

Revista Iberoamericana, 19-2, 2008

Community of Equals: made by intelligence and imagination

Eun Ha Choi
New York University

**Choi, Eun Ha(2008), *Community of Equals: made by intelligence and imagination*,
Revista Iberoamericana, 19-2, pp. 199-212.**

This essay dialogues with Jacques Rancière's *On the Shores of Politics* and Jorge Luis Borges's short story, "El Congreso". Though employing different genres, Jorge Luis Borges and Jacques Rancière discuss a series of common themes: political community, equality and the role that intelligence (for Rancière) and literary fiction (for Borges) play in imagining the contours of possibility of a "community of equals" of an unfixed definition. I argue that according to both thinkers, fiction and political essays create the space for the discursive exposition of such a community as one always imminently to come, or as always already a catachresis. Discursively situating the "community of equals" is a practice of artifice that is constituted in the community's ability and need to enact it.

**[Equality / Community / Intelligence / Fiction / Political thought/
Imaginary / Borges / Rancière]**

“What gives commitment its aesthetic advantage
over tendentiousness is that it renders the content
to which the artist commits himself inherently ambiguous,
thus opening up a realm of free choice for the reader.”
(Adorno, “Commitment”)

I . Introduction

“El Congreso,” and “Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote” among possibly many other stories of the Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges, conduce us to ponder whether the author creates a space and time where the emergence of a “community of equals” can be realized. This work intends to inquire what type of community, if any, Borges’s stories adumbrate and subsequently observe whether the experience of equality can be found in such a construction, albeit literary. By “community of equals,” I do not refer to Benedict Anderson’s seminal synthesis of an “imagined community,” where its constitutive subjects need to imagine the presence of others equally belonging to this nucleus, many others whom they will never actually meet but are not less real because of that. Rather I borrow from Rancière’s work on the same subject as he expounds it in *On the Shores of Politics*.

Two main sections comprise this work of which the first part assimilates a close reading exercise of Rancière’s work,¹⁾ particularly of one chapter that appears in *On the Shore of Politics*. The second section entertains a possible

1) I understand the potential antipathy that this first section can arouse in the reader due to its refusal to leave out many details and specific discussions from Rancière’s text. After much consideration, I have decided to retain the section, despite its length, as such because of, among other reasons, the very difficulty of the text with which it deals. At the present stage of the work, only a detailed discussion and reading of the chapter “Community of Equals” promised to render some justice to the author and the complexity of his thought.

dialogue between Borges's fiction and the ideas of the French political thinker. Though not dwelling on the extra-textual subtleties, this work projects to find crossing points or themes between their works without disrespecting their dissimilar intellectual aims and literary genres.

II . Rancière's community and equals

Then, what does Rancière mean by "community" and what else by "equals"? Is this compound term somewhat redundant considering that the presence of a community should presuppose the objectification of some form of commonness, in other words, of some measurement of equality uniting the members involved? Isn't a community a homogeneous and harmonious body whose constitution can only depend on subjects who regard one another as equals? Should a manifestation of equality be already inscribed in the imaginary²⁾ of a community for it to be possible in first place? Does equality, as an a priori condition, underpin the formation of a community, which, in spite of its particular dimensions, always hinges itself on universal symbolisms?

Responding to the necessity to think about both terms and the relation between them as upheld by Rancière, it is imperative to make a clear distinction between our understanding and experience of society and that of community. Society is and invariably remains the failed materialization of the community of equals. Society is a physical space where policy governs and collective consent need to be negotiated at every step. For policy to be implemented people need to be

2) Though this concept will rarely appear again in the progress of this paper, it seems preferable to specify which definition of "imaginary" I am subscribing to. It is the same that Nora Domínguez utilizes in her article "Literary Constructions and Gender Performance in the Novels of Nora Lange," which was published in Jones and Davies' *Latin American Women's Writing: Feminist Reading in Theory and Crisis*. It refers to a set of "social myths and beliefs that form social meaning and individual attitudes and actions(31).

classified, categorized, and differentiated; necessary hierarchies are established; and social functions are given. Thus society not so much denies equality but cannot help but denigrate it significantly even when ideally and rhetorically aspires it. In his text Rancière advises us to reject any tendency to view society and community as synonyms, as he claims that the community of equals and society remain “as mutually exclusive in their principles as they are mutually reinforcing in their existence”(84). In other words, one could not explain this pressing dialectic by borrowing Homi Bhabha’s notions of the pedagogical versus the performative. Society cannot be described to belong to the latter inasmuch the community of equals is only understood in terms of the former. The differences between the two, therefore, are rather permeable and they are constantly being crossed. The realization of a society of emancipated beings, in other words capable of cohabiting as a community, depends on the unceasing re-enactment of the community of equals albeit in disparate and incommensurable spaces.

