

Rodríguez Salas, Gerardo. *Vivir sola es morir: El modernismo comunitario de Katherine Mansfield.* Editorial Comares, 2023. 104 pages

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Vivir sola es morir: El modernismo comunitario de Katherine Mansfield discusses the social relations that characterized the life of the New Zealand-born writer as well as her understanding of affection and community, both of which are rendered in her works through the embrace of alterity in the margins of society, and the desire to achieve significant communication and physical connection, thus defying the traditional conception of the modernist subject as solipsistic and alienated. Thus, the book offers a new approach—in line with new studies on modernism—to Mansfield and contributes to enhancing her recognition on the occasion of her centenary. Gerardo Rodríguez Salas, a pioneering expert in Katherine Mansfield studies in Spain, demonstrates his mastery of the author's character and narrative with a thorough analysis of the symbolism and hidden meanings of her short stories, while simultaneously providing a classification of the affective relations that preponderate in her writing, mostly based on the theoretical frameworks provided by Jean-Luc Nancy and Maurice Blanchot.

As exposed in the introduction, the life and work of Katherine Mansfield were conditioned by her colonial origins, which prevented her from entering the literary canon at first instance and also from fitting into the intellectual circles of the time, such as the Bloomsbury Group. In addition, Rodríguez Salas argues how the characters in Mansfield's fiction partake of the writer's loneliness, communication problems and a sense of the closeness of death that characterized her own life, marked by abortion, miscarriage and illness. Notwithstanding, Rodríguez Salas vindicates that Mansfield's works address issues pertaining to class, race, gender and age, thus denoting empathy towards the other. Indeed, in the face of her imminent death by tuberculosis, Mansfield decided to live to the fullest, which, for her, implied communion: "What is important is to try and learn to live—really live, and in relation to everything—not isolated (this isolation is death to me)" (xi). This challenges Georg Lukács's association of modernism with asocial and apolitical attitudes

which still pervades contemporary studies on the movement, proving that social concern can actually be combined with the aesthetics of fragmentation, the use of free indirect style and focalization, and the recourse to the iceberg theory to which Mansfield frequently resorted. Moreover, Rodríguez Salas also asserts that the publication of new materials and letters by Katherine Mansfield—*The Katherine Mansfield Notebooks* (1997)—evinced the restless and controversial behaviour of the author, which did not correspond to the myth around her figure that was posthumously nurtured by her second husband, John Middleton Murry.

The book begins with the chapter “Hacia un modernismo comunitario,” which provides the theoretical background on both modernism and models of community to be employed in the analysis of Mansfield’s short stories in the following chapters. The first section questions traditional conceptions of modernism by exploring the new approaches observed from the turn of century, which aimed to expand its temporal and geographical boundaries, aesthetic criteria, and literary canon through the establishment of intersections with postcolonial and gender studies, while simultaneously attempting to provide a redefinition of the modernist subject that could reconcile its introspective character with new notions of community through the recognition of finitude and vulnerability. In this respect, Rodríguez Salas mentions Linda Hutcheon’s distinction between high modernism—characterized by a vindication of high art as opposed to mass culture and thus by a focus on formalism—and a historical avant-garde with an ideological orientation, already heading to postmodernism by offering “an example of the possible subversion and democratization of high art, of aestheticist hermeticism, and of nostalgia politics” (Hutcheon 218). In addition, the author also refers to the volume *The Gender of Modernism*, edited by Bonnie Kime Scott, where “the ‘experimental, audience challenging, and language-focused’ writing that used to be regarded as modernism” becomes associated with a masculine modernism (Scott 4), allowing for the establishment of an exclusively female modernism in which alternative relations in the margins of society, in between the domestic and the public sphere, are usually explored. The second section of the first chapter addresses the redefinitions of community developed in the philosophy of communitarianism of the 1980s as a result of the crisis of the old models of communism and socialism. These theories shared a turn towards finitude and death as elements of social union, as seen

