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Locating Sites of Paradoxes: A Study of the (IM)Possibility of Community in Gish Jen's *World and Town*

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Abstract

Gish Jen is widely recognized as a preeminent fiction and nonfiction writer in contemporary America. A second-generation Chinese American, Jen has distinguished herself in the literary world with her compelling works, most of which have been at once intelligible and thought-provoking. Her fourth novel, World and Town, offers a provocative and purposeful look at issues concerning a cosmopolitan world. The novel, however, has not received the academic attention it deserves. The novel's supposedly "immense scale," as hinted in the title along with its suggestive theme, eludes the reader's interpretative grasp, which contributes to its general lack of critical and profound exploration. This essay intends to do justice to Gish Jen's World and Town through an investigation of "community"—an important approach that has not been systematically and adequately examined in the field of literary studies.

Keywords: Community, Co-originality, Ethics of alterity, Gish Jen, Singular plurality, World and Town.

1. Envisioning the Singular Plurality of Community

In *Culture and Society*, Raymond Williams comments that, "unlike all other terms of social organization (*state*, *nation*, *society*, etc.) [community] seems never to be used unfavorably, and never to be given any positive opposing or distinguishing term" (1958: 76). In the Western tradition, the Enlightenment and its legacy justify totalizing systems, in which the urge for communal life seems truism. Up to the 2010s, the notion of community has surged as a hot topic, signified in divergent and increasingly important ways. Theorists hold a critical and engaging attitude towards this very notion. Tracing the germination of the philosophical concept of "community," we observe that Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Community* (1983) innovatively connects the rise of "the new communities" (42) of nations with print technology and capitalism and triggers the debates. Fundamentally, community is supposed to be the site of communication and communion par excellence. What signifies community has been consequently driven by political, cultural, or social impetus, which suggests that the very concept of community refers to a demand for security, a state of exigency. As such, the notion "community" also paradoxically denotes a sign of desire, an absence, or simply a political project, rather than a delineation of any actual condition of being together.

In the wake of Georges Bataille's writings on *désoeuvrement* (the inoperative), Maurice Blanchot, Jean Luc Nancy, and Giorgio Agamben respectively cast different opinions towards the issues of "community." In *The Unavowable Community* (1983), Blanchot relates his earlier exposition of "unworking" to Bataille's "negative community." He criticizes the kind of community that is based on the communality of a common goal. Like Bataille, Blanchot aspires to a notion of community that cannot be co-opted by totalitarian forces. Blanchot's sustained and explicit reflection on "community" is based on his concept of revolution—a kind of literary or linguistic terror, in which things are killed through language and subsequently reborn into a renewed existence in language. Blanchot maintains that the death involved in language is the foundation of communication and, by extension, of community: "What of the human 'community,' when it must respond to this relation of strangeness between man and man—a relation without common measure, an exorbitant relation—that the experience of language leads one to sense?" (1993: 71) While Maurice Blanchot's concept of "community" is distinctive for its freedom from any form of sovereignty, Jean Luc Nancy's invocation is mainly a resistance to collectivity. Nancy proposes a concept of community that produces new constitutions of relationships which are not predicated on predisposed notions of "bonding." What is produced in such constitutions is the idea of a "community without community" (1991: 71), referring to a network of relations, a "multitude," concerned not with race, gender, sexuality, class, or culture that traditional idea of community is premised upon. Instead, it is a community which draws upon relations that are formed across these categories—*being with*. In *The Inoperative Community* (1991), Nancy criticizes the idea of bonding embedded in the idea of community. Nancy narrates that,

> [i]t is a matter of a lost age in which community was woven of tight, harmonious, and infrangible bonds and in which above all it played back to itself, through its institutions, its rituals, and its symbols, the representation, indeed the living offering, of its own immanent unity, intimacy, and autonomy. (1991: 29-30)

According to Nancy, the appeal of community has eventually enacted the consolidation of state power and neutralized any purported support of political dissent. To redress, Nancy's *The Inoperative Community* seeks to reformulate community as a critical concept used to dismantle the totalizing logic. On the whole, Blanchot's and Nancy's discussions of the concept of community focus on its conflicting aspect as universal belongings, while Agamben's opinion about community centers on the relation between singularity and ethics. He opens *The Coming Community* (1993) with a reflection on the relation of the universal and the singular under the uncommon title of "Whatever" to express something being "*such-as-it-is*":

> The Whatever in question here relates to singularity not in its indifference with respect to a common property (to a concept, for example: being red, being French, being Muslim), but only in its being *such as it is.* Singularity is thus freed from the false dilemma that obliges knowledge to choose between the ineffability of the individual and the intelligibility of the universal. (1993: 1, italics original)