In order to understand what a community is, Rancière, not unlike Anderson, also invokes the creative and enactive power of imagination for his community inevitably relates to the universal as it encompasses all those who will never actually meet one another. Therefore the community, for it to be of equals, cannot be less than universal. In a different essay titled “Politics, Identification, and Subjectivization,” Rancière continues to argue that equality remains the single universal political value. “Equality exists, and makes universal values exist, to the extent that it is enacted. Equality is not a value to which one appeals; it is a universal that must be supposed, verified and demonstrated in each case”(65). But enacted how? How should it be presupposed, verified and demonstrated? According to Rancière, it should be done in each translating effort.

He further explains equality as the act of translating, and the act of translating as the one that unequivocally acknowledges the equal grounds of a multiplicity of languages present in the world but also somewhat converging in on language. No one language stands alone in purity and originality, but languages stand at the

crossroads with many, intersecting with others both spatially and temporally. It is precisely in that space of “in-betweenness” that one produces that performative enactment of equality. Rancière concludes that “the activity of thinking is primarily an activity of translation, and that anyone is capable of making a translation. Underpinning this capacity for translation is the efficacy of equality, that is to say, the efficacy of humanity”(63). Thus we must understand that the process of equality is a process of marking difference, that which exists inexorably in each national language. But difference does not mean the assumption of a different identity in oneself or an other, or the plain confrontation of two identities. Again, equality demands that we position ourselves in the ephemeral place of “in-between” others.

What kind of realization can the community of equals undergo or is it completely outside the phenomenal boundaries? Realization of the said community is possible, explains Rancière, but strictly based on two uncorrupted conditions. The first one is that such a community must be understood as a “supposition to be posited from the outset and endlessly repositd”(84) and not as an ideal and accomplishable goal to which one aims. “All that strategies or pedagogies of the community of equals can do is cause that community to fall into the arena of active unreason, of explanatory / explained inequality ever seeking to pass itself off as the slow road to reconciled futures”(84). As opposed to the legal field, where experts do exist and bring about effectual changes, there are no experts in equality. Then we are led to conclude that all those who enunciate upon this matter merely produce hypotheses and at the slightest attempt to ‘upgrade’ it into a pedagogical material, the community simultaneously digresses to an illogical vacuum that entraps a future of equality that never materializes. The second, which is not completely unrelated to the previous, states that though constantly tempted to do so, one must actively reject the view that the community of equals represents a utopian formulation waiting to be implemented and thus mutate to become an ideal social institution. As Rancière more eloquently states:

"Reason begins when discourses organized with the goal of being right cease, begins where equality is recognized: not an equality decreed by law or force, not a passively received equality, but an equality in act, verified, at each step by those marchers who, in their constant attention to themselves and in their endless revolving around the truth, find the right sentences to make themselves understood by others."³⁾

III . Borges's Community of Equals

We understand Rancière's postulation of a community of equals to be that of intellectually emancipated beings, who are capable of translating thought to sign, and from one sign to another, in other words, they display the capacity of not only using language but also producing rhetoric for it must be impregnated with meaning. In that space of "in-betweenness" the emancipated being seems to reenact the equality of the other. Having said this, we proceed to probe whether Borges's fictional communities reflect a similar view and make-up. How is a community constructed in Borges's world and do their constituents imagine each other as equals? If so, on which principles is their equality grounded?

"Las palabras son símbolos que postulan una memoria compartida. Las que ahora quiero historiar en mía solamente, quienes la compartieron han muerto"(53). The narrator and protagonist of "El Congreso" utters these words as he introduces the account ahead of him. Thus he marks the prominence of words, not necessarily his own but that of any words. According to the narrator, what marks this shared memory it is less the content of these words or the story that will be revealed through their utterance than the very use of language itself. The commonality of what they have experienced matters less than how it is perpetuated through speech. It is the apparent critical weight that language

3) Jacques Rancière. 1991. *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. 72.

receives in Borges's fiction that serves as the space of intersection between his work and that of Rancière. It is the human ability to think, translate it through language ("Cogito Ergo Sum" after all, the Cartesian dictum could not have been postulated without the presence of language) and narrate from memory that entitles him to equality. In "Pierre Menard, Autor del Quijote," a story from an earlier book, *Ficciones* (1944), we discover a re-positing of this view when Menard claims that:

"pensar, analizar, inventar (me escribió también) no son actos anómalos, son la normal respiración de la inteligencia. Glorificar el ocasional cumplimiento de esa función, atesorar antiguos y ajenos pensamientos, recordar con increíble estupor que el *doctor universalis pensó*, es confesar nuestra languidez, o nuestra barbarie. Todo hombre debe ser capaz de todas las ideas y entiendo que en el porvenir lo será" (*Ficciones*, 55).

