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Cynthia Yang April 3, 2020

The Spectrum of Silence:
A Study of Power and Oppression in the works of Kingston and Ng

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Abstract

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In a society that values speech, silence is often perceived as an absence. In Asian American literature in particular, silence often has negative connotations as it perpetuates the stereotype of the inscrutable Oriental, functioning as subservience or docility. However, studying representations of silence and secrecy within Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior* and Celeste Ng's *Everything I Never Told You* and *Little Fires*, silence shifts away from the one-dimensional purpose of oppression. Through three forms of silence—enforced silence, chosen silence, and breakage of silence—I attempt to show how silence is not only indicative of acquiescence and oppression, but also of empowerment.

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Introduction:

Asian American Literature: My Introduction

I first learned to cook from my mother. She would spend hours in the kitchen replicating the smells of my grandmother's house in Beijing: a pot of steaming green tea, a large steaming bowl of congee topped with slices of pork and slivers of century eggs, and my grandmother's infamous steamed eggplant. I would sit on a nearby stool, mesmerized as the pot bubbled and the wok sizzled, poking around happily with my giant wooden spoon. When I was six, I would head to school each day with a container of *baozi* (steamed buns) or *zhajiangmian* (soybean paste noodles), before I realized that the cafeteria was a homogenous sea of sandwiches and Capri suns. Callous young children gawked at my lunches and I begged my mother to let me bring sandwiches as well. Looking back on it, that was my first recognition of my racial identity and *difference.*

I am Chinese American. I have dark hair and brown eyes that turn up at the corners. I grew up in small towns where a head of dark hair stood out in the seas of browns and yellows. My childhood took place in a white suburban town in Massachusetts. I was invited to sleepovers and I was never left out of the recess shenanigans, but there are brief moments where I am reminded that I am different. A fleeting remark from a classmate, teasing me about my 'resemblance' to Bruce Lee; feeling the entire classroom's eyes boring holes into my skin as we begin the history unit on China; the monotony of "*where are you from? But no, where are you really from?"* My father came into my room one day, holding a book outstretched in his hand like a peace offering: *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan.

Reading *The Joy Luck Club*, I realized that the stories I had been surrounded with were filled with a certain *whiteness*. And while I did occasionally read novels featuring Asian

characters, I had never truly read a book about Asian Americans. Consequently, my father was delighted to have found an Asian American author for me to look up to and happily listened to me ramble about mahjong and San Francisco—two concepts, neither of which I quite understood, but towards both of which I felt inexplicably intimate. My attention was soon diverted by *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, but Tan's novel sat on my shelf—well-loved and worn—for years to come.

As I began my study of English literature, I became immersed in the texts of Milton and Shakespeare; discussions of British and Irish authors; and translations of theorists such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Sigmund Freud. Asian American texts were rarely included in an academic context, and instead my courses were filled with the works of Poe and Faulkner and Woolf. By then, I had all but forgotten my love for Tan's novel, and my ignorance of the Asian American literary presence allowed me to further convince myself of my own disinterest in the field. In fact, that my thesis began as a study of Steinbeck's *East of Eden*. When asked about my fascination with that particularly monstrous text, I answered truthfully that I was interested in delving deeper into the Asian American character of Lee. My knowledge of Asian American's literary existence was so limited that I turned towards Steinbeck's representation of Asian America, oblivious to the myriad of Asian American authors. This time, I was handed Frank Chin's *Donald Duk*, and an introduction to Asian American literature.

"Asian American literature" as it is understood today began in 1968 after the coinage of "Asian American" as a political term by student activists. Despite Asian American literature having only been established in the late 1960s, however, there already exists a complex establishment of knowledge and criticism. Due to the nature of the growth, Asian American literature is an incredibly multifaceted field rife with tensions between literature and criticism,

representation and those represented, the considerations of white audiences, and the myriad of groups and people who identify as Asian American. Asian American scholar Min Hyoung Song describes the movement as "an ideologically complex one… No simple phrase is capable of capturing this complexity" (Song 61). Through the struggle to understand Asian American literature emerged *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian-Writers* in 1974. This seminal anthology helped to establish Asian American literature as a legitimate literary field, recovering literature from previous generations and bringing early Asian American authors such as Diana Chang and Toshio Mori out from obscurity. The editors identify the anthology as a voice from Asian Americans—Filipino, Chinese, and Japanese Americans—after seven generations of oppression and silence: "it is more than a whine, shout, or scream. It is fifty years of our whole voice" (Chin et al. XXVI). This breakage of silence also actively offers a new identity; an identity created by Asian American authors rather than their white counterparts' flawed representations. The editors— Frank Chin, Jeffery Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong—prefaced the anthology, writing:

> The Asian American writers here are elegant or repulsive, angry and bitter, militantly anti-white or not, not out of any sense of perversity or revenge but of honesty. America's dishonesty—its racist white supremacy passed off as love and acceptance—has kept seven generations of Asian American voices off the air, off the streets, and praised us for being Asiatically no-show. A lot is lost forever. But from the few decades of writing we have recovered from seven generations, it is clear that we have a lot of elegant, angry, and bitter life to show. We know how to show it. We are showing off. If the reader is shocked, it is due to his own ignorance of Asian America. We're not new here. Aiiieeeee!! (Chin, et al. XXXVI)

For some Asian American literary scholars like Chin, Asian American literature held a rebellious streak—rebelling against white authority, against expectations, and against silence. He believed that the emergence of Asian American literature functioned as the ability of Asian Americans to genuinely represent themselves for the first time.

Alternatively, Vietnamese author, Viet Thanh Nguyen asserts that the context of this moment in time was critical in that:

> American society was, in general, more willing to read about difference and inequality than to engage in political changes to ameliorate inequality and injustice. Asian American literature, then, occupied an ambiguous position. It told stories about difference and inequality and was studied by its critics for its capacity for political provocation, but its ability to bring about political and economic change was debatable (294-295)

Works at this time emerged within the context of the 1965 immigration reform—in which the earlier 1943 quota system was abolished and reformed to reunite immigrant families and encourage immigrant workers—and the model minority status played an undeniable role at this time; discussions of identity and culture within Asian American literature was restrained to that of healing and being fixed, rather than a critique of the system. According to scholars like Nguyen, emergent Asian American literature was primarily focused on asserting that Asian Americans belonged to the United States as “Asian, in this case, was only an adjective for American” (Nguyen 292). Interestingly, Caroline Rody, a multi-ethnic English professor at the University of Virginia, notes that Asian American fiction is “noteworthy among its contemporary American cohort because it so often focuses on the puncturing of ethnic boundaries” (Song 81). Asian American literature is focused on making differences disappear, with the historical understanding that a wider audience cannot enjoy Asian American narratives

unless the narrative becomes inclusive and connected with the habitual, white audience. Rather than emphasizing Asian, literature would emphasize the commonalities of the *American* in Asian American.

However, Asian American literature goes beyond assimilation. Min Hyoung Song wrote that early Asian American writers were "told that to be successful, they must write a particular kind of work, one that focuses on Asian and Asian American characters in settings and roles and events that conform to fairly conventional ideas about them as primarily immigrants" (13). A certain kind of Asian American literature emerged, which represented Asian Americans through the lens of the immigrant narrative. The term *racist love* (in contrast to racist hate, a term directed towards minorities such as African Americans) was "reserved for more docile minorities like Asian Americans, who would willingly participate in their own co-optation into a racially stratified society by accepting their subordinated place as a model minority" (Nguyen 290). Rather than simply assimilating and emphasizing the *American* in Asian American, a conventional Asian American, immigrant narrative was established. Asian American authors were compelled to conform with the stereotypical standards of white oppression. Deviation from the expected narrative was discouraged, as exemplified by authors like Lois Ann Yamanaka whose characters differentiated from the expected narrative. Her work was in turn protested.

Other Asian American literary scholars such as Elaine Kim held a *restrained* academic approach to literature. Diverging from the polemical and political methodology of *Aiiieeeee!*, Kim believed that Asian American literature would only be accepted if it was (emotionally and politically) restrained and followed academic conventions (Nguyen 291-292). Critics and writers began focusing on aesthetics and formalism, and the defined rubric for emergent Asian American literature began to fall apart as the lines that broadly defined the genre began to disintegrate.

While Asian American literature established itself through the ideological approach in which texts were committed to issues such as the Immigration Acts, and "was coherent and focused because of a consensus around ideology and a reliance on the biological or essential definitions of Asian American identity, the institutional mode's strength is found in greatly expanding the possibilities of Asian American literature, at the expense of its political focus and force" (Nguyen 301). Texts were no longer focused on the emergent era's need to conform or rebel or assimilate and shifted from a U.S. centric focus to one of the transpacific imaginations. The establishment phase was pushed forward as the graduate students of the 1990s became professors, accentuating the academic scholarship of existing Asian American literature. This new era of Asian American literature meant that the institutional and academic aspects of tenure and publication became significant considerations, moving away from the ideologically focused texts of the emergent phase.

This paralleled rise in criticism and literature helped to further establish Asian American literature as a literary genre and the field is continuing to broaden. More authors are becoming interested in writing about Asian Americans, and Asian American authors are expanding their own literary borders. Within the expansion, some scholars emphasized the theoretical approach to literature. For example, Anne Anlin Cheng—author of *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation and Hidden Grief*—studies race and literature through a theoretical and psychoanalytic lens. The focus turns towards *how* to read a text, and *how* to think about the text. Cheng explores the psychoanalytic difference between grievance and grief, and how that distinction influences our discussions of race. Other scholars, such as Nguyen and Song, focus on analyzing the text itself. There exists a tension between Chin and Kim—a tension between the

ideological and the institutional, the aesthetic and the didactic. Asian American literature was established on a foundation of tension.

Early Asian American writers and critics created a broad rubric outlining Asian American literature, framing the political and cultural subtexts of its literature and establishing Asian American literature as a genre that embodied a fundamental tension within Asian American cultures: who are Asian Americans and who speaks for Asian Americans? The significance of Asian American literature was partially due to its ability to allow Asian Americans to finally speak for themselves; but this in and of itself was complicated situation, in which "writers often interested in writing about underrepresented, suppressed, or forgotten historical events, or writing about their own families and communities, who may not want to be written about" (Nguyen 290) became entangled within their own narratives. The establishment of Asian American literature allowed Asian Americans to write their own narrative and to represent themselves, but simultaneously, Asian American writers may be speaking, in turn, for others who lack a voice, representing and misrepresenting the broader Asian American population. Not only is Asian American literature limited by the immigrant narrative and the need for inclusive narration, it is also made complex by the ethical complications of representation itself.

Additionally, as Asian American literature has grown alongside Asian American literary criticism, the increasing amounts of scholarship and literary texts also indicated a shift in the understanding of the genre itself. As Asian American literature began to proliferate, it also began to stray from its original identifiers. While the literary canon of Okada, Yamamoto, Chin, and Kingston might be categorized in similar ways or contain similar themes and tropes, the new generation of writers are not as easily contained. Song wrote:

> While American writers of Asian ancestry, of which there are many now, might have a shared literary past (even if it is one past among many they might have) and a shared culture (again one of many), both powerfully shaped by the ever-changing experiences of immigration, it is not clear whether they have a shared future. (14)

The literary field continues to grow, and the broad rubric which functioned both to define and restrict Asian American literature becomes less applicable. Furthermore, the existing tensions within the field make it difficult to determine a recognized focus or standard upon which to designate Asian American literature. Moreover, as Asian American literature became more legitimized, and as more scholarship emerged, it became a category or *culture* that was both a benefit and a detriment to Asian American writers. Asian American literature became associated with the immigrant narrative, but there was a lack of individualization. As Song says:

> There is also now, irrefutably, a tradition of Asian American literature that helps anchor what it means to write Asian American literature in the present. This tradition can at once act as a resource for writers whose works are enhanced by their association with it and simultaneously as a limitation that writers must work to overcome, another hurdle that gets in the way of attaining whatever ambitions any individual writer might harbor for his or her work. (13-14)

While a clear rubric for Asian American literature can facilitate the efforts to define this vibrant genre, contemporary authors are less and less willing to restrict themselves to Asian American literature and the limits imposed onto their writing. The very borders that would be used to define Asian American literature would likewise limit writers through expectations—just as white America expected the conventional immigrant narrative throughout the emergent phase, a similar expectation lingers for Asian American writers.

