



# THE WORLD ON A TRAIN: GLOBAL NARRATION IN GEOFF RYMAN'S 253

**Berthold Schoene**

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with unconditional hospitality in the work of the Swedish-Finnish children's writer Tove Janssen. Artist John Timberlake offers a visual afterword with original artworks based on a virtual grand tour of the world facilitated by Google Earth.

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### Abstract

*The focus of this essay is an exploration of Geoff Ryman's interactive novel 253, which was originally released online in 1996 as 253, or Tube Theatre: A Novel for the Internet on London Underground in Seven Cars and a Crash and two years later also published as a 'print remix'. Examining Ryman's text as an example of contemporary global narration, Schoene explores the cosmopolitan techniques and structural devices employed in 253 not merely to envisage the individual's immersion in global community but to facilitate an enduring interactive experience of it. Aligning the hypertextuality of 253 with Jean-Luc Nancy's philosophy of community, Schoene argues that Ryman's use of hyperlinks does not destroy plot, but deconstructs it, reconceiving it as fluid and 'inoperative' instead of strictly telos-driven. With close reference to Ryman's 'The World on a Train', his BBC News tribute to the 52 victims of the 7/7 London terrorist attacks, the essay concludes by looking at the new cosmopolitical currency acquired by Ryman's novel – a currency it did not originally have in the mid-1990s.*

Recent developments in communication technology have made the world a smaller and more easily navigable place. The world is now more efficiently connected and as a result we seem to be living within much closer reach of each other. Yet, at times, it looks as though instead of evolving into new global neighbourhoods, buzzing with multicultural diversity and cosmopolitan fellow feeling, the globe has begun to shrink into a claustrophobic, inhospitable throng, tighter and more compact than before, but hardly any more intimate or empathic. Individuals lead ever more atomised and isolated lives while the population of the world as a whole finds itself corralled into fiercely inimical identities. Contemporary cosmopolitan fiction's effort at imagining global community is compounded not only by the sheer number of people in the world, but also by the unwieldy anonymity, mounting competitiveness and neoliberal fractiousness of these people, and as a result cosmopolitan community becomes increasingly difficult to represent within the confines of a single narrative.

## Far-fetched segments: global narration and the individual

Contemporary global narration tends to retain the novel's traditional focus on the individual, but often the individual now appears multiply mirrored and replicated. As the novelist concatenates individual lives from different parts of the world, successive chapters tend to introduce new individuals, each starting the narrative more or less from scratch like a self-contained *petit récit*. These snapshots of individual lives become the constitutive building blocks of the writer's attempt at cosmopolitan world-creation. They function similarly to atom-like units that are expected somehow to react with each other, generating increasingly more elaborate molecular clusters, or 'communities'.

The scenario involving Rana Dasgupta's characters in *Tokyo Cancelled* (2005) seems symptomatic in this context. Stuck due to bad weather in a remote international airport besieged by civil war, and bereft of the company of 310 of their fellow travellers for whom emergency overnight accommodation has been found, the remaining thirteen passengers 'felt an inexplicable need to stay close, as if during the reconstitution of themselves around this new Situation a sort of kinship had emerged. They moved towards the chairs like atoms in a molecule, no closer but also no further away than their relationship dictated' (pp.5–6). For the duration of Dasgupta's novel contemporaneity's ceaseless flux comes to a standstill and settles into an opportunity for creating community out of a random assortment of strangers. This manifestation of community appears prompted by some kind of axiomatic necessity at once determined by and generative of – to use Raymond Williams's resonant term – a common 'structure of feeling' that binds these forlorn individuals at least fleetingly into one. According to Williams, each new generation 'responds in its own ways to the unique world it is inheriting ... yet feeling its whole life in certain ways differently, and shaping its creative response into a new structure of feeling' (Williams, 1961, p.65). Notably, in interview with Travis Elborough, Dasgupta has explained that '*Tokyo Cancelled* is about the feeling of globalization' ('About the Author' appendix, in Dasgupta, 2005, p.2). The stranded passengers' spontaneous communion results in the composition of a catalogue of stories which simply by being told at the same time in the same place transcend the apparent incommensurability of their various international settings and origins. It is the globalised context of their telling that transforms these far-fetched segments of the global imagination into a new, temporarily-composite, mosaic-like picture of the world.

