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BIBLIOTHECA PHOENIX

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comparing ethnic groups in Gish Jen’s collection
of short stories entitled Who’s Irish?

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“Who’s American?”:

*comparing ethnic groups in Gish Jen’s
collection of short stories entitled Who’s Irish?*

At the very beginning of its production, what goes under the general name of “Asian American literature” (i.e. a corpus of memoirs, novels, poems, short stories written by American authors of Asian Pacific descent) has almost always been characterized by the attempt, on the part of the writers, to overcome historical traumas and demonstrate that they were entitled to pursue the “American dream” of wealth and success, that they actually belonged to and could contribute to the “making of America”. “Asian American literature” has, as well, dealt with the difficulties — particularly experienced by first generation immigrants — in adjusting to the new context, with the necessity to negotiate an identity (which often implied the desertion of their own cultural heritage), with misunderstandings and conflicts between mothers — whose mentality and values still mirrored the way of living in their motherlands — and thoroughly Americanized

daughters, grown up with chewing gum, Barbies, French fries and hamburgers. In 1990, Amy Ling theorized the particular status of the Asian Americans as “caught between worlds”, since “their facial features proclaim[ed] one fact — their Asian ethnicity, but by education, choice or birth they [were] American”.¹

Nonetheless, especially in the last decade, things have been changing dramatically. The American myth of the “melting pot” has been converted into the more “politically correct” idea of a “mosaic” — whose multicolored tesserae all contribute to create the picture — or into the humorous image of a “tossed salad”. Critics such as Donald C. Goellnicht have replaced the concept of a “double consciousness” on the part of *any* ethnic writer with her/his “multiple consciousness”, portrayed as a “web of multiple intersecting and shifting strands in which the precise location of the subject is extremely difficult to map”.² The problem is not anymore what is “original” versus what is “fake”, whether to “hyphenate” or “not to hyphenate”. Jessica Hagedorn, an American writer of Filipino (but also German, Chinese, Spanish) origin, has already pushed the critical discourse even further by stating, in the *Preface* to her 1993 seminal anthology entitled *Charlie Chan is Dead*, that Asian American literature is “too

¹ Amy Ling, *Between Worlds: Women Writers of Chinese Ancestry*, Pergamon, New York, 1990, p. 20.

² Donald C. Goellnicht, “Blurring boundaries: Asian American literature as theory”, in K. Cheung, *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature*, Cambridge, 1997.

confining a term” and that the readers should regard the short stories she edited not only as “American” but more simply as “world literature”³.

One could wonder, then, who is the “*real American*” nowadays? Is it still possible to identify her/him with the White Anglo Saxon Protestant? And moreover, isn’t it time to release the artists from their sort of “ethnic niche” that, once provocative and protective, seems now to become another dangerous way of labeling and secluding? Gish Jen, an American writer of Chinese descent, born in 1956 and raised in Scarsdale (New York) — a neighborhood where Jewish Americans, WASPs, Asian Americans and African Americans live side by side — seems to be the right person to answer these questions. In a recent interview with a journalist of *AsianWeek*⁴, Jen has stated:

Especially on the East Coast you find that you are constantly fighting a tide of what defines Americanness as something *opposed* to your heritage, and then, by definition, anyone who holds onto a part of their heritage is *less American*. That is something that I categorically reject. I have my own definition of American. It is not something that you come into and particularly does not involve abandoning where you come from. I think of Americanness as a *preoccupation with identity*. [...] This has been the story from the beginning. America did start with a bunch of

³ Jessica Hagedorn (ed. by), *Charlie Chan is Dead*, New York, 1993, p. xxx.

⁴ Julie Shiroishi, “American as Apple Pie”, in *AsianWeek*, Sept.-Oct. 1996.

English people who decided they weren't English anymore.
From the beginning, it has been about *fluidity of identity*.

This concept of *fluidity of identity* indeed transforms the very idea of "roots", of "ethnicity", even of "inter-ethnic" relationships, as Jen asserts in two more interviews by first remarking that...

ethnicity is a very complicated thing, not a stable, unified thing [...] All the groups in America have rubbed off on each other, and [...] no group is *pure*. [...] If you look at what it means to be Chinese Americans today, for instance, I think you'll find that a lot of our ideas about group identity have been borrowed straight from Jewish and black people⁵.

...and then by concluding with the following statement: "it's time to think again about ethnic lit; what is it about? What does it presume to speak on? It does not need to be *representative* to be of value [...] We are finally at that point where people don't *need* to be *representative* anymore... enough of that".⁶ Again, as in Jessica Hagedorn's words, we are heading towards "world literature".

