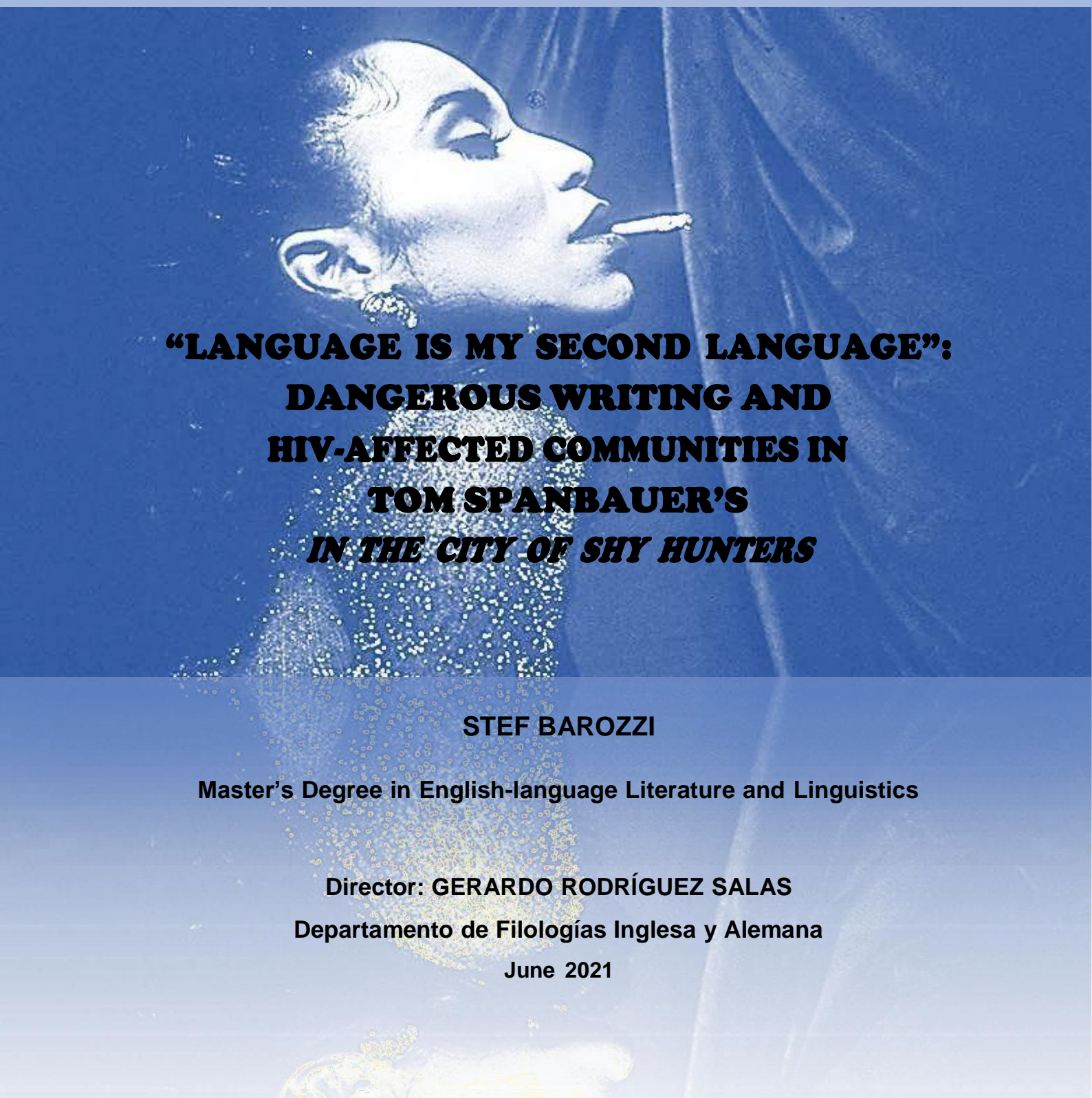


MASTER'S THESIS - TRABAJO FIN DE MÁSTER
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**“LANGUAGE IS MY SECOND LANGUAGE”:
DANGEROUS WRITING AND
HIV-AFFECTED COMMUNITIES IN
TOM SPANBAUER’S
*IN THE CITY OF SHY HUNTERS***

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Cover image from the documentary *Paris is Burning*
(Jennie Livingston, 1990)

In homage to the drag queen Rose from *In the City of Shy Hunters*

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A mia madre

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to analyse the U.S. writer and teacher Tom Spanbauer's novel *In the City of Shy Hunters* (2001) by means of theoretical perspectives that embrace both queer and communitarian epistemologies. The novel, set mainly in New York City in the mid-1980s, is narrated in first person by the protagonist and shows how HIV/AIDS, and the elevated social stigma surrounding it, affects different classes and ethnicities, as well as gender, sexual and corporal diversities. It experiments with a particular writing style and teaching method that Spanbauer calls *dangerous writing*; that is, how to expose our inner life and secrets, which are often related to social taboos. The main objective of this paper, which underlines its originality, is to demonstrate the connection between *dangerous writing*, queer studies and community theory by adopting a multidisciplinary approach to literary critical analysis. The novel is about an inwards as well as outwards journey taken by a young protagonist, who is both a queer¹ *singularity* and a *shy hunter*, looking for the sore truth that lies within his own and other human hearts. Firstly, I will explore Spanbauer's *dangerous writing* style, then I will investigate the HIV/AIDS crisis through a queer perspective (Judith Butler, Teresa de Lauretis, Michel Foucault and Annamarie Jagose). Furthermore, different community configurations (Jean-Luc Nancy's *in/operative community*, Maurice Blanchot's *community of lovers* and Roberto Esposito's concept of *immunitas*) will be discussed. The main result demonstrates that the *singularities* represented in the novel, who are mostly queer and affected by HIV/AIDS, can create inoperative communities and communities of lovers, open to otherness and secret sharing, as well as being spontaneous, antisocial and momentary, with a recognition and acceptance of mortality.

Keywords: Community theory, dangerous writing, finitude, HIV/AIDS, immunity, queer theory, singularities.

¹ In this text *queer* is mainly used as an umbrella term, including all non-cis heterosexual people. *Queer* will be further analysed in Chapter 1, where the term *cis* will be explained as well.

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*Life is a mess. You can fix the mess human beings make,
But you can't fix the mess being human is*

The lucid compulsion to act polemically determines the substance of the self

*We are so busy filling up the void,
We are filling our world with the garbage it takes to fill the void
(Tom Spanbauer)*

*Je meurs sans avoir vécu, n'ayant j'amaï fait rien d'autre que de mourir en vivant
(Marguerite Duras)*

INTRODUCTION

Tom Spanbauer, who was born and raised in Idaho (U.S.), is a writer as well as teacher. He has published five novels and since 1991 has been teaching a critical writing workshop in Portland, Oregon, on *dangerous writing*,² which is a minimalistic writing style as well as a teaching method that I will analyse and discuss in Chapter 1. By adopting a multidisciplinary approach as methodology, I connect Spanbauer's writing style with queer studies - in relation to hiv/aids³ - and with community theory, applying them to the novel under analysis. In this Introduction, I will offer a synopsis of *In the City of Shy Hunters*, followed by the contents, expected contribution and objectives of this paper.

1. "It is the responsibility of the survivor to tell the story": An outline of the novel

In the City of Shy Hunters (2001), Spanbauer's third novel, is a clear example of dangerous writing.⁴ In fact, from its very first page it reveals the social taboos related to death and finitude:

There's a couple suicides, a couple sacrifices, a betrayal. An ethical act. A famous movie star. An ancient Indian legend. A journey into the underworld to find a lost lover. There's the greedy king and his evil queen.⁵ Vicious Totalitarian Assholes. A virus – an epidemic – thousands of dead. [...] Torch songs forever. It's all drag. (2001: 1)

Set in rural Idaho around the 1970s and, especially, in the New York City of the mid-1980s, this graphic story is narrated in the first person by a young white man, Will Parker – "William of Heaven". Educated in Catholicism and rejected by his father, Will struggles with his sexuality and a stutter: "I am lip-syncing here, so sometimes the words don't go with my mouth. Language is my second language" (ibid. 2). In his early life in provincial Idaho, Will relates only to his sister Bobbie, his mother and his best friend, turned lover, Charlie 2Moons, a Native-American. During these years the enemy is his father, who abuses Will's mother and repeatedly rapes Bobbie from about the age of eleven (ibid. 289). Will betrays Charlie by telling a lie and keeping a secret. The plot is not linear, as there are flashbacks to Will's earlier life. We learn that Charlie 2Moons abandons Idaho and Will for a better life in New York City. Seeking to leave his own tragic past behind,

² I will write *dangerous writing* without italics from now on (dangerous writing).

³ I prefer to write "hiv/aids" in lowercase (apart from the Abstract and Keywords) because the uppercase stands out in a text. My intention is to reduce its social stigma. As a matter of fact, in journalistic language in English, "hiv/aids" is often spelt in lowercase, hence supporting my choice.

⁴ Examples of dangerous writing are to be found in the quotations in this Introduction as well as in Chapter 2; however, the concept will be explored in Chapter 1.

⁵ Ronald and Nancy Reagan, often mentioned in the novel.

Will too moves to New York City to look for Charlie 2Moons and ask for his forgiveness. In his “preying” he meets other “shy hunters”, people like him who search for the sore truth within their heart and who have suffered all sorts of traumatic experiences, especially due to hiv/aids, which in some way or other affects all of them. Will’s encounters in New York include Rose (or Argwings Khodek),⁶ an “extra lovely” Afro-American drag queen and performer who becomes a key character in his life: “His⁷ shiny oiled head smelling of rosemary and eucalyptus, and his black black skin and the gold loops in his queer ear, his jewels sparkly sparkly. Drop-dead freshly fucked gorgeous” (ibid. 5); True Shot, “crazy eyes” and “extra lovely” native American (or is he not?); Ruby Prestigiacomio, a poignant character and a queer drug user angry with society, who often resorts to a telephone booth to call Will, leaving long messages on his answering machine: “Hopeless cases. Last call. [...] The meaning of it. Not to be alone” (ibid. 3); and Fiona Yet (or Susan Strong or Maffy), Will’s colleague in a restaurant in downtown Manhattan, and later lover: “Fiona, beautiful according to Fellini. Beautiful the way New York is beautiful: something monstrous, wrong, dark, corrupt, bigger than you, important, too much attitude, always compelling” (ibid. 11).

As mentioned above, although a considerable part of the story is dedicated to Will’s adolescence in Idaho, the main setting of the novel is New York in the mid-1980s, at a time when the city was ravaged by the hiv/aids crisis. In the novel we learn that the “gay cancer” was firstly officially named in 1982 as GRID (Gay-Related Immune Deficiency). The hiv infection has always been considered a social stigma, and continues to be so to the present day. As I will discuss in Chapter 1, since the 1980s, the political and medical sciences have identified specific “risk groups” for hiv: these were already marginalised communities, including gay men, trans people and drug users,⁸ especially those afflicted by poverty, like migrants and different ethnicities, some of whom found refuge in the ballroom culture of New York City, frequented mainly by black and latinx drag queens, queer performers and trans people.⁹

⁶ The concept of “crossing over” (reaching Manhattan) is related to changing one’s name (and possibly one’s identity), as I will explore in connection with queer singularities in Chapter 2.

