



**Rodríguez Salas, Gerardo. (2023). *Vivir sola es morir: el modernismo comunitario de Katherine Mansfield*. Granada: Editorial Comares. Pages: 104. ISBN: 978-84-1369-604-1**

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The year 2023 marked the centennial anniversary of the death of Katherine Mansfield (1888–1923) at Fontainebleau, France. To commemorate such an occasion, Professor Gerardo Rodríguez Salas published his fourth monograph on the celebrated modernist writer, *Vivir sola es morir: el modernismo comunitario de Katherine Mansfield*.<sup>1</sup> Rodríguez Salas stands out due to his extensive scholarship regarding the New Zealand-born modernist, including articles, chapters, and three monographs (2003, 2007, 2009). This latest volume is an important contribution to the critical study of Mansfield from the perspective of a new tradition of exploring the possibilities that this particular author provides –community studies. This academic discipline draws upon community phenomena from varied approaches, relying mainly on sociology or anthropology; however, its interdisciplinary research often shifts to psychology or cultural ethnography, for instance, to prove its hypotheses. New community studies came to be at the end of the twentieth century as an aesthetic that tries to redefine the concept of “community” by means of a cooperative function, with critics such as Rebecca L. Walkowitz or Jessica Berman, among many others.

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<sup>1</sup> Citations from this volume have been translated by the author from the original language of Spanish. It is assumed Rodríguez Salas has chosen his native language to give Mansfield visibility in Spain, where, as is argued here, she lacks the prestige that she holds in other European countries.

The volume consists of three main associative models or small communities –each one thoroughly examined in its corresponding section– always functioning around two partners, reminiscent of Mansfield’s own personal relationships. Thus, the book is composed of three main chapters, with the addition of an introductory one that lays the theoretical foundation needed for the models here proposed. The introduction departs from the rejection of the canonical view of Georg Lukacs regarding Modernism as an alienating and solipsist movement. This vision permeated most critical readings on Mansfield throughout the twentieth century, as her characters were envisioned as solitary and isolated from society. Rodríguez Salas recalls other distinctions carried out within Modernism itself, like the one theorized by Bonnie Kime Scott (1990), where she distinguishes between the canonical *high modernism* linked to male authors such as Joyce, Pound, or Eliot, and a feminine modernism where we might notice an emerging postmodernism. In his first chapter, prior to the three models that Rodríguez Salas has drawn upon, the communal impulse is laid against the traditional perception of modernism as a literary movement where a “solitary and asocial” human being is projected<sup>i</sup> (2023, p. 1). Later, after further examination of that view of the modernist subject as engrossed and withdrawn, the author considers an antagonistic approach to Mansfield that encompasses theories and critical models suggested by authors such as Jean-Luc Nancy or Maurice Blanchot. This communal view, applied to the modernist realm, draws attention in its intention to “elucidate the traditional modernist pursuit of interiority in the dialogue with a redefinition of the communal bonds” (Rodríguez Salas, 2023, p. 5). This introductory chapter follows a critical itinerary in community studies, which saw its zenith in the 1980s due to the theoretical foundations laid by thinkers such as Bataille, Lévinas, or Heidegger. Moreover, Rodríguez Salas abides by the underlying principles of sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies and his distinction between *community* and *society*, as the starting point of the ideas and theories introduced by the author later on. To continue, the chapter reveals the two community models theorized by Nancy that will considerably dominate the critical examination of Mansfield’s fictional and personal production: the *operative* and *inoperative* communities. The operative community owes its operational nature to an artificial imagined model, following the principles of critics like Benedict Anderson, whilst the inoperative community responds to a “questioning of the precepts of the latest model, rejecting their eucharistic and essentialist immanence” (Rodríguez Salas, 2023, p. 11). Lastly, Rodríguez Salas coins the term *affectional association* –these small communities held by Mansfield herself that act as liminal and disruptive spaces between the solipsistic modernist subject and general society, and whose destructive nature tries to redefine society itself– to discuss the three community models that are here explored. In doing so, the author aims at distancing himself from the terminology adopted by Nancy and Blanchot that limits further examination.

