THE HUNCH OF RACISM

Racial Paranoia and Microaggressions in Celeste Ng's Everything I Never Told You *(2014)*

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Abstract. This article argues that a contemporary work of Asian American mystery, Celeste Ng's novel *Everything I Never Told You* (2014), operates through racial paranoia, in which there is a fundamental epistemological uncertainty around what racial harm is and how it occurs. Paranoia has typically been approached as something to be "solved" by identifying the clear presence of racial harm. However, Ng's novel sustains rather than dismantles racial paranoia by narrating various linguistic microaggressions that a mixed-race Chinese American family suffers, even as she refuses to neatly link these microaggressions to the death of their child. Paranoia is endemic to the Asian American mystery genre, which swirls around the assimilatory potential of Asian Americans who often experience racism in the minor key of mundane, everyday interactions. Yet rather than reading Ng's novel as a politically conservative text in which Asian Americans are model minorities who do not suffer from "real" harm, I argue that the novel's racial paranoia fosters productive uncertainty, in which racial harm and repair exist side by side with neither taking precedence over the other. Asian American racial paranoia has deeper implications for how we narrate minority identity overall, challenging us to cultivate a gentler relationship to historical loss through the realm of feeling.

I. FOLLOW YOUR HUNCHES

In Weike Wang's short story "Omakase," published in *The New Yorker* in 2018, a Chinese American woman in a relationship with a white man attempts to ascertain whether she is experiencing racial harm.[1] On the surface, not much seems to happen: the woman and the man, a relatively well-to-do couple who remain unnamed, go to a high-end omakase restaurant in New York City, share a meal, and engage in polite conversation with the restaurant staff before leaving.

However, the woman's internal monologue, which the short story is focalized around, betrays the placid external world around her. The woman's thoughts are described as "feverish…her brain in overdrive," swirling around questions of how being Asian does or does not matter in her interactions with her white boyfriend. For example, as the woman reflects on her first online movie date with the man who selects the martial arts film *House of Flying Daggers* for them to watch, the woman had wondered whether the man has "yellow fever" and is only romantically interested in her because of her race. She asks him a series of questions about his reasons for selecting the film and interrogates him about the race of his previous girlfriend, feeling relieved when the man reveals that he chose the film simply because it is "critically acclaimed" and that his former girlfriend is Jewish. Yet back in the present moment, when the man mistakes their sushi chef for another Asian chef he has previously seen, the woman is deeply uncomfortable, wondering whether he has made the mistake because he thinks all Asians look the same.

By the story's end, the unnamed woman ultimately feels pressured into taking on a colorblind, post racial vision of the world, where the particularities of being Asian devolve into universals. Looking at the Japanese sushi chef, she thinks, "The Japanese way. Or perhaps the Asian way. Or perhaps the human way." She feels unable to vocalize her discomfort around race to her boyfriend, going along with his view that she "worr[ies] too much" and is "overthinking." The title of Wang's short story, "Omakase," references a Japanese meal whose dishes are not decided in advance but left up to the chef depending on the ingredients they have on hand. In the story, the woman translates "omakase" into the phrase, "I leave it up to you," indicating her deferral of agency. Indeed, Wang's short story concludes with the man literally placing his hand over the woman's head in a condescending gesture that is meant to silence her very thoughts.

What Wang's short story highlights is the notorious problem of how to address racial microaggressions, or the range of conscious and unconscious social interactions that do not result in clear material violence but are still considered harmful for racial minorities.[2] "Omakase" demonstrates that navigating these

racialized instances, ones that occur through understated speech, is an exercise in affective and readerly paranoia where the woman works hard to interpret how racial difference impacts her life. Yet navigating microaggressions comes to a head for upwardly mobile, East Asian Americans who are often perceived as a privileged demographic who do not "really" suffer from racism. In Wang's story, the woman is a finance professional living in New York City who clearly feels great racial strain in her relationship but receives messaging from her friends and family that she is "lucky" to inhabit the position she is in and that there is nothing truly amiss. "Omakase" shows that conversations around racial microaggressions are bifurcated between establishing clear intent, causality, and harm—providing "proof" of what occurred—or dismissed as instances of "overthinking." The woman's thoughts are described as "oscillating between… two extremes," where she suppresses her worries under an appearance that is as emotionless, colorless, and composed as a "statue."

Rather than treating racial paranoia as a temporary state where racial harm either is proven or dismissed, my interest in this article lies in approaching racial paranoia as an affective reading practice for racial minorities who exist in a continual state of epistemic uncertainty about the varied effects of racialization and racism in one's relationships with others.[3] When presenting students with "Omakase," they commented on how the story doesn't "flash red"—displaying the dangers of explicit racism—so much as "glow orange," a dull, persistent warning that indicates how the woman "felt that she was constantly [on the verge of] danger."[4] However, while the woman's questioning around what counts as harm is silenced by the story's end, I argue that a contemporary, New York Times bestselling work of Asian American literature, Celeste Ng's mystery novel *Everything I Never Told You* (2014) sustains racial paranoia by tracing the circumstances around the death of Lydia, the mixed-race Chinese and white daughter of the Lee family who live in the fictionalized town of Middlewood, Ohio, in the 1970s. While an omniscient narrator initially seems to lead readers to hypothesize that racist microaggressions are a major contributing factor in Lydia's death, the true cause of her death is never fully revealed—not only is this information withheld from Lydia's surviving family members, but it is also withheld from readers themselves.