⁵ Compare what she says in <http://www.mcdougallittell.com/guest/garchive/jen.htm/>

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Gish Jen’s theoretical discourse translates into her literary production, especially into her two latest volumes: the novel *Mona in the Promised Land* (1996) — where the protagonist, a Chinese American teenager, paradoxically converts to Judaism — and *Who’s Irish?* (1999). In this collection of short stories, Jen’s cultural horizon widens as much as to include not only Americans of Chinese and Jewish origins (like in *Mona in the Promised Land*), but also of African, Japanese, Hawaiian, Irish, Italian, Mongol, Northern European descent, and even the WASP, as in the story entitled “Chin”, whose little, thoroughly Anglo-Saxon narrator, thus humorously reversing any racist perspective, is so embarrassed when asked about the ethnic origins of his family that he has to invent a name, “Vanilla” (“ethnicity” is always associated with “diversity” in food): “I said that” — he remarks — “because I didn’t want to say we were nothing, my family was *nothing*” (107).

By analyzing two of the most striking stories of the collection — “Who’s Irish?” and “Birthmates” — this essay aims at showing that, in her stories, Gish Jen actually re-interprets and overcomes the themes that the reader would expect from a “thoroughly *representative*” Chinese American writer. The problems of integration, the clash/encounter between “ethnic groups”, tradition Vs. the *American way of life* are only the dazzling *surface* of her stories, the “ingredients” that Jen uses, according to her favorite

metaphor of “writing fiction” like “making a soup”⁷. On the other hand, every story focuses on a problem that touches the very core of a modern man’s existence, regardless of where he lives, of what his ethnic origins are. This is what makes *Who’s Irish?* theoretically interesting.

In the story that gives the title to the volume, a Chinese American grandmother can hardly cope with her little grandniece Sophie, due to her being a “wild”, “mixed” (3) child with an Irish father, John Shea, who is always depressed and incapable of keeping a job (as any other Irish American, according to the stereotypes). The grandmother finds it very hard to come to terms with the American upbringing shared by her daughter, in whose opinion Sophie is allowed to take all her clothes off in the middle of a public park, is entitled to kick and hurt her relatives (if required by the game she is playing), and can do all sorts of nasty things without being spanked, since this is almost regarded as a violation of human rights (a humorous overstatement of the American concept of democracy). The story is narrated by the grandmother in perfect “broken English” — the mark of foreignness and alienation of the immigrants — and it is full of what now we might call the “commonplaces” of *representative* Chinese American narratives. The harshness experienced by the immigrants when they first arrived in the U.S. is recalled through the mention of the famous Transcontinental railroad, completed in the middle of

⁷ Ibidem.

the Nineteenth century: “I always thought Irish people are like Chinese people, work so hard on the railroad” (3).

The clash between people of Chinese and Irish origins, besides being embodied in Sophie herself, with her “nice Chinese side” and her “wild Shea side” (6), is expressed by the “plain boiled food”, “plain boiled thinking” and even the “plain boiled name” (5) of John Shea as against “the black bean sauce and hoisin sauce and garlic sauce” (5) which gives the grandmother (and every person of Chinese descent) a deeper insight and understanding of life. Even the linguistic problems, the difficulty in translating the contents of a culture into another, are present in the texture of this story, always in connection with the conflict — so often described by writers such as Amy Tan⁸ — between Americanized daughters and traditionalist mothers:

In China, daughter take care of mother. Here it is the other way around. Mother help daughter, mother ask, Anything else I can do? Otherwise daughter complain mother is not supportive. I tell daughter, We do not have this word in Chinese, *supportive*. (5)

My daughter thought this [baby-sitter] very *creative* — another word we do not talk about in China. In China, we talk about whether we have difficulty or no difficulty. We

⁸ Compare with volumes such as *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Kitchen God's Wife*.

talk about whether life is bitter or no bitter. In America, all day long, people talk about *creative*. (8)

But what the reader does not expect is the way the plot develops. One day, in the public park, Sophie decides to hide in a foxhole. She does not want to come out, even when her grandmother starts poking with a stick into the hole, for fear that the little girl might fall asleep and be bitten by an animal. When her parents arrive at the playground and look at the scene, they immediately think of child abuse. Sophie has “bruises all over her brown skin, and a swollen-up eye” (14). The story shifts abruptly towards modern problems that have nothing to do with ethnicity and, in only two pages, the reader is faced with a possible divorce of the couple, and with the necessity on the part of the grandmother to find an apartment of her own, not to upset any further, with her presence, the fragile family equilibrium that she seems to have threatened. She ends up living in Bess’ (John’s mother) flat. The two old women watch the television and chat together; they get on very well and seem to share the same ideas in terms of upbringing. The grandmother is even appointed “honorary Irish” — according to Jen’s theory of the *fluidity of identity* - she is “not going anywhere”, she is a “permanent resident” (16) in Bess’ place, as Jen remarks thus hinting (although this time the meaning is clearly different) at the same “magic” status that the first Asian American immigrants longed for, when they tried to settle in the States. What

seemed to be, at the beginning, the story of a clash of ethnic groups, of mothers and daughters in a *representative* Chinese American fiction, turns out to stem — more simpler — from the lack of dialogue and understanding between generations, that is precisely what the writer wanted to describe.