Following this introductory chapter, the first example of affectional association in Mansfield that appears in this study is that of lovers. In the case of the New Zealand author, we are witnessing a union that is never consummated and that leads irremediably to immateriality. It is precisely this failure, caused by non-existent communication, that Rodríguez Salas links to Nancy’s model of

inoperative community. Mansfield rejects the idealistic and romantic notion of the fusion between lovers, to give way to a rejection announced through symbolism. The author then enquires into different tropes and themes such as desire or corporality in several of Mansfield's short stories to look for the community impulse within them. Also noteworthy are the social masks that Mansfield herself mentioned in her letters to her husband Middleton Murry, as well as the frustrated materialization expressed symbolically. It is thus confirmed that the union of lovers between Henry and Edna –the protagonists of the story “Something Childish but Very Natural”– does not correspond to the inoperative community of Nancy and Blanchot, since “a cannibalistic intention is revealed in Henry that shows that the ultimate goal is not communication but communion, fusion, metaphorically devouring the other” (Rodríguez Salas, 2023, p. 23). Rodríguez Salas, then, highlights the recognition of corporeality, and how both lovers are caught between “the idealism of the new community and the limiting reality of its social environment” (2023, p. 24). Despite the youth and immaturity of the protagonists, Mansfield sees the subversive potential of the community of lovers as a model for an inoperative community.

However, Rodríguez Salas points out that the failure in lovers' relationships lies in the dichotomy between the social mask and the inner self, in which the former ends up irremediably prevailing, to the detriment of the latter. This mask is presented through lyrical symbolism in images such as the hat, whose social significance appears in many of Mansfield's stories. Their female protagonists succumb to the expectations of romantic essentialism, and a desire for communion is established between them, alluding to the trope of the cannibal embodied in the lover, who tries to devour the woman in a symbolic way through sexual desire. These lovers suffer from the inability to detach themselves from gender roles, and their return to them is perceived as an achievement in view of their extramarital disillusionment, despite the existence of a clear attempt to reverse it, as in the case of the story “Psychology”. The autobiographical dimension, critiques of which have afflicted Mansfield's writing for much of its existence, is evident in Mansfield herself and her idealization of Middleton Murry. Married life and motherhood make their way into her writing over time, especially as her health becomes weaker. However, her subsequent disenchantment with her husband and her desertion of Heron's idyllic reverie –an idealized home bearing the middle name of her deceased brother Leslie– for a more realistic vision of it, replaces the “unreal and tortuous motherhood of her biological and social plans with Murry with a symbolic motherhood, which she projects into her fiction” (Rodríguez Salas, 2023, p. 35). In this way, the writer extends her own desires to her fiction, which had become aggravated by the time she found a relatively steady marital life alongside Middleton Murry.

The second affectional association that Rodríguez Salas proposes revolves around the literary and artistic circles of which Mansfield never became a part, but did join occasionally. Although she repudiated the intellectual snobbery of groups such as Bloomsbury or the literary circles of Paris – in which canonical modernists such as Joyce participated– one can observe in Mansfield the longing

to fit in, or at least to seek validation, that she would not overtly recognize. After echoing Rancière's distinction between the *representative regime of art* and *aesthetic art* to understand the artistic communities linked to modernism, part of its solipsistic nature is denied or, at least, questioned. This questioning is based, additionally, on the ideas of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who traces the modernist origins in nineteenth-century Paris. Bourdieu called out the opposition of authors such as Baudelaire or Renan to bourgeois art, and their claim for artistic autonomy in the face of commercial success, despite the fact that their complete separation was not ultimately achieved. Rodríguez Salas once again questions modernist solipsism, following Bourdieu's assumptions, perceiving the artistic community to be "open to other fields in the negotiation of its own identity, (...) [which, in turn] connects with Nancy's operative community by operating from the aesthetic object" (2023, p. 42). The author points to Mansfield's possible perception of contemporary modernist circles as an "anticipation or response to Bourdieu's 'The Rules of Art'" (Rodríguez Salas, 2023, pp. 42–43). We are witnessing, then, an ambiguous response in Mansfield to these modernist communities, as she rejects their inherent intellectualism, whilst seeking, to some extent, their approval. Consequently, as Rodríguez Salas points out, a dissatisfaction is generated that leads her to look for an intermediate alternative: "reduced spaces halfway between the general artistic community and artistic self-absorption" (2023, p. 45).

