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Celeste Ng in Conversation with Maxine Hong Kingston: Intergenerational Trauma and the Asian American Experience in Everything I Never Told You.

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Abstract:

This paper delves into the representation of intergenerational trauma within Asian American literature, focusing on Celeste Ng's *Everything I Never Told You*, Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, and the critiques by Viet Thanh Nguyen. Ng's work is analyzed for its nuanced portrayal of trauma as an intrinsic part of the Asian American experience, distinguishing it from earlier works that, as Nguyen argues, tend to conform to the "model minority" stereotype. The paper examines Ng's sensitive unpacking of trauma, particularly its non-punctual, systemic nature, and its intergenerational transmission, especially in parent-child relationships. Additionally, it contrasts Ng's approach with Kingston's, exploring how trauma in *The Woman Warrior* is masked by cultural reinterpretation and the desire to please dominant Western narratives. By employing the theories of Cathy Caruth, Naomi Mandel, and Greg Forter, the essay argues that Ng repositions trauma as a core theme in Asian American literature, filling a significant gap left by previous works and redefining the narrative of Asian American identity and heritage.

Keywords: Intergenerational trauma; Asian American studies; Celeste Ng; Everything I Never Told You; Maxine Hong Kingston; Viet Thanh Ngyuen.

Introduction

Celeste Ng's *Everything I Never Told You* debuted to immense success and won Amazon's 2014 Best Book award among other accolades. It chronicles the story of the Lee family from the arrival of James's parents in America to James meeting his wife Marilyn and finally to the death of his daughter Lydia. As the story progresses, Ng gradually uncovers the ways in which trauma has shaped James's relationship to his family and American society at large. This is especially prominent with his children, Nath and Lydia (Ng, 90).

Ng's unhesitant inclusion of trauma in relation to the Asian American experience sets it apart from other Asian American stories. This brings to mind Viet Thanh Nguyen's essay in *Flashpoints*, where he points out the stereotype of the Asian American ethnic minority that, in attempting to accommodate American values, turns Asian American fiction into nothing more than "the paperweights of industrial fiction," (Nguyen, 302). Ng's breaking away from this stereotype is what sets her novel so clearly apart.

I argue that Ng's sensitive unpacking of intergenerational trauma in relation to the Asian American experience re-establishes the position of Chinese American fiction within the literary scene. This essay is split into two large sections, the first interprets Nguyen's critique on Asian American studies and analyses Ng's incorporation of trauma into her novel as a way of subverting the model minority stereotype. I begin by talking about trauma inherent to the Asian American experience and move on to its intergenerational nature and its manifestations in parent-child relationships, as seen in James Lee. Lastly, I touch upon object symbolism in Lydia's necklace and swimming as navigating trauma.

In the second section, I put Celeste Ng in conversation with Maxine Hong Kingston. Kingston, as Ng's predecessor in the Asian American field, circles around trauma in her novel *The Woman Warrior* and fits Nguyen's critique. In turn, *Everything I Never Told You* makes space for the (ironically) unspoken trauma in Kingston's novel. Celeste Ng's bold yet sensitive approach to trauma finally fills in the gap that trauma left behind in previous Asian American works. Thus, Ng re-establishes the position of trauma within Asian American fiction and puts in place the last puzzle piece for the narrative of Asian American fiction.

Throughout the essay, I make use of three critics' theories of trauma, namely Cathey Caruth, Naomi Mandel, and Greg Forter. Caruth, the most prominent critic since Freud,

defines trauma as an empty space in the psyche. Trauma's unrepresentable nature means that it can never be known as other than a "reoccurring absence" that resists narrative and linguistic representation (1996: 187). On the other hand, Mandel argues that the 'irrepresentability' of trauma is not a property of trauma so much as a result of conflict between the subjugated and the subjugating rhetoric. She claims the 'irrepresentability' of trauma (the aforementioned 'gap' within Asian American narratives) is part of discourse enforced by the dominant culture. Finally, Forter differentiates between punctual and non-punctual trauma; the former being a once-occurring event, while the latter refers to reoccurring, systematic trauma, usually as a result of social institutions and historical forces (Forter 2011: 98).