It is important to note that his understanding of "whatever" not as "indifference" but as "being such that it always matters" with its original meaning translated from Latin. "Suchness," according to Agamben, is that which "presents itself as such, that *shows* its singularity" (1993: 9, italics original). With this, Agamben describes the nature of "whatever singularity" as that which has an "inessential commonality, a solidarity that in no way concerns an essence" (1993: 19). Centered on the legacy of Bataille's thought, the three thinkers aspire to an idea of community that cannot be co-opted by totalitarian forces. All of them criticize the way ideology has been used to make the idea of community which is based on a communality of experience or a common goal. Among them, Nancy conceives of community as discrepant rather than homogenized, and redefines the concept of community as a shared experience of this dissolution. Such a notion of community calls for something beyond the formation of communal bonds and beyond the search for "common ground." Nancy argues that it is necessary to unwork the deleterious effects of modernity's communities, so as to undo the exclusions. For Nancy, the unworking of community can be accomplished by exposing myths of completion on which communal exclusions are based. In *The Inoperative Community*, Nancy thus refutes "the breakdown of community that supposedly engendered the modern era" (1991: 9). To debate, Nancy points out that communal impossibility, instead, is the ontological reality of the modern society. Narratives of communal impossibility lead NOT to the myth of the imagined community of homogeneity, but to a recognition of the process of community as excess, as exceeding. As Anja Streiter observes that, "[i]t is the limit, the excess, and the openness where we can experience what is common to us" (Streiter 52). In *The Inoperative Community*, Nancy further suggests a notion of community which urges us to recognize the lack of communal goals and traits and to accept that we are always together in a "singular plurality." In addition to questioning the genealogical bonds inherent in the very notion of community in the Western tradition, Nancy's "singular plurality," in particular, serves to frame the issue of "inoperativeness." In his "Sharing Freedom," Nancy states that: "One could say: the singular of 'mine' is by itself plural" (*The Experience of Freedom*, 67). That is, "I am" and "we are" are co-original. For Nancy, that "*being* is *being-with* or *being singular plural*" has to be thought of as the only possible condition or structure of our being-in-the-world" (Devisch 175). As such, Nancy designates "singular plural" as "being in the world where the 'with' is co-original with every 'there'" (Devisch 175). With such a concept, Nancy develops nothing but a resistance to the collective identity as a communion or community as "oneness." Translator Peter Connor sums up Nancy's different ways of looking at community in the preface:

> [...] community does not consist in the transcendence (nor in the transcendental) of a being supposedly immanent to community. It consists on the contrary in the immanence of a "transcendence"—that of finite existence as such, which is to say, of its "exposition." [...] community cannot be presupposed. *It can only be exposed.* (xxxix emphasis added)

Eluding any modes of bonding, Nancy's "community" is therefore best described by "exposedness." In this exposedness, collisions happen on a daily basis. This is not the community we are always accustomed to or thinking about. It is not communion, not fusion, not a bond, nor does it always involve shared goals, coherent projects, or allude to traditional notions of community, which often only account for attempts to fuse in the name of shared vision. Instead, for Nancy, community is described as something based on "a shared experience of finitude." But any attempt to commune is threatened by the ever emerging colliding goals and conflicting identities. The failure in communing also stems from the presence of infinite purposes—purposes that expose what Nancy calls "being-in-common." Therefore, community is predicated not upon an essence or presence but upon something or someone missing, held "*in* common [...] without letting itself be absorbed in a common substance" (xxxviii). Myths of completion, as dictated by conventional discourse of community, actually deny a community's resistance, and excess. Arguably, instead, it is the very persistence of this excess that provides the potential for the process of community to continue.

In this sense, Nancy's concept of community can be appropriable for an attempt to (re)work *from* under the totalizing and dominating forms of modern reason *towards* politics of resistance. Further, to argue against the homogeneity of identity on which community is grounded, Nancy states that, "it is not that identity is always 'on the way,' projected on the horizon like a friendly star, like a value or a regulative idea. It never comes to be; it never identifies itself, even as an infinite project, *because it is already there*, because it is the *mêlée*" (2000: 155). A *mêlée* is a concept of Nancy, who uses it to theorize a number of phenomena such as culture, language, knowing, subject of knowing, etc. *Mêlée* highlights the processual nature of these categories and denotes the processes of mixing and mixes rather than purities: "in a *mêlée*, there is opposition and encounter, there is what gathers itself and that which separates, that which makes contact and that which makes contract, that which concentrates and that which is spread out, that which identifies and that which alters" (1993: 12).

Nancy's renewal of the question of community suggests that community does not involve a consistent group built around an essential identity or shared project. In this sense, if we are to build a communal narrative that does not support the myths of completion, it must be continuously contested, incomplete and caught in the *mêlée*. *World and Town* is a story of community where there continues to be a venue for *mêlée* to occur. It reveals community in process. This revelation is registered by the descriptions of the *mêlée* in the novel with a wealth of illuminating and "singular plural" ethnic anecdotes. Put it in another way, *World and Town* relies on certain *mêlée* as means to orchestrate and perform community.

