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Review Essay: Capitalism, Exceptionalist Nationalism and Alternative Communities in Contemporary Fiction

Contemporary Historical Fiction, Exceptionalism and Community: After the Wreck by Susan Strehle, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, x+205pp., ISBN 9783030554651, h/bk €99.99, p/bk €99.99, e-book €85.59

Community in Contemporary British Fiction: From Blair to Brexit, edited by Sara Upstone and Peter Ely, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023, xii+240 pp., ISBN 9781350244023, h/bk £90.00, p/bk £28.99, e-book £26.09

Zhu Yian, Tongji University, China, jasminezhu@tongji.edu.cn



In 'To the Film Industry in Crisis' (1957), American poet Frank O'Hara states that 'in times of crisis, we must all decide again and again whom we love' (1967: 3). While this line meditates on the necessity of affective connections among mortal beings, whether 'we' or others 'whom we love', it also anticipates the further possibility of 'community' formed through a shared sense of belonging and mutual responsibility, particularly 'at times of profound social transformation or of great turmoil' (Nancy 2010: 147). Despite their many differences, two recent books, Susan Strehle's monograph *Contemporary Historical Fiction, Exceptionalism and Community: After the Wreck* (2020) and Sara Upstone and Peter Ely's edited collection *Community in Contemporary British Fiction: From Blair to Brexit* (2023), share a thematic focus on the possibility of building such communities amid crises.

Composed of eight chapters, Strehle's earlier work follows a highly coherent analysis of its subject, i.e. contemporary historical fiction 'after the wreck'. The monograph begins with an ingeniously interdisciplinary dialogue with the English painter J. M. W. Turner, whose watercolour *Dawn After the Wreck* (1841) contrasts the seemingly serene seascape with a hound alone baying at some 'invisible' catastrophe (Strehle 2020: 1). Inspired, Strehle analogises the mourning hound to a group of contemporary novelists who write historical fiction with 'grief and anger' (6) responding to human wreckage such as oppression, slavery and genocide. For her, this specific genre distinguishes itself by its exposure to state and imperial exceptionalisms as roots of ruins as well as its constructive portrait – a step further than the hound – of alternative communities that resist, or 'a company of witnesses to mourn, protest, and collaborate' (6) after the wreckage.

Following this key logic, Chapter One first draws on multiple theoretical models from New Americanist scholars like Donald E. Pease and Anthony Bogues to clarify the operations of 'exceptionalism', which evolves from advanced nationalism, chimes in well with capitalism's emphasis on private ownership and exceptional rights and sanitises imperial atrocities through 'structures of disavowal' (Pease 2009: 12). Therefore, exceptionalist states rely heavily on citizens interpellated into defending the myth of 'national community' to sustain themselves (Strehle 2020: 10), a 'sham-community' (8) which simply comprises the homogeneous few and precludes all the subaltern (yet diverse) Others. Authentic communities, as Strehle goes on to illustrate, are instead created and inhabited by those whom states exclude: rather than 'pretend-exceptions to the common lot' (15), communities are inclusive and gesture toward obligation; though 'far from perfectly utopian' (18), they are bound by members who communicate to, care for and protect each other.

While the opening chapter combines contemporary theories to interpret 'exceptionalism' and 'community', Chapter Two complementarily situates fiction

‘after the wreck’ within the tradition of the historical fiction genre. It starts with a distinction between literary historical fiction and other categories of historical fiction represented by (popular) romance. Unlike romance narratives, which end with ‘progress and continuity’ (26), literary fiction dispels these certainties, portraying conversely ‘unanswerable losses’ (26) emerging from historical chaos. To better understand historical fiction as a whole, Strehle provides the genealogy for two opposing theoretical accounts in the first section: whereas Marxist scholars read the genre politically as a representation of the subaltern masses, poststructuralists shift their focus from ‘content’ to ‘form’, calling attention to the genre’s value as historiographic metafiction. Instead of embracing a dichotomy, Strehle herself aims to straddle both sides, ‘these two impulses meet in contemporary historical fiction’ (31). With this balanced awareness, she therefore presents and critiques the explicit inadequacies of recent postmodernism-oriented studies in the second section. The last section continues with a more nuanced division within literary historical fiction: unlike ‘recovery’ fiction which retrieves heroism and democratic seeds in a ‘linear’ (41) history, ‘wreckage’ fiction explores damage wrought by imperial exceptionalism on subaltern communities. For a deeper comparison, Strehle also devotes several pages to examples from Hilary Mantel’s ‘recovery’ *Wolf Hall* trilogy (2009–2020) and Amitav Ghosh’s ‘wreckage’ *Ibis* trilogy (2008–2015).