In lingering with the epistemological uncertainty at the heart of racial paranoia, I seek to take a more neutral stance toward racial paranoia, one that does not position it as good or bad, helpful or harmful within itself. Rather, racial paranoia becomes a way for racial minorities to manage microaggressions that can open possibilities beyond the pressure to exhaustively provide incontrovertible "proof" that harm is happening to them as the basis for their claims to identity. Scholars have long noted that Asian Americanist critique is

caught up in a critical impasse that rejects the upwardly mobile model minority as politically dispensable while gravitating toward subjects of historical pain and trauma as politically consequential. Viet Thanh Nguyen refers to this mode of critique as one that reifies the "bad subject" over and against the model minority.[5] Other scholars have used related terminology, including Mark Chiang's "subject of material lack,"[6] Christopher Lee's "idealized critical subject,"[7] and Amy C. Tang's "repetition" of racial trauma.[8] Most recently in a special issue of the *Journal of Asian American Studies* on the "success," or institutional recognition of Asian American studies programs, scholars like Mimi Thi Nguyen argue that Asian American studies needs to look beyond the "minor object" of political contestation.[9] It follows then that if minority identity finds its roots in narratives of marginalization—"I suffer, therefore I am"—focusing on affects (more than effects) moves us beyond understanding minority identity as *primarily* the sum of historical losses that need to be recovered, balancing it with the necessity of "imagin[ing] a world…in which being Asian American isn't necessary."[10]

In particular, the Asian American mystery novel is a rich site to locate racial paranoia, which serves as an important political and interpretive mode as authors and critics do the essential work of uncovering histories of racialization that have been obscured. As Yunte Huang argues in a survey of the genre, the flowering of primary and secondary works around the Asian American mystery genre speak to the "history of suspicion, surveillance, exclusion, and discrimination plaguing the Asian American community…[who] have lived under a cloud of suspicion and paranoia." [11]Asian American racialization has always been a paranoid formulation, caught between the poles of being either a Yellow Peril perpetual foreigner and "threat," or a model minority who is ostensibly a perfectly assimilated citizen who suffers no racial harm. In Celeste Ng's novel, the veneer of respectability that surrounds the middle-class Lees who live in Midwestern suburbia is always shadowed by the threat of racial discrimination. Yet curiously enough, *Everything I Never Told You* sustains, rather than dismantles racial paranoia by presenting readers with a series of nonlinguistic clues that can never be completely deciphered for their relationship to racial harm in advance. In the process, the novel reveals how an overreliance on the realm of language to account for harm, such as what we see in "Omakase," is an exhausting, even fruitless task. Ng shows how racial paranoia can tune us in to the nonlinguistic realm of "reading" body language and archival fragments as an alternative site for reconciliation and repair. By refusing to equate linguistic microaggressions with a totalizing metrics of harm, Ng presents us glimmers of how to exist in a gentler relationship with minority pain through the realm of feeling.

I am highly aware of the negative connotations around a term like paranoia, especially for racial minorities who are commonly accused of overreacting or

making up their harms in response to microaggressions. Yet in choosing paranoia over a related term like suspicion, I mean to recuperate it as an essential mode of interpretation for racial minorities who constantly experience epistemological uncertainty over the status of their own racialization. As Sianne Ngai writes of paranoia, it is a "meta-feeling" in which one is not sure how they should be feeling in the first place.[12] Hence, my argument reaffirms the value of paranoia in literary-critical debates that have questioned the utility of "deep," suspicious, and negative readings as advanced by scholars like Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus.[13] As Vivian Huang details in her monograph on performances of Asian American inscrutability—which I take here as the inability to easily "read" what one is presented with—inscrutability can "stoke anxieties of Asian American apoliticality,"[14] even as Huang contends that it also functions as a mode of reparative reading that acts as a "productive force of what can be sensed."[15] However, while Huang focuses on staged performances, I ask how inscrutability manifests in a major prose work.

In what follows, I first give an overview of the genre of Asian American mystery, discussing how racial paranoia is endemic to the genre because of how it toggles between the Yellow Peril and the model minority. Consequently, I argue that Asian American racial paranoia is best poised to approach racial harm through the lens of uncertainty because of how it is often rooted in mundane interactions, before contrasting it with how racial paranoia has been approached in other humanistic fields. Finally, I analyze Celeste Ng's *Everything I Never Told You* as a text that demonstrates the value of Asian American racial paranoia.

My reading is two-pronged, and rests on the temporality through which Ng's mystery unfolds around the death of a mixed-race child: on the one hand, the omniscient narrator in Ng's novel is situated far beyond the 1970s when the novel is set, capable of supplying a progressive language for racial harm that doesn't yet exist for the Lee family. In this way, the omniscient narrator lures readers into thinking that she will reinstate the link between racial microaggressions and racial harm that the Lees are never able to say out loud, seemingly working to assign a precise who, what, where, when, and why to Lydia's death. On the other hand, Ng sprinkles a series of nonlinguistic moments throughout the story that seem to have a relationship to racial harm but can never be confirmed as such. Rather, these moments turn out to be unclear signs that can never be confirmed in advance as markers of foul play but must be constantly assessed and re-assessed in the expanding present. Make no mistake: racial harm does exist, although my interest lies not in clearly staking it out so much as pinpointing how, for the marginalized, a state of paranoid uncertainty about how harm might unfold can also come with an attendant hope for existing beyond the need both for Asian Americans and other racial minorities to prove their pains in order to prove their existence.

II. RACIAL PARANOIA AND THE BLAME GAME

Mystery is a broad genre associated with the subcategories of detective, spy, and crime fiction in which a hidden plot is eventually resolved.[16] A sense of readerly paranoia around trying to resolve troubling events, then, is one of the engines of the Asian American mystery genre. In *Everything I Never Told You*, the mystery is activated by the mysterious circumstances around Lydia's death, with the assumption that by the novel's end, Lydia's true killer (ostensibly the forces of structural racism) will be fully revealed. Before the 1980s, the mystery genre heavily featured Asians through Orientalist stereotypes, which were split between the Yellow Peril of Sax Rohmer's wildly successful serial *The Mystery of Dr. Fu-Manchu* (1912–1913) and the model minority figure of Charlie Chan, an accommodating Chinatown detective.[17] As the scholar Tina Chen writes in a monograph about Asian American double agents in fiction, there has always been a sense of apprehension around Asian Americans who are perceived as having divided loyalties.[18] Well-known works of mystery authored by Asian Americans later in the twentieth and twentieth-first century work to complicate these stereotypes, such as Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker* (1995) and Viet Thanh Nguyen's Pulitzer Prize winning novel *The Sympathizer* (2015), which revolve around protagonists whose identities and actions vacillate between their countries, their communities, and themselves in what Yunte Huang calls the continuing "lure" of the Asian American mystery.[19] In Charles Yu's recent award-winning, metafictional work *Interior Chinatown* (2020), Willis Wu, a Chinese American man, is literally stuck in the space of Chinatown, unable to leave and scripted into the role of a "Generic Asian Man" on a police procedural show called *Black and White*.[20] Yu's novel demonstrates how the relationship between the mystery genre and racial stereotype stubbornly persists into today.

