

THE INFINITE TASK: BEING-IN-COMMON IN ROBERT ANTELME'S *L'ESPÈCE HUMAINE*

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ABSTRACT

L'Espèce humaine, Robert Antelme's 1947 memoir chronicling his year in a German labour camp, was read, in its initial reception, as a reflection on alterity: the human subject, stripped of the capacity to speak and reduced to eating scraps of food, is revealed as the Other. Against these readings, contemporary critics have argued that alterity is not quite so central to Antelme's work, and that the text should instead be read as a triumph of the subject that survives the experiences of the camps. Pushing this debate further, this essay argues that the significance of Antelme's text lies in its configuring of relations beyond the logic of subjectivity and prior to an ethical demand. The essay thus offers a reading that recognizes the 'unity of the species' as an ontological given rather than a project realized or affirmed on the basis of transcendent notions such as fraternity or a shared humanity. To this end, the reading draws heavily on the work of Jean-Luc Nancy and in particular on his efforts to rethink the fact of our shared existence in the wake of the catastrophes of the twentieth century. Finally the essay argues that such a reading has important consequences for our status as readers and the possibility of testimony.

Keywords: Robert Antelme; Jean-Luc Nancy; community; being-in-common; exposure

The space of the subject

IN 1962, MAURICE BLANCHOT located the central import of Robert Antelme's *L'Espèce humaine*, Antelme's 1947 memoir of his year in a German labour camp, in its reflection on alterity; the human subject stripped of its capacity to speak, reduced to eating scraps of food, is revealed as the Other. Blanchot wrote, 'Dans le malheur, nous nous approchons de cette limite où, privés du pouvoir de dire "Je", privés aussi du monde, nous ne serions plus que cet Autre que nous ne sommes pas.'¹ In a reading influenced by the work of Levinas, the encounter with alterity becomes for Blanchot the point of departure for a common demand. When the oppressor (the SS officer) meets the oppressed (the prisoner), he becomes conscious of his struggle and ultimately recognizes it as an injustice committed against everyone. And this occurs because the oppressed, despite efforts to destroy him, remains indestructible. Blanchot wrote:

Que l'homme puisse être détruit, cela n'est certes pas rassurant; mais que, malgré cela et à cause de cela, en ce mouvement même, l'homme reste indestructible, voilà qui est vraiment accablant, parce que nous n'avons plus aucune chance de nous voir jamais débarrassés de nous, ni de notre responsabilité.²

In 1987, Sarah Kofman helped to renew interest in Antelme's text with the publication of her work *Paroles suffoquées*.³ In it she followed Blanchot's insistence that the irreducible humanity of the person of the camps results in an encounter with alterity, and that this encounter generates an ethical demand, but she took this conclusion one step further: on her reading, the experience of the camps called for a wholly new ethics not founded on the potentially exclusionary concepts of a shared essence or identity. To this end the framework of alterity offered a promising model on which to think this new humanism as defined not by any positive characteristics, but rather by exposure and vulnerability – as Otherness as such. More recently Colin Davis has argued that the encounter with alterity does not have the centrality in Antelme's work that Blanchot or Kofman want to give it. Sceptical of the attempt to assimilate Antelme to a Levinasian ethics, Davis insists that the text be read instead as a triumph of the self that survives the camps. Any reading that identifies the encounter with Otherness as an opportunity for radical ethical renewal fails to recognize the integrity of the self and the species that resists the threat of Otherness, and which Antelme's text ultimately affirms.⁴ On Davis's account, Antelme's is a 'robust, defiant humanism'.⁵ Davis's reading has in turn been criticized by Martin Crowley, among others, for not allowing for a more decisive break with a kind of confident, affirmative, and ultimately outmoded humanism that, post-World War II, has been deemed problematic – and against which Kofman's work was formulated. For Crowley, what Antelme's text affirms is, at best, a 'residual humanism', defined not by its positive solidity, but rather by a weakness revealed only at the limits of the human.⁶

