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The Limits of Hospitality in Gish Jen's *The Love Wife*

JEANNE SOKOLOWSKI

Though antithetical to the figure of the citizen, the foreigner often reinvigorates discourse on national identity in that the interaction between “foreign” and “native” can create a more dynamic sense of self. Gish Jen’s 2004 novel *The Love Wife* highlights the foreign presence within American national boundaries and demonstrates how the figure of the immigrant activates a critical inquiry into national and ethnic identity simultaneously. The novel begins with the arrival of Lan Lan: a foreigner, a stranger, a woman identified nominally as family, but completely unknown to her hosts. Her appearance disrupts and alters the life of the Wong family, which includes the Chinese American Carnegie Wong, his Caucasian wife Janie (nicknamed “Blondie”), their two Asian adopted daughters, Lizzy and Wendy, and their biological son Bailey. Yet, while Lan occupies a central position in the narrative, her experience eventually comes to figure less prominently than the transformations that the other characters undergo as a result of her presence.

The narration of events in *The Love Wife* proceeds primarily through the voices of Carnegie, Blondie, Wendy and Lizzy. Relatively few sections feature Lan’s perspective, and those that do appear in italics, indicating that these are her thoughts, rather than her speech. As the sympathetic orphan, survivor of the Cultural Revolution, and newly arrived immigrant to the land of possibilities, Lan appears at first a likely protagonist. However, Jen deliberately plays with these expectations, thereby deconstructing the categories of citizen and immigrant, foreigner and native, protagonist and antagonist, and host and guest. This blurring between antagonist and protagonist in the novel captures the dynamics of hospitality: through a delicate series of adjustments, concessions, and compromise, guest and host can come to exchange places with one another. Jen’s choice to redirect the reader’s gaze—away from the character of the immigrant and toward the family who receive her into their home—reveals how identity as conceived intersectionally along both gender and ethnic lines influences citizens’ expressions of hospitality toward the immigrant, as

well as how the immigrant responds. Tapping into fears concerning the “infiltration” of immigrants in the post-9/11 era, Gish Jen broaches this cultural anxiety directly. Jen’s novel engages with the fear and anxiety evoked by the foreigner’s presence, but complicates this notion through her careful examination of the ethnic- and gender-inflected dimensions of that response, as well as through the resolution of the plot. In *The Love Wife*, the Asian immigrant woman replaces the Caucasian wife. This transposition may temporarily traumatize those involved, but ultimately enlightens the characters and enriches their lives.

Jen’s novel takes an oblique look at the new Asian immigrant—the product of post-1965 changes in immigration law—by exploring that figure’s interaction with members of the host country. While narratives of arrival in Asian American literature often center on the pressures that citizens place on immigrants, Jen’s novel explores the converse: how foreigners can spark questions about the identity, sense of belonging, and nationalism of citizens. Hospitality names the interaction between these groups, and undergirds notions of American national history and identity. The Wong family’s reaction to Lan’s entry into their life evokes larger political and philosophical questions regarding the limits of hospitality, tested by the arrival of the foreigner and nuanced by issues of gender and ethnicity.

As the novel begins, the reader discovers that Carnegie Wong’s mother, Mama Wong, has died after a battle with Alzheimer’s. Mama Wong fled the mainland for Hong Kong before the Cultural Revolution (1967-1976) and immigrated to the United States, where she became rich through real estate and other investments. Carnegie learns from a relative in Hong Kong that Mama Wong left a will: in it, she bequeathed to Carnegie the family book (containing birth, death and marriage records), on the condition that he act as sponsor for their relative Lan to come to the United States. Within the first few pages of *The Love Wife*, Carnegie, Blondie, Lizzy, Wendy and Bailey arrive at the airport to meet Lan and take her home.

Lan, who, at forty-six, is a year older than Blondie, lives with the family, helping with childcare and household duties while studying English, and, later, business. As Lan becomes closer to Carnegie, Lizzy and Wendy, the distance between Blondie and Carnegie increases. Though Carnegie feels an attraction to Lan, she begins a relationship with Shang, a Chinese American entrepreneur. However, when Shang turns violent and Lan defends herself, Carnegie and Blondie seize the opportunity to send Lan with Shang’s employee, Jeb Su (also a survivor of the Cultural Revolution, but now an American citizen), to live in Blondie’s family’s cabin in Maine. Jeb and Lan open a Chinese restaurant and marry, but just as Lan finds out she is pregnant, there is a mysterious fire at the cabin, and Jeb is killed. Lan returns to the Wong family house, and shortly afterward, Blondie moves out of the house with her baby, Bailey. The novel concludes with the arrival of the family book. Reading it, Carnegie learns that he was adopted and that Lan is his mother’s biological daughter, news that causes him to suffer a heart attack. The family, including both Blondie and

Lan, gathers in the waiting room at the hospital, and celebrates when they learn that Carnegie will survive.

