

What Silence Says: Family, Race, Identity, and the American Dream in Celeste Ng's *Everything I Never Told You*

Senior Paper

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For a Degree Bachelor of Arts with
A Major in English at
The University of North Carolina at Asheville
Spring 2019

By Carolyn A. Schweitz

Thesis Director
Dr. Erica Abrams Locklear

Thesis Advisor
Dr. Gary Ettari

For the past several decades, predominantly non-White and diverse suburbs have exploded, experiencing far faster population gains than central cities and majority White suburbs. The suburbs have, in fact, never really been the placid, homogeneous spaces that have so captivated the American imagination. (Lung-Amam 4)

Author and professor of urban inequity, Willow Lung-Amam places pressure on idolizing the perfect American suburb in her book *Trespassers?: Asian Americans and the Battle for Suburbia*. Lung-Amam demonstrates a rich history of Asian American life both inside and outside of the suburbs of America. Similarly, Celeste Ng illustrates the life of the Lee family in her novel *Everything I Never Told You*, including the struggles of interracial marriage and the pains of growing up with multiethnic identity in a predominantly white Ohio town in 1977. Ng exemplifies the complexity of life in the suburbs of America, subverting the stereotypical concept of white America. *Everything I Never Told You* illuminates the racialization of the American Dream. Ng highlights how unobtainable the American Dream is for both people of color and women by positioning a multiethnic family in the midst of suburban America - the location where the American Dream should be the most accessible and achievable - by having each family member fail at their dream. Ng also complicates the concept of the American Dream through the family, revealing both the generational gaps between the ability to achieve one's dream, and the harm that the pursuit of a dream outside of one's means can have on family members.

Everything I Never Told You begins with an ending. Lydia's death is the fulcrum on which the entire narrative rests. Lydia's death is the opening line of the novel and it is the fracture that divides the family. The remaining family members must come to terms with the actions they took or those they did not take, that potentially led to Lydia's death. Shrouded in the

silence of what was left unsaid and what was left undone, chapters alternate between the past and the present to encompass the family's dynamics before and after Lydia's death. Ng allows for the audience to have a clearer understanding of the family than the family members themselves do. Before Lydia's death, silence separates the family members. They often keep secrets from one another to protect their individual dreams. However, no one's dreams are truly being achieved and the failures of those dreams are likewise not discussed among family members. When Lydia dies, it is a silent death. The family members do not know what has happened. Did she commit suicide or was it an accident? The remaining family members must come to terms with this silence and come back together again. They will not get any answers about Lydia, so what remains is to reestablish their relationships with one another. Surprisingly by the end of the novel, the family members reconnect through moments of positive and healing silence. The variety of ways in which Ng represents silence demonstrates that **she uses silence to establish the boundaries of identity through the relationships of the Lee family and their individual failures to achieve the American Dream. By demonstrating its destructive qualities before Lydia's death and its healing components after, Ng imagines silence not only as a coping mechanism against the racialized American Dream but also as an act of resistance.**

Ng places the American Dream as a threat to the livelihood of the Lee family, having the family compete between reality and their dreams. The dreams of individual members often conflict with the reality of their own identity, especially racial identity, or conflict with the reality of the operation of their family unit. The American Dream also impacts the Lee family intergenerationally, from grandparents to parents to children. Asian American historian, Erika Lee mentions the importance of the generational experience of Asian Americans, stating, "the previous generations shaped the world that Asian Americans live in today" (3). Ng demonstrates

this shaping of experience through the dynamics of the parents and children. James, the father of the Lee family, meets Marilyn, the mother, while he is a professor at Harvard teaching a course on cowboys and the American West. Ng denotes his student's surprise when she discovers that an Asian American man would be teaching the course: "this little man, five foot nine at most and not even *American*, was going to teach them about cowboys?" (31). Even though James was born in America, his peers perceive him as only Asian. His students question his ability to teach the course, and many leave within the first few minutes of the lecture. The delegitimization of James's American identity silences James's whole identity, both as an Asian American man and as a legitimate professor for the University. His students do not see him as worthy of teaching the course as someone who is not white, so they leave the class. James strives for acceptance by his fellow Americans, especially white Americans, but it is an unachievable dream. True assimilation into American culture would require erasure of James's ethnic identity, which is impossible.

James will never transcend his Asian American identity even though his dream is exactly that - to transcend being Asian American and be simply American. James's desire for acceptance leads him to study cowboys in the first place. The cowboy and the American West symbolize for James an unsettled frontier and lawlessness within which one can shape their own identity into whatever they wish it to be. Ng explains, "without realizing why, [James] studied the most quintessentially American subject he could find - cowboys - but he never spoke of his parents, or his family" (45). James's desire for acceptance also drives him to omit his parents from his life story. Both of James's parents are dead by the time his wife, Marilyn, meets him, and he never tells her or their children about them. By silencing this portion of his story, James inadvertently forces a silence into his relationships with Marilyn and the children. Additionally, silencing

portions of his personal history is a learned behavior from his parents. James's parents had to maintain silence to keep their jobs in America, cutting ties with their Chinese familial history and adopting new names to secure immigration into America. Once in the country, they had to keep quiet so that no one would report them and attempt to deport them, but they were also forced into silence due to the language barrier. James was often dismissive of his parents' janitorial and cooking work at school so that he could maintain some credibility with his classmates, even though he is only able to attend the school through his parents' work. He furthered the silence between his parents and himself when in fifth grade he stopped speaking Chinese so that his American accent would not be blemished. This learned behavior of silence between parent and child spills over into James's own parenting as he often silences himself in interactions with his children. He never expresses his dreams for Nath to be athlete or his hopes for Lydia to be popular at school. Thus, James fixates on the perceived and quintessentially American freedom of the cowboy without realizing that such a version of the American Dream is not possible for him and rather hinders him from truly communicating and bonding with his family.

