Seeking Communion: The Pursuit of Belonging

In "No Name Woman," Maxine Hong Kingston, a Chinese-American writer who grew up on terrible stories about the fate of her obscure aunt, reminisces on how things could have turned out differently. Due to the shame of her pregnancy through adultery, her aunt ended her life and was forgotten by her family. Aware of the harsh conditions in China, with "ghost plagues, bandit plagues, wars with the Japanese, [and] floods" (142) on the people's minds, Kingston comes to understand the seemingly irrational behavior of the villagers as they brought mayhem and ruin on her family's property. Despite respecting her aunt as a symbol of the individual that can make their own choices, the author realizes that to survive through crushing poverty the villagers from her childhood had to resort to harsh measures. Not unlike social media shaming, the villagers sought to "[speed] up the circling of events" and let them run their course with minimal damage since her aunt had "already harmed the village" (142) with another mouth they could not feed. Kingston illustrates this tough-love approach of dealing with unintended consequences through the roundness found in all aspects of Chinese life, from "round moon cakes and round doorways" to the ubiquitous "round windows and rice bowls" (142) that define the Chinese way of living. This roundness bias values a cultural ideology stressing wholeness and eternity, justifying the village's efforts to disgrace the aunt for interrupting the balance of their little world.

Family and community occupy central roles as the pillars of great civilizations thanks to their stabilizing influence and capacity to bring order to one's worldview. No culture upholds this idealization of community above the individual more so than that of the Chinese people over the past few thousand years. From unconditional respect for the man of the household whether it be husband or father to reverence of emperors as divine father guardians for all those under the heavens, Chinese culture has passed on a profound legacy of sacrificing the desires of the few for

the survival of the many through its hierarchical social relationships. This ideology clashes with individualistic cultures, which celebrate independence of the self in determining one's fate as Kingston's aunt did with her pursuit of love. The Chinese relationship hierarchy manifests in ancestor worship rituals meant to perpetuate a family's heritage and reputation by honoring the memory of relatives from past generations. However, this cultural adherence to tradition only makes the conscious forgetting of Kingston's aunt's existence more intriguing for its abrupt break with precedent. If even family can abandon you for your actions, how does one go about finding community that respects the needs of the individual and not just the group?

Despite her implicit justification of the villagers' shaming of her aunt, Kingston dignifies her memory rather than ignore it like the rest of her family has. As a silent but powerful tribute, Kingston explores her aunt's conflicted feelings of anxiety and self-sacrifice in the wake of being abandoned by her family, which had once cherished her as their only daughter. As her aunt lay "flayed [and] unprotected against space" in the throes of pain from labor, Kingston lets us sympathize with her aunt's suffering as "a bright dot in darkness, without home…in eternal cold and silence" (142). In the face of her plight, Kingston focuses on her aunt's final determination to give birth to her child and take care of it for how little time she has as a "tribal person alone" (143). As she reflects on how her aunt wished to "protect [her] child as she had protected its father" (143), Kingston honors her aunt with an indistinct sense of heroism for choosing to take the child with her to the grave. Recognizing "a child with no descent line" would forever be haunted, "begging [her aunt] to give it a purpose" (143), Kingston grants a degree of respect for her aunt's silent bravery, honoring the hope her aunt embodied in the tragedy of it all.

Kingston's admiration of her aunt's broken bravery, which extends to the point that even "after fifty years of neglect, [she] alone devotes pages of paper to her" (144), testifies to the deep

and intrinsic relationship that she shares in identifying with her aunt's struggles as family. Such a sense of private community is engendered in the institution of the family through the honoring of the ancestors. As a central tenet of Chinese cultural philosophy, traditional ancestor worship has defined the fundamental nature of the family and community by adhering to the principle of respect for one's elders. Such a belief even extends to the worship of the mythical Yellow Emperor as the "common ancestor of the Chinese nation" (Liu 605). Ancestor worship has also undergone radical changes through the millennia. It has gone from the rituals of "group-ancestor worship" of early Neolithic peoples like the Yangshao culture (602) to the individual worship that developed as Chinese society matured in social stratification four thousand years ago (603) and is still practiced to this day. Subsequently, one comes to understand ancestral cult worship as an extension of how political figures and philosophers looked to honored ancestors in running a stable state down to the level of local community. It is also this long tradition of communion and respect for those who came before that frames the actions of Kingston's family to condemn her aunt to obscurity as abominable to Kingston. This ends up fueling her rebellious curiosity for learning more about her aunt's story and how she became so despised.

The subtle defiance on Kingston's part despite her family's insistence on the damnation of her aunt's memory and its weight on her life reflects the instinctual need to reconnect with one's past for the sake of finding community. This is embodied in the idea of "reverse ancestor worship" that Kingston uses to characterize the role of her aunt in her family. In contrast to traditional ancestor worship, through which most relatives are showered with gifts and material offerings after death to ensure a fruitful afterlife living like gods, reverse ancestor worship condemns the forgotten ancestors of the past to eternal shame and disgrace. This is demonstrated by the eagerness with which Kingston's family not only shun Kingston's aunt to the end of her

life but beyond as well since her "betrayal so maddened them" with shame (144). Such a fate leaves those like Kingston's aunt to "fight the [other] ghosts massed at crossroads for the buns" offered by the occasional bystander to keep them pacified away from the communal shelter of the villages for fear that their shame poisons the living (144). In the backdrop of the usual ancestor blessings denied to her aunt, Kingston highlights an unpleasant reality. In communal cultures, it is the burden of individuals to conform to society's expectations in the name of social harmony. With such harmony among all people being a criterion for the model community in Chinese culture, the self is obligated to shed off all personal desire, lest they experience eternal suffering like Kingston's aunt did for her recklessness. Such shame is so ingrained into their culture thanks to the crucial role that ancestor worship plays in forging community.