What are the dimensions of the community in Borges's fiction? Distancing myself from any gender reading or criticism of the word "hombre" I propose that humanity integrates this community, thus elevating it to one of universal proportions. Story after story Borges creates characters whose experiences fuse the experiences of endless ancestors; man who emerge as the fluid reflection of all men. Let us remember the protagonist of "El Jardín de los senderos que se bifurcan", also from *Ficciones*, where an English literature scholar Yu Tsun, of Chinese origin but at the service of Germany resides in England as a spy. Yu Tsun confesses that "innumerables antepasados confluyen en mí" (104). Albeit this seemingly nationalistic statement, Borges does not hesitate to displace this character completely in terms of national and cultural symbolisms. Yu Tsun dedicates himself to an other's literary tradition (English literature), thus undermining the literary and cultural contributions that he has inherited from his ancestors. He ultimately kills an other (Stephen Albert, whose name and address Yu Tsun finds by chance in the phone book). He kills and dies for the sake of a different other's nation (Germany). The character of Yu Tsun defies all cultural

and national essentialism to symbolize universal multiplicity and multilateral ambiguity.

In “El Congreso” and “Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote”, the author’s narrative does not involve regional or local communities, though seemingly situated in one, for instance the members of El Congreso gather in Montevideo and Buenos Aires later. Rather they project a universal imaginary, even if they were initiated by an exclusive group of individuals such as we find in “El Congreso”. The universal proportions of their community is precisely what the main character, Alejandro Ferri, discovers after joining this exceptional organism.

“La empresa que hemos acometido es tan vasta que abarca ahora lo sél mundo entero. No es unos cuantos charlatanes que aturden en los galpones de una estancia perdida. El Congreso del Mundo comenzó con el primer instante del mundo y proseguirá cuando seamos polvo. No hay un lugar en que no esté”(El libro de arena, 51-52).

In this story Borges creates a congress of universal dimensions, whose members share this communitarian sense of equality by not only experiencing the same but also promising to generate the same account. Those who study and admire Borges’s fiction know that universality is hardly a foreign concept to his work. This universal preoccupation does not suddenly appear in his later books such as *Ficciones*, *El Aleph* or *El libro de arena*. On the contrary, an effort to illuminate the universal, to give it linguistic and literary form persisted in his work since his first universal book, as Ronald Christ calls Borges’s *Historia universal de la infamia*. In *The Narrow Act*, Christ qualifies the *Historia universal de la infamia* to be “the first of Borges’s imaginative works to show him deliberately looking beyond personal and parochial subjects arising from his relation to his city, his country, and their history. For one thing, the book is almost entirely devoted to fiction”(54). Borges’s, however, is not regular fiction in that metaphysical fantasies abound in a unique fashion, one that has defined over the

past half a century a certain Borgesian style. About Borges's fictional beginnings, Kate Jenckes comments that "Universal histories, or histories that purport to define a certain universe, be it national, regional or truly cosmic are based on the exclusion of things that, were they to 'speak', would dissolve the history's pretension to represent a whole"(3). Borges rarely hesitates to make this process explicit to the reader as his narrators usually edit and comment themselves in loud voice. Ferri mentions which details of his experience are worth recollecting, which others remain a pure invention, or the facts that have always been simply irrelevant. The same spirit to enhance the ambiguity and impurity inherent in language, memory and the act of producing speech retains its power in his much later works which mainly focus on injecting his fiction and the genre in general with new dynamics.

"El Congreso," as it is revealed to Ferri becomes represented in historical instances and historical beings across centuries and across oceans. "El Congreso," that Ferri discovers beyond the meetings and research assignments abroad after four year of his enrollment cannot be materialized within temporal and spatial frames that genealogical and teleological narratives cannot but reinforce. This organism exceeds the boundaries set by this group of charlatans, as the narrator calls himself and the rest who met somewhere in Montevideo on February 7, 1904 for the first time. It is not quite utopian in that it is present everywhere, but paradoxically that unbounded universality verges on the limits of an ideological utopia and physical utopia, literally "out of or with-out a place", in this case the impossibility to be located in one specific place.