Analysis & Discussion

Ng's *Everything I Never Told You* undoubtedly puts Asian American studies in conversation with trauma studies, and the importance of this is not to be understated. Viet Thanh Nguyen, a Vietnamese American writer and scholar, writes about the dilemma inherent in Asian American studies in *Flashpoints*:

"Asian American literature was too [anxious] to please the white majority […] Conversely, […] Asian Americans always resisted what was done to them and […] stood for justice and the future yet to come. What justice and the future meant need never be defined, so that the scholar could avoid the uncomfortable reality…" (Nguyen, 302-03).

In scholarship, Nguyen claims that Asian American studies is torn between accommodating dominant American culture and maintaining its status as a minor literature that fights back against dominant narratives. Put differently, 'resisting' the dominant culture is championed, but not too *championed* for the fear of offending said dominant culture's sensibilities.

Nearly every minor piece of literature faces this dilemma. Asian American scholars chose the blurred idea of "justice and the future yet to come" as the silver-bullet solution to this "uncomfortable reality," and what Nguyen implies is that by advocating for this solution, Asian American scholars avoid "resisting what was done to them."

For literature, this manifests as the model minority stereotype. Nguyen continues,

"[the] model minority Asian American writer, […] beneficiaries of a century of Asian American struggle who had sublimated the violence and anger of Asian American history into the paperweights of industrial standard fiction." (Nguyen, 302).

Like the model minority scholar who is scared to offend the dominant culture, the model minority writer turns all painful experiences of Asian American history into "standard fiction." Nguyen's use of "industrial" and "standard" is particularly poignant. Wanting to conform to the dominant culture, Asian American literature becomes nothing more than another unremarkable literature—which is to say that by denying the traumatic experiences (arguably) inherent to the Asian American experience, Asian American literature also denies what makes Asian American literature stand out. The most unique, valuable parts of the Asian American experience are weighed down by discrimination, and trauma because of their differences. Simultaneously, the dominant culture denies the trauma of any minority experience. Asian American literature that wishes to 'fit in' to the dominant culture must then deny all traumatic experiences and in doing so flattens Asian American literature into run-of-the-mill work. Such is Nguyen's claim that the "violence and anger" of Asian American history becomes no more than a "paperweight."

Perhaps controversially, I argue that many previous Asian American works including Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior and* Amy Tan's *Joy Luck Club*, are permutations of Nguyen's paperweight. Both dance around the dilemma of *pleasing the white majority* or *resisting what has been done*, resulting in a skewed representation of the Asian American experience. They are technically accurate but always a little *off in* some unnamable way—that is, the denial of traumatic experience (to different degrees) leaves gaps in the narrative that the reader is aware of but unable to make sense of. Such is the sublimated violence and anger of Asian American history (Caruth).

This is more prominent in Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* which represents the Asian American experience in an earlier era. For a long time now, critical response to *The Woman Warrior* has been divided between praise for its representation of identity (Hunt, Miller, Wong, Su) and attack for its Orientalist interpretation of Chinese culture (Mylan, Yu, Chin, Chun). The first camp is mostly made up of Caucasian scholars while the latter is overbearingly supported by Asian American scholars. Particularly vocal scholars include both Asian American ones like Frank Chin and Benjamin Tong, and China's mainland scholars such as Chen Xiaohui, Xue Yufeng, and Lu Wei.

Mainland scholars are more concerned with whether Kingston's representation of the Chinese, the image so to speak, is accurate. They have "deep reservations" about the feminist readings of *The Woman Warrior* that are seemingly built on the victory of one culture over another (Li Qingjun). Similarly, Asian American scholars such as Frank Chin are concerned with the (inaccurate) representation of Chinese culture in Kingston's work (Chin, Fong Katheryn). However, I argue that all of the above stem from what Nguyen pinpoints in Asian American studies—scholarly concern that an Asian American work is too

focused on *pleasing the White majority* to the detriment of representing one's Asian heritage.

Other interpretations approach Kingston's text itself from Orientalist and postcolonial perspectives (Yu, Mylan). Sheryl A. Mylan and Su-Lin Yu highlight how Kingston approaches the other in conjunction with her search for identity. In Yu's words, Kingston has an "identificatory desire for Chinese women" all the while separating herself from what is in her eyes, "the true other, Chinese women," that Yu conceives as "simultaneous acceptance and disavowal of Orientalism," (Yu). *The Woman Warrior*, then, is built on Kingston's identity as "a product of Western culture" who "cannot but conceive of Chinese women in an Orientalist way."

