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# Europe Degree Zero: Community, Inoperativity, and Storytelling in Pieter de Buysser's *De keisnijders*

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## ABSTRACT

This article considers Pieter de Buysser's recent speculative novel *De keisnijders* (2012) from the perspective of the post-structuralist rethinking of the idea of Europe and the concept of community, as undertaken by Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy respectively. Set halfway into the twenty-first century, *De keisnijders* depicts a (pseudo-) utopian enclave in the center of Berlin, frequented by individuals from all over the world and from

practically all social strata. Unlike traditional utopias, the community does not revolve around a political blueprint or shared essence, but around philosophical speculation and storytelling. The characters in *De keisnijders* seek to fundamentally rethink the possibilities for a common, transnational identity, while at the same time attempting to think community in a non-identitarian, non-organicist manner.





*Something unique is afoot in Europe, in what is still called Europe even if we no longer know very well what or who goes by this name. Indeed, to what concept, to what real individual, to what singular entity should this name be assigned today? Who will draw up its borders?*

— Jacques Derrida, *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe*

In recent years, the political situation in Europe, the proverbial old continent, has been marked by the exacerbation of geopolitical, economic, and humanitarian tensions. Especially since the violation of Ukrainian sovereignty, which started in 2014, political commentators have likened the Russian Federation's military aggression and its refusal to comply with the demands of the European Union to the practices of the Soviet era, even going so far as to speculate about a new Cold War (Tisdall; Trenin). In Greece, the ephemeral success of the radical left-wing party Syriza, spearheaded by the then Minister of Finance Yanis Varoufakis, temporarily put the stability of the EU in jeopardy, with the Greeks protesting against bailout plans aimed at alleviating government debt. Meanwhile, the current refugee crisis lends credence to Giorgio Agamben's claim, in *Means Without End*, that perhaps the refugee has become the exemplary figure of citizenship after the fall of the Iron Curtain (16). Recently, these geopolitical, economic, and humanitarian tensions have resulted in a wave of Eurosceptic, xenophobic, and populist sentiments, as testified by, for example, the considerations of the so-called "Brexit" and "Grexit," the protests against the establishment of asylum centers, and the recent electoral victory of the conservative Law and Justice party in Poland.

Against an appeal to yesteryear's pan-European metanarratives, against the conservative desire to rehabilitate and safeguard traditional norms and values, and against smug Euroscepticism, the aforementioned developments necessitate perhaps more than ever a reconceptualization of the idea of a non-identitarian, non-organicist European community. Traditionally, the idea of Europe, as Jacques Derrida put it in *The Other Heading*, has been characterized by "the idea of [such] a transcendental community," that is to say, "the subjectivity of a "we" for which





Europe would be at once the name and the exemplary figure” (33). A reconsideration of this traditional conception, on the other hand, “consists precisely in not closing itself off in its own identity and in advancing itself in an exemplary way toward what it is not” (29). Against the backdrop of these developments, and bearing Derrida’s cautious remarks in mind, how can the idea of such a European community be (re)thought, without presuming an essential European identity or common project? Can one, to invoke Étienne Balibar, speak of a European “we,” a “people of Europe,” precisely in a time when the borders of Europe—both as a territorial unit and as an idea—are being questioned (Balibar, *We, the People*; cf. Balibar, “Border”)? Lastly, in a question exhaustively pursued by Jean-Luc Nancy, how can one conceive of such a first person plural, of “being-in-common” [*être-en-commun*], without rehabilitating exclusionary, essentialist political schemata that have proven to be inadequate in the old continent’s recent past (*Being Singular Plural*)?

In this essay, I will probe these questions through a reading of Pieter de Buysser’s idiosyncratic novel of ideas *De keisnijders* (2012). The titular *keisnijders* (literally “bouldercutters”) are four Flemish siblings, called Gerrit, Lis, Susan, and Robbert. In the late twentieth century, these siblings, aided by the enigmatic Hans, construct a vast, circular boulder from the debris of the Berlin Wall. Around the boulder, an open community is formed, in which various visitors from all over the world and from all social strata play games with each other and engage in communal storytelling. While reminiscent of the utopias described by Thomas More and Tommaso Campanella, the community does not fall under any political authority, nor does it revolve around an ideological blueprint or shared identity. ““This is a society [*samenleving*], and not a community [*gemeenschap*],” remarks Gerrit. “The society we are inventing consists of several communities. Communities of ancestry, class, friends, action-groups, parties, assemblies and ... individuals who sometimes constitute a community in themselves” (De Buysser 32).<sup>1</sup> Approximately half a century after its establishment, the Berlin enclave is again visited by four young Flemish siblings. Shortly after their arrival, Marthe, Anouk, Peter, and Jules engage in dialogues with the founders and with other

1. All translations from Dutch sources are mine [N.S.].





visitors, frequently speculating about political and philosophical topics such as transnationalism and community. The *kei*, described by Gerrit as “this intensely exacerbated [*intens verscherpte*] part representing the whole” (35), is conceived of by the *keisnijders* as a *pars pro toto*, which is representative of the political impasses on the continent on a limited geographical scale. The experimental stories of the *keisnijders*, at turns pretentious, ambitious, banal, playful, and speculative, address the problem of a shared, transnational identity in a variety of mutually deconstructive ways.