The contemporary readings challenge the extent to which Antelme's work might be associated with a Levinasian account of alterity. For Blanchot and Kofman, alterity is identified as a means of overcoming the logic of traditional humanism, problematic, on Levinas's terms, because of its potential for exclusion; for it is this logic that makes possible 'cette cassure insensée de l'espèce humaine en deux' (Kofman writes: 'Parce qu'il était juif, mon père est mort à Auschwitz.').⁷ And yet such readings in difference and alterity seem to fail to accommodate what Antelme's testimony ultimately affirms (and from which the text draws its title): the essential unity of the human race in spite of the murderous efforts to divide it. Davis writes: 'The unity of the species is primary, difference – however inevitable it may be – is secondary.'⁸ Still, Davis's reading emphasizing the 'perhaps heroic endeavour to preserve the self' is itself problematic for the reasons argued by Crowley and noted above. What is at stake, then, in the debate that emerges is whether we can read in the text an affirmation of the essential unity of the human race without at the same time operating within the problematic framework advanced by

traditional humanisms. How can we grant this unity without falling back within such frameworks?

I seek to push the critical debate further by offering a reading that addresses the questions just posed. Rather than respond to the Levinasian readings by affirming the integrity of the surviving subject the way more recent literature has done – albeit, in the case of Crowley, a weak, residual subject – I argue that the significance of Antelme's text lies in its configuring of relations beyond the logic of subjectivity and prior to any ethical demand. What I am proposing is a reading that recognizes the 'unity of the species' as an ontological given rather than a project realized or affirmed on the basis of transcendent notions like fraternity or a shared humanity. To this end my reading will *not* begin, as Davis's reading does, from the 'Je' that survives (and speaks to us in the preface: 'Je rapporte ici ce que j'ai vécu.'⁹), but will instead work from the space *between* the prisoners, and the relations *opened up* by this space. This follows from the argument that these relations be understood outside of the framework of subjectivity – a framework that would instead insist, as some of the previous readings do, that we recognize the individual subjects and *then* the relations between them. That the relations are made possible by and constituted in the *opening of a space* allows us to designate an existence in common that does not consist in the totalizing substance that we might otherwise call community. For this totalizing substance would only posit something like a 'wider subjectivity' and thereby pull us back into the framework of the subject with all its concomitant dangers.¹⁰ Instead I argue that the relations are configured negatively by showing how a space between the prisoners is opened that both unites and separates (or spaces) them, and thereby makes possible their common existence. To this end I will, like Kofman and Crowley, employ the notion of bodily exposure as the conceptual ground by which such spacing takes place. That this space is 'opened' – and not 'realized', 'affirmed' or 'produced' – allows that these relations, and whatever meaning we make of them (existence in common, community), are not static or fixed but can instead be continually, even infinitely, reconfigured. (This will be addressed below.)

It has perhaps already become clear that my reading will draw heavily on the work of Jean-Luc Nancy, and in particular on his efforts to rethink the fact of our shared existence in the wake of 'le témoignage de la dissolution, de la dislocation ou de la conflagration de la communauté' and with an eye towards 'les lieux, les groupes, les instances qui sont le théâtre et l'enjeu de conflits sanglants entre des identités'.¹¹ As such it is worth saying a word about the tradition to which Nancy is responding and his broader commitments. Nancy positions his work as an ongoing engagement with the fate of Marxism and Communism (*CD*, p. 11).¹² This engagement leads often to the question of finitude – that is, the question of our relation to death as the horizon that delimits our shared existence; we are all born and we all die, and we are fated to pass the time in between in the company of others. In this respect Nancy is very much embedded in the tradition of postwar French philosophy. But beyond this tradition Nancy's work also offers a significant rejoinder to Heidegger's thought by trying to reconsider the categories of social life

from a distinctly ontological basis. To this end Nancy seeks to rethink the fact of our being-with (Heidegger's *Mitsein*) as primary and constitutive of our being. On his account, to exist is to exist in common:

La communauté signifie, par conséquent, qu'il n'y a pas d'être singulier sans un autre être singulier, et qu'il y a donc ce que, dans un lexique mal approprié, on appellerait une 'socialité' originaire ou ontologique. (CD, p. 71)

Nancy's *La Communauté désœuvrée* reworks these concepts by replacing the positive subject-centred logic of community with a concept of 'being-in-common' grounded in shared bodily exposure – a concept thought of not as substance, subject, or even as collection of individual subjects, but rather as negative space, defined by separation, dispersal and exposure (CD, p. 68).¹³ Nancy's community is unworked or inoperative in that it cannot be thought of as the product of work or of an explicit political project. In this respect as well, Nancy forcefully departs from Heidegger's thinking of community as the realization of the historical destiny of a people because this simply constitutes a larger form of subjectivity (and perhaps evidence for the implicit Nazism in his work).¹⁴

