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how do we live here? abyssal intimacies in jean-luc nancy's *la ville au loin*

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C'est toute l'habitation qui est ouverte, béante, et tout son habitus à réinventer
—Nancy, *La ville au loin*

It might seem rather strange to turn to Nancy, the thinker of exposition, to rethink the figure of intimacy. Indeed, it is Nancy who said, in "The Intruder," that "the subject's truth is its exteriority and its excessiveness: its infinite exposition" and, in "On the Soul," that "the body is always outside, on the outside. It is from the outside. The body is always outside the intimacy of the body itself."[1] We also find in Nancy a powerful critique of the nostalgic paradigm of the lost community and of the community of lovers as harboring the truth of the lost community at a remove from society. Here again, no intimacy, at least if by that we mean an immanence, an inside that would be so compact or so full that it would absolve the community from any contact with itself and with others. But of course things are not so straightforward. Indeed, already in the early book on Descartes, *Ego Sum*, we find the word "intimate" under Nancy's pen, but in conjunction with

another word: "abysmally" (*abyssalement*).

The passage I have in mind appears in the fourth chapter, "*Mundus est fabula*," and speaks of the abyssal intimacy of the ego that withdraws in the moment at which it utters "ego sum": "Everywhere in this world, the I withdraws within and from its *for*. And it is this *withdrawal*—which is, or rather makes neither absence nor rift, neither fiction nor truth, but forms the 'subject' in a much more abysmally *intimate* way [*abyssalement* intime]—that remains to be thought."[2] And since in the Preface to the English edition, Nancy also says of the book *Ego Sum* that "it has never ceased reworking, repeating, and renewing itself within [him] — somewhere in an obscure region" and that it "still resonates, always producing new scions"[3] in his work, it might not be too abusive to attempt to tie the abyssal intimacy of the subject's withdrawal with other figures of intimacy that appeared subsequently in his work. I will only attempt here to draw one of these possible lines, the one that goes from *Ego Sum*, through the critical engagement with the Western figure of community in *The Inoperative Community*, up to a lesser known book on the contemporary city, and more specifically on Los Angeles, *La ville au loin*, tying together withdrawal, abyss, exposition, and transit. I will leave completely aside another scion of abyssal intimacy, namely that of art.

The questions that guide my foray into Nancy's work are the following: even if we recognize that communal intimacy is impossible, are we not condemned to attempt to rebuild forms of intimacies wherever we live together? Is not intimacy an unfulfillable but necessary desire? What would a life together without the phantasm of intimacy, that is, a life together that puts into play an abyssal intimacy, look like? I believe that raising these questions is important today, amidst calls of border protection and immigration control. I also believe that Nancy's deconstruction of the Subject and of community offers us a promising avenue for reconfiguring—reinventing—our being-with in places that seem to breed only individualism.

1. THE SUBJECT AS ABYSSAL INTIMACY

Nancy's reading of Descartes in *Ego Sum* is not only difficult, but also estranging since it is often at odds with the picture of Descartes we are so often presented with: the father of modern philosophy, the thinker who founded the edifice of knowledge on the absolute self-certainty of a Subject fully transparent to itself. By paying attention the mode of presentation of Descartes's subject, to the masks,

portraits, feints, and fables that populate his writings, Nancy is able to uncover in the texts another thinking of the subject at odds with the traditional interpretation of the cogito. Rather than following this reading closely, I just want to sketch the movement at the heart of the uttering of the ego so as to tie intimacy with the abyss, and hence with exposition. Turning then to *The Inoperative Community*, we will be able to distinguish another kind of intimacy, one that would be related to a completely different kind of abyss.

The withdrawal that, according to Nancy, "remains to be thought" is first of all the withdrawal of the subject. A subject, a true and living subject, Nancy says, never takes place, never happens. Yet the uttering of *ego* happens. This *ego* "*is* not", Nancy writes, "neither a nature, nor a structure of subject, not even it [ça]. But something that nevertheless makes up the very act of *ego*, its self-position in the form of: it withdraws *itself*, and this *happens* to it, at the extreme point of its fabulation—of its *saying*."[4]

The uttering of the *ego* happens. At this point, it is important to underline the ambiguity in the phrase "the uttering of *ego*." It oscillates between the subjective and objective genitive at the same time: is *ego* the subject of the uttering or is it the object of the utterance? While it seems that the *ego* must pre-exist the expression of its existence—first I exist and only then can I utter: *I exist*—Nancy will read *ego sum* as sort of pure performative, a performative without underlying substrate or subject. What passes itself off as a constative utterance, as the expression of a prior existence, in fact lets this existence come about or come to itself.