⁷ In the novel, Will refers to Rose using masculine pronouns. This is Spanbauer’s choice as Will probably perceives Rose as a man who sometimes dresses up and performs as a “woman” (being a drag queen), and it could be part of Will’s self-understanding process of his own sexual and gender construction. In this text, I have instead chosen to use the feminine pronouns for Rose.

⁸ Through the sharing of needles (syringes).

⁹ This context is reflected in the milestone documentary *Paris is Burning* (Jennie Livingstone, 1990), as well as in the TV series *Pose* (Ryan Murphy, 2018) and the documentary *Disclosure: Trans Lives on Screen* (Sam Feder, 2020).

The title chosen for this paper – “Language is my second language” – as well as representing the protagonist’s stutter and his nerves - serves to call attention to the fear we experience when we have to expose something about ourselves in public or with a particular person. Sometimes it is difficult to find the right words to convey our thoughts and feelings, especially those related to matters of secrecy, like disclosing our gender identity or sexual orientation, or our hiv status, or our surprise linked to mystery or revelations. Tom Spanbauer, through the main characters of *In the City of Shy Hunters* and his dangerous writing style, gives voice to this issue, especially in the case of the protagonist, Will Parker, since for him language often becomes his second language; that is, not his primary source of communication: “Language is my second language. I’m just making it up where I don’t know” (ibid. 2).

Language is nonetheless a form of power.¹⁰ I believe that this power is used by the world of medical sciences, pharmaceuticals and corporations to define pathologies and diseases, classifying them into a rigid hierarchical (dis)order from more to less, according to what is medically and socially acceptable (or, as in the case of hiv, what is not acceptable). By contrast, queer theorists and poststructuralists try to understand language differently, redefining the meanings of words and expressions, and seek to destabilise grammar, pressing on the instability of language, its use and its meanings, as in the case of the misleading definition/interpretation of aids in the 1980s.¹¹ Language therefore becomes a key tool under scrutiny in the novel, and will be central for my analysis of the special communication among characters who make up different community models.

2. Contents and objectives

Chapter 1 will be dedicated to the historical and theoretical background for my analysis of Spanbauer’s novel and its literary review. Firstly, I will describe Spanbauer’s dangerous writing style. Then, hiv/aids will be discussed in relation to queer activism (and subsequently queer theory), which started in the U.S. in the mid-1980s as a response to the political and social crisis around the epidemic. Finally, community theory will be introduced to help understand communal associations, such as *the inoperative community* (Nancy, 1991), *the community of lovers* (Blanchot, 1998) and the concepts of *communitas* and *immunitas* (Esposito, 2006), as well as exploring the notions of *finitude* and *secrecy*.

¹⁰ This is linked to the ideas of Ronald Barthes that language is not an innocent tool (2010, new version) and Michel Foucault that language and social discourses are forms of power (1972).

¹¹ This will be discussed in Chapter 1.

Chapter 2 will be dedicated to the analysis of *In the City of Shy Hunters*, discussing queer singularities in contraposition to “toxic masculinity”, as well as applying the community configurations and concepts analysed in Chapter 1.

Queer theory has been widely applied to the field of literary theory and criticism since the 1990s,¹² whilst community theory has more recently found an avenue in the literary field.¹³ Community theory is of special importance in my critical analysis, as I aim to explore the community configurations in the novel, especially those affected by hiv/aids.

Although Spanbauer has not received widespread public or academic attention, approximately forty of his students (up to 2018) have published novels and memoirs (Joshi, 2018: n. p.), including Chuck Palahniuk. Furthermore, Spanbauer’s acclaimed novel *The Man Who Fell in Love with the Moon* (1991) was a finalist for the 1992 Stonewall Book Award, and Ross Bell, producer of the movie *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999), considered it the best novel he had ever read - but nevertheless found it hard to adapt into a movie script (Spanbauer, 2015: n. p.). As a matter of fact, the Spanish film director Pedro Almodóvar also had the desire, never fulfilled, to adapt *The Man Who Fell in Love with the Moon* into his first Western (as a film genre) queer movie (Grayson Bell, 2006: n. p.). Hence, in an attempt to redress this scarcity of critical attention, the main contribution of this paper is to expand a rather new academic avenue by incorporating Spanbauer’s concept of dangerous writing into the field of literary criticism.¹⁴ To achieve this, as well as applying queer and community theory to my analysis, the following objectives will be pursued:

- To examine the powerful interconnection between dangerous writing, queer studies and community theory.
- To demonstrate that queer theory is an essential tool in the prevention of the medical and social stigma associated with hiv.
- To demonstrate that the queer *singularities* of the main characters in the novel fit into the models of the *inoperative community* and the *community of lovers*.
- To explore and apply the notions of *secrecy*, *immunity* and *finitude*.

¹² Nasrullah Mambrol (2019) offers a good introduction to queer theory in literary critical analysis.

¹³ Martín Salván, Rodríguez Salas and Jiménez Heffernan, 2013; Rodríguez Salas, Martín Salván and López, 2018.

¹⁴ There are very few published academic studies (e.g., Norman, 2010) related to Spanbauer’s dangerous writing within the field of literary criticism.

CHAPTER 1. HISTORICAL AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

1. “The Shy Hunters search for the sore truth within another human heart”: Tom Spanbauer’s dangerous writing

Tom Spanbauer is the founder of dangerous writing, which is a minimalistic approach to writing as well as a teaching method. It consists of investigating situations that hurt us and that exist but we try to ignore, taboos, “things that won’t leave us alone” (Gutierrez Jr., 2014: n. p.). It is not “dangerous” because it is about popular fantasy themes (e.g., vampires or zombies); rather, it is dangerous because it forces the writer and the reader to explore past painful and dark experiences, such as fears (ibid.). Although dangerous writing uses the first person singular “I” as narrator (Reeves, 2011: n. p.), it does not involve writing a memoir. It is in fact more similar to an “autofiction”: the I-writer and the I-narrator are very close to each other, but the writer can explore parts of the self that are not sufficiently dealt with in their real life, and, most importantly, the writer can lie (Spanbauer, 2014a: n. p.). That is, the situation can be similar to one in real life, and does not have to be outside of it; rather, the I-narrator reinvents it, makes it up, and makes it even more “dangerous” by exploring personal and social taboos. Consequently, through fiction the dangerous writer lies and tells the truth truer (Spanbauer, 2014b: n. p.).¹⁵ In fact, at the beginning of each workshop, Spanbauer recommends his dangerous writers to accomplish two important tasks: to write about a moment that changed them, and about an event that they do not remember well (Byloos, 2014: n. p.), and then create a fictional story around these issues. Thus, Spanbauer claims that dangerous writing is about dealing with human experiences “by going inside to our own particular battles [. . .]. To talk about being human is to talk about the pain and sorrow in your own heart” (Byloos, 2014: n. p). Once they reach that personal battle place, dangerous writers must stay there and investigate it as well, trying to understand, and if possible, to forgive. This process, according to Spanbauer (2014a, n. p.), is a type of therapy, because it allows them to rediscover their experience and take any direction they desire, exaggerating the actual situation as well as dealing with it, even though a different and invented “I” experiences it. It therefore becomes an opening, a disclosure, a space to be filled in with multiple possibilities. As the protagonist of the novel says: “Make it aware, make art out of it” (2001: 113). To sum up, writing dangerously involves abandoning a third-person omniscient narrator and instead allowing the first-person

¹⁵ Spanbauer (2014b) claims that: “It takes balls to make a safe place for yourself where you can tell what is true for you. What is true for you is usually not allowed and is forbidden” (n. p.).

narrator to have a personality, to be vulnerable, to create a voice, to make meaning in their writing, and to take a journey inwards. By contrast, “safe writing” avoids conflicts and personal battles, and tells us not to go there (Eppinger, 2016: n. p.). Spanbauer’s dangerous writing style is close to the spoken language, using at times “bad grammar” and cursing, as well as breaking English syntax rules, repeating words (usually adjectives) and, whenever possible, avoiding adverbs.¹⁶

Throughout Spanbauer’s novels there are often references to his Catholic upbringing in Idaho, to his repressive parents, and to what it meant for him to grow up as queer with the societal pressure to be straight (he was married to a woman). Anything related to sex was considered a sin and a social taboo, and anything coming from the outside was considered a threat, like native people living in the area or Mexican migrants working on his family’s farm. References to hiv/aids are to be found not only in the novel under scrutiny but also in his latest one (*I Loved you More*, 2014d). As a survivor of aids himself, Spanbauer (2014c), discussing the epidemic in New York City in the 1980s where he used to live, recalls that “[t]he widespread affliction, the calamity, wasn't just death. The epidemic was also the fear of death. Nowhere to run. Nowhere to hide. That's what a plague is” (n. p.).

2. “Another New Yorker has gone to hell”: The stigma associated with hiv/aids

2.1. Historical context

In order to contextualise the novel, it is important to historically locate what happened to the queer population, inter alia, in the U.S. (specifically in New York City) affected by the hiv/aids crisis in the 1980s and early 1990s. In the documentary *United in Anger. A History of ACT UP*¹⁷ (Jim Hubbard, 2012), we learn that between 1981 and 1987 over 40,000 people died of aids in the United States alone and that President Reagan, mentioned by Rose as a “tyrant” in the novel, never publicly uttered the word “aids”, thus contributing to the ignorance of and hatred towards people living with hiv/aids. In 1987 the FDA¹⁸ approved the drug AZT (or in Rose’s words “American Zero Tolerance”), a

¹⁶ An example of breaking syntax rules, apart from employing a language closer to the spoken form, is using a capital letter after a comma, or avoiding using commas altogether. See quotations from the novel throughout this paper, especially in Chapter 2. However, Spanbauer’s writing style is not as complex as that of other “postmodernist” authors, who experiment/ed intensely with grammar and syntax, such as William S. Burroughs. Spanbauer does not seem to like these types of literary labels (e.g., “postmodernism”) and Burroughs apparently did not like them either.

¹⁷ ACT UP: AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power. It is one of the most important international, grassroots and political associations working to end the AIDS pandemic, founded in 1987. One of its founding members was Larry Kramer.

¹⁸ U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

recycled cancer treatment, which cost too much and killed too many. Sadly, within two years of diagnosis, 80% of all infected people died. As late as 1988 it was still believed that women were not at risk for hiv/aids and hence no drug trials were carried out on them. Nonetheless, lesbians were at first not permitted to donate blood, clearly conveying Monique Wittig's message that lesbians are not women (1992: 32). As portrayed in Hubbard's documentary, the ACT UP movement was pure activism through civil disobedience,¹⁹ and its members, the "ACT UPers",²⁰ waged a war against (male) heteronormative white supremacy²¹ and the establishment, which is echoed in the novel by Will and Fiona's experiences in "Dog Shit Park".²² In 1989, the ACT UPers occupied St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City, protesting against the then archbishop, Cardinal O'Connor, for having condemned the use of condoms even during the hiv/aids pandemic. Although Spanbauer in the novel changed the name of the cardinal from O'Connor to O'Henry, St. Patrick's Cathedral is nevertheless the place where Rose sacrifices herself, thus linking real facts to fiction. Hiv/aids was a powerful social and political weapon against sexual freedom – and still is. It is no coincidence, in my opinion, that it took a long time for the pharmaceutical companies to put on the market the first effective combination of antiretrovirals²³ that became available in 1996 and only in the West.²⁴ Moreover, the antiretrovirals are not a cure: they only keep the viral load in the blood system under control, although this is not achieved in every case. With no effective cure, the stigma endures.