James believes he finds a portion of the American Dream in Marilyn when they fall in love. Marilyn as a white woman represents for James a piece of the American Dream he will never be able to fully achieve as an Asian American man. Yet, when Marilyn falls in love with him and chooses him, James receives a portion of that American Dream he has sought after, not only through the proximity to her whiteness and therefore status by association, but also through Marilyn's love as a validation of his own identity. Marilyn's whiteness impacts the way James is perceived and the way James perceives himself. When they have sex for the first time, Ng writes, "it was as if America herself was taking him in. It was too much luck. He feared the day the universe would notice he wasn't supposed to have her and take her away" (45-46). Marilyn

represents the ideal America for James, beautiful, capable, and white. James's deep-seated fear that Marilyn is too good for him or doesn't belong with him continues to impact their marriage and is often the root of many of the issues James and Marilyn face. For James, being desired by a white woman is foreign and will be the closest he ever comes to that acceptance he seeks from society. Even so, James's insecurity of truly being desired ultimately leads him to have an affair with his Asian American student, Louisa, because he fears he never truly deserved Marilyn. His affair is further complicated by the fact that Louisa as an Asian American embodies the opposite of the assimilation that James has strived for. And even further complexities arise when readers experience Marilyn's perspective on James. James chooses Marilyn because she symbolizes a step towards assimilation, but Marilyn chooses James for the opposite reason. For Marilyn, James represents something outside the norm and against her own mother's ideal wishes for her. Marilyn picks James as her lover because he is Asian American and she exoticizes him because of his racial identity.

However, the couple never discusses the racial tensions within their relationship. There are moments throughout their relationship, even early in it, that one of them recognizes the difference or tension but fails to address it. After they have sex, James notices a bit of yellow paint from the wet paint on the wall of his apartment is on Marilyn's toe. He also locates the spot of white on the wall where Marilyn's toe has rubbed the paint off. Ng details, "[James] said nothing to Marilyn, and when they pushed the furniture back into place that evening, the dresser concealed the smudge" (46). Using the symbol of the paint smudge, Ng reveals how James has altered Marilyn, as the paint stains her toe. Likewise, Marilyn has also changed James, leaving a mark on his wall. The colors are also white and yellow, the stereotypical colors associated with both Marilyn and James's races. Most importantly, James notices the impact that they have on

one another, even this early in the relationship, but he does not express it - a silence he leaves between them. Instead, he says nothing to Marilyn and returns the furniture to its place, effectively creating a silence between them. The paint smudge symbolizes the recognition of their racial difference, which James chooses to hide from both Marilyn and himself. Instead of admitting their differences, James focuses on chasing after the desire to be seen as truly American.

For James, the achievement of the American Dream is dispelling the word “different.” James has always perceived himself as different from his white peers and wished that he fit in rather than stood out. Ng explains,

To James, years of unabashed stares prickling his spine, as if he were an animal in the zoo, years of mutters in the street - *chink, gook, go home* - stinging his ears, *different* has always been a brand on his forehead, blazoned there between the eyes. It tinted his entire life, this word; it has left its smudgy fingerprints on everything. (251)

Here, Ng embodies the word “different,” giving it the power to brand James’s body as well as giving “different” a sense of body with fingerprints. Difference is what James fights against when he pushes against his Asian identity. As Ng points out, “different” tints every part of James’s life. For James, Marilyn cannot understand what it is like to be an Asian American. When James and Marilyn fight at the end of the novel, James tells her: “You have no idea what it’s like, being different” (Ng 242). Even though Marilyn represents the goal James strives for as a white woman, Marilyn also symbolizes everything that he is not and the chasm between who James is and whom he wants to be. James sees Marilyn as incapable of understanding him or his experience. In reality, Marilyn actually does understand the experience of discrimination since she has encountered it countless times as a woman, especially as a scientist. But James does not

afford Marilyn the opportunity to explain her encounters with prejudice. James's fear of difference also directly impacts his relationship with his children, as he urges them to assimilate into American culture and embrace the white heritage of their multiethnic identity, especially with his son, Nath.

The pressure to assimilate also manifests physically for the family in a number of instances. The children especially demonstrate sensitivity to maintaining James and Marilyn's sense of perfection. In one moment while James and Marilyn are out of the house, Nath squishes a spider on the ceiling with James's shoe and it leaves a mark. Lydia rather than admitting to the incident decides to cover the marks up. Ng describes, "[Lydia] fetched the bottle of Liquid Paper from beside her father's typewriter and painted over each spot, one by one. Their parents never noticed the dots" (175). Lydia and Nath cover up the mark of imperfection with the Liquid Paper, perpetuating the ideas of perfection and assimilation they have been taught to maintain by their parents. The Liquid Paper dots are whiter than the original white of the ceiling - the cover up being more perfect than the original. Nath and Lydia attempt to assimilate but their actions to do so are often fake, seemingly too perfect to truly be the reality. However, they perform for their parents. Furthermore, neither James nor Marilyn notices the mistake, just as they do not notice many of the actions their children take to make them happy. In fact, it is Hannah, silent but ever observant, who notices the white footprint at the very end of the novel.

Of all the Lee children, Hannah is the most sensitive to the pressure of assimilation in their household. When Lydia fails her driving test, Hannah observes that though Marilyn covers the celebratory cake decorations up, the imperfection is still there. Ng writes, "hiding under the smooth white, Hannah thought, was the pretend driver's license, the *Congratulations* and the blue L-Y-D. Though you couldn't see it, it was there just underneath, covered up but smudged

and unreadable and horrible. And you'd be able to taste it, too" (238). Lydia's failure at the driving test remains an imperfect mark against her parents' hopes, and though the family attempts to move forward with dinner as though everything is fine, Hannah knows that something deeper remains beneath the surface. Moments of failure or imperfection become covered up by the color white, whether paint or icing, symbolic of the children's use of hiding their true selves - and their true dreams - behind the assimilation they perceive that their parents desire. If they cannot become white, they will do their best to paint a layer of whiteness over themselves to help achieve their part in the family's American Dream.