in Jean-Luc Nancy: “Death is indissociable from community, for it is through death that the community reveals itself—and reciprocally” (*The Inoperative Community* 14). Rodríguez Salas mostly focuses on the works by Jean-Luc Nancy and Maurice Blanchot, but also exposes the theories on social structures from the 1880s on which the former based their studies. In this sense, he highlights the distinction made by Ferdinand Tönnies between community or *Gemeinschaft*—“[a]ll kinds of social co-existence that are familiar, comfortable and exclusive” and which, therefore, have “real organic life”—, and society or *Gesellschaft*, which “means life in the public sphere, in the outside world” and is conceived “as a purely mechanical construction, existing in the mind” (Tönnies 17-18), echoing Hegel’s civil society. In this vein, according to Rodríguez Salas, scholars of the 1980s considered community fictional. Nancy named *substance* a number of essentialist aspects of identity that produce feelings of belonging and a natural sense of identity—“be these homeland, native soil or blood, nation, a delivered or fulfilled humanity, absolute phalanstery, family, or mystical body” (*The Inoperative Community* 15)—which constitute a social contract created by myths. This communitarian model, known as “operative community,” gives a sense of protection through the imposition of homogeneity and control. Its opposite model is the “inoperative community,” which questions the former by highlighting singularity and alterity, as well as by abandoning the sense of security for the recognition of vulnerability. This is what Blanchot, using George Bataille’s words, defines as “the community of those who have no community” (Blanchot 24). Both Blanchot and Nancy resume, in this respect, Bataille’s concept of the “community of lovers,” defined as temporary associations of singularities that act as liminal and disruptive spaces between the subject and society—“antisocial society or association, always ready to dissolve itself, formed by friends or couples” (Blanchot 33). Rodríguez Salas prefers the term “asociaciones afectivas” (14), seen to be more inclusive, and analyzes Mansfield’s works around three specific associations: lovers, literary circles, and fraternal relations.

The second chapter, “Amantes”, deals with the first of these alternative communities, characterized in Mansfield’s short stories by failures of communication, but also by a mutual understanding of isolation: “Mansfield reemplaza la idea romántica de la fusión orgánica con una confrontación más realista con la finitud y una comprensión del aislamiento mutuo” (16). The first section, “Deseo y amor inmaduro,”

focuses on the short story “Something Childish but very Natural,” which portrays an unreal and pseudo-platonic relationship, only feasible in liminal spaces—during a train ride, in dreams—which contrasts with the social conventions that the lovers encounter in the real world. The romantic idealization of their love is emphasized by Coleridge’s poem, which gives the story its title, whereas social oppression is symbolized by the wearing of a hat. The second section, “Diálogos utópicos,” analyzes “Psychology,” in which the characters do open to alterity and have potential for social rupture and transformation, in spite of which their communication always ends up taking place throughout fictional dialogues inside their heads. Both of them are unable to verbalize and rationalize their feelings because they fail to acknowledge that physical communication requires other codes. The third section, “Matrimonio y adulterio,” also exposes the gap between internal and external conversations, between those imagined and those verbalized in “The Black Cap.” In this last story, gender stereotypes impede real connection through a truthful exploration and acceptance of alterity, which results in frustrating experiences of both marriage and adultery. In the final section, “Mansfield: amor romántico y maternidad simbólica,” Rodríguez Salas traces parallelisms between the love relations of her characters and Mansfield’s own autobiographical experience, going through the idealization of her husband, John Middleton Murry, her unfulfilled expectations of marital life and her failed attempts to become a mother.

The third chapter, “Círculos literarios y artísticos,” revolves around the second of the affective associations observed in Mansfield’s literary production and life. The first section, titled “El orden de los artistas,” comments on the fact that Mansfield’s colonial origins, and her extroverted and carefree character, were not well accepted in the literary circles of Bloomsbury, Garsington or Paris. Mansfield was torn between her wish to belong to an artistic community and her dislike of the elitism of its members, and the disguised forces of oppression and control those groups exerted. In this sense, Rodríguez Salas relates Bourdieu’s ideas on modernist groups, which, in his view, searched for social disruption and autonomy only to end up constructing a new power structure, with Nancy’s model of the operative community — “it will be a matter of a veritable structural subordination which acts very unequally on different authors according to their position in the field” (Bourdieu 49). The second section, “Sororidad artística: cartas y diarios,” delves