In the introduction to *The Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination* (2012: 1), Sarah Schulman cites Milan Kundera (1979) in relation to the hiv/aids crisis that hit the United States:

The first step in liquidating a people [...] is to erase its memory. Destroy its books, its culture, its history. Then have somebody write new books, manufacture a new culture, invent a new history. Before long the nation will begin to forget what it is and what it was. The world around it will forget even faster. (159)

¹⁹ As a form of example, the poorer sectors of the population had no possibility to access a complex health system based on very expensive health insurances, which is also reflected in the novel.

²⁰ This is the spelling chosen by Sarah Shulman (2012) for the "ACT UPers" (instead of "ACT UPpers").

²¹ This is related to the concept of "hegemonic and toxic masculinity" (e.g., Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005), which I will explore (notably "toxic masculinity") in contrast with queer singularities through explanatory examples from the novel in Chapter 2.

²² Tompkins Square Park in Manhattan.

²³ HAART: Highly Active Anti-Retroviral Therapy.

²⁴ I do not particularly like the terms "West" and "Western" because there are also countries in the East (e.g., Japan) or South (e.g., Australia) that are considered part of the "Western" world, which basically means rich and powerful. So, I will employ these terms bearing this in mind.

According to Schulman (2012: 14-15), this is exactly what happened to many people who died of aids, notably queer people and artists: they had their homes taken over by rich investors after their death, who built in their place much more expensive flats and houses to sell at a far higher price (for example in downtown Manhattan), thus contributing to the gentrification of many U.S. cities. Furthermore, many of these queer artists were robbed of their art, partially due to their being denied by their “natural” and “biological”²⁵ parents and relatives, as in the case of Harry in the novel, and also due to the reappropriation of their arts by other artists; and most of them have been forgotten or did not live long enough to be remembered. Schulman claims that “the ones who have survived are in kind of hell of confusion and chaos that feels personal but it is actually political [...]. We have responsibilities, after all, we the living” (ibid. 3). This chimes with the novel: “It is the responsibility of the survivor to tell the story” (2001: 49).

Regarding the hiv-stigmatised body, Schulman comments that many ACT UPers had significant facial wasting and their faces had sunken. Everyone had suffered profoundly from that magic combination of the mass death of their friends and the mass indifference of government, families, and society. We were laughing and smiling and hugging and flirting, as we always had with each other, but somehow it was being among each other that was the most normalizing. (2012: 5)

Therefore, the prejudice against hiv/aids was/is manifested also through the stigmatisation of the sick body,²⁶ as happens in the novel, in particular to Rose, Ruby and Harry. Moreover, Schulman affirms that “we certainly had not addressed the consequences of AIDS on the living. No one had [...]. Something had been erased. Some truth has been forgotten and replaced” (ibid. 11).

2.2. Queer studies in relation to hiv/aids

The hiv/aids crisis is closely connected to queer theory, which emerged in the U.S. in the early 1990s²⁷ mainly from poststructuralism and feminist theorists and writers, such as Judith Butler, Teresa de Lauretis, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Audre Lorde.²⁸ According

²⁵ I usually write “biological” or “natural” with quotation marks in respect to all the people who do not belong to biological family units (adoption, for example). Another reason is that they are often used to discriminate against non-heterosexual gender and sexual identities, considering only “cis” (see footnote 29 below) heterosexual relations as “natural”.

²⁶ This can be related to Julia Kristeva’s notion of “abjection” (1982), which refers to our negative reaction towards and rejection from what we might consider sickening, including the dying and unhealthy body (aids) or the corpse.

²⁷ It is important to note however that queer activism preceded queer theory, having begun in the 1980s.

²⁸ The principles of poststructuralism, and consequently queer studies, were notably born in France in the middle of the 20th century through critical philosophy and theory, recollecting the thoughts of Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan and Louis Althusser, among others, including Sigmund Freud.

to Jagose, “the most frequently cited context for queer [. . .] is the network of activism and theory generated by the AIDS epidemic, parts of which have found that queer offers a rubric roomy and assertive enough for political intervention” (1996: 93). Moreover, this necessary queer political intervention was accelerated also by “the growing homophobia brought about by public response to AIDS” (Creed, 1994: 152).

The term *queer* was, and still is in certain contexts, used as an insult equivalent to “faggot” in the U.S. However, it was politically and academically reappropriated in order to expand lesbian and gay studies by problematising the idea that gender and sexual identities, including cis²⁹ heterosexuality, are culturally constructed: “Heterosexuality, then, is equally a construction whose meaning is dependent on changing cultural models. As a descriptive term its provenance is historical, no matter how often it lays claim to universality” (Jagose, 1996: 17). Furthermore, queer can also be used as an umbrella term to include all lgbtiq+,³⁰ fluid and gender nonconforming people, as I do in this paper, although it is also often employed to define gender nonbinary persons (“genderqueer”). Queer is therefore a “problematic” term - to the point that Judith Butler claims that “normalizing the queer would be, after all, its sad finish” (1994: 21).³¹

Whilst lesbian and gay studies of the 1970s and 80s concentrated on an essentialist view of sexuality, seeking to grant human rights and accepting the idea that people were born homosexual and that homosexuality has always existed throughout history (Jagose, 1996: 16-17), queer theorists argue that sexual and gender identities are principally sociocultural products, fluid and changing in time and context, and which are perpetuated with a specific purpose, thus taking a more constructivist stance (ibid.).³² For example, the idea of having risk groups for hiv has been problematised by queer activists due to its relationship with power, control, social construction and even immunity: if you are a white cis heterosexual person, notably a cis heterosexual man, you are generally considered immune to or protected from contracting hiv.

Queer theory was first considered as being more like a parody than a scientific theory,

²⁹ A cis person feels comfortable with their sex and social gender, both assigned at birth, unlike trans (the opposite of cis), gender nonbinary or intersex persons (intersexuality is related more to anatomical sexual parts). In this text, unless otherwise specified, heterosexuality will be always connected to cis people.

³⁰ I prefer to write lgbtiq+ in lowercase since the capital letters stand out in a text and this acronym is mainly used as an adjective.

³¹ The use of queer, as intended in queer theory, was adopted for the first time by Teresa de Lauretis in 1991 and has since been applied to various disciplinary contexts, literary analysis being one of them.

³² This thought can be connected to Michel Foucault’s perspective on sexuality (*Histoire de la Sexualité*, 1976), which he considered to be a form of power hierarchy created with the aim to recognise heterosexuality as the only acceptable identity and orientation, considering all the others inferior and deviant.

born to provoke as a form of antinormative resistance (Sáez, 2004: 126-127). It tries to reconstruct the subject without falling into the trap of what it might represent to be an identity. It was in response to this very idea that sexual and gender identities (as well as different ethnicities and social classes) can be used with political manipulation and specific purposes that queer activism and queer theory emerged during the hiv/aids pandemic respectively in the mid-1980s and the early 1990s in the United States.³³

Hence, queer theory appeared as a space for resistance to heteronormativity and gender regulation: “Demonstrating the impossibility of any ‘natural’ sexuality, it calls into questions even such apparently unproblematic terms such as ‘man’ and ‘woman’” (Jagose, 1996: 3). Moreover, the gender binary system has contributed to making the life of trans, intersex and gender nonbinary people even more complex since in the vast majority of the countries of the world one can be classified only as either female or male and other possibilities are not contemplated by law (Ghoshal, 2020: n. p.). Ultimately, Butler (qtd. in García López, 2016: 225) proposes to dissolve the gender-sex binary system, based as it is on universal, natural and fixed parameters, which separate the legitimate from the illegitimate, the normal from the pathological (cis vs trans; hiv- vs hiv+), and the being from the non-being. Moreover, de Lauretis (2015: 110) argues that our sexual impulses are formed during our childhood, as contemplated by Freud, and are usually blocked and repressed by adults in line with our Western idea of sexual practices as social taboos, all of which is closely related to the dangerous writing of the novel.

As previously stated, the stigma attached to hiv/aids further reactivated homophobia³⁴ in the public sphere and produced an identity crisis, which forced the reformulation of the individual (Argüello, 2016: 238), thus opening up the possibility of more and diverse types of identifications. Ever since the appearance of hiv/aids in our Western world, certain types of people have been classified into risk groups; that is, communities of people who were believed to be more at risk of contracting the (retro)virus. The problem

³³ The idea of (de)constructing our gender (and sex) is directly associated with Judith Butler (*Gender Trouble*, 1990), who believes that our gender and sexual identity is acquired and learnt through a series of repetitive behaviours that we perform every day according to what is expected from us in a specific and historical sociocultural context; whether it is forced on us (heterosexuality is forced on almost everybody in the world at birth, often before birth) or whether it is a personal appropriation. She uses the idea of “drag” as a performance, reappropriating and reformulating Derrida’s concept of “performativity”, which we unconsciously act so as to be recognised as a specific category/identity in our society or community. This is reflected in the novel where the main characters try to break free from their imposed sexual/gender norms and codes.

³⁴ Together with general intolerance of all lgbtiq+ people. However, “homophobia” was the commonly accepted term in the 1980s, which was both inclusive and exclusive, although gay men were among the primary targets in the pandemic in the Western world.

is that those communities, more than being “at risk”, and hence in need of protection (or immunity), were first and foremost considered as “risky” - and primarily for the “wellbeing” of our society at large. Initially, in the U.S. it was mainly the four Hs: homosexuals, Haitians, haemophiliacs and heroin addicts (ibid. 240); and then also trans people, migrants, sex workers and “people of colour”. These groups of people were in fact already marginalised and stigmatised by the establishment, which saw in hiv/aids an opportunity to further destabilise them. However, the accent should have been put, and should still be put, on risk practices and not on risk (or even worse, “risky”) groups. In the sexual sphere, practices and behaviour should be prioritised over one’s identity or orientation, as many men who have sex with men (MSM), for example, do not consider themselves gay. The stigma is partially associated to sexual acts, one of the most frequent Western taboos; yet it is the mere belonging to a certain community or category that is considered risky for hiv. Furthermore, heterosexuality is seldom mentioned in hiv/aids prevention programmes, and heterosexual men in particular have remained a “forgotten group in the pandemic” (Higgins, Hoffman and Dworkin, 2010: 435). As a result of all these “questionable” practices undertaken by the political establishments and the pharmaceutical companies, in the Western world hiv/aids started to be taken more seriously into account only in the 1990s when it was perceived to be affecting the general population. This has been demonstrated in the U.S. in the film *The Normal Heart* (Ryan Murphy, 2014) and in France in *120 Beats per Minute* (Robin Campillo, 2017); as well as in the TV series *When We Rise* (Gus Van Sant, 2017) in the U.S., and in Britain in *It’s a Sin* (Russell T Davies, 2021), just to name a few examples.