For Yu to position Willis Wu on a racial spectrum between "Black and white" speaks to the way that Asian Americans have been rendered both visible and invisible in discussions around racial politics through affective paranoia. Cathy Park Hong identifies paranoia as a type of Asian American "minor feeling"[21] that emerges when Asian Americans question whether they have "really" suffered racist harm because of the ways they have been perceived, and even perceive themselves, as a model minority who are "next in line to be white."[22] Model minority identity dovetails with narratives around racial passing; Jinny Huh has explored the relationship between detective fiction and passing narratives that are animated by what she terms "race detection paranoia," locating this impulse in Asian American writers such as Winnifred Eaton, a mixed-race Chinese-British author who masqueraded as Japanese under her pseudonym Onoto Watanna,

as well as Chang-rae Lee's *A Gesture Life* (1999) wherein the protagonist Doc Hata's quiet suburban life in the United States belies his troubling previous role as a doctor for Korean comfort women.[23] In erin Khuê Ninh's monograph *Passing for Perfect: College Imposters and Other Model Minorities* (2021), she takes direct inspiration from Tina Chen's earlier work on Asian American double agents. But while Chen, as Ninh writes, makes a distinction between "deviant imposters" and "ordinary impersonators," the former "who are guilty of stealing someone else's identity and may presumably deserve to be expelled," Ninh makes no such distinction, arguing that Asian Americans "who resort to passing for model minority are imposters and impersonators, both."[24] In all these examples, paranoid uncertainty exists around the assimilatory potential for Asian Americans. As these examples show, Asian American racialization is not just marked by dramatic instances of material destruction and violence, but also around quotidian interactions no matter Asian Americans' class backgrounds.[25]

Asian American racialization in the mystery genre means that it is well primed to address racial paranoia around harm not solely in the major, but also in the minor key of everyday interactions. Beginning in the 1970s, the same time period that Celeste Ng's novel is set in, social science research established "microaggressions" to expose the more subtle realm of discrimination, documenting the many spoken and unspoken social cues that can stigmatize minority groups. Nevertheless, like the legal realm, social science research on microaggressions focuses on being able to trace an etiology of harm more than lingering with a sense of paranoia around harm, with categories like microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations accounting for different kinds of scenarios.[26] However, critics of microaggression research claim that it can overdetermine instances of harm: both perpetrators and victims of microaggressions can become so hyperaware of their actions and words that it numbs the ability for people to engage in constructive conversation.[27]

While microaggressions can and do cause racial harm, they are fundamentally caught up in the vagaries of language itself, in which what is said (or even unsaid) can be assigned different meanings depending on the context and the individuals who are present. While a phrase like "go back to your country" is more obviously associated with xenophobic hate, a question like "where were you born?" could be interpreted either as an example of xenophobia that implies that the recipient is a foreigner, an instance of genuine curiosity about someone's background, or both. Outside of formal studies, situations involving microaggressions are extremely numerous and varied, occurring in ways that are so sudden and fleeting that one may question whether they have even occurred, especially if they are operating on an unconscious and unspoken level. As Judith Butler notes, hate speech—which I treat here as dovetailing with

microaggressions—is difficult to delineate and persecute when language itself has so many different connotations and impacts.[28]

The cloudiness between harm and not-harm in the Asian American mystery dismantles the binary distinction in Asian Americanist critique I identified earlier which tends to be bifurcated between the bad subject and the model minority. In her 2010 dissertation on Asian American paranoia, Swan Kim argues for "paranoia not just as a phenomenon evidenced through Asian American experience but also as a strategy of reading to be taken up by Asian American critics."[29] As she writes, "paranoia can be a sign of a healthy subject and a necessary structure…a flexible strategy that can accommodate to Asian American studies in the state of becoming."[30] So, too, does Betsy Huang share similar sentiments in her chapter on Asian American crime fiction, where she directly cites Nguyen's *Race and Resistance* on how the Asian American mystery "contravene[s] the master narratives of both a complicit and a resistant Asian America."[31] Notably, Kim does not treat readerly paranoia as a "pathology,"[32] but in tandem with my own interest in paranoia as ripe for cultivating productive uncertainty.

In contrast, in various humanistic fields from literary and cultural studies to the law and social sciences, racial paranoia is ultimately something to be undone, a feeling that is linked to strong forms of harm that can be clearly identified. Paranoia is discussed as a feeling that emerges when histories of systemic material violence against marginalized bodies are routinely swept under the rug; identifying and uncovering these histories becomes a mode of redress and a "remedy" for paranoia. In C. Namwali Serpell's study of literary uncertainty, she identifies a type of narrative structure called "mutual exclusion," where competing versions of events are presented to readers, who continually vacillate between "paranoia and its undoing" such that "readers end up asking the most fundamental narrative questions: 'Did this happen? Does this exist? Is it true?'" Serpell lists a variety of genres that fall under mutual exclusion, including "ghost stories, vision tales, insanity narratives, and hallucination stories," to which I also add narratives of racial microaggressions since they are commonly dismissed as a figment of sufferers' imaginations.[33] For Serpell, narratives of mutual exclusion evoke affective paranoia not just for characters, but also for readers, who experience an "ethics of paranoia" in which they approach events with "skepticism," moving "between paranoia and its denunciation."[34]

In ethnic studies scholarship more broadly, especially in African American studies, racial paranoia is a feeling that is meant to be "justified" and grounded in histories that have been obscured.[35] As Ju Yon Kim writes, racial paranoia is about the "desire to expose powerful yet elusive forces… [and treats] colorblind racism as a structural rather than individual phenomenon."[36] In the now classic text of racial microaggressions, the mixed media poetry collection *Citizen: An*

American Lyric (2014), Claudia Rankine details the paranoia that racial microaggressions, from individual interactions to cultural touchstones, engender, asking "What did he just say? Did she really just say that? Did I hear what I think I heard?"[37] Analysis on *Citizen* tends to naturalize the relationship between microaggressions and established, material harms. As Heather Love underscores, citing Felicia Lee, "documenting…microaggressions is to understand where the bigger, scandalous aggressions come from."[38] In short, scholars reinforce the belief that microaggressions are sutured to drama, an understanding mirrored in literature itself. [39]