James and Nath's relationship epitomizes the intergenerational struggle to achieve the American Dream. James sees himself in Nath. When Nath is a child, James takes him to the pool and the other children bully him. Nath doesn't want to get in the pool, but James forces him to go swim. The children play Marco Polo and when it is Nath's turn, the kids turn on him. Ng writes,

An older girl - maybe ten or eleven - shouted, 'Chink can't find China!' and the other children laughed. A rock formed in James's belly. In the pool, Nath paused, arms outstretched on the surface of the water, uncertain of how to proceed. One hand open and closed in silence. (90)

This is the first time Nath experiences direct and acute racism. A young Nath does not know exactly how to handle it and reacts in anger. Nath leaves the pool after this incident showing visible signs of rage. Ng illustrates a metaphor for Nath's journey with his racial identity using the imagery of Nath with his hand outstretched along the surface of the water, but his eyes still closed. He reaches out for his dream, grasping at a fluid that will never remain the same, while still staying blind to some extent, whether by choice or by circumstance. James, however, has experienced this kind of racism before and that is why he feels a pain in his stomach over the

situation. Ng details, “part of [James] 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” (92). James knows exactly what his son experiences at this moment because he himself was bullied by his classmates when he was Nath’s age. But, James has fought being seen as Asian, as other, and as different his whole life. Ironically, Ng uses the same word - different - to emphasize that James wishes Nath not to be viewed in this way of othering. He even has the reaction of wanting to physically harm his son because of Nath’s inability to deal with the situation, even though it is not Nath’s fault, but rather James’s, that Nath is not equipped to handle the situation.

James’s silence regarding his racial identity leaves Nath unable to deal with his own; Nath has not yet confronted this part of himself and has no example from his father of how to. Historian Helen Zia comments on the parental desire for children to overcome the racism that they experience writing, “my father wanted us to speak flawless English to spare us from the ridicule and the language discrimination he faced” (8). Like Zia’s father argues for his daughters to assimilate, James hopes for Nath to assimilate in order to face less discrimination than he did and this desire causes James to deflect the situation. He chooses not to address this moment of blatant racism with his son and instead to tell him to toughen up. Nath does not forget the way his father acts in the situation and James’s silence remains a driving force that impels Nath to pursue his own dream as he never truly feels supported by James to do so.

Nath inherits James’s dream for American freedom. While James’s dream manifests in the form of cowboys, Nath’s dream presents in the form of astronauts. James desires to be considered truly “American” and escape the Asian portion of his identity. Nath similarly wishes to escape, but rather than from a portion of his identity, Nath seeks freedom from his parents and

the pressures they place on him. The audience does not get specific details regarding how Nath feels about his own ethnic identity. The closest Nath comes to wrestling with his identity is when he breaks down following the trauma of Lydia's death and gets drunk on a bottle of whiskey. Nath does not seem to know who he is, so the only way he can deal with this question, including his racial identity, is to become intoxicated. Nath deals with the pressures of identity by lulling himself with alcohol. He aims for complete removal from his own identity and from his family. The imagery of an astronaut floating alone in the vacuum of space embodies this sense of removal. After being bullied and while his mother is missing in Toledo, Nath watches the launch of a Gemini rocket. Nath reflects that space must be so much better than life on earth: "everything on earth would be invisible. Mothers who disappeared, fathers who didn't love you, kids who mocked you - everything would shrink to pinpoints and vanish. Up there: nothing but stars" (Ng 133). Nath sees a world of possibility in the realm of space, a place without the pain of his ordinary life. In space, he would not be bullied or be missing his mother. Nath's pursuit of the American Dream is just like his father's, a chase after ever-elusive freedom. For James, the American Dream presents freedom to be a man, but for Nath, the American Dream represents freedom from the constriction of his parents.

However, despite similar experiences with racism and pursuit of the American Dream, James does not understand Nath's love of astronauts. James refuses to share his experiences with bullies and his own struggle for identity with his son. Nath, in turn, does not share things with his father about his personal discourse either. Ng comments on this when Nath lists off multiple facts about astronauts stating, "James, who should have loved astronauts - what were they but modern cowboys, after all, venturing into the newest frontier? - did not know any of these things" (134). The lack of communication between father and son causes an irreparable rupture

between the two of them. Because neither one discloses to the other these experiences that shape them, even though they are intrinsically similar in their pursuit of freedom, they fail to recognize it. In fact, James misunderstands his son to the point of anger, smashing the tv. In the same way that a teenage Nath uses alcohol to curb the anxiety of reality, Nath as a child uses the television as a form of disconnection. The television symbolizes the visualization of the American Dream. The visuals present what the ideal America and the ideal family looks like, while also allowing for escapism both visually and mentally. Nath watches the television religiously in Marilyn's absence and within it sees his dream of space. When James breaks the television the vision shatters, representative of the unattainable American Dream. The television also serves as an enabler for the perpetuation of familial silence since if everyone is watching it, no one is talking to one another. It is not until James smashes the television that Nath and Lydia truly recognize Marilyn's absence from the home because the removal of the television forces recognition of reality.

James erects a permanent division and silence between himself and his son when he chooses to break the television. The silence between them is not only destructive, it actually pushes them further from one another. For himself, he damages his own perception of Nath and Nath's dream of astronauts. Ng details, "[James] would never again think of astronauts, of space, without recoiling, as if shielding his eyes from shards of glass" (135). James renders himself unable to think of space without negative connotations and inadvertently ties his son to this reaction. James also directly enforces Nath to a path of space as true freedom. Nath aligns his dreams of space with the goal of college and when he gets accepted at Harvard, he achieves a step towards the American Dream that his father was unable to take. While James did get an education, it was one of means of positioning himself better than his parents. James's education

was fueled by shame. Nath's acceptance into Harvard poses as an education driven by proving his father wrong. Nath's educational goals thrive on the vindication of his dream of space. When Nath opens his acceptance letter, Ng writes, "[Nath] stood silent, awed and grateful, 1981 glistening in his eyes like a beautiful far-off star" (170). Harvard is the first step towards space and Nath's dream of true freedom. Both James and Nath share the same dream, though fueled by different aspects, and both fail to recognize the dream within one another. However, James and Nath are not the only family members to symbolize the intergenerational polarization of the American Dream.