Gamson (2003) asserts that queer theory should be considered an essential intervention in the health sciences (cited in Argüello, 2016: 231). However, health disciplines and social knowledge are largely characterised by cultural discourses, and this is especially true in the case of hiv. Argüello criticises the current logic of medicine as being based on facts and nature, and that by positioning

social matters against naturally fixed phenomena [. . .]. It produces a rational mind-body split in which the mind is the purview of philosophy and the body is the subject of medicine. And, it defines the laws of the body via its clinical gaze. (ibid. 232)

In addition, he attests that hiv is “both a biologic reality and a discursive syndrome of historically contingent meanings, situated politics, and marginalized identities” (ibid. 237). Thus, it is also an ontological threat because it represents a social stigma attached to the person who lives with it through discourses aimed at marginalisation. As a result,

even nowadays people living with hiv are commonly regarded as “the walking dead” (ibid. 238), an analogy that symbolises the ongoing social stigma attached to hiv.

To sum up, using Argüello’s words when discussing Waldby: “a queer perspective works to accommodate death within a positive ideal of life [...] and has more potential to bring into focus the intergenerational traumatic effects due to HIV and its epidemic of signification” (ibid. 238). Furthermore, Argüello argues that our Western culture has become obsessed with “risk”; however, he attests that: “Risk is evidence of all that professionals and public citizens cannot see or understand. Risk is life” (ibid. 242).

3. “Why else do we live, except to be loved and remembered by those we love?”: An introduction to community theory

Community theory was potently reconsidered in Europe³⁵ in the 1980s, around the same time “William of Heaven” was in New York City in the novel. This revision of the community debate was initiated notably by George Bataille during the first half of the 20th century, and continued by Jean-Luc Nancy, Maurice Blanchot and Roberto Esposito, among others.

3.1. Operative and inoperative communities: death and finitude

In *The Inoperative Community* (1991), Nancy describes an “operative community” as a working community: hierarchical, transcendental and usually heteropatriarchal. Similar to Ferdinand Tönnies’s *Gemeinschaft*,³⁶ it relies on blood ties, on commonality, on sacrifice, and on the sublimation of death. According to Nancy (ibid. 9), this type of community is often regarded as nostalgic and pastoral, with strong communitarian bonds that we seem to have lost in our modern world. Nonetheless, he recognises that this idealised and nostalgic community has never really existed because in order to do so it would need to be completely separated from the rest of the world (ibid. 11) and thus immunised from anything external and from outside threats. The aim of such a community would be absolute immanence (a communal fusion, self-contained) and

³⁵ They were debated notably in France, but also in Germany and Italy, as I will show in this text. This is still an ongoing discussion, also in the field of literary analysis (Rodríguez Salas, Martín Salván and López, 2018).

³⁶ According to Tönnies (1887), *Gemeinschaft* is an idealistic type of community: organic, old, genuine, homogenous, exclusive, united, with strong family bonds. Whereas *Gesellschaft* could be considered the society at large, based on production and on self-interest, related to the public sphere; heterogenous, competitive, individualistic and rather superficial, similar in fact to the general public society of New York City in the 1980s.

elimination of difference. Indeed, its principles recall the dangerous outcomes of Fascism and Nazism, including the failure of the attempt of the Soviet Communism.

In contrast, “the inoperative community”³⁷ is not associated with work and with the value of production. It is instead based on singularities without a common identity³⁸ and individual property; it is spontaneous, open to alterity, exposed to vulnerability through communication and secret sharing. Its encounters are momentary and imminent (*transience*), and it comes to terms with death: “Community is calibrated on death as on that of which it is precisely impossible to *make a work* (other than a work of death, as soon as one tries to make a work of it)” (ibid. 15). The concept of “singularity”, which chimes with the notion in the novel of the “shy hunter”, is explained by Nancy as follows:

A singular being does not emerge or rise up against the background of a chaotic, undifferentiated identity of beings, or against the background of their unitary assumption, or that of a becoming, or that of a will. A singular being appears, as finitude itself: at the end (or at the beginning), with the contact of the skin (or the heart) of another singular being. (ibid. 27-28)

Discussing finitude, a central aspect in community theory and in the inoperative communities analysed in this paper, Nancy reminds us “that the individual can be the origin and the certainty of nothing but its own death” (ibid. 3) and that “death is indissociable from community, for it is through death that the community reveals itself, and reciprocally” (ibid. 14). He also claims that community can only exist with finite beings and with the recognition of each other’s death, resulting not just in the impossibility of absolute immanence but also in “the impossibility of a communitarian being in the form of a subject” (ibid. 15). Thus, if we cannot be part of a communitarian “we” or a combined identity, we rely on the individual, which, according to Nancy is a “figure of immanence” (ibid. 3), an indivisible atom. “Still, 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 [. . .]. Community is at least the *clinamen* of the *individual*” (ibid. 3-4). However, he also reminds us that “[s]ingularity never takes place at the level of atoms, those identifiable if not identical identities; rather it takes place at the level of the *clinamen*, which is unidentifiable” (ibid. 6-7). The idea of inclination from one singularity to another, or of “being-with” and “being-together”³⁹, and the recognition of

³⁷ From now on, “operative” and “inoperative” communities will be written without quotation marks.

³⁸ In Spanbauer’s novel, “identity” is contrasted with “individuality” (see chapter 2).

³⁹ The concepts of “being-with” and “being-together” were used primarily, but not exclusively, by the German philosopher Martin Heidegger.

death, is thus essential in Nancy's concept of an inoperative community.

3.2. The community of lovers

Blanchot confronts and expands Nancy's communitarian debate in *The Unavowable Community* (1998). Through a close reading of *La Maladie de la Mort* by Marguerite Duras (1982), Blanchot describes *the community of lovers*, which is "formed by *friends* or *couples*" (1988: 33), as spontaneous, vulnerable, based on secrecy and revelation. Its encounters are momentary and self-dissolving (normally binary: two persons) and it usually occurs within an inoperative community. In his own words, it is

the affirmation of a relationship so singular between beings that love itself is not necessary for it, as love, which by the way is never a certainty, may impose its requirements on a circle where its obsessions can go so far as taking on the form of the impossibility of loving. (ibid. 34)

This type of relationship is concerned with the other and is not restricted to a conscious or unconscious "I" (ibid.).⁴⁰ It is a relation without relation, which echoes the principle of Blanchot's "negative community": "the community of those who have no community" (ibid. 50); that is, the connection of singularities that are open to and embrace alterity without a common purpose. Accordingly, Blanchot quotes these significant words from Duras' *récit*: "I die without having lived, having never done anything but dying while living" (ibid. 37). The two "lovers" in the *récit* are totally isolated from the society that surrounds them (ibid. 38), thus maintaining an antisocial positionality, and according to Collins (2018):

The man cannot love because he is an immanent subject, a totality. Yet, he still desires, because of the insufficiency of being, to move toward the others. He longs to call forth community through approach. But, in that approach, he meets the Other as contestation that puts himself radically into question. The gift of the presence of the other is radically more than he bargained for, and it presents to him the reality of his death. (26)

Blanchot argues that whenever loving somebody is possible, it is due not to desire, but rather through a "mistake [. . .]. Never through an act of will" (1988: 41). He then highlights the woman's last words in the *récit*: "Even so you have managed to live that love in the only way possible for you. Losing it before it happened" (ibid. 42). Hence, love is experienced through loss, as so often happens to Will in the novel. Moreover,

⁴⁰ The relationship between a man ("you") and a woman ("she") in Duras' *La Maladie de la Mort* relies on power, on an exchange, contract or transaction, "in which it is the one who pays or supports who is dominated" (Blanchot, 1998: 36).

Blanchot comments that even if the community of lovers does not entirely rely on love - something which renders it paradoxical - it is not imposed but “elective” (ibid. 46); it is therefore a free choice without an agenda. He also claims that “[t]he community of lovers, no matter if the lovers want it or not [. . .], has as its ultimate goal the destruction of society” (ibid. 48). This denotes the possibility of a relationship founded on some kind of attraction and trust between two or more people who are totally exposed to each other (ibid. 50), and who are socially marginalised, hence, driven by antisociality, and yet possibly in need of each other, as in the case of Will’s encounters, which often involve singularities dying of aids.

Eventually, the community of lovers breaks with all identity bonds and with all the processes of subjectification. It is formed by chance, by crazy love or passion for death (death drive), which can in fact be a threat for the society (or *Gesellschaft*), not on account of its violence, but rather its “virulence”, and its capacity for contagion (qtd. in García López, 2011: 227), which idea fits in with Roberto Esposito’s concept of *immunitas*.⁴¹

3.3. Community and immunity

Following the subsequent debates on community theory from Nancy, Blanchot and Giorgio Agamben (1993), in 1998 Esposito introduced the notions of *communitas* and *immunitas* in *Communitas: Origine e Destino della Comunità* (new version in 2006).⁴² He argues that the relationship between community and violence has generated two categories: *communitas*, in reference to the common/public, and *immunitas*, related to the particular/private (qtd. in García López, 2011: 220). An important concept in Esposito’s analysis (2006: XI) is the *munus*, which is a particular gift or donation that implies a duty upon the recipient whereby the gift, once accepted, must be returned to the *communitas* by way of goods or services. On the other hand, *immunitas* is the negative or “lacking” form of *communitas*, where the “immune” person maintains their substance, freedom, and exemption from paying debts (ibid. XIII). This political strategy aims at avoiding the

⁴¹ Communitarian theorists have never seemed to take into account the gender dimension of humanity (or community), as I do in this paper. In fact, the language used by Bataille, Nancy and Blanchot is always androcentric, referring to a generic person as “man” / “he”, thus reducing women to “the other”, and it never includes other nonbinary gender or sexual identities (French, note, still uses *homme / il* as inclusive forms but even the English translation copied this, using “man” / “he” as universal and inclusive terms). Nonetheless, Blanchot’s comment on homosexuality is rather interesting for the purpose of my analysis: “Homosexuality, to come to that name which is never pronounced, is not ‘the malady of death’, as it is difficult to contest that all the nuances of sentiment, from desire to love, are possible between beings, be they alike or unlike” (1998: 51).

⁴² In this text I will refer to the latest version of 2006.

danger of transmission (or infection) of the “common”: the contagion of a relationship (ibid. XXI) or a virus (e.g., hiv). Esposito believes that the quintessential category of modernity is the *immunitas*.

However, he also reminds us that immunity is interconnected with death. A vaccine (that is, usually the same, or a similar virus injected at very low doses or in an inactive form), exposes the body to the infection and hence to the possibility of death (ibid. 11). This protection cannot be expelled from our body because it is produced by our immune system itself, so the “virus” will always be a part of ourselves (ibid). In the case of hiv, a vaccine has never been found to date. This fact increases and prolongs its social stigma as the infection must be controlled by antiretrovirals for life, at least in the Western world, often with life-threatening side effects,⁴³ meaning that it is effectively both medicine and poison at the same time.⁴⁴

Moreover, unlike his predecessors, Esposito has contributed to the recovery of the political dimension of community through the paradigm of immunity, in which certain people enjoy diplomatic or parliamentary immunity while the vast majority is subjected to the law:

But it is equally recognizable in the medical and biological meanings of the term, according to which natural or induced immunization implies the ability of the body, by means of its own antibodies, to resist an infection caused by an external virus. (ibid. 84-85)

As we can clearly see, the politics behind this reasoning is a form of *biopolitics*, where biology and medicine mingle with law and jurisdiction (ibid. 85). Thus, politics deals with the biological life, which can refer to individuals, “but also to particular communities” (ibid.); and biopolitics discloses two internal possibilities in the immunisation paradigm: affirmative/positive (protection) and negative (destruction/negation), echoing Derrida’s concepts of immunisation and self-immunisation (ibid. 86). This is directly connected to hiv, which is an autoimmune infection that without the antiretrovirals would become a syndrome (aids), due to the exposure of “opportunistic diseases or infections” (e.g., tuberculosis and certain types of meningitis, pneumonia or cancer), where the immune system of our body, in the fight against the (retro)virus, becomes so strong as to turn against itself. The same occurs when

⁴³ The infection caused by hiv, apart from the adverse effects generated by the antiretrovirals (usually in the long term), further accelerates the aging effect in the body (Horvath and Levine, 2015), frequently exposing it to different types of cancer (Kaposi’s sarcoma was common before the antiretrovirals), among other deteriorating conditions.