In the legal sphere, working toward the redress of racial harms means that it is extremely difficult to dwell with the paranoid uncertainty of what qualifies as racial harm in the first place. Distinctions are made between hate crimes, which involve violence, threats, and property damage against someone based on aspects of their identity and bias incidents, which are acts of prejudice, such as verbal harassment that does not result in material damage.[40] Scholars have long noted that the law is unable to fully account for the way that microaggressions, implicit bias, and unconscious bias play a part in the damaging effects of racial discrimination overall.[41] According to the affect theorist Sara Ahmed who cites Wendy Brown and Lauren Berlant, "wound culture" or "bruised skin or other traces of violence" are typically fetishized in instances of bias deemed worthy of redress.[42] The emphasis still lies in identifying crimes rather than navigating incidents. For example, the murder of Vincent Chin in 1982 is largely cited as a watershed moment for the establishment of official hate crime laws even as the question of whether Chin's murder was truly a hate crime persists today. In addition, many of the recent assaults and murders of Asian Americans during the COVID-19 pandemic have been caught up in debates around whether they even "count" as hate crimes.

Even in Asian American literature writ large, the emphasis has similarly been on justifying paranoia. Drawing inspiration from Claudia Rankine's *Citizen*, Cathy Park Hong discusses the "minor feeling" of paranoia as emerging when the "reality" of racism against Asian Americans is repeatedly denied through the myth of the model minority.[43] Similarly, in Troung Tran's recent poetry collection, *Book of the Other* (2021), Tran describes the sense of paranoia he experiences upon being repeatedly denied tenure at his university over much less qualified white colleagues, even as the university refuses to admit that these promotions have anything to do with race. Tran's collection is meant to be both a documentation and an "antidote"[44] to his feelings of paranoia, in which he insists that he is the victim of a "crime," affirming that racism that something that has indeed "happened to [him]."[45] As these authors show, racial paranoia is framed as a natural response to structural racism, the latter which is routinely dismissed by those in

power and even internalized by Asian Americans themselves as "minor" rather than "major" feelings.

If Asian American racialization is caught up in a paranoid formulation of continually disavowing the model minority, further examination reveals that the model minority and the "bad subject" are two sides of the same coin. That is, scholars note that the model minority, while a demographic myth, is still a powerful narrative that continues to structure the lived experiences of many Asian Americans today. For example, Takeo Rivera encourages us to think of how the model minority is not "an ontological component of Asian American subject hood…[but] has been underestimated as a historically constitutive (rather than merely antithetical) component, something that must be 'overcome' or rejected rather than a despised ingredient of Asiatic racial form."[46] The model minority is, in fact, endogamous to Asian American racialization. Yet in discussing the model minority as a "psychic and affective condition"[47] rather than an "ontology," the scholarly emphasis, such as Rivera's own work on "model minority masochism," skews toward uncovering states of affective pain.[48]

In an Asian American mystery novel like Celeste Ng's *Everything I Never Told You*, the Lee family "pass" as model minorities and analysis on the novel seeks to peer beneath their veneer of perfection. Erika Poulsen argues that the mystery story seeks to reinstate a history of racism against Asian Americans.[49] While Lydia's death initially signals her "dematerialization," in that racial discourse is initially silenced, Poulsen concludes that Ng's work offers an example of "successful self-definition" by uncovering this hidden history by the story's end.[50] While it is true that Ng suggests Lydia's death might be the result of the larger forces of racism, I diverge from Poulsen's point by emphasizing how Ng's mystery sustains racial paranoia through the "weak" force of everyday microaggressions, ultimately leaving the precise causes of Lydia's death underdetermined.[51] Ng's model minority characters muddle the typical trajectory of dispelling racial paranoia by unveiling a clear path of affective pain.

By turning now to my analysis of *Everything I Never Told You*, I hope to show that racial paranoia around the mundanities of a quiet suburban existence offers what twinkles beyond histories of pain through the temporality of how the "crime" at the heart of the narrative unfolds. As racial minorities often accused of "passing" for white and not "real" minorities, a mystery narrative surrounding a mixed-race family like the Lees can temper the seemingly naturalized link between racial microaggressions and racial harms.[52] As the anthropologist John L. Jackson writes about racial paranoia, "the point isn't…to demand that people provide irrefutable evidence for their accusations…. Instead, we should think seriously about what these claims can teach us about race's stubborn obduracy, about its resistance to proofs and standard empirical confirmation."[53]

This statement finds echoes in Sara Ahmed's insistence that we work hard to listen and respond "to the affective life of injustice."[54] I answer these scholars by turning to Ng, which addresses the difficulties of being a racial minority in a world full of biases and harms that unfold in a "continuous present of doing"[55] that, although they are grounded in longer histories and "effects," are also harms that are never preordained.

III. (DISCOVERABLE)? RACIAL HARM IN CELESTE NG'S *EVERYTHING I NEVER TOLD YOU* (2014)

"Lydia is dead. But they don't know that yet."[56] With this forceful instance of dramatic irony that opens Celeste Ng's *Everything I Never Told You*, Ng establishes readerly suspense around the circumstances of Lydia's death. Ng's novel follows the story of a nuclear, mixed-race Chinese and white family living in a small college town in Ohio in the 1970s: James Lee, a Chinese American history professor, his wife, Marilyn Walker, a homemaker who aspires to be among the small number of female doctors at the time, and their three children: their eldest daughter Lydia, their son Nath, and their youngest daughter Hannah. *Everything I Never Told You* is driven by racial paranoia—at first, Ng's novel seems to work to "solve" paranoia by introducing an omniscient narrator, one modeled after Ng herself, who can retrospectively comment on the historical forces at work in the Lee family. This narrator seems to work to make harm traceable by linking bad actors to bad effects in which the intersection of sustained racism against James and the pressure to conform to traditional gender roles for Marilyn culminates in Lydia's death. However, further reading reveals how racial paranoia is not solved but sustained by "reading" nonverbal cues as they occur in the moment—bodies and objects that push past language itself and which become essential to lightening painful histories.