There is the presumption that the work should be *Asian American,* and the characters should be *Asian American*, and the themes should follow the conventional *Asian American* tradition as well. Author Leonard Chang faced backlash for his novel from an editor who said:

> The characters, especially the main character, just do not seem Asian enough. They act like everyone else. They don't eat Korean food, they don't speak Korean, and you have to think about ways to make these characters more 'ethnic,' more different. We get too much of the minutiae of [the characters'] lives and none of the details that separate Koreans and Korean-Americans from the rest of us. For example, in the scene when she looks into the mirror, you don't show how she sees her slanted eyes, or how she thinks of her Asianness. (qtd. in Chang)

Even within the publishing world, there is an expectation of *Asian*ness, or a certain exoticism from Asian American writers. These existing expectations restrict the individuality of Asian American writers. Yet, without them, we lack an organization that allows us to identify Asian American literature.

The realm of Asian American literature has expanded far beyond its origins, and there is a lot of debate and tension concerning the genre—what is Asian American literature, how do we define Asian American literature, who writes Asian American literature? Rather than attempting to answer these questions, which are ever changing and shifting as Asian American literature continues to transform and grow, I want to explore select works from two prominent Asian American female authors: Maxine Hong Kingston and Celeste Ng.

Part Two: My Project

In this piece, I will be exploring three select works: Celeste Ng's *Everything I Never Told You* and *Little Fires Everywhere*, and Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*. Maxine Hong Kingston was a writer of the emergent generation—one of the *canon* writers, whose works were part of "a core set of Asian American texts [which] could be identified that all critics should know" (Nguyen 296)—and she published *The Woman Warrior* in 1976. Celeste Ng, born during the emergent phase of Asian American literature, published her novels—*Everything I Never Told You* in 2014, *Little Fires Everywhere* in 2017—four decades later.

Despite the apparent temporal distance between them, these texts initially caught my eye as they were the works of Chinese American female authors. Undeniably, my intrigue of Chinese American female writers is personal, however, there is an irrefutable connection between gender and ethnicity. Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong describes the process of ethnicizing gender as a way of making the *other* more coherent by assigning them a certain gender characteristic. Two defining examples describing African Americans would be the "black stud, abnormally libidinous and driven by aggressive sexual appetites, and the black mammy, masculinized in her strength and stripped of sexual allure" (Wong 111-112). Historically, these caricatures were used to justify the plantation economy and support anti-miscegenation laws. Along this vein, the emasculation of Asian American men and *ultra*-feminization of Asian American women is another assignment of gender characteristic used to marginalize Asian Americans and justify white societal norms. The intersection of gender and ethnicity is entrenched within Asian American literature and history.

Furthermore, these texts made me question what I thought I knew about Asian American literature. While it is undeniably an ethnic text, *The Woman Warrior* is also considered by many

critics to be a feminist work rather than a purely ethnic, Asian American novel (K. Cheung, *Articulate* 76). Kingston's novel was published in 1976, striking a delicate balance of an autobiographical narrative and Chinese folktales that harken back to the Chinese tradition of oral storytelling (Carabí 141). Written during the emergent phase, Kingston's novel can be read through the lens of the ideological commitments of her time; the story situates itself through Chinese folktales and oral storytelling, and it constantly reminds the reader of its ethnic foundation. Kingston writes, "even now China wraps double binds around my feet" (Kingston, 51), succinctly binding her novel to China and Asian America. And yet, *The Woman Warrior* subverts expectations of racial assimilation or aggression. Rather, there is a central focus on gender within the novel, straying from an exploration of Asian American to one of women, specifically Asian American women. It is a novel that gives a voice to the silenced Asian women, subverting power and encouraging solidarity. King Kok Cheung writes that the "braiding of gender and ethnicity in [*The Woman Warrior]* produces an unusually resonant double-voiced discourse, one that upsets the opposition between women and men, East and West, fable and fact, orality and chirography, talking and listening, (re)vision and history" (K. Cheung, *Articulate* 75). *The Woman Warrior* acknowledges its Chinese roots but is not constrained by the expectations of Asian American literature.

Interestingly, *The Woman Warrior* is also known for inciting the anger of Frank Chin, one of the editors of *Aiiieeeee!*. In his article, "Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake," Chin scathingly attacks Kingston's text as a false narrative and one that caters towards white, "racist love". Chin views Kingston's works as "a revision of Chinese history, culture, and childhood literature and myth by restating a white racist stereotype" (F. Chin 29). In fact, Kingston's works—and the works of other authors, such as Amy Tan and David Henry

Hwang—were purposefully excluded from the *Aiiieeeee* anthology as Chin believed they were not genuine representations of real Asian American literature. Rather, he viewed them as falsified narratives which catered towards racism and "Christian brainwashing" rather than an authentic Asian American literature (Chin 26). And while Kingston has become a prominent figurehead in current Asian American literature courses, at the time of its publication, *The Woman Warrior* was in fact heralded into popularity by white women readers. Chinese critics such as Frank Chin and Benjamin Tong viewed it as an exotic Oriental fantasy pandering to the white population. Consequently, even as Kingston is viewed by many to be a canonical Asian American literary figure, she does not fit neatly into the literary genre.

As a comparison, I will be delving into Celeste Ng's novels, *Everything I Never Told You* and *Little Fires Everywhere*. Her texts were published in 2014 and 2017 respectively, four decades after Kingston's text. Ng's texts also differ from the expected Asian American narrative. There is an expectation of Asian characters, an immigrant narrative, and a certain exoticism; Ng deftly subverts these expectations. While many Asian American novels situate themselves in the heavily Asian-populated West Coast, *Everything I Never Told You* takes place near the fictional Middlewood College in Ohio, and *Little Fires Everywhere* takes place in Ng's childhood town of Shaker Heights, Ohio. Her novels also feature interracial families, biracial characters, and focus on white American families and relationships. There are moments within her works that echo the immigrant narrative. The father figure in *Everything I Never Told You*, James reflects many aspects of the immigrant narrative; Ng writes, "in fifth grade, [James] had stopped speaking Chinese to his parents, afraid of tinting his English with an accent" (*Everything* 48), encompassing the Asian American desire for assimilation. Celeste Ng even comments, briefly, on the stereotype of the inscrutable Asian in *Little Fires Everywhere*. "*You just can't tell what*

he's really thinking, Mr. Richardson thought, and then instantly chagrined, *What a terrible thing to think*" (Ng, *Little* 264). Although only a brief quote, these two lines indicate that Ng is aware of the history surround Asian American culture. In an interview with Celeste Ng, she notes that "in the case of *Everything I Never Told You*, [her] goal was to make the experiences of a family that had always felt marginalized feel accessible and understandable even to people who'd never been in that situation" (Ng, SCMP Interview) . Like other aspects of Asian American literature, she attempts to make differences disappear—to make the story inclusive and relatable for its white audience.

On the other hand, in *Little Fires Everywhere*, the Asian characters are the supporting characters who linger along the peripherals of the text. Ng's novels disassociate from a focus on the immigrant narrative and instead surround interracial families, bringing to life voices that are not limited to Asian Americans. In a joint interview, Ng commented on the progress of Asian American voices and seemed to echo the sentiments of younger Asian American writers who dislike the restrictions of the Asian American literary genre. She says that:

> I think there have been more and more stories getting told, not just Chinese American stories, but stories from lots of different kinds of Asian-American styles, Asian, East Asian. And we're seeing more books too by writers with Asian heritage that aren't—quote, unquote—"about being Asian," which I think is a wonderful thing, that there is space now, I think, for those writers to talk about things other than just their particular ethnicity. (Ng, Kingston, PBS Interview)

Ng lauds Kingston for paving the way for other Asian American writers but emphasizes the significance of Asian American's growing voice—that more writers are writing their own, different stories. She notes in another interview that what fascinated her about authors like

Kingston and Tan was that they wrote "from a particular perspective informed by the writer's Asian background, yet also tell a universal story along with the particular" (Ng, SCMP Interview). She seems to excuse herself from the restrictions of Asian American literature, noting that she too is *informed* by her Asian background, but writes novels that are not restricted by her Asian American identity.

What ultimately drew me to these particular novels is the notion of silence that pervades the text. My fascination with silence is a fascination with erasure and with obscurity. In literature, silence can be captured in gaps, fragments, atmospheres, and hidden bodies; it can be used to portray a glimpse of something beyond the text. And yet, it is often perceived as an absence. Within Eurocentric literature and history, there is an expectation of speech and assertion. In American culture, "voice is tantamount to power and where they have been traditionally muzzled, have also forsworn silence in order to have a say in society" (K. Cheung, *Articulate* 1). While silence has its place in Eurocentric society, there is a definite value placed upon speech.

In Asian American literature in particular, silence has become an entrenched feature. In *Aiiieeeee!*, the editors noted in the introduction that the anthology was a representation of ignored and silenced Asian Americans; they were "wounded, sad, angry, swearing, and wondering, and this is his aiiieeeee!!!" (Chin et al. XXVI). This sound was "more than a whine, shout, or scream. It is fifty years of our whole voice." (XXVI). Many Asian American male critics wanted to renounce silence entirely, further promoting its negative connotation. However, the silence has historical and cultural backings.

Articulation and silence play a significant role within the political and cultural context of the Asian American narrative. "This early silence is, in part, a legacy from a people who believe

that ‘a ready tongue is an evil.’ The Chinese keep secrets, they conceal their real names, they withhold speech. The hovering threats of deportation directed toward Chinese immigrants in America deepen this taciturnity” (Morante 78). Silence is deeply rooted within Asian American’s cultural identity. From the mid 1880s when Chinese workers—coolies—began replacing European immigrant workers in factories and continuing to the Chinese Exclusion Acts and the Japanese internment camps, Asian Americans were designated as “docile” or “subservient” or “compliant” (Chae 22); they were silent and lacked assertion. As more coolies entered the workforce, “legal exclusions and racism against Chinese workers have eventually prevented them from establishing solidarity with other domestic white workers and European immigrants” (22); They were silenced by the legal and cultural challenges they faced, and the racist rhetoric would serve to maintain their positions as outsiders—“forever alien” (23). Silence became associated with femininity, emasculating Asian and Asian American men, and furthering the perceptions of a docile and subservient minority.

Even today, with the status of *model minorities* clinging tightly, silence pervades the representation of Asian Americans. Youngsuk Chae writes in her book, *Politicizing Asian American Literature: Toward a Critical Multiculturalism*, that model minority is a racist tactic which “induces the assimilation, acculturation, or silence of Asian Americans” (Chae 16).White America labelled Asian Americans as *model*, touting their economic success and their positions as a “‘self-serving’ minority compared to African Americans or Chicanos/Latinos” (25) in an attempt to justify racial inequality. Moreover, model minority obscures the large amounts of Asian American narratives that do not fit neatly into the perceived economic success. Instead, the term *model minority* only further emphasizes the perception of the original Asian American workers. They were subservient and compliant and docile; they were silent and unthreatening.

