Engaging Communities in Comparative Literature

Jessica Tsui-yan Li
York University

166 The English word *community* first appeared in the fourteenth century. As Raymond Williams points out in *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, it can be traced to the middle French *comuneté*, which comes from the Latin *communitatem*. From the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries, *community* meant "the commons or common people, as distinguished from those of rank," "a state or organized society," "the people of a district," "the quality of holding in common, as in community of interest, community of goods," and "a sense of common identity and characteristics." From the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, the connotations of the English word *community* became similar to those of the French *commune* and the German *Gemeinde*, with which "the sense of immediacy and locality was strongly developed in the context of larger and more complex industrial societies" (Williams 75). The meaning of *community* has changed and expanded through the centuries as its structures become more complex and its members become more individualized.

The modern concept of community has been largely suggested in the dichotomy of *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (society), coined by Ferdinand Tönnies. While *Gemeinschaft* suggests traditional cohesive groups formed by kinship, strong emotional ties, and physical proximity, *Gesellschaft* refers to modern cosmopolitan societies based on formal and impersonal human relations, self-interest, and practical concerns (Tönnies 9). As communities have become more globalized, they move towards *Gesellschaft* and away from *Gemeinschaft* in terms of structure and human relations. Seeking convergence rather than divergence, Max Weber analyzes the communal relationship, *Vergemeinschaftung*, and its associative relationship, *Vergesellschaftung*, and further argues for the co-existence of both types of communities as suggested by Tönnies (Weber 40). When individuals in a similar situation join together to form a community and pursue a common objective, they will engage

with one another and eventually generate a sense of belonging.

Since the twentieth century, the characteristics of community have progressed from a static and essentialist social aggregation toward an increasingly dynamic concept. The element of "time" is important in the construction of a community (Weber 43). A community can be built, developed, prospered, and maintained for a long period of time before declining, but will not necessarily be eternal. Individuals are free to join and leave the community at any time depending on their "collective sense of honor" (Simmel 163-64). Morris Janowitz developed the term "community of limited liability" to describe the state of individuals' temporary involvement in a community (Janowitz 223). Communities establish social hierarchies and boundaries through the interactions among their members. Inclusion and belonging are juxtaposed with separation and marginalization. The dynamic interactions among the members and between different communities create constant transformations within a community.

The symbolic construction of a community is profoundly discussed in Benedict **167** Anderson's *Imagined Communities*. As Anderson argues, a community "is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them or even hear of them, yet in the mind of each lives the image of their communion" (6). Even without direct and regular communication and social contact among its members, a community is symbolically produced by national consciousness. Common languages and literatures circulate shared values and collective identities that are facilitated by capitalism and print technology (Anderson 46). The traditional notions of community are homogeneous, stable, and close human relations within a bounded territory. The modern sense of community as a social aggregate involves the "mutual orientation of members," "a sense of reciprocal dependence," and "sustaining a sense of belonging" (Djelic and Quack 13). The members of the community become more diversified and complex within a certain boundary.

Imperialism, colonialism, and globalization nurtured conditions for the phenomenon of transnational communities, which "are social groups emerging from mutual interaction across national boundaries, oriented around a common project and/or imagined identity which is constructed and sustained through the active engagement and involvement of at least some of its members" (Djelic and Quack xix). These communities are produced by the migrations of people, ideas, and material culture. Transnational migrants are at least bilingual and bicultural, and engaged in social, economic, and/or political interests in different communities (Djelic and Quack 14-16). Transnational leaders and participants, such as professionals, consultants, experts, and spokespeople who work in international organizations, move across borders at ease to exchange ideas, collaborate, and make business deals (Djelic and Quack 19). They develop a sense of belonging to transnational communities according to their professions, their interests, and their practices.