Lan's arrival in the first chapter places us immediately in the realm of hospitality, and it is through the lens of critical theory on hospitality that I wish to analyze the novel. The topic of hospitality has garnered increasing critical attention since the late 1990s, when it came to preoccupy the work of Jacques Derrida, who analyzed the concept's significance for thinkers from Kant to Emmanuel Levinas. However, Derrida's work on hospitality has been relatively underutilized within the field of Asian American Studies.¹ Thinking about the trope of hospitality within contemporary Asian American works, particularly those that respond to recent trends in immigration and to transnational movements, helps illuminate fiction's role in evolving definitions of "Asian American" and "America" in what has been termed a "post-national" era.² Though an ethics of hospitality applies to immigrant-citizen encounters across a range of ethnic, racial, and gender differences, the responses of characters in Jen's novel address reactions to immigration from Asia generally and China specifically, both between women and intersexually.³ Hospitality brokers the relationship between immigration and national identity; in *The Love Wife*, hospitality tracks the figure of the guest as an agent of transformation in relationships indelibly marked by gender dynamics. The portrayal of Lan offers a critical re-interpretation of the trope of the "Asian female as threat."

Thus in the first section of this essay, I argue that Blondie's struggle with and withholding of hospitality in her dealings with Lan is derived from her fear of the threat that Lan represents to her way of life, particularly as a woman. The second part of my argument analyzes Carnegie's ambivalent performance of hospitality as it reflects the vexed position of American-born Chinese (ABCs) toward newer, recently immigrated Chinese. The American-born Asian population occupies the position of host to new Asian immigrants, but this positionality lends itself to deep ambivalence in the case of Asian Americans who still feel outside the nation and national culture. Carnegie's tendency to question his subject position with respect to Lan parallels larger issues within Asian American studies regarding the heterogeneity of that group, while also invoking questions about the legibility of Carnegie's (Asian) masculinity within his interracial marriage.

The preceding points articulate the dynamics between the immigrant and both Asian- and non-Asian American hosts. However, *The Love Wife* also envisions the Asian guest as triangulating the relationship between Asian Americans and non-Asian Americans.⁴ While a more cynical reading might label Lan as the wedge between Blondie and Carnegie (and between Blondie and her adopted daughters), that perspective occludes a recognition that the Asian immigrant illuminates certain dynamics of this interracial marriage (and family) that might otherwise remain shadowed. As Bonnie Honig reminds us in *Democracy and the Foreigner*, foreignness does not have to be a "problem to solve;" rather, historically, nations and democracies have relied on foreigners to solve problems and to reinvigate a

society suffering from “stale or corrupt patterns” of thinking.⁵ Jen’s novel underscores how fragile our worldviews can be; when our most assured beliefs encounter challenges, we find that “this world can disappear like any other.”⁶ Jen suggests that we have the power to choose and create the new world that will replace the old. The novel’s uncertain conclusion—Blondie and Carnegie are not yet divorced, though she has moved out—stands as Jen’s textual gesture toward individual choice and agency.

Blondie and Lan: Figures in the Mirror

The novel’s drama arises in part from the tension between the pressure to welcome Lan and the resistance to embracing her fully. As Mireille Rosello discusses in her critical look at postcolonial hospitality, the conversation on immigration and hospitality generally takes place in non-gender specific terms, a situation due to the “strong connection between hospitality and universalistic ideals or illusions.”⁷ *The Love Wife*, however, counters this tendency and forces a consideration of the “gender specificities of the host or hostess’s role.”⁸ In this novel, hospitality’s Other—hostility—manifests even as the family prepares to welcome their guest. Lan’s ambiguous status in the household adds to the conflict, as it makes it difficult to know her position with respect to the other characters, a fact reflected in their different conceptualizations and executions of hospitality. The uncertainty of Lan’s status in the Wong household—whether she should be considered a family member or an *ayi*, a servant—also complicates the relationship between Blondie and Lan. As Rosello argues, guest and servant enjoy a strange fraternity: “both are allowed to enter the master’s house, but servants are precisely not placed in the role of guest.”⁹ In his review of the novel, critic Jeffrey Partridge poses the following question: Did Mama Wong stipulate in her will that Carnegie sponsor Lan’s voyage to the United States so that she could serve as a nanny to his children, or so that she could become “the love wife” (i.e., a concubine), with the purpose of re-infusing the family with a “purer” Chinese identity?¹⁰

Cultural norms and expectations contribute additional layers of confusion. In a Chinese context, family obligation figures so largely that, as sociologist Min Zhou points out in her 2009 analysis of ethnic enclaves, more than eighty percent of immigrants from China in the 1970s and 1980s were sponsored by family members.¹¹ As a result of the central importance of family in China, immigrants automatically expect even relatively distant kin to take them in as intimate family members. Chinese generally share the idea that the location of their relatives determines their destination in America, and that accepting newly-arrived relatives into one’s home represents a tradition and an obligation that cannot (and should not) be avoided.¹² Philip Q. Yang’s research on the factors affecting Asian immigration to the United States affirms Zhou’s findings. Yang articulates the force of what is termed “migrant social network theory”: sponsorship by family, friends, and relatives supports the act

of immigration, while survival and success after migration depend on these same networks.¹³ However, the Chinese norms of shared domicile and comprehensive support for immigrant relatives do not necessarily adhere in the dominant cultural imagination of many Americans.