Global narration aims to convey a sense of synchronicity while resisting homogeneity. Picturing the world from any one perspective is likely to lead to distortions of conviviality as, for example, manifest in the post-9/11 Western tendency to conceive of Islam, according to Judith Butler, 'as not of *this* time or *our* time, but of *another* time, one that has only anachronistically emerged in this time' (Butler, 2009, p.110). Global narration insists on a radical synchronisation of what we call 'modern' with what by contrast we choose to designate in terms of otherworldliness, anachronicity or retardation. However, such a synchronisation involves the world not only in its present and past configurations, but also in the ways it unfolds its futural, as yet unrealised, potentialities. Much contemporary global narration ventures into at least some kind of tentative, loose-end interrogation of what is to come. Globalisation has unsettled the narrative management of time insofar as it pairs its new spatial expansion with a temporal, if achronological deepening of perspective.

No matter how conventional or innovative global narration's chronological make-up, the many individual characters it portrays rarely appear in neat succession. Often they are out of sync, or run the same lag repeatedly, or abruptly drop the baton of narration altogether. Global narration excels at past-present-future time shifts, but due to its sustained multiplicity and abstention from definitive reconfiguration it never crystallises into straightforwardly utopian or dystopian narration. Cosmopolitan novels like David Mitchell's *Ghostwritten* (1999) and *Cloud Atlas* (2004), as well as Hari Kunzru's *Transmission* (2004) and *Gods Without Men* (2011), all avoid lapsing into an easily classifiable, generically specific type of world-creation. In their refusal to project a definite future, their conception of world community overlaps in interesting ways with that of contemporary philosophers such as Giorgio Agamben in *The Coming Community* (1990) or Jean-Luc Nancy in *The Inoperative Community* (1986). Like Agamben and Nancy, Mitchell and Kunzru – and somewhat more obliquely also Margaret Atwood in her dystopian-utopian hybrid *Oryx and Crake* (2003) and its sequel *The Year of the Flood* (2009) (see Schoene, 2013) – appear set on extricating humanity from any one already-worked-out global formation, be it real-political or imagined. Like Agamben and Nancy, these authors portray the world as always in the process of emergence, as 'coming'. Accordingly, global community never assumes entitative corporeality. Instead, it emerges as the wholly contingent unwieldiness of our shared existence in the immediate here and now, weaving us into one at the same time as setting us free,

disclosing both our predilection for affiliation and our capacity to propagate endless dispersion. Ateleological, deconstructive and cosmopolitan, the new global narration sees the world open up in communal, yet never homogeneous, synchronicity.

Another characteristic trait of contemporary global narration is that it decentres the individual: all individuality amounts to in the end is the production of countless variations on one and the same contemporary humanity. This dynamic stalls whenever global narrative shifts into the mode of postcolonial fiction and becomes waylaid by the psychological turmoil of cross-cultural encounter. Novels such as Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows* (2009), whose protagonist Hiroko Tanaka is presented to us as a survivor of Hiroshima, India's Partition and 9/11, or David Mitchell's fifth novel *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet* (2010), which brings to life an eighteenth-century encounter between Dutch and Japanese traders, introduce their characters as allegorical representatives of their nations. Rather than assuming shape and gaining momentum by reacting with one another like atoms in a process of world-communal molecularisation, the explicit tokenism of Mitchell's Jacob de Zoet and Shamsie's Hiroko Ashraf proves obstructive of free mutual exposure. Fully formed and informed from the outset, the actions of Jacob and Hiroko serve to fulfill a preconceived authorial vision or plot.

To elucidate global narration's treatment of individuality further, a brief excursion into an earlier period of literary cosmopolitanism appears useful. Since the beginning of the twentieth century the individual has become the subject of increasing scrutiny. Symptomatically, in *Jacob's Room* (1922) by Virginia Woolf, possibly high modernism's most vociferous cosmopolite,<sup>1</sup> one finds manifestations of individuality reduced to a mere flicker. In *Jacob's Room* every passer-by in the city, every pedestrian, every commuter – no matter how fugitive their significance for the development of the novel – is called by their full name and title. As Edward Bishop has commented, 'the text is naming everybody in sight, and all it does is confuse us ... We do not know who is important ... It alienates the reader and reminds him or her of the alienation that takes place in mass culture; it establishes from the outset [the protagonist] Jacob's status as a cog in the machine' (Bishop, 1992, pp. 161–2). The seeming