Nancy's critics have asked whether such formulations lend themselves to any kind of practical political praxis. How can one bring an ontological recasting of community to bear on the realm of human affairs? That is, how can one force a political project out of a thinking that explicitly denies this manner of engagement? And if one cannot do so, are Nancy's interests in the experience of the political practically useless?¹⁵ To the extent that I engage with this line of criticism, my reading of Antelme will help flesh out how Nancy's framework, especially in light of some of his more recent work on the question of French identity, might point the way through these concerns. Thus I hope to contribute to the literature on Antelme's text while also articulating and reexamining Nancy's efforts to reconfigure the contours of our existence in common. Nancy himself commented on Antelme's work on a few occasions. However, he never addressed explicitly the manner in which his own notion of being-in-common is played out in the text, in the way I propose to address it here.¹⁶

'Aux chiottes'

Antelme's opening 'Je suis allé pisser' is followed by a sparse description of the space in which such activities take place: 'Derrière la pissotière il y avait la fosse des chiottes avec un petit mur sur lequel d'autres types étaient assis, le pantalon baissé. Un petit toit recouvrait la fosse, pas la pissotière' (p. 15). Just as Antelme's description lacks flourishes, so too does the space he describes – a space constituted by the bodily function that it serves. We also learn that nobody speaks in the latrine and that it is never unoccupied. Later in the text, Antelme narrates the transformation of the latrine:

Aux chiottes – un espace entouré de quatre planches hautes avec une fosse au milieu –, des copains piétinaient dans la boue de neige et d'urine. Ils n'y allaient pas simplement pour

chier ou pour pisser; ils y allaient pour y rester un moment, les mains dans les poches. C'était aux chiottes que les copains se disaient bonjour pour la première fois le matin, et se questionnaient.

– Quoi de nouveau?

– Rien de nouveau. (p. 76)

While the material characteristics of the latrine remain unchanged (it is still, Antelme reminds us, a room with four walls and a pit in the middle), something besides excrement now appears there. Not only do the prisoners speak to each other, but they come in with the intention of speaking. What is said is important too. While the fact of their shared existence (the fact that they are not alone) is suggested simply in the uttering of 'Quoi de nouveau?', the question is posed, initially at least, in the hopes of acquiring a piece of news. That such news is almost never acquired in these exchanges suggests a function of speech other than that of communicating information. If the prisoners' speech does anything it seems to reconstitute the space of the latrine so that it no longer stands solely as a place where bodily needs are served, but one that offers as well the possibility of what Nancy would call 'being-in-common' – that is, a kind of common existence defined not by any positive characteristics but by the exposure of bodies to one another, and which does not give way to a larger, totalizing collective; it exists only to the extent that it appears. And it appears *as* 'Quoi de nouveau?'. Nancy writes:

[I]l n'y a pas de communion des singularités dans une totalité supérieure à elles et immanente à leur être commun. Au lieu d'une telle communion, il y a communication: c'est-à-dire, très précisément, que la finitude elle-même n'est rien, qu'elle n'est pas un fond, ni une essence, ni une substance. Mais elle paraît, elle se présente, elle s'expose, et ainsi elle *existe* en tant que communication. (CD, p. 72)

We are tempted to draw from this that their communication establishes some level of solidarity, or that such exchanges offer the possibility of transcending the physical, of rising to the level of something meta-physical like community or fraternity. After all, the prisoners, through their speech, reconstitute a space otherwise defined by bodily necessity. Antelme reminds us, however, that such speech is still inscribed within the space of such necessity – within the latrine. Indeed Nancy writes 'la parole n'est pas un *moyen* de communication, mais la communication elle-même – jusqu'au silence –, l'exposition' (CD, p. 77). Communication is speech and speech is itself made possible by nothing more than the exposure of bodies to one another.