2. The *Mélée*

World and Town consists of six sections, each devoted to the different and contrasting backgrounds of the figures, and the community episodes surrounding them. In this novel With "various innovative narrative constructions" (Ho 86), "the communal aspect" peculiarly fleshes out as the reader is left to "imagine what happens when a group of people share a space designed to accommodate one particular identity," as is commented by Joseph George in his book on the suburbia life of America. (George 3). The characters' lives as well as the ever emerging challenge and vicissitude that shape them have consequently been disclosed. Hattie Kong is a Chinese American, whose father was a direct descendent of Confucius, and mother, an American missionary. The "Prologue: A Lost World" is set in a Chinese cemetery located in a beautiful old forest in which Hattie's relatives—all descendants of Confucius—are buried. This family burial ground located in Qingdao in Shandong province, "*[a] cosmopolitan city, occupied by the Germans before the Japanese, and city known therefore for its 'charming Bavarian architecture*," which is also the city where Hattie was born and brought up. A powerful and poetic evocation of the remote past and place initiates the novel: "*Even now, at the age sixty-eight, it is something for Hattie Kong, American citizen, to recall. Two thousand years of relatives, plopped down to rest in a single old forest*" (3; italics author's). With this, the prologue unfolds the novel with a narration of the "bonding" of relatives for two thousand years in this bucolic woods—a bonding which is set against the continuingly "fabricating" of community in New England. Hattie laments that, "*For what has there been to replace that old world, with its rituals and certitudes, its guide posts and goal-posts?*" (8, emphasis original). This inception, which is provocative, leads the reader to the unfolding of the narrative of variously-featured ethnics in New England.

In the first section: "Hattie I: I'll But Lie and Bleed Awhile," the novel briskly dives into a series of vignettes of life in Riverlake, a fictional town in Vermont. We see Hattie, a retired biological teacher, has scarcely emerged from mourning the cancer deaths of her husband, Joe, and her best friend, Lee, who both died the year before. It seems an unbearably devastating loss for her: "Ever since Joe died and then Lee, in a kind of one-two Hattie still can't quite believe […] she still begs them, in her half-sleep, sometimes. *Come back. Come back*" (12). Hattie seeks to restart her life by relocating herself at this New England small town where she once lived with an American couple, after she as teenager student illegally immigrated into the United States by assuming the passport of an American girl who died. Now, Hattie lives with her three dogs, Cato, Reveille, and Annie. She has some friends to take a walk together; she paints Chinese style pictures, takes yoga class, and attends the community meetings.

Events and unexpected happenings, every now and then, redirect Hattie's life to a new level of complexity. In Riverlake, Hattie finds herself immersed in space of mutability. Waves of vicissitude interfere with the story arc, which is at one time compelling and at another challenging. To begin with, the Chhungs, a family of displaced Cambodian refugees, move into "an odd lot the church has been trying to sell off" (12) living in a trailer on the adjoining lot next to Hattie's cottage. Observing and reporting the everyday life of the refugees involuntarily, Hattie narrates,

> Last week, a family moved in down the hill—Cambodian. They plan to build themselves a little house, people say. Hoping that the house will—*ta daah*!—become a home. Well, that's not so simple, Hattie happens to know. But never mind; this is an age of flux. She, Hattie Kong, came from China; her neighbors from Cambodia; is there anyone not coming from somewhere? (11)

Later, talking to the head of the Cambodia family, Hattie seems to encounter something ungraspable:

> He has on a blue buttoned-up polo shirt, a black leather belt, and blue denim pants that look as though they are meant to be jeans but somehow look like slacks. His hair is white and thin, his skin pale and loose, and his face the fine result, she guesses, of a Pol Pot facial: One of his cheekbones sits a half-step high. She shivers. The man's nose is likewise misaligned; his pupils are tiny; and his gaze has a wander, as if possessed of a curiosity independent of its owner. (16-17)

Hattie is impressed by Ratanak Chhung's "Pol Pot facial," and thus, "she shivers." After they exchange some personal information, Hattie, however, changes her first impression: "For a moment she can see him in a suit and tie, with slicked-back hair and a cell phone" (19). Ratanak would have been a distinguished entrepreneur if not for the turmoil on the Indochinese Peninsula of South Eastern Asia.

From the next section, "Sophy: How They Even Got Here," we learn not only the history of the Chhung family but also the complex intertwinement of Asian ethnics. Like millions of other Cambodians, the Chhungs bear deep physical and mental scars from the reign of Pol Pot (1975-1978). And like the people on the Indochinese Peninsula, the Chhungs have been part of the complex process of transculturalization on the Peninsula. As Sophy narrates about his father, Ratanak, "four of his grandparents were from China" (112), and therefore, the Chhungs are Chinese Cambodians. As Chinese Cambodians, they hate Vietnamese and lead a life of multicultural style. Ratanak's first wife "drank café au lait like a foreigner, and not only could she read and write Khmer," she could also speak several languages and dialects, including French, Chinese, Teochew dialect and Cantonese (112-13). Ratanak's first wife, refusing to be one of the Khmer Rouge's wives, was buried "up to her neck" and "left" "to die" (114). Ratanak "found her and dug her out, and that was so happy! Except that then she couldn't make herself eat, and died anyway" (114). In the refugee camp, Ratanak protected Sophy's mother, Mum, from "the Thai robbers" and he stole rice from the Thai villages; they became husband and wife. In the meanwhile, Mum found her sister's son, Sarun, because she recognized "a bullet hole" on his face (115). They became family, "before they found each other they were completely alone in the world" (115).