In Borges's fictional community there are no masters, slaves, guardians or fraternal workers. There is no need to negotiate between differentiated classes and groups of people because policy need not be enforced, because social and political functions seem to have no meaning at all. It is not what they do, represent, subscribe to or embody that allows them to enlist themselves as members of this global community. Even at the end of "El jardín de los senderos que se bifurcan",

it is less than clear why Yu Tsun does what he does. There is not convincing political or psychological reasons that predate or serve to make sense out of the characters' actions. Borges's fiction does not aim at portraying political subjects full of realism. On the contrary, it flees away from this technique in order to promote the literary beauty embedded in imaginary, ambiguous and continuously displaced characters. On this Kate Jenckes comments that Borges "repeatedly (denies) the continuity and consistency of the subject (el yo continuo), and also that of the continuity or coherence of space, time and representation. His works present us with an entirely different conception of what history actually is: not a continuous outer world that can contain a self-enclosed 'hecho literario', but something that must be understood internally, through the complexity of 'literary' forms of representation (Kate Jenckes, 2007: 3).

This brings us again to Ferri's suggestive words: "Es verdad que todos los hombres lo son, que no hay un ser en el planeta que no lo sea, pero yo lo soy de otro modo." (*El libro de arena*, 29) Thus Ferri affirms that everyone equally belongs as he alone has become the one who remains liminal to that equality. He is marginal to the blissful ignorance that secures everyone who equally belongs and equally does not know. He claims to have witnessed and participated in the brief existence and irrevocable demise of the brief materialization of such a universal community, or rather of its failed attempts to become a substantiated society. The end of the story relates the importance of that fleeting moment, one evening when the members realize that their plan "del cual más de una vez nos burlamos, existía relamente y secretamente y era el universo y nosotros" (54). This comments on how El Congreso should have remained a community as Ranciére defines it, and resist becoming conceptualized as society. Now he is left with the unenviable task to narrate it, to translate the experience into fallible words. "No falsearé deliberadamente los hechos, pero presiento que la haraganería y la torpeza me obligarán, más de una vez, al error" (*El libre de arena*, 30). Borges seems to agree with Ranciére that the unreliable human will causes us (in his

chapter, Rancière explains that disparate degrees of intelligence do not cause inequality, but the human will's tendency to relax⁴⁾) and in this case his story's narrator and protagonist, to fault intellectually. Is it when Ferri fails to recollect the facts that his imagination gets to play a more active role? Ferri does say that his narrative belongs to him alone. "Las palabras son símbolos que postulan una memoria compartida. La que ahora quiero historiar es mía solamente; quienes la compartieron han muerto" (*El libro de arena*, 53). There is another narrator of Borges that actively engages his imagination in the act of narrating and accessing all ideas.

Let us remember that the narrator in "Pierre Menard, el autor del Quijote" also exercises the power of the imagination in his arduous task of re-writing or shall we say translating Cervantes' *El Quijote*. His labour does not simply mimetically transcribe word for word, though this is actually what he does, but it translates as it gives his version of Cervantes' book a new meaning, more fitting to modern times. "El texto de Cervantes y el de Menard son verbalmente idénticos, pero el segundo es casi infinitamente más rico (Más ambiguo, dirán sus detractores; pero la ambigüedad es una riqueza.)" (52). Thus Menard speculates about a very eminent future, at least according to his understanding, when "todo hombre" finds the enablement for "todas las ideas". The very important and challenging aspect of *how* fails to be elaborated. But that could be because the "*how*" is somewhat less important than the "*why*" and "*what if*" in Borges's metaphysical exercises. This is the sort of equality that the author's fiction rather abstractly envisions for the human community, one in which every communal subject will be able to exercise their imagination and benefit from its fruits to its fullest.