<sup>1</sup> See also Jessica Berman (2001) and Rebecca Walkowitz (2006). Berman discusses Woolf's 'politics of connection' and the recurrence of 'splinter' and 'mosaic' as leitmotifs in her work while Walkowitz dedicates a chapter to Woolf's cosmopolitan poetics of 'evasion'.

importance assigned to a person by taking the time to name them in full is undermined by their utter inconsequence:

☛ The motor omnibuses were locked. Mr. Spalding going to the city looked at Mr. Charles Budgeon bound for Shepherd's Bush. The proximity of the omnibuses gave the outside passengers an opportunity to stare into each other's faces. Yet few took advantage of it. Each had his own business to think of. Each had his past shut in him like the leaves of a book known to him by heart; and his friends could only read the title, James Spalding, or Charles Budgeon, and the passengers going the opposite way could read nothing at all—save "a man with a red moustache," "a young man in grey smoking a pipe." The October sunlight rested upon all these men and women sitting immobile; and little Johnnie Sturgeon took the chance to swing down the staircase, carrying his large mysterious parcel, and so dodging a zigzag course between the wheels he reached the pavement, started to whistle a tune and was soon out of sight – for ever. ☛

(Woolf, [1922] 1999, p.85)

Neither Mr Spalding, nor Mr Budgeon, nor little Johnnie Sturgeon plays a role of any significance in the novel. In *Jacob's Room* individual life belongs wholly with the mass that crowds the metropolis; the individual crystallises from the mass only to melt back into it. This mass circulation of human life is everything; it is what constitutes the city.

It is of course precisely this annihilation of individual import by the mass that matters when it comes to imagining community in contemporary global narration, where one would expect the dilemma to be more pronounced and compounded. Cosmopolitan fiction, in alignment with the contemporary philosophy of community, suggests that humanity's existence as mass – largely anonymous, amorphous, and asocial – harbours real opportunities for communal assemblage, for example by allowing random gestures of local, individual solicitude to initiate global conflagrations of neighbourly compassion. The mass is neither inert nor atomised beyond repair; it is essentially 'inoperative'. In other words, it is alive with the community-generating processes of mutual exposure within which, according to Jean-Luc Nancy, each individual represents 'a contact ... a contagion: a touching, the transmission of a trembling at the edge of being, the communication of a passion that makes us fellows, or the communication of the passion to be fellows, to be *in common*' (Nancy, 1991, p.61). This touching or contagion is as inevitable

as it is surprising and unanticipated, and as symptomatic as it is unprecedented. It manifests in the form of popular uprisings like those leading up to the fall of the Berlin Wall or driving the ongoing revolutionary agitation in the Arab world, but also in instances like London's summoning of its 'blitz spirit' in response to the terrorist attacks of 7 July 2005, or the world – fundamentally torn – rallying in shock and sympathy, intellectual resignation or triumphant *schadenfreude*, in the immediate aftermath of 9/11.

### Relations without a centre: 253 as hypertext

Globalisation has brought about significant shifts in the practice and imagination of global politics, culture and community – shifts that one would expect contemporary narration to reflect and record, not least by utilising the digital devices and virtual vistas opened up by the new communication technologies. As Jay Bolter speculated over ten years ago in *Writing Space: Computers, Hypertext, and the Remediation of Print* (2001), this new electronic type of writing might in the end prove far more adept than the conventional novel at capturing who we are, or aspire to be, both individually and as communities:

☛ If ... electronic communication corresponds to a postmodern sense of self, it may also correspond to a postmodern definition of affiliation and community. We exploit the World Wide Web, e-mail, and chat rooms to facilitate a culture of temporary allegiances and changing cultural positions – to fashion our “network culture.” The Internet and particularly the Web become for us a metaphor for the ways in which we function in our various communities by sending out dozens of links to sites of interest or contestation. We compile hot lists or bookmarks that indicate which groups we choose to belong to at any given moment, and we can erase these lists as easily as we create them. ☛

(Bolter, 2001, p.203)

As global culture evolves into what Bolter describes as ‘a vast hypertext’, which with regard to its methods of self-authentication remains entirely self-reliant, digitalisation and virtuality enable spontaneous changes in individual self-fashioning, as well as communal affiliation and disaffiliation, the rapidity and scale of which exceed anything conventional textuality could ever dream to generate or sustain. The elasticity and endless mutability afforded by the new communication technologies create a fecund environment for exactly the kind of inoperative communal dynamics that, according to Nancy, constitute and propel the world.