Not only do the characters puzzle over Lan's present status, but also over her future status: will she stay in the United States or return to China? An ethics of hospitality operates on a premise of provisionality and impermanence: both guest and host must understand hospitality as the right of visitation, rather than of permanent residence. As Kant outlines in *On Perpetual Peace*, this right of visitation arises from "our common right of possession on the surface of the earth."¹⁴ Caught in between her old life in China and a life in the United States with an uncertain future, Lan lives as one of the doubly absent, who exist neither in their country of origin nor in their country of destination.¹⁵ She tells the younger daughter, Wendy, at one point that "she has no place in America," thinking to herself that neither America nor the new China seemed to want her.¹⁶ In this context, the reality of a transnational lifestyle holds a certain appeal for Lan,¹⁷ but simultaneously creates a great deal of anxiety for her. Even though she understands that a good work ethic and charity are greatly valued in America, she nonetheless describes the country as "cold" and claims that "in China, many more people help you," even while acknowledging the existence of others less altruistic in their behavior.¹⁸ The uneven performance of hospitality that she experiences in the Wong home engenders ambivalence about an American future, while her limited resources and support system make a transnational future equally murky.

The tension between Lan and Blondie, and the comparisons between them, frame the opening chapter of the novel, underscoring the extent to which Blondie has left unexamined her own behavior, life choices and values, and setting up Lan's role as a catalyst for Blondie's re-evaluation of her life. The opening line of the novel forecasts the changes to be revealed in the course of the narrative by referencing the question of family possession and belonging. "The day Lan came," Blondie states, "you could still say whose family this was—Carnegie's and mine."¹⁹ Blondie's proprietary feelings toward her family make evident her perception of Lan as a threat, while the statement simultaneously resists closure by falling short of an admission that the family now belongs to Carnegie and Lan. As Blondie contemplates the imminent incorporation of Lan into their family, she asserts that she values diversity, considers herself open-minded, and avoids generalizing—all qualities essential to the health and survival of multicultural societies. Yet, she also notes that this attitude requires effort, an effort she sometimes wishes she didn't have to make, relishing instead the peace that comes when she considers "no view but her own."²⁰ The chapter concludes with Carnegie's observations about Lan's stoic endurance of the cheap, painfully tight, and too small high heels that have swollen her insteps²¹ and created welts on her feet.²² His wife, he mentally notes, "would have rightly complained about how her feet hurt" but Lan "simply gazed, meditative, upon

hers.”²³ The structure of this opening chapter elucidates the ability of characters to illuminate one another through their differences.

Blondie comes from a line of liberal progressives: a pacifist, an abolitionist, an art preservationist/civil rights activist. She laments at one point that members of her generation are “votive candles at best, if compared with the original bonfires.”²⁴ Blondie tries to set herself apart by working at a high-tech firm, but ends up distinguishing herself by “making a most original marriage.”²⁵ In this way, Blondie’s nickname (bestowed upon her by Mama Wong) contains some irony. The original Blondie of the eponymous comic strip was considered a gold-digger, who married the son of a millionaire, while the marriage between Blondie and Carnegie (named for one of America’s most famous capitalists) ostensibly increases Carnegie’s cultural capital and legitimizes him socially.

Though Blondie asserts emphatically in the opening chapter that she considers Lan “a relative of Carnegie’s,” this assertion follows directly after she mentions the exchange students that her family hosted when she was a child, a relationship in which strangers co-exist in a single household, but with a pecuniary element.²⁶ Lan’s student visa distances her from a familial relationship with the Wongs; after all, she does not come to the US under a Family-Based Immigrant Visa.²⁷ However, Blondie also notes that a student visa represents “the easiest kind of visa to get.”²⁸ To use Lan as a combination maid, cook, and nanny conveniently relieves Blondie of some of her duties as wife and mother, while also modulating against the issue of whether a woman can fully occupy the position of guest.²⁹ The ease with which the family allows Lan to take on this role reveals stereotypical conceptions about the narrow range of possible roles for Asian immigrant women. Lan thus enables Blondie to maintain her liberal feminist belief in the power of individualist action: that through smart choices, she can successfully juggle her responsibilities, and that doing so brings her success and happiness. However, when Lan’s role with the girls blurs from nanny, older sister, and confidante to surrogate mother figure, Blondie can no longer continue the façade, and is forced to reassess the choices she has made. Given Blondie’s anxiety about Lan as a potential threat, relegating her to the role of servant also re-asserts Blondie’s power over Lan.

Lan’s ambiguous position in the Wong household causes difficulties regarding her living quarters, an early sign of trouble and of Blondie’s failure to consider her guest’s perspective—a key component within the ethics of hospitality—and Lan’s inability to speak for herself, an early criticism by Third World women of the liberal white feminist movement. Lan is given “an apartment in the garage-née-barn built especially for an au pair,” despite Carnegie’s desire to give her the guest room within the house in order to make her feel like a welcome part of the household.³⁰ Blondie, unable despite her cross-cultural training³¹ to consider Lan’s perspective, views the situation on her own terms, positing Lan as a mirror image of herself. Blondie explains the rationale behind her decision: the apartment is larger, and allows Lan more privacy and her own space.³² However, this decision clearly offends Lan,

causing her to question the authenticity of the family's (or at least Blondie's) hospitality.