It follows that the 'Chinese' legends in *The Woman Warrior* are interpreted through a Western lens. Consequently, Kingston's interpretations flip the stories' traditional Chinese values and customs on their head, often bewildering Chinese readers such as Zhang Ya-jie. Fa Mulan's story, originally about patriotism and filiality, becomes centered around gender roles and American individualism. The same goes for the rest of the stories in the novel: Western values of feminism and individualism are clothed by traditional Chinese stories. Put shortly, cultural appropriation. I argue that the overwhelmingly positive reviews from Western scholars are largely because Kingston's values are familiar to Western scholars and not because of any soul-searching.

I turn my attention to the *why* behind Kingston's cultural appropriation. As both a minority and a woman, Kingston faces racism from one culture and sexism from another. Her fictional alter-ego searches for an ideal ego in her Chinese heritage in hopes of articulating her identity without coming up against the even more taboo issue of trauma. In her search for identity, Kingston must turn to Chinese culture as a way of compensating for the trauma she cannot talk about. Thus, Kingston turns the *violence and anger of Asian American history* toward her cultural heritage. Her sublimation of trauma becomes cultural appropriation when she struggles to find an ideal within Chinese legends and must reinterpret them according to her American values. In this sense, Kingston's cultural appropriation is the result of denying trauma's existence. This denial, as Mandel argues, is both the subjugating culture's requirement and an act of the subjugated in an attempt to adapt to the situation. Moreover, trauma is represented by a gap within the narrative, as by Cathey Caruth's definition. *The Woman Warrior*, then, is Kingston's skewed attempt at representing trauma by turning the *violence and anger* toward her cultural heritage.

Celeste Ng differs in that she gives voice to the traumatic experiences themselves rather than channeling them into a different form. In Nguyen's words, Ng represents the *violence and anger* of the Asian American experience in and of itself, rather than through sublimation. In *Everything I Never Told You*, she conceives a nuanced, sensitive interpretation of trauma on both personal and intergenerational levels. Ng's pure representation of trauma as is for the Asian American experience negates the need to channel the emotion behind the trauma into something else.

1. Non-Punctual Trauma and the Asian American Experience

Ng's novel is deeply concerned with what trauma theorist Gregory Forter terms "non-punctual trauma," a form of trauma that is not tied to a single event but is rather the result of continuous, systemic discrimination. James Lee, the patriarch of the Lee family, embodies this non-punctual trauma through his experiences of racial discrimination. His persistent efforts to "fit in" to the dominant culture are manifestations of this trauma, as he attempts to erase the aspects of his identity that mark him as different. This form of trauma is insidious, as it becomes internalized and is subsequently passed on to the next generation. By giving voice to the trauma of the Asian American experience, Ng subverts the model minority stereotype on multiple dimensions, the most hidden of which is trauma.

When Nguyen spoke of the "sublimated anger and violence" of Asian American studies¸ it was in reference to the irrepresentability of trauma within the dominant Western rhetoric. In other words, Asian Americans refuse to represent their own trauma as an act of yielding to the dominant rhetoric's implicit expectations in hopes of being accepted by said rhetoric. For the Asian American, refusing to represent trauma is part of becoming the model minority, and by extension achieving the illusion of 'fitting in' as James Lee so dearly hopes to.

Conversely, Ng centers *Everything I Never Told You* around familial trauma and its intersection with the Asian American experience. James Lee's wounds from consistent, systematic discrimination—what Forter calls non-punctual trauma—are handed on to his first two children in prominent but distinct ways. His daughter Lydia represents his unfulfilled dream of 'fitting in' and his son Nath serves as a reminder of all the reasons his dream remains unfulfilled. Such a designation explains why he treats the two so differently. Lydia, the American dream, is cared for and pruned like a delicate flower; Nath, who has failed by being exactly like James, is avoided and treated coldly (Ng, 113). Ironically but unsurprisingly, this is exactly how James treats the parts of himself: he ignores and sometimes denies the very existence of, his Chinese heritage (refusing to speak Chinese, disliking Chinese take-

out, not speaking of his family) while developing the parts of himself he considers American (the cowboy archetype, having Marylin be a housewife, following what the American 'everyone else's is doing) (Ng, 75). All this reaches a critical mass when Nath is leaving for college and Lydia dies. Toward the end of the book, James finally turns his attention to his youngest child Hanna, who thus far has been overlooked, and treats her as she is, rather than as an unfulfilled dream or a disappointing weakness.