Moving to the empty lot close to Hattie's cabin, the Chhungs become the burden of the retired teacher. Exhausted by the endless dithering, Hattie one day sees "violent up-and-down movements" inside the trailer and gets panic. She thinks that Sarun is being beaten to death; she calls 911 (230-31). A good comment puts that: "how many secrets can really be kept in a trailer that size?" (235). Then, one night, Sarun gets serious hurt and no one can "stop the bleeding" of his would (250). It turns out that Sarun is involved with the trading of "[b]ear stuff. Bear paws" and "gallbladders" for "traditional medicine" (265).

Compared with the Chhungs, Everett and Ginny's story seems commonplace. The husband, Everett, is a country handyman, coming from Hungary. His fragmented language narrates the events, simple and direct: "He

was from Hungary, see. He knew what hard times were. Communism. War. Never mind that back in the old country his family were teachers. Lawyers. He wasn't proud" (277). Like the Cambodian family, he is a man with traumatic past, tortured by political extremists of communism. Ginny's mother came from France, "died when Ginny was eight" (278). After a short courtship, the sweet young couple married and there are "happy times": "Everett got himself a job at an outfit called J.H. Moses" (281); and Ginny got herself hired as a teacher's assistant" (282). Then, their farm plan fails. Ginny blames on Giles and Belle, and she believes it is they who destroy their farm," because "[t]hey hated our farm. Hated it that we stood on our own two feet. Hated it that we stood for something. They hated the whole world where people believe in honor . . ." (301). After the sudden death of her father, Rex, Ginny turns a religious fanatic, dogmatically adheres to distorted idealism of a rigid world view:

> . . . she was going to *set the world back right*, see—her and her church. They were going to set the world back right.
>
> They were. She saw it. They were.
>
> It was going to take time. But one day, they were going to do it. And then they were going to see it again: *the ideal world*. The world the way it used to be. The world the way it used to be. They were going to have it all back: The world the way it was, back when she was queen. (308 emphasis added).

Then, the idea of opening a café is dampened by the realization that it is not fully thought out: The "café in the house make them feel like they'd lost their privacy" (304). Ginny leaves her "Eastern Orthodox" husband (303), follows a warped sense, and uses Sophy as her weapon to revenge, creating disturbance. The way Ginny isolates herself into rigid fundamentalist principles leaves the town in dire need of peace, security, and order. When there is "a fire at the mini-mall site," "[o]nly Ginny is suspicious" (245). The truth is that Ginny takes advantage of Sophy's traumatic past and her eager to be reborn, introduces her extremism. Sophy gradually falls in the conspiracy of Ginny, alienates Hattie. It is Sophy who sets the fire and causes the commotion. It seems that accidents and danger are imminent and will happen next moment. "People say there might be terrorists coming in from Canada now;" with this, all the talking in the restaurant comes to a stop (235). "And everything happening sudden—you never knew what was coming. Startling. It was startling" (280). In addition, the town is not quiet, the hunters, some of them are "kids—twelve, thirteen, fourteen years old" and their "shots are disturbing" (247). "Now that Value-Mart's up and left, and the inn's been sold again, there's a mini-mall going up on the sites" (229). An outspoken speaker in the town meetings, Jill Jenkins says, "[i]t's not her fault the cell tower passed . . . It's our own fault for not going to every darn meeting. For relaxing our vigilance" (229). Eventually, the intertwined twist between them and the town people becomes what constitutes part of the *Mélée* of the plot.

Apparently, the town in *World and Town* is afflictively undergoing a series of upheavals and changes: the destroy of the forests: "there might have been more trees to drink up some of the water—that flood wasn't all Mother Nature" (312); the hippies in the "Buddhist temple" (312); the building of a threatening cell-phone tower, gangsters' drug trafficking, the construction of big chain stores, religious fundamentalism, unresolved domestic conflicts and the entangled personal dramas all weave together to make up the complex fabric of the community life. The story involves the values of diverse groups of people, immigrants, refugees, fundamentalist Christians, environmentalists, urban gangs, hippies, and Buddhists, who bring a myriad of problems. As well, the story sophisticatedly incorporates the voices of varied types of characteristic figures, Hattie, Sophy, Carter, Everett, Ginny, who navigate complex multiple world views. Almost all of the characters are identifiable as part of "modulating networks" of communication and what is called "abstract cooperation," to borrow Hardt and Negri's term (*Empire* xiii). The centrifugal interactions between these characters exhibit different ways of exchanging, relating, and bonding in the community, analogous to the networks of communication in Hardt and Negri's sense (*Empire* 2000: 296).