Her profound textual analysis of ‘wreckage’ novels is further developed in the ‘case studies’ from Chapter Three to Chapter Seven. Each of the five chapters follows a similar structure: the first section explores the novelist’s extensive historical research; the second exposes a certain exceptionalism and its destruction on Others, among whom resistant communities may emerge; and the last examines the respective novels’ formal artistry. However, this structural pattern does not mean these chapters are simple replicas of one another; in fact, despite a united critique of exceptionalist ideologies, novels selected in chapters differ in ways of representation. While ‘exceptionalism’ is embodied as certain individuals in Chapter Three (‘Captain Thurso’ and others related to the profit-driven slave trade in Barry Unsworth’s *Sacred Hunger* [1992]), Chapter Four (Japanese military forces in Richard Flanagan’s *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* [2014]) and Chapter Seven (all graveyard ghosts [as a metaphor for the general populace] in George Saunders’ *Lincoln in the Bardo* [2017]), it emerges more as systemic institutions in Chapter Five (the racist US government treatment of African Americans in Toni Morrison’s *Home* [2012] and *God Help the Child* [2015]) and Chapter Six (Indian boarding schools in Louise Erdrich’s *LaRose* [2016]). These two modes are not presented as dichotomous. Regardless of how exceptionalism is depicted, all five chapters unveil the fiction’s capacity to reimagine alternative communities: the Florida maroon

community in Chapter Three; the bonds among Australian prisoners forced to build the 'Death Railway' in Chapter Four; small-town, multiracial communities of healing in Chapter Five; the kinship collective of traumatised Native Americans in Chapter Six; and the empathetic community among spectres after Willie Lincoln's entrapment in the intermediate bardo in Chapter Seven.

In addition to these political concerns, Strehle carefully expounds on the postmodernist impulse in 'wreckage' novels. For instance, in the 'Kinship and Form' section of Chapter Six, she points out that *LaRose* is characterised by 'a multiple inward-looking omniscience' (151), 'accidental' origins (153) and 'never conclusive' endings (154). Notably, as in her other case studies, here Strehle achieves an integration of 'content' and 'form'. In parallel with the thematic kinship collective, the section foregrounds *LaRose*'s entangled 'web' structure. At the character level, the novel develops 'a complex network of connected characters who move progressively into a community' (152), an open web of relationships that even the novel's most isolated character, Romeo, could enter. At the story level, the novel substitutes an exceptionally linear plot with 'an inexhaustible web of connected stories' (156), stories that themselves are also part of Erdrich's wider 'ocean of story' (155). As such, Strehle not only instantiates the profile of contemporary 'wreckage' novels, but also contributes to a new understanding of historical fiction as a whole.

To 'demonstrate the unlimited expansive potential of the genre' (189), Chapter Eight briefly evaluates more 'wreckage' novels, whose exceptionalist contexts range from fame-driven polar voyage in the 1850s to the Dominican Republic under Trujillo's rule. Nevertheless, despite a wider geographical scope, these novels are somewhat problematic to classify as 'global fictions of wreckage' (189), as Strehle's chosen works originate dominantly from Occidental cultural contexts. Though some, like Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), are indeed 'global' in their indigenous representation of exceptionalisms, others risk dramatising past events and may caricature the authentic voices of the populace. Yet, as contemporary reflections on the past, all these fictions share a sense of obligation to confront historical damage and bravely speak for alternative communities, however precarious they may be.