2. Intergenerational Trauma: The Burden of Unfulfilled Dreams

Intergenerational trauma, of course, must also have its roots in the parental figure and James himself has experienced the same discrimination and worse. Seeing Nath being teased reminds James of having his shorts stolen while changing for gym class. Instead of Nath's anger, however, James is "mortified." James's emotional experience is glossed over by the adult represented by his teacher, who says his clothes were "probably just mixed up" though it is clear to anyone watching that it was anything but (Ng, 89). In James's case, the adult models ignoring the child's emotional experience and minimizing the impacts that James replicated with his son. With Nath, James is simultaneously the child and the adult: he is brought back to a childhood experience while having to take up the adult's role. From this angle, James's treatment of his son, though still not okay, is at least understandable.

Furthermore, the dual role of the child-adult manifests in the two urges mentioned above. The child part of himself is entirely sympathetic to Nath's experience and urges James to tell Nath that he understands, yet this buts heads against the adult role, which James knows only as his old teacher and wants to change Nath so that he might not be bullied anymore. James's belief that Nath's changing can prevent further teasing reveals how he has tried to deal with his own trauma. By believing that he can do something to change the situation (being teased), he retains the hope that he will one day "fit in" despite his race. As such, James fits into his teacher's rhetoric which denies the existence of trauma and is as Mandel says, both a choice to fit in on the subjugated person's side and a result of the subjugating culture's denial of discrimination of trauma. This becomes especially damaging in the case of non-punctual trauma.

3 . The Duality of Trauma: Sympathy and Violence

James's relationship with Nath exemplifies the duality of trauma. On one hand, James is sympathetic to Nath's struggles, recognizing in him the same pain and alienation that he experienced as a child. On the other hand, James's unresolved trauma drives him to harshly criticize and even physically abuse Nath, as he desperately tries to mold his son into someone who can succeed where he failed. This duality reveals the complexity of trauma, which can manifest as both empathy and aggression.

James's trauma is transmitted to his children, most notably to Lydia and Nath. Lydia becomes the vessel for James's unfulfilled dreams of assimilation and success, while Nath becomes a painful reminder of James's own failures. Lydia is overburdened with her father's expectations, which ultimately leads to her tragic demise. Nath, on the other hand, is treated with coldness and distance, as he reminds James too much of his own unresolved trauma. This intergenerational transmission of trauma highlights the ways in which unprocessed trauma can become a destructive force within families.

Trauma is both present and absent within James's psyche. The 'confident young man in his imagination' exists as both James's expectation of Nath and James's own fantasy of the version of himself that can 'overcome' the original circumstances that led to his being bullied.

"The confident young man in his imagination dwindled to a nervous little boy: skinny, small, hunched so deeply […] reminded [James] of himself at that age […] part of him wanted to tell Nath that he knew: what it was like to be teased, what it was like to never fit in. The other part of him wanted to shake his son, to slap him. To shape him into something different." (Ng, 83).

Nath acts as a living representation of James's own trauma and it follows that the way James treats his son is a representation of the way James treats his own trauma. On one hand, he is sympathetic, willing to understand Nath's experience, yet on the other hand, James retains the hope that perhaps Nath will be able to do what James himself could not do and fit in, to shape Nath into "something different." This urge to "shape" Nath manifests as the urge to "shake his son, to slap him," something that appears violent and blames the victim. Behind this, however, is the implicit hope that it was Nath's fault that he was bullied, so that he might have some power over not getting bullied again—obviously erroneous, but revealing in its intensity, just how deeply James's own experiences of being bullied affected him. In essence, the two urges that James feels of being sympathetic and being hard-headed are two sides of the same coin, the coin that holds all the intense emotion from his original experiences that are awakened when he sees his son go through the same things.

In the same vein, when James witnesses Nath being teased in the playground, he not only has to watch his son be left out but simultaneously relives his own trauma. The intense pathos is illustrated in the sibilance of the repeat-

ing ‘s’ in “shake his son” “slap him” and “shape him into something.” Moreover, the parallel structure that can be seen in this entire section in the repeated “what it was like” and “to shake/slap/shape his son,” all of which are imperatives that urge one to just do something. Paired with alliteration and sibilance, the parallel structure gives force and power to James’s words. At first, they are more drawn out in the slower “what it was like” sections and eventually speed up with shorter three-word sentences. This is reflected in one’s breath when reading aloud and mirrors James’s mental state as he relives his trauma and hopes in vain that he or Nath can do something to stop the experience.