In an interview, Ng has mentioned that her decision to place herself into the role of omniscient narrator was a pedagogical decision in which she wanted to be "like a teacher: someone giving you context along the way to help you interpret what you're seeing."[57] The narrative seems to indicate that readers will eventually discover a clear through line to harm. Following Lydia's death, sensationalist newspaper headlines bluntly invoke the trope of the tragic mulatto: "Oriental Girl Drowns in Pond"[58] and "Children of Mixed Race Backgrounds Often Struggle to Find Their Place,"[59] with the police and public concluding that Lydia's death is a suicide from the psychic distress of being mixed-race. Marilyn is determined that "she will find out who is responsible. She will find out what went wrong."[60]

Along with Nath, she becomes convinced that Lydia was murdered, and that blame can be placed on a specific perpetrator. Yet Ng also makes it clear that the Lees themselves lack contextual language to discuss racial harm. After the Lee children are born, the narrator mentions the tectonic changes occurring in the country, including civil rights protests, war protests, and feminist movements in which "the nation learned new words: Affirmative action; Equal Rights Amendment; Ms."[61] even as racial tensions in the Lee family "had still not come undone."[62] Indeed, James is not part of the Asian American movement being formed during this time period, and the concept of microaggressions was only being formalized by psychiatry.[63]

Since Ng-as-narrator constantly looks backward from her vantage point in the present, it seems that she will be able to supply the language around racial harm that is held out of reach for the Lees. The narrator takes a solemn moment to ask, "How had it begun?" before supplying the answer in the form of a longer historical lineage: "Like everything: with mothers and fathers."[64] Although the racist microaggressions that impact James throughout his life and will later impact Lydia are something he is never able to articulate either to himself or others, Ng's narration fills in this gap for readers. By stating that James "would never fully realize"[65] just how powerfully his longing to assimilate also structures his romantic desires [for Marilyn], the narrator also stresses how the pain of "years of unabashed stares prickling his spine…years of mutters in the street—chink, gook, go home"[66] is what motivates James to seek out his eventual wife "as if America herself were taking him in."[67] Moreover, James associates his surname with the Confederate general, Robert E. Lee and upon marrying Marilyn, "make[s] a pact: to let the past drift away, to stop asking questions, to look forward from then on, never back."[68] Yet it is Ng who shares his backstory with readers about how he is the child of a paper son with parents who immigrated to the United States under false identities during the Chinese Exclusion Act.[69] When Marilyn's mother insists that her marriage is "not right," the narrator chooses to zoom out, purposefully juxtaposing the Lees' marriage with an interracial marriage she mentions is happening almost simultaneously between "a white man, a black woman, who would share a most appropriate name: Loving. In four months they would be arrested in Virginia…. It would be four years before they protested, and four years more before the court concurred, but many more years before the people around them would, too. Some, like Marilyn's mother, never would."[70] Although the Lee family is full of unaddressed racial tensions, Ng connects their intimate family dynamics to larger structural forces.

However, while telling the Lee's story, a correlation with racial harm does not always equal its causation. Even if the omniscient narrator can identify the

presence of racial harm through microaggressions, Ng runs into other competing factors such that she is unable to neatly connect microaggressions alone to the dramatic instance of Lydia's death by drowning. Readers learn that it is the intersection of race and gender that leads to major conflicts in the Lee family: it is not just that James is attracted to Marilyn because he desperately wishes to assimilate, but also that Marilyn views James as unconventional, which reflects her own desire to break gender norms by becoming a female doctor. Yet James's and Marilyn's failure to live up to these aspirations, along with their inability to even put words to how race and gender influence their aspirations in the first place, morph into invisible, competing expectations to simultaneously conform and be "different" that they place on Lydia.

Racial harm ultimately remains indeterminate as the circumstances of Lydia's death by drowning are never completely resolved, even when Ng narrates Lydia's perspective at the moment of her drowning. Lydia's diaries meant for recording her secrets remain completely unwritten in, offering no clues to her interiority. Although Ng reveals that Lydia's death was not the result of foul play, it remains unclear if her death is the result of suicide or an accident. As Ng shares with readers, Lydia visits the lake in her hometown overnight, convinced she can teach herself how to swim. This move is largely symbolic for Lydia: if she can overcome her fear of the water, she can also overcome her fear of telling her parents that she is deeply depressed and can no longer sustain their dreams for her life. Yet it is unclear if Lydia is truly empowered at this moment or simply in a state of complete denial about her own despair. As Lydia thinks to herself, "she will begin again.... Feet planted firmly on nothing, Lydia—so long enthralled by the dreams of others—could not yet imagine what that might be, but suddenly the universe glittered with possibilities.... Looking up at the sky, she felt as if she were floating in space, completely untethered. She could not believe that anything was impossible."[71] The space of the lake, which mirrors the space of the sky, is a space of both possibility and annihilation. Even as Lydia feels encouraged to confront her parents, the basis of this impulse is described as "planted on nothing," "untethered," and operates on a double negative.

By the novel's end, Ng suspends the family's sense of unknowing through the questions they will always ask for the rest of their lives: "What had they missed that they should have seen? What small gesture, forgotten, might have changed everything? They will pick it down to the bones, wondering how this had all gone so wrong, and they will never be sure."[72] Resting on a singular, overarching account of harm is impossible when Ng locates many different contingencies. If the rest of Lydia's family is never privy to her private thoughts, the fact that Ng allows readers access does nothing to dispel the uncertainty around the reasons for her demise.

We might think of how Ng's omniscient narration questions historical progress, in which political ideals from the 1970s have not been fully realized even today. But I further contend that her narration should not just be read as moments of deep historical mourning for what could have been had James and Marilyn simply had the language to properly address racial dynamics: they also serve to highlight the gaps rather than the continuities between histories of racialization and the lived experience of racialization. With the irresolution of Lydia's death, Ng's novel offers more than a tale of repression in which readers and characters search for but can never fully access the exact reason for her passing. Rather, the hope of reconciliation comes into being when Ng moves us away from language and toward alternate pathways of interpretation that are nonlinguistic and can never be interpreted entirely in advance, but only as they occur in the moment.