⁴⁴ Esposito (2006: 10) denominates this type of antidote as *pharmakon*.

we receive immunity, be it individual, social or political, at higher doses. An example is our globalised neoliberal world, where the demand for protection of our Western countries from “the outside” becomes an expression of danger (be it real or not), thus activating defensive and hostile mechanisms against it (ibid.). Esposito’s intent is to employ the potentially affirmative function of biopolitics, instead of using it with threatening purposes. In fact, he claims that biopolitics has always been a part of our political life. “But what caused the first modern intensification and, later on, during the totalitarian phase, its thanatopolitical development,⁴⁵ was its immunitary character” (2013: 87).

Esposito argues that there is a strong need for affirmative biopolitics where life would no longer be the object of politics but rather the subject (ibid.). However, I believe that there has always been resistance to use affirmative biopolitics, with its idea that people’s lives should matter more than money. Clear examples of this are the crisis of hiv/aids and the current globalised emergency brought about by Covid-19. Governments and corporations all over the world seem reluctant to prioritise the preservation of our health and life over maintaining a globalised neoliberal economic system which, based on massive privatisation, clearly prioritises the economy over life, with the risk of collapsing both. Esposito’s answer to the problem would be to find

the balance of power between ‘common’ and ‘immune’; to separate the immunitary protection of life from its destruction by means of the common; to conceptualize the function of immune systems in a different way, making them into relational filters between inside and outside instead of exclusionary barriers. (ibid. 87)

Consequently, he proposes the deactivation of the structures of negative immunisation “accompanied by the production of common spaces, spheres, and dimensions” (ibid.). However, he recognises the immense obstacle to this represented by the hyper-globalised privatisation system, which has increasingly taken over environmental resources, communal areas, cultural assets, health systems,⁴⁶ but also spaces for communication and instruments of information (ibid. 89). In Esposito’s words:

The common is neither the public, which is dialectically opposed to the private, nor the global, to which the local corresponds. It is something largely unknown, and even refractory, to our conceptual categories, which have long been organized by the general immune dispositif. (ibid.)

⁴⁵ This refers to the Nazi regime.

⁴⁶ For example, the cost of the antiretrovirals produced by private pharmaceutical companies is astronomical, which makes it impossible to sustain in many countries.

3.4. Community and secrecy

Secrecy, which is an important aspect to both dangerous writing and community theory, is explored by Matei Călinescu (1994: 443) in terms of the concept of rereading, more specifically rereading for the secret. Rereading a novel is of paramount importance for its critical analysis. Moreover, narrative is “a process of unfolding and revelation. It is precisely because there are things that remain hidden from us, and because we want to know what these things are, that we continue to read” (Bennet and Royle, 2004: 241). The figure of the narrator of the story (Will) is fundamental for the discovering or disclosing of secrets and revelations. Thus, the “communities of secrecy”, which in my analysis are represented by the inoperative community and the community of lovers, are those that do not respond to traditional and conventional collective forms based upon national identity, social class, ethnicity, gender and sexuality. These antisocial communities form non-homogenic bonds, open to difference to the other, manifested in secret and interrupted language.

Furthermore, secrecy as linked to inoperative models of community reacts against traditional perceptions that conceive secrecy as foundational for operative models of community. Derrida calls the latter a “classical concept of the secret”; that is, the secret upon which the exclusive and excluding character of the “community, solidarity or the sect” is built (1994: 35-36). Nancy, in turn, speaks of the “*founding fiction*” of Western myths (1991: 17), “the nostalgia for a communal being” (ibid. 46) and “the desire for a work of death” (ibid. 53). As clarified by Gerardo Rodríguez Salas in his study of this classical notion of secrecy, “this secret is the foundation of the operative or traditional model, a secret linked to its essence in the form of purity, sacrifice, sacredness, or violence” (2021: 125). On the other hand, in inoperative communities, such as those explored in Spanbauer’s novel, secrecy is shared by the members of these alternative and antisocial associations, a secret held against the society that stigmatises or renders them invisible. It is therefore a type of secrecy that dynamites the general model of community and escapes foundational myths and communal essentialism.

CHAPTER 2. ANALYSIS OF THE NOVEL

All the themes discussed in this chapter are interconnected with dangerous writing and with its social taboos that are present in the novel. In section one, queer singularities will be analysed, including the idea of “crossing over”, and in contrast with toxic masculinity. In section two, the concepts of the inoperative community and the community of lovers will be applied to the novel. Section three will be dedicated to the disclosure of the novel’s secrecy and revelations. Finally, in section four, I will analyse the issue of hiv-related stigma, discussing immunity and finitude.

1. “It’s a tale lip-synched by a drag queen”: Queer singularities vs toxic masculinity

Most of the main characters in the novel could be considered queer singularities: Will, Bobbie, Charlie, Rose, Ruby and Fiona. They all try to escape fixed and hegemonic gender and sexual identities and they are not part of any clear-cut community. They are defined more by what they do, and by what they feel, than by what they are. Will mainly falls in love with Charlie (a boy), but then in New York he also falls for Rose (a drag queen) and Fiona (a woman); hence, in terms of sexual orientation, he could easily be considered “pansexual”. In his adolescent time in Idaho Will struggles with his gender, but Charlie is there for him: “It’s always me, I said, Who screams like a girl, I said. When we play Door of the Dead [. . .], No matter how hard I try not to. That’s when Charlie kissed me” (122).⁴⁷ Whilst in New York he understands performativity as part of one’s singularity:

Life is an art and art is a game, I said. This is all an illusion, I said. *Asobase kotoba*. So why not continue playing? I said, I see that you are playing at being a great Susan Strong, I said, And I’m playing at being a great Will Parker. (186)

From the little information we can gather from her brief life, Bobbie does not conform to expected gender stereotypes either. In one instance, Charlie is questioning whether she is a lesbian because she has a stack of magazines full of half-naked women, but to Charlie’s surprise, and ignoring the issue, she instead asks him a question, turning the focus on his identity: “Injuns got straight hair. Where did you get them waves?” (121).

As for Fiona, she questions defined identities or belonging to a community, but she understands the necessity for human rights:

⁴⁷ From now on, all the page numbers, such as (122), will refer to the novel unless otherwise stated.

So, us poor orphan American bastards struggle for some kind of belonging – gay, black, feminists, Native Americans. But don't get me wrong. I love both my two brothers Hunter and Gus and they're both fags [. . .], And I sleep with women now and then – so how can I not be for gay rights? And women's rights – I mean I'm a woman, right? How could you be a woman and be against women's rights? And black rights and red rights and brown rights and yellow rights – shit, people only get what they get because they fight for it. (76)

She then explains her view on bisexuals, considering that men are not “proper bisexuals”. In her opinion, bisexual women are the decent ones, whereas “[b]est man to fuck with is a man who's been fucked in the ass, Fiona said. Makes a man more attentive” (83).

Rose, as a drag queen who falls in love with Will, is another clear example of a queer singularity. In a conversation with Will, she gives a salient explanation of the imbalance between femininity and masculinity in our world, commenting also on different types of discrimination, and so giving voice to fundamental principles shared by queer theory and *transfeminism*:

We are living in a time where meaning has been obliterated by an excess of the male [. . .]. We take it as given that the White Paranoid Patriarch [. . .] is our voice, our spokesman. We take it as given that Christianity and the belief in Jesus H. Christ as our savior is the only religious truth because some white guy says so [. . .]. We take it as given that women do not make as much money as men. We take it as given that Native Americans are a conquered people and should live on those patches of infertile land we let them live. We take it as given that sex is male penetrating female. We are living in a world of false assumptions, Rose said, bracelets clack-clack. Ergo: that which appears to be is not. (253)

Another aspect that I consider queer in the novel is the dual idea of “crossing over”, that is, reaching Manhattan and changing your name. According to Ruby, when you cross over you need a new name, so you change it and with it possibly even your identity, thus claiming your own singularity: “Will of Heaven!” (27). Ruby, talking about Fiona, suggests that her name should start with “one of these fucking *f*'s”, and “last night she was Harlequin, a fool in costume” (366). Will connects crossing over with fear about accepting one's gender and sexual identity:

Since I was a Crossover, and a Crossover is someone who what he's afraid of happens to him, I might as well let it happen. Let gay, let pride, happen to me. I loved Charlie, and Charlie was a boy, a boy I had sex with. I couldn't get it up for Fiona. Now Rose. (305)

However, Rose notices how Will is confused with his sexuality and offers to help him to accept himself, to stop hiding (at the Pride Parade) and to say the word: “Gay [. . .]. You can say it. Gay, I said. And proud [. . .]. I smiled” (312).

Finally, for this section, an important issue raised in the novel is toxic masculinity, which is in total contrast with feminist and queer positionalities, and hence is of inherent interest here. Two characters in the novel represent this type of masculinity: Will's father and Sergeant Richard White. Will's father constantly rapes his daughter Bobbie, who gets pregnant at the age of sixteen (146). Eventually, Will's mother tries to confront her husband:

Cotton Parker, Mother said, Now you listen up! We ain't afraid of you no more. We ain't following your rules no more. We're tired of being bullied by a damned old drunk sonofabitch! [. . .]. And Bobbie's got a dog in her room. And your son Will's got an Injun in his. That's not all Bobbie's got in her room, I said. But it's not the truth. I didn't open my mouth. (214)

Bobbie gets hold of her father's gun and, encouraged by her mother, shoots but misses him. The result is a much more unbalanced and troubled family:

Well, now, Father said. My dear sweet little Bobbie girl, Father said. The light of my life! You sure do look mighty pretty today. Shut up! Bobbie said. You'll shoot your mother too at this range, Father said. She wants to go too, Bobbie said. Don't you, Mother? Mother smiled, smoothed the black dress across her hips, stepped closer. Careful, Mother! Bobbie said. Don't block him [. . .]. Listen up, Mr. Rodeo Fucking Clown, Bobbie said. Don't you ever fucking ever, lay a hand on Mama again [. . .]. We've had enough! Bobbie said. All of us! Bobbie said. Isn't that right, Will? [. . .]. Just shoot! Mother cried, and fell down on her knees. Dear God, just shoot! Bobbie swung the shotgun to the left and pulled the trigger. Shotgun blast real loud and a hole in the plaster wall bigger around than Father was wide. Mother screamed, or Father screamed. Maybe it was me. (215)

A few days later, Will is accidentally sleeping in Bobbie's bed alone and at night his father pays (him) a visit, thinking that it is Bobbie in the bed. In the dark, he starts caressing and touching Will, until he realises it is his son and jumps out of the bed. Will, as narrator, thus gives us a confirmation of his father's incestuous brutality, and is the discloser of this particular secret (220).