It is, we could say with Derrida but changing a bit the context in which he used the term, a kind of teleiopoetic uttering. In *Politics of Friendship*, the word "teleiopoetic" names the movement of a sentence that begins at the end, travels at infinite speed, "advances backwards; … outruns itself by reversing itself … outstrips itself [*elle se gagne de vitesse*]."[5] A teleiopoetic utterance is one where the subject who seems to be pre-existing the utterance is in fact made possible by the utterance itself. Such utterances are impossible since the sentence must already have reached its goal before it can set itself in motion. An example of such sentences, one Derrida discussed a decade before *Politics of Friendship*, and without using the word of teleiopoesis as such, is found in the American Declaration of Independence: "we, the people," who will only come to be at the end of the Declaration, anticipate their own independent existence in order to be able to declare it; "we" will have been the one who uttered the sentence only once the sentence is completed.[6] As

Derrida explains: "Such an utterance can only be destined (that is addressed) with the precipitative supposition of a *we* [or, in the case that interests us, an *ego*] that, by definition and by destination, has not yet arrived to itself. Not before, at the earliest, the end and the arrival of this sentence whose very logic and grammar are improbable."[7] If we were to follow Derrida further, we could say that the abyssal intimacy of the subject is the mystical foundation of its authority,[8] of *ego* as the author of its own saying, of its own fable. No foundation sustains *ego*, or, as Nancy will say many times in *Ego Sum*, *ego* sustains itself with nothing (*il se soutient de rien*).

The word I have up until now been rendering with withdrawal is not *retrait* but *retranchement*. The subject *se retranche*: withdraws, cuts itself off, retreats or hides behind a fortification. But to call this *retranchement* abyssal is to introduce an excess in the movement of withdrawal so that the interior to which the subject is thought to withdraw does not form a ground but itself withdraws deeper and deeper, further and further away from any ground. The word "intimacy" is the superlative of *intus*, the most *intus,* the most interior, the innermost. "It is the inner," Nancy writes,

> such that there is no deeper or higher inner. But the depth in question has no ground: if there were a ground, somewhere it could be grounded or founded (in whatever sense), and it (or he or she) could not even enter into relation. This is because a ground assures and fixes a being on its proper substance. The intimate is always deeper than the deepest ground. ... But the intimate is also the place of a sharing, both of oneself and of the other.[9]

This movement of withdrawing or of *retranchement*, which is also a movement of distancing, distinction since it gives rise to *ego*, *I*, leads not to a protected interiority but to an exteriority.

The withdrawal of the subject, where *ego* is sustained by nothing, happens "as soon as I open the mouth." The mouth, as the place of intimacy, is abyssal. Why? Because it is in a sense impossible to say that it belongs to me, that it is mine. "The subject," Nancy writes,

> ruins itself and collapses into this abyss [the mouth]. But *ego* utters itself there. It externalizes itself there, which does not mean that it carries to

> the outside the visible face of an invisible interiority. It means, literally, that *ego* makes or makes itself into *exteriority*, spacing of places, distancing and strangeness that make up a place, and hence space itself, primordial spatiality of a true *outline* in which, and only in which, *ego* may come forth, trace itself out and think itself.[10]

In the opening of the mouth, the inside is thereby "turned on itself, extravasculated, exogastrulated, exclaimed, expressed and thrown—not 'outside' but 'as the outside.'"[11] It is not that I, in the uttering, carry what was hidden inside of me to the outside. Rather than speaking of an outside of me, we should speak of a "me-outside," of me as outside, especially when the exclamation *I am, I exist* seems to come out of my deepest heart of hearts: "Not 'outside me,'" Nancy writes,

> because in truth the only inside is not "me" but the gaping in which a whole body gathers and pulls itself together in order to find a voice and announce itself as "self," reclaim itself and call itself, desire itself in desiring the echo that will perhaps come back from the other bodies around it.[12]

Here Nancy is perhaps very far from Derrida, for whom every other remains an absolute secret, hidden behind the unbreachable wall of her alterity, so that every address is a promise—promise to tell the truth, promise of relation, which is always essentially threatened by perjury.