As Fredric Jameson asserts in *Archaeologies of the Future*, the imaginative potential of speculative texts lies in their “capacity to provide something like an experimental variation on our empirical universe” (270), that is to say, the capacity “to defamiliarize and restructure our experience of our own *present*” (286; original italics). Speculative texts thus form a structural counterpart to the historical novel: whereas historical novels reconfigure the reader’s view of the past, speculative texts historicize in reverse, by contrasting an estranged future with the present (286; cf. Suvin). In this sense, speculative texts exemplify what Ernst Bloch once referred to as the “synchronicity of the non-synchronous” [*Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen*], that is to say, the coexistence of social realities from different moments in history (qtd. in Jameson, *Postmodernism* 307).

Taking up Jameson’s statements, and drawing on Derrida’s deconstruction of Europe and Nancy’s social ontology, I will inquire as to how the storytelling practices and ideological conflicts in *De keisnijders* constitute attempts to think of a possible European community. By imagining new and old ways of being-in-common, the conflicting, speculative narratives cast a sideways glance at current political tensions on the old continent, in a manner that is both familiar and estranged.

### Community, Inoperativity, Utopia

Halfway through the twenty-first century, the political situation on the European continent has changed significantly. Initially inspired by the idealism of the *keisnijders*, the Transcapitalist Movement [*Transkapitalistische Beweging*] has morphed into the Transcapitalist





Party [*Transkapitalistische Partij*], which advocates a form of technocratic state-capitalism. Meanwhile, the economic center of gravity has shifted from the West to East-Asia, while the global political landscape is dominated by the “Euro-Asian alliance,” an organization reminiscent of the NATO.

In Berlin, the circular boulder in the city center forms a peculiar enclave and is still frequented by individuals from all regions of the world. While formally resembling real and fictional utopias, the community of the *keisnijders* contrasts with the traditional utopian paradigm in several ways. As Northrop Frye notes in “Varieties of Literary Utopias,” utopias are in most cases static societies, featuring “built-in safeguards against radical alteration of [their] structure” (329).<sup>2</sup> The utopian community can thus only function by isolating and protecting itself from influences which could corrupt the stability of its body politic (329).<sup>3</sup> By contrast, the community around the boulder does not fall under any juridico-political authority, does not form a state, and is not predicated on a central ideology. Instead, the founders and visitors tell each other stories, bearing names such as “the Precursor” [*de Voorloper*] and “the Latecomer” [*de Nakomer*].

Traditionally, as Walter Benjamin demonstrated in his essay “The Storyteller,” storytelling was instrumental in the foundation of a community. The storyteller, coming from a remote region, possessed a certain didactic authority: by imparting a useful moral or maxim to his audience, each listener could interpret the story on his own, and subsequently disseminate it to others in an altered form (98). This process, which Benjamin referred to as “epic remembrance” (98), was of

2. In Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516), to take the best-known example, King Utopus decides to cut his country off from the mainland by digging a fifteen-mile wide channel (39).

3. In this sense, traditional utopias correspond to sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies’s definition of “community” [*Gemeinschaft*], as opposed to (civil) “society” [*Gesellschaft*]. In *Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft* (1887), Tönnies characterized community as “genuine, enduring life together” (19), where individuals were tied by blood and kinship. Community was organized around an “essential will” [*Wesenville*], the intrinsic will of each to unite his interests with those of the community at large (95). *Gesellschaft*, on the other hand, characterized as a “transient and superficial thing” (19), was driven by an “arbitrary” or “rational will” [*Kürwille*], a calculating, contract-based relationship established by individuals to reach a certain (predominantly economic) goal. In *Gesellschaft*, as Tönnies synoptically put it, individuals “remain separate in spite of everything that unites them” (52), whereas in *Gemeinschaft* individuals “stay together in spite of everything that separates them” (52).





fundamental importance to the historical consciousness of a community and bound its members together. Furthermore, Benjamin claimed that the art of storytelling and the “aura” of the work of art, its originality and unique presence in space and time, had been destroyed due to the rise of the novel and the advent of techniques of mechanical reproduction. Although he occasionally seemed to lament the loss of the ritualistic function of art as embodied by the storyteller, he on the other hand celebrated the emancipatory potential of new reproductive techniques such as photography and film: by bridging the gap between the audience and the work of art, he hoped that these techniques would culminate in a “politicization of aesthetics” (“Work of Art” 242).

