

# Overcoming Adversity and Composing Future: Community Writing in *Little Fires Everywhere*

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**Abstract:** *Little Fires Everywhere* is the latest masterpiece by Celeste Ng, a rising Chinese-American author who gained recognition with her acclaimed novel “The Silence of the Lambs.” This 2017 Amazon Bestseller novel delves into the Shaker Heights community, exposing how its seemingly idyllic facade masks a rigid, profit-driven social structure. The chronic emotional void has created an intractable impasse in building organic community bonds. By portraying the shared struggles of marginalized groups in daily realities, survival challenges, and emotional experiences, the novel demonstrates that compassion, inclusivity, and mutual support form the bedrock of cross-cultural solidarity.

**Keywords:** *Little Fires Everywhere*; Celeste Ng; Community

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## 1. Introduction

*Little Fires Everywhere* (2017) is the second novel by Chinese-American author Celeste Ng. Set in the modern utopian community of Shaker Heights, the story portrays conflicts among characters from diverse backgrounds, revealing how the community’s mechanized cohesion, driven by self-interest, lacks emotional bonds. It highlights how marginalized groups—represented by artist Mia, Chinese-American worker Bebe, and an outsider Izzy from a middle-class family—overcome class, racial, and cultural barriers to form a transboundary spiritual community through shared experiences and emotional connections. Ferdinand Tönnies, in his seminal work *Community and Civil Society* (1887), posits that kinship-based family life—rooted in blood, familial bonds, and marriage—constitutes the most fundamental form of community. Neighborhood-based cohabitation forms a community of place, which evolves over time into a community of spirit where members are united by shared spiritual values and strive toward common goals. In his seminal work *The Inoperative Community* (1986), Jean-Luc Nancy underscores that the interlinked internality and intimacy form the bedrock of community formation, thereby enriching the theory with an emotional dimension. While most scholarly analyses focus on maternal narratives, existentialism, and spatial storytelling, the role of community through characters’ resistance and solidarity remains

underexplored. Through the perspective of community theory, this study examines the fundamental logic behind the Shake Heights' failure to establish a spiritual community in the novel, and reveals how marginalized groups—excluded from mainstream discourse—overcome barriers of identity, class, and race through mutual empathy. The research ultimately dismantles the facade of Shaker Heights' emotional poverty and profit-driven hypocrisy, constructing an inter-ethnic community built on shared emotional bonds.

## 2. Dilemma of constructing an organic community

Tonnies observed that cohabitation based on non-blood ties, like neighborhood relations, could form a community of place, predicated on shared ownership of land and farmland. However, mere coexistence cannot create a genuine community. Modern urban dwellers, despite living side by side, lack essential communication and mutual understanding, resembling mechanical aggregation. “Thus Gemeinschaft must be understood as a living organism in its own right, while Gesellschaft is a mechanical aggregate and artefact”<sup>[1]</sup>. The planners of Shaker Heights in the novel adhered to the principle that “order-and regulation, the father of order-has been the Shakers' key to harmony”, meticulously managing every detail—from residential styles and curtain colors to morning wake-up times and men's hair length—to ensure uniform standards<sup>[2]</sup>. Raised in this environment, generations of Shakers identified themselves as perfectionists, adopting “a deep intolerance for flaws”<sup>[2]</sup>. The highly homogenized community development subtly influenced local value judgments, reducing right and wrong to black-and-white binaries. Nancy and other post-structuralist scholars argue that true communities do not blindly pursue undifferentiated uniformity, but rather enable non-objectified sharing and communication among diverse individuals. While Shaker Heights, dominated by rationalism and mechanization, promoted order and rules, it overlooked the crucial role of emotional orientation in community cohesion. As a third-generation Shaker, Mrs. Richardson rigorously adheres to those values centered on rules, order, and stability. She tirelessly lives a regimented life, neglecting emotional fulfillment despite the material abundance. As a newspaper journalist, she deviates from her original professional purpose, mechanically reporting those “feel-good stories” day after day, having mastered the art of crafting such narratives<sup>[2]</sup>. She labels real-life riots and unrest as sensationalism while avoiding discussion. “The construction of a community should first start with dispelling the superstition of instrumental rationality and mechanicalism”<sup>[3]</sup>. Under the influence of instrumental rationality, Mrs. Richardson has long abandoned her youthful ambitious aspirations in the so-called self-disciplined life filled with dogmas. Anything deviating from the path she has set for life will face resistance or suppression.