One can understand that this desire of belonging, both from her cultural upbringing and her traumatic family experiences, compels Kingston to share her experiences with the world as a cautionary tale. As she is constantly reminded of the disgrace dealt upon her family by what even she labels a "spite suicide" by her aunt "[drowning] herself in the drinking water," Kingston expresses a discomforting sentiment of fear brought upon by the fact that she is the only one left that dares speak of her memory (Kingston 144). Reflecting on her own insecurities, she believes herself to be haunted by the ghost of her dead aunt, brought back to life by the mere mention of her story and ready to cast her curse of disgrace upon Kingston herself. With the apprehension on confronting the shadows of disgrace wrought upon one's family and name, one can grasp the dark side of community in the form of shame culture and the psychological impact it can leave through threats of example. Such a line of thinking may seem harmless in times of great fortune and plenty, when personal wants can be accommodated for without endangering the integrity of the community. However, as shown by the villager's behavior resulting from their impoverished

living conditions, the work of preservation has its downsides. The very desire to survive that fuels persistence and endurance in communal societies can often lead to irrational destruction and the unjust sacrifice of the individual in times of trouble. Such struggles are reflected in the personal search for identity within Kingston herself, as she is caught between her Chinese roots and American experiences. From dealing with the Chinese tendency to "[shout] face to face" and "yell room to room" that clashes with "American tones" of private chatter (140) to the unsisterly braggadocio of attraction in American culture (141), Kingston depicts herself at the crossroads of two cultures with opposing attitudes toward the social purpose of community.

Even when it comes to seemingly individualistic cultures, the desire of community still compels us in our social actions. In her essay "Generation Why?," Zadie Smith questions the merit of the connected lifestyle that social media like Facebook has made available to the wider adolescent generation, which contrasts with the issues of community brought up by "No Name Woman". Compared to the tight-knit groupthink that defined the united villagers of "No Name Woman," the modern youths that Smith labels as "Generation Facebook" (295) are more loosely connected via the Internet in a way that seemingly allows them to express their individuality. Although the social circumstances of the communities in "No Name Woman" and "Generation Why?" could not be any more different, both develop similar feelings of oppression and isolation within the people involved in their groups. In an ironic twist, the lack of privacy and unbridled expression of "individual" desires have turned people into shallow beings within the detached social construct offered by social media, even to the point of trivializing the concept of death. This is most evident in the trend noticed by Smith of the flippant messages posted to Facebook accounts of those that have passed on, ranging from "Sorry babes! Missin' you!!!" to "PEACE XXX" (304). People are no longer given individual rights but become commodities that are

traded and owned. Not only do they possess a lack of appreciation for the "gravity of what has occurred," but they also serve to underscore the deficiencies of the "Internet with one mind" where it no longer matters who one is (304). This stands in sharp contrast to ancestor worship, which calls for the honoring of those who have passed on in rituals meant to perpetually respect the departed. Yet such shallow behavior aligns with the fate of Kingston's aunt in her family's memory. The only difference is that while the aunt's damnation to obscurity was a conscious effort on the part of her family, the downplay of respect for the deceased among social media youths today is unintentional. In the pursuit of promising personal autonomy and control in one's lives, Facebook and like-minded social networks have all become highly restrictive in the way one can express individuality. As Smith suggests, the "software currently shaping [Generation Facebook] is unworthy of them" as it fails to capture all their nuances (295) and reduces users to shapeless entities valued by their "capacity to buy" (304).

By exposing the illusion of freedom that modern social networks provide for their users, Smith cautions that the tempting desire to always connect with others regardless of depth brings its own perils. Namely, the restrictions of the ways through which individuals can represent their complex identities indicate how "everything shrinks" when people are reduced to numbers (303). For all the ways in which life on the Internet is a "transcendent experience" as we "[lose] our bodies, our messy feelings, our desires, [and] our fears," Smith warns that such a reality is a false paradise. To her, one becomes a "set of data…[and] is reduced" for the price of being able to interact with others in a "free space" (303). From this commentary, "Generation Why?" reveals the complacency and shallowness bred into the consciousness of social network users. Most are swept up by the restrictions of choice in how they portray themselves not only as individuals but also as part of the social media community. This serves to partially justify the moral integrity of

the villagers in “No Name Woman” for their unity in hardship and sense of common purpose. Rather than the lack of choices for the impoverished villagers of “No Name Woman,” it is the flood of controlled choice that is harming Smith’s Generation Facebook as they desperately strive for any sense of belonging, no matter how fake it truly is.

In the quest for community, one must understand the risks of submission to the group mentality in all its forms. Whether it may present itself as a strict social order designed to benefit the many over the few or as a decentralized space for free exchange of ideas, community of the individual and group is difficult to achieve. Threatened by a mob mentality in times of adversity and by complacency in a free-form space like the web, the desire for community often requires making compromises in the realm of individual desires and the rigid social norms that guarantee security for the masses. Both a quiet mediator for dispensing knowledge of Chinese culture and a product of the American way of life through her writing, Kingston represents the potential for reconciliation between the individual and the collective. Speaking from experience, she helps us realize that only by aligning personal wants with those of the greater community can individuals find common purpose in working for others. As displayed in the well-intentioned but failed approaches to building community embodied by the villagers in “No Name Woman” and youths in “Generation Why?,” the consequences for not respecting needs of the community and self in equal proportions will only ensure mutual destruction. To find the true path toward community, one can only hope to achieve shared understanding through mutual dialogue rather than force.

Works Cited

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