The storytelling practices depicted in *De keisnijders* differ from the figure of the storyteller as presented by Benjamin. Instead of seeking to find a political blueprint or to construct a founding myth, says Gerrit, these practices serve to call traditional conceptions of community into question:

In the question we gather and live together: [in the question], we are we. We? Always already torn apart by the question mark: we? The same thing goes for this wall ... A community like this changes, lives, evolves, shifts, reinvents itself with the arrival of every newcomer ... The best way to kill a community is by concretizing [*betonneren*] it within state borders. (De Buysser 35)

Soon after their arrival, Marthe, Anouk, Peter, and Jules engage in dialogues with the founders of the community, as well as with other occasional visitors. The discussions gravitate between the exhausted idealism of the older generation and the Icarian fanaticism of the new generation, who are not content with either the safe pragmatism of their parents, or with the closed-off, short-scale alternatives to the pan-European state capitalism of their time. What ensues is a clash between opposing political narratives, none of which solidify into a stable blueprint. Such a break with the traditional utopian paradigm, asserts Jameson, is indicative of a wider trend in speculative fiction since the early 1990s, in which it is not the representation of a utopian ideal, but rather the conflict between various political narratives that takes center stage:





What is Utopian becomes ... not the commitment to a specific machinery or blueprint, but rather the commitment to imagining possible Utopias as such, in their greatest variety of forms. Utopian is no longer the invention and defense of a specific floorplan, but rather the story of all the arguments about how Utopia should be constructed in the first place. It is no longer the exhibit of an achieved Utopian construct, but rather the story of its production and of the very process of construction as such. (*Archaeologies* 216)<sup>4</sup>

Already in the early 1980s, in his essay “The Inoperative Community” [*La communauté désœuvrée*] (1983), Jean-Luc Nancy signaled a pervasive exhaustion of traditional historical-philosophical schemata in Western philosophy and culture.<sup>5</sup> In his essay, which was part of a conspicuous revival of the concept of community that took off in the late 1970s, Nancy argued that practically all Western thought on community was characterized by a sense of nostalgia, in which community was thought of as something that had been “lost” or “broken” in the course of time (10).<sup>6</sup> Traditionally, claimed Nancy, community was conceived

4. Jameson identifies Kim Stanley Robinson’s *Mars* trilogy, consisting of *Red Mars* (1993), *Green Mars* (1994), and *Blue Mars* (1996), as the most prominent example of this development. The late 1980s and early 1990s, moreover, coincide with the fall of communism and the definitive victory of neoliberal forms of governance. This victory was famously described by Francis Fukuyama as the putative “end of history,” while Margaret Thatcher triumphantly declared that there was “no alternative” to neoliberalism (qtd. in Harvey 40).
5. Nancy’s text was expanded into a book bearing the same name in 1986, which was translated into English in 1991, the version I refer to in this essay.
6. In North America and the United Kingdom, thinkers such as Amitai Etzioni, Alasdair MacIntyre, Michael Sandel, and Charles Taylor, loosely labelled together as “communitarians,” sought to revive the concept of community, primarily in opposition to the work of John Rawls. Against Rawls’s “primacy of the right over the good” (qtd. in Devisch, *Wij* 21) communitarian thinkers argued that every individual’s moral integrity is first and foremost shaped by the norms, values, and traditions of the “native community” in which s/he is born (see especially Etzioni, *The New Golden Rule*; *The Spirit of Community*; MacIntyre; Sandel; Taylor, *Sources of the Self*; *The Ethics of Authenticity*). Radically different from the (either left-liberal, centrist, or conservative) communitarian critique of liberalism, the publication of Nancy’s essay influenced post-structuralist thinkers such as Giorgio Agamben, Maurice Blanchot, and Roberto Esposito (see especially Agamben, *The Coming Community*; *Means Without End*; Blanchot; Esposito, *Bíos*; *Communitas*; *Immunitas*; *Terms of the Political*). Nancy’s intervention coincides with a conspicuous shift toward political and ethical themes in his former teacher Derrida’s work from the mid-1980s onwards, whose concept of “democracy-to-come” bears resemblances to *désœuvrement* (*The Politics of Friendship*; *Rogues*; *Specters of Marx*).





of as a “work” [*oeuvre*], defined as “the goal of achieving a community of beings producing in essence their own essence as their work, and furthermore producing precisely this essence *as community*” (2; original italics). As Roberto Esposito notes, the work links the notions of an *arche* (“origin,” “beginning,” or “commandment”) of community with a *telos* (“goal,” “endpoint”): only through a collective effort of all the members of a community can the (allegedly) lost *arche* be restored (*Communitas* 2). Nancy called such an operation “immanentism”: the attempt of a community to incorporate its limits and to teleologically immunize itself from threatening forces that could corrupt the *arche* (*Inoperative* 3).