'Il faut parler'

The contours of the space of the prisoners' existence, which is existence in common, are defined by the exposure of their bodies. Their shared existence does not amount to a substance and cannot be pursued as a project. Instead it *is* when it presents itself. And it presents itself *as* speech. In this way speech is bound to

the moment of bodily exposure at the same time that its appearance constitutes the ontological condition of possibility for being-in-common. In other words, the very fact that speech can pass between them at all is what makes their relations apparent. But it would be wrong to then conclude that these relations have established a substance (a community, a fraternity) that transcends or outlasts the immediate moment of exposure. This double significance of speech is captured by Antelme. He recounts a quarrel between the prisoners: 'Fange, mollesse du langage. . . Les phrases se suivaient, se contredisaient, exprimaient une certaine éruption de la misère; une bile de mots . . .' (p. 148). 'Mollesse' suggests the physicality of speech and the extent to which it is bound to the bodily: 'C'était un état du corps qui proposait à ceux-là les mots les plus ignobles' (p. 148). But their speech also works to pull them away – if only for a moment – from bodily concerns, and to define a space in which they may affirm their shared circumstance. At work in the mines, a prisoner named Gaston decides that something must be done about the state of their bodies. He passes along the message: 'Il faut sortir de la faim. Il faut parler' (p. 211), which suggests that escaping their hunger entails quite simply speaking. Just as 'Quoi de nouveau?' works to reconstitute the space of the latrines, it is the fact of speech ('il faut parler' is, after all, an empty demand) that initiates the transformation in the mines:

Ainsi, un langage se tramait, qui n'était pas celui de l'injure ou de l'éruption du ventre. . . Celui-là creusait une distance entre l'homme et la terre boueuse et jaune, le faisait distinct, non plus enfoui en elle mais maître d'elle, maître aussi de s'arracher à la poche vide du ventre. (p. 211)

However, at the same time that their language momentarily distances them from bodily or physical concerns, it is still described as physical: it is heavy, it possesses weight: 'Ces phrases étaient lourdes dans le block' (p. 213). And it takes on this weight precisely because it is shared: 'Et ce que l'on avait pu se dire seul à soi-même, venait d'acquérir une force considérable pour avoir été crié à haute voix, pour tous' (p. 213).

When the prisoners gather later, Gaston delivers a speech, and the rest of the prisoners help each other in reciting poetry and songs:

Chacun d'eux, le soir, allongé sur sa paille, essayait de se souvenir et quand il n'y parvenait pas, allait consulter un copain. Ainsi, des poèmes entiers avaient pu être reconstitués par l'addition des souvenirs qui était aussi une addition de forces. (p. 212)

While one might be inclined to read in this some sort of sentimental affirmation of fraternal resistance, we must be careful not to draw from it more than what is given. That is to say, while what I have shown might suggest a connection between bodily concerns, speech, and the transformation of a shared space where the prisoners talk, sing and leave behind their hunger (indeed, they do manage that: 'On oubliait la soupe, on n'y pensait plus' [p. 213]), we need to be wary of any perceived dialectic and its supposed moment of transcendence. As Martin

Crowley has argued, Antelme's thinking typically lends itself to a 'dialectic without transcendence'. Crowley writes:

In Antelme's thought, then, there is a dynamism, and an outcome. There is, thus, a dialectic, and one which is not doubled by impossibility and aporia. But this outcome is utterly minimal, and structurally inseparable from the negativity it also denounces. There is, thus, no transcendence.¹⁷

We might characterize the space of their poetry recital as the site of this non-transcendence. This is why, I suggest, their speech is still described in the language of the corporeal, possessing weight. It does not transcend. We note as well that the space of their recitation is not essential; it is not uncovered or revealed. Indeed, Antelme stresses the agency and resolve with which Gaston organizes the prisoners. This space only exists to the extent that the prisoners have affirmed it. It is given in their shared existence and can only be affirmed, rather than established or created. Nancy writes, 'La communauté nous est donnée avec l'être et comme l'être, bien en deçà de tous nos projets, volontés et entreprises' (*CD*, p. 87).¹⁸ Further in so far as we know their afternoon meeting is never repeated, and nor does it bring about any perceivable change in their relations. Whatever sense of community or solidarity the gathering would seem to establish, it leaves little trace as such, never transcending the moment of exposure. Nancy describes the modern experience of community as: 'ni œuvre à produire, ni communion perdue, mais l'espace même, et l'espacement de l'expérience du dehors, du hors-de-soi' (*CD*, p. 50). It is nothing more than the space defined by the exposure of bodies.