This special issue of the *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature/Revue*

Canadienne de Littérature Comparée mainly derives from the annual meeting of the Canadian Comparative Literature Association at the University of Calgary from 28 to 30 May 2016, which I organized with the help of committee members. The following ten essays were selected, peer-reviewed, revised, and extended from the original conference presentations, all of them engaging with the conference theme "Engaging Communities Comparatively." Adopting various literary and cultural discourses, these essays discuss how Comparative Literature depicts the boundaries and developments of different communities, including Canadian communities, Hong Kong Canadian communities, Hispanic-American and Arab communities, the African American community, the Jewish queer community, communities and nature, and diasporas in communities, in regard to nationalism, digital culture, environment, gender and queer theory, sentimentalism, and psychotherapy, as well as the use of irony, poetry, the space between the visual and the verbal, and the self and the other.

168   The opening essay by Paul D. Morris investigates the significance of Canada's official policy of multiculturalism, which was implemented in 1971. While multiculturalism *as a state policy* has not consolidated "a cohesive and honest narrative" of Canada in dealing with social diversity, it nonetheless contributes to the "normalization" of cultural pluralism. After reviewing two major theoretical paradigms of the nation, the *modernist* and the *perennialist*, Morris argues that such conflicting understandings of the nation hinder the formation of a unified Canadian national imaginary. He further explicates a possible "reading" of five Canadian communities that contribute to the life of Canadian culture: Anglophones, Francophones, Indigenous peoples, Allophones, and social groups that share a "politics of identity."

With respect to the multicultural narrative of Canadian communities, my essay argues that digital culture contributes to the fluidity and diversity of Hong Kong Canadian communities through transnational connections, virtual community, and cultural innovation, as depicted in Yi Shu's fiction. Traditionally, Chinese Canadians have had to endure long-distance separation from their families and hometowns due to geographic and communication barriers. Since the 1990s, however, Hong Kong Canadians have been widely engaged in Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) that, nonetheless, generate paradoxical implications. On the one hand, ICTs facilitate the flow of people, commodities, and social networks within Canada and in other parts of the world. On the other, they may drive human relationships further apart with less face-to-face communication. The impact of ICTs on Hong Kong Canadians depends on the agency of the users of the technology.

Doris Hambuch's essay analyzes Sandra Cisneros's "Barbie-Q" and Fatima Hamad Al Mazrouei's "The Couch" in terms of the Hispanic American and Arab communities, respectively, from which they originate. These two stories revolve around female narrators who desire the objects in the stories' respective titles and reflect extensively on budget complications. The reflections of these protagonists engage with the "beauty myth" and ultimately lead to empowerment. Hambuch's comparative study of these two stories exemplifies the transcultural or cosmopolitan feminist discourse

by drawing attention to uniting rather than dividing treatments of female desire, aesthetics, and anti-capitalist undertones.

Focusing on reproductive politics in the African-American community, Lourdes Arciniega's essay studies a special issue of *The Birth Control Review*, edited by Margaret Sanger in 1919. Sanger's periodical featured Mary P. Burrill's drama *They That Sit in Darkness* and Angelina Grimké's short story *The Closing Door*. Despite Sanger's pro-eugenics agenda, these African-American playwrights recreate African-American maternity as a controversial site for a debate on reproductive rights and women's rights in general. More importantly, these two playwrights establish a ground-breaking public and cultural space more attuned to African-American women's voices, and thus embarking on a journey of artistic transformation with theatrical recognition.

Regarding the self-fashioning of the Jewish queer community at the turn of the new millennium, Shlomo Gleibman's essay investigates representations of same-sex desire in reworkings of biblical texts. Both Maggie Anton's *Rashi's Daughters, Book II: Miriam* (2007) and K. David Brody's *Mourning and Celebration* (2009) develop new strategies of interaction between queer Jewish men and the mainstream Jewish community, through the interplay of two competing discourses of gay male desire in two biblical texts: the story of David and Jonathan in Samuel, and the prohibition of sex between males in Leviticus. Encountering the cultural conflict between Judaism and homosexuality, the authors redefine "the sacred" and "the profane" in the discursive relationship between Jewishness and queerness.

169

Expanding the boundaries of communities to the natural world, Lambert Barthélémy's essay argues that contemporary fiction from Oceania attempts to cure the "sickness" of land (geopathology) inherited from colonialism. The narratives of different conceptions of "land" and their applications re-evaluate the definitions of communities, and their often confrontational relationships, by extending their traditional anthropocentric and ethnocentric boundaries. Substituting the colonial narratives of communities, this geographical imagination attributes a moral and juridical significance to the natural world through the development of a sensitive and pluralistic approach toward the interactions within and between human circles.