James and Nath both appear (in James’s mind) to be powerless against this teasing, Nath because he is a child and has his eyes closed, and James because he is re-living his trauma. He is “uncertain” and an entire paragraph is dedicated to his hesitation: “Could he…saying anything would…He could…he might…Nath would…” The repeating words, all modal words that talk about hypothetical situations, belie James’s intense anxiety and freeze him on the spot. By the time Nath leaves the water, James is still frozen and unable to communicate with his son, despite Nath showing intense anger and frustration.

Later on, James distances himself from Nath because Nath reminds him of his own trauma by proxy, as illustrated when an angry Nath is ignored when James is “cringing” thinking about the slur (“Chink can’t find China”) thrown at his son (Ng, 86). It becomes evident that Nath’s natural anger and frustration at this treatment is neglected. As such, what was originally James’s trauma is passed on to Nath and becomes intergenerational because the parent has not processed their own trauma and thus has no way of helping their child work through a similar event.

During school activities, James, after seeing Nath fail an egg race, taunts him cruelly, saying “Now, if they had a contest for reading all day.” He himself admits how his words “sounded like jokes but weren’t.” The heart of the issue is the similarities between father and son, and how by extension Nath “reminded [James] of everything he wanted to forget from his own boyhood,” (Ng, 151).

As one side of the coin, James treats Nath the way James’s own bullies treat him. Taking up the role of the abuser, James absolves himself of the painful experience of being bullied by becoming the bully themself. James constantly taunts Nath and at one point, slaps him, leaving his relationship with his son desolate and cold. On the other hand, Lydia is treated as a star, one that is meant to save James from his own fate. Lydia is given an excess of ‘love’ in the form of expectations, of ‘potential.’ James, like Marylin, treats Lydia as an extension of self who is meant to become everything James was not. All this hope weighs on Lydia like chainmail and eventually drags her to the bottom of the lake. In attempting to become the perfect extension of her parents, Lydia omits the development of her own self, which is buried under her parents’ hopes. As such, James (and Marylin) can mold her as desired.

4 Object Symbolism: The Tangibility of Trauma

Ng uses objects within the novel to symbolize the presence of trauma within the Lee family. The locket that James gives to Lydia, for example, is a potent symbol of his desire for her to fit in and be accepted by her peers. However, the locket is also a burden, representing the weight of James’s expectations and the pressure on Lydia to conform. Similarly, the necklace given to Lydia, though intended as a token of love, becomes a reminder of the identity that she is expected to inhabit—a role that ultimately leads to her undoing. On a larger scale, water and swimming are metaphors for trauma and the ability to navigate it.

a. Lydia’s necklace as the physical manifestation of parental expectations

James’s trauma manifests most prominently in the social sphere where he is the perpetual outsider. Simultaneously, he is perpetually attempting to change this. Nath, who is also an outsider in James’s eyes, is cast aside and taunted as James once was. Here, James makes Nath the outsider by becoming a bully. On the other hand, Lydia, who James views as a native of the social sphere, is fawned over. He treats Lydia the way he imagines the native wants to be treated, giving her a friendship necklace and How to Win Friends as gifts. Lydia, as Ng writes, “absorbed her parents’ dreams, quieting the reluctance that bubbled up within.”

The necklace in particular reveals James’s hopes for Lydia, which is just as suffocating as his disdain for Nath. The necklace is made up of a chain and a locket, the latter of which opened into photographs of Lydia and her father after Lydia had lied about how much fun she had at the school dance for her father’s sake. As Ng writes, the locket was not “something [Lydia] wanted” but “a hint… something [her parents] wanted for her.” Tellingly, the locket is in the shape of a “silver heart.” Silver was chosen not because Lydia liked it but because it was what everyone was wearing…this year,” a choice made so that Lydia might fit in as her father wants (Ng, 226). Moreover, the heart is an especially ironic choice. As a symbol of love, James likely intended it to be representative of a father’s love, yet what is inside the heart, in the photographs, is James’s expectation that Lydia fits in, makes friends, and has fun. In Lydia’s own words, it is not love but a remind-