Hence, tracing a sense of artistic sisterhood in Mansfield's personal material, that is, her letters and journal –although scholar Margaret Scott demonstrated that Mansfield did not keep a journal *per se*, but writings of a very diverse nature– seems adequate, as a more feminist turn in community studies also took place. This shift proves useful to trace that sisterhood as an important element, in Mansfield, particularly, and in women's literature in general. Rodríguez Salas introduces us to the questioning of Nancy and Sarah Clift's (2013) notions of fraternity and sisterhood. The latter, which "implies nourishment and affection" as opposed to the model of fraternity that "favors male unilateralism" (Nancy & Clift, 2013, p. 121, as cited in Rodríguez Salas, 2023, p. 46), in turn, explains the two types of relationships between women traced by critic Janice G. Raymond (1986): *hetero-reality*, understood as the subordination of women's existence in relation to men, and *female affection*, or friendship and influence among women. Rodríguez Salas argues that, although the latter is present in Mansfield, it is this hetero-reality that marks these relationships in her fiction. Mansfield's contact with the rest of her fellow contemporary female artists was also based on the parasitic Derridean model, of which, despite supporting the suffragette movement that was in full swing at the time, she was suspicious, due to it creating a certain separation with elitist nuances, reminiscent of Woolf, between "them" and "us".

It is precisely her complex and well-known partnership with Virginia Woolf that concludes this second affectional association in Mansfield. Despite the genuine and public admiration between the two, beyond the rivalry and jealousy that characterized their relationship, there are numerous aspects in which they concur. According to critic Angela Smith, who devoted a volume to exploring the relationship between these two modernist writers, the "abjection in illness, bisexuality, the response to childlessness and the complex relationships with husbands, publishers

and fathers” (1999, p. 31) are some of these elements appreciable in both authors, and, according to Rodríguez Salas, what could also explain their separation from Bloomsbury in Mansfield. However, their relationship was stained by hetero-reality, as Mansfield herself deeply longed for Woolf’s marital stability and how it facilitated her expression whilst writing. The union between the two is characterized by “affective exploration [based] on identification and complementarity, an incursion into the singularities of each within, but also beyond, the general artistic order” (Rodríguez Salas, 2023, p. 55). Finally, to explore this impulse of artistic sisterhood in Mansfield’s fiction, Rodríguez Salas chooses the stories “Bliss” and “Carnation”. In the first story, full of sexual overtones, images, and allusions to corporeality, the desire to cultivate creative as well as sentimental bonds between two women stands out. The exploration of such sorority extends to the relationship held by a mother and her daughter, where the corporality expressed through the image of the precious violin in its confining carcass –the arms of the usurping maid– gives way to the reinforcement of the ties between them. However, the main communal affiliation takes place in the protagonist’s engagement with the character of Pearl Fulton. The aesthetic tension between the two is embodied through a symbolic display of colors and erotic innuendos that ultimately foresee the tragic ending of the story. On the other hand, “Carnation” emphasizes the triumph of artistic sisterhood, according to the author, through the proposal of an “alternative literary tradition of women” (Rodríguez Salas, 2023, pp.56–57). The proposal takes hold of feminine affection, mostly through a corporality that encapsulates this new feminine writing tradition, what Nancy (2008) has called *corpus* –the body as the core of all writing, affiliated with neither images, nor signs. According to Gerri Kimber (2008), this is one of the most sexually charged stories written by Mansfield –constantly intertwined with eucharistic and religious references– as several symbols suggest, like the perfume that the carnation gives off and its trance-like effect on the professor. “Hugo-Wugo’s voice began to warm, to deepen, to gather together, to swing, to rise–Oh, the scent of Eve’s carnation!” (Mansfield, 2006, p. 554).