In Nancy's reading of Descartes's *cogito* as the uttering of *ego*, we have a torsion of inside and outside. This torsion is probably laid out most clearly by Antonia Birnbaum in "To exist is to exit the point," which appears in *Corpus*. During doubt, I seem to retreat from the world (the outside) into the intimacy of thought. But "in cutting itself off from the world, the 'auto' of auto-affection and the 'I' of the 'I am, I exist' don't regain an interiority closed in upon itself but experience themselves in the concentrated extremity of thought."[13] Here we have the torsion or inversion: the world as extension is interiority; this world has no outside and I am in the world, yet, "during the time of doubt," the *ego* "determines exteriority by exempting itself from everything that renders it present to the inside of the world."[14] While this exemption looks like a withdrawal from exteriority and a "return to intimate self-presence," a *retranchement* to something solid and stable, it in fact pushes the withdrawal to its outermost extremity, to the extremity of *la pointe*. Nancy writes of the extremity:

> the *extremity* constitutes, in all respects, the position and the nature of the *cogito*. *Extremum* is the superlative of *exterum*: The extremity is that which is most exterior. It is, *of all the things that are interior*, the one that is farthest out [*le plus à l'extérieur*]. In all extremity, not only do the interior, the inside, or the property of a being reach their limit, the ultimate point of their completion and of their closure, but they also exceed this closure and undo their own completion.[15]

In uttering "ego cogito," ego withdraws away from the absolute inside that we call the outside world into an "inside" where it calls itself "I." At the extreme point of this withdrawal, ego distinguishes itself as what is farthest out, as the *extremum* (the extremity, the most exterior) of all the things that are inside the world. It is as such that the I is a point without extension or, in Descartes's vocabulary, a non-extended thinking substance.

In *Being Singular Plural*, we find a similar torsion of inside and outside, but instead of the inside being what is the most outside, the farthest out, it is the "outside" that is "inside,"

> in an inside more interior than the extreme interior, that is, more interior than the *intimacy* of the world and the intimacy that belongs to each "me." If intimacy must be defined as the extremity of coincidence with oneself, then what exceeds intimacy in interiority is the distancing of coincidence itself.[16]

What is most inside is not some me that would finally coincide with itself but always something more or other than me that exceeds any identity, distances me from myself and opens me up to relation. The distancing of self-coincidence as the most interior is "a coexistence of the origin 'within' itself, a coexistence of origins," which means that being-with is not the "secondary dispersion of a primordial essence."[17] The movement of *retranchement* in which I distinguish myself, insofar as it does not lead to a ground but to an abyssal intimacy, is necessarily tied to exposition as the turning toward the outside (which remember is the inside of the world) of the existent.

What we are led to understand with the movement of withdrawal or distinction that is concomitant to the expression of *ego* is 1) why expression is not a secondary movement, the carrying outside of what already existed inside, but

also 2) why exposition cannot be a melting or blending together since it is always the other side of a distinction. It is such double movement of contact/separation or entanglement/disentanglement that will form the basis of Nancy's thinking of singularity and that runs the risk of being forgotten if one overemphasizes the category of "exposition" in Nancy's work.

2. INTIMATE COMMUNITY

In *The Inoperative Community*, another valence of the word "intimacy" appears, one which, as I mentioned in the introduction, ties "intimacy" to the Romantic paradigm of the lost community, to immanence and unity, to the sense of closeness that is thought to have been lost in modern society. Whereas society relates separated individuals on the basis of rational calculation and self-interest, and thus allows these separated individuals to live peacefully beside one another, community fosters a feeling of belongingness, familiarity, and intimacy, joining its members together at the affective level.[18] Whether one celebrates the birth of society or mourns the loss of community, in each case community is thought to be "not only intimate communication between its members, but also the organic communion of itself with its own essence."[19] The members are, in their plurality, impregnated with the same identity so that each member identifies himself or herself and each other by identifying with the living essence or the living body of the community.

But community, as we readers of Nancy know well, is not something we have lost. The reason is simple: this experience of the so-called loss of community is an experience we make in common; hence we are there, in common, in the "absence" or "loss" of community:

> The era of the limit abandons us together on the limit, for if not, it would not be an "era" or a "limit," and "we" would not be there. If we suppose that there was before (or elsewhere) something else, we can say that there remains this remainder of community that we are in common, within—or faced with—the disconnection of common sense.[20]

We can go further and affirm with Nancy that this is the only possible community, namely the community that experiences its own absence or the interruption of fusion and communion. Indeed Nancy writes of community: "What this community has lost—the immanence and the intimacy of a communion—is lost

only in the sense that such a loss is constitutive of 'community' itself. It is not a loss: on the contrary, immanence, if it were to come about, would instantly suppress community, or communication, as such."[21] Communion, if it were to be realized, would lead to the black hole of immanence, a black hole that is a different kind of abyss than the one discussed in the first section. In *Corpus*, Nancy describes this pure immanence in the following way: "total absence of exteriority, a non-extension concentrated in itself, not something impenetrable, but rather its excess, the impenetrable *mixed with* the impenetrable, infinite intussusception, the *proper* devouring itself … in an abyss where the hole absorbs even its own edges."[22] On the contrary, the abyssal hole of the mouth was "the primordial spatiality of a true outline in which, and only in which, ego may come forth, trace itself out and think itself." There, the abyss was not the place of a total collapse unto oneself, but the possibility of a coming forth, of expression.