Reading Ng and Kingston's texts, I was struck by the proliferation of silence. Ng titles her first novel, *Everything I Never Told You*, with silence; the novel is about *everything* I never told you, and *everything* that was kept silent. Kingston starts her novel with silence as well. She begins the novel writing, "'you must not tell anyone,' my mother said, 'what I am about to tell you" (Kingston 5). Silence pervades Asian American literature, often with negative connotations. However, while the silence in Kingston's and Ng's works might appear to support the stereotype of the acquiescent Asian American, I find that their works resist the notion of silence as a negative attribute or of assimilation. In an interview with Celeste Ng, Ng notes that "it's the writer's impulse too that, when there is a secret, there is a power there. There is something there that is dangerous. And one of the ways to sort of deal with that danger is to shine a light on it and tell it, and imagine your way in, and fill in all those details that have been sort of left out." (Ng, Kingston, PBS Interview).

In my project, I plan to step away from the restraints of Asian American literature and examine silence as an aesthetic and didactic tool which functions to expose and interpret struggles for power and identity. Rather than viewing silence as a cultural or gendered device, I believe that representations of silences in Ng and Kingston's works showcase oppression and power that are not limited nor defined by cultural disarticulation, although the articulate silences of the cultural narrative certainly exist. While silence in these novels do perpetuate an Asian American narrative, the Asian American narrative is only a subset of the overarching struggle for control.

Rather than primarily considering the historical and literary context of silence within the Asian American narrative, I intend to utilize theorist Michel Foucault's argument that "there is not one but many silences" (qtd. in Bindeman 143). Silence, Foucault believed, was not an

absence of meaning. Rather, silence permeates in the gaps between and within discourse, distinguishing the very notion of reality and power-relations. As discourse is defined by Foucault as the "various ways societies impose power-relations on their members" (Bindeman 143), and silence is "less the absolute limit of discourse, the other side from which it is separated by a strict boundary, than an element that functions alongside things said" (143). In other words, silence and discourse are so incredibly interdependent that the logical conclusion would be that silence, too, is a form of oppression. I believe that Foucault's interpretation of silence fits neatly within Ng and Kingston's texts, as there are a multitude of silences within the three novels: I will be focusing on an enforced silence, a chosen silence, and the breakage of silence. These various forms of silence form a narrative of power and oppression, through the questioning of identity and control.

The first chapter of this paper will examine the enforced silence within Kingston and Ng's texts. Here, I will explore how Kingston and Ng depict and evoke silence through assessing the language, narrative, and fragmented gaps of their works. Specifically, I hope to explore silence in its relation to oppression and identity, focusing primarily on Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*. In the next chapter, I will focus on *chosen* silence. While enforced silence stipulates a rather negative connotation, chosen silence is more ambivalent, with the potential of indicating either autonomy or assimilation. For this, I will concentrate on *Everything I Never Told You*, examining two contrasting perspectives of silence: assertive control and passive assimilation. In the last chapter, I hope to explore the breakage of silence within Kingston and Ng's texts, specifically *Little Fires Everywhere*. Just as silence is perceived as subservience or assimilation, the breakage of silence—or speech—is associated with assertion and power. Through this

project, I hope to better understand Ng and Kingston's texts through the portrayal of power and identity.

Chapter One: Enforced Silence

There is a proliferation of silence within Asian American literature and culture. In her book, *Articulate Silences*, King Kok Cheung describes the "verbal restraint" that was instilled in Japanese and Chinese cultures and "reinforced as a survival strategy in the face of racism in the corresponding immigrant communities" (6). Asian American youths were taught against assertion by their communities, forced into silence. Consequently, as Asian Americans regained their voices, reticence has transitioned from a survival mechanism to something that is perceived as adverse and repulsive. In *Aiiieeeee!,* the editors emphasized the anthology as a *scream* from Asian Americans who were, for so long, ignored and excluded. The establishment of the term *Asian American* stepped away from *Oriental, chink* and other monikers created by white America. The term Asian American was seen as departure from enforced silence and social invisibility; by claiming their own term and disregarding terms such as Oriental or Mongoloid, Asian Americans were able to more fully represent themselves through their own words—they were no longer silenced.

However, even with the coinage of Asian American—a verbal assertion of their own identity—enforced silence was entrenched throughout Asian American culture, seeping into their literature. Even traditional Asian literature "generally value[d] the implicit over the explicit so that even political writing [was] often coded" (K. Cheung, *Articulate* 8). While the younger generation of Asian American writers often advocate for assertion and more *masculine* writing, feminist literary critics have found commonalities in the writings of Asian American literature—specifically female writers—that signify an "exclusion from dominant discourse" (K. Cheung, *Articulate* 4), reflecting themes of oppression. Cheung describes the commonalities of speechlessness and reticence in the writing of women; there are difficulties in asserting oneself in

an *inherited* language—whether it be the language of men or of white Americans. Many female writers would undercut their own narrative authority, turning towards dreams and fantasies, and projecting their own anxieties. In her analysis of female Asian American writers, Yamamoto, Kogawa, and Kingston, Cheung found similar motifs and patterns. In Asian American males, silence was likewise a significant aspect of their lives, especially as men were the ones who fully interacted with white society; they were forced into subservient, docile roles, silencing their own identities to conform.

Following Foucault's definition of silence as a form of oppression, I want to examine enforced silence within Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*. The word "enforced" is immediately associated with force and coercion, establishing an awareness of power and authority. Of the various silences I will be discussing, enforced silence most easily lends itself to the narrative of oppression. In *The Woman Warrior*, I believe that enforced silence is a form of oppression that functions to silence and erase identity.

Maxine Hong Kingston's novel, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* is a fusion of autobiography and Chinese folktales. *The Woman Warrior* tells the stories of five women: "No-Name Woman", Fa Mulan, Brave Orchid, Moon Orchid, and Kingston herself. They are five distinct, yet intertwining stories, retold to us by Kingston, following the Cantonese tradition of talk-story. Despite the foundation of a *talk*-story, silence permeates the novel. The novel begins with a forced secrecy: "'You must not tell anyone' my mother said, 'what I am about to tell you" (Kingston 5). Kingston ultimately breaks this silence, confiding these stories with us through her novel, but nevertheless the enforced silence enshrouds the text. Kingston is given constant reminders to keep silent, which she then conveys to her readers. After Kingston's mother tells her about her aunt, she warns Kingston to keep silent: "Don't let your

father know that I told you" (7). The warning is echoed again, as her mother tells her, "Don't tell anyone you had an aunt. Your father does not want to hear her name" (Kingston 18). The repetition of secrecy and maintaining silence fills the text with an oppressive force. Kingston may have temporarily broken the silence, confiding these stories with her readers, but the inclusion of the repeated warnings to stay silent, serve to muzzle the readers into maintaining the enforced silence as well.

Consequently, the stories that Kingston (and her mother) tell function to enforce the existing silence: they uphold the oppressive force of silence. Although Kingston's mother confides in her daughter about her aunt, she does so as a lesson. Kingston's mother interrupts the No Name Woman stories with warnings to keep silent, reminding Kingston that "now that you have started to menstruate, what happened to her could happen to you. Don't humiliate us. You wouldn't like to be forgotten" (Kingston 7). These intrusions create a disconnect within the talk-story, shifting the narrative of the No Name Woman from an assertion of her individuality and character, into a warning to maintain the status quo and keep silent. Her mother's stern "don't humiliate us. You wouldn't like to be forgotten" (7) is meant to subjugate Kingston, threatening her with the loss of her memory and her identity. Kingston's mother uses the No Name Woman's silence—the forgotten, nameless family member—as a warning and a threat to enforce Kingston's own obedience, maintaining the threat by including Kingston as a perpetrator of the repression. Despite her inclusion of her aunt's narrative within *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston admits that she participates in the punishment of her nameless aunt by maintaining the erasure of her identity and being from memory and speech. Kingston acknowledges this preservation of silence, writing that "there is more to this silence: they want me to participate in her punishment. And I have" (18). She confesses that in the twenty years since the story, she "had not asked for

details nor said [her] aunt's name; [she] does not know it" (18). And thus, her inclusion of the No Name Woman remains a conjecture, as Kingston is unable to give an authentic representation of the No Name Woman; to ask about her aunt, she must bring the nameless woman into speech and "[she] cannot ask that" (8). She participates in the suppression of her aunt's memory and individuality as she presents an unreliable narrative. She resorts to speculations and fantasies to dictate her aunt's story, failing to fully assert the No Name Woman's narrative. Kingston participates in the erasure of the No Name Woman, enforcing the existing silence.

The No Name Woman's tale is filled with implicit speculations rather than outright expositions. In Kingston's speculations, she suggests that some man could have commanded her aunt to sleep with him. Kingston muses that the man gave orders, ensuring her silence. "If you tell your family, I'll beat you. I'll kill you" (Kingston 9), enforcing her silence through fear. Furthermore, Kingston noted that "no one talked sex, ever" (9), suggesting that societal norms could have also forced the No Name Woman to stay silent. Kingston explains the role of outcasts within Chinese culture; outcasts were stuck at home, delegated to a separate table, and forced to endure the shame as others averted their eyes. Kingston suggests that the No Name Woman was already an outcast, having been cast out of her husband's parents' home, returning to her own parents: "a mysterious act hinting at disgraces not told" (10). As an outcast, the No Name Woman may have been further forced to keep silent in fear of societal repercussions.

The No Name Woman's identity was stripped as Kingston's family purposefully excludes her from the family narrative "as if she had never been born" (Kingston 5). Kingston's mother shares the No Name Woman's story, not as an introduction to a family member, but rather as a warning. Even as a cautionary tale, the narrative strips Kingston's aunt of any identity. Her silence is evident as she does not utter a single word throughout the text; she is

simply a passive object that is abused, unable to cry out. Even as she was raped and impregnated, "she kept the man's name to herself throughout her labor and dying; she did not accuse him that he be punished with her. To save her inseminator's name she gave silent birth" (14). Furthermore, despite the first chapter of Kingston's novel is dedicated to her memory, the No Name Woman remains anonymous throughout the text, and we—alongside Kingston—are never given her name. She is stripped of her voice; she is *told*, "if you tell your family, I'll beat you. I'll kill you" (Kingston 9) and she obeys. Her family curses at her, "Ghost! Dead ghost! Ghost! You've never been born" (16), and likewise she obeys, running into the fields and effectively becoming a ghost. Although it is unclear whether she was genuinely physically silent throughout her ordeals, Kingston's mother's narrative enforces her silence. Kingston's speculations enforce her silence. In fact, the only words that the No Name Woman utters in the story are "I think I'm pregnant" (9); Kingston's speculations give the No Name Woman life, suggesting that she "may have been unusually beloved, the precious only daughter, spoiled and mirror gazing because of the affection the family lavished on her" (13) but it does not give the No Name Woman speech. Kingston even gives speech to the "other man" (9), envisioning the threats of violence and shame that the man held over her aunt, but the No Name Woman remains silent. She is even described as the "*secret* evil" (8 emphasis mine) of the man who impregnated her. Kingston's novel is a chance to bring the No Name Woman to life and to speech, but Kingston chooses to silence her aunt even through speculations. At the No Name Woman's death, Kingston's mother tells Kingston that she "found her and the baby *plugging* up the family well" (7 emphasis mine), *gagging* the family well, maintaining the silence. The No Name Woman's story ends with her body plugging up the family well, forgotten as if she had never been born. Her silence permeates the text, and consequently the existence of the No Name Woman is eradicated.