We see this non-transcendence in another way as well. The Levinasian readings offered in the work of Blanchot and Kofman caution against positive, exclusionary claims of solidarity. Nancy avoids the potential for exclusion by grounding the experience in exposure and proposing a being-in-common that thus cannot be subsumed under any totalizing, transcendent figure of community. He writes, 'Le retrait du politique et du religieux – ou du théologico-politique – n'a pas un autre sens que le retrait de tout espace, instance ou écran de projection pour une figure de la communauté' (*ESP*, p. 67). The prisoners' gathering suggests the withdrawal of such a figure of community; they reconstitute poetry on the basis of collective memory and share in the singing of familiar rhymes. Nancy asks how it might be possible to be in common without what an entire tradition calls a community.¹⁹ The reconstituted Joachim du Bellay sonnet the prisoners recite – a traditional French poem that takes on an untraditional form – might be understood as an eroded figure of national identity. While the prisoners have in common their French identity and a shared inherited tradition, their meeting is not grounded in or dependent upon this fact of biography. What does constitute this ground? Gaston announces to his fellow prisoners, 'Nous existons encore' (p. 213). And it is from this that they draw the strength and the urgency to stick together. The logic of their community, then, is grounded in the fact of their continued existence and in the continued possibility to affirm their shared existence – that 'nous existons encore' can be said. Nancy writes,

‘La communauté est révélée dans la mort d’autrui: elle est ainsi toujours révélée à autrui. La communauté est ce qui a lieu toujours par autrui et pour autrui’ (CD, p. 42).

The language of the prisoners, heavy, possessing weight, opens them to a space of shared existence. It is important that the space be understood as bodily. Otherwise this thinking gives way to something transcendent and metaphysical, potentially allowing for problematic, essentializing claims about community. We might note, instead, that the space affirmed by the prisoners is, in the last analysis, constituted by their bodies. This is why, in the end of the scene, the only indication that something meaningful has transpired is given by the body: ‘Si quelqu’un à ce moment-là était entré dans le block, il en aurait eu une vision étrange. Tous souriaient’ (p. 215).

‘Wir sind frei’

Early in the narrative Antelme imagines an unnamed ‘they’ (ostensibly the Allied forces) reaching the Rhine, appearing before him and declaring, ‘vous êtes libres’ (p. 47). The text’s closing scene offers a rich contrast with this imagined one. It is not a ‘they’ who declare Antelme’s freedom. It is Antelme himself who, sitting in the dark, says to a fellow prisoner, ‘Wir sind frei.’ Nancy, prompted by the collapse of various communist and socialist governments, argues that in the absence of any religious or political legitimization of community, we ought to retain the communist urgency to say ‘we’: ‘dire “nous”. . . nous dire nous (le dire de nous-mêmes et nous le dire les uns aux autres), à partir du moment où ni chef ni Dieu ne le dit pour nous’ (ESP, p. 62). Such urgency – to say ‘we’ in the absence of God, in the absence of (or, better yet, without recourse to) a sense of community legitimized along national or ethnic lines, in the absence of a visible body – characterizes the final scene in which, in the dark, Antelme encounters a Russian man, a fellow prisoner whom he cannot see:

La cigarette est éteinte. Je ne l’ai pas vu. Demain je ne le reconnaitrai pas. L’ombre de son corps s’est penchée. Un moment passe. Quelques ronflements s’élèvent du coin. Je me suis penché moi aussi. Rien n’existe plus que l’homme que je ne vois pas. Ma main s’est mise sur son épaule.

À voix basse:

– *Wir sind frei.* (Nous sommes libres.)

Il se relève. Il essaye de me voir. Il me serre la main.

– *Ja.* (p. 321)

What can be said of the body? It appears in shadows. Only the prisoners’ voices and the dim flicker of the cigarette butt are made available to the senses. What can be said of the space their speech opens onto? Antelme’s statement – in German, their common tongue – comes to rest in his Russian comrade’s *Ja*. What has been established in this exchange? It is tempting to read in it an affirmation of something greater, something transcendent – solidarity, resistance, fraternity.

Lyotard is tempted: 'Mais Antelme résiste, c'est un résistant. . . Antelme sauve l'honneur.'²⁰ But this is a misreading. Antelme cannot see the Russian and so will not recognize him tomorrow. Their exchange has established nothing; it leaves no physical trace. Which is not to say that Antelme's *Wir sind frei* opens onto something meta-physical. Antelme tells us that nothing exists but the man whom he cannot see. What can be said? Only that their speech opens to a space between bodies, which means also a space constituted by bodies. Nothing more is affirmed – nothing more than Antelme's 'We.'. Nancy writes, 'Cette affirmation suffit, elle n'est affirmation de rien qui lui soit extérieur.'²¹ Nothing more is affirmed. Only an opening.