With regard to narratives of geographical displacement in communities, Magali Sperling Beck's essay discusses the production and understanding of cultural identities in Karen Connelly's writings. Despite the fluidity that such crossings might evoke, the travelling (or migrant) subject is constantly re-positioned in his/her encounter with the foreign. By reading the body as a place of arrivals and departures, Connelly elaborates on the tensions involved in the desire for displacement and the need for grounding. By embracing the experience of "not being at home" as a way to re-read or re-invent the self, Connelly's works allow the reader to reconfigure the political implications involved in constructing and reconstructing identities at the crossroads that are marked by gendered, cultural, and social bodies.

Andrea Speltz's essay analyzes the use of irony in Voltaire's *Candide*, Laurence

Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, and Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's *Minna von Barnhelm* to expose the tensions and affinities between the violence of war and the affective ethics of sentimentalism. The nationalistic militarism of the mid-eighteenth century contradicts with the sentimentalist belief in the goodness of human nature. However, sentimental discourses actually feed nationalist allegiances and justifications for war. Voltaire, Sterne, and Lessing all employ irony as a literary device to unsettle the relationship between the said and unsaid, and either-or dichotomies, thus problematizing the dynamics between war and sentimentalism, the human propensity to violence, and humanitarian compassion.

Jenna Brooke's essay demonstrates how poetry, as a mimetic and creative act, offers healing to survivors of trauma, both individuals and communities, using the examples of writers such as Audre Lorde, Virginia Woolf, and Indigenous Canadian author Beckylane. Through a feminist lens, she discusses a "politics of trauma" that identifies the poetic transformation of the trauma narrative as a vehicle for social change. Brooke uses an expressive arts model of psychotherapy in conjunction with Paul Ricoeur's phenomenological hermeneutics in order to work with and educate trauma survivors to follow the "aesthetic impulse" of the poetic experience.

Considering the "in between" spaces between the visual and the verbal, Ana Lúcia Beck explores artworks by José Leonilson (Brazil, 1957-93) and Louise Bourgeois (France/USA, 1911-2010). She argues that these artists' creative processes are conversations between their desires and the materials with which they work. While both speech and silence are involved, the artistic processes, like seaside landscapes, require balances between the self and the other within the artists' communities.

This collection of essays exhibits the diversified, dynamic, and transnational notions of community demonstrated via various literary techniques and cultural and political discourses. Morris's essay and my own showcase diversity in Canada, particularly in Hong Kong Canadian communities; my essay and Magali Sperling Beck's also discuss the transnational ideal of community inherent in border-crossing activities and identities promoted by, respectively, digital culture and travel narratives. Hambuch, Arciniega, and Gleibman examine how shared values and social hierarchies established in communities can foster both belonging and marginalization. Where Hambuch examines the cases of underprivileged women in Hispanic-American and Arab communities, Arciniega explores the reproductive rights of women in the African-American community, and Gleibman investigates queer culture in the Jewish community. Barthélémy's essay pushes the boundaries of communities to discuss interactions between nation and nature; and, where Speltz and Brook both discuss the use of irony and poetry in expressing sentimentalism and providing therapeutic effects for individuals and communities, Ana Lúcia Beck analyzes the space between the visual and the verbal to articulate the self and the other.

170

Works Cited

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. 1983. Verso, 1991.

Djelic, Marie-Laure, and Sigrid Quack. *Transnational Communities: Shaping Global Economic Governance*. Cambridge UP, 2010.

Janowitz, Morris. *The Community Press in an Urban Setting*. The Free Press, 1952.

Simmel, George. *Conflict and the Web of Group Affiliations*. 1995. Translated by Kurt H. Wolff and Reinhard Bendix, Free Press, 1966.

Tönnies, Ferdinand. *Community & Society (Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft)*. 1897. Translated by Charles P. Loomis, Michigan State UP, 1964.

Weber, Max. *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Society*. 1922. Edited by Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, U of California P, 1978.

Williams, Raymond. *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. 1976. Oxford UP, 1983.