How better ultimately to describe the World Wide Web, its processes and effects, than to cite Nancy's identikit of ‘the world’ in his treatise *Being Singular Plural*:

☛ The unity of a world is not one: it is made of a diversity, and even disparity and opposition ... The unity of a world is nothing other than its diversity, and this, in turn, is a diversity of worlds. A world is a multiplicity of worlds; the world is a multiplicity of worlds, and its unity is the mutual sharing and exposition of all its world – within this world.

The sharing of the world is the law of the world. The world has nothing other; it is not subject to any authority; it does not have a sovereign. ☛

(Nancy, 2000, p.185)

This makes a pertinent portrayal of the world as simultaneously singular and plural, unified by its multiplicity while multiple in its all-encompassing oneness. Whereas the world ceaselessly proceeds to come together, it never sets into one. Its intrinsic nature is ‘contagious’ (to use Nancy's term) or ‘viral’ (to use a contemporary neologism). What Nancy's description highlights is the world's immense rallying power. However, what in the end keeps it going – or, rather, what keeps it ‘coming’ – is disruption, dispersal and ceaseless reconfiguration.

Geoff Ryman's novel *253* was originally released online as *253, or tube theatre: a novel for the Internet on London Underground in Seven Cars and a Crash* and two years later, in 1998, as a ‘print remix’. The action of the novel, which in print adds up to 366 pages, takes place on 11 January 1995, from 8.35 to 8.42 in the morning, amounting to a total time span of just seven and a half minutes. The setting is a London underground train on the Bakerloo line, which at full capacity accommodate 253 people including the driver. The action starts as the train leaves Embankment, then continues via Waterloo and Lambeth North to the Elephant and Castle, where it crashes after the driver falls asleep. In Ryman's novel each passenger's identity is rehearsed in three separate sections dedicated to ‘outward appearance’, ‘inside information’, and ‘what he or she is thinking or doing’, amounting to exactly 253 words irrespective of how eccentric or non-descript the passenger under scrutiny turns out to be. Emulating Woolf's method in *Jacob's Room* Ryman names all his characters, thus highlighting everybody's unique individuality as well as the transience and ultimate inconsequence of their existence. Showing its characters in transit, wholly immersed in mega-urban anonymity, the novel is at the same time rooted in a very specific locale through

its footnotes which reference various landmarks and sights. Local Londoners, who use this particular stretch of the tube for their daily commute, are joined on the train by tourists, immigrants and visitors from both other parts of the city as well as the provinces, creating an egalitarian atmosphere of multicultural diversity as black and white, Christian and Muslim, young and old, male and female, straight and gay are shown seated together: labourers next to professors, celebrities rubbing shoulders with unassuming nobodies, even the occasional dame and lord slumming it among the commoners. Ryman's assortment of passengers mirrors London's – and, by extension, the world's – exceptional demographic super-diversity (see Steven Vertovec, 2007).

As an example of global narration Ryman's novel imagines not just the daily circulation of *Massenmenschen* that is contemporary London, but moreover the mass commotion that animates and agitates the world as a whole. Interestingly, in his essay on literary representations of the London Underground, Tobias Döring makes use of images of Nancean inoperativity to evoke 'London's vast immensity' and, more specifically, the tube system that renders this immensity more easily negotiable. What Döring invokes by describing the tubed city as 'a network of relations without a centre, without clear limits' (Döring, 2002, p.55) as well as 'a vast arena for unforeseen, momentary and often singular encounters' (p.57), and the tube itself as 'a site to trade collective fantasies or to respond to the contemporary fragmentation of urban existence' (p.56), is Nancy's promise of inoperative community emerging from the contagion of the mass's entirely quotidian exposure to itself. 'Long seen as the greatest concentration of the urban crowds,' Döring notes, 'underground stations, carriages and passages are consistently described in a rhetoric of physicality, with strangers' bodies regularly touching, rubbing, sweating, pressing, pushing one another as closely as nowhere else' (p.58). What Döring finds in his selection of literary texts is not a vision of London as a place rendered uninhabitable by overpopulation and functionality, a place where proximity, connectivity and diversity have congealed into a density unalleviated by human fellowship. Rather, London is presented as a world, and the definition of 'a world' according to Nancy is 'precisely that in which there is room for everyone ... a genuine place, one in which things can genuinely *take place*' (Nancy, 2007, p.42). Or, to express it in the words of Marc Augé, despite its size and compression, London continues to be 'a place for living ... equivalent to those produced by an older, slower history: where individual itineraries can