Marilyn and Lydia's relationship also represents the intergenerational impact of the American Dream, but they highlight the female experience with it. The dynamics of Marilyn and Lydia's relationship differ from James and Nath's because Marilyn is a white woman and Lydia is multi-ethnic, being half white and half Asian American. Race still directly impacts Marilyn, Lydia, and their relationship. Marilyn inherits her identity as a white woman from her own mother. Marilyn's mother was a home economics teacher at Marilyn's high school and had expectations that Marilyn would follow in a similar fashion to become the ideal Southern homemaker. However, Marilyn never wanted to fit this mold, instead leaving for college to study science. Marilyn's marriage to James is a final break in Marilyn and her mother's relationship. Since James is an Asian American man, he could not be further from Marilyn's mother's ideal husband for Marilyn (which of course is exactly why Marilyn chose him in the first place). On the day of Marilyn and James's wedding, Marilyn's mother tells her in the bathroom of the courthouse, "'It's not right, Marilyn. It's not right.' Leaving *it* unnamed, hanging in the air between them" (Ng 54). Race, the unnamed *it*, divides Marilyn and her mother, as well as Marilyn's actual life course from her mother's idealized one. Even when race is discussed

between Marilyn and her mother, it is not actually discussed, formulating yet another silence as the subject is left unnamed and unaddressed. Marilyn and her mother never directly discuss James's race or Marilyn's interracial marriage, instead leaving the racism "hanging in the air between them." This choice to remain silent on a keystone of Marilyn and James's marriage destroys the relationship between Marilyn and her mother to the point of no repair. Marilyn does not speak to her mother again and the only other interaction with her in the novel is after her mother has already died and Marilyn must clear her mother's house out.

For Marilyn, proving her mother wrong and trying to overcome the gendered expectations of her status equates to an attempt at the American Dream. In high school, Marilyn's mother is her home economics teacher. Marilyn requests to take shop with the boys, but her mother refuses to let her switch classes. Stuck in home economics, Marilyn purposely fails at the assignments, angering her mother by refusing to conform to her idea of a "Southern woman." For a short while in college, Marilyn momentarily succeeds at overcoming the "ideal Southern woman." However, after Marilyn gets pregnant with Nath, she falls back into her mother's vision of who she should be as she's unable to complete school and must take care of the house and the baby. Marilyn may have cut off communication with her mother, but she continues to be haunted by her expectations. Marilyn fails at her attempt at the American Dream because she cannot surpass the gendered inequalities when it comes to achieving her dream. Scholar Pamela Thoma comments on Asian American women's identity and neoliberal feminism within the context of popular literature. However, Thoma's comments on neoliberal feminism can apply to Marilyn, even as a white woman. Thoma explains that literature creates "citizenship models that demand that 'good citizens' conform to mainstream cultural narratives of Americanness and normative femininity while simultaneously calling on the female subject to

balance and regulate a revised combination of marketplace activities” (5). In contrast to this model of literature, Ng places Marilyn as a woman who cannot have it all. Marilyn wrestles in between the conformity of culturally traditional feminine identity and the desire to succeed beyond her homeplace. Ng critiques the culture of neoliberal feminism that Marilyn faces by having her drastically fail at breaking away from her mother’s vision. Marilyn cannot escape her mother and her mother’s form of womanhood.

Even after Marilyn’s mother’s death, her mother still has a hold over Marilyn. As Marilyn clears her house out, she finds her mother’s cookbook, the symbol of that idealized womanhood. Ng writes:

“[Marilyn] thought with a sharp and painful pity of her mother, who had planned a golden, vanilla-scented life but ended up alone, trapped like a fly in this small and sad and empty house, this small and sad and empty life, her daughter gone, no trace of herself left except these pencil-marked dreams.” (83)

Marilyn despises the life her mother led but fails to realize that her own life now resembles that of her mother’s. Marilyn mocks her mother’s life, criticizing even the way her mother’s house smells. She compares her mother to a trapped fly, even though Marilyn herself is also trapped by her own life. Additionally, the only remainder of her mother is the pencil marks in her mother’s cookbook, which are erasable; Marilyn could just wipe her mother away completely if she wanted to. On the one hand, there is irony in the fact that the only part of her mother she wishes to keep is the cookbook - the very symbol of the kind of womanhood she has been trying to run away from. On the other hand, the erasure of Marilyn’s mother to the point of just a few pencil marks is its own kind of twofold silence, both by Marilyn’s choice to remember her this way and by society’s dictation of her mother’s role. And because Marilyn chooses to depict the memory

of her mother in this way, Lydia grows up thinking of the cookbook as Marilyn's most treasured item.

Marilyn's failure at the American Dream directly influences Lydia, both as a child and as a young adult. Marilyn leaves James, Nath, and Lydia for a brief period of time to chase after her dreams of science and academics in Toledo. However, when she discovers that she is pregnant with Hannah, her dream is once again ruined as she must return to the confines of motherhood. While Marilyn is missing, Lydia pulls her grandmother's cookbook off the shelf, wishing for her mother to come home. Ng details, "This cookbook, Lydia knew, was her mother's favorite book, and she leafed through it with the adoration of a devotee touching a Bible" (136). Ng highlights the disparity between the knowledge mother and daughter have here. Lydia knows the cookbook is Marilyn's favorite, completely believing this fact since there has never been evidence to the contrary for her. But readers also know from Marilyn's perspective that she detests this cookbook, the only remaining piece of her mother and her mother's life - the life she has attempted and failed to escape. Because Marilyn has failed to communicate with Lydia the shortcomings of her dreams and her own mother's failure to support them, Lydia does not know that Marilyn hates the cookbook and what it represents. Ng also compares Lydia to a Christian devotee flipping through the pages of the Bible, stirring up connotations of religious practice and the ways that religion has impeded women's progress. Lydia takes on a role of devotion to Marilyn, reminiscent of a religious practitioner. Ng writes, "If her mother ever came home ... [Lydia] would do everything her mother told her. Everything she wanted" (137). This promise of doing everything her mother wants is a silent one and one that Lydia keeps only to herself, and yet, this promise ultimately becomes Lydia's downfall. She never communicates what she

actually wants to do with her mother, instead doing everything Marilyn wants, including math and science even when Lydia underperforms in these subjects.