“Community means genuine, enduring life together, whereas Society is a transient and superficial thing”<sup>[1]</sup>. Thus, the community possesses greater strength and vitality than society. In *Little Fires Everywhere*, although the Shaker Heights appear harmonious on the surface, residents lack strong emotional bonds, making it impossible to form a vibrant, mutually influential, organic community. Bauman defines a community as “a ‘warm’ place, a cosy and comfortable space” where members, even when quarreling, “never wish each other bad luck”<sup>[4]</sup>. In contrast, beneath the local pride of order and rules in Shaker Heights lie oppressive mechanisms that stifle humanity. Those daring to challenge established norms are mercilessly labeled as abnormal and even ostracized. Mrs. Richardson alone deemed Mia “a completely different kind of woman leading a completely different life, who seemed to make her own rules with no apologies”, simply for observing her unique artistic style and unconventional lifestyle<sup>[2]</sup>. From that moment, jealous flames quietly took root, culminating in her authoritative declaration of “I think it's time you moved on”, believing she had fulfilled her mission of excluding

the alien by expelling Mia <sup>[2]</sup>. “If a community cannot accommodate strangers or treats them with coldness, it has no depth whatsoever” <sup>[3]</sup>. Mrs. Richardson’s exclusion of Mia exposes the deeply rooted exclusivity in mainstream society represented by the Shaker Heights: “Why should Mia get to, when no one else did?” <sup>[2]</sup>. Through constant exclusion of others, Shakers affirm their identity, making Mia’s expulsion from Shaker Heights an inevitable outcome. This further confirms the rupture of emotional bonds within Shaker. To Shaker Heights residents who adhere to the principle of “there was a plan for everything”, Mia represents rule-breaking, her presence only disrupting the established harmony <sup>[2]</sup>. A community is a social living space marked by a certain degree of social cohesion, yet Shaker Heights clearly lacks the strong cohesion needed to build a mutually supportive shared home.

In discussing the distinction between community and society, Tonnies noted that in society “nobody wants to do anything for anyone else, nobody wants to yield or give anything unless he gets something in return that he regards as at least an equal trade-off” <sup>[1]</sup>. While appearing charitable on the surface, the Shakers actually mask their selfish motives behind acts of kindness, driven by a desire to assert their superiority as “the wealthiest, the most enlightened” inhabitants <sup>[2]</sup>. In the novel, Mrs. Richardson perfectly inherits her ancestors’ legacy, viewing everything as a means to satisfy personal achievements and seek rewards. Her ideal tenants are people “she felt were deserving but who had, for one reason or another, not quite gotten a fair shot in life”, as this “pleased her to make up the difference” <sup>[2]</sup>. Meanwhile, all the vulnerable individuals she believes benefit from her kindness must also show her overwhelming gratitude. When former friends repeatedly decline her unreasonable requests, Mrs. Richardson first thinks that they ignore the various help she once provided, not even willing to grant her a little favor. Members of the community share closer, tighter, and more cohesive connections, while society is formed more by specific interests. Beneath Mrs. Richardson’s compassionate savior mask lies a sense of superiority and relentless pursuit of self-interest, a social pattern prevalent among Shaker Heights that clearly hinders the construction of an organic community with emotional interconnection and inclusiveness, instead becoming an obstacle to maintaining interpersonal relationships.