intersect and mingle, where a few words are exchanged and solitudes momentarily forgotten, on the church steps, in front of the town hall, at the café counter or in the baker's doorway' (Augé, 1995, pp.66–5).

The tube comes alive as a cosmopolitan place in which community can unfold, and this capacity of the tube to generate community is at least in part to do with its 'glocalised' situation. The London tube is a place where the local and the global interpermeate, thus introducing the world to one of its specific locales as well as vice versa, while showing the individual never to be entirely isolated or atomised. As Döring observes, 'among the fictive crowd of 253 underground travellers not everyone is a stranger to the other and not everything occurs at random; characters interrelate and interact, some are violent, some are affectionate to one another' (p.58). By virtue of being contemporaries, the people portrayed by Ryman are always already in touch: they are relatives, rivals, neighbours, lovers, colleagues, service providers and customers, or, if they are indeed strangers, they are shown to be only ever one small step removed from making contact. Ryman shows them bumping into each other, responding to each other's facial expressions and involuntary gestures, being touched by one another's joy, hope, anger, stress and frustration, confronting strikingly similar dilemmas or sharing common interests, longing to converse, and rushing to each other's aid. In addition to these naturally occurring intersections and correspondences, Ryman presents us with at least two further situations that trigger variously inoperative displays of community. In carriage 3 we are treated to an impromptu production of the 'Mind the Gap' theatre group who specialise in performing improvised slapstick and situation comedy on the tube. Abruptly lowering the barrier between fiction and reality, as well as that between reader and text, the character in 'the lead idiot role' is Passenger 96, identified as Geoff Ryman, 'an amateur actor on holiday from his day job' (p.137). The other display of community is more complex and more precariously held together when in the tail end of the final carriage Passenger 253, an elderly woman named Anne Frank, begins to sing. The first to join her is Passenger 223, identified as African-American Professor Dionne Butler, now resident in Nigeria:

“ Then the woman starts to sing: “is that all there is?” and Dionne understands.

Dionne first heard the song when she was seventeen, and it seemed then to sum up America; something sad and disaster-bound about it. Even then, it was the loneliest country in the world. One reason why she lives in Africa. Dionne stands up, and with her strong clear

voice, joins in. Her eyes fix all the frightened people in turn. "Everybody!" ¶

(p.307)

The light-hearted tube party that ensues is prompted by a shared memory of oppression and suffering, summoning the traumatic historical interconnectedness of Europe, America and Africa in a spontaneous apotheosis of contemporary celebration and solidarity. Emotion spills into song that touches and 'infects' bystanders, demonstrating just how close an anonymous mass of people is at any one moment to stepping into sync and pulling together.

Despite the fact that the train is hurtling towards destruction it seems at least initially very appealing to think of 253 as basically 'a novel without a plot' (Döring, 2002, p.58); its mechanisms of cohesion appear far more tentative, random and haphazard than those of a conventional novel. Still, even though Ryman's text is clearly straining towards achieving a more flexible dynamic, it remains confined by traditional emplotment. As Laura Colombino notes with some frustration, 'the tremendously extensive – at least for the space of a novel – human material at stake [in 253] paradoxically amounts to an absolutely enclosed and predetermined structure' (Colombino, 2006, p.624). Ryman's story-telling remains chained to the schematic layout of the train, in which each passenger is assigned a seat and number, from the fixed position of which they are never shown very far to stray. This 'perfectly arranged grid of control' (p.624) is even more inhibitive of narrative flow in the 'print remix' of the novel, where each passenger is not only contained within a seat but also within a page. Our reading experience is considerably impeded by the ensuing repetitiveness and tedium. It is the original web version of the novel that, due to its hyperlinks, enables, and indeed pioneers, the kind of fluid dynamic that has become such a dominant formative principle in contemporary global narration.