Another instance of enforced silence follows Kingston's aunt, Moon Orchid. When Moon Orchid arrives in San Francisco to meet her estranged husband, Moon Orchid is talkative and full of laughter. She follows her nieces and nephews around, describing their actions aloud. "Oh, she's going to school now: She's choosing a plain blue dress. She's picking up her comb and brush and shoes…" (141). However, at the prospect of meeting her estranged husband, Moon Orchid falls to silence. She tells her sister, "I can't bother him. I mustn't bother him" (Kingston 125) and that she does not know what to say. She asks Brave Orchid to go with her, with the excuse that "You can talk louder than I can" (Kingston 144). The fear and trepidation of meeting her husband stifles the typically verbose woman to one who repeatedly insists that she does not know what to say. As they arrive in Los Angeles to meet the husband, Moon Orchid asks her nephew to turn back, begging him "Please turn back. Oh, you must turn the car around. I should be returning to China. I shouldn't be hear at all. Let's go back. Do you understand me" (145)? Yet, her pleas are silenced by Brave Orchid who orders her son to keep driving.

She is physically unable to talk when she finally meets her husband. As Brave Orchid orchestrates the meeting, "Moon Orchid kept shaking her head in trembling no's" (Kingston 151); the fear and anxiety of finally meeting her husband diminished her speaking capacity. Whereas she began by protesting in complete, articulate sentences, she is reduced to a series of sounds—*no, no, no*. Furthermore, when she finally meets her husband, Moon Orchid is struck utterly silent: "all she did was open and shut her mouth without any words coming out" (153). As her husband stares at her, demanding answers, "it silenced her crying" (153) entirely. When she finally speaks up against his accusations, it is a mere whisper: "what about me" (153)? The rest of the conversation is led by Brave Orchid, who ultimately speaks for Moon Orchid. "How could you ruin her old age… You made her live like a widow" (154). Later, when Kingston's brother

recounts the story to her, he says that "Mom [Brave Orchid] did all the talking… I don't think she [Brave Orchid] said anything. I don't remember her saying one thing" (162). Moon Orchid stays silent as others speak *for* and *about* her, her own speech blocked by fear.

Moon Orchid's husband finally says, "You can't talk to them. You can barely talk to me" (Kingston 154). Rather than allowing Moon Orchid to talk, he enforces the silence that her fear has already fixed upon her. He demands that Moon Orchid leave and not return, and when his American wife shows up to the scene, "he gestured to the old women, holding a finger to his mouth for just a moment" (155). By speaking and issuing his own demands—telling Moon Orchid and Brave Orchid "I don't want either of you coming here anymore" (154)—he maintains the power and control within the relationship. As Cheung explained in *Articulate Silences*, "America [is] where voice is tantamount to power" (2) and silence is renounced as docile or subversive. As he is the one who speaks and issues demands, he inadvertently places himself in a position of power. As Moon Orchid has been silent this entire time, she lacks power. There is a power imbalance within the conversation. Thus, when he raises his finger to his lips, it becomes an order from a position of authority for Moon Orchid and Brave Orchid—silent and powerless—to remain silent and keep his secret. As the authority figure, he is enforcing his silence upon them as "he had never told his American wife that he had a wife in China, and they mustn't tell her either" (Kingston 155). Through Kingston's text, fear and authority is used to enforce silence, oppressing the loquacious Moon Orchid.

Silence and speechlessness likewise become associated with insanity; Moon Orchid's descent to madness is precedented by her inability to talk. Kingston says that she "thought talking and not talking made the difference between sanity and insanity. Insane people were the ones who couldn't explain themselves. There were many crazy girls and women" (Kingston

186). Disregarding for a moment the muzzle of sexism within Kingston's work, insanity becomes another version of enforced silence. After her husband pushes her away for a younger, American wife, Moon Orchid's ability to articulate transitions from silence to a speech that cannot be understood by others. Prior to meeting her husband, Moon Orchid "had written [to her sister] every other week" (156), but afterwards fails to communicate with her sister for several months. When Brave Orchid calls her sister, Moon Orchid whispers through the phone "I can't talk now… They're listening" (156). Her fears muffle her voice, forcing her voice into a whisper. Afterwards, when she described her nephews and nieces aloud, her voice was no longer vivacious and curious but monotone (158).

Moon Orchid still *spoke*, but she spoke in repetition and without meaning. Brave Orchid explains to her children that the difference between the sane and the insane, is that "sane people have variety when they talk-story. Mad people have only one story that they talk over and over" (Kingston 160). As her speech became less articulate and more irrational, her nieces and nephews would lock themselves in their own bedrooms, sneaking out of the home, disregarding her words. Even as she continues to *speak*, the words she is uttering become meaningless and regarded as madness. And meaningless words ultimately become silence as her ability to communicate ceases. It is only when she is committed to the mental asylum that Moon Orchid is finally heard by the other patients, and she tells Brave Orchid that "we understand one another here. We speak the same language, the very same. They understand me, and I understand them" (161). The inability to articulate her thoughts and her descent into insanity reflects the inability to communicate with others. Moon Orchid's ability to talk, to tell her story, and be heard formed the basis of her identity, and as she loses her ability to be heard—as she is silenced by her mental illness—even her sister turns her away believing that Moon Orchid "had already left this mad old

body, and it was a ghost bad-mouthing her children" (161). Even as she spoke, her words were imbued with silence, and she was no longer regarded as significant or authentic; she may as well be silent.

The depiction of enforced silence as an oppressive force that erases identity translates into Kingston's Asian American narrative. While silence as a struggle for power and identity is not necessarily confined to the Asian American narrative, when placed within a cultural context, it can address questions of assimilation and acquiescence.

As *The Woman Warrior* begins, Kingston's voice is weak as she struggles to find her own place and identity within America. The first sentence of the novel is not her own words, but rather, her mother telling her to stay silent. Instead of introducing herself, she begins by telling the stories of other women: of the No Name Woman, of Fa Mulan, of Brave Orchid, and of Moon Orchid. She leaves her own story to slip in through the gaps of the other narratives in fragments and pieces. While Kingston speculates upon the silences in her aunts' stories, we are left to our own speculations regarding Kingston. It is through these fragments of silence that Kingston confides her own identity to us, amidst the stories of other women and other identities. Within the silence, Kingston expresses her desire to assimilate, either as a boy or as an American. She says briefly that: "I did not turn into a boy [although] I would have liked to bring myself back as a boy for my parents" (Kingston 49), and that "all the time I was having to turn myself American-feminine" (50). Societal expectations, both from her parents and from white America, force Kingston to limit her own voice. Instead, the voices of her mother and of folklores take over as she is unable to articulate for herself. She struggles to establish her own identity, confessing that her own voice is unreliable, and she is often caught between the other stories.

An inability to articulate could suggest that "speechlessness has to do also with cultural dislocation: being a Chinese girl in an American school, daughter of China exiled in an alien country" (Morante 78). Silence eradicates identity, and for Kingston, there is a struggle in which both her Chinese and American identities are affected. She contrasts her voice with those of Chinese and American women, noting that:

> Normal Chinese women's voices are strong and bossy. We American-Chinese girls had to whisper to make ourselves American-feminine. Apparently, we whispered even more softly than the Americans. Once a year the teachers referred my sister and me to speech therapy, but our voices would straighten out, unpredictably normal, for the therapists. Some of us gave up, shook our heads, and said nothing, not one word. Some of us could not even shake our heads. At times shaking my head no is more self-assertion than I can manage. Most of us eventually found some voice, however faltering. We invented an American-feminine speaking personality, except for that one girl who could not speak up even in Chinese school. (Kingston 171)

Kingston compares the loud, bossy Chinese women's voices with the quiet, feminine American women's voices. Analyzing this excerpt with Cheung's *Articulate Silences* in mind, I cannot help but find the degree or volume of speech fascinating. Chinese women are bossy and loud, with the most assertive speech. Americans women, by contrast, are softer and more feminine. They too, however, maintain their voice. It is the Chinese American girls who lose their voices, as they attempt to assimilate with American feminine personalities. They step away from their Chinese identities in their endeavors to emerge as "American-feminine", but they are unable to find their own voice as Chinese-Americans and they lose all form of assertion—"at times shaking my head no is more self-assertion than I can manage" (Kingston 171). Some ultimately find a *faltering*

voice as they invent their own version of the American personality, but the term faltering suggests hesitance and weakness; it suggests an unsustainable identity. They invent an "American-feminine" speaking personality, however this *personality* lacks an authentic identity and power. As they are trapped between the two cultures, seemingly unable to become one or the other, their voices—and their ability to articulate—disappears. The disarticulation is imposed by their inability to fully recognize either culture. For Kingston, the self-enforcing silence that serves as a power struggle and oppression for others—Chinese women who have unfaltering voices, or even American women with their feminine characterization—also functions to express the cultural displacement for those stuck in the liminal space: Chinese American girls.

It is in the final chapter of *The Woman Warrior,* "A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe," that Kingston finally begins her own story. Yet, even her story begins with the words of others: "what my brother actually said was, 'I drove Mom and Second Aunt to Los Angeles'… In fact, it wasn't me my brother told about going to Los Angeles: one of my sisters told me what he'd told her" (Kingston 162). The introduction to Kingston's own narrative is as evasive as her speech, interrupting Kingston's life with snippets about ancient Chinese emperors and childhood stories that her mother told her. We are finally introduced to Kingston's narrative as she says, "my mother cut my tongue. She pushed my tongue up and sliced the frenum" (163). The tongue is the most important muscle in articulation, and the supposed cutting of Kingston's tongue becomes an official introduction to her silence. However, Kingston's mother explains that she cut her tongue so that:

> You would not be tongue-tied. Your tongue would be able to move in any language. You'll be able to speak languages that are completely different from one another. You'll

> be able to pronounce anything. Your frenum looked too tight to do those things, so I cut it" (Kingston 163)

On one hand, this follows the theme of enforced silence—by snipping the frenum of a child, Kingston's mother has enforced her own control over the child's tongue, and consequent speech. And yet, the snipping of the frenum is meant to free Kingston's speech. It is meant to help her be articulate and not be "tongue-tied" (163), so that she may speak in any language and pronounce anything. And yet, Kingston has a "terrible time talking" (164). She notes that, "when I went to kindergarten and had to speak English for the first time, I became silent" (164). What was meant to support her freedom of speech becomes an impediment, lost in translation. Kingston's silence is enforced both by her family, her culture, and by the *ghosts*—white people.

She describes the sound of Chinese as "chingchong ugly, to American ears, not beautiful like Japanese sayonara words with the consonants and vowels as regular as Italian. We make guttural peasant noise" (Kingston 171). She compares the guttural sounds of Chinese to American language, which is softer and quieter. Living in American society, Kingston and other Chinese American girls are forced into silence to fit in. Kingston notes that "my mouth went permanently crooked with effort, turned down on the left side and straight on the right" (171) as she struggles to balance the two societies she is embedded into. The desire to assimilate into American society forces her to whisper, silencing Kingston. The desire to please her mother and her Chinese culture, however, has Kingston asking for candy from pharmacists as "that is the way the Chinese do it" (170). She is similarly silenced, unable to articulate herself as she "felt the weight and the immensity of things impossible to explain to the druggist" (170). Instead of using actual words, what comes out is "Mymotherseztagimmesomecandy" (170). America and China wage war upon Kingston's tongue, muting her entirely.