The segregation of Lan in the garage later comes back to haunt Blondie when her children start to visit Lan in the apartment, where she occupies the role of hostess. Lan's ideas of hospitality do not align with Blondie's: Lan allows Bailey to eat candy, Wendy to watch television while doing her homework, and Lizzy's boyfriend to visit her in the evening, all behaviors expressly forbidden by Blondie. When Blondie discovers this during an impromptu visit, she is frustrated by her lack of authority and Lan's hold over her children—a crisis which leads her to resign from her job and become a stay-at-home mother. This decision is reinforced by the fact that Blondie also suspects that Lan aspires to replace her as Carnegie's wife.³³ In the dominant American cultural imagination, depictions of Asian women range from the Dragon Lady—diabolical and sneaky, but capable of seduction and corruption through sexual allure—to the Lotus Flower—meek, mild, patient, and willing to please.³⁴ In Blondie's eyes, Lan combines the two, seducing Carnegie through her sinister malleability, which contrasts with Blondie's active and decisive nature.

Though Lan's entry into the Wong home initiates a period of tension and negotiation on several levels, it is also a period of discovery. In this way, Lan, as what Derrida calls "the absolute arrivant," forces the host into confusion, providing a shock severe enough to "call into question, to the point of annihilating or rendering indeterminate, all the distinctive signs of a prior identity."³⁵ While Lan judges herself against the model of assertive, independent American womanhood embodied by Blondie, Lan's appearance and gradual attachment to the other members of the family also compels Blondie to question her membership in the upper-middle class, in the liberal Bailey clan, as a partner in an interracial marriage, and as an employee in capitalist America. Blondie has embraced a liberal progressive American political identity, and her familial identity is structured around the ideal of a multicultural society. Blondie's faith in the possibility of a "color-blind" family (a microcosm of the nation) undergoes a series of challenges, precipitated by Lan—challenges that leave her increasingly uncertain about her own happiness as the working wife of a Chinese American man and her ability to be a good mother to her adopted Asian American children.

Some of the early changes that Lan inspires in Blondie are fairly innocuous, and are closely connected to Lan's upbringing and experiences during the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Inspired by Lan's anti-consumerism attitude, Blondie begins throwing things out, vowing to "get rid of three things" every day.³⁶ Blondie interprets Lan's philosophy as stemming from an Asian minimalist aesthetic, or possibly a Buddhist emphasis on non-attachment. She idealizes Lan as "rich in spirit" and imitates her active rejection of American materialism, while simultaneously remaining ambivalent about the relationship between material comfort and happiness.³⁷ Lan's attitude, while influenced in part by her father's occupation (he was a scholar), also reflects her experiences with deprivation and loss. Doing without

and learning “to eat bitter” (*chi ku*, in Mandarin), or deal with life’s bitterness, represents a philosophy that allows one to survive during trying times, and not necessarily a lifestyle choice. Even though Blondie looks to Lan as a model for how to rid one’s life of extraneous clutter, she does not necessarily believe that Lan is happier, arguing to Carnegie at one point that he “can’t seriously envy someone who’s lived through the Cultural Revolution.”³⁸

Blondie, in her appropriation of select elements of Chinese culture, turns Lan into a type of pet, one of the pitfalls of both hospitality and Orientalism. The origin of the word “hospitality” lies in the Latin “*hosti-pet-s*,” which breaks down into “guest” and “host” (or master).³⁹ The Latin “pet” or “master” holds two important implications here: one, the notion of self-mastery and two, that of mastery over another. The latter suggests how easy it is to slip from host to despot, from welcoming to controlling, and how hospitality can be compromised by the unequal balance of power between guest and host.⁴⁰ In the former, mastery first of all occurs over the self; in order to offer hospitality, the host must first be master of himself.⁴¹ So, though the reader may respond unfavorably to Blondie’s inhospitable behavior, the interrelation between mastery and hospitality predicts Blondie’s inevitable failure to welcome Lan, as Blondie lacks control over herself and her own life.

The changes Blondie begins to make in her external environment as a result of Lan’s influence signal the beginnings of her skepticism toward a national faith in consumerism, but do not immediately translate into a reconsideration of deeper economic foundations. Blondie articulates her new thoughts on consumption; it is, she asserts, a way to “avoid living . . . [and] questions like, Are we alive? And, can we call this a life?”⁴² Nevertheless, she still holds firm to a conviction that alternative approaches to economics and investing can repair a flawed capitalist system premised on a belief in *homo economicus*.⁴³ This model of the economic man anchors capitalist thinking on free market economies, but has always faced critique in the form of arguments about reciprocity, public good, and kinship. Blondie works for a socially responsible investment firm, and her faith in the power of responsible investment to change the world remains undaunted, until almost the end of the novel.

Blondie’s utterances repeat and reiterate positions that reflect her subjectivity as a liberal, educated, upper-middle class woman whose faith in a nation of endless possibility and multicultural harmony has never been significantly challenged. This unquestioned faith enables her to express her beliefs freely. Though it belies her true feelings, Blondie’s articulateness contrasts sharply with Lan’s silence. Blondie’s facility with language contrasts with Lan’s silence or ambivalence toward language, a silence that signifies both a different cultural norm as well as a sense of pervasive uncertainty that comes from living through the Cultural Revolution. Lan resists any public performance aimed at gaining or claiming rights as an immigrant to the United States; in fact, she employs a common refrain in the novel when queried about her

own desires. For example, when Blondie discusses setting limits with Bailey, Lan replies, "If you want me say no, I say no."⁴⁴