As for Sergeant White in New York, he first confronts Will in this scene:

You a faggot? The sergeant said. Round face, pinker than Harry O'Connor, thin blondish-red hair [. . .]. You always stutter? When I'm not singing, I said [. . .]. Ever had sex with him? Sergeant said [. . .]. He had a big one, the sergeant said. Puerto Rican. 'Course, you know all about Puerto Ricans. And Italians. And blacks [. . .]. Then: You Italian? the sergeant said. Language is my second language. I'm black, I said – just like that – I'm black. (139)

On another occasion, Ruby remarks upon Sergeant White's alleged masculinity and repressed sexuality, revealing that when drunk he loses his inhibitions:

Around here, they call him Sergeant White Supremacy. And talk about *short*. His dick is *ugly!* Tiny little pink thing, no bigger than your thumb. Likes to get drunk and come down here. Likes black men with big ones [. . .]. I hate the motherfucker. Fucked me one night [. . .]. Lips at my ear: Some day soon, Ruby whispered, Mark my words, some day I'm going to kill that cop! (361-362)

Towards the end of the novel, Will understands that his role is to kill the monster (Sergeant White) and then save the maiden (Fiona):⁴⁸

When I turned around, Sergeant White Supremacy was a big pink smiley face. The barrel of his gun now between my eyes. The horrific whisper: You Italian? [. . .]. I'm the survivor, I said [. . .]. You're a faggot, he said. (495)

Then, just like that, using Rose's revolver, Will shoots Sergeant White between his eyes. Hence, he kills the monster: "The terrible things done to the world by the father. I paid the devil his due" (497).

2. Community configurations in the novel

Although the closest individuals to Will during his upbringing cannot be considered an operative community as such, they nonetheless represent a community, albeit one that can only exist in conditions of constant menace (father/toxic masculinity). Their lives are defined by objective violence, which is divided into symbolic violence (manifested through language) and systematic violence, related to the homogenic functioning of political and economic systems (Žižek, 2009: 9-10). This violence can have its roots in cultural demands that stem from "biological" links (like family ties), which are often based on obedience, religion, immunity and restriction of freedom and individual independence, and which sometimes result in sacrifice, incest, rape and suicide – themes closely related to the novel and to dangerous writing. On the other hand, in the capitalist and neoliberal society (similar to the idea of a *Gesellschaft*), such as the New York of the 1980s, there is a strict hierarchical (dis)order in which there is subjective violence, in this case based on social resistance movements, like riots and demonstrations.⁴⁹ Naturally, this is in addition to the above-mentioned objective violence, which is the least visible and possibly the most dangerous form because it sustains the norm and its associated hegemonic power (qtd. in García López, 2011: 219). Above and beyond this violence - and most importantly for my analysis - there is also a terrible social threat and stigma: the

⁴⁸ Story based on the Wolf Swamp (Manhattan) legend, told by Charlie to True Shot, who in turn, tells Will.

⁴⁹ Antisocial movements such as ACT UP and anti-war protests; or, more recently, Black Lives Matter and Black Trans Lives Matter. This type of antisocial rebellion can also include right-wing movements.

risk of hiv transmission and death, hence the need for the protagonists of the novel to incline towards each other, forming a *clinamen*.

2.1. “All this family shit! How can you reinvent your life if the original versions won’t leave you alone?”: The inoperative community

The main characters in the novel, notably Will and his encounters in New York, are a good example of an inoperative community and of singularities, where vulnerability serves to expose their mortal truth. In Will’s words:

Five people I know: Ruby, True Shot, Rose, Susan Strong, Harry. One’s a junkie, one’s a spirit schlepper, one’s a Shakespearean drag queen, one’s idiot-savant mother fucked a truck driver, one is New York’s only Irish Catholic homosexual. Two I count as friends, Rose and True Shot. One is just a voice on my answering machine, Ruby. One is attached to the other one, Harry. (186)

During Will’s childhood and adolescence in Idaho, he, Bobbie, and Charlie can be considered as singularities forming an inoperative community because they are social outcasts who need to go towards one another, totally exposing themselves to each other, in an otherwise hostile social and family environment.

In New York, Will is made aware of the importance of “being-together” or “being-with” his new friends and how he inclines towards them (which is a clear case of *clinamen*), and then how their subsequent deaths affect him.

Will’s sole purpose in New York is to find Charlie 2Moons. His job in a restaurant is not aimed at production, it is only needed to survive. Therefore, he is on a mission, not for the sake of a community or society, but rather - in line with dangerous writing - to heal his sore heart, which makes him both a singularity and a shy hunter. Furthermore, all the people he meets in New York are likewise survivors, operating not for a community or society at large but on the margins of that society, as I alluded to above. Before coming to New York, Rose, who has a doctorate in Theatre Arts, secured a teaching job at the university in Portland (Oregon), but was rejected for tenure due to her ethnicity: “I figured fuck it. It was best to get out of academia [. . .]. So I moved to New York, Rose said, And became a drag queen” (409).

True Shot is another survivor and social outcast: he is not interested in working to produce money (and his alleged Native American origins are somewhat dubious). Ruby

Prestigiacomio is a drug user, who spends most of their⁵⁰ time in “Dog Shit Park”, they do not have a permanent residence and they are not producing for a specific community nor for society. Fiona and Harry too are survivors, not fully integrated into society, disinterestedly waiting on tables while aspiring to be professional artists. When Will arrives in New York, he is spotted by Ruby Prestigiacomio and True Shot, who are driving the “Door of the dead van” (17). Back in Idaho, Will, Bobbie and Charlie used to play a game called “door of the dead”; Spanbauer is making a connection here with finitude, with the idea that our lives are just temporary, all synonyms of an inoperative community. Ruby tells Will that in “Wolf Swamp” (Manhattan) there are two types of people: Pharisees and fools. According to Ruby, Pharisees are cunning, logical and directed by power; while fools are directed by spirit, and are illogical, scared and lonely (64). This makes “fools” singularities in an inoperative community where they perform a role: “Harlequin is a fool with consciousness, Ruby said, A fool who puts on a costume. The difference between a fool and Harlequin is Harlequin knows he is hiding” (65). Ruby also stresses the importance of living for the moment: “What a Talent for Reality is [. . .], Is acknowledging that you’re here and remembering it” (57). On a similar note, Fiona marks a difference between identity and individuality: “Identity is your role in life, the part you play. Individuality is who you are, and who you are is revealed to you if you can get to complete presence” (74). Thus, forming a thread connecting individuality to singularity, and then to the queer concept of playing a role: “The idea being that you are in such control of your life and your powers that everything is a game [. . .]. The fates lead her⁵¹ who will; who won’t they drag” (75).

Turning to the shy hunters, who could be considered singularities (in this case mostly queer) inside an inoperative community, Rose explains that they are terrified that others will destroy the truth within their heart; hence they protect themselves and hunt out the sore truth: “No one surprises a Shy Hunter, Rose said. Not even death [. . .]. It is the best of combinations, Rose said. The Shy and the Hunter” (134). Moreover, Rose argues that darkness is something that we should not reject because in our society there is too much light and “[t]he Shy Hunter knows underneath it all there is nothing, no thing [. . .], The

⁵⁰ Will considers Ruby as male, just like Rose, hence the use of the masculine pronouns when he refers to Ruby in the novel. However, we do not know for certain what pronouns Ruby would have chosen for himself/herself/themselves. Although Spanbauer, through Will, has used masculine pronouns, in this paper I have decided instead to use the nonbinary and inclusive “they/their/them” in their singular form for Ruby (instead of one of the less common nonbinary singular pronouns, such as “ze”).

⁵¹ Spanbauer, unlike Will or Rose, makes Fiona aware of people’s inclusive pronouns. In this case Fiona uses the feminine pronouns as a generic and inclusive form.

thing is a lie, an illusion. The only *thing* there is is your concept of the thing. That's illumination" (256). Rose also reminds Will that the submissive Christians follow everything like sheep and that people like her and Will are fools, admitting that "the lucid compulsion to act polemically determines the substance of the self. By going against the gods, you become more and more who you are [. . .]. You know, Rose said, You forget to stutter when you're drunk" (256-257). Returning to gender unbalance to discuss death, she argues that the female is

the bringer of life from out of darkness. She brings life, but because she gave us life, now we must face death [. . .]. Our fear of death has turned us against the female [. . .]. The excess of the male principle, Rose said, Has created an illusion of reality we all assume is true [. . .] The society she [Antigone] lived in feared the female as well, for the same reason every mother's son has ever hated the female: With life comes death. (274-275)

In addition, Rose criticises the modern society (of the 1980s) in which there is a return to Christian fundamentalism and family values, as well as an "increase in police forces, emphasis on law and order, construction of more prisons – all these are signs of the White Paranoid Patriarch's approaching extinction" (286).

Undoubtedly, Will finds comfort in the company of this inoperative community where its singularities depend and lean on each other and where they all suffer directly and indirectly from the horrors of HIV/AIDS, forcing them to confront reality, expose their true selves and deal with finitude. These singularities are people who, in concordance with dangerous writing, spontaneously form a family union (an inoperative community), thus positioning themselves outside the "biological" family, which nobody chooses and which at times can be oppressive.

2.2. "Doubt thou the stars are fire; Doubt that the sun doth move; Doubt truth to be a liar; But never doubt I love":⁵² The community of lovers

According to the principle of Blanchot's community of lovers, love can only exist through an antisocial dimension and a death drive, losing itself before it materialises. There are several examples of this type of relationship in the novel. First, Charlie and Will, whose love is, for various reasons, extremely fragile. We learn that Will starts getting intimate with Charlie, who is a little older than him, when he is about twelve. Their ethnicity is another factor to consider: Will being from a white Catholic family with a racist father, and Charlie being a mixed-heritage "Injun". Theirs is a form of strong passion predestined

⁵² Words (from *Hamlet*) whispered by the Shakespearean drag queen Rose to Will just before dying (473).

not to endure. They seek to become blood brothers (without knowing that they already are) by cutting their wrists and mingling their blood, swearing an oath to seal their secret blood pact:

We'll be blood brothers, Charlie said. We'll have the same blood [. . .]. I promise to always tell the truth to you. I promise that your secrets are always safe with me. I promise always to respect you and love you. I will never betray you I promise I will never forget you. (169-171)

Will repeats the same words and then they have sex. This is a type of love that vanishes in the blink of an eye, and all that remains for Will is a memory of Charlie: "A photograph. No bigger than the palm of my hand. Things and the meaning of things" (36), and a desperate cry: "Please Charlie, I said, Forgive me. You got to forgive me. I didn't have a fucking clue what to do" (37). The circumstances that lead up to Bobbie's death and Will's subsequent lie to protect a terrible secret are the cataclysm for the destruction of this community of lovers, despite Will's later attempts in New York to rescue it: aids gets there before him.