er of "all [her father] wanted for her," (Ng, 227). The girl that James holds in his heart is not the real Lydia, drowning under her parents' expectations, but the girl he hopes Lydia becomes, the girl who fits smoothly into all the places James did not. And here is the tragedy of trauma: a father's love, as well-intentioned as James's is, cannot see through to Lydia (or Nath) for the trauma. In his perpetual attempts to escape his own memories, James pushes onto Nath all his disdain and onto Lydia all his hope, both suffocating in their own way. All his love and good intentions could not undo the knot trauma had tied around his heart and he can only love his children as he wants them to be, not as they are.

Of course, James's inability to see and thus inability to love his children as they are stems from denial of his own trauma. James's own experience growing up was characterized by non-punctual trauma in the form of consistent racial discrimination. He speaks of "years of unabashed stares...as if he were an animal in the zoo, years of mutters in the street—chink, gook, go home," and how this has "tinted his entire life...left its smudgy fingerprints on everything," (Ng, 253-55). James is very much right when he speaks of his this has left a mark on the rest of his life. His own trauma, still unresolved, leads him to internalize what 'everybody else' seems to think of him: "Squinty and servile. Bowing and belittled," (Ng, 113). In a word, inferior, and related to his being different. When Marilyn says kowtow, when she claims someone is responsible for Lydia's not being happy, James naturally assumes it is his fault. His trauma, all of his repressed ideas about his inferiority bubble up to the surface, and in a survivalist fashion, he dissociates as every trauma survivor does, only this time with a graduate student.

b. Swimming as navigating trauma

Throughout the novel, water and the ability to swim are used as a metaphor for navigating trauma. Fittingly, James and Nath both know how to swim and have methods (if not always healthy) of coping. Lydia, on the other hand, cannot swim and has never learned to navigate her trauma alone.

In the first chapter, Ng writes about how "[James] had been a swimmer…he'd taught Nath to swim at age three," but Lydia had "refused, refused" swim classes," (Ng, 27). With trauma it is the same. Lydia, as the vessel for her father's dreams, is not taught to swim at age three as Nath was. James claims that he had "started too late" with Lydia, when in reality, he simply treated her differently from Nath. When Nath is reluctant to enter the pool, James turns cold and treats his son as James himself was once treated. Ultimately, Nath is forced into the pool but also learns how to navigate his trauma alone. Lydia, on the other hand, is not forced into the pool when she refuses because James sees her as not having the same trouble of being different as he did as a child. It follows that James believes she has no need to navigate trauma because he simply believes that she does not have any.

The familial tragedy comes in because Lydia does have her own trauma and suffocates under her parents' dreams yet never learns to navigate it as James and Nath do. Consequently, she becomes reliant on her brother—a dynamic that was established ever since Nath pushed Lydia into the lake.

In chapter six, when their parents are away, Nath and Lydia head out to the lake. The moment after Nath pushes his sister into the laker, he reflects that "the world would not level" if Lydia was gone. In fact, he goes on to say that he had "misunderstood everything" about her. Nath sees, when Lydia falls, how she "staggered so readily, fell so eagerly" and was more than happy to let go of the burden of unfulfilled dreams. The burden of their parent's attention, their love, in Ng's words, 'the weight of everything tilting toward [Lydia] was too much," (Ng, 149).

Ng's description of Lydia heavily implies that if Nath had not pulled Lydia out of the water, she would have drowned then. Already, Lydia feels the weight of the world on her shoulders, and to fall into the water is not only an acknowledgment of this weight but also relief from it. When the two children lie, exhausted, on the shore, Lydia reaches for her brother's hand.

"Don't let go, she meant, and, dizzy with gratitude, Nath gave [his hand to Lydia]," (Ng, 151).

Nath's gratitude toward Lydia appears strange at first glance. Is he simply grateful that Lydia let him save her? The answer comes from Nath's revelation when Lydia falls. He understands that by absorbing both their parent's dreams, Lydia spares him from the same fate. Though Nath is always secondary to Lydia within the family, he also does not shoulder the burden of holding their parents together, something Lydia does by appearing to fulfill their dreams. Nath, then, has no duty to hold the family together; he only has to hold Lydia together. Here, the two sibling's dynamic is officially established. Lydia, the center of the universe, holds the fragile balance of the family. She and Nath both know this. In the meantime, Nath holds Lydia together and offers her the understanding and empathy she cannot find from her parents.