What informs our thinking of community as communion is the same logic that informs our thinking of the individual: the logic of "the absolute." The absolute is, etymologically, that which is detached, separated, without relation. But, Nancy shows in *The Inoperative Community*, the logic of the absolute is self-contradictory. Its existence implicates it in a logic of relation that its essence precludes. As Nancy writes:

> A simple and redoubtable logic will always imply that within its very separation the absolutely separate encloses, if we can say this, more than what is simply separated. Which is to say that the separation itself must be enclosed, that the closure must not only close around a territory (while still remaining exposed, at its outer edge, to another territory, with which it thereby communicates), but also, in order to complete the absoluteness of its separation, around the enclosure itself. The absolute must be the absolute of its own absoluteness, or not be at all.[23]

This is what Nancy meant that the hole must "absorb even its own edges." Only in this way is all contact avoided.

Given this self-contradictory logic of the absolute—either the absolute is exposed and hence not absolute, or else it is absolutizes itself by collapsing completely upon itself, but cannot ex-ist or come forth— we also need to complicate the relation between the community of the lovers, which might provide us with the figure of intimacy par excellence, and the social community. Without going into

the details of Nancy's reading of Bataille here, I just want to outline how this complication is carried out by means of the logic of arealization. "Areal" is a word Nancy already used in *Ego sum* to describe the mouth.[24] Playing on the double origin of areality (in relation to the word "area" or with a privative alpha), arealization first means that the community is beyond the dichotomy between the real and the irreal, understood as the imaginary, the nonexistent, but also the ideal: the community is not some ideal to be realized. On the contrary, community has to be, or is always, arealized. This arealization relates to the nature of community as area, as extension; it means that a community is spread out. A community is "not a territory [not something delimited and enclosed], but the areality of an ecstasy."[25] Nancy speaks of a double arealization of ecstasy and of community, the play between them consisting in the resistance to immanence and to fusion. Ecstasy opens up the subject and places it outside of itself. But what an ecstasy encounters in this movement of existence is another ecstasy. As a result, the community of lovers is never their fusion but their encounter on the limit of their respective ecstasy. Hence, "community" is the name of what resists the rebuilding of immanence at a higher level, here at the level of the couple. At the same time, the logic of arealization also means that there cannot be any "private" community of lovers that is not already "woven, arealized, or inscribed"[26] (IC 20) in a larger community, for example in the social community. Intimacy as the play between two ecstasies—as communication rather than communion and as the unworking of intimacy—is necessarily spread out so that the lovers are exposed at their limits—the limit between them and around them—to the community. "Touching the limit—which is the possibility of touch itself," Nancy writes,

> the lovers however defer it. … Lovers know joy in drowning in the instant of intimacy, but because this foundering [*ce naufrage*] is also their sharing and dividing since it is neither death nor communion—but joy—*even this in its turn is a singularity that exposes itself to the outside*. In the instant, the lovers are shared (out), their singular beings—which constitute neither an identity nor an individual, which effects nothing—share each other, and the singularity of their love is exposed to community.[27]

Having shown that the paradigm of the loss of community as loss of intimacy, loss of some *thing* that would be more interior, hence more essential, to me than myself, is a phantasm, we are left with the abyssal intimacy of community: the spacing or dislocation of the interior, the interior always pushed to the extremity where it undoes any possibility of completion and passes outside, exposes itself.

Hence, we are not wrong if we claim that Nancy is the thinker of exposition. At the same time, we should not forget that he also insists on distance and distinction, on *retranchement*, even as this *retranchement* leads us farther than any interior, at the extremity of the interior where the being does not reach its completion but, rather, undoes itself. It is such abyssal intimacy that is the reason for both the impossibility of the Subject (as self-grounding ground) and the community (as communion).