As Marilyn attempts to live out her unfulfilled dreams through Lydia and her education, Lydia loses all sense of herself and her identity, especially her familial identity. Scholar Wendy Ho addresses the dynamics of motherhood with regards to Chinese American stories. Though Marilyn is not a Chinese mother, many of Ho's observations about recovering feminist identity within the home space can be applied to Marilyn and Lydia's relationship. Ho writes "many women construct and situate their understanding of a personal self and its relations to the family, community, and larger society" (1). Marilyn's sense of self situates around her identity as a mother, which she cannot escape. Likewise, Lydia invests her identity in being her mother's daughter, only striving for success in her mother's eyes and thus surrendering her agency. While Marilyn positioned herself in opposition to her mother to construct identity, Lydia aligns herself exactly with her mother's goals to construct hers. Lydia is a vessel for her mother's broken dreams, which halts her progress on a dream for herself. Without her own dream and with her sense of self entirely defined by her relationship with her mother, Lydia ends up lost and confused. She attempts to rectify this feeling but winds up dead as a result. Right before Lydia steps out of the boat into the lake, Ng writes, "Lydia made a new set of promises, this time to herself. She will begin again. She will tell her mother: enough" (274). However, after Lydia makes these new promises to herself, she steps into the lake and because she cannot swim, she drowns. Lydia attempts to choose herself, but with this choice she enacts her death. Sadly, the entire process Lydia undergoes from promising to abide her mother's wishes to choosing herself, is one that is completely internal and never shared with anyone beyond the readers. Both her

family's and her own silencing kill Lydia but also continue to further damage her family after she dies.

Lydia's death is one of silence. No one knows for certain what happened - if it was suicide or an accident. Marilyn struggles with this silence most of all because the relationship she thought she had with Lydia is shattered. While all the remains of Marilyn's mother after her death is pencil marks in her cookbook, all the remains of Lydia after her death is a set of blank diaries. Marilyn gave Lydia these diaries as gifts each year. Ng details when Marilyn gives Lydia her first diary, "'For writing down your secrets,' Marilyn had said with a smile, and Lydia had smiled back up at her and said, 'But Mom, I don't have any secrets'" (74). Marilyn encourages Lydia to have secrets but experiences devastation when she realizes that Lydia keeps secrets from her. Conversely, Lydia claims to have no secrets, and in truth, her biggest "secret" is her lack thereof. Lydia plays into the conversation to please Marilyn by accepting the diaries and keeping them on her shelf, but she never writes anything in them. Marilyn discovers this after Lydia's death when she investigates Lydia's room for answers to Lydia's disappearance. Ng explains, "Every page is blank. [Marilyn] takes down 1976. 1975. 1974. Page after page of visible, obstinate silence. She leafs backward all the way to the very first diary, 1966: not one word. All those years of her daughter's life unmarked. Nothing to explain anything" (74). Ng presents the visual silence of Lydia's death here with the imagery of the blank diaries. Ng even describes the silence as obstinate, refusing to change because of its owner's death. Marilyn's anger comes from the lack of evidence that Lydia even existed or had any impact. So much of Marilyn's identity was established by mothering Lydia, and with Lydia's absence, Marilyn feels helpless. Lydia cannot even offer answers or explanation because all the pages are blank. Lydia's silence also forces Marilyn to confront her own silence in Lydia's life as she has grown up.

When Marilyn leaves without telling the family, she attempts to write a note but ends up destroying it and leaving nothing. James pieces the note's remains back together to read what Marilyn said, but her intention is to leave in silence. Marilyn also calls the family's phone line multiple times while in Toledo but does not say anything. Marilyn's silences directly influence Lydia's choices to remain silent too.

The journals are not the only silence Lydia leaves in her absence. Lydia hides information and performs for both of her parents. Marilyn finds condoms and cigarettes hidden in Lydia's backpack and this comes as a shock to her. James eventually finds out that none of Lydia's "friends" actually even knew her. Lydia simply pretended to have friends after James gave her a book titled *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. Nath observes early on that Lydia performs for their parents. Ng details, "while Lydia was curled on the window seat, phone pressed to her ear, [Nath] picked up the extension in the kitchen and heard only the low drone of the dial tone. Lydia had never really had friends, but their parents had never known" (16). Lydia would sit for hours not talking to anyone in order to make her parents believe that she had friends and was well liked at school. In reality, Lydia's race set her apart from the other girls and none of them really wanted to be her friend. Lydia hides in the silence of the phone line, just as Marilyn hides in the silence of her phone calls during her time in Toledo. Her parents do not know until after Lydia's ultimate silence in death that she had lied about any of this.

Lydia's intentional silence, especially in moments like pretending to have friends when she does not, is largely an attempt to portray her white identity over her Asian identity. James encourages assimilation to both Nath and Lydia, and Lydia's attempts to fit in echo those of James's early childhood. Scholar Stephen Hong Sohn explains that "whiteness signified the ultimate racial criterion for American citizenship and was defined in part through its opposition

to the Asian, the forever foreign subject” (63). James as an Asian man is unable to be fully white, but his children are multiethnic, so James pushes for them to assimilate and exemplify as much “whiteness” as they can so that they can be successful in social settings. In these terms, Lydia’s silence is a performance of white identity rather than an omission of her Asian identity. She silences herself to maintain the facade of white identity.