3. Exposedness

In *The Inoperative Community*, Jean-Luc Nancy denies the identification of man to man, which, he thinks, is exactly the problem in need of rethinking. And the only way to resolve is to accept the "walls" that separate "you" from "me," or "us," not as barriers but as "limits" that infinitely interrupt every attempt to identify or construct immanent community; that is, community "realizes itself in the sharing of its limits, of its impossibility" (Streiter, 52). According to Nancy, "the sharing of community . . . between singular existences that are not subject and whose relation—the sharing itself—is not a communion, nor the appropriation of an object, nor a self-recognition, nor even a communication as this is understood to exist between subjects" (1991: 25), for

> these singular beings are themselves constituted by sharing, they are distributed and placed, or rather spaced, by the sharing that makes them others: other for one another, and other, infinitely other for the Subject of their fusion, which is engulfed in the sharing, in the ecstasy of the sharing: "communicating" by not "communing." These "places of communication" are no longer places of fusion, even though in them one passes from one to the other; they are defined and exposed by their dislocation. Thus, the communication of sharing would be this very dis-location. (1991: 25)

In other words, "communication," in Nancy's sense, has nothing to do with two consciousnesses sharing in or communing with some common existence, substance, or essence. Nor is it a dialectic of a subject working through negativity in a self-affirmed realization. Singularity itself is the "dislocation" of a "sharing" that has nothing to do with a subjective sharing. Rather, here "sharing" refers to the infinitely mobilizing the thinking "to the limits."

World and Town tackles the themes of death, grief, friendship, family, religion, science, domestic abuse, drugs, alcoholism, and love, and all of these are connected under the rubric of "community." In Riverlake, connections between events, people, races, values, are complicated as the tensions of community life rooted in the outside larger mutating worlds. The community has been subsequently turned into a troubled ground. The contour of the community is arguably brought into relief by conflicting differences and contrasting ideologies. Eventually and stunningly, these incongruous communal daily happenings are set in another higher pitch of tension when 9/11 terrorist attacks happened.

In the doomed day morning, Hattie was ready for giving language lesson to Chhung's wife, and the TV was on. What appeared on TV, the image of the falling of World Trade Centers, became the untouchable topic of the

days that followed. "'Terrorists,' she says, slowly. A new world for her, too, and how to explain? The World Trade Center—big buildings—New York, New York City. . . ." Hattie is shocked and dumb, and

> the events repeating again and again on the screen and then again and again, all night, in her head; only to be recounted so often on the radio today that it seemed that history could just get stuck; no one was ever going to move past this. And what a different America they live in now, with such a different idea of what's possible. . . ." (220)

Watching the TV report on 9/11 terrorist attacks with Hattie, Chhung, contrastingly, thinks that the news report is nothing but a movie. In talking about movie, he says he would rather watch the DVD of "*Killing Fields*," instead (220). Two devastating events, "9/11 terrorist attacks" and "Pol Pot Genocide" are thus associated. 9/11 disastrous event in the U.S and the Killing Fields in Cambodia, which happened in two different countries, different times, for different reasons, are brought side by side suggestively and abruptly. During the Khmer Rouge regime, people in Cambodia "counted hardship by the millions. The million wounded, the millions dead" (220). Hattie's eagerly sharing of shock, panic and helplessness only earns Ratanak's insensible response. The act of sharing uncovers not the common ground from which to communicate human deep fears, but the "limits" of such a sharing. The confrontation of Hattie and Ratanak on the matter of "sharing" opinion about disastrous experiences leads clearly to the different and incomparable associations of events—the infinitely mobilizing the thinking "to the limits" as discussed above. The act of sharing reveals the limits of affinity.

Lost in thought, Hattie understands that there is no "any point in going on" because she is "on the other side of a divide" (221). The ripple effects of September 11 terrorist attack on Hattie and on the community residents are compounded by the fear of the increasingly going extreme in local religious fundamentalists, involving a circle of town people. Intended by the author or not, Riverlake serves as a dramatically transforming cartography through which the uncertainty planted in post-9/11 America becomes manifest.

4. (Un-)Working

Through the novel's delineation of the town people who live in a circle, a community is in the becoming: Events are unfolded, conflicts configured, encounters occurred; pain, fear, sorrow and death are fabricated into many contoured profiles of a community in becoming. Fraudulent but revealing, *World and Town* has gestured the formation of a community toward an imperative rethinking of "community." A small town, which prevails with multiple voices and languages: English, Khmer, Chinese (Teochew dialect, Mandarin, Qingdao dialect) and different religious, moral or spiritual faiths, struggles to serve the occasions for the town people. Superstitions and confusing religious maxims reside. Three religions (Buddhism, Confucianism, Christianity), several ethnicities (Cambodian, Chinese, European, Indian, and North American) produce a dynamic nexus in which the characters are simultaneously connected and divided.