In the chapter entitled "Nothing's Plenty for Me," Lan's philosophy becomes clear: she tries to make herself act without attachment in order to avoid the pain of longing, a philosophical legacy she inherited from her father and perfected during the Cultural Revolution when she was "sent up" to the countryside. The irony, of course, is that Lan is not free from desire, and her efforts to remain detached result in silence, lest her words or voice betray her longing for attachment and make evident the emotion she tries to abjure. The deprivation that characterizes Lan's life reflects her communist upbringing and opposes the capitalism that so prominently figures in Blondie's life.⁴⁵ It also places Lan and her philosophy deeply at odds with Blondie's belief in actively searching out happiness, as the later chapters "Trying to Be Happy" and "A Happy Family" suggest. While Lan's refusal to engage with Blondie implies problems with Lan's performance as an ideal guest, the fact that Blondie consistently misinterprets her silence as indicating obstinacy or "inscrutability" testifies to a welcome with conditions. The limits of hospitality have been reached when the foreigner is tolerated, rather than embraced.⁴⁶

While Blondie's insecurities certainly factor into her reactions to Lan's behavior (reactions that Carnegie sometimes describes as paranoid), Jen's careful structuring of the antimonies between the two women helps demonstrate a transformation in Blondie's thinking. Michael Naas, a philosophy professor and Derrida scholar, summarizes the threat of the foreigner, a threat which makes the ethics of hospitality a lofty and difficult ideal. He writes that the foreigner is "one who may in fact pose a threat to us, who may cause us to question our right to what we call 'our home,' or who may in fact evict us from that home and from everything we consider 'our own.'"⁴⁷ On the surface, these changes appear traumatic and overwhelmingly negative, but inevitably the world that Blondie occupied prior to Lan's entrance into her life cannot be maintained in the face of challenges. The shock that Lan initiates indicates the potential for disruption signaled by the immigrant, but also exposes the instability in the original edifice. The destruction of certain relationships in the novel proceeds from but is not necessarily caused by the foreign presence represented by Lan. As the precocious Lizzy remarks, "First Lanlan burned down the other house and now she's burning down this one too. . . . [but] it's not her fault the houses were ready to burn."⁴⁸

Lanlan signifies Jen's critical reinterpretation of the trope of the "Asian female as threat." Through Lan, Jen considers how transnational relations are created, encouraged, and produced by globalization. As Jen posits, these relations not only challenge the security of economic structures in the United States, but also the ideologies and narratives upon which the nation, and the family, are premised. Though global capital may operate, as Donald Pease writes, by reproducing the "collective illusion that the state is an imaginative correlate of an individual's desires, the world s/he wants, rather than the world the state has already imposed,"⁴⁹ actual

interaction between people—as idealized in an ethics of hospitality—forces individuals to acknowledge the extent to which their beliefs and values are founded on illusions. Ironically, though Lan does in fact endanger the security of Blondie’s home life as well as the stability of Blondie’s position as a representative of liberal feminism, when Blondie relinquishes her role as host, she undergoes a liberatory experience, thus demonstrating the potential for freedom and self-understanding in encounters with the Other.

Chinese Diaspora and Asian American Identity

The Love Wife examines a critical point in Asian American studies: the changing demographic face of Asian America. As the editors for the Spring 2010 special issue of *Modern Fiction Studies* on Asian American fiction note in their introduction, “social contexts remain of great importance to the field.”⁵⁰ Immigration quotas involving East Asia changed in 1965 with the passage of the Immigration and Naturalization Act, also known as the Hart-Celler Act. These shifts dramatically altered the constitution of the Asian American population in the United States by allowing larger numbers of immigrants from Asian countries to enter the country. According to the 2007 American Community Survey of the US Census Bureau, 67.3% of Asian Americans were born outside the United States.⁵¹ The primary countries of origin have shifted as well: in addition to the historically regular waves of immigration from China, Japan and the Philippines, Asian Americans now increasingly hail from India, Vietnam, South Korea, Thailand, Cambodia and Burma. The education and literacy patterns also reflect these realities, with highly educated immigrants from the professional classes arriving alongside the poor and uneducated—individuals not only unable to speak English, but also illiterate in their native languages. The number of Asian Americans who come to the United States as a result of political persecution and as adopted children has also increased.

Combined, these historical, political and legislative changes have resulted in a much more heterogeneous Asian America—as evidenced in the multiplicity of languages, national origins, and belief systems that comprise Asian America—leading to what the editors of *Transnational Asian American Literature: Sites and Transits* term “cultural cognitive dissonances.”⁵² While the editors address specific examples of textual sites in which cross-ethnic dissonances appear, *The Love Wife* adds a new layer to the palimpsest of Asian American identity by fleshing out Asian cultural dissonance as it occurs between members of the same ethnic group (in this case, Chinese) who immigrate at different times. Both contemporary literature and social reality reveal the ambivalent positionality of the American-born Asian population that finds itself in the position of both host and kin to new Asian immigrants. The creation and maintenance of ethnic enclaves, for example, offers a rich opportunity for observing how the “new Asian immigrant” (the product of post-1965 legal shifts) has revitalized ethnic communities. Sociological studies have established the extent to

which Asian American business owners take advantage of these new immigrants, while also noting that the familiarity and support of these communities compensate somewhat for the reduced wages and longer working hours.⁵³