Ironically, Lydia has always been prone to keeping secrets as a form of silencing herself. Even when Lydia is a baby, Marilyn is suspicious of her. When Lydia walks for the first time Marilyn does not see it, but instead turns around, shocked to see Lydia standing. Ng details, “[Marilyn had] felt as if she’d found a locked door in a familiar room: Lydia, still small enough to cradle, had secrets” (4). Ng compares Lydia’s true self to a locked door, highlighting how Lydia takes active precaution, even at such a young age, to guard her true self from her mother. Lydia instills a silence on herself and her true desires in the same way that Marilyn suppresses her dreams. Devastatingly, even though Marilyn and Lydia are the same in this way, they do not understand one another and never truly will after Lydia’s death. Death is, after all, the ultimate silencer.

In fact, the only person that seems to truly understand Lydia and her self inflicted repression is Nath. Nath and Lydia fight the same struggle with racial identity and the American Dream. Nath and Lydia cannot achieve their dreams due to their multiethnic identity and because of their failure to accomplish their parents’ dreams that they have been subject to. Nath does get into Harvard, which is a success in his own right, but this accomplishment is a success in his own dream’s path, not in his father’s. Nath fails his father’s dreams of assimilation and Lydia fails her mother’s dreams of becoming a scientist, both failing to progress beyond where their parents are stationed. Ng inextricably ties Nath and Lydia together through this experience. Ng explains

when Lydia would stand in Nath's doorway, "[Nath] understood everything she did not say, which at its core was: *Don't let go*. When Lydia left - to struggle over her homework or a science fair project - he turned his telescope outward, looking for faraway stars, far-off places where he might venture one day alone" (160). Nath understands the silence that Lydia leaves. While her parents are unaware of her secrets, Nath shares them, knowing that their parents' expectations drown Lydia the same way they stifle him. However, Ng poses a commentary on the gendered experience of the failure of the American Dream through Nath and Lydia. While Lydia struggles over homework, Nath turns outward to the sky, the symbol of his dreams of space. Lydia is unable to overcome Marilyn's expectations for her and ultimately dies because of this failure. Conversely, Nath overthrows James's expectations, moving beyond the boundaries of the home to Harvard to pursue his dreams. Ng argues through Lydia and Nath that women are less likely to be able to break away from the racialized and gendered American Dream than men by having Nath move forward while Lydia stays stagnant. Nath ultimately leaves the home as he has wanted to, while the only exit for Lydia is death.

Ng furthers the gendered divide and the intergenerational impact of the failure of the American Dream through Hannah and her lack of relationship with either parent. Hannah, the third Lee child, is an unplanned pregnancy who forces Marilyn to return to the family after her brief time in Toledo. Ng characterizes Hannah as forgotten by the family. Even when Marilyn is pregnant with her, Hannah is already dismissed to a certain degree: "in Marilyn's belly, Hannah began to fidget and kick, but her mother could not yet feel it" (Ng 147). Even in utero, Marilyn is unable to pay attention to Hannah. Though Hannah fights to be seen and heard, even in her mother's womb, Lydia overshadows her sister. Hannah is the afterthought. Ng highlights this trend when giving descriptions of all three children. She first details Nath and Lydia and then

sets Hannah's description aside in a paragraph surrounded by parentheses as though Hannah herself is a side thought:

(What about Hannah? They set her nursery up in the bedroom in the attic, where things that were not wanted were kept, and even when she got older, now and then each of them would forget, fleetingly, that she existed - as when Marilyn, laying four plates for dinner one night, did not realize her omission until Hannah reached the table. ...) (Ng 160-161)

Hannah's physical displacement in her attic bedroom reflects the emotional displacement she feels from her family. The family forgets about Hannah in obvious ways, including Marilyn forgetting a place setting for Hannah. Hannah knows she does not fit into the ideal picture of the family and so in order to maintain the illusion of a picture-perfect family, she purposefully removes herself from the family, hiding in corners. Although Hannah's act is sacrificial, it also exhibits its own kind of assertion and agency.

Because of her positionality within the family's dynamics, Hannah is the physical embodiment of silence. Hannah claims silence in a way that no other family member does - through her very body. Richard Teleky, scholar and writer on multiethnicity, explains that "the claiming of silence ... is part of a transformative act that over time yields ... identity" (207). Teleky underscores the importance of silence giving way to one's identity if they claim silence rather than letting silence operate against them. Hannah's claim on silence, in turn, yields her identity, both within the family and as an individual. Though Hannah's lack of relationship with either parent is toxic to the overall health of the family, Hannah's embodied silence comes with its advantages. When Lydia sneaks out on the night of her death, Hannah is the only one who hears her leave. Ng explains, "although upstairs Marilyn and James and Nath all lie awake, searching for sleep, no one hears: Hannah's body knows all the secrets of silence" (103). Hannah

physically encapsulates the silences that her family perpetuates to the point of omitting herself from the family narrative. Hannah does not tell anyone in the family that she noticed Lydia sneaking out, not because they would not believe her, but because without Lydia's presence, Hannah is rendered visible. Even though Hannah selects silence for herself to maintain the family's vision, physically carrying the weight of silence taxes Hannah, even as she gains recognition in Lydia's absence.

Silence manifests not only in Hannah's physicality, but also in physical items around her. Like Marilyn and Lydia's relationship with silence over the cookbook, Hannah also has a relationship with silence and textuality. Hannah steals Lydia's copy of *The Sound and the Fury* that Lydia was reading for her high school English class. Even though it is beyond Hannah's fifth-grade reading level, she reads the book in secret, hiding it under her bed in the attic. In the same way that Lydia misinterprets Marilyn's annotations and tear stains in the cookbook resulting in a sense of connection that is not actually authentic, Hannah reads Lydia's annotations in a similar effort for connection that never comes to fruition in spoken form. However, Hannah stops reading when Lydia stops annotating the book: "after this page, the book is untouched. Hannah flips through the rest: no notes, no doodles, no blue to break up the black. [Hannah]'s reached the point where Lydia stopped reading, she realizes, and she doesn't feel like reading anymore" (Ng 21). Hannah loses motivation to read the novel because Hannah does not read for the story, but rather for her sister's presence. Like Lydia's disappearance from the text, Lydia's death removes her presence from Hannah's life. These physical manifestations of textual silence parallel the relational silence between the sisters.