'Identité: fragments, franchises'

How far does this opening extend? To whom does Antelme's *Wir* refer? Nancy's critics have asked how his ontological approach to the question of social relations can be brought to bear on the empirical, political realm. That is, if community is given prior to our projects and enterprises, if it cannot be thought of as the product of work, how ought we to act? Is action irrelevant? And if action, the comportment proper to politics, is not relevant, how can Nancy's thinking be helpful beyond the theoretical realm? A corresponding problem is this: if being-in-common has as its ground, or is delimited by, the moment of exposure, and if, as Andrew Norris writes, Nancy's inoperative community 'constitutes one of our most comprehensive arguments against [the] understanding of politics as a form or expression of identity', then how can we account for the real experience of community in which membership in a particular group is inevitably restricted?²² That is to say, if community is figured negatively as the shared exposure from which, by definition, no one is excluded, how do we at the same time make room for moments where belonging to the group is restricted to those with certain identities or experiences? Antelme's text suggests this limitation. 'Vouloir dire "nous";' Nancy writes, 'cela n'a rien de sentimental, rien de familial, ni de "communautariste"' (*ESP* p. 62). Yet, if we understand Antelme's first person plural to include only other political deportees like himself, or other Frenchmen like himself – 'les copains', 'les types', as he variously refers to them – then have we closed off the community to a determinate set of individuals? Have we fallen back into the familial and sentimental?

What I have presented thus far should already suggest that no, the community need not be thought of as closed, but I want now to make explicit why this is the case. To do so we need to consider Nancy's more recent engagement with the question of identity politics, which, while consistent with the thrust of his earlier arguments, articulates more precisely a way through these apparent limitations. *La Communauté désœuvrée* challenges the nostalgic conception of community, associated with Rousseau, as something in the past or lost in the modern experience of society. Instead community cannot even be conceived as something lost or gained, because were we to gain community, to complete the community, we would deny the separation and dispersal that makes possible the moment of

exposure that defines it. Nancy writes: '[Passengers in the same train compartment] are between the disintegration of the "crowd" and the aggregation of the group, both extremes remaining possible, virtual, and near at every moment.'²³ In this way Nancy's being-in-common gestures towards the future: it is always in the process of becoming. We are always sharing our existence, but we never complete the sharing ('il s'agit d'inachever son partage' [CD, p. 87]). Community is thus 'une tâche infinie au cœur de la finitude' (CD, p. 89).

The futural gesture is made explicit in Nancy's recent engagement with the question of collective identity in his 2010 work *Identité: fragments, franchises*. At the end of 2009, Nicolas Sarkozy initiated a debate about French identity by organizing an online survey and a series of town hall meetings across France which aimed to explore what it means to be French. But the project had to be abandoned because these meetings and online forums soon became platforms for anti-Islamic xenophobia. Nancy's 'fragments' were written as a critique of this project and with the aim of offering a perspective on shared identity that would provide a non-exclusionary ground for the exploration of the meaning of 'being French'.²⁴ He again uses the moment of ontological exposure as the defining ground. But, as Martin Crowley argues, Nancy also recognizes this experience of exposure as itself situated and determined by context. Nancy writes:

L'appartenance à une forme ou à une autre de communauté (quoi qu'on mette sous ce mot), voire l'appartenance simultanée à plusieurs communautés, est bel et bien donnée avec la naissance, ce qui n'en fait pas une simple contrainte immuable.²⁵

The notion of belonging as being not merely an immutable constraint articulates the double experience of community – at once given and open to future modification. Thus Nancy arrives at an understanding of identity as always pointing 'dans la direction de cela qui vient et qui ne cesse de venir'.²⁶ And by continuing to articulate the meaning of our collective identity in a way that does not predetermine the result or arrive at a definitive and thus closed conclusion – in a manner not unlike Nancy's own fragments – we keep the conversation of belonging and identity going. This suggests the way that the practice of writing, or literature, is itself suited to such an engagement – if by writing we understand, with Derrida, that activity through which meaning is continuously deferred. Indeed Nancy proposes as much (and here the prisoners' sharing of poetry resonates):

l'être-en-commun est littéraire, c'est-à-dire... qu'il a son être même dans la 'littérature' (dans l'écriture, dans une certaine voix, dans une musique singulière, mais aussi dans une peinture, dans une danse, et dans l'exercice de la pensée). (CD, p. 161)²⁷