In shifting from paranoia as temporally retrospective and linguistic to paranoia as located in the unfolding present and the nonlinguistic, I take inspiration from Sara Ahmed, who uses affect theory to discourage an overreliance on assigning blame to specific actors and situations. According to Ahmed, understanding how hate works against the marginalized involves moving away from racist language as fixed to understanding how hate works in a larger exchange of "affects and effects."[73] While Ahmed acknowledges the work that Judith Butler has done in discussing re-signifying signs of hate in new and different ways, Ahmed emphasizes that "the signs themselves [do not] contain hate."[74] Rather, neither the "affects" of hate—its lived experience from the perspectives of those it is directed at—nor the "effects" of hate—outcomes that have seemingly been cemented throughout history—can be entirely determined beforehand. Ahmed insists that "we cannot assume we know in advance what it feels like to be an object of hate,"[75] but rather, that we must be attentive to how hate works as an "affective economy…[that] circulates or moves between signs and bodies."[76] If microaggressions have been discussed as a predetermined form of hatred and therefore harm against minorities, Ahmed demonstrates these harms are in fact far from inexorable.

While Ahmed focuses on how the slipperiness of what language connotes is channeled through individual and collective bodies with highly unpredictable results, Ng demonstrates what Ahmed perhaps only suggests: that is, reading—the act of interpretation—occurs through physical bodies. It is not simply words that are written and spoken between characters that are open to different interpretations, but also the corporeal realm of body language and physical objects that engage in communicating. If *Everything I Never Told You* initially seems to gravitate toward naming harms through language, it eventually shifts toward emphasizing that we must look past the linguistic realm which, when taken too far, can cement the "effects" of harm.

If language seems like an unbreakable chain of harm that cannot be superseded, then a character like James is able to "read" body language in the moment it occurs as a way of understanding his wife. When Marilyn argues with James, she uses the words "kowtow"[77] and "different,"[78] which James interprets as attacks on his racial identity, even though Marilyn uses these words inadvertently. Likewise, James accuses Marilyn of being "hysterical,"[79] which Marilyn interprets as a gendered jab that dismisses her fears that Lydia's death was the result of foul play. Yet rectifying these misunderstandings do not occur through mutual conversation since James remains "afraid to tell Marilyn" about how she "would see him as he had always seen himself: a scrawny outcast.... An imposter."[80] However, in offering to leave his marriage, James notices how Marilyn flinches, and remembers a time when he had "once...been able to read his wife's mood even from her back. By the tilt of her shoulders, by the shifting of her weight from left foot to right, he would have known what she was thinking."[81] Rather than a revealing conversation between James and Marilyn about race and gender, their reconciliation occurs at an unspoken level in which "for the rest of his life—James will struggle to piece words to this feeling, and he will never quite manage to say, even just to himself, what he really means. At this moment he can think only one thing: how was it possible, he wonders, to have been so wrong."[82] The process of reading his wife's gestures opens the possibility that James could be "wrong" about the harm contained in the words that Marilyn speaks to him.

While I argued earlier that Ng's novel revolves around historical silence, history is never permanently lost for her characters. Indeed, Marilyn eventually comes into the knowledge of what happened to Lydia by silently reading the archive, paying attention to how certain objects have accrued significance over time. When searching for clues to her daughter's passing in her room, Marilyn finds a Betty Crocker cookbook hidden away. In the novel, this cookbook is the only object that Marilyn inherits from her mother when she passes away, and it represents the conventional life of a homemaker that Marilyn is pressured into, one that she desperately tries—but fails—to escape. Although the cookbook is full of tips and recipes that can literally be read, what connects Lydia and Marilyn, though they never have a heart-to-heart conversation, is not so much their shared understanding of the words on the page as their bodily response to grief.

In two separate instances, Lydia and Marilyn cry over the cookbook. As a young girl who does not understand why her mother is so unhappy, Lydia notices that bumps cover the pages that look like "Braille.... She did not understand what they were until a tear splashed against the page. When she wiped it away, a tiny goose bump remained.... Her mother must have cried over this page, too."[83] Though she does not have the precise language of gender dynamics, Lydia's response is to try to remedy her mother's unhappiness by becoming a dutiful daughter. Upon discovering the cookbook again after Lydia's death, Marilyn

begins to cry. In remembering her personal grief, Marilyn's "tears are telescopes" shifting her perspective such that she suddenly sees all the science textbooks she has gifted Lydia as "everything…she had wanted for Lydia which Lydia had never wanted but had embraced anyways…[it] had dragged Lydia underwater at last." [84] In this astonishing moment, Marilyn's individual experiences expand to encompass structural pressures such that she can intuit as "a dull chill"[85] what Lydia, with her death, will never be able to speak out loud. Model femininity and model minority become linked through the repetition of tears that spill onto the page years apart—an archive of tears rather than an archive of recorded words.

Criticism on the intersection of affect and racial harm discusses varying degrees of negative affects. When Ahmed writes that "we cannot assume to know in advance what it feels like to be an object of hate," she goes on to say that "for some, hate enactments may involve pain; for others, rage."[86] And when Ninh writes about the restrictions that model minority racialization places on Asian Americans, she describes them as affective, "feelings [that] come to map out, like sonar, the shape and size of what is happening to us, even if, like bats, we don't quite know what we are being made to fly around."[87]

For Lydia, the pressures of race and gender that she contends with are never pinpointed in language alone: "though her father had never mentioned his schooldays, though she had never heard the story of her parents' marriage or their move to Middlewood, Lydia felt the ache of it all, deep and piercing as a foghorn."[88] Here, the foghorn of history that Lydia feels as an "ache" that she can never fully puts words to uncannily echoes Ninh's description of sonar. It would be easy and narratively satisfying for Ng to have the Lees come into an awareness of the precise language to address the inequalities in race and gender that she makes clear prove so detrimental to them. Yet the fact that they never do—that this language is completely withheld from them—ultimately deemphasizes words as a vehicle capable of completely anchoring harm. In *Everything I Never Told You*, rendering histories of racial hate hazy through affects felt in the moment also means that pain and rage come with a looser grip so we might begin looking toward a world that exists beyond it.

The conclusion of *Everything I Never Told You* demonstrates how, even after Lydia's death, care continues to linger in unexpected ways between characters. It's notable that in the final scene of the novel, Nath attempts to figure out what Lydia was thinking in her last moments by letting himself be pushed into the water and mimicking the act of drowning. However, for Nath, "it's too late. He's already learned how not to drown."[89] Here, in lieu of a conversation with his sister, moving past language also gives ways to live beyond harm. Swimming is something that Nath learned through his father's coaching even as James turns a blind eye to how Nath is being bullied in the pool for being mixed-race.