into theories of female relationships in line with revisionist gender studies of the 1980s. In this regard, Rodríguez Salas employs Janice G. Raymond's distinction between "hetero-relations," which refer to "the wide range of affective, social, political, and economic relations that are ordained between men and women by men" (Raymond 7) —and which are, therefore, constructed by the "hetero-reality," that is to say, "the world view that woman exists always in relation to man" (Raymond 3)— and "Gyn/affection," which "can be defined as woman-to-woman attraction, influence, and movement" and often functions as "a synonym for female friendship" (Raymond 7). In addition, the author references Elizabeth Abel's view of female friendships as inherently different in nature; opposed to men's conception of friendship as instrumental and group-oriented, "friendship becomes a vehicle of self-definition for women, clarifying identity through relation to an other who embodies and reflects an essential aspect of the self" (Abel 416). Rodríguez Salas pertinently points out that Mansfield's failed attempts to build female friendships might have been due to the context of the "hetero-reality," while her rejection of female writing could be owed to an excessive identification with the other; he examines, in this respect, Mansfield's relationship with the painter Dorothy Brett and with the writers Sarah Gertrude Millin and Virginia Woolf. The third and last section of the chapter, "Sororidad artística: ficción," contains the analysis of two short stories, namely "Bliss" and "Carnation". "Bliss" depicts a party of intellectuals and artists around whom snobbism and compliance are palpable. The protagonist, Bertha Young, feels detached from such community and attempts, instead, to establish a relation with one of the female guests that can be understood in terms of the community of lovers: "Bertha, al seguir los designios de su cuerpo, está liberándose de ese entorno intelectual opresivo buscando una conexión sensorial con la señorita Fulton, con la que espera recrear su propio espacio [...] [b]uscando la pulsión antisocial de la que hablaba Blanchot en su teorización de la comunidad de amantes" (59). Nevertheless, this effort to establish an alternative model of community ends up in enmity when Bertha finds that the woman is having an affair with her husband, which subjects both women to "hetero-relations". In opposition to this, in "Carnation," gyn/affection dominates over patriarchal structures in a French classroom where the decrepit and pathetic figure of the teacher serves as the perfect allegory for a critique of the male-dominated canon —"La historia es un ataque frontal al canon literario patriarcal y una

apología de la escritura de mujeres” (61). The female students of the class are presented as a solid literary community against their teacher; they metaphorically reject oppressive teachings and dominate the man with their sensuality, projected through the carnation, which stands as symbol of homosexuality.

The last chapter, “Intimidad Fraternal,” delves into the last community of lovers by exploring Mansfield’s relation with his brother Leslie, who died at the front during the First World War, and her subsequent fictional representations of siblings who encounter the shadow of death. The first section, “Pulsión de Muerte,” takes into consideration the presence of death in Mansfield’s own life, as she suffered from tuberculosis, and connects that to the recurrence of the *memento mori* motif in her fiction, exemplified, as Rodríguez Salas notes, by “The Wrong House,” “Her First Ball” and “The Doll’s House.” The next section, “Intimidad fraternal y communion,” looks into the death bond that Mansfield believed she shared with her brother and the enshrinement and mystification she creates around his figure and their connection: “Con Leslie, Mansfield crea una intimidad y proximidad alternativas a las de los amantes, sin el impulso sexual, donde la pureza del amor se ve realizada ante la inminencia de la muerte” (76). The third section, “La escritura del cuerpo: derrotar a la Muerte,” analyzes two short stories in which the alterity of death is confronted through a notable corporeality. “The Wind Blows” depicts a fleeting connection between a brother and a sister when they find themselves out of their solitary routine and take off their hats—a symbol, as mentioned above, of social conventions and constraints—to experience the force of the wind, which stands as a symbol of death. The symbol of the wind is also used in “The Garden-Party” as an omen of death that briefly intrudes a bourgeois party before the death of a neighbor is announced. The girl later sees the corpse and has no words to account for that encounter when she tries to share it with her brother, who nevertheless manages to comprehend. Thus, using Nancy’s correlation of corporeity with *epopteia* — “The mystical *epopteia* [...] is properly and absolutely a vision of death, an absolute, mystical desire that cannot be fulfilled without blasting bodies apart” (*Corpus* 45)—, Rodríguez Salas concludes that the mystery of death in Mansfield’s fiction cannot be revealed through communication or mystification, since it can only be expressed through direct corporeity (84).

In conclusion, Gerardo Rodríguez Salas provides a novel and enlightening contribution to the studies on Katherine Mansfield by exploring the affinities between the author's own views and experiences concerning community and affective relations and their fictional representations and interpretations. Moreover, Rodríguez Salas, through an insightful and well-structured literary analysis supported by a solid theoretical framework, allows for the categorization of Mansfield as a precursor of postmodernism, proving that the relations of small groups depicted in her works can function as social structures that act as liminal and disrupting spaces between the isolated modernist subject and the general community. Mansfield's intention, shared by postmodernist writers, to find and establish meaningful attachments in fiction that defy conventional senses of community in favour of the recognition of vulnerability and singularity is therefore demonstrated in this book, even if those were frequently interrupted or unattainable due to predominant social restrictions throughout Mansfield's lifetime. This discussion thus fosters a reflection on traditional conceptions regarding modernism and philosophy on community and invites further research on non-normative and liminal practices.

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