Lydia and Nath's dynamic is another fragile equilibrium that Lydia comes to understand when learning to drive with Jack. He tells Lydia to think of the gas pedal and clutch as partners and says symbolically, "When one goes up, the other goes down," (Ng, 217). Such is Lydia and Nath's relationship within this dynamic. So, when Nath leaves for college when he "goes up," Lydia is left to weather her burden alone—she "goes down."

All in all, swimming as a metaphor for navigating trauma reaches a poetic if tragic conclusion when Lydia heads out in the lake for the second and last time. She herself realizes how "it all went wrong" when Nath pulled her out of the lake. On the shore, when Nath took her hand, he was making Lydia the promise to not let her sink, to help her navigate her trauma. When Lydia finally gets into the water and tells herself that "all she had to do was kick," she reveals her willingness to face her trauma, (Ng, 280). Though her own fate is tragic, the final choice brings about a change within her family's fragile balance and not just herself but her entire family to start resolving their trauma.

The power of Ng's pure representation is felt on many levels. For instance, from a reader's perspective, *Everything I Never Told You* validates and empathizes with the deepest wounds of being Asian American. It gives voice to something that was previously glossed over and forced into hiding by its taboo nature and creates a new narrative around trauma. Under Ng's pen, trauma is no longer shameful or unrepresentable, but rather it sheds the label of being shameful by being frankly represented. *Everything I Never Told You* revolutionizes our understanding of trauma as readers.

In contrast to Kingston, Ng also restructures the conception of Asian heritage within the Asian American experience. A common theme within Asian American literature is the struggle between allegiance to one's heritage and allegiance to one's environment, as seen in both *The Woman Warrior* and *Joy Luck Club*. The second-generation immigrant's search for identity traces back to China, be it travelling to the country or embracing the culture, but is always interpreted through American values. Generally, these are not satisfying conclusions to the character's soul searching. In Ng's work though, this soul searching is not directly related to what a character does with their heritage, instead Ng focuses on whether the characters can acknowledge the trauma that is connected to their heritage.

For instance, James reaches a resolution with his heritage in his final argument with Marylin. He acknowledges and voices his awful experience with being different, a consequence of his heritage, and makes space for understanding and empathy from both Marylin and himself. With his second daughter Hanna, James finds the opportunity to work with his children's heritage in a way that is not destructive and that does not engender intergenerational trauma.

James's daughter Lydia reaches a similar conclusion in her final moments. When she travels to the middle of the lake, she admits to herself how she has thus far been living out her father's dreams instead of her own. Then, she makes the choice to put this all behind when she decides to swim back to shore, a consequential decision considering Ng's use of swimming as a metaphor for traversing trauma throughout the entire novel. In this sense, although Lydia life is cut short, it is not without a final acknowledgement of and choice to work with the fallout of her trauma.

From the lens of scholarship, Ng's work is a challenge to the rhetoric around trauma, especially within the context of Asian American studies. The power of Ng's pure representation is felt on many levels. For instance, from a reader's perspective, *Everything I Never Told You* validates and empathizes with the deepest wounds of being Asian American. It gives voice to something that was previously glossed over and forced into hiding by its taboo nature and creates a new narrative around trauma. Under Ng's pen, trauma is no longer shameful or unrepresentable, but rather it sheds the label of being shameful by being frankly represented. *Everything I Never Told You* revolutionizes our understanding of trauma as readers.

Conclusion

Everything I Never Told You is a poignant exploration of the intergenerational trauma that permeates an Asian American family. By focusing on the family dynamics of the Lees, Ng brings to light the often invisible yet deeply impactful trauma experienced by marginalized groups. The novel subverts the model minority stereotype by revealing the hidden layers of trauma that lie beneath the surface of this ostensibly successful Asian American family. Trauma, as depicted in the novel, is both present and absent—a force that is keenly felt yet often unacknowledged, shaping the characters' lives in profound ways.

From the lens of scholarship, Celeste Ng's choice of depicting trauma head-on instead of skirting around it finally completes the thus far incomplete narrative of the Asian American experience. All in all, Ng has successfully broken away from the model minority stereotype and re-established the position of trauma within both Asian American studies and the literary field as a whole.

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