3. BEING-WITH IN THE CITY

At this point that I would like to turn to *La ville au loin* to ask, finally, the question that is raised in title of this article: How do we live there, in the city? That is, Can we only bear to live there by rebuilding a certain form of intimacy? The turn to *La ville au loin* might seems strange, but it will certainly appear less arbitrary if one recalls that in that small book, Nancy speaks of the city as the place of the "with." "In it rules," Nancy writes, "neither the intimacy of community, not the arrangement of collectivity, not the regulation of assembly," but a "multitude that mingles [*mêle*] and distinguishes in the same movement."[28] Here we have again the double movement of existence: *retranchement*, withdrawal, distinction on the one hand; exposition, contiguity, touch on the other: "Whether one wants it or not, the city mingles and shuffles at the same time as it separates and dissolves. One rubs shoulders, one passes close to the other, one touches and moves apart: it is one and the same way of treading [*une même allure*]."[29] If the city exposes the full force of being-with, then it seems essential to try to understand what kind of place this is and how we can or should dwell in it. It seems crucial to ask, as Nancy does, what the *ethos* of the city is. One might be tempted, in asking after this *ethos*, to ask: can we inhabit this place *meaningfully*, can we live a *meaningful* life there? But putting the question in this way might have already tempted us to cast the question in terms of a lost meaning and hence to assume that this meaning could only come to our life in the city from beyond and above it. Put in such a way, we would miss the specific regimen of the "with" that it exposes.

The text *La ville au loin*, we should make clear, is not a treatise on the city in general but rather a meditation on a specific, singular city: Los Angeles. The first part, "Au loin... Los Angeles," was written in 1987, after he was guest professor at the University of California at Irvine (1976–78, 1984) and at San Diego (1985–87). Though he visited the city during that time, he never lived there.[30] The second part of the book, "La ville au loin," was written twelve years later, in 1999,

without Nancy having returned to Los Angeles in the meantime. It is important to remember that Nancy speaks of a specific experience of a specific city, and that the specificity of this experience was responsible, as he says, for his "love affair" with Los Angeles.[31] There is something idiosyncratic and singular, not only about Los Angeles, but also about Nancy's personal experience of Los Angeles. Yet, Los Angeles is also exemplary of the truth of all cities. Despite the specificity of Nancy's experience, or maybe because of it, something came to light, as if the strangeness of Los Angeles, and Nancy's position as a fascinated outsider, operated a sort of phenomenological reduction that brought to the fore the modality of the "with" proper to the city. This tension between the singular and the exemplary means that the text oscillates between affirmations about Los Angeles, and even more specifically about Nancy's own personal experience of Los Angeles at the end of the 1980s, and general, universal affirmations about the modern city as such and the relation of the city to the "with." As if this city, this experience of this city, could teach us something about existence and being-with in general. Now this tension—some might even say this confusion—between the personal and the ontological, the contingent and the essential, is not only a feature of *La ville au loin*, but can found in many of Nancy's writings. We could even say that it is a feature of his philosophical method, insofar as it is attentive to the phenomenological power of "the end" or "the extremity."

On the one hand, Nancy often describes "our times" as the epoch where something has come to an end: end of sense as signification, end of the world as organized whole, end of community as communion, and so on. On the other hand, Nancy's ontology of finitude describes the fundamental structures of existence so that the coming to an end of signification, world, and community cannot be what first makes us finite. That finitude and the being-with of existence are revealed to us now is a function of what Nancy calls "ecotechnics," a world without reason, end, or figure, but whose loss of origin and end, whose loss of direction, is only effective under the names of "planetary technology" and "world economy."[32] Today, in the epoch of "ecotechnics," we are brought face to face with the impossibility of the closure of signification. Our desire for closure—our desire for a final end—is brought to an end when it appears for what it is, namely an impossible desire: the desire to put an end to existence itself in its singular plurality. By undoing of all ends, ecotechnics lets our naked, figureless, and meaningless being-together appear. Of course, this by no means denies or underplays the destructive nature of ecotechnics. The question is whether ecotechnics also uncovers other possibilities for enacting our being-with. Los Angeles plays a similar role as the more general

figure of ecotechnics: in it something comes to an end but something also comes to light for the first time.

In *La ville au loin*, Nancy describes Los Angeles as a city at the extremity of the city, again: the extremity, the city that passes over to something that is not quite recognizable as city anymore, undoing itself along its edges, along edges that do not delimit or circumscribe a territory but cut across it (Nancy speaks of the freeways) and turns this place into a space made of lines and axes, a space of passage, transit, movement, of agitation and dispersion. This city might expose, Nancy writes, "the unheard-of capacity of the city to push back, repel or repulse the interiority or intimacy that still plagues our idea of the city."[33] *Une ville*, not *une cité*. *Ville*, as we can read in Littré, more generally than *cité* (and city), expresses a significant agglomeration of houses and inhabitants. *Cité*, even when rid of its ancient meaning, adds to this idea the representation of the *ville* as a political person with rights, duties, and functions. Hence, while the city denotes a certain kind of organization and unity, a *ville* like Los Angeles, spreads itself out—urban sprawl, as it is called, is a big problem in North American cities—it spreads itself out without downtown, without a heart around which the town organizes itself and without city walls or limits that would keep its extension contained. This sprawling gives the impression of indifference and randomness, of a lack of "urban planning," a lack of unity. The city changes and grows from within, without anyone occupying a God's eye perspective to control or guide this growth from above.