Nancy developed Maurice Blanchot’s concept of *désœuvrement* in an attempt to deconstruct identitarian, organicist conceptions of community. *Désœuvrement*, explains Ignaas Devisch, is a “praxis of resistance against the thought of community as a perfectible activity ... against the concept of the human being as capable of auto-production, which presupposes an essence of the human being that could (and should) in principle be realized” (*Wij* 44–5). By developing the aporetic concept of *désœuvrement*, Nancy sought to think community as something which is shared and relational, instead of, to borrow Devisch’s colorful phrase, “a With or a We as a Great Subject that swallows the individual up” (“Trembling” 243). *Désœuvrement*, in other words, consists of the suspension of closure and the exposure to the non-identitarian, in an attempt to think beyond the immanentist fusion of individuals into a greater whole.<sup>7</sup>

In the opening pages of *De keisnijders*, Hans explains the principle of the Precursor, one of the games played by the inhabitants and visitors of the boulder. The Precursor, explains Hans to Jules, the youngest of the four siblings, is a speculative form of storytelling, in which the insertion of a speculative element in a story disrupts a carefully unfolding narrative. In this sense, storytelling, remarks Hans, forms part of the “unsurance sector” [*het ontzekeringswezen*]: “The insurance sector already exists. What remains is the unsurance sector. It is certain

7. Examples of the community-as-work in Western culture include Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s theory of popular sovereignty, the Nazi *Volksgemeinschaft*, Soviet “socialism in one country,” and the various strands of communitarianism that came into prominence during the 1970s.





that catastrophes will come. How can we insert a spark of insecurity between that?" (De Buysser 13). The Latecomer, on the other hand, is reminiscent of the categorical imperative. "During the Latecomer," says Marthe, "you have to say that which you would like anyone, in the past, now, and in the future, to hear" (69). The statements made during the Latecomer, states Marthe, should possess a universal validity, irrespective of differences of age, language, and culture.

During one of the editions of the Latecomer, the old mathematician Mustafa Al Khowarizmi reflects on the peculiar status of the zero in the history of mathematics. "The zero," says Al Khowarizmi, "has no substance, no content, but nevertheless this piece without content manages to undermine all mathematical calculations" (155). The boulder, the giant zero in the center of Berlin, remarks Robbert in a similar vein,

is a thing that belongs to no one, a zero-thing, which withdraws itself from every form of property. For over half a century, this piece of land has been contested and claimed by a multitude of governments and companies, even by families. But it belongs to no one. The last verdict of the European court: *res nullius* ... Property is sacred. Possessed land is sacred land. This land is neither occupied [*bezet*], nor property [*bezit*]. For some, that comes down to blasphemy. (71)

The form of the boulder, the static, unmultipliable "zero-thing," continues Al Khowarizmi, poses a problem inherent to the traditional utopian paradigm: without a certain stasis, be it territorial or ideological, the pseudo-utopian sanctuary of the community cannot function (172–3). In this juridico-political lacuna, the stories of the *keisnijders* oscillate between disruptive speculation on the one hand, and the attempt to ground the community in a new metanarrative on the other.

In *The Inoperative Community*, Nancy refers to such founding narratives simply as "myth," defined as "a full and original speech, which both reveals and forms the intimate being of a community" (48). Myth is a narrative that provides a shared origin and identity, and





functions as a preceding *logos* which serves to perpetuate the essence of community (43–4; Van Rooden 82–4). This impasse between the attempt to think community aporetically (*het ontzekeringswezen*) and the rehabilitation of such myths comes to the forefront in a conversation between Marthe, the oldest and most idealistic of the four siblings, and her pragmatic father. Marthe, in an expression reminiscent of Jean-François Lyotard's, explicitly longs for a "grand narrative":

The saga of this wall ... everything that lives here and everything that materializes here, forms a bond. Not only between us and those who live around the wall, but also with the history that has shaped us and made us what we are—the cheerful, subversive, sunlit history of this wall. We want this history to mold our future. Such is the power of a grand, enthusing narrative. But you have never known such a thing. (De Buysser 230)