Literary representations of immigrant interactions with native-born Asian Americans also reveal potential and actual violence. Sheng-mei Ma's work *Immigrant Subjectivities in Asian American and Asian Diasporic Literature* (1998) examines several canonical Asian American authors with an eye to their portrayal of immigrants as foils to second-generation, native-born Asian American characters. The latter, Ma charges, exoticize immigrant others (often their own mothers) for "self-definition and self-empowerment" and as a way to distance themselves from Asia.⁵⁴ Using a rather restricted archive, Ma cites Asian American authors Maxine Hong Kingston, David Henry Hwang, and Frank Chin in order to explore the pressure on second generation Asian Americans who must negotiate the realities of the American publishing industry and the expectations of the mainstream reading public. Ma's reading of these writers highlights the possible consequences of an internalized Orientalism, combined with pressures to "claim America," for Asian American writers struggling to carve a place for themselves in the literary marketplace of the 1970s and 1980s.

Applying Ma's thesis to works such as *The Love Wife*, however, proves problematic. Rather than defining themselves in opposition to immigrant characters, the Asian American characters in Jen's novel find a reinvigorated sense of ethnic identity through their encounters with foreign arrivals, which may be the result of a generational gap between authors such as Jen, Kingston and Chin. Gish Jen, born in 1955, fifteen years after both Kingston and Chin, represents a new group of Asian American writers whose interests lie in interpreting contemporary Asian American identity as it intersects with, influences, and is influenced by new modes of immigration and the new contours of diaspora. Jen represents a growing cadre of contemporary Asian American writers whose work centers on the new Asian immigrant invoked by Lisa Lowe as central to the new direction in Asian American studies. Other writers who employ Jen's approach include Lan Cao and Lê thi diem thúy, who explore the lives of Vietnamese refugees in *Monkey Bridge* (1997) and *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* (2003), respectively; Wendy Law-Yone, who, in *The Coffin Tree* (1983), relates the story of a Burmese brother and sister who arrive in the US after a political coup; and Fae Myenne Ng who, in *Steer Toward Rock* (2008), addresses directly the effects of the 1952 McCarran-Walter Act.

The Love Wife encourages us to ask how the concept of the Chinese diaspora alters contemporary understandings of "nation" within the United States. Not only does the new Asian immigrant reactivate the discourse on the "Asian threat," but her presence also forces native-born Asian Americans to re-evaluate their loyalties and reconsider their internal perceptions of race relations in the United States. Jen's narrative exaggerates this question to some extent, first, by placing the two groups in the same living quarters for an extended period of time, and then by focusing on Chinese Americans for whom recent events have made ethnic identity a pressing

concern. In Carnegie's case, the death of his mother and the information that surfaces with the family book forces a genealogical reexamination. The loss of Carnegie's mother results in Carnegie's longing for his deceased mother and her approval, both of which are displaced onto another authentic representation of China: Lan.

Rey Chow, in *Writing Diaspora*, considers the myth of consanguinity (alliance or connection by blood) that links diasporic Chinese groups—in Hong Kong and elsewhere—to mainland China. The myth, she asserts, possesses power in direct relation to its emptiness, and submission to this myth results in the “surrender of agency—what is built on work and livelihood rather than blood and race—in the governance of a community.”⁵⁵ Prior to Lan's arrival, the Wong household operates, not through consanguinity, but through “improvisation;” it is a life, not predetermined by blood linkages, but one that is made and chosen.⁵⁶ The chapter title, “A Family is Born,” subverts the binary of natural and constructed ties. Through the relationships they develop with Lan, Carnegie and the girls begin to question their allegiance to a vision of family that privileges improvisation and choice over genealogy and inheritance. This exposes the tension between the competing narratives of family in the novel: can the “new American family,” created through improvisation and desire, supplant the vision of family based on similarity and sameness?

Carnegie's reflections about his relationship with his mother underscore the extent to which he has rejected the myth of consanguinity to embrace an American ideology of freedom and progress, and question his reliance on the narrative of Americanization that he has accepted as a second-generation Chinese American. Carnegie reflects on how little he knows about his mother's identity. Although he knows the story of her swimming to Hong Kong, that story takes on a mythical quality that obscures other details of her life on the mainland preceding her flight to Hong Kong and then the United States. Carnegie suffers because he never amounts to the “perfect Chinese son.” As Blondie notes, Carnegie's passion lies not in finding happiness, but in a “certain small vengeance,” the desire to be resolutely un-Asian and non-Chinese and to reject his mother's attempts to create an upwardly mobile, filial, Chinese American success story.⁵⁷ Unlike his mother, Carnegie believes that his identity as an American requires him to individualize, to separate himself from his roots and forge his own personality and character. This leads him through a “poetry phase” and compels him to take an opera class, mainly because his mother does not like opera.⁵⁸ By the same rationale, Carnegie feels driven to choose a wife his mother will never approve, telling her, at one point, that he will marry Blondie even if it kills both him and his mother.⁵⁹

However, Lan's Asian-ness ultimately forces him to question his American-ness. Lan's malleability, her remoteness, and her seeming need to be protected captivate Carnegie. Compared to Blondie, who is assertive, a staunch believer in open communication, and even more economically successful than Carnegie, Lan excites