Upstone and Ely's more recent collection, *Community in Contemporary British Fiction*, shares this sense of moral responsibility as well. Instead of focusing on historical damage, the essays in this collection are united by their attention to present experiences. If 'exceptionalism' functions as the root of destruction for Strehle, 'neoliberalism' is seen as the underlying logic of social exclusion for all the authors here. This nine-chapter collection begins with an editors' introduction titled 'Rewriting community in an age of crisis and nostalgia'. With a Britain-specific attention, Ely and Upstone not

only chronologise and problematise the rhetoric of ‘community’ in political discourse – from Tony Blair’s Labour government to Brexit and to the Covid-19 pandemic – but also reveal, in parallel, the hegemonic underpinnings of the neoliberal market. This market logic, with its emphasis on ‘individualism and competitiveness at every level of social life’ (2023: 5), rejects any sense of inclusive community and generates tragedies such as social atomisation, xenophobia and deepening inequality. To address this communal crisis, Ely and Upstone turn to socially-engaged writers who ‘comment on the existing state of community and its future possibilities’ (9), as their fictions inhabit the now ‘post-postmodernist’ (9) cultural moment, where both ‘internal difference’ (11) – postmodernism’s hallmark – and ‘commonality’ are foregrounded. In this sense, this collection offers a timely contribution to countering conservative, over-deterministic assumptions about community.

As the UK points to heterogeneous constituents and its nationalisms are susceptible to neoliberal manipulation, the concept of a ‘British community’ often becomes questionable. The first section from Chapter One to Three examines how the concept of ‘National Community’ is differently engaged in contemporary British fiction. Chapter One by Robert Eaglestone innovatively combines quantitative political science, Hannah Arendt’s political theories and hermeneutical accounts of three novels (Sarah Moss’ *Ghost Wall* [2018], Barney Farmer’s *Drunken Baker* [2018] and Bernard Cornwell’s *Warlord* [2020]) to examine activated English ethnocentrism alongside the destruction of communities wrought by neoliberal policies. In a similar vein to Strehle, Eaglestone exposes the exceptionalist nature of contemporary ‘Englishness’ as ‘profoundly Eurosceptic’ (29) and its inevitable consequences of grievance, nostalgia and loneliness.

While Eaglestone’s essay focuses more on the bleak prospect of intra-UK coherence, the next two chapters move to explore the reshaping of ‘National Community’ in Northern Ireland and Scotland. Chapter Two by Alison Garden offers a detailed analysis of cross-border convivial possibilities envisioned in three Northern Irish short stories (Jan Carson’s ‘Children’s Children’ [2016], Bernie McGill’s ‘No Angel’ [2013] and Róisín O’Donnell’s ‘Ebenezer’s Memories’ [2016]) thematically related to the Troubles, when ‘community’ was equated with two dichotomous ethno-religious identities. Sensitive to their ‘magic realist genre’ (47), Garden highlights how these stories transcend the simplistic love-cross-community romance tradition and explores their subversive potential to ‘desire outside’ (62) the then binary worlds. In Chapter Three Timothy C. Baker delves into rural or cosmopolitan Scottish communities of care in four works: Malachy Tallack’s *The Valley at the Centre of the World* (2018), Linda Cracknell’s *The Call of the Undertow* (2013), Leila Aboulela’s *Elsewhere, Home* (2018) and Sarah Moss’ *Summerwater* (2020). In a thought-provoking analysis, Baker emphasises the dual nature

of ‘community’ in the Scottish context: while literature and life in Scotland have been uniquely characterised by the community tradition, the idea of ‘Scottish community’ itself may risk becoming a regional myth of homogeneity, given its emphasis on ‘the Central Belt of Edinburgh and Glasgow’ – often ‘at the frequent expense of the rest of the country’ (70). As such, small, localised communities of ‘shared experience’ (73) function as necessary alternatives.

Baker’s localised concern is further developed in the second section, ‘Speculative Community’, comprising Chapters Four to Six, in which the authors make a more explicit critique of the neoliberal nation-state’s social exclusion. In Chapter Four, Peter Ely powerfully interrogates the Blairite model of multiculturalism and unpacks its failure to truly include Others outside the neoliberal ‘unified national community’ (89). Drawing on Daniel Loick and others, Ely sees in Jackie Kay’s novel *Trumpet* (1998) a marginal yet disruptive ‘queer counter-community’ (100), whose refusal to conventional kinship norms enables a transformative possibility of human affinity. This ‘refusal’ is also central to Chapter Five, in which Caroline Lusin explores the resistant power of small (sub)urban communities in two contemporary London novels – Kae Tempest’s *The Bricks That Built the Houses* (2016) and Fiona Mozley’s *Hot Stew* (2021). Yet, rather than family ideology, neoliberalism is embodied anew as ‘gentrification’ (113) in Lusin’s analysis. As gentrification encourages competitive commodification, human connections risk being reduced to their exchange value. To counter this erosion, Lusin views mutual ‘empathy’ as an anecdote – quite like Strehle – to rebuild ‘a sense of true togetherness, and from there, community’ (126). Echoing Ely’s interrogation of the multicultural ideal, Chapter Six by Devon Campbell-Hall addresses racism faced by brown-skin South Asian Britons in four works – Meera Syal’s *Anita and Me* (1996), Ravinder Randhawa’s *A Wicked Old Woman* (1987), Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* (2000) and Raman Mundair’s *Lovers, Liars, Conjurers and Thieves* (2003). Drawing on postcolonial theories from Stuart Hall, Frantz Fanon and others, Campbell-Hall pinpoints the ‘empowering potential’ (148) of othered brown skin in its rejection of hegemonic identity discourses represented by white skin. In this regard, all three essays expose the illusory nature of the state’s grand ‘Britishness’ narrative and instead propose micro alternative modes of community.