The novel opens with a promotional ad for Shaker Heights and a magazine excerpt about the area, filled with effusive praise for Shaker. While locals call themselves “inhabitants of Utopia”, their inability to respect individual differences and their use of rationality to restrict personal growth ironically expose the hypocrisy of this so-called utopian community’s outdated order and rules. As Izzy reflected before leaving Shaker: “In their beautiful, perfectly ordered city, where everyone got along and everyone followed the rules and everything had to be beautiful and perfect on the outside, no matter what mess lay within” <sup>[2]</sup>. The usually considered madman Izzy, with her impartial perspective, precisely observed the cold-heartedness and hollow-heartedness driven by profit in Shaker Heights. “Communities are not counter-constructions but only extensions of home, providing the same comforts and terrors on a larger scale” <sup>[5]</sup>. The enclosed space of Shaker shattered Izzy’s and others’ conception of home, leaving individuals unable to find emotional anchorage and thus incapable of developing a genuine sense of belonging.

### **3. Common fate of marginal characters**

“The commonality of suffering will inevitably make diaspora individuals recognize the commonality of their destinies, assisting them to find strength in the ruins of reality, explore paths forward, envision the future, and eventually form a community through shared adversity” <sup>[6]</sup>. Unlike the orderly and rule-bound life in Shaker Heights, Mia’s past was seen as rebellious by those around her. Her insistence on studying art in spite of her

parents' opposition led to a growing estrangement from them, culminating in her complete severance of ties after her brother's accidental death. After giving birth to her daughter Pearl, Mia continued living a life misunderstood by others: she rarely stayed in one place long, and driving her brother's car while traveling with her daughter became her daily routine. The independent-minded Mia constantly wandered the fringes of mainstream society, moving between cities like a nomad, taking part-time jobs merely to sustain her beloved artistic career that remained incomprehensible to most. Bebe, the Chinese female worker Mia worked with at the same Chinese restaurant, also endured a bitter life. Originally earning a generous salary in San Francisco, she was deceived by her boyfriend into moving to Cleveland, where she could not even find a job to make ends meet. To make things worse, Bebe's boyfriend vanished completely after she became pregnant. The diaspora "share a common destiny across races, cultures, and national political-geographical boundaries...the differences in racial, cultural and national identities among the members of community become irrelevant" <sup>[7]</sup>. Though vastly different in race, nationality, and cultural background, Mia and Bebe are both diaspora members of mainstream American society. Their shared personal struggles allow them to empathize with each other's circumstances. To the rigidly rule-bound, elitist inhabitants of Shaker Heights, these two are the quintessential "outsiders." The hardships they've endured and the prejudices they've faced form the bedrock that enables them to set aside their differences and unite.

In the novel, the youngest daughter of the Richardson family, Izzy, is also perceived as an alienated individual. Unlike Mia and Bebe, who grew up in affluent middle-class households free from basic survival concerns, Izzy faced social exclusion due to her distinct personality and rebellious behavior. In Shaker Heights, "the various spheres of power and activity are sharply demarcated", and Izzy, as a challenger breaking these norms, naturally encountered hostility <sup>[1]</sup>. She was suspended for publicly defending a black classmate unjustly targeted by the violin teacher, and once packed all her colorful clothes to give to homeless people out of dislike. Though appearing eccentric and arrogant, Izzy possessed a kind and upright heart. To the Shaker Heights obsessed with perfection, she was totally "the black sheep, the wild card" of the Richardsons, with even her own family calling her "a dog that might go rabid at any time", depriving her of any right to self-expression <sup>[2]</sup>. "Marginal Character" refers to someone who escapes social control or is ignored and marginalized by mainstream society, categorized into "self-aware" or "other-defining" types <sup>[8]</sup>. As peripheral members of the dominant community, Mia, Bebe, and Izzy's perpetual alienation prevented them from being truly accepted by the natives of Shaker Heights. "Some of the most powerful expressions of community are often experienced precisely where there has been a major injustice inflicted on a group of people, who consequently develop a sense of their common fate" <sup>[9]</sup>. The intersection of marginalized others from different identities, classes, and races through their shared fates provides possibilities for building cultural inclusivity and emotional resonance within spiritual communities.