The main character of “Birthmates”, Art Woo, is a Chinese American minicomputer programmer who desperately strives to succeed in his profession. His role-model is the irritating character of Billy Shore, his competitor and “birthmate” (since they were born on the same day), whom Gish Jen ironically describes as the caricature of the “typical American”, who “had been a quarterback in college”, is sexually successful with women and “not only sp[eaks] Mainstreamese, [but] a pure dialect of it” (23). Art is perpetually mistreated by his boss who once, due to a collapse in his financial situation, even threw a tennis racket at him because, as he said, “it’s you Japs who are responsible for this whole fucking mess” (22). The next day the boss apologized by saying that he was absolutely aware of the fact that Art was not a Jap...but a Chink (22)! Notwithstanding the verbal and physical abuse, Art is always patient and passive, like the perfect *representative* of the Chinese *model minority*, like the stereotype of the son of immigrants who wants to partake in the “American dream”. When he has to attend a conference, for the sake of behaving as an exemplar employee and making his company save “precious” money, he decides to check into the cheapest hotel he could possibly find, that

happens to be, as he discovers when he arrives there, a welfare hotel for mothers and children, where almost everyone is black and, in his superimposed white-centric way of thinking, “the white children st[and] out like little missed opportunities” (21). The only thought that seems to rescue him from the shabbiness of that place is humorously related to a “full *American* breakfast with bacon and eggs” (20), that he is planning to have in an “expensive hotel” the following day. Art Woo is scared and goes everywhere with a telephone handset that could turn into a weapon, if necessary: he is the caricature of the American manager, with his mobile phone always at hand! Art is teased by a bunch of black kids with sentences such as “ching chong polly wolly wing wong” “go to hell” (25) and he is eventually knocked down by them. He wakes up in a shallow room where Cindy, an African woman, former nurse and, most of all, mother of some of the children, is treating his wound. At this point of the story, the reader would expect a development of this problematic “ethnic” encounter between a tentative Americanized Chinese and the African American community at its poorest level. But, once again, Gish Jen breaks the expectations and shifts the focus of the narration towards general themes that involve and question the conscience of any modern man regardless of his origins: this time, she deals with the relationship between men and women and their different ways of coping with parenthood and abortion. That sudden blow, inflicted by a child, in a welfare hotel for mothers and children, seems to open the way to all the

grief that Art Woo had inside of his soul without even knowing, since he had been more concentrated on his career, on financially securing his family. The reader gathers that Lisa, Art’s wife, had left him because she had not had any real support from him when, after having trouble in getting pregnant, after her undergoing fertility treatments, after several, painful miscarriages, the child that they had eventually conceived had shown on the amnio to be affected by a serious genetic abnormality, with the result that Lisa had to have an abortion. “She called the fetus her baby” — Art remarks in his stream of thoughts — “though it was not a baby, just a baby-to-be”. (27). Lack of communication seems to be the real problem of this couple, as it is for very many others, all over the world.

Art recalls the time when they went to grieving group sessions and women did “85 percent of the talking” (27) whereas men almost never talked. “They bonded, subtly affirming their common biology”(27), regardless of social standing, of ethnic origins, as Gish Jen seems to infer, repeating what she openly stated in an interview by saying: “motherhood is something more profound and defining than ethnicity”⁹. As a result, at the end of the story, when Art Woo has even obtained a better job that probably will enable him to “take up tennis” and “own a Jacuzzi” (35), he goes back to his room, in the welfare hotel of his realization, and looks at the telephone without its handset, without the possibility of communicating. He is still scared, he

⁹ Compare <http://www.harvard.com/gishjen.html/>

can distinguish some shadows behind the windows. But if he had a telephone he would not call the police, “he would probably call Lisa” (36) just to tell her, years too late, “Yes, that was a baby we had together, it would have been a baby” (36).

The ethnic discourse is once again overcome: this is what makes Gish Jen simply a *writer*; this is what shifts her volume towards *world literature*.

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