First, the (dis)entanglement of community and the colliding energies which make up the fabric of the novel in question is reflected in Hattie's self-conscious engagement with Chinese-style painting. The changing contour of community is metaphysically epitomized in her endeavoring in using different styles of compositing painting. To resume her normal life, Hattie's "chief job these days is to reconstitute herself; and "painting has been a help with that" (21). Hattie's symbolic reconstitution is thus realized in her painting of bamboo, which both implicates her self-positioning in the community, and virtually symbolizes the (un-)working of the community. At the outset, she paints in a meditative way, seeking a "monk like lightness," a "detachment . . . the old Chinese scholars used to seek . . . a feeling that one has risen above life, seen through it" (21). Increasingly, the composition of Hattie's painting mirrors her emotional and mental struggles with the Chhung family as well as her affective investment in the chaotic public affairs of the community. At this struggling stage, her composition is "less blank"; the "stalks seem to have more to do with one another, as if they're acquainted from another picture—involved" (60). During this period, the painting's composition parallels the way Hattie is trapped with various problems: the involvement with the Chhung family's crisis one after another, the "misfortunes" of her Chinese relatives, and the effort to resume her relationship with Carter, the widower. As the community affairs get entangled, Hattie adds leaves to her bamboo stalks that are "blowing pell-mell, flecked and pelted with rain" (103), which turns out to be a foreshadowing image of the coming domestic turmoil in the Chhungs.

Solving the pressing issues in the community is no easy task for Hattie. She has to separate Sarun from his drug trafficking gangsters, warn Sophy off a fundamentalist Christian church, and protect Sophon and Sopheap, the other two daughters, and the father, Ratanak, from criminal charges. Her manners of composition painting evolve correspondingly : "For once she has a clear idea what she's going to focus on if she ever makes it back to her bamboo—a more natural splay of the leaves. Like the fingers of a hand" (184). The moment as Hattie intercedes in yet another Chhung family crisis, she is seen by Sophy as enemy. Being disappointed and angry, she resorts to her painting. Hattie "starts working on some bamboo in snow—trying to convey the weight of the snow [with a] judicious absence of ink. The weight of it's all suggestion—a matter of bending stalks and burdened leaves, and of using these things to trick the eye into 'seeing'" (225).

The philosophy suggested in Hattie's shifting painting styles refers to some interesting deeper implications. Hattie, at the critical moment, wonders why she has burdened herself with all this adversity. She is painfully aware through her involvement with the Chhungs that she has "evoked" a "good heavy load" (225). Anyhow, Hattie is unable to wash her hand off those troubling affairs in the same way as Carter, her high school lover, who returns to the small town to teach yoga after his wife died. She cannot let go and "watch people get pushed halfway around the globe only to get plowed under once they get here" or "airbrushed out" in the same way as she was when she arrived in the U.S. as a teenager (238). Her rational mind knows humans are "prone to superstition" and "are wired to seek cause and effect whether it's there or not" when they "don't feel quite in control" of things, such as her relatives' belief that reburying the bones in China will stop their bad luck. In due time, she learn to attribute her compassion less to Confucianism and more to "tradition and hope and humility and coping" (321-22).

During this period of time, Hattie has developed different points of views towards the community. Having decided to fulfill her relatives' wishes, she visits her parents' graves while the bones are being exhumed. There she notices her parents' Chinese names carved with a clump of bamboo in each corner of the tombstone. Through all the ups and downs of life, Hattie realizes in time that she has been "painting her way all along to this moment—retreating that she might inch forward" (328).

By the end of the novel, Hattie withdraws from the given image that bamboo represents in traditional Chinese culture as an idealized decency and creates a new picture of "community." She begins to draw with a different perspective, dropping the idea of the communal fusion. As the novel closes with Hattie moving toward a realization of "dissolution of communication," she grows "sick of bamboo" and is ready to paint the lake behind her cottage (383). Yet, at this moment the lake view is not picturesque at all; instead, it has already been blemished as a cell-phone tower being built across it—a mixed image of worldwide connection of communication technology; it, above all, signifies that community is more than "woven of tight, harmonious, and infrangible bonds." The new lake view marks an irreversible intrusion of variations into the town life.

Further, as "a novel of ideas," *World and Town* is inscribed in witty eloquence associated aptly with philosophical discourse. In a talk with Hattie, Carter remarks how people are influenced by community that,

> we will do anything to maintain the illusion that the world we apprehend is reality. For example, I might believe myself to care about truth and the advancement of knowledge, but that would only be my self-serving illusion, beyond which lay a deeper truth. To wit—" (80)

Carter doubts and ridicules the approachability of the "world" and hoorays the flexibility of "wit." In this way, the novel casts insightful perspectives, articulate powerful voices, and holds a host of colliding energies and concerns. Subsequently, in exchange of opinions about the changing milieu of the community, Carter maintains: "All cultures make their own truths, Hattie. The question is, Does their world work? Is it adaptive? Does it help us procreate? Or does it obscure so much fact as to be maladaptive?" (239) Hattie replies that,

> each community member is "trying not to *combust*, . . . trying to play along—to see where he's going . . .[in a] community, imagined or real . . . And the answer, maybe, that such inclusion fosters cooperation and social cohesion. Which contributes in turn to the survival of the gene pool—that is, to the genes of the individual and of his or her kin." (239)

In this world-shaping novel, piercing words crisscrosses and questions are made known in constant idea exchange, and concepts of "common ground" are negotiated between we and they, here and there, then and now, imagined and real, the old and the new. The depth of social and psychological observation and the employment of scientific language offer a captivating vision of how the residents of Riverlake make connections with each other through "exposedness to others." Notion of "community" and the question of belonging to different worlds are thus explored in depth. A meaningful description reads,

> "Riverlake being a good town, an independent town—a town that dates to before the Revolution. *A town that was American before America was American*, people claim—though, well, it's facing change now. . . . Yet, originally, "Riverlake wasn't Riverlake;" "Brick Lake overflowed its banks a hundred year ago" to avoid confusion, the town had to be renamed. . . . Riverlake has been dubbed by local residents as "a lake born of a river"; "Riverlake—*a town born of change*" (11, emphases added).