"The destinies of diasporas and those connected to them are closely linked by actions or events of diaspora and the aspiration for a beatific, complete, and stable life after overcoming hardships, thereby forming diverse communities of common destiny" <sup>[7]</sup>. Mia did not want her daughter to continue living a nomadic and isolated life, so after moving to Shaker, she promised her daughter they would stay there. When Bebe first arrived in Cleveland, she also held hopes for the future, hoping to possess a house with a yard with her boyfriend. The solitary Izzy was always longing for someone who could understand her inner world; even the smallest kindness from strangers would be cherished in her heart. Although all three were marginalized groups on the edge of Shaker Heights, enduring various prejudices and unfair treatment, they still harbored aspirations for life. Similar experiences and pursuits became the bond connecting them.

"Facing the future world, authors are concerned not only with the fate of individuals or ethnic groups, but



with contemplating humanity's collective destiny" <sup>[10]</sup>. As a representative work of Chinese-American literature in recent years, *Little Fires Everywhere* has expanded its perspective from the singular cultural sphere of Chinese Americans to encompass various minority groups within American society, breaking down traditional boundaries of race, identity, and class. Shared experiences unite three marginalized individuals from different ethnic backgrounds and social statuses within a common emotional space. Through mutual empathy and solidarity, they confront the various ills of Shaker Heights, thereby further constructing a spiritual community that transcends ethnic divisions and fosters emotional interconnectivity.

#### 4. Emotional communication in the cross-racial spiritual community

"Building a diaspora community requires not only objective foundations but also spiritual and emotional bonds" <sup>[6]</sup>. "The use of the term community has remained to some extent associated with the hope and the wish of reviving once more the closer, warmer, more harmonious type of bonds between people vaguely attributed to past ages" <sup>[11]</sup>. This reveals that communities transcend physical spaces to form emotional networks—a crucial element often missing in modern multicultural cities. In the novel, Mia and Bebe, both single mothers struggling financially, cherish each other's presence deeply due to their shared hardships. After meeting at a Chinese restaurant, Bebe treats Mia as her only trusted confidante abroad, opening up about her life experiences without reservation. Meanwhile, Mia never grows weary of Bebe's endless stories as an attentive listener. When discussing community building, Nancy highlights communication as essential, through which individual memory can transform into communal memory. Mia and Bebe gradually become witnesses to each other's lives and emotional anchors in the process of intercourse. When Mia accidentally learns that Mrs. Richardson's friend, Mrs. McCullough, has adopted a girl named Mirabelle—Bebe's biological daughter, she has been searching for months—she resolves to help Bebe get her child back. "For those who've endured similar suffering, shared misfortunes, and hopes for a better future evoke identical or comparable emotions" <sup>[12]</sup>. Although Mia and Bebe are from different countries and different races, the same emotional flow is enough to unite them across all kinds of barriers.

Empathy serves as the "social adhesive" in community-building, being the most vital emotion within a collective—a value discourse circulating within the community and the foundation for constructing shared homes and communities. This aligns with Tonnies's concept of "mutual understanding": "Mutual understanding rests upon intimate knowledge of one another, reflecting the direct interest of one being in the life of another willingness to share in his or her joys and sorrows" <sup>[1]</sup>. In their struggle, Bebe willingly opens her heart to Mia, whose profound empathy for Bebe further expands their emotional connection. "The idea that someone might take a mother's child away: it horrified her. It was as if someone had slid a blade into her and with one quick twist hollowed her out, leaving nothing inside but a cold rush of air" <sup>[2]</sup>. Bebe's desperate search for her daughter infects Mia, during which Mia recalls the magical sensation of Pearl's tiny body pressing against her belly during their first wandering journey. Shared experiences and emotional currents create a deep bond that tightly "glues" them together. This shared emotional experience also facilitates Mia and Izzy's transcendence of individual identities, fostering increasingly intense emotional resonance through their deepening interactions. With her keen eye for detail, Mia noticed that the strained relationship between Izzy and her family stemmed from his mother's overly strict discipline. Mrs. Richardson always magnified Izzy's mistakes while ignoring her achievements. These emotional factors that the Richardsons had long overlooked ultimately created an irreparable rift between Izzy and her family. Emotional resonance means recognition and acceptance. When others saw Izzy as a clumsy