Just as silence has been enforced upon Kingston, however, she likewise imposes her own silence on others. In her interactions with the mute girl, Kingston demands that the girl—a girl with a China doll hair cut—talk. She twists the girl's ears, pulls her hair, all the while demanding "come on! Talk! Talk! Talk!" (Kingston 179). Her demand for speech, for articulation—even for a simple *ow*—is rationalized as, "if you don't talk, you can't have a personality… You've got to let people know you have a personality and brain" (180). As someone who has been silenced, both by *ghosts* and by her family, Kingston can identify with the mute Chinese girl, seeing in her an aspect of her identity that she is trying to forget. She demands that the girl talk, perhaps associating her own fears of identity loss with the girl's inability to articulate any desire, fear, or anger. However, in the same breath, she demands that the girl stay silent: "Don't you dare tell anyone I've been bad to you. Talk. Please talk" (181). This oscillation between desiring speech and wanting silence reflects Kingston's own cultural crisis as a child of immigrants:

> Sometimes I hated the ghosts for not letting us talk; sometimes I hated the secrecy of the Chinese. 'Don't tell,' said my parents, though we couldn't tell if we wanted to because we didn't know… they would not tell us children because we had been born among ghosts, were taught by ghosts, and were ourselves ghost-like. They called us a kind of ghost. Ghosts are noisy and full of air; they talk during meals. They talk about anything" (Kingston 183).

Her lack of voice, her inability to articulate is tied deeply to her duality of identity. She feels the enforcement of silence from the *ghosts*, and also from the reticence of the Chinese. Ghosts, throughout Kingston's text, represents white people or *kuei (鬼)*. Her identification with ghosts, as *a kind of ghost* echoes her futile attempts to assimilate. However, she is only *ghost-like*; while she is influenced by ghosts, taught by ghost teachers, and born within a ghost society, she herself

is not a ghost, and is thus also unable to fully identify with white Americans. Her immersion within the ghost culture, however, lends to a disconnect with her parents. Her Chinese, immigrant parents view Kingston as a *kind of ghost,* as they cannot connect with her. There is a constant disconnect within her identity, as she is unable to fully identify with either half of herself.

Enforced silence becomes oppression. In *The Woman Warrior*, silence functions to erase identity. The No Name Woman is forgotten as Kingston's family enforces the erasure of her memory and Moon Orchid's descent to madness is punctuated by her loss of language and her loss of identity. Kingston silences herself throughout the novel, describing her own voice as faltering and unreliable. In telling her story, she questions her own experiences, wondering "what is Chinese tradition and what is the movies" (Kingston 8)? Enforced silence seems to affirm the negative perception that speech is good, and silence is bad.

Chapter Two: Chosen Silence

Celeste Ng's *Everything I Never Told You* is built upon a foundation of silence. Ng *labels* her text with silence. The title, *Everything I Never Told You* indicates that the novel is about *everything* I never told you, and all the things that were kept silent. Moreover, the first few sentences of the novel tells the reader that "Lydia is dead. But they don't know this yet" (Ng, *Everything* 1). Immediately, we become aware of the imbalance of knowledge. Two sentences into the novel and we are aware that Lydia is dead, yet *they*, the Lee family, are still unaware of this knowledge. The first few sentences set the tone for the novel, in that the novel is layered with knowledge and silence. Gaps and fissures are filled within the text as the perspectives and knowledge of different characters trickle down, piecing together the reader's understanding. *Everything I Never Told You* is constructed through the different perspectives of the family members as they reach the point of Lydia's death, and afterwards as they process her loss. The differing perspectives of the novel create varying narratives, best showcased when Nathan pushes Lydia into the lake:

> It was too big what happened. It was like a landscape they could not see all at once; it was like the sky at night, which turned and turned so they couldn't find its edges. It would always feel too big. He pushed her in. And then he pulled her out. All her life, Lydia would remember one thing. All his life, Nath would remember another. (Ng, *Everything* 154).

This novel takes singular events and expands them; the events, such as Lydia falling into the lake, become so immense that the individual characters are unable to comprehend its entirety. Instead, each character understands their own fragmented perception of the event. Lydia understood the event as one thing and "all his life, Nath would remember another" (Ng,

Everything 154). Their unique narratives are maintained by their lack of communication—by the silence—and the novel functions in a similar way. Ng maneuvers through the story, interlacing the different narratives together by their shared silences.

In Chapter One, I explored Kingston's novel *The Woman Warrior* as a study in enforced silence, both as a cultural and general understanding of oppression and identity. In this chapter, I intend to analyze the *chosen* silence in Ng's *Everything I Never Told You* through two different viewpoints. In Ng's text, silence is skillfully showcased through the structure of the novel. Ng develops the mystery of Lydia's death as she tells the story through fragments. She interlaces pieces of the Lee family's lives, filling in the gaps left by one, with the knowledge of another. Consequently, the structure of *Everything I Never Told You* is filled with chosen silences. The goal of these silences is to relay certain information and certain perspectives at differing times in order to build suspense and to enrich the narrative. For the Lee family, a chosen silence functions both to assimilate and to assert autonomy. Silence in Ng's text does support the stereotype of the acquiescent Asian American, but it also breaks out of the mold, allowing silent figures to harness power.

Silence functions as invisibility, as acquiescence, and as assimilation. For James Lee, the father figure of the Lee family, silence means invisibility. Ng writes that the story began "like everything, with mothers and fathers… because more than anything, her mother had wanted to stand out; because more than anything, her father had wanted to blend in. Because those things were impossible" (Ng, *Everything* 25). The act of blending in, of becoming indistinguishable, inherently reflects silence. To blend in is to lose your unique voice and become silenced by the dominant majority. To blend in is to acquiesce with the majority, to restrict your differences, to not be heard.

James Lee exemplifies this want to blend in, to disappear, to not be heard. This desire infiltrates his relationships, and his attraction to Marilyn begins because of her anonymity—"hers had been just one of the pale, pretty faces, indistinguishable from the next, and though he would never fully realize it, this was the first reason he came to love her; because she blended in so perfectly, because she had seemed to completely and utterly at home" (Ng, *Everything* 37-38). There is a certain silence to blending in, to being indistinguishable from the rest, and James pursues this anonymity. He stops speaking Chinese in fifth grade to avoid tinting his accent with Chinese; he studies "the most quintessentially American subject he could find—cowboys" (45); "he set himself a curriculum of studying American culture—listening to the radio, reading comics, saving his pocket money for double features" (44); he married a white woman who fit in a way that he never could, believing that "America herself was taking him in" (45).

Throughout the text, however, James is unable to achieve his goal of fitting in. During his school years, James "could pretend that, in the uniform, he looked just like everyone else" (Ng, *Everything* 44), but he never felt like he fit in. He did not attend the dances or the proms, he had acquaintances rather than friends, and even though he spent twelve years at Lloyd, he felt as if "he had been caught trespassing" (44). After seven years at Harvard, "he still found himself shifting in his seat, as if at any moment someone might notice him and ask him to leave" (45). His entrenched fear of being different and being noticed is intrinsically attached to his desire to assimilate.

In Marylin's first encounter with him, she is intrigued by him because he is different. During his first trial class, the entire class is surprised by James. "*Lee* conjured a certain kind of man: a Richard Henry, a Robert E. Now she realized that she—that everyone—had expected someone in a sand-colored blazer, someone with a slight drawl and a Southern pedigree" (Ng,

Everything 31). James's entrance into Marilyn's life is anything but silent—he is unexpected, he is different, he is *loud*. Even his hair defies his desire to fit in, as it was "slicked back and parted in a perfect pale line, but one wisp stood straight up in back, like an Indian chief's feather" (31). The single cowlick sticks out despite his best efforts to contain it with the masses. When James begins to talk, Marilyn is relieved to find that "there was no trace of an accent in his voice" (32), and even James's attempts to assimilate with America forces him to stand out. He has *no* accent, conditioning his voice to be neutral without anything to distinguish him from anyone else. Just as James's attraction to Marilyn stemmed from her ability to fit in, Marilyn's attraction to James was based on the fact that "something inside her said, *He understands. What it's like to be different*" (36). Years later, the Lee family is described as *strange*: "a family with no friends, a family of misfits" (112). James's presence is loud and conspicuous, however, James's narrative is one of chosen silence; he desires assimilation and his choices reflect his desire to fit in.

To fit in, James tries to silence the aspects of himself that do not conform: his Chinese heritage. He restricts his own usage of language, noting that:

> In all their time together, white has been only the color of paper, of snow, of sugar. Chinese—if it is mentioned at all—is a kind of checkers, a kind of fire drill, a kind of takeout, one James doesn't care for. It did not bear discussion any more than that the sky was up, or that the earth circled the sun. (Ng, *Everything* 202)

He attempts to silence the words 'Chinese' and 'white', muting their significance so as to distance the words from himself. The word Chinese becomes associated with "a kind of checker" or "a kind of fire drill" (202), and by reducing the word to simply an adjective of such mundane things, James attempts to erase the power of the terms themselves.

James's desire to assimilate can also be seen by his avoidance of the Chinese language and his aversion to his past. In fifth grade, James "stopped speaking Chinese to his parents, afraid of tinting his English with an accent" (Ng, *Everything* 48). After Lydia's death, James goes to Louisa, his Chinese TA's home where she offers him roasted pork buns or *char siu bao*. He says the words aloud before realizing that "he has not said a word in forty years… he has not had one of these buns since he was a child" (204-205). He chooses to avoid speaking Chinese, afraid of tinting his accent with Chinese as that would encumber his attempts to assimilate. He had not eaten a char siu bao since he was a child; "his mother had packed them in his lunches until he told her to stop, he'd rather eat what the other kids were eating" (205). James's choices are to assimilate, to be invisible, and to be silent.

Even within his marriage with Marilyn, James kept secrets and silences. When she tells him that her mother was a home economics teacher, opening up to him and revealing a secret that "she had kept hidden and now deliberately, trustingly revealed" (Ng, *Everything* 47), he is unable to tell Marilyn about his own family and life. He reveals to her that his parents also worked in the school, but he never told her:

> How the school kitchen had been like the land of the giants, everything economy sized… He had never told anyone how the other kitchen ladies snickered at his mother for wrapping up the leftover food instead of throwing it away; how at home, they'd reheat it in the oven while his parents quizzed him. (Ng, *Everything* 47-48)

He is afraid of revealing these aspects of himself to Marilyn, fearing that "she would see him as he had always seen himself: a scrawny outcast, feeding on scraps, reciting his lines and trying to pass. An imposter. He was afraid she would never see him any other way" (Ng, *Everything* 48). James chooses to be reticent regarding his past because he fears that a breakage of silence would

reveal that he is an imposter—someone who does not actually fit in, someone who is different. So, when Marilyn confides with him that her mother was a home economics teacher, he chooses not tell Marilyn that "his mother had died his second year, a tumor blossoming in her brain. His father had gone six months later" (48). He simply tells her that both of his parents are dead. When they get married, they make a pact "to let the past drift away, to stop asking questions, to look forward from then on, never back" (49). They agree to disregard the past, allowing for a silence to overtake their histories.

James's love for Lydia is reminiscent of his love for Marylin. He finds joy in the fact that *his* daughter, despite her Chinese genetics, has blue eyes and the ability to fit in. When James finds Lydia on the phone with a friend, Lydia describes James' reaction, saying that "a lightness crossed his face, like clouds shifting after strong wind" (Ng, *Everything* 179). His aspirations for Lydia are for her to fit in, and he even presents her with a book titled *How to Win Friends and Influence People* in the hopes that it will help her win friends and become popular. Lydia notes that James never picked out presents by himself—"usually James left the Christmas shopping to Marilyn, allowing her to sign each tag *Love, Mom and Dad*. But he had picked this gift out himself" (175) and this exception is prominent. This gift which represents a breakage from tradition as he had chosen it himself, embodies the hopes and dreams he has placed upon Lydia. He gives the book to her, hoping that it would help her fit in in a way he never could: "*I wish I'd had it when I was your age*. Perhaps, he thought, everything would have been different… perhaps he'd have fit in at Lloyd… He'd have *gotten more out of life*" (177). She embodies his desires for assimilation, as "for her, he thought, everything would be different" (159). His love for her, which rings louder than his affection towards his other children, seems to stem from her ability to assimilate.

