *inquiétudes* of today, leading us from the acts *jouissants* of a few pages before to the in comparison rather disappointing gesture of throwing papers out the window. This gesture is hardly a rupturing of the social order, that can easily create new paperwork.²⁵ In addition, because there are no singular lives presented in this passage, there is no

²⁴ In *Coming*, Nancy touches on the connection between the words *joie*, *jouissance*, and *réjouissance* (*Coming* 7-8). The meanings of all three words are “on the side of excess” (8). Interestingly, while the word *jouissance* does not occur in *14 juillet*, its two related words do, for example in the following passage: “La joie gagna tout le monde. [...] Il y eut une semaine de réjouissances publiques, d’embrassades fraternelles” (196). *Jouissance* would be just as fitting a term to describe these events, and we can read it in the missing link between *joie* and *réjouissance*. In another passage, the word *exubérance*, that is closely related to *jouissance* according to Nancy, is also used (198).

²⁵ The “parfois” in this passage even seems to imply that this will happen, and that these new papers should then be thrown out again.

sharing of the limit between singularities, which is, as I show in the next paragraph, also necessary for *jouissance*. The final scene of *14 juillet* therefore fails to implicate us.

Community is present in *jouissance* because *jouissance* can never be solitary, it is always dependent on others (*Coming* 17). We know others (as well as ourselves) through the sharing of the limit between us, through touch (*Coming* 113; *Community* 27-28). Nancy draws a connection between touch, *jouissance*, and uprising in his discussion of the German words *rühren*, *berühren*, and *Aufruhr*²⁶ (101), stating: “There is insurrection, in fact—and sometimes erection—in the motion of touch” (114). He notes that the original meaning of *rühr* is primarily sexual, linking it to *jouissance* (111-12), and thus also linking *jouissance* and insurrection, a connection that I have already found in queer nihilist theory. The link between *jouissance* and touch allows us to further analyze *jouissance* and the sharing of the limit of being-in-common. In the moments of *jouissance* presented in *14 juillet*, touch plays an important role.²⁷ *Jouissance*, despite its limitless nature, allows for the sharing of the limit, invites being-in-common and therefore community.²⁸

The community inscribed in *14 juillet* is a community of interrupted myth, because the text interrupts mythic narratives. According to Nancy, community in the interruption of myth is “coming”: he writes that it is “to come,” not in the sense that it is “a future or final reality,” but “in the sense that it is always *coming*, endlessly, at the heart of every collectivity” (*Community* 71). Nancy’s book *Jouissance* has been translated as *Coming*, and *jouissance* is always occurring, continuous (*Coming* viii), it has no future (Baedan 29). We can thus understand the community invented by *14 juillet* as *jouissante*. Nancy goes on to say of the community of interrupted myth that

²⁶ Meaning “to move” or “to agitate,” “to touch,” and “uprising.”

²⁷ After the taking of the Bastille, for example, “[d]es couples se penchent, des jeunes s’amusent, à se faire peur en se bousculant. On s’aime, on s’embrasse sur la bouche” (193).

²⁸ Women in *14 juillet* are also shown to take part in *jouissance*: “On parvient comme on peut à se glisser par le chemin de l’Avancée. Bock et les deux Boquet se font la courte échelle. Derrière eux, une femme leur demande ce qu’ils voyent. Toinette embrasse Bezou. Madeleine décoiffe Melot” (95). Delorme is shown in a moment of *jouissance* once: “Et maintenant j’imagine Delorme, le Noir, au milieu de la foule, il entre dans la Bastille. Il court lui aussi, se perd dans les couloirs, pénètre les cachots” (182). Despite their presentations being problematic, Delorme and women characters are inscribed as part of the community the text invents.

it consists in the coming to the limit at which we appear together; we are called toward this limit, and we address a call to each other at this limit, and this call is literature (*Community* 71). Literature is thus a voice, or as we have seen in the previous chapter, the multiple voices of the wholly other. These voices invent a community, “invent” coming from the Latin *in* (“into,” “upon”), and *venire* (“to come”) (Cresswell): they come into a coming community.

14 juillet inscribes the passing of the limit, but also the sharing of the limit in moments of *jouissance*. Because the narrative is both interrupted and interrupting, and because *jouissance* contributes to this interruption through its subversive, destabilizing nature, the passing of the limit does not make the text mythic. Instead, it invents a coming community, in the sense that this community is occurring, to us and with us, in the moment, in the act of reading. Despite the text losing momentum in the final scene, because it is no longer coming, *14 juillet* is thus a subversive text. Because *14 juillet* implicates us in the coming community it invents, its voices are not neutralized by its being fiction.

Conclusion

In my thesis, I explored the different subversive aspects of *14 juillet*, in order to understand whether and how the text can avoid being neutralized as fictional. The text is subversive in its interruption of mythic narratives of the French Revolution. It also attempts to link the events of 1789 to our *inquiétudes* of today, which would make it resist neutralization. I have shown that *14 juillet* succeeds in resisting this neutralization by implicating “us” in its invention of a coming community, despite the limitations of this community.

First of all, *14 juillet* is subversive because it interrupts myth, both by interrupting mainstream narratives on the French Revolution, and by interrupting its own exemplarity. The narrative interrupts myth’s presentation of lives as exemplary both through presenting lives in their singularity, and through its focus on the crowd, that it inscribes as a being-in-common. *14 juillet* interrupts its own mythic aspects, its own exemplarity, through its presentation of an incomplete figure: the text presents its own interruption.

Secondly, *14 juillet* is subversive in its inscription of multiple voices. The presentation of interruption can never be the voice of an exemplary character; the text is thus the voice of community. The subversion of language in *14 juillet* also allows for the coming of multiple voices, for the coming of the wholly other that invents a community.

It is in the invention of a community that *14 juillet* also resists being neutralized as fiction. The invention of community in *14 juillet* takes place through its inscription of *jouissance*, in which “we” are implicated. *Jouissance* is occurring to us and with us: the text thus invents a coming community. Not all characters are equally a part of this community, however, and the final scene also fails to implicate “us” to the same extent as the text does elsewhere. Still, the text manages to implicate us, it manages to be subversive, allowing us to come in the coming community. The invention of a *communauté jouissante* makes us “burn with the same fire” in the act of reading.

Coming and *jouissance*, as notions that are always occurring in the present moment, and therefore without future, seem to clash with Derrida's concept of democracy "to come" (his *démocratie à venir/avenir*) ("Strange Institution" 37). Whether these two different interpretations of coming can be reconciled, would be a promising topic for further research.

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