However, as an example of hypertext fiction Ryman's 253 also immediately gives rise to certain reading difficulties. As Richard Saint-Gelais and René Audet explain, 'these difficulties not only arise from the computer environment as such, but also from [the reader's] perplexity in the face of fictional discourses which wipe out plot or make it undergo transformations beyond mere fragmentation or the multiplication of possible narrative frameworks' (Saint-Gelais and Audet, 2003, p.72). What is intriguing in this context is the question of exactly what impact hyperfiction may have had on the generic development of the contemporary print novel. Saint-Gelais and Audet point out how fundamentally inimical hypertextuality is to plot generation and ultimately

to narrative *per se*. In their view, 253 is reduced to 'a descriptive file whose narrative component, if not absent, seems very slight – the fiction does not offer piecemeal stories, but rather countless pieces of story' (p.74), explaining that '[s]light narrative developments can ... be observed by the reader who follows the links and reconstructs, piece by piece, the puzzle of a situation sliced up according to the different perspectives of the characters involved. But this puzzle is deceptive: it never leads to more than a few reconstructions without much plot potential' (p.75).

Only in conclusion do Saint-Gelais and Audet wonder if we might be able to conceive of new narrative forms that could operate without plot, instead 'putting fiction together according to different principles of organization' (p.85). Yet their categorical juxtaposition of narrative and fiction, which culminates in the proposition that '(hyper)fiction can escape narrative's grasp' (p.84), appears extremely dubious. It seems much more fruitful to discuss these issues with regard to narrative's evolution and the novel's capacity for generic renewal. The novel avails itself of the techniques and devices developed by hyperfiction, appropriating them to respond more effectively to the challenge of representing the world as it is now. The use of hyperlinks does not destroy plot, but deconstructs it, reconceiving it as fluid and inoperative rather than strictly *telos*-driven. In *Ghostwritten* and *Cloud Atlas*, but effectively across all his works, David Mitchell – to name contemporary Britain's arguably most cosmopolitan writer – not only exploits the use of hyperlinks to create communities out of loose clusters of isolated characters separated geographically as well as in time (see Schoene, 2009, pp.97–124). Mitchell also involves the reader in a way that significantly lowers the bars between fiction and reality. Showing characters as thinking of each other, or sensing the import of each other's lives across space and time, suffices to present them as interrelated and capable of mutual contagion in the Nancean sense. Significantly, this interrelation also aptly describes the way readers connect with and immerse themselves in the texts they read.

### The world on a train: trauma and world community

A good illustration of Ryman's use of hyperlinks in 253 is the 'Big Issue love chain' (p.355). Four women – Maggie Rolt (Passenger 57), Marge Matisse (Passenger 79), Anita Mazzoni (Passenger 140) and Beverly Tompset (Passenger 198) – are lusting after the same *Big Issue* seller, Sam Cruza, who is also on the train as Passenger 216. Sam is a womanising cosmopolite who

has variously introduced himself to the women as Swiss, Albanian, Italian and Cossack, when in fact he is American. The discovery of this pentagon of would-be lovers is much easier in the novel's web version than the 'print remix', which relies primarily on the reader's own perspicacity and only secondarily on the appended index, which makes an awkward substitute for the web version's abundance of signposted hyperlinks. Hyperlinks, which Saint-Gelais and Audet encourage us to regard as 'meeting places, crossing points' (Saint-Gelais and Audet, 2003, p.74), point to the existence of a definite, preconceived structure – in this particular case, that of the love pentagon. But the novel, despite its reliance on such fixtures for expanding its depth and multi-dimensionality, is ultimately more interested in exploiting their loosely multitudinising effect rather than implementing them as a mere plotting device. Referring back to Nancy's philosophy I want to suggest that what this example demonstrates is that 253 aspires to a more fluid dynamic of world-communal narration. Rather than comparing and categorising the four women in relation to each other, let alone the feckless male via whom they are linked, the novel accentuates their differences and similarities which define their contemporariness by means of mutual exposure. Without their knowledge or intention, the women's lives and identities are shown to be leaning towards each other as if engaged in intimate communication. Their exposure to each other both defines and augments their singularity while at the same time alleviating the pain of individuality. In the Nancean view, this is how people come to constitute a world. As Nancy explains, 'one cannot make a world with simple atoms. There has to be a *clinamen*. There has to be an inclination or an inclining from one toward the other, of one by the other, or from one to the other' (Nancy, 1991, p.3). This implied dynamic of the *clinamen* is provided by the hyperlinks that leave individuality intact while also 'declining' it in communal exposure to other individuals. In characteristically inoperative and deconstructive fashion what is introduced here is at once something more and something less, a detraction that simultaneously serves as an enhancement.