Rather than dwelling with James's failure to properly defend him, Nath's swimming abilities now operate at the level of instinct, pushing him toward survival. As Nath floats to the surface of the water, he reaches toward Hannah and Jack, who represent the hope of future healing. While Hannah resembles Lydia, Jack, their neighbor and Lydia's friend, is a figure outside of the family who is also the most progressive, as he is raised by a single mother who is a doctor, attempts to discuss racial difference with Lydia, hands Nath his college acceptance letter, and comes to love Nath. While the interracial relationship between James and Marilyn is surrounded by a cloud of shame, Ng holds out hope for the success of another stigmatized relationship through the queer storyline only just beginning to blossom at the novel's conclusion. Still, Ng underscores that historical and personal loss will persist for these children, in which Nath, Jack, and Hannah "won't be able to explain" easily using words their perspectives, with Jack's shirt stained an "Rorschach of dark brown"[90] that will require further deciphering. For Ng, the only "solution" to racial paranoia is to remain interpretively paranoid and open to reading not just linguistic cues whose meanings have accrued over time, but also nonlinguistic cues as they happen to occur. The inability of either Ng herself or her characters to ever truly "know" how harm precisely occurs is repeated countless times throughout the narrative. Ng does not rely on her characters' "knowing" and being "sure" about Lydia's death so much as their affective state of "feeling," sensing, and intuiting not just harm, but also repair.

IV. INTIMATIONS

Against the impulse to root out racial discrimination by establishing intent, causality, and harm, *Everything I Never Told You* centers a narrative of racialization and racism marked not by its quantitative clarity, but by its qualitative uncertainty. Racial paranoia is typically approached like the butterfly effect, a chain reaction that moves from seemingly innocuous to egregious harms. However, Ng's version of the Asian American mystery shows how racial paranoia takes on another valence of how not saying—of how getting a sense of the immediacy of bodies and objects that push past language itself—is essential to lessening painful histories. Ng's novel ultimately conceptualizes racial paranoia as a ripple effect, in which racial harm and healing continually intersect with one another. We can think about the ripple effect in terms of the town lake in Ng's novel: not only do the Lees associate it with the source of their greatest trauma after Lydia's death, but the lake also becomes associated with their greatest joy in the rare occasion that they gather as a family to swim in its waters. As different bodies dip in and out of the water, they create currents that meet with one

another such that there is no clear beginning nor ending, no inalienable positive or negative outcomes.

Discussions around the feelings of paranoia that emerge for Asian Americans navigating microaggressions are often treated as a barrier to cross-racial solidarity and political activism. Journalist Jay Caspian Kang goes so far as to argue that Asian Americans who fixate on microaggressions distract from a truly progressive politics for Asian Americans as a whole: "upwardly mobile Asian Americans must drop our neuroses about microaggressions and the bamboo ceiling, and fully align ourselves with the forgotten Asian America: the refugees, the undocumented, and the working class."[91] Although Cathy Park Hong does work to justify her feelings of paranoia, she also remains self-conscious that her perspective as an elite East Asian is "minor and non-urgent,"[92] and that she must speak to the importance of taking action for the most vulnerable populations. In short, the abstract realm of feelings only seems to go so far in addressing material, structural realities.

Based on these perspectives, the silence and elisions around racial harm in Ng's novel can be perceived as assimilatory and politically conservative. Yet as Crystal Parikh writes about what seem to be betrayals of progressive politics in Asian American literature, betrayals have an "ethics" in that they "can open a future that is unimaginable and unintelligible from within the bonds of fidelity and identification."[93] Despite the thicket of misunderstandings in their marriage, James remains receptive to his wife's body language, issuing an unspoken apology on what it means to be "wrong" such that their family remains together beyond Lydia's death.

What I hope this article conveys is that living as a racial minority is not simply characterized by explosive events, but also by a high level of day-to-day uncertainty about what harm is. Even as these harms can remain elusive, racial minorities are always seeking to navigate and mitigate them. Upwardly mobile Asian Americans' complaints about microaggressions have been cast as non-urgent when it comes to understanding racial harm because they are perceived as a privileged demographic. However, it is the exact indirectness of how Asian Americans experience harm that shows us how racial identity overall, to reiterate Jackson's point, resists "standard empirical confirmation." Because racial categories are social constructions, the "affects and effects" of being racialized will always remain underdetermined, not "opera[ting] on the terrain of truth" but "calling into question, rather than assuming, the relationship between violence and identity."[94]

In her essay collection *Ordinary Disasters: How I Stopped Being a Model Minority* (2024), scholar Anne Anlin Cheng attempts to take her pathbreaking scholarship on Asian American subjecthood and think about how it "gets realized

in the minute grains of [my own] everyday life."[95] She courageously narrativizes her marriage to a white man and her mixed-race family, writing that, "The intense, seemingly one-off things we argue about unlock larger systems of meaning: forces of family, of race and culture, a wide field of interconnected structures that we can barely perceive most of the time but are always sounding. If we're lucky, we love and fight each other, a small huddle that absorbs and softens the rumbling fields all around us."[96] Lydia's foghorn and the ripples on the lake, Ninh's sonar, Cheng's earthquake rumbling underground: all deeper forces of history that impact "model minority" Asian Americans. Yet it is in the minute interactions between friends, family, and lovers that are so often private, full of paranoia, and are therefore difficult to characterize that we see how these forces can "soften," not wholly defining Asian America.

As literary scholars who linger with inconclusiveness, we have a responsibility to talk about racial harm in ways that are more than the sum of the trenches of history. It is not that harm isn't real and tangible. The student who insists that a white author writing about racial minorities is automatically an act of violence, the Asian American friend who makes increasingly acerbic comments about how white people will never view her free from racial stereotype, well-meaning family members who caution I must always lower my expectations in life because I will inevitably be discriminated against. These fears are not overreactions but based in legacies of real harm. Yet to perceive harm as irreparably written in stone acts as its own form of damage, one that eclipses the possibility of telling any other story. Racial paranoia is not an easy affective or interpretive path to take: it requires us to be open to uncertainty and misreading over narrative closure. Our inclination to be sure—to treat racial harm as a straight path—may feel more gratifying, but it does not bring us closer to the truth of treating each encounter as if it could be a new story. How difficult it is to be a racial minority, living in a world so full of possibility, so full of harm, and with none of it completely predictable. Read: understand.