As we should not mourn the loss of communal intimacy in the coldness of society, we should not mourn the loss of the intimate inhabitation in the town or the village at the expense of the coldness of our modern city. Of course, there are the incessant complaints about life in the city: "inhuman, atomized, condemned to cars, pollution and congestion."[34] The nostalgia for the village, the countryside or the villa haunts the city's inhabitants, "always the dream of communal immanence," of the "intimacy of community."[35] Why this nostalgia? Because, Nancy says, and I think this is important, "it is difficult for us to think that the truth of community is a sharing (or a sharing out) in the two senses of the words and that if the city partakes of communal life and truth, it is also insofar as it shares out, separates, divides with all its power of spacing."[36] And so the question, "What ethos for the city?," arises as an attempt to figure out the ways in which the city—and more specifically a city at the limit of the city, a city that pushes its limits to the extreme so that it is on the edge of becoming undone— might partake of communal life and might teach us something about being-with.

There are two Greek words, which we transliterate as "ethos." The first one, written with eta, means, in the words of Heidegger translating a fragment of Heraclitus, *Aufenthalt*, sojourn or abode, *Ort des Wohnens*, dwelling place. The second one, written with epsilon, is the one that gives us the word ethics, and means, conduct, habit, or custom. When it was a question of the globalised world, Nancy wrote of these two senses that they "contaminate each other in the motif of a stand [*une tenue*], a 'self-standing' [*un se tenir*, a holding oneself]."[37] The question, "What ethos for the city?," asks after the stance or hold of the city as a place of dwelling and the modality of our stance within it. Heidegger defined dwelling in the following way: "To dwell, to be set at peace, means to remain at peace within the free sphere that safeguards each thing in its nature. *The fundamental character of dwelling is this sparing and preserving*."[38] Of course, for Heidegger, inasmuch as the human being is the most *unheimlich* (the most unhomely), inasmuch as the human being is always beside or outside of him- or herself, dwelling does not mean standing firm on a ground, since there is no such ground. Yet, at the same time, to learn to dwell for Heidegger is to find peace, to hold firm, to gather oneself (or rather to be gathered) and hence to arrest the movement of dispersion. But if the city is, "first a circulation, it is a transport, a run [or an errand, *une course*], a mobility, a motion or commotion, a vibration,"[39] and if there can be an ethos of the city, then we need to rethink the *tenue* or the *se tenir* away from both the connotations of firmness and concentration.

In the city, one inhabits in passing (*en passant*) or as a passer-by (*comme un passant*), a passer-by who, Nancy writes,

> goes alongside and rubs shoulders with other passers-by, so close and so far, familiarly strange, whose stations are only provisional, in the middle of traffic, errands, transports, journeys, doors always opened and closed upon spaces of dwelling set back from the street but still penetrated by the rumbling of the street, by the noises and dust of a world that is entirely passing or passing-by.[40]

These passers-by are close, sometimes very close, pressed into a subway car or an elevator, but this closeness is without proximity, familiarity, or intimacy. The passer-by is "far but within reach and at an earshot. Between us blinks the feeble exchange of signals, an imperceptible and random correspondence."[41] A hand stretched toward the lady who smiles and hands me the metro newspaper every morning, a glance in the direction of the man who plays classical music on his slide

whistle in the subway station, a step aside to step out of the way of the older man with blue hair pushing his floor scrubber in circles, a smile at the grandmother of the child who lets out a genuine 'Wow' when she sees the high-level bridge light up from the subway car. These moments are not moments of intimacy, they are not community-building, barely moments of fleeting complicity, of being for a moment folded together. But always there remains not only a movement of transit, transport, and passage, but also a sense of distance, of withdrawn presence.

In *La ville au loin*, Nancy captures this double movement in the following passage, which I want to quote at length:

> Faces keep hurrying: tight, compact, busy, furtively offered in a mobility that carries them away. Infinitely, traits, skins, ages, charms, wrinkles, folds, postures, accents, effaced faces, fleeting figures, a multiplied pleasure of non-exposed portraits [a portrait, from the Latin *protraho*, is something that extracts or draws out an intimacy], carried away toward the inaccessible distances of their worries, their thoughts, and their very intimate images [that is, withdrawn and exposed at once]. One touches it without touching it, one is touched [contact/separation]. One observes sideways, surreptitiously [à la *dérobée*], one observes the slipping away [*le dérobement*] itself. … [All looks] are for one another strangers, intruders, unwelcomed visitors, one so close to the other, so similar, coming back again and again in unmistakable types: young girls, old gentlemen, elegant ladies, undecided clients, attractive guy, generic beings, styles, fashions, infinitely mingling singulars in a great unsettled tension between the universal and the particular, between vague extension [that is, anonymity, dispersion] and secret precision [that is, singularity, distinction].[42]