Marthe's father, on the other hand, who came of age at the end of the twentieth century, retorts: "When I was your age, I detested such grand narratives ... They are bodices. Straitjackets. They determine what you should do. They are accompanied by a whole system of norms and values, and I am not in need of such regulatory zeal [*regelneverij*]" (231). By contrast, Marthe rejects her father's anti-foundationalist attitude:

You and your whole generation are degenerates. Along with abolishing every desire for a grand, interconnecting story you have uprooted yourselves. And those little companies of yours, even if they are mastodons, do not weigh enough to give you a solid foundation. Such a foundation requires stories. (231)

In an attempt to think beyond her father's pragmatism, Marthe's longing for a grand narrative resembles Nancy's notion of myth and Benjamin's figure of the storyteller, although she does not elucidate at length what shape this narrative would take, nor does she manage to successfully oppose the defeatism of her father or the skepticism of Al Khowarizmi. Straddling the line between longing for a founding





myth on the one hand, and a coming-to-terms with the exhaustion of traditional historical-philosophical schemata on the other, the storytelling practices of the Precursor and the Latecomer thus constitute an irresolvable impasse. While the *keisnijders* have succeeded in their (pseudo-)utopian attempt to think an inclusive, transnational community which functions as a microcosmic counterpart to the European status quo halfway past the twenty-first century, this success at the same time lays bare their political fragility. Like the figure of the zero, the community remains bound to itself and unmultipliable, suspicious of every attempt at “concretization” or immanentism. Eventually, Marthe’s exuberance, her father’s pragmatism, and the remnants of the idealism of the founders of the community prove to be incommensurable. Following the second edition of the Latecomer, the boulder is destroyed and the community is disbanded, approximately half a century after its establishment. “We have realized it,” concludes Gerrit. “And just when we thought that the truth we had made had been completed, it turns out that it has become a lie” (374). After its dissolution, the community disperses, and all that remains of its legacy resides in the stories told.

### **Europe Degree Zero, or, Where Are We Heading?**

Moving from the future history of *De keisnijders* to the present day, the wave of Eurosceptic, xenophobic, and populist sentiments mentioned above poses significant problems for rethinking what Derrida referred to in *The Other Heading* as the “old, exhausted theme” of a common, European identity (5). Instead of relegating the idea of such a common identity to the ash heap of history, such a rethinking, writes Derrida, requires that one “be suspicious of *both* repetitive memory *and* the completely other of the absolutely new; of *both* anamnestic capitalization *and* the amnesic exposure to what would no longer be identifiable at all” (19; original italics). As the narratives in the hypostasized future of *De keisnijders* testify, such a rethinking simultaneously has to confront the call for the rehabilitation of political myths (in Nancy’s sense of the term), Euroscepticism, as well as the “anamnestic” call for a new grand narrative. In De Buysser’s text, the persistent questioning of new and old ways of being-in-common lays bare that traditional





political schemata have been exhausted, as well as that the fragile, (pseudo-)utopian attempt to conceptualize an open, transnational community is continually threatened by such immanentist and mythical tendencies. Without a shared narrative, as Marthe claims, such a community cannot be formed: precisely such an overarching narrative, claims her father, constitutes a yoke one has to get rid of.

In keeping with Derrida's wordplay on the French *cap* ("both," "heading," "headland"), the question where "we" are heading in the Europe of today similarly straddles the line between these opposing positions. Against conceiving of a common identity as *oeuvre*, such a common European identity, to refer once again to the (with the ongoing refugee crisis in mind especially timely) words of Gerit quoted above, demands to be rethought with every newcomer, and does not revolve around committing to political blueprints which are specifically designed to exclude such "improper" elements. Recalling Bloch's formula, the characters depicted in *De keisnijders* strive to incorporate numerous historically nonsynchronous perspectives in one frame, without willing to solve the aporia that lies at the heart of the community. The figure of the aporia, as Derrida elucidates, does not constitute a mere "stumbling before roadblocks," but needs to be understood in an affirmative sense, as "the thinking of the path" (*Memoires* 135). To employ psychoanalytical terms, such an aporetic rethinking of a European identity held in common, as for instance attempted in the keisnijders' experimental inoperative community, requires a fundamental working-through of Europe's past failures, current predicament, and prospects, instead of engaging in repetition-compulsion or denying the problem wholesale. Perhaps, then, to misquote Karl Marx, the point is not only to fundamentally reinterpret the possibilities for such a European identity held in common, but also to imagine it again (145).

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