Carnegie's curiosity. For Carnegie, the host-guest relationship, in which the host "comes to enter his home through the guest," takes on a specific ethnic meaning. Carnegie can "return to" an authentic Chinese identity lost to him when his mother died through Lan.⁶⁰ More importantly, Lan can also re-gift to him a sense of promise unique to the immigrant. Lan offers him an opportunity to redeem his own past. Carnegie's regrets over the choices he has made in his life can be revisited through the empty promise of Lan's future in America, and the promise embodied by her unborn child. Simultaneously, she brings to the surface nagging ideas about his motivation for marrying Blondie. Carnegie has long had suspicions that the Bailey family enjoys a sense of liberal pride in the fact that Blondie was "open-minded" enough to marry a Chinese American man and adopt two daughters from Asia. However, when he interacts with the Baileys, he feels the need to prove his masculinity, and that he is interesting (read: exotic) enough to warrant Blondie's attention. Carnegie feels that his role in the extended Bailey family is to infuse them with new (immigrant) blood; this is his contribution, rather than anything specific about his personality or character.

Carnegie's ambivalence toward his own identity and life choices is apparent throughout the novel. Like Blondie, Carnegie generally avoids deep, critical thinking about the choices he has made in his life. He maintains an ironic detachment toward, for example, textbook approaches to raising adopted children in a biracial family. Only when he discovers the truth about his own adoption does he realize the unnecessary emphasis he has placed on blood linkages between himself and his mother, and the extent to which his own non-biological family with Blondie and their adopted children parallels his relationship with his mother. The shock causes his heart attack, and prompts an imaginary conversation with his dead mother which allows Carnegie to reconcile the different definitions of family that exist in his world.

The novel ends with the discovery of adoption and a scene in a hospital, a suitable conclusion to a novel that takes hospitality as one of its central concerns. Adoption, the act of taking in and raising someone else's child, transforms the abstract ethics of hospitality into a tangible way of life; it surpasses the limits of hospitality, and turns an obligation into an active choice. Hospitals, meanwhile, originally offered hospitality to two groups in need of help and support, functioning both as almshouses for the poor and as way-stations for travelers and pilgrims. Thus, the conclusion of the novel counters the notion of hospitality as a single, dischargeable duty, universal in its contours, positing it instead as ongoing and individualized. Carnegie's discovery that he was the recipient of the ultimate act of hospitality (adoption) compels him to continue this cycle by claiming responsibility for Lan and her baby. Thus, while legislation and news coverage offer Americans a sanitized and distant view of the impact of globalization and immigration, *The Love Wife* insists on drawing the reader in closer. When the immigrant has not just crossed the border, but the threshold of the home, universalist discourse about hospitality cannot prescribe an effective course of action. Individual hospitality, determined and

influenced by questions of gender and ethnicity, provides a testing ground for unexamined beliefs and unquestioned truths. The immigrant becomes a threat to the stability of one's existence, while simultaneously offering the promise of a previously unimagined future.

Notes

¹ One exception is the work of Deborah L. Madsen, which looks at the function of hospitality within the Chinese Australian context. See Deborah L. Madsen, "'No Place Like Home:' The Ambivalent Rhetoric of Hospitality in the Work of Simone Lazaroo, Arlene Chai, and Hsu-Ming Teo." *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 27.1/2 (2006): 117–132. Sean X. Goudie also looks at the work of Sui Sin Far through the lens of hospitality in "Toward a Definition of Caribbean American Regionalism: Contesting Anglo-America's Caribbean Designs in Mary Seacole and Sui Sin Far." *American Literature* 80.2 (2008): 293–322.

² Postnationalism names the shift in relevance from nation-based governments, institutions and organizations to entities located outside and across national boundaries. Theories of postnationalism hold significance to theorists of citizenship, who see these trends as potentially able to detach human rights from a particular legal status within a nation-state. See Yasemin Soysal, *Limits of Citizenship: Migrants and Postnational Membership in Europe* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994) and Saskia Sassen, "Toward Post-National and Denational Citizenship," in *Handbook of Citizenship Studies*. Eds. Engin F. Isin and Bryan S. Turner (London: Sage, 2002), 277–292.

³ Chinese immigrants represent one of the most sizeable groups of newcomers. In 2009, 37,130 Chinese were naturalized, and another 64,238 Chinese received legal permanent resident status the same year. See the Department of Homeland Security, "2009 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics," http://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/statistics/yearbook/2009/ois_yb_2009.pdf.

⁴ I am indebted to one of the anonymous reviewers of *JTAS* for encouraging me to make this point more explicitly.

⁵ Honig, Bonnie. *Democracy and the Foreigner* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 4.

⁶ Gish Jen, *The Love Wife* (New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 2004), 351.

⁷ Mireille Rosello, *Postcolonial Hospitality: The Immigrant as Guest* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 120.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 123.

¹⁰ Jeffrey Partridge, "Adoption, Interracial Marriage, and Mixed-Race Babies: The New America in Recent Asian American Literature." *Multi-Ethnic Literatures of the United States* 30.2 (2005): 247.

¹¹ Min Zhou, *Contemporary Chinese America: Immigration, Ethnicity, and Community Transformation* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2009), 69.

¹² *Ibid.*, 70.

¹³ Philip Q. Yang, "A Theory of Asian Immigration to the United States." *Journal of Asian American Studies* 13.1 (2010): 8.