Furthermore, Lydia's book is not the only item that Hannah steals from her. Hannah also steals Lydia's locket, which was given to Lydia by James as an early sixteenth birthday present.

For Lydia, the locket represents the burden of silence and of assimilation that James has placed on her. When Lydia discovers Hannah wearing the necklace, she rips it from her neck, saying, “You don’t want that. ... You think you do. You don’t” (Ng 261). Lydia effectively removes this burden of perfection from Hannah, but in doing so furthers Hannah’s distance from their parents, widening the lack of connection. Hannah does not know that Marilyn also stole items from the other family members when she left before Hannah’s birth. Though Hannah and Marilyn parallel one another, they remain disconnected, in part because of Lydia’s choice to spare Hannah from the high demands of their mother and in part because of Hannah’s embodied silence.

Even though Hannah is the most silenced character in the novel, she has the most agency in enacting and using silence to her advantage. Hannah uses silence as a form of protection in a different way than the other family members. When her parents fight in the kitchen over the investigation of Lydia’s death, Hannah uses the physicality of silence to remove herself from the conversation. Ng details, “in the brief silence that follows [the fight], Hannah slips under the table and huddles there, hugging her knees to her chest. The tablecloth casts a half-moon shadow on the linoleum. As long as she stays inside it, she thinks, curling her toes in closer, her parents will forget she is there” (115). Indeed, Marilyn and James leave the room and Hannah remains beneath the table. This is a moment where Hannah chooses to make herself invisible, presumably because she does not want to heighten the argument between her parents. When considered within the context this argument establishes, that refusal to confront conflict may also be read as her refusal to further the failure of the family’s dream. Hannah’s embodiment of silence may stem from the intergenerational failure of the pursuit of the American Dream. James fails at his dream and so he focuses on Nath. Likewise, Marilyn fails at her own dream and channels her energy into Lydia. Hannah lacks a parental figure to pressure her into perfection, but this absence

is in itself a form of furthering the failure of the family. In turn, this parental absence spares Hannah from James and Marilyn's dysfunctional attention but further contributes to the family's failed Dream.

However, just because Hannah can use silence to gain information and as protection, does not mean that Hannah wishes to be disconnected from her family in this way. At Lydia's funeral, "Hannah, her small heart awash with pity, reaches up to take [Marilyn's] hand, but her mother doesn't notice. Hannah contents herself by clasping her own fingers behind her back" (Ng 64). Hannah attempts to connect with Marilyn in this moment of grief, but Marilyn lost in her own grief does not recognize the attempt. Hannah has sustained this lack of attention from her mother throughout her life, but in this moment of grief, she hopes to finally connect. Though it does take some time, Hannah's attempt to connect after Lydia's death is eventually received by Marilyn and the other family members. Hannah subverts silence to gain a form of power, in this case, connection to family. In doing so, Hannah rejects the American Dream perpetuated through her parents and siblings, instead demanding a focus on real family, not a fabrication of one. It is in Hannah's subversion of silence that some of the healing processes begin for the Lee family.

Through Hannah, Ng demonstrates the healing components of silence when they are subverted against the toxicity of the American Dream. Writing scholar, Anne Ruggles Gere explains that silence can be used in more ways than just negative ones. She writes, "instead of seeing silence as speech's opposition, we can conceive of it as part of speech, located in the continuum that puts one in dialogue with the other" (206). Ng utilizes this concept of silence as a part of speech when she turns silence from destructive to healing. The same silence that once divided family members from one another is the thing that knits them back together again. The first moment of healing silence happens between Hannah and Nath. Nath gets angry at their

neighbor, Jack, thinking he had something to do with Lydia's death. Hannah intercepts Nath's attempt to talk to Jack, then Nath and Hannah fight. Ng details,

Hannah, to his surprise, slides over to sit beside him. Gently, she puts her hand on his arm, where she's scratched it, and leans her head against him. She has never dared sit so close to Nath before; he and Lydia and their mother and father are too quick to shrug her off or shoo her away. *Hannah, I'm busy. I'm in the middle of something. Leave me alone.* This time - she holds her breath - Nath lets her stay. Though he says nothing more, her silence tells him she is listening. (122-123)

In this moment of silence, both siblings get what they need from one another. Hannah is seen and receives physical contact and comfort from Nath that she has not had before. Likewise, Nath is heard, even in silence, when so often he is dismissed by his father. Hannah and Nath heal their relationship through the silence of this moment.

Similarly, Hannah heals her relationships with her parents through silence. Hannah and Marilyn heal their relationship when Marilyn walks into Lydia's room to find Hannah crying. Ng writes, "then [Marilyn] blinks, and the figure sharpens: Hannah, pale and trembling, her face glossy with tears. 'Mom,' she whispers. Without thinking, Marilyn opens her arms, and Hannah stumbles into them" (248). Hannah finally has both the visible and physical attention that she has needed from her mother. Marilyn does not even think when she reaches out to embrace Hannah, even though she has dismissed Hannah for a majority of the novel. When Marilyn removes herself from grieving the loss of Lydia and stops fighting her mothering instinct, she automatically reaches to comfort Hannah. This is a turning point for Hannah and Marilyn, as they begin to form a new relationship moving forward, forged in the healing silence of this hug. Likewise, James and Hannah seem to heal a bit in a scene where James holds Hannah on his lap

after spinning her around as he used to do with Lydia. James and Hannah converse for most of this scene, so it is a healing that happens in less silence than in Hannah and Marilyn's case. However, Hannah still receives healing physical contact from her father that she has lacked up until this point.