Literature, in involving us in the activity of making meaning, reveals to us our being-in-common. My reading of Antelme's work has sought to articulate clearly and faithfully the shape of the prisoners' being-in-common as Antelme affirms it by arguing that their relations are made possible by the fact of bodily exposure, by the spacing of their bodies, and made apparent to us as speech. I now want to

suggest that this reading leads us to some essential thinking about our status as readers and the possibility of testimony – that is, the possibility for continuous, even infinite, re-making of meaning.

The space of testimony

In the preface to *L'Espèce humaine*, Antelme identifies two problems raised by the effort to testify to the experience of the camp: (1) alongside the survivors' 'désir frénétique' to speak was a resistance, on the part of their audience, to listen: 'On nous dit que notre apparence physique était assez éloquente à elle seule' (p. 9); (2) the experience, unprecedented as it was, would not give way to a corresponding language in which it could be told: 'il nous paraissait impossible de combler la distance que nous découvrons entre le langage dont nous disposons et cette expérience que, pour la plupart, nous étions encore en train dans notre corps... À peine commençons-nous à raconter, que nous suffoquions' (p. 9). Both problems suggest the extent to which the possibility of relating the experience of the camps is determined – and potentially denied – by the body. In the first case, the state of the survivors' bodies closes them off from their listeners, who assume, or perhaps choose to assume, that the survivors' sorry appearance speaks for itself, as it were. In the second case, the attempt to speak of the experience fails in part, Antelme suggests, because the survivors are confined to the bodily; their words suffocate them. The possibility of such failure is given its dramatic due in a scene late in the narrative when the prisoners, face-to-face with the Allied soldiers who have come to liberate them, are overcome with the desire to tell their stories: 'Le soldat, d'abord écoute, puis les types ne s'arrêtent plus: ils racontent, ils racontent, et bientôt le soldat n'écoute plus' (p. 317), which recalls the prisoners' 'bûle de mots' in an earlier scene. The soldiers' response to what they see ('Frightful, yes, frightful!' [p. 317]) works to further close off the space in which the prisoners' words might be received – as if to say, 'We've seen it. We get it.' While the encounter represents for Antelme a failed effort to share the 'inimaginable' (p. 318) experience, the narrative of the encounter appears, of course, within the space of Antelme's testimony, the space of what we might call a successful attempt to tell of his experience. This is not to say that the experience has been transmitted, that the telling is complete. If Antelme's narrative affirms the possibility of relating the experience, it does so only in so far as it affirms the opening of a space in which such testimony is possible.

Towards the end of the work Antelme writes, 'La guerre finit. On ne sait pas si je suis vivant. Mais je voudrais que l'on sache que, ce matin, je suis dedans, que je l'ai remarqué, que ma présence dans ce matin laisse des traces indiscutables et transmissibles' (p. 244). Like Antelme's final *Wir*, such remarks spill out onto the space of the reader. The text opens us to this space. Just as we – like the Russian comrade – affirm Antelme's *Wir*, we acknowledge Antelme's presence 'dans ce matin'.²⁸ He has left a trace. But the trace does not transcend – which is to say, it is still constituted by our bodies, Antelme's body, the words on the page. In this way, we allow for a

shift whereby literature, the writing of testimony, refers us not solely to the material, or bodily, reality of the world, but also to a space between bodies. But in Antelme's characteristic dialectic that material reality does not fall away and so the narrative never transcends that reality. This shift answers to the desire on the part of the survivors to speak and be heard by opening us up to a space that we might share with them, and allowing us to abandon both any insistence that their physical appearances might suffice, and any expectation that a facile understanding of the experience of the camps can be reached through a straightforward recounting of it. In acknowledging the opening of a space in which such testimony can be told but which does not transcend the moment of the telling, we draw attention away from the dangerous impulse to make the reality of the camps known to us or complete, insisting instead that the meaning of such narratives continues to be made by us in the space we come to share.