The last network of relationships or affectional associations that occupies Rodríguez Salas’s last chapter responds to Mansfield’s complex relationship with her brother Leslie. The last years of the writer’s life were marked by the constant presence of death. Rodríguez Salas pays attention to the late-medieval motif of the *dance of death* in much of the author’s fiction produced during this period. After the diagnosis of the tuberculosis that wound up claiming her life, she channeled that irremediable arrival through her fiction. The chapter highlights Mansfield’s artistic merit and projects her as one of the masters of the short story, since part of her success also lies in the achievement of her own space within the canon despite her early death, while writers like Woolf or Joyce did not attain the notoriety or achieve the level of experimentation that their work entails until they reached a certain maturity in life. However, the episode that would mark Mansfield’s treatment of death as a new dimension acquired in her work was the sudden death of her brother Leslie in 1915. Her mystification of her brother, after this loss, provided a literary and spiritual

refuge from the nearness of her own death. Mansfield observed how the patriotism that overwhelmed Leslie in his final moments burdened her, renewing her perception of New Zealand as an idealized place and source of pride. Her writing, as well as her *modus vivendi*, acquired a new dimension where motifs such as the Eucharistic are noticeable, present in her journal where references to the Christian rite and to the figure of Christ himself are evident. This complicity stands out from previous associations, as it is permeated by the proximity of death and the absence of sexual desire that we can observe in previous communities. Rodríguez Salas, in turn, links this motif of *ecce homo* to Nancy's vision of the body as "a cultural product saturated with signs" (2023, p. 75). Mansfield's mystification of her brother in her fiction is undeniable. The trope of communion appears in Leslie, whose "almost incestuous" nuances are one of the elements assigned to the asocial aspect of Nancy and Blanchot's "community of lovers" (Rodríguez Salas, 2023, p. 77). However, Mansfield moves away from the religious/patriotic element in the treatment of death in her fiction in order to maintain a shared corporeality that will cement the foundations of her own religion. Here, we witness a "writing of the body, where life and fiction shift towards an inoperative model of community by which death is not mystified" (Rodríguez Salas, 2023, p. 78), but is faced without filters, as Nancy (2008) warns. Rodríguez Salas exemplifies this writing of the body in Mansfield's "The Wind Blows" and "The Garden Party", where precisely that corporeality predominates, which Mansfield uses in a symbolic lyricism aiming at facing death without palliatives, symbols that reject any hint of mystification. This intimacy and fraternal communion translate into details such as the names of the protagonists –Laura and Laurie– as well as in the fusion of identity between the two. Their bond with the inoperative community is evidenced in that fraternal intimacy in the face of death, accepting the incomprehension that it entails. The Derridean mystery of death, as a secret further revealed through the triumph over it, is manifested in Mansfield through this communication by means of the "transfigured body of her brother (...) [that] leads to the mystery of Derrida and his responsibility, which becomes literary responsibility in the face of Leslie's death and her own" (Rodríguez Salas, 2023, p. 83). Hence, her fiction acquires a religious solace that functions as her own credo.

This volume by Gerardo Rodríguez Salas follows the trend of recent community studies research that seeks to redefine or question the modernist movement in its most canonical conception. *Vivir sola es morir: el modernismo comunitario de Katherine Mansfield* is an essential account in tracing this communal impulse in an author who, for a long time, has generally gone unnoticed by the public and critics in Spain, in contrast to the reception the modernist writer has received in other continental countries, where she belongs to a lively tradition of scholarly examination. The monograph also proves useful in its interrogation of modernism, as it draws upon recent critical pathways, thus challenging the very foundation that ruled out that communal potential in the movement. Nevertheless, it is the author Katherine Mansfield and her spiritual triumph over death that the reader is ultimately reminded of by the end of the volume, as, although it has been one hundred years since her passing, her figure rejoices in a newfound interest that is seemingly unrelenting.

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