Unfolding in just seven and a half minutes, a time span that reloops 253 times with the portrayal of each passenger, Ryman's novel insists on radical synchronicity. And yet the text is informed also by a diachronic deepening: not only does it provide glimpses of each character's individual life, it culminates in a chaotic atemporal apotheosis which appears at once as futural and burdened by past trauma, yet which – despite the crash – resists dystopian categorisation. Crucial in this context is Ryman's introduction of Passenger

253 as Miss Anne Frank, who is said to have 'wandered Europe for the last 50 years' and believes herself to be on the train to Auschwitz. Not only does Anne save a considerable number of passengers by ushering them off the train at its penultimate stop, but also, as one would perhaps expect of a ghost, she escapes herself unscathed. Anne's antagonist is Passenger 252, the aptly named Mr Harold Pottluk, a market researcher for London Underground, who is compiling a passenger survey. His interest in his fellow passengers is purely quantitative; his perspective is calculating and coldly analytical, perceiving people as random products of life's contingencies, 'sitting inside their fates like eggs in cartons, there through an inexorable logic of age, gender, genes, character, their time in history, luck. He sees their faces like insulation wrapped around boilers' (p.339). Harold's is a strictly foreboding presence, deathly in its statistical quantification, whereas, somewhat ironically perhaps, Anne emerges as the spirit of enduring, life-affirming conviviality. The polarity of bureaucratic Harold and cosmopolitan Anne is what life in our increasingly neoliberalised world has come to contend with: the former strictly disavowing community while the latter proliferates it against all the odds.

The Holocaust is not the only trauma that frames and informs the narrative of 253, lending it historical depth and global significance while quite literally derailing its logical trajectory. The incorporation of Anne Frank suspends the novel between utopia and dystopia, history and the contemporary, the local and the global, the individual and community, as well as the particular and the universal. However, Ryman's novel is haunted also by a second trauma – that of the AIDS epidemic. As Ryman himself notes, there was no accident on the London Underground on 11 January 1995; he selected that particular date because it was 'the day I learned my best friend not only had AIDS, but would die within days' (p.354). In his comparison of 253 with the NAMES Project of the International AIDS Quilt, an enormous patchwork-in-progress commemorating the lives of those killed by the disease, Eric Sonstroem starts with the observation that the web version of Ryman's novel is 'similarly sprawling, and similarly composed of discrete, democratically equalized units that are stitched together' (Sonstroem, 2004, n.p.), both the panels of the quilt and the portraits of Ryman's individual characters functioning simultaneously as obituaries and open pages from the book of life. According to Sonstroem, both the NAMES Project and Ryman's novel prefer hypertextual devices to the techniques of 'conventional narrative' because of their superior aptitude for highlighting community in

a realist, 'natural' and curative manner. Hypertextuality is not simply better equipped to convey a sense of synchronicity and belonging across spatial and identitarian boundaries; equally, if not more, significant is its reliance on 'repetition and looping as a process of healthy renewal'. Hypertextuality insists on taking its time. Rather than giving in to emplotment's *telos*-driven imperative to get on with it, it moves at its own pace. As Sonstroem explains, 'in hypertext, iterations do not lead to death, silence, or stultifying weariness; they are what animates the text, offering a continual source of renewal to the reader' (n.p.). The tube seems like a perfect choice of location in this respect, as it shows people in transit enjoying a moment of respite from the city, finding time for quiet contemplation while immersed in metropolitan life, assuming shape as individuals without lapsing out of community.