James' relationship with his son, Nathan, is also affected by his deliberate pursuit of silence. While Lydia pretends to fit in, talking to "friends" as the dial tone hums in her ear, Nathan very clearly does not. In the novel, James takes Nathan to the pool and the other children leave the pool during a game of Marco Polo, leaving Nathan alone in the middle. They taunt him, one girl shouting "Chink can't find China" (Ng, *Everything* 90) while the other children laugh. James is stuck on the sidelines, unable to help or to look away. He reflects on this moment:

> Part of him wanted to gather his son into his arms, to tell him that he understood… 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. Later, when Nath was too slight for the baseball team, when he seemed to prefer reading and poring over his atlas and peering through his telescope to making friends, James would think back to this day in the swimming pool, this first disappointment in his son, this first and most painful puncture in his fatherly dreams. (Ng, *Everything* 92).

His disappointment in Nathan stems from his inability to fit into the Caucasian mold that Lydia seems to fit; he wants his son to be indistinguishable, to be silent, but instead Nathan is stuck in the middle of the swimming pool as laughter floods around him. Just as Lydia embodies James's desire to assimilate, Nathan represents the differences that James was unable to move past.

The moment at the pool reminds James of his own insecurities and fears: "to James, years of unabashed stares prickling his spine, as if he were an animal in the zoo, years of mutters in the streets—chink, gook, go home—stinging his ears, different has always been a brand on his forehead, blazoned there between the eyes" (Ng, *Everything* 251). James is unable to cope when Nathan suffers through similar experiences, and James recognizes in Nathan his own inability to

silence his differences, to become popular, and to assimilate. His pursuit of silence translates into a physical silence as his distance from Nathan grows, and his inability to speak and communicate to his son dominates their relationship. Their relationship deteriorates. James constantly says hurtful things to his son, and:

> Every time, as he heard his own voice, James bit the tip of his tongue, too late. He did not understand why he said these things to Nath, for that would have meant understanding something far more painful: that Nath reminded him more and more of himself, of everything he wanted to forget from his own boyhood. (Ng, *Everything* 156)

His inability to communicate with Nathan and his inability to articulate his emotional trauma consequently leads to the silence between them, and the inability to articulate their own selves to each other. However, this inability is self-imposed; this disarticulation is a choice. James excuses his behavior under the guise that "he did not understand why he said these things to Nath" (Ng, *Everything* 156) because facing the motivations underlying his cruelty would be to recognize his own inability to assimilate that is reflected in his son. He *chooses* to belittle his son, to condescend his efforts in a way to keep his own boyhood trauma at bay. He chooses silence and assimilation over his child; there is a hauntingly silent space between father and son, and this silence is the consequence of James's choices.

While Nathan does not reflect James's pursuit of silence in assimilating to American culture, Nathan (or Nath) does envelop his life in another form of silence. While James stopped speaking in Chinese to his parents in fifth grade and refused to talk to his parents at school, Nathan similarly silences himself, distancing himself from his parents:

> Each day, at the dinner table, Nath sat quietly while his father quizzed Lydia about her friends, while his mother nudged Lydia about her classes. When they turned, dutifully, to

> him, he was tongue-tied, because his father—still seared by the memory of a smashed television and his son's slapped face, did not ever want to hear about space. And that was all Nath read or thought about… After a few stuttering replies, the spotlight would swivel back to Lydia. (Ng, *Everything* 159-160)

Nathan's choice of silence—his tongue-tied, stuttering replies—can be seen as both assimilation and autonomy. At dinner, Nathan does not talk, knowing that his father does not want to hear about astronauts and waits for dinner to end so that he can retreat back to his room where he is allowed to continue his fascination in secrecy. Through his silence, Nathan assimilates to the household hierarchy: "he did not mind this permanent state of eclipse" (160). He essentially becomes invisible, muted in the background as the spotlight shines upon Lydia.

Nathan uses his invisibility to his advantage, shifting years of silence into autonomy. He allows Lydia to take the spotlight, choosing to stay quiet during family dinners. He supports Lydia, "buoy[ing] her up with how too much love was better than too little" (Ng, *Everything* 168) making her burden more bearable while he and their youngest sister, Hannah, go on unnoticed. By being silent and avoiding detection, however, Nathan avoids taking responsibility for their parents' dreams. He does not have to sacrifice his dreams to fulfill the desires of his parents, nor does he have to silence his own desires of space in order to please his mother. While Lydia is constantly hammered by her mother's dreams of *doctor, doctor, doctor* and her father's desires to blend in, Nathan is left alone to chase after his own dreams. Through his silence, Nathan gains his own autonomy—he is able to "leave everything and everyone behind" (167) and pursue his own dreams. The power he gains from his silence is the freedom of college and the freedom from his parents' expectations and criticisms.

Lydia too chooses silence. Like Nathan, Lydia's silence functions as autonomy but her version of autonomy differs drastically from his. Unlike Nathan who distanced himself from family, preferring space to home life, Lydia is embedded deep into the Lee family. She is the "reluctant center of their universe—every day, she held the world together. She absorbed her parents' dreams, quieting the reluctance that bubbled up within" (Ng, *Everything* 160). When Marilyn left the Lee family, pursuing her life-long dream of *more*, of medical school, and of independence, Nathan turned towards space. Lydia, however, internalized her mother's abandonment. Her silence serves less as individual autonomy, and more as influence over whether Marilyn leaves again. When Marilyn returns, Lydia silences herself—her own dreams, desires, and individuality—in order to gain *tomorrow.* "That most important word: *tomorrow*. Every day Lydia cherished it… Every night a small promise extracted from her mother: that she would be there in the morning" (149). She exchanges her individuality and her speech—allowing her mother to stifle her with dreams of medical school, suppressing her own desires as "she did everything her mother asked" (149)—for the promise of another day with Marilyn. Although it differs from personal autonomy, it is a form of control that Lydia retains. She chooses to maintain her silence in exchange for her parents' affection and happiness.

She hides her mother's Betty Crocker cookbook, understanding that the red cookbook actively crushed Marylin. Lydia hid the red notebook, and this act of silencing—of hiding, of omitting—is also an act of power. Her empty diaries are, I think, an extraordinary show of autonomy. Marilyn had gifted Lydia a diary every single year since she was five "for writing down [her] secrets" (Ng, *Everything* 74). And yet, Lydia's secrets remain with her after death, as the diaries are filled with "page after page of visible, obstinate silence. [Marilyn] leafs backwards all the way to the very first diary, 1966: not one word" (74). Despite listening to everything her

mother asked of her, the empty diaries symbolize a secrecy that is impenetrable and unchanged by Marilyn. The rows of empty diaries are almost an act of rebellion, written in silence. Marilyn was not able to control every aspect of Lydia's life, and her silence becomes her assertion.

The family member who truly embraces silence is Hannah, the youngest daughter of the family. While James wants to silence himself, trying to be as American as possible, Hannah is inherently silent throughout the text. She lurks within the margins of the story, unseen and unheard by her family or even the readers. Even Ng's references towards Hannah are placed within parentheses, almost as an afterthought—

> (What about Hannah? They set up her nursery 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 places for dinner one night, did not realize her omission until Hannah reached the table. Hannah, as if she understood her place in the cosmos, grew from quiet infant to watchful child: a child fond of nooks and corners, who curled up in closets, behind sofas, under dangling tablecloths, staying out of sight as well as out of mind, to ensure the terrain of the family did not change.) (Ng, *Everything* 160-161)

Hannah's silence can be read as imposed; her nursery is placed within the attic along with all of the other discarded, forgotten things are. She is forgotten by her own mother as a member of the household, silent to the point of invisibility. And yet, unlike Izzy Richardson—from *Little Fires Everywhere*, whom we will go into in Chapter Three—Hannah chooses to maintain the silent disposition she has created for herself. Ng writes that it was "as if she understood her place in the cosmos, grew from quiet infant to watchful child: a child fond of nooks and corners" (Ng, *Everything* 161). She understands that her place within the family is as the quiet, youngest

child—the one who may often be overlooked or even forgotten—and she seems to embrace her position. Ng writes that Hannah curled up in corners and nooks "to ensure the terrain of the family did not change" (161). Her parents may have hidden her within the attic, but it is Hannah who retains her reticence, placing herself within the nooks and corners of the home, becoming *fond* of the small hiding spaces. She is often hiding beneath the table as her parents talk, sneaking into her sister's empty room, or watching from the sidelines alongside the reader. In a way, she seems to fill the place of Kingston's narrator in *The Woman Warrior*, listening and living through the stories of others. Moreover, "she is used to keeping people's secrets" (278)—she chooses to maintain not only her silence, but the silence of others.

Hannah's utilization of silence can thus be seen as autonomy. It is through *her* silence that Hannah is able to observe and interpret the silence of others, discerning the minute changes that would otherwise be overlooked or ignored. Her unique perception is an asset and a power. Hannah understands silence in a way that others do not: when she sneaks out at night, "she takes the squeaky sixth stair on her toes; she skips the middle rosette in the front -hall carpet and the creaky floorboard beneath, landing cat-soft just at the door… Hannah's body knows all the secrets of silence" (Ng, *Everything* 103). Her quiet observations allow her to follow the same path Lydia took the night of her death. While her family is stuck in speculations, she knows that "this is what her sister would have seen that night: glints of moonlight reflected in Mrs. Allen's windowpanes, the mailboxes all leaning slightly away (103); she is able to place herself within the secrets of her sister's narrative. Just as Nathan gains control through his silence, Hannah's control appears through a different form of power—knowledge.

Within Asian American literature, the trope of speech and articulation exists in part to amplify and recreate historical silences. Cheung explains that "historical silences, for the most

part, cannot be retrieved. For Kingston, such intolerable absence provokes a telling that does not attempt to restore what is lost. Instead she amplifies the glaring omissions" (K. Cheung, *Articulate* 75). In an interview, Ng echoes a similar point: "it's the writer's impulse too that, when there is a secret, there is a power there. There is something there that is dangerous. And one of the ways to sort of deal with that danger is to shine a light on it and tell it, and imagine your way in, and fill in all those details that have been sort of left out." (Ng, Kingston, PBS Interview). These two authors view silence as a power and as an opportunity. They want to *amplify* the silence, to reinterpret it, to fill out the voids of the secret. Hannah represents the power to observe such silences, and to expand the silences. She follows the route to the lake where her sister drowned and "imagines her sister kneeling to unknot the rope… It is as close to her sister's last night as she can get" (Ng, *Everything* 105). She amplifies the unknown and is able to fill out the gaps of the silence with her interpretations.

Hannah's understanding of silence allows her insight into other narratives. She understands that Nathan blames their neighbor, Jack for Lydia's death. She also *knows* that Nathan is wrong. It is her unique awareness of a certain moment in time—one day last summer at the lake—that allows her to come to this accurate conclusion. Hannah remains in the background, observing her siblings and Jack and:

> Only Hannah, arms curled around her knees, a little way behind them, saw it fall. In her ears, it made a noise, like a cannon shot. And Jack himself jumped. He stared at the drop of water without moving, as if it were a rare insect that might fly away. Then, without looking at any of them, he raised his hand to his mouth and touched his tongue to it, as if it were honey.