Of course there are also nostalgic ways of inhabiting the city. Neighbourhoods are one of them: "The neighbourhood," Nancy writes "is the city that attempts to reconstitute itself, to fold itself back into the city."[43] In other words, it is the city that attempts to delimit itself, to draw a border, but this "local temptation or tendency" is always carried away by the movement of the city. The place, the inhabitable, delimited place, passes into extension, spread, sprawl because the neighborhood is, like the community of lovers, never enclosed, never fully absolved from contact with the city. Not only is it always traversed by strangers but it itself is always in movement: new buildings spring up, old ones are demolished or restored, businesses close, new ones open. In a sense, this is true even of gated

communities. It is true that these communities with their thick walls and their restricted access look like attempts at absolving themselves from any contact. They are neighborhoods that attempt to absorb even their own edges, as we saw in the second section. Here we could turn to Derrida's meditation on the home and on hospitality to underline the fact that the home, in order to be livable, has to be opened to what comes from the outside. As one needs to cross the gate to go shopping or go to work, friends and emergency services (the good stranger), but also workers (who often can't afford to live in these communities) must be also allowed inside. This opening or openness, despite all attempts at control, has always already opened the community to what or who comes.

But it is not only the walls of gated communities that attempt to arrest the mobility of the city. Both their calculated design—from the width of sidewalks to the color of the pavement—and the necessity of policing the behavior of inhabitants in order to ensure that the calculated design remains intact are attempts at preventing the community from being transformed by existence, by the lives of the inhabitants: no clothesline, no red front doors, only windows of this type, green grass no longer than 2 inches long (and no weeds!). In some communities you can even be fined for uttering a swearword on the sidewalk. While it might be easy to diagnose the phantasm of community as work of death in the phenomenon of the gated community, I would also like to point out a different kind of attempt at rebuilding intimacy, a way of traversing the city, of being in transit without being-with.

The examples of urban encounter I mentioned above were all taken from what we call public transit. Indeed one might think that public transit is the place where being-with is most explicit, most unavoidable. One might think that one is more exposed in public transit than in one's car, that driving a car is a way of being alone, separated, of avoiding contact. At the same time, while driving one necessarily remains turned toward the outside, exposed to others, even if it is just to cut someone off or honk between two text messages. To repeat a passage I quoted above: "Between us [necessarily] blinks the feeble exchange of signals, an imperceptible and random correspondence."

The second part of *La ville au loin* was written in 1999, before electronic devices invaded our lives, and especially our daily commutes or transits. These have of course affected the ways in which one moves around in the city. I am not thinking about the problem of distracted walking or inattentional blindness, people falling in ditches or hitting poles while talking on their phones, or of the famous violinist

Joshua Bell playing more or less incognito for hours at a Washington subway station to commuters who couldn't hear him with their headphones or were too distracted to lift their head from their phone.

Rather, what I have in mind is the following: A student in my department, a woman, admitted to only travelling on public transit with her headphones on, even when she was not listening to any music, and staring at the screen of her phone, even when she was not actually looking at anything on her phone. She was clear that this was her way of avoiding any conversation, avoiding any form of contact. It might even be an attempt not merely at being left alone, since one must be exposed to be alone, but at absolute concentration, at absolving oneself from one's extension, at absorbing one's edges and returning back to the point, rather than exiting from it, to play on the title of Antonia Birnbaum's text mentioned above. This reminds us how contact, however fleeting, can be unwelcome, how exposure can be taxing, even violent.

4. CONCLUSION

Were I to attempt, in conclusion, to summarize what life in the city teaches us about community, about being-with, I would venture the following: First, others—other singularities—always remain a withdrawn presence, even in our most intimate relationship. They are always "non-exposed portraits, carried away toward the inaccessible distances of their worries, their thoughts, and their very intimate images." Access always remains suspended on the limit; what is touched always also withdraws or remains withdrawn. This does not mean that it remains hidden in an interior, but rather that it withdraws in an abyss that is like the mouth. This withdrawal is the other's distinction or discreteness. If the intimate encounter of the lovers effects neither death nor communion, if they remain shared out, withdrawn, touching on/at the limit, then the "truth" (or the model) of being-with is in the random encounter of the passer-by, and the lovers are but an example of such encounter.