Language appears to occupy a critical and perhaps irreplaceable role in the

4) Rancière affirms that error in judgment only occurs upon the passiveness of the will rather than its haste and unconquerable intrusion. Rancière interprets that "it is the lack of will that causes intelligence to make mistakes. The mind's original sin is not haste, but distraction, absence." In *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, using Joseph Jacotot's words he concludes that "idiocy is not a faculty; it is the absence, or the slumber, or the relaxation of [intelligence]" (55), which of course derives from the unstable state of the human will.

experience and manifestation of “todas las ideas” to which Menard refers. Language is similarly important in Joseph Jacotot⁵⁾ and Rancière’s thoughts on equality and community. As it goes in the Aventine Hill’s anecdote, language breaks the equality between those who listen and those who speak. In Borges’s fiction, this egalitarian community never materializes either. It is represented everywhere such as in “El Congreso,” or is yet to be formed in an advent future, as it is foretold in “Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote”. But Borges has one advantage over Rancière and that is the literary genre with which he works. Rancière is a political thinker as clearly as Borges never intends to be. “La lotería de Babilonia,” evinces, however, elements of political philosophy that are not completely rare in Borges’s fiction. Regarding this issue, Sylvia Molloy comments the following:

“Political philosophy is not to be learnt from Borges. But he does invent plots where a philosophical question is confronted by means of fictional devices and processes. There is no answer to the question. What we find, instead, is the literary development of the problem in the form of a plot built around fictional hypotheses that describe a utopian or, in effect, a dystopian order”(Molloy, 1993: 78).

5) Rancière introduces Joseph Jacotot’s theories on the equality of intelligence into the course of his argument, of which he does a lengthier and more in depth analysis in a previous book, *The Ignorant School Master*. Equality, Jacotot suggests, can be realized upon the assertion of intelligence. Believing on this equality of intelligence enables the emergence of a community of equals that can simultaneously be identified as a community of emancipated men. Inequality, according to Jacotot, prevails inherent in the construction of social bond. The community formed upon the equality of intelligence, on the other hand, refuses to be objectified as a material substance because it thrives in its very fluidity. “It is borne at each and every moment by someone for someone else for a potential infinity of others. It occurs, but it has no place”(82). This community defies the temporal and spatial limits to which society is inevitably constricted for both present existence and future progress. This opposition results from the persistent insubstantiality of the community versus the possibility of society only in its materialization. Thus Rancière concludes that “a community of equals is an insubstantial community of individuals engaged in the ongoing creation of equality”(84).

Borges writes fiction, of strong metaphysical overtones, but ultimately fiction, which is read and approached as such. That is why the malleability of the imagination, language and ideas are chiefly available to him in ways impossible to Ranci  re's field of work. Both of them agree that a purely egalitarian community remains a concept, an idea that needs to be posited repeatedly for it exists in as much as it is discussed as ideal and yet commensurable. As Ranci  re concludes:

"There are moments when the community of equals appears as the ultimate underpinning of the distribution of the institutions and obligations that constitute a society; moments when equals declare themselves as such, though aware that they have not fundamental right to do so save the appeal to what has been inscribed earlier, which their action raises behind it as a banner. They thus experience the artificial aspect of their power in the sense that 'artifice' may mean both something that is not necessary and something that is to be created"(91).

This is the kind of artificial, soon to be negated, deflated power that the members of el Congreso experienced during that transient night when the potential and impossibility were simultaneously realized. And artifice is what Borges creates in his short fictional stories where his communities are either not vitally necessary or yet to be formed. Thus, creatively he does what Ranci  re advises us to do: to imagine the invention and discuss the need for a community whose equal members' intelligence is never undermined and creates characters who despite their terror, invest every effort to communicate their communal experience.

Bibliography

- Borges, Jorge Luis. 1995. *Ficciones*. Madrid: Alianza Editorial.
- Borges, Jorge Luis. 1975. *El libro de arena*. Madrid: Alianza Editorial.
- Christ, Ronald. 1995. *Narrow Act: Borges' Art of Allusion*. New York: Lumen Books.
- Jenckes, Kate. 2007. *Reading Borges After Benjamin*. New York: SUNY, Press.
- Molloy, Sylvia. "Imaginary Constructions." in Sarlo, Bestriz and King, John(eds.). 1993. *Jorge Luis Borges: the Writer on the Edge*. New York: Verso Books.
- Ranci  re, Jacques. 1995. *On The Shores of Politics*. London: Verso Books.
- Ranci  re, Jacques. 1991. *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- _____. 1999. *Dis-agreement: Politics and Philosophy*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Rajchman, John. 1995. *The Identity in Questions*. New York: Routledge.

Eun Ha Choi
New York University
E-mail: ehc223@nyu.edu

Date of submission: 30 September 2008

Date of revision: 10 October 2008

Date of approval: 18 October 2008