> It happened so quickly that if she were a different person, Hannah might have wondered if she'd imagined it. No one else saw. Nath was still turned away; Lydia had her eyes shut now against the sun. But the moment flashed lightning-bright to Hannah. Years of yearning had made her sensitive, the way a starving dog twitches its nostrils at the faintest scent of food. She could not mistake it. She recognized it at once: love, one-way deep adoration that bounced off and did not bounce back; careful, quiet love that didn't care and went on anyway. It was too familiar to be surprising. Something deep inside her stretched out and curled around Jack like a shawl. (Ng, *Everything* 210-211)

While the other Lee children are oblivious to the silence, it is Hannah who picks up on Jack's *quiet* adoration. Hannah is the only one, besides Jack, who notices the drop of water and she is the only one who is aware of Jack's reaction; "no one else saw… but the moment flashed lightning-bright to Hannah" (Ng, *Everything* 211). She is so sensitive to the silence, that even the drop of water falling sounds like a cannon shot. This excerpt comes from Hannah's point of view, but she provides an amplification and interpretation of Jack's silence. Hannah chooses to keep Jack's secret, maintaining the silence.

Another striking moment is her conversation with her father, when James returns home after storming away. James enters the home to find Hannah huddled on the living room floor, and despite her tears and watery eyes, and she seems unsurprised to find her father back home. Hannah tells her father, "'I told her you would come home.' Not smugly, not triumphantly. Just a fact, round and simple as a bead" (Ng, *Everything* 278). Hannah's perceptions allow her insight and knowledge that goes beyond that of her family members; she *knows*, when Marilyn does not, that James would be coming back home. By sneaking around, unnoticed, her knowledge and

understanding of her family members far exceed their understandings of each other. Hannah's perceptions give her the power to understand and comfort others.

Throughout the novel, Ng follows the different family members as they trace the silences left by Lydia, trying to understand her death. Nathan's understanding leads to an intense hatred of their neighbor, Jack, who he erroneously believes is responsible for Lydia's death. Marilyn pores over Lydia's empty diaries, the box of condoms and the Marlboro cigarettes, hidden within the lining of Lydia's bookbag. But it is Hannah who can clearly see the full picture. Hannah is the first person to glimpse through Lydia's cracking exterior, silently observing and recreating her sister's distress within her own perceptions. In her memories of Lydia's birthday party, Hannah notes that Lydia is forcing a smile for her family. In each of the Lee member's memories, they are focused on their own internal issues. However, Hannah, enclouded in silence, is able to spot the first signs of Lydia's demise. At the party:

> Lydia forced herself to smile. She sat bolt upright with that same fake smile at the dinner table, like a doll on display, but only Hannah spotted its fakeness. Her back ached, watching Lydia, every bit of her did, and she slouched in her own chair until she nearly slid off the seat" (Ng, *Everything* 238).

When Lydia is upset, only Hannah notices the tremors in her hunched shoulders and her clenched jaw; only Hannah notices that "the smile as too wide, too bright, cheery and wide-toothed and fake" (Ng, *Everything* 237). She is also the first to notice that "something had shifted inside her sister, that she was balanced on a dangerous high-up ledge. She sat very still, as if one wrong move might tip Lydia over the edge, and Lydia blew out the flames with one quick puff" (238). The rest of the family is oblivious to Lydia's inner turmoil because they do not observe the silence, only paying attention to Lydia's verbal acquiescence. Just as Nathan and Lydia failed

to notice Jack's silent adoration, the entire family overlooks Lydia's fake smiles and internal tension because they do not know what to look for. They disregard the silences—the silent trembles, the fake smile, and the silent puff of air as the candles go out—but Hannah is well versed in silence.

Chosen silence offers possibilities. It can facilitate invisibility and assimilation, as James desires, stifling his differences and muzzling his Chinese culture. Chosen silence also offers a chance for empowerment. Silence enables Hannah to access perceptions and knowledge, allowing her to understand and reinterpret gaps and secrets. Chosen silence, as seen in Ng's *Everything I Never Told You*, has the capacity to empower and change the lives of characters, just as much—or perhaps more than—speech.

Chapter Three: Breaking Silence

By now, we have covered enforced silence and chosen silence, and we move on to the breakage of silence. In a society that values speech and assertion, the notion of articulation is one that infiltrates literature surrounding the topics of race and subjugation. In her article, "'Don't Tell': Imposed Silences in *The Color Purple* and *The Woman Warrior,*" King-Kok Cheung writes that:

> Both the black and the Chinese American protagonists proceed to tell all-on paper. Their needs for self-expression are obvious: they hang onto sanity by writing; they defend themselves with words; they discover their potential-sound themselves out—through articulation (162).

Words, writing, and articulation become a weapon of destruction for women, and for women of color, who are silenced in more ways than one, articulation becomes a crucial point in their narrative as "silence runs even deeper in the work of minority women" (K. Cheung, *Articulate* 163). This notion of disarticulation also touches upon the multilingual identity of immigrants who arrive in America, and the disconnect between the two languages, the two cultures, and the two generations of people.

While reticence is entrenched within Asian culture, younger and newer Asian American voices have called for speech rather than silence. It would be remiss to overlook that the anthology, *Aiiieeeee!* was considered by its editors to be "fifty years of our whole voice" (Chin et al. XXVI), and a breakage from the silence and obscurity. Kingston's novel, *The Woman Warrior* follows the journey of a young girl's attempts to find her voice. And as Asian Americans attempt to step away from the image of the "inscrutable Oriental" (K. Cheung *Articulate* 7), speaking up and asserting their own voices became essential. While Kingston's

novel begins with enforced silence as her mother instructs her to keep secrets, the entire novel is a bid for speech. "'You must not tell anyone,' my mother said, 'what I am about to tell you'" (Kingston 5), and yet the entirety of the novel is the retelling of secrets and stories. Despite the significance of entrenched silence, *The Woman Warrior* gives a voice—as faltering and unreliable as it may be sometimes—to five women who would otherwise be voiceless in such a society. It is silence which shutters the No Name Woman into the margins of her familial history, but Kingston's text—her articulation, and her breakage of silence—allows Kingston, and by extension us, to recognize and better understand the No-Name Woman. Despite the lapses in information, Kingston provides speculations and fantasies which fill the gap of silence. Kingston speculates that her aunt "may have been unusually beloved, the precious only daughter, spoiled and mirror gazing because of the affection her family lavished on her" (Kingston 13), and Kingston suggests that "perhaps my aunt, my forerunner, caught in a slow life, let dreams grow and fade" (10). There is an entrenched and enforced silence within the text, but Kingston is able to forge an identity through words and articulation: the same identity that was eradicated by silence.

In this chapter, I plan to examine the breakage of silence within Celeste Ng's *Little Fires Everywhere*. Ng's most recent novel is fascinating in that it disrupts the expected Asian American narrative entirely. The novel centers around two families: the Richardson family and the Warren family. Neither family is Asian, and in fact, the first Asian character we meet is such a trivial character that he is not given actual dialogue but is instead introduced by the white Mrs. Richardson. Mrs. Richardson introduces to us Mr. Yang, her first tenant who "was an immigrant from Hong Kong who had come to the United States knowing no one and speaking only fragmentary, heavily accented English. Over the years his accent had diminished only

marginally" (Ng, *Little* 13). In fact, the majority of the Chinese characters within the text have a very small role. Besides Mr. Yang there is Serena Wong and her mother, Ed Lim, May Ling, and Mirabella. The narrative shifts from the Asian-dominant narrative of *The Woman Warrior* and *Everything I Never Told You*, to a narrative that is cognizant and derived from an Asian American experience. Ng noted in an interview that she found it a wonderful thing that Asian American writers were writing "more books too by writers with Asian heritage that aren't— quote, unquote— "about being Asian," … there is space now, I think, for those writers to talk about things other than just their particular ethnicity" (Ng, Kingston Interview). In a way, I think *Little Fires Everywhere* is Ng's breakage of "silence" or expectations, writing a novel that is informed by her Asian background, but not necessarily an "Asian American novel".

This novel begins, unlike the other two, with speech. Ng begins the novel with: "Everyone in Shaker Heights was *talking* about it that summer" (Ng, *Little* 1 emphasis mine), *it* being that Isabelle Richardson had burned the Richardson's house down. Before the talk about the Richardson fire, "all spring the gossip had been about little Mirabelle McCullough… and now, at last, there was something new and sensational to discuss" (1). Unlike the other novels, which begin in silence and secrecy, *Little Fires Everywhere* begins with active discourse.

The fire that both concludes and begins the text can be read as the most significant breakage of silence. The fire is started by Izzy Richardson, the youngest child in the Richardson family and the evident "black sheep" of the family. While the rest of the children—Lexie, Trip, and Moody—were easy pregnancies, Izzy's pregnancy induced bouts of morning sickness and nausea, incapacitating Mrs. Richardson. Izzy was born 11 weeks early, leaving Mrs. Richardson to watch through the portholes of the incubator at her daughter who was "a net of purple veins

under salmon-colored skin" (Ng, *Little* 109), meticulously checking that Izzy was even breathing. However, Izzy:

> Did grow: despite her early start, she displayed a tenacity of will that even the doctors remarked upon. She tugged at her IV; she uprooted her feeding tube. When the nurses came to change her, she kicked her thumb-sized feet and hollered so loudly the babies in nearby incubators woke and joined in. "Nothing wrong with her lungs," the doctors told the Richardsons. (Ng, *Little* 109).

The doctors warned Mrs. Richardson about various prognoses: jaundice, vision issues, hearing loss, heart defects, seizures, cerebral palsy. Despite her uncertain conditions, however, Izzy was strong willed and assertive, hollering and pulling at the chains around her.

Izzy was spirited and full of life. Mr. Richardson "delighted in her intelligence, in her spirit. In fact, she reminded him of her mother, when she'd been younger: he'd been drawn to that spark, that certainty of purpose, how she always knew her mind and had a plan" (Ng, *Little* 112). Izzy "had been born to push buttons, and as she grew—with excellent vision and hearing, no sign of seizures or palsy, and a clearly agile mind—the more closely her mother watched her and the more she chafed at the attention" (111). Izzy and her mother develop a tumultuous relationship in which Mrs. Richardson attempts to set boundaries for her daughter, resentment and anxiety paving the ground for miscommunication. Unable to effectively communicate her concern, the conversations would often consist of Mrs. Richardson saying "*No, no Izzy, why can't you listen to me, Izzy, behave yourself, for god's sake, no, are you insane?*" (110). She tries to enforce behavior, a *silence* of sorts, by setting restrictions on Izzy, fearing the various prognosis the doctors had warned her about.

Rather than becoming paranoid or caving into her mother's incessant fussing, Izzy actively protests against her oppressive mother. The result is "Izzy pushing, her mother restraining, and after a time no one could remember how the dynamic had started, only that it had existed always" (Ng, *Little* 112). At the pool, as her siblings splash in the water, Izzy is forced to stay on the edges, "on a towel, coated in sunscreen and shaded by an umbrella" (111). Instead of remaining concealed beneath layers of sunscreen and towels, Izzy jumps into the deep end, headfirst, making a splash. When Izzy is grounded from sleepovers, "Izzy took to sneaking outside at night and returning with pinecones or a handful of crab apples or a buckeye to leave on the kitchen island" (111). These offerings are placed in prominent positions; the pinecones and crabapples and buckeyes are meant to be seen. Not only does Izzy rebel against her mother's authority, going directly against the verbal commands, she does so in the *loudest* way possible. Izzy does not jump into the shallow end or dip her feet into the water, she jumps headfirst into the deep end of the pool and needs a lifeguard to rescue her. She does not just sneak outside after dark, she brings back little accolades and flaunts them in front of her mother, actively asserting herself. When Mrs. Richardson frets over Izzy's picky eating, "Izzy declared herself a vegetarian" (111). Her mother's restrictions and limitations are, unintentionally or not, acts of silencing Izzy's individuality and spirit. Izzy refuses to let herself be silenced, breaking the restrictions—and silence—with active assertion of her own mind and purpose.