troublemaker, Mia was the first to recognize his inherent qualities: “A lot of times, parents are not the best at seeing their children clearly. There’s so much wonderful about you” <sup>[2]</sup>. As Izzy grew emotionally attached to Mia, she shed the defensive shell before her, breaking free from her long-sealed inner world. Meanwhile, Mia saw in Izzy a younger version of herself—stubborn and resilient, like a roaring fire on barren land. Though deliberately concealing harsh truths during their farewell, Mia still guided Izzy to break free from the shackles imposed by Shaker Heights. Upon learning the truth about Mia and Pearl’s departure, Izzy resolutely embarked on a journey to follow them. As their emotional distance narrowed, Izzy realized Mia was no longer a stranger to her. Their shared emotional bond woven them into an interconnected web. “Mia had opened a door in her that could not be shut again” <sup>[2]</sup>. Mia is undoubtedly the enlightener to Izzy’s self-awareness, and their two-way emotional practice in their respective marginalized spaces drives their union.

People are “fulfilling their intrinsic purpose when they draw nearer to the centre and gather together in one place. This is essential when circumstances either external or internal require mutual assistance and coordinated action” <sup>[1]</sup>. When Mia witnessed Bebe in a dilemma, she chose not to stand idly by but volunteered to support the latter. Through this positive mutual aid, Mia and Bebe forged cross-cultural emotional bonds that strengthened their sense of belonging to their shared community. This allowed Mia, who usually avoids meddling in others’ affairs, to transcend racial, cultural, and value barriers when helping Bebe overcome loneliness. Even after upsetting Mrs. Richardson by intervening in Bebe’s conflict with Mrs. McCullough and leaving Shaker, Mia never regretted her decision. Izzy, as a beneficiary of this emotional community, acknowledged Mia’s transformative power: “With Mia she’d been different, in a way she hadn’t known she could be: in Mia’s accepting presence she’d become curious and kind and open, as if under a magic spell” <sup>[2]</sup>. The emotional agency ignited Izzy’s latent vitality, ultimately enabling her to break free from Shaker Heights’ constraints. “Community is what takes place always through others and for others” <sup>[13]</sup>. Though Mia, Bebe, and Izzy left Shaker for different reasons, they all gained strength through community-building. By challenging mainstream norms, they asserted their right to self-expression, while intense emotional resonance healed their negative emotions, guiding them to dismantle societal shackles and construct a shared spiritual home.

“The cultural ethos of Asian Americans transcends racial and class boundaries, creating a fluid space that empowers marginalized communities to articulate their identities and redefine cultural expressions” <sup>[14]</sup>. As a pioneering Chinese-American writer, Celeste Ng has demonstrated her commitment to minority advocacy since her debut novel, *Everything I Never Told You*. *Little Fires Everywhere* continues this tradition by weaving together conflicting values through a baby-snatching case. As representatives of marginalized communities, Mia, Bebe, and Izzy break through cultural silences amidst systemic oppression with their unique voices, ultimately forging an intercultural community ideal through shared emotional resonance.

## 5. Conclusion

From the perspective of the community, *Little Fires Everywhere* exposes the mechanical aggregation driven by interests behind the seemingly perfect utopian facade of Shaker Heights. The severe lack of emotional connection makes the construction of an organic local community an insurmountable dilemma. By reconstructing the commonalities of marginalized groups in real-life circumstances, survival conditions, and emotional experiences, the novel confirms that the emotional power centered on empathy, inclusiveness, and mutual assistance is the key to building a cross-cultural spiritual community. “In general, outstanding writers and critics all have a ‘community

impulse', that is, a vision of a beautiful future society, a form of organic, dynamic, and cohesive community that transcends kinship and geography" <sup>[15]</sup>. As a representative of Chinese-American writers, Celeste Ng is no exception. Despite the vastly different cultural backgrounds of her characters, they form connections through shared life experiences and emotional resonance. The differences between individuals and ethnic groups give way to a strong desire to build a cross-racial and cross-cultural community. Emotional interconnectivity allows characters to remain united while preserving their unique identities.

## Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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