¹⁴ Immanuel Kant, *On Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Essay* (London: Motley Press, 1903), 138.

¹⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, "Preface," in *The Suffering of the Immigrant*. Ed. Abdelmalek Sayad, (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 2004), xiv.

¹⁶ Jen, *The Love Wife*, 135–136.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 298.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 135.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

²¹ This imagery evokes the old Chinese patriarchal tradition of foot-binding, which contrasts with the independent, practical woman personified by Blondie.

²² Jen, *The Love Wife*, 23.

²³ *Ibid.*, 23.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 75.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 76.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

²⁷ Because Lan and Carnegie do not know the exact nature of their relationship (non-biological brother and sister), and because the Family-Based Immigrant Visa paperwork requires that the applicant specify the nature of the relationship, it would have been impossible for Lan to qualify for this type of visa. However, neither she nor Carnegie suggest an investigation into the exact nature of their relationship either. See the US Department of State website on the Family-Based Immigrant visa at http://travel.state.gov/visa/immigrants/types/types_1306.html.

²⁸ Jen, *The Love Wife*, 15.

²⁹ Mireille Rosello writes that “no discussion of hospitality can ignore the troubling elimination of the female figure from the primordial guest-host pair and how hard it is for women to be treated as guests” (119).

³⁰ Jen, *The Love Wife*, 21–22.

³¹ Blondie has energetically pursued knowledge that will equip her in a globalized society: she is knowledgeable about China, having studied in Hong Kong while in college, speaks Mandarin better than the other family members, and responds enthusiastically to Chinese literature and cultural markers. Jen, *The Love Wife*, 118–121.

³² *Ibid.*, 22.

³³ Lan’s pregnancy (she carries Shang’s baby) completes the reversal of positions between the two women. While her separation from Carnegie releases Blondie from the necessity to play hostess, Lan’s pregnancy places her at the ground zero of hospitality. The pregnant woman uses her own body to host her unborn child, a role that Blondie, because of her age and separation from Carnegie, no longer plays.

³⁴ See Hemant Shah, “Asian culture and Asian American Identities in the Television and Film Industries of the United States.” *Simile* 3.3 (2003) and Sheridan Prasso, *The Asian Mystique: Dragon Ladies, Geisha Girls, and Our Fantasies of the Exotic Orient* (New York: Public Affairs Books, 2005).

³⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*, trans. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), 34.

³⁶ Jen, *The Love Wife*, 50.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 52.

³⁹ Tracy McNulty, *The Hostess: Hospitality, Femininity and the Expropriation of Identity* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), ix–x.

⁴⁰ Deborah Madsen writes about the effects of unequal power relationships on the performance of hospitality. Madsen, ““No Place Like Home,”” 119.

⁴¹ McNulty, *The Hostess*, x.

⁴² Jen, *The Love Wife*, 51.

⁴³ John Stuart Mill, “On the Definition of Political Economy, and on the Method of Investigation Proper to It” (1836) in *Essays on Some Unsettled Questions of Political Economy* (London: Longmans, Green, Reader & Dyer, 1874), essay 5, paragraphs 38 and 48.

⁴⁴ Jen, *The Love Wife*, 278.

⁴⁵ At one point in the novel, Blondie purchases a massage table as a way to rekindle her relationship with Carnegie. Ibid., 236.

⁴⁶ That tolerance is the opposite, or at least the limit, of hospitality is an idea of Derrida's explores in a dialogue with Giovanna Borradori. See Giovanna Borradori, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jurgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 127.

⁴⁷ Michael Naas, "'Alors, Qui Etes-Vous?' Jacques Derrida and the Question of Hospitality." *SubStance* 34.1 (2005): 9.

⁴⁸ Jen, *The Love Wife*, 356.

⁴⁹ Donald E. Pease, "National Narratives, Postnational Narration." *Modern Fiction Studies* 43.1 (1997): 3.

⁵⁰ Stephen H. Song, Paul Lai and Donald C. Goellnicht, "Theorizing Asian American Fiction." *Modern Fiction Studies* 56.1 (2010): 1.

⁵¹ "Race and Hispanic Origin of the Foreign-Born Population in the United States: 2007," <http://www.census.gov/prod/2010pubs/acs-11.pdf>.

⁵² Shirley Geok-lin Lim, John Blair Gamber, Stephen Hong Sohn and Gina Valentino, eds. *Asian American Literature: Transnational Sites and Transits* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2006), 2.

⁵³ For more on Asian American entrepreneurship and ethnic businesses, see Min Zhou and Carl L. Bankston III, "Asian-American Entrepreneurship: The Causes and Consequences." *National Journal of Sociology* 9.2 (1995): 1–35 and Michael Liu and Kim Geron, "Changing Neighborhoods: Ethnic Enclaves and the Struggle for Social Justice." *Social Justice* 35.2 (2008): 18–35.

⁵⁴ Sheng-mei Ma, *Immigrant Subjectivities in Asian American and Asian Diasporic Literature* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998), 2.

⁵⁵ Rey Chow, *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993), 24.

⁵⁶ This refers to both the interracial marriage of Blondie and Carnegie, and the interracial (in Blondie's case) adoption of two Asian American girls. Jen, *The Love Wife*, 3.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 38.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 56–59.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 73.

⁶⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 125.