Earlier on in Idaho, Bobbie, Charlie and Will initiate a love and sex triangle, based on the same principle of the fraternity/sorority blood pact explained above. Before having sex with Will and Charlie (only once), Bobbie summarises "her concept" of a community of lovers as follows:

Listen up! [. . .]. All of us, each one of us here, is fucked up [. . .]. Charlie 2Moons, Bobbie said, You're a half-breed oversexed homo, Will Parker, Bobbie said. You're a crybaby and a homo [. . .]. And me, Bobbie said, Me, Barbara Lynn Parker, I'm a sixteen-year-old slut who's fucking her daddy. Now, I might be wrong, Bobbie said, But I don't think so. There ain't a whole lot of hope for us [. . .]. But we got each other [. . .]. This will be our secret. The thing that we'll never tell. The thing that will bind us together forever. (245-246)

After that, Will tries to get an erection to be able to penetrate his sister, helped by Charlie's kisses on his mouth:

Bobby's cry at first I thought was me. When my ears heard the cry was hers I knew it in my blood: It was the cry inside Bobbie all her life. Looks like the pain, sounds like pain. The little scream that gives it all away. Help. (248)

This incestuous situation interconnects the community of lovers with dangerous writing and its social taboos. Bobbie is raped by her father, one of the most difficult taboos to counteract because it happens within a heteropatriarchal family unit, considered one of the most "natural" form of family. On the other hand, the incest between Bobbie, Will

and Charlie is voluntary and is not imposed, which chimes with Blanchot's community of lovers as being an antisocial pact. It is in fact planned by Bobbie, and most importantly, it represents a moment of fulfilment and detachment for the three of them: "We are still lying there, in the meadow, on the muddy grass, after the tornado. Bobbie, Charlie, and I. Roadkill" (ibid.).

Another example of what could be considered a community of lovers is the special relationship between Will and his mother, where they sometimes play at being boyfriend and girlfriend, changing roles when necessary. However, this is not a clear case of incest because there is no sexual activity involved. This particular community of lovers is one that is affected by threat and finitude: Will's mother commits suicide as a result of the continuous abuse from her husband, of losing a baby and, finally, due to her daughter's tragic death; basically, after losing her mind. These are some of her last words to Will:

No matter what happens, even if something bad happens, Mother said, promise that you will always love me. That you won't forget me. That you'll remember me. Promise me you'll never leave me [. . .]. Why else do we live, except to be loved and remembered by those we love? I promise, I said. (265)

Rose is not particularly shocked when Will tells her of the incest acts (the voluntary one). On the contrary, she finds the subject of incest fascinating to explain:

The Greeks, Rose said, Believed that when incest was vertical – that is [. . .], Father with daughter, mother with son – that the child of this union was born a hero [. . .], the child's task is to restore order to the universe [. . .]. On the other hand, Rose said, If the incest was horizontal – that is, brother with sister - the child of this union was born a monster [. . .]. And your situation [. . .], Is unique because actually you were your mother's boyfriend – physically speaking, weren't you? Plus then you fucked your sister [. . .]. Vertical and horizontal [. . .], Ergo, Rose said, You are both the hero and the monster. The hunter and the prey. (294-295)

In New York City, Will engages himself with two types of community of lovers, as represented by Rose and Fiona. His love with them is intense and it happens spontaneously; simultaneously guided by a strong sense of survival and a death drive. Before being a lover, Rose is a guide and a dear friend; she is the person who, in my opinion, best gets to know Will, teaching him how to survive and how to become a shy hunter. Before Rose's self-immolation, she leaves Will a note:

The time has come for all good men to come to the AIDS of their country.⁵³ All daring and courage, all

⁵³ Quotation adapted from Charles E. Weller (1918: 21)'s "Now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of the party". Often quoted as "of their country". Rose uses a play on words: "aid/AIDS".

iron endurance of misfortune, make for a fine, nobler type of manhood.⁵⁴ Don't worry about the puppies. Elizabeth⁵⁵ has taken them. Love, Rose. (462)

In the case of Fiona, she inclines towards Will especially after the death of her best friend Harry and her two brothers (aids) and ultimately of her mother (suicide). She realises that her and Will's lives are worth but a moment, echoing the transient duration of the community of lovers: "Finally, Fiona said, Our lives just come down to moment, don't they?" (303). Will fears for Fiona's mental stability: "Don't ever leave me, I said. I'm going to four funerals, Fiona said. Don't leave me, Fiona" (413). However, Fiona wanders lost in the city and ends up stranded in "Dog Shit Park". When Will accidentally bumps into her, he realises that she is pregnant (of him), "shit happens" (452), and she is going insane: "The horrific whisper: Everybody dies" (454). She is looking for a cure for hiv/aids and she thinks she has it (455). Ultimately, Fiona runs away from Will and from life: "Fiona was gone. Not on the premises. Nowhere. Lost the way. Lost the world. Lost for words. Lost on the blue road. No Lost and Found" (458). Ergo: "Rose was gone. True Shot was gone. Ruby dead. Charlie dead. Fiona nuts" (462).⁵⁶

3. "Things start where you don't know and they end up where you know": Secrecy and revelation

Secrecy and revelation are important components of community theory, since among the singularities who belong to an inoperative community or a community of lovers, communication often takes the form of antisocial secrecy. This is in accord with Spanbauer's dangerous writing style, in which secrets and revelations, often related to social taboos, are continuously maintained and revealed. *In the City of Shy Hunters* unfolds its secrets gradually and, as expected, mostly towards the end, although Spanbauer does give us clues from the beginning.

The first secret/revelation is related to Bobbie, who undergoes a cheap and illegal abortion (393): this is clearly an example of antisocial secrecy, as it was illegal in the early 1970s in Idaho, and furthermore Bobbie was raised Catholic and only 16 at the time. Yet she knew she would not keep her father's seed within her: the incest ghost inside Bobbie. Thus, like Rose, she opts for an auto-immunitary act; she is a victim of

⁵⁴ Quotation by Theodore Roosevelt, inscribed on a statue in New York City, according to the novel.

⁵⁵ Elizabeth Taylor was Rose's best friend.

⁵⁶ Will's relationship with Ruby Prestigiacomo is not one of reciprocal love; rather, it is a type of friendship that vanishes too soon, as Ruby is brutally assassinated by Sergeant White. Likewise, True Shot is just a good friend, who, according to Blanchot's theory, could be a potential "lover"; however, in my opinion, there are not the right circumstances for them to be considered a community of lovers.

heteropatriarchal abuse and her attempted abortion is a form of protection from societal prejudice. Unfortunately, due to the botched abortion, which causes an excessive blood discharge and the shame that goes with it, Bobbie hangs herself, which is itself another antisocial act, given the preaching against suicide in the Catholic creed. It is Will who finds her: “The moment that, after, you’re different” (398). In front of her sister’s lifeless body, Will is devastated: “If we could freeze moments in time” (415). Will’s mother does not want to accept that Bobbie was continually raped by her father, so, together with her husband, she chooses instead to confront Will and Charlie in order to find an “alternative” truth. Will becomes speechless, once again language becomes his second language: “Lost soul, lost the way, lost the world, lost for words. No lost and found” (417). Fearing his father and under pressure Will tells his biggest lie: “Yes, Charlie fucked her, And I fucked her too, I said. But it’s not the truth. Charlie’s the father, I said” (418). As a result, Charlie is whipped on his face by Will’s father: “And just like that you were gone, into the night, down the back stairs, Charlie 2Moons out of my life, forever” (419). All these secrets are clearly antisocial as they relate to incest, abortion and suicide, and are a fundamental aspect of the communication among the singularities of these inoperative communities.

Finally, the most important revelation and mystery of all is for Will to discover what happened to Charlie. The answer was there from day one in New York: when True Shot first meets Will he is wearing a buckskin bag containing Charlie’s ashes (23). True Shot had in fact met Charlie, who, after “crossing over”, was going under the name of Fred. True Shot could not make the connection because Charlie/Fred had aids and took drugs and so looked much older and had no teeth. It is instead Will who manages to put all the pieces together: “The mystery. The true mystery. Everything is there all along and you just don’t realize it” (383). Another bearer of a secret is Charlie’s grandfather: “Grandfather Alessandro said, Charlie said, That I am your brother. Brother, I said? What does he mean? [. . .]. Hell if I know! Charlie said. I just thought we should make it official” (171). And this secret is finally revealed to Will by True Shot after he visits Charlie’s grandfather: “You were Charlie’s brother, Will. Your father had an affair with Viv. Charlie’s father is your father, Will” (488). This is a further example of antisocial secrecy as it destabilises the blood ties as socially perceived (and moreover through another act of incest, although Will and Charlie did not know they were “half-brothers”).

Affected by all these secrets, revelations and deaths, Will observes the transformation in his new singular form:

The strange sense of otherness about me. Even myself, there was some other self on me hanging on my bones. Something about myself I'd never recognized before that was with me, that was on the objects of my world, on my body, the way after a hot shower fog gets on the mirror. (478)

Eventually, during the riots in "Dog Shit Park", Will has a revelation about his traumatic journey, which summarises the purpose of his inoperative community formed by (queer) singularities and by the disclosure of antisocial secrecy:

My task was nothing compared to True Shot's, or Rose's, or Fiona's. True Shot's task was to restore order to the universe. Rose's task was to make the ultimate sacrifice. Fiona's task was to find the meaning of life. Ruby's task to give us all a name. And now, at sunrise, sitting on a white stallion, my task is easy: Get on the horse and ride out of town. But it's not the truth. (497)

4. "When you're thirsty, water is so beautiful":⁵⁷ Hiv-related stigma, immunity and finitude

The interdisciplinary approach that I have used to analyse this dangerous writing novel, drawing notably upon queer studies and communitarian theories, helped me to explore and better understand the devastating social, medical and political consequences of hiv/aids (a key aspect in my analysis), and the way the deadly syndrome affects these inoperative communities in particular. The novel strips bare this terrible reality in several different ways. Will experiences at first hand the suffering caused by hiv/aids through the many encounters he has with the people dying of it, including Rose, Harry and Ruby: "On my way home, no Charlie 2Moons. I looked at everybody as if they were already dead and I was dead too" (50). In addition to the physical suffering and psychological trauma, there is the discrimination and stigma attributed to hiv/aids by society, and the frustration that this provokes in people like Rose:

The life I am trying to grasp is the me who is trying to grasp it. My task was to not abandon myself, to not confuse the confusion with myself, to not turn into salt, into dust, charcoal, into purple bumps of Karposi's sarcoma like the rest. (2)

Rose further expresses her exasperation in wearing T-shirts with political messages like "CURE AIDS: FUCK THE CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL" (93). In an intimate moment with Will, she reflects on what it means to get hiv/aids, saying that you never know when it will hit you: one day you are leading your normal life and the next you end up "in a coma with tubes in your nose and mouth and up your ass" (135). It is also Rose who

⁵⁷ These words are whispered by Harry on his dying bed, celebrating life while dying (411).

illustrates the financial problems that come with hiv/aids, reflecting that when, or if, you leave the hospital you think you are the lucky one, you have all the hope in the world; meanwhile you have to pay a massive hospital bill and you are terrified (136): “I tell you, I’m not going to do it. I got my jar of Valium or something dramatic – I’m going out with a bang, a big fucking bang, no whimpers here [. . .]. I am going out in style” (ibid.). She, however, as a member of Screen Actors Guild, could at least afford to stay at the hospital thanks to its private health insurance, but for many other patients it was impossible to sustain the cost, proving once again that immunity (protection) is a privilege that is not available to everyone.