The novel traces the historical construction of Riverlake with a myth, which privileges the foundation of a nation and its counterpart, community. Riverlake is "good" and "independent" and hailed above America, but, it is, after all, inauthentic—"a lake born of a river"—an amalgamation. This fictional New England town intended to allegorize the emergence of the U.S. is an amalgamation. A critique of the U.S. is evident as Riverlake is metaphorized as America: "A town that was American before America was American."

It is important to note that Riverlake is not created as an all-time community. Rather, *World and Town* critiques such an idea by exposing a longstanding issue within the traditional notion of community which considers community's communion and fusion to be final and inevitable. In this way, Riverlake reminds us that, as Nancy argues, we need a "renewal of the question of community" (1991: 22). In fact, any attempt at communion is always troubled by forces that prevent fusion, and these forces offer an exposition of *community*.

According to Nancy, community emerges in the unworking of the attempt at a common purpose. The threatening of the erection of cell-phone towers and the building of chain stores Value-Mart; the hearing of new commercial proposals in Town Hall; the informal speech conflicts in the meeting room, domestic troubled life, the failed plan for the hillside farm, and the ever emerging fundamentalists gathering at local church, all contribute to the problematic of forming an integral body of "community." When Neddy Needham, at the first Town Hall, asks "Whose town is this?" it is clear that the community has been intended by contradictory purposes, and for this reason it is an ideal site for discussing how community (un)works. On the front page of the novel, Gish Jen puts down these words:

> The American attaches himself to his little community for the same reason that the mountaineer clings to his hill, because the characteristic features of his country are there more distinctly marked; it has a more striking physiognomy. (Aleis De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*)

By citing an epigram from de Tocqueville, Jen addresses an intricate theme of what lies at the tangled roots of Americanness. As an ironic echo of de Tocqueville's ideal, *World and Town* writes back to the ideal community as the well-being of a country—the image of "City on the Hill."

5. Infinitude

In *World and Town*, Gish Jen creates a detailed picture of a small town whose inhabitants are struggling to learn *from* and *about* each others' peculiarities and languages—"The trailer is not so much about teaching Mum English now as it is about teaching Hattie Khmer" (314). The author presents a rich picture of how different generations of immigrants, though they originate from different cultures and ethnicities, seeks to communicate with each other, sharing their traditional practices, cultures, moralities, beliefs, and languages. The ethnic, cultural, and linguistic differences among the characters, however, have created an intriguingly intertwined *tension* on which the story is based. The neighbors come from all over the world—Cambodia, Vietnamese, China, India, Hungary, Middle Easterners, etc. The ethnic codes and historical residues they bear are thus brought into intimate proximity with one another; in this way, the community opens itself to its own infinitude. Formed in this way, the community is not fused on "totality," the common features; but is based on the "infinitude," the inevitability of unreducible difference. In the wake of Levinas' distinction between totality and infinity, the relation to the other is always seen to exceed the act of oneness through which members of a community recognize themselves in each other. Levinas inquires: "Does a face abide in representation and in proximity; is it community and difference? What meaning can community take on in difference without reducing difference?" (Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, Or Beyond Essence* 154) Levinas's inquiry recalls the first time Hattie looks at Ratanak Chhung's "Pol Pot facial" (16). Here, this statement in comparison to Nancy's may require further discussion, Levinas is relevant to Nancy's in that he considers that ethics of alterity is non-thematizable by definition.

In the recent academic studies, the relevance of Nancy's argument to ethical questions has been a conspicuous the topic. A further step, for Nancy, community is the existence of a "Being-in-Common." By *common*, he does not denote a uniform substance that binds separate individuals, but rather a "shared experience." Nancy characterizes community through the sharing of what takes place in the face of the "terminations and boundaries" of finitude: through "birth, death, and alterity," we find "limit and difference." In this shared experience of finitude there is no "communion" or unity, but an alterity. Community, for Nancy, is this shared, constant, exposure to finitude: a simple mode of "exposition in common" (1991: xxxvii), a "being-in-common."

For this "being-in-common" to exist, Nancy's community requires a new conception of "individual" to understand the act of "sharing." Nancy replaces the classical 'individual' with a *singular being*. A singular being is not given meaning by the community, or by its own subjectivity, but is instead "the residue of the experience of the dissolution of community" (1991: 3). Consequently, being "singular plural" is the condition of what opens us up to and exposes us onto the world. According to Nancy, interactions between singular beings are shared expositions of alterity, which allows social interactions to open up and draw upon the idea of a being-in-common—a necessary requirement for the shared exposure of alterity, that is, the community, to occur.