Continuing the critical thread of previous sections, the last section ‘Precarious Community’ (Chapter Seven to Nine) lays bare the communal crises within more recent contexts. Chapter Seven by Kristian Shaw resonates strongly with Eaglestone’s concern with nostalgic English nationalism; yet compared with Eaglestone, Shaw goes further to examine its activation through the lens of Brexit. Analysing characters’ various responses to the seemingly inclusive London Olympic opening ceremony, Shaw sees in

Jonathan Coe's novel *Middle England* (2018) the deep-rooted intra-UK divisions and how such incoherence foreshadows the 2016 referendum: 'the ceremony's archaic vision of a monocultural, pastoral Little England won out over the vibrant multiculturalism of a modern Great Britain' (165–166). Though shifting its attention to the Covid-19 pandemic context, Chapter Eight by Emily Horton also captures the tensions between a narrow, exclusive identity and a broader, more open communal belonging. Reading Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* (2021) from a posthuman perspective, Horton identifies the neoliberal hegemony of human 'rationality and uniqueness' (179) over non-human existence and its systematic neglect and exclusion of the vulnerable Others, whether those genetically unaltered individuals (without privatised education) in the novel or the disadvantaged populations (without privatised healthcare) during the pandemic years. Crucially, Horton proposes in both situations the need to jettison exceptional superiority in favour of broader connections that bind 'the human, the robotic and nature' (190) – a kind of universal care ethics shared by Chapter Nine, in which Sara Upstone experimentally extends such connections to spectral beings, since 'the encounter with death is an encounter with responsibility' (213). Written predominantly in the first-person plural, the last chapter flexibly blends together Upstone's personal experience of planting sunflowers during the pandemic, multiple philosophical theories and readings of three fictions (Niall Griffith's *Broken Ghosts* [2019], Jon McGregor's *Even the Dogs* [2010] and Max Porter's *Lanny* [2019]) to argue as well as plea for the ethical transcendence of obligation to the Other over market-driven politics that tends to sacrifice them. With the renewing image of 'go[ing] into the garden to clear away the summer' (215), the chapter ends on an optimistic note: we can still build communities despite failures, challenges and precarities. This no doubt echoes Strehle: 'if communities like these can be imagined and desired, they can be created' (Strehle 18).

Yet despite these thematic overlaps, the two books are structurally distinct from one another. If Strehle's monograph is progressive in developing its key argument, essays in Upstone and Ely's collection appear much more fluid in its overall organisation. For instance, although Baker's chapter appears in the 'National Community' section, it not only shares the localised concern with essays in 'Speculative Community', but also includes a subsection titled 'Precarious Communities', which recalls the final section. This intertwined structure may cause some confusion among readers seeking a clear organisational logic; yet on the other hand, its formal inclusiveness creates a compelling echo of the collection's thematic focus. However, in terms of specific textual analysis, the collected essays (with a few exceptions, such as Garden's Chapter Two) tend to focus mostly on 'content' and may overlook stylistic features that also gesture

toward 'community'. This marks a contrast with Strehle's 'balanced' model. Moreover, the collection is also somewhat limited in scope. While Strehle fails to incorporate more indigenous works across the globe, the collection similarly falls short of fulfilling its promise of representing 'British fiction': it succeeds in representing communities in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland, but omits communal possibilities in Wales. In spite of these limitations, the two books are well-wrought overall and jointly push the boundaries of literary communal studies.

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Competing Interests

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