Second, the desire for enclosure—be it of oneself or of the community—is not merely an attempt to absolve oneself from any point of contact, to absorb even one's own edges (as we saw in the case of the gated community or of the student with her headphones and her screen); it is also an attempt at arresting the movement of passing-by, the mobility or *emportement* of existence. It is not just a suppression of the ex- but also of the trans-, and not just one's own but

also that of a world "that is entirely passing or passing by," as Nancy said. If our intimate life—our being at home with our loved ones, our family, our friends—tends to cover over this mobility through our renewed encounters, life in the city exposes the trans- as a truth of being-with. It attunes us to the movement of transit, passage, and dispersion that is inherent even in what appear as our most stable ways of dwelling, our most reliable relationships and encounters.

Though this does not entirely answer the question regarding the ethos of the city, and remains in that respect a philosophical theory, I think it also proposes a basis upon which to engage in the city, and to reimagine our being-with one another. It also has, as I pointed out at the beginning, wider implication for our conceptualization of borders and immigration. By reversing the ontological priority of rest over movement, Nancy shows us that the mobility of existence is more fundamental than the home, that the stability of the home is only ever partial, itself transient. As a result, there is no originary experience of the home to be defended and protected. This does not necessarily call for the abolition of borders or the removal of all regulations concerning passage, but it does require that we let go of our phantasm of control and the rhetoric of protection and defense that accompanies it. By reversing the priority of the intimate over the foreign, Nancy's theory also attunes to the strangeness, the withdrawn presence inherent in all the passers-by we encounter, including those we called our loved ones. As a result, if we are all passers-by, if we always remain withdrawn even in our most intimate encounters, then the immigrant, the refugee, the real stranger, are not other than those who are familiar to us, but only a mode of withdrawn presence among others.

NOTES

1. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, trans. Richard A. Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 170, 129.
2. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Ego Sum*, trans. Marie-Eve Morin (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 87.
3. Nancy, *Ego Sum*, vii.
4. Nancy, *Ego Sum*, 87.
5. Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (London & New York: Verso, 2005), 32.
6. See Jacques Derrida, "Declarations of Independence," trans. Tom Keenan and Tom Pepper. *New Political Science* 7, no. 1 (1986): 7-15.
7. Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, 77.
8. See Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority,'" in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice,* ed. David Gray Carlson, Drucilla Cornell, and Michel Rosenfeld (New York: Routledge, 1992).
9. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus II: Writings on Sexuality*, trans. Anne E. O'Byrne (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 18.
10. Nancy, *Ego Sum*, 112.
11. Nancy, *Corpus II*, 88.
12. Nancy, *Corpus II*, 88.
13. Nancy, *Corpus*, 147.
14. Nancy, *Corpus*, 147.
15. Nancy, *Ego Sum*, 79, my emphasis.
16. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, trans. Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O'Byrne (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 11-12.
17. Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 12.
18. This basic differentiation between society and community is first explicitly develop in Ferdinand Tönnies's *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* (1887) and taken up by Max Weber in his *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (1921–22).
19. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, ed. Peter Connor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 9, trans. mod.
20. See Jean-Luc Nancy, "Of Being-in-Common," trans. James Creech, in *Community as Loose Ends*, ed. Miami Theory Collective (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 6.
21. Nancy, *Inoperative Community*, 12.
22. Nancy, *Corpus*, 75.
23. Nancy, *Inoperative Community*, 4.
24. See Nancy, *Ego Sum*, 112: "But the human being is that which spaces itself out, and which perhaps only ever dwells in this spacing, in the *areality* of his mouth."
25. Nancy, *Inoperative Community*, 20.
26. Nancy, *Inoperative Community*, 20.
27. Nancy, *Inoperative Community*, 39, trans. mod.
28. Jean-Luc Nancy, *La ville au loin* (Paris: La Phocide, 2011), 40.
29. Nancy, *La ville au loin*, 43.
30. Nancy, *La ville au loin*, 21.

31. Nancy, *La ville au loin*, 21, in English in the text.
32. Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 133.
33. Nancy, *La ville au loin*, 15.
34. Nancy, *La ville au loin*, 21.
35. Nancy, *La ville au loin*, 22.
36. Nancy, *La ville au loin*, 22.
37. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Creation of the World* or *Globalization*, trans. François Raffoul and David Pettigrew, Albany: SUNY Press, 2007), 42.
38. Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. A. Hofstadter (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), p. 147.
39. Nancy, *La ville au loin*, 34.
40. Nancy, *La ville au loin*, 45.
41. Nancy, *La ville au loin*, 43-44.
42. Nancy, *La ville au loin*, 44-45.
43. Nancy, *La ville au loin*, 19.