I believe that in our recent times, hiv/aids serves as one of the clearest examples of how negative biopolitics, based on destruction and/or negation, has been implemented almost all over the world, categorising certain groups of people as “risky”, rather than “at risk”, thus maintaining stigma, discrimination, hate and prejudice against them. According to the establishment, “they” (these “risky” groups) are considered contagious for the rest of the “immunised” population, as they can transmit hiv. Hence, it is easier to quietly and slowly let these communities die, or keep them at bay, than to immunise them.⁵⁸ Rose, in accordance with queer activism, summarises the above concept as follows:

I’m going to nail these motherfuckers for giving me the disease, Rose said [. . .]. AIDS? I said. The word that hurts. HIV positive, Rose said [. . .]. The God who gave me this disease is the God of Taken as Given. Rose said: Ronald Reagan, and Nancy, Margaret Thatcher, George Bush, The Pentagon, the CIA, the FBI, Oliver North, Bernhard Goetz, Ed Koch, and Cardinal O’Henry, the whole fucking hierarchical gaggle of White Paranoid Patriarchs. AIDS is the shadow of Christianity [. . .]. There must be a sacrifice, Rose said, To restore order. (295-296)

The signs of the deadly syndrome are all around Will: all the young men he sees in the streets or at the gym with their wasted bodies, no muscles anymore, only flesh and bones (154); and the many suicides he hears of, some after parties with friends at home (155). He and Rose even witness one young man throw himself out of an upper-storey window at the hospital, moments after entrusting Will with a ring to pass to his boyfriend: “Death is only a window” (326). The hospital, including dramatic incidents like this, is also the place Spanbauer uses to exemplify the relentless, mundane brutality of hiv/aids. The first thing Will notices on visiting Rose is the stench of death among all the patients there and

⁵⁸ Most medical scientists are in favour of a cure or a vaccine for hiv, but, in my opinion, their work has not been sufficiently supported by the political establishment and the pharmaceutical companies.

the fear of losing his beloved friend and lover:

I wondered if it even was Rose there, lying so still [. . .]. Lips at his ear: Rose? I said. You OK, Rose? [. . .]. The horrific whisper: Just a touch of the AIDS, Rose whispered. Rose laughed a little, but I didn't laugh. (323)

Similarly, Will experiences the sight of Harry dying in hospital: "his body just lumps in the bed, his mouth open, a blue tube in his mouth, blue tubes on his nose" (388). Will feels also wounded by the language that surrounds the syndrome. When asking a nurse about Harry's health condition, she utters *the word that hurts*: "Your friend has AIDS, the nurse said. *Lletre ferit: AIDS*" (390). Harry's suffering is compounded by the rejection of his parents, who do not want to know anything about him; called on the phone Harry's father says: "My son died years ago, and then hung up. Can you imagine, Will? Fiona said. His own fucking father" (389). Fiona, seeing that Harry is in excruciating pain, gives him a full bottle of morphine to assist his death: "Death, Fiona said, Is a motherfucker" (413). She also ensures that Harry is buried with her own family: her two brothers and her mother. In this way, Harry, rejected by his biological family, becomes part of Fiona's family, the type of community who has always loved and accepted him.

To deal with the pain provoked by such situations, Spanbauer often has his characters resort to humour and irony. Fiona proclaims: "Let's have a cocktail! [. . .], Cool! And we walked out the door, laughing at Harry's bare pink butt sticking out of his hospital gown. But it's not the truth. Harry's eyes stayed tight" (389-390). And Ruby says, to reassure Will about their "purple bumps" (56) on their arms: "If it's the gay cancer you're worried about, [. . .], we can just hold each other" (28).

Will's internal confrontation with the atrocities of hiv/aids is played out in his first participation at the Gay Parade in New York in June 1986: "People with AIDS. Walking wounded. Thousands" (308). He notices young guys who look socially shy and terrified: it is their first time in a gay parade and their first time with aids (309). "In that moment, my body understood what it was to be brave [. . .]. Brave meant you were afraid, real afraid, but you went ahead with it anyway" (ibid.).

In relation to Rose's suicide, we experience a clear case of autoimmunity, a sacrificial self-destruction as an antisocial act. Dressed in drag as a priest, she takes hostage Cardinal O'Henry, tying him to the main door of St. Patrick's Cathedral. Will arrives at the last minute. When he tries to stop Rose from killing herself, she warns him: "This is the end of my life. And you're not going to fuck it up" (468). Then: "A toast, Rose said [. . .].

Only in New York City, Rose said, Would I meet the likes of you, dear William of Heaven. To Manhattan! [. . .]. To Harlequin, I said, And the city of fools!” (470). Rose takes Valium but also a lot of morphine and alcohol as she prepares to set herself on fire with gasoline: “Now it’s time to exit stage left, Rose said. Something dramatic, with a bang, a big fucking bang! No whimpers here! Time to say good-bye, Rose said. The lucid compulsion to act polemically” (471). But Will is not ready to let her go:

You said, I said, That on TV black people never make it to the next episode. Rose! I said. What about the next episode? Read up on the Cambodian monks who self-immolated, Rose said. There’s no victim here! This is my final act as a Shy Hunter, Rose said, A Shy Hunter always chooses life until he chooses death. (472)

Then she hands Will the revolver telling him that he will need it to protect himself, and asks him for a match:

A big bang, a big fucking bang. [. . .]. The scream we all live for [. . .]. Rose was only fire now [. . .]. The only sound was flames – and something else. The muffled whimper from the tiny Catholic heart in the darkness behind the bronze door. (474-475)

CONCLUSIONS

The main contribution of this paper has been to further introduce Spanbauer's concept of dangerous writing into the field of critical literary analysis, using *In the City of Shy Hunters* as a case study. This has been effectively pursued applying a multidisciplinary methodology that has combined all the necessary ingredients for the analysis in terms of queer studies and community theory. The principal characters from the novel, particularly Will, his sister Bobbie and Charlie 2Moons in Idaho, and the friends that Will makes in New York, notably, Rose, True Shot, Ruby, Fiona and Harry, can all be considered queer singularities. These singularities incline towards each other and, in line with queer theory, do not seem to possess a fixed gender and sexual identity. They all share a similar aim in life: shy hunting. The shy hunters can at the same time be considered both singularities and social outcasts, who look for the truth within their own and other sore hearts. They are faced by constant social threats: toxic masculinity, as represented by Will's father and Sergeant White, and the establishment, including the Catholic Church.

Hiv/aids is the trigger for this inoperative community in New York City. The protagonists of the novel are forced to confront finitude and the inherent social stigmatisation of what it means to live with hiv and die of aids, and with all the horrendous consequences on the survivors, like Will. Their community is not a project with a specific social aim; on the contrary, it is an antisocial community that tries to survive and fight against the establishment, as well as a common deadly enemy: the retrovirus. In the novel the hiv/aids-stigmatised body has been rendered visible through the very painful and relatively slow death that people with the syndrome must endure, as discussed by Schulman, exposing themselves, in Kristeva's terms, as "abjects". Spanbauer understands the necessity to celebrate the momentary existence of the body:

Whether you fight it, cop an attitude, fuck it, or fall in love with it, you're still going to die. We're all just in our bodies for a moment in our life. Such a brave and lovely act it is to let the body celebrate.
(500)

During my research I have found it quite disturbing to realise that discrimination, prejudice, stigma and internalised shame related to hiv are still widely present nowadays and that hiv is considered one of the most dangerous and socially threatening viruses (or

“diseases”) among all;⁵⁹ a fact upon which we should all reflect, since the hiv-infection can potentially affect each and every one of us. Indeed, its social stigma, together with the efficiency of the antiretrovirals (which are nonetheless a palliative and not a proper cure), has contributed to its being forgotten as an ongoing reality, relegating it to places where people neither want to think about it nor wish to go. Moreover, Will’s inoperative community in New York City is one where him and his friends could find spaces to confront and comfort themselves. Nowadays, physical spaces have been partly supplanted by virtual spaces (e.g., online communities), meaning that the type of inoperative community experienced by Will would now probably work differently or would simply not exist at all. This corroborates the queer perspective that time and place are important factors in defining individual or communal identities. Furthermore, a queer epistemology has been demonstrated as an essential tool in counteracting the stigma and prejudice surrounding the economic, political and health aspects of hiv, where the most disadvantaged portion of the population is reduced to “risk groups” considered “risky” for the immunity of society at large. This aspect is amply manifested in the novel, where Rose, Ruby, Charlie and Harry all fall victims of the system that has created these discrepancies.

Furthermore, consistent with Nancy’s theory, these singularities form an inoperative community not because they aim at collective production, but because they all have their own task to fulfil; that is, not for the sake of society but for themselves and their “unworking” community. The novel highlights the importance of being part of a family formed by queer singularities inside an inoperative community who decide to form bonds outside biological links, which are instead “imposed” on us.

The unions of some of these singularities have established communities of lovers (in Blanchot’s terms), where love in these ephemeral relationships is based on loss and secret sharing. All the communities of lovers analysed in this paper are spontaneous, antisocial, alternative, momentary, and directed by death, and they suffer the consequences of secrets

⁵⁹ It is easier to verbalise that you have, for example, diabetes, hepatitis C or even cancer than it is to admit that you are living with hiv, even nowadays. The following are examples of attitudes which stigmatise people living with hiv: some dentists refuse to treat them (Jessani, 2019); some nursing homes for the elderly discriminate against them (POZ, 2016); and according to the UN, one in eight people with hiv is denied health care (Sambira, 2016). Furthermore, Turan et al. (2018) analyse how stigma affects people living with hiv. This type of stigma is also related to the rejection provoked by societal “serophobia”, which can compromise a possible love relationship too. In addition, many people with hiv have to endure internalised shame and stigma as they are often blamed for it, thus feeling “guilty”, “ashamed” and even “sinful”, which further complicates its disclosure, including in the health system (Hutchinson and Dhairyawan, 2017).

and revelations that destabilise not just their relations but also their own personality.

Finitude appears in different forms in the novel, mostly infringing social taboos: suicide (including sacrifice), homicide, or caused by aids. These events exemplify Spanbauer's dangerous writing style and the community configurations that I have applied to the novel. Fiona, for instance, experiences death among her closest people, unsuccessfully trying to mitigate her consuming pain: "We've been around, we've fought, we've lied. We mostly fall, we mostly run. And every now and then we try to mend the damage that we've done" (182).⁶⁰

I shall conclude this paper⁶¹ by quoting Bobbie's words when Will asks her why she always looks so sad, which, in my opinion, summarise the impotence for some of us in changing the life we lead, our "*maladie de la vie*":

The river is going by and the river is beautiful and the day is quiet and warm and green and everything is going by. I can't make the river stop or the day stop and I can't make myself stop. And I am here by the river and I could jump in, but the river would still flow on and I wouldn't be the river, I would still be me. (466)

⁶⁰ This sentence is from *Song of Bernadette* by the singer/composer Leonard Cohen, one of Fiona's idols.

⁶¹ As proposals for future research, the findings of this paper could be corroborated by applying dangerous writing to other fields of literary analysis. Moreover, other Spanbauer novels could be analysed by looking at alternative theories, thereby introducing his writing approach to a wider scope in literary criticism. Finally, the issue of hiv/aids could be further investigated and compared by analysing novels from other authors and employing distinct methodological approaches.

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