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NOTES

¹ The edition referred to in this article is: Maurice Blanchot, *L'Entretien infini* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), p. 192.

² Ibid.

³ Sarah Kofman, *Paroles suffoquées* (Paris: Galilée, 1987).

⁴ Colin Davis, 'Antelme, Renouir, Levinas and the Shock of the Other', *French Cultural Studies*, 14:1 (2003), 41–51.

⁵ Colin Davis, 'Duras, Antelme, and the Ethics of Writing', *Comparative Literature Studies*, 34:2 (1997), 169–83 (p. 172).

⁶ Martin Crowley, 'Remaining Human: Robert Antelme's *L'Espèce humaine*', *French Studies*, 56:4 (2002), 471–85 (p. 475).

⁷ Kofman, *Paroles suffoquées*, pp. 14–15.

⁸ Davis, 'Antelme, Renouir, Levinas and the Shock of the Other', p. 49.

⁹ Robert Antelme, *L'Espèce humaine* (Paris: Gallimard, 1957), p. 11. Hereafter cited in the text.

¹⁰ See Roberto Esposito, *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), p. 2.

¹¹ Jean-Luc Nancy, *La Communauté désœuvrée* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1986), p. 11 (hereafter cited as *CD*); Jean-Luc Nancy, *Être singulier pluriel* (Paris: Galilée, 1996), p. 12 (hereafter cited as *ESP*).

¹² See also Ian James, *The Fragmentary Demand: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Jean-Luc Nancy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), p. 173.

- ¹³ See *ibid.*, pp. 152–201.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 185.
- ¹⁵ For a summary of this line of criticism and the contributions to this debate (including criticism given by Nancy Fraser, Simon Critchley and Andrew Norris), see James, *The Fragmentary Demand*, pp. 168–69 and 186–95.
- ¹⁶ See Jean-Luc Nancy, 'Les Deux phrases de Robert Antelme', in *Robert Antelme: Textes inédits sur 'L'Espèce humaine'*, ed. by Daniel Dobbels (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), pp. 140–42. See also Nancy, 'Vengeance de Robert Antelme', in Robert Antelme, *Vengeance?* (Paris: Hermann, 2010), pp. 39–46. Lastly, see *CD*, p. 88, n. 26.
- ¹⁷ Martin Crowley, *Robert Antelme: Humanity, Community, Testimony* (Oxford: Legenda, 2003), p. 13.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 87. Nancy cites Antelme here (n. 26): 'De cette résistance essentielle, archi-essentielle, de la communauté – dont l'affirmation ne relève d'aucun "optimisme", mais de la vérité, et dont la vérité relève de l'expérience des limites – il n'y a peut-être pas de meilleur témoin que le récit par Robert Antelme de sa captivité dans un camp de concentration nazi.'
- ¹⁹ Jean-Luc Nancy, 'Conloquium,' *Minnesota Review*, 75 (2010), 101–08 (p. 103).
- ²⁰ Jean-François Lyotard, *Heidegger et 'les juifs'* (Paris: Galilée, 1988), p. 53.
- ²¹ Nancy, 'Les Deux phrases de Robert Antelme', p. 140.
- ²² Andrew Norris, 'Jean-Luc Nancy and the Myth of the Common', *Constellations*, 7:2 (2000), 272–95.
- ²³ Jean-Luc Nancy, 'Of Being-in-Common', in *Community at Loose Ends*, ed. by Miami Theory Collective (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), pp. 1–12 (p. 7).
- ²⁴ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Identité: Fragments, franchises* (Paris: Galilée, 2010). See Martin Crowley, 'Being Beyond Politics, with Jean-Luc Nancy', *Qui Parle*, 22:2 (2014), 123–45; see also Chantal Bax, 'A Forward-Looking France: Jean-Luc Nancy on National Identity', *TELOSscope*, 2013 <<http://www.telospress.com/a-forward-looking-france-jean-luc-nancy-on-national-identity/>> [accessed 28 September 2014].
- ²⁵ Nancy, *Identité*, p. 41. See Crowley, 'Being Beyond Politics', p. 136.
- ²⁶ Nancy, *Identité*, p. 68.
- ²⁷ See also James, *The Fragmentary Demand*, p. 200.
- ²⁸ See Crowley, *Robert Antelme: Humanity, Community, Testimony*, pp. 74–75.