Izzy's breakage of silence also involves her willingness to speak out against others when she believes it goes against her perception of "right versus wrong" (Ng, *Little* 112). At Linda McCullough's party celebrating Mirabelle's—the baby Chinese girl they were in the midst of adopting—birthday, Izzy questions Mrs. McCullough regarding the baby. She asks Mrs. McCullough, "how can you know it's her birthday" (114), persisting in the questioning despite

her mother's reprimands. "'But you don't know her real birthday, then, do you' Izzy said. 'Did you just pick some random day" (115)? She is relentless in her questioning, asking Mrs. McCullough "Is her name really Mirabelle?... But she must have had a name before" (115). Even when her mother scolds her, telling Izzy, "*you* need to be less rude next time we go to a party, or you can just stay home. Linda McCullough babysat *you* when you were little, you know… you think about that the next time you see her" (117), Izzy is unrepentant, slamming her car door. She has a strong sense of what is right and wrong, and verbally supports her principles.

When Mr. Richardson decides to assist in the legal court case for custody of Mirabelle—or May Ling Chow, as she was originally named—Izzy refuses to be swayed against her opinions, unafraid to speak out against her family as "Izzy knew where her loyalties lay" (Ng, *Little* 136). She calls Mrs. McCullough a "baby stealer" (136) and continues speaking up even as her mother attempts to silence her. Mrs. Richardson's attempts to silence Izzy—using her full name, Isabelle Marie Richardson, and saying "Izzy, apologize to your father" (136)—eventually end in punishments, as she tells Izzy to go to her room and "confiscating her beloved Doc Martens and throwing them in the trash" (136). Despite the efforts to silence her, however, Izzy remains firm. By asserting her own mind and refusing to bend or be silenced, Izzy exhibits the power of speech in power-relations. She refuses to give in to the enforced silence, and also denies the choice of silence—by being outspoken regarding her own mind, she commands autonomy and power.

The novel begins, and ends, with the fire in the Richardson home. Izzy sets the fire, influenced by Mia's well-intentioned advice that, like prairie fires, "sometimes you need to scorch everything to the ground and start over" (Ng, *Little* 311). The reasoning behind her actions was to *break the silence*. Izzy pieces together the various narratives running throughout

the story and "in her mind she cataloged the many betrayals. Lexie had lied; she'd used Pearl. Trip had taken advantage of her. Moody had betrayed her, on purpose. Her father was a baby stealer. And her mother: well, her mother had been at the root of it all" (322). Izzy had a very strong sense of what was right and what was wrong, and she saw the situation and her family to be incredibly unfair. She perceived the Warren family, Mia and Pearl, to be warm and kind, and she saw her own family as one of betrayal and criticism.

Significantly, Izzy notes that when she was with Mia, "she had felt, finally, as if she could speak without immediately bumping into the hard shell of her sheltered life, as if she suddenly saw that the solid walls penning her in were actually bars, with spaces between them wide enough to slip through" (Ng, *Little* 323). Now that she has felt the freedom from oppression, she can no longer go back to living the restricted life she knew, but even more importantly "she could not pretend that nothing had happened" (323). The fire in the Richardson home is a physical declaration from Izzy that asserted her values and her morals. By starting the fire, Izzy broke through the silence of her family, not necessarily exposing the Richardson family's bad secrets but rather asserting the need for change. Prairie fires, she is told, "*scorch everything to the ground and start over. After the burning the soil is richer, and new things can grow*" (324). The fire represents Izzy's voice burning through the criticisms and oppression she—alongside Mia and Pearl—has faced. It is a final grasp for power against her oppressive family, breaking the silence in favor of something new.

The breakage of silence functions in many ways throughout *Little Fires Everywhere*. For figures like Izzy and Elizabeth Manwill, breaking the silence means speaking up against authority. Izzy is in constant conflict with her mother and with societal expectations. Her ultimate stand against authority—her *aiiieeeee*— is the fire that demolishes her family home, a

clear message of her insubordination against the oppression she faced. For Elizabeth Manwill, her *aiiieeeee* is standing up against Elena Richardson.

Elizabeth Manwill is a less prominent figure within the text—the head of the medical clinic that provides abortions and Mrs. Richardson's freshman roommate. She was eighteen and shy, "an easy target for mockery: glasses perpetually sliding down her nose, forehead knobby with acne, clothes frumpy and ill fitting" (Ng, *Little* 283), but it was Elena (Mrs. Richardson) who had taken her in and taught her confidence. "By the time they graduated, Elizabeth was a different person, Liz Manwill, who wore pantsuits and heels and architect's glasses that made her look almost as smart as she was" (284). Mrs. Richardson continued to offer her guidance and support, providing connections for the local clinic, and even introduced Elizabeth Manwill to her husband but "Mrs. Richardson had never asked, or even hinted, at repayment, and *both of them were keenly aware of this*" (283 emphasis mine). Despite the equal status they may portray as friends, there is an imposed power-relation between the two women. Mrs. Richardson has given Elizabeth—whom Mrs. Richardson calls Betsy—so much, that the imbalance between them causes an unequal dynamic.

In the novel, Mrs. Richardson wants a favor from Elizabeth and Elizabeth was ready to help her, as Mrs. Richardson had done so much for her and there is an unspoken obligation. However, during their encounter Elizabeth notices that "Elena so often talked to her as if she were a child, as if she, Elena, were the expert in everything and Elizabeth should be taking notes" (Ng, *Little* 286). Mrs. Richardson also seems to understand this dynamic, as in her own thoughts, she is rather condescending towards Elizabeth. "Betsy Manwill, Mrs. Richardson thought, had always been timid. She'd always needed a good push to do anything… she needed a firm hand" (287). Mrs. Richardson's tone and usage of phrases such as "firm hand" suggest that

she views Elizabeth the same way one would view a young, timid child who needs to be controlled in some way. By telling Elizabeth "you got a husband and a child by trusting me, so I'd say my judgement has worked out well for you every time before" (288), Mrs. Richardson implies that she is the firm hand who's judgement controls Elizabeth, establishing their power-dynamic as imbalanced. Furthermore, by bringing up Elizabeth's husband—who Elizabeth met thanks to Mrs. Richardson—she is calling upon an unspoken favor. "She'd been keeping a running tally of everything she'd ever done for Elizabeth, too, every bit of support she'd given, and now she expected to be repaid" (288). Both Elizabeth and Mrs. Richardson are "keenly aware" (283) that Mrs. Richardson has built up credit within these transactions of support and social engineering, and the dynamic between the two women is no longer one of equal grounds. They both understand that in this social scenario, Mrs. Richardson feels that she is *owed* her favor, placing Mrs. Richardson within the position of power.

As the position of authority, Mrs. Richardson attempts to silence Elizabeth into acquiescence. When Elizabeth attempts to argue against her, "Mrs. Richardson went on as if she hadn't been interrupted" (Ng, *Little* 288). However, Elizabeth does speak up despite Mrs. Richardson's attempts to restrain her. She goes against Mrs. Richardson's claims, saying "I hope you aren't planning to take credit for my entire marriage" (288) and admonishes Mrs. Richardson. "I'm disappointed that you would even ask for such a thing" (288), she tells Mrs. Richardson, switching their roles. Elizabeth utilizes disappointment to patronize Mrs. Richardson the same way Mrs. Richardson uses condescension and phrases like "firm hand" to belittle her.

She protests against Mrs. Richardson's enforced silence, and by speaking up, empowers herself. Mrs. Richardson herself is dumbfounded by the shift in control, wondering:

> Had that really been Betsy Manwill talking to her like that? Implying that she was unethical! And that last little dig about *being the director*—as if Betsy were reminding her how important she was, as if to say *I'm more important than you now*" (Ng, *Little* 289)

Mrs. Richardson recognizes the shift in control, noticing that Elizabeth's comment about being director was indeed an assertion of her own power. Their relationship began in a state of imbalance, with Mrs. Richardson holding the power. By speaking up and "talking to [Mrs. Richardson] like that" (Ng, *Little* 289), Elizabeth breaks the restrictions of the power-dynamic, taking power for herself. Later in the day, Elizabeth would be "proud of herself for standing up to Elena Richardson" (290), and the lunch would be "the last lunch the two women ever had together" (290). Both women understand that the silent power-dynamic has shifted beyond repair, and that Mrs. Richardson no longer held absolute control.

Ng also uses the text to break the silence. For half of the novel, Ng's focus is on the McCullough's story. The reader is told that the McCulloughs had wanted a baby for so long, and when they were given the opportunity to take in the malnourished Mirabelle, they jumped at the chance. They were good parents, the reader is told, who very obviously adored the child. For this half of the novel, Bebe is silent. When Ng does introduce Bebe's story, she does so in parenthesis—like Hannah's introduction in *Everything I Never Told You*—as a story that is hidden and forgotten. By oscillating between the public perception and Bebe's own narrative, hidden in parenthesis, Ng is able to break the silence on Bebe's own struggles. The public sees that the baby was malnourished because, "at two months old, she had weighed only eight pounds" (253). In parenthesis, hidden from knowledge is Bebe's side of the story—"the baby had refused to latch. Bebe had tried and tried until her nipples cracked and bled" (253).

Following the story in parenthesis, the reader is introduced to a helpless and depressed mother who tried to help her child. The public perception shows the child abandoned at the firehouse on a freezing evening, but Ng shines a light on Bebe's reality:

> (Although it had indeed been quite cold when Bebe placed her baby on the steps of the fires station, the baby had been wearing three shirts and two pairs of pants and had been swaddled in four blankets—every baby item Bebe had owned. Her little hands had been tucked inside to keep them warm and a fold of blanket had been drawn over her head to shield it from the wind. By everyone's best estimates, she had been outside for approximately twenty minutes when the fire chief opened the door, and in the snow for perhaps two…) (Ng, *Little* 254-255)

By shining a light on Bebe's narrative, Bebe is seen in a new light, allowing for the reader to sympathize more with the mother. She is allowed empathy and understanding. By breaking her silence and sharing her story, Ng is able to empower Bebe.

Ed Lim, Bebe's lawyer to win back May Ling Chow, is also an advocate for speech. He is a skilled lawyer who utilizes speech to empower his client. His articulation, in particular, emphasizes the trope of representation and breaking silence within Asian American literature:

> The tropes of self-representation, speaking out, breaking silence, and claiming voice… would become common, powerful tropes in Asian American literature as a whole. They were also, of course, found in Asian American cultures in general. These tropes had both aesthetic and political meaning and found strategic corollaries in the explicitly political realm of community organizing, labor movements, grass-roots activism, electoral politics, and economic entrepreneurship that shaped Asian American community formation. (Nguyen 290)

As significant as representation can be, however, it inherently goes against the stereotype of the inscrutable and subservient Asian man. Lim's articulation goes against the allowed power-relations within society, and Mr. Richardson realizes that:

> An angry Asian man didn't fit the public's expectations, and was therefore unnerving. Asian men could be socially inept and incompetent and ridiculous, like a Long Duk Dong, or at best unthreatening and slightly buffoonish, like a Jackie Chan. They were not allowed to be angry and articulate and powerful. And possibly right. (Ng, *Little* 267)

The simple act of articulation creates unease within the white society. Asian men are allowed to be silent, acquiescing to expectations. Asian men are allowed to be buffoonish or incompetent, as they do not present a challenge for control. However, when they become articulate and "aggressive" (266), they are empowered, and they offer resistance to the social norm. Ed Lim's ability to speak articulately shifts the power-relations of the racial hierarchy.

While it may seem that the breakage of silence is not form of silence at all, I believe that the silence exists in the expectation of oppression or assimilation. Ed Lim's articulation is seen as representation and a *breakage* because there is the preconception that Asian Americans should be silent. Izzy's rebellious streak is a breakage of silence as she goes against her mother, defying standard power-relations. They are empowered not only because they chose to speak, but because they chose to speak in defiance of the oppressive silence.

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