Finally, Marilyn and James also heal their relationship through silence. At the end of the novel, Marilyn and James argue, tensions of their racial differences finally becoming named. James leaves the house and instructs Marilyn to forget him, even though this is an impossible feat. When James returns, Marilyn reacts in surprise, saying she thought he had left, and James admits he thought the same of her. This is all that is exchanged in their apology to one another, which Ng asserts that "for the moment, this is everything they need to say" (282). Marilyn and James instead give the rest of their apologies to one another through silence. In the case of their romantic relationship, they heal through the physical contact of sex. Marilyn initiates by reaching out to James:

In this moment of silence, something touches James's hand, so light he can barely feel it. A moth, he thinks. The sleeve of his shirt. But when he looks down, he sees Marilyn's fingers curled over his, the merest curve as they squeeze. He has forgotten what it felt like, to touch her. To be forgiven even just this much. (Ng 283)

Marilyn bridges the rift between them through physical contact by holding James's hand. James admits that he had forgotten what physical contact from his wife had felt like, but also denotes that at this moment, he feels forgiven by Marilyn. As this physical touch escalates into sexual intercourse, Marilyn and James seem to heal some of the divisions between them, even though they do not do so through words. In this instance, James no longer focuses on Marilyn as his

piece of the American Dream, but as his wife and his partner. Things are far from perfect between them, but they have renewed their bond to one another.

It should be noted that Ng purposefully leaves some relationships unhealed or unresolved to demonstrate the efforts still needed to be made by the family to continue healing after Lydia's death. James and Nath do not ever reconcile their relationship, whether through words or through silence. Perhaps it is because they are too similar, or perhaps they have just not been given the opportunity to heal together within the frame of the narrative. Whatever the case, Ng seems to leave their relationship unresolved as a signal that the family has more healing to do past the end of the actual narrative. Ultimately the actual healing within the narrative matters less than the fact that healing silence exists in the narrative at all. As writer Jennifer Ho comments: "narratives are not simply representations of our reality; narratives embody and generate knowledge" (7). Ng propagates the expansion of the knowledge of silence by presenting a full and dynamic representation of its multiple uses within the novel.

The healing silence that forms in the family following Lydia's death may be read as Ng's response to the racialized American Dream. While the American Dream locks out people of color and women from achieving the actual essence of the dream itself, these marginalized groups can exist outside the Dream. When this choice is made, agency is enacted by these marginalized groups. In turn, these groups can use the silence that was once destructive as a coping mechanism against the larger cultural dismissal of their stories. Silence operates as a form of resistance to the larger American enterprise - a kind of refusal to participate in a dysfunctional system - shifting the focus away from industry and perfection and towards the family dynamics that actually matter. Scholar Patti Duncan illuminates the use of silence as an act of resistance: "silence operates as a form of discourse and as a means of resistance to hegemonic power" (2).

Duncan's work was published ten years before Ng's novel, and *Everything I Never Told You* makes Duncan's argument for silence as resistance even more relevant now than it was then. The threads of silence that Ng weaves alongside the racial tensions of the family can be read as a strong resistance to the idealized and singular white American Dream.

Ng herself acts in resistance in writing *Everything I Never Told You*. She uses words to call attention to silence, formulating an active silence - a silence of possibility that wants to be filled and welcomes a story to fill its space. Her message requires quiet contemplation, but it is not passive storytelling. Ng leaves readers with a call to action as Nath ponders what he will wish he could tell his sister were she still alive: "When a long, long time later, he stares down at the silent blue marble of the earth and thinks of his sister, as he will at every important moment of his life. He doesn't know this yet, but he senses it deep down in his core. So much will happen, he thinks, that I would want to tell you" (Ng 291). Nath has strived for separation from his family through Harvard and through the dream of space the entire novel and in this flash forward moment, we see he finally achieves that dream of becoming an astronaut. Yet, at this moment of absolute isolation, he thinks of Lydia. Lydia reminds Nath of familial bonds and of connection. Nath wishes to tell her the stories of his life, and the importance of this desire is not the stories to be told, but truly the impulse he has to tell stories itself. With this closing image, Ng charges readers to use active silence to tell stories, even the painful and ugly ones. And most importantly, Ng gives the solution to combat the restrictions of the American Dream - connection - through family, through humanity, and through stories. In telling stories that raise awareness about race and gender outside of the confines of the American Dream, the myth of the American Dream ceases to hold power and is itself silenced.

Works Cited

- Duncan, Patti. *Tell This Silence: Asian American Women Writers and the Politics of Speech*. Iowa City, University of Iowa Press, 2004. Print.
- Gere, Anne Ruggles. "Revealing Silence: Rethinking Personal Writing." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 53, no. 2, 2001, pp. 203–223. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/359076.
- Ho, Jennifer A. *Racial Ambiguity in Asian American Culture*. New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 2015. Print.
- Ho, Wendy. "Feminist Recovery and Reception: Chinese American Mother-Daughter Stories." *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, edited by Lawrence J. Trudeau, vol. 379, Gale, 2015. Literature Resource Center, <http://link.galegroup.com.proxy177.nclive.org/apps/doc/H1100119706/GLS?u=ashv45734&sid=GLS&xid=52cd5150>. Accessed 8 Oct. 2018.
- Lee, Erika. *The Making of Asian America: A History*. New York, Simon & Schuster, 2015. Print.
- Lung-Amam, Willow. *Trespassers?: Asian Americans and the Battle for Suburbia*. Oakland, California, University of California Press, 2017. Print.
- Ng, Celeste. *Everything I Never Told You*. New York, NY, Penguin Random House, 2014. Print.
- Sohn, Stephen Hong. *Racial Asymmetries: Asian American Fictional Worlds*. NYU Press, 2014. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qg1ws.
- Teleky, Richard. "'Entering the Silence': Voice, Ethnicity, and the Pedagogy of Creative Writing." *MELUS*, vol. 26, no. 1, 2001, pp. 205–219. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/3185503.

Thoma, Pamela. *Asian American Women's Popular Literature: Feminizing Genres and Neoliberal Belonging*. Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 2013. Print.

Zia, Helen. *Asian American Dreams: The Emergence of an American People*. New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000. Print.