The insert of Cambodian refugees in a New England community illustrates the "shared exposition of alterity." In portrayal of the refugees, *World and Town* has a somber undertone as Hattie observes Ratanak:

> His gaze lists left, like a car out of alignment, then jerks back-left left left again, and back. It is strange to think him around her age-younger than her, even. Mid-sixties, people have said. He looks, she thinks, to belong to his own reality; and who knows but that he thinks something similar of her, for he beholds her with a blankness so adamant that the closed door he's replaced does seem, in retrospect, to have been friendlier. (17)

In Hattie's eyes, Ratanak is a person belonging to "his own reality." The adamant "walls" between them seems unconquerable. What kind of new life can such Cambodian refugees with a traumatic past forge in America? How do they redefine themselves? The Chhung family consists of Ratanak, Mum, Sophy, Sarun, and an infant son, Gift, born in Vermont. They also have two additional girls, Sophan, Sopheap, who were placed in foster homes prior to the family's moving to Riverlake. Hattie increasingly gets familiar with Sophy, the fifteen-year-old girl, who begins to open up and share with her the Chhung family's painful past.

With annexation of the Cambodian refugees, *World and Town* reflects on theoretical, textual, and ethico-social implications of acknowledging otherness, or radical differences, in the conceptualization of "community." Additionally, the novel tells us what world we make for ourselves and others: From native land to host country and *from* exclusion and expulsion of others *to* "exposedness to others," all of which are the issues of important theoretical debates and philosophical concerns of our times. In *The Coming Community*, Giorgio Agamben asserts:

> The fact that must constitute the point of departure for any discourse on ethics is that there is no essence, no historical or spiritual vocation, no biological destiny that humans must enact or realize. This is the only reason why something like ethics can exist, because it is clear that if humans were or had to be this or that substance, this or that destiny, no ethical experience would be possible—there would be only tasks to be done. (1993: 43)

This essay does not intend to exhaust the questions of community and the issues of otherness as articulately elaborated in contemporary continental philosophy. It instead aims to see what the signification of community speaks to a philosophy that articulates the singularity of the self and negotiates the alterity of the other. For us to approach the other, our ethical task is to envisage an incommensurable commonality. In the meanwhile, insofar as the approach involves ethics, it may not be an act for the good. Rather, it may be a means to deal with the difficulty of being ethical, a point responding to Agamben's argument cited above.

The broad sweep and exquisite detail of *World and Town* builds up a punctilious yet intriguing story, which chronicles the intrusions, large or small, of the wide worlds on this rural New England town, Riverlake. Different world views gradually come home to roost together in the town. What manifests itself is the ever emerging of multicultural perspectives of "the world come to town," (29) when everyday life is forced to confront the "other"—the racial other, cultural other, religious other, or the dissent other. We follow the perspective of Hattie, who has had years of assimilation, or at least acclimation, versus the Chhung parents and their teenager children, who are relatively new and unassimilated, and who confront a world that sees them as ethnic other (Vietnamese, Thailand, or Cambodia with "Pol Pot facial") in an "alienated" land. Riverlake is thus used to explore points such as "being *in*

common" by *placing* the diverse residents in the community with others regardless of identity, *facing* toward others regardless of choice, and *situating* side-by-side with others regardless of any shared goal(s).

The subtext of the novel is a discursive construction of "community," only that this construction ends up reconfiguring its very core notion. That is, the construction itself brings us to the question of the availability of community. The attempt to recreate continuity in a discontinuous world is exemplified both in the story's world-making attempt and in its subtext's provocative unfolding this very reformulation attempt. *World and Town* connects and mediates the disconnected phenomenon of today's world in a way that a differential view of the current social, cultural, ecological, and ethnical conjuncture merges. As the novel in question suggests, maintaining aspects of ongoing debates within the concept of community creates moments in which the potential to signify multiple meanings and possibilities depends on an acknowledgement of the existence of un-represent-able otherness. One important ethical task left for us is to assume radical alterity and to envisage an incommensurable commonality that pertains to our world of difference.

6. Coda

This essay draws on the theory of continental philosophers to propose "community" as a conceptual and methodological tool that opens up productive possibilities in the study of Gish Jen's long neglected novel. To echo Don DeLillo's compelling phrases in his *White Noise*, community should not unproblematically conceptualized as a political, social and cultural space that is "sealed-off, timeless, self-contained, self-referring" (51). In its most productive sense, the notion of "community" moves beyond a contestation for a common ground toward a confirmation of contingent transformation. A book reshaping the imagination of the world, *World and Town* implicitly and explicitly takes issues with the assumption of a fixed and unproblematized common ground from which community is expected to base itself on. The novel creates intriguing moments of affective cohesion and provocative dissolution to locate sites of paradoxes and offers engaging ways to redress the linear and therefore hierarchical notions of bonds that backs up the conventionally-assumed "community." It then suggests how "conflicts" and "difference" can lend meaning and force to the notions of community in its philosophically sophisticated sense. What lies at the core of *World and Town* is ultimately a penetrating and absorbing reflection on the limits of ethics, alterity, singular plurality, and the issues of co-originality in navigating toward the rethinking the conflicting concept of community in today's world.

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