Following the terrorist attacks on the London Underground of 7 July 2005 Ryman's novel has acquired a new resonance which it did not originally have in the mid-1990s. In the immediate aftermath of the 7/7 atrocities Ryman produced a moving tribute to the 52 victims of the attacks for BBC News, which was published as 'The world on a train'. 'The most important thing about these people is not how they died but how they lived,' Ryman writes in his obituary. 'All of them were hard-working, decent and loving. That seems to be what most of us are. Goodness is ordinary. Which is why it so often goes unreported' (Ryman, 2005, n.p.). It is the way in which Ryman's novel about 253 fictional lives segues almost seamlessly into a reflection on the lives of all of us that identifies the text so indisputably as a cosmopolitan novel. As Sonstroem remarks, 'like real passengers on any London train, [Ryman's characters] come from all walks of life, are of all different sizes, races, ages, nationalities, genders, and sexual orientations' (n.p.). Indeed, the opposite is also true as the names, identities and real life stories of the victims of the 7/7 attacks, and the brief synopses of their final movements, read like an extension of Ryman's fiction, and the widely published mosaic-like panel of their facial photographs evokes the commemorative design of the AIDS quilt. Posthumously this entirely random group of individuals has come together as a community, and due to both their ordinariness and their superdiverse cosmopolitanism they represent a perfect identikit of global community. The 52 victims of the 7/7 attacks not only included young and old, male and female, Christian and Muslim, black and white, gay and straight, but they also represented over twenty different nationalities, including Afghanistan, Ghana, Iran, Mauritius, Montserrat,

Romania, Vietnam and Zimbabwe. Two of them were from Poland.

In his portrayal of Anthea Dobbs (Passenger 217) Ryman zooms in on one particular envisioning of community, which appears surprisingly traditional in its technophobic indictment of the way in which anonymous mass transport like the tube inhibits the flourishing of genuine communal conviviality in the city. Anthea remembers the tube strike of 1989 as follows:

❏ Everyone walked to work. It was summer, and London was suddenly a festival of people ... The streets, instead of being deserted, bustled. Even the evenings were better: the shadows long, the sun golden. People said what the hell, and went to the pub. They walked in chains with hands on each other's necks ... You saw faces everywhere, and the message of those faces over time was this: we are for the most part hard-working, decent, pleasant people.

She has read recently of an alarming fall in numbers of people volunteering for charities. It is not due to overwork, since it is busy people who have continued to volunteer. The reason, the article claimed, is habitual isolation. It breeds mistrust and cynicism.

She almost thinks there should be a two-year moratorium on cars, tubes, TV. She suddenly yearns to be out on the streets and abruptly decides to walk to the Elephant from Waterloo. ❏

(p. 296)

Significantly, Anthea's description of the people of London echoes Ryman's tribute to the victims of terrorism almost verbatim, identifying them as 'for the most part hard-working, decent, pleasant people'. But should we therefore agree with Jan Van Looy who suggests that 'it is the divine hand of the author that seems to interfere here, saving Anthea by and with her utopian vision of the past' (Van Looy, 2003, p. 116)? Anthea escapes the train crash, but that cannot conceal the anachronism of her vision of community, which is informed by a nostalgic utopianism that Ryman's cosmopolitan novel is so clearly determined to rebut. Identifying all his passengers as 'hyperlinked by common bonds' at all times, Ryman's novel pays elaborate homage to the ineradicable omnipresence of cosmopolitan community in our lives. As Sonstroem explains, 'if passengers know each other, they are linked. If they think about or do the same thing, they are linked. If they interact or even glance at each other, they are linked' (Sonstroem, 2004, n.p.)

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## THE PRECARIOUS ECOLOGIES OF COSMOPOLITANISM<sup>1</sup>

Marsha Meskimmon

### Abstract

Meskimmon contends that cosmopolitanism might be described as a precarious ecology, a state of dynamic exchange between selves and others, and a corporeal interplay between subjects, objects and ideas in the world. In this sense, cosmopolitanism is not a finished product, but rather a delicate balance reached during the mutual making of subjects and worlds, when that making welcomes difference and encourages ethical encounters with others. Turning to specific works by the artists Joan Brassil, Catherine Bertola and Johanna Hällsten, Meskimmon suggests that one of the ways that contemporary art can play a role in the creation of the precarious ecologies of cosmopolitanism is through its ability to evoke in viewers

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