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NOTES

1. Weike Wang, "Omakase," *New Yorker*, June 11, 2018, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/06/18/omakase.
2. This concept also has corollaries in the terms "colorblind racism" and "unconscious bias." While colorblind racism refers to the end of *de jure* segregation and the Obama-era presidency in which the nation had supposedly achieved "post-race" equality, unconscious bias refers to the racial stereotypes that can structure people's actions yet remain outside of their conscious awareness. In utilizing the term "microaggressions," I aim to emphasize the interpersonal nature of racialization.
3. Racial paranoia is a term originally coined by the anthropologist John L. Jackson in *Racial Paranoia: The Unintended Consequences of Political Correctness* (Basic Civitas, 2010).
4. Sophia Mao, "Racial Paranoia and the (Absent)? Asian American Body," in *The Art of Minor Feelings: Asian American Emotional Lives in Contemporary Literature* (Seminar, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, February 9, 2022).
5. Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America* (Oxford University Press, 2002).
6. Mark Chiang, *The Cultural Capital of Asian American Studies: Autonomy and Representation in the University* (New York University Press, 2009).
7. Christopher Lee, *The Semblance of Identity: Aesthetic Mediation in Asian American Literature* (Stanford University Press, 2012).
8. Amy C. Tang, *Repetition and Race: Asian American Literature After Multiculturalism* (Oxford University Press, 2016).
9. Mimi Thi Nguyen, "Getting Over Ourselves," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 25, no. 2 (2022): 347, https://doi.org/10.1353/jaas.2022.0028.
10. Viet Thanh Nguyen, "Asian Americans Are Still Caught in the Trap of the 'Model Minority' Stereotype. And It Creates Inequality for All," *Time*, June 25, 2020, https://time.com/5859206/anti-asian-racism-america/.
11. Yunte Huang, "The Lasting Lure of the Asian Mystery," *PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 133, no. 2 (2018): 385, https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2018.133.2.384.

12. Sianne Ngai, "Introduction," in *Ugly Feelings* (Harvard University Press, 2015), 14.
13. Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction," *Representations* 108, no. 1 (2009): 1–21. https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2009.108.1.1.
14. Vivian L. Huang, *Surface Relations: Queer Forms of Asian American Inscrutability* (Duke University Press, 2022), 19.
15. Huang, *Surface Relations*, 15.
16. Huang, "The Lasting Lure of the Asian Mystery," 384–85.
17. Betsy Huang, "Recriminations," in *Contesting Genres in Contemporary Asian American Fiction* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010): 55.
18. Tina Chen, *Double Agency: Acts of Impersonation in Asian American Literature and Culture* (Stanford University Press, 2005).
19. Huang, "The Lasting Lure of the Asian Mystery," 384–87.
20. Charles Yu, *Interior Chinatown* (Pantheon Books, 2020).
21. Cathy Park Hong, "Stand Up," in *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning* (One World Books, 2021), 55.
22. Hong, "United," 18-9.
23. Jinny Huh, "Introduction," in *The Arresting Eye: Race and the Anxiety of Detection* (University of Virginia Press, 2015), 1–21.
24. erin Khuê Ninh, "Introduction: The Strange Case of the College Imposter," in *Passing for Perfect: College Imposters and Other Model Minorities* (Temple University Press, 2021), 12–13.
25. I draw inspiration from Ju Yon Kim's monograph *The Racial Mundane: Asian American Performance and the Embodied Everyday* (New York University Press, 2015), which argues that "unremarkable," quotidian activities like eating rice or studying for exams are key to how Asian American racialization is understood.
26. Lisa Spanierman and Derald Wing Sue, "Taxonomy of Microaggressions," in *Microaggressions in Everyday Life*, 2nd ed. (Wiley, 2020), 31–58.
27. Spanierman and Sue, "Misunderstanding Microaggressions," 20–23.
28. Judith Butler, "Burning Acts, Injurious Speech," in *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (Routledge, 2021), 43–70.
29. Swan Kim, "Feeling, Paranoia, and the Invisible," in *Invisible Economies: Paranoia and Asian American Literature and Culture* (PhD diss., University of Virginia, 2010), 4.
30. Kim, "Feeling, Paranoia, and the Invisible," 9.
31. Huang, "Recriminations," 93.
32. Kim, "Feeling, Paranoia, and the Invisible," 9.
33. Namwali C. Serpell, "Mutual Exclusion," in *Seven Modes of Uncertainty* (Harvard University Press, 2014), 41–42.
34. Serpell, "Mutual Exclusion," 50–54.

35. For notable examples see Elijah Anderson, *Black in White Space: The Enduring Impact of Color in Everyday Life* (University of Chicago Press, 2022) and Kimberly Drake, "Fear and 'Paranoia' in/About Richard Wright's Novels," in *Paranoia, Fear, and Alienation* (Salem Press, 2016). Patricia A. Turner's *I Heard It Through the Grapevine: Rumor in African-American Literature* (University of California Press, 1993) examines a variety of seemingly outlandish rumors circulating in the African American community based in the devastations of slavery.
36. Ju Yon Kim, "Between Paper and Performance: Suspicion, Race, and Casting in *The Piano Teacher*," *Modern Drama* 63, no. 2 (2020): 46, https://doi.org/10.3138/md.63.2.1081.
37. Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (Graywolf Press, 2014), 9.
38. Heather Love, "Small Change: Realism, Immanence, and the Politics of the Micro," *Modern Language Quarterly* 77, no. 3 (September 1, 2016): 436, https://doi.org/10.1215/00267929-3570678.
39. Andrea Long Chu analyzes Rankine's poetry alongside the rape of Columbia University student Emma Sulkowicz as two cases in which there is a "mismatch between affect and event," between what happened (experiencing a crime) and what one feels or is told one should feel about it (experiencing something that is not a crime). Although Chu is not interested in establishing the "truth" of what happened or didn't happen, the textual and current events examples she relies on are linked to the "effects" of hate—histories of exceptional violence against marginalized bodies. See Andrea Long Chu, "Study in Blue: Trauma, Affect, Event," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 27, no. 3 (2017): 313, https://doi.org/10.1080/0740770X.2017.1365440.
40. Learn About Hate Crimes," US Department of Justice, last updated July 2, 2024, https://www.justice.gov/hatecrimes/learn-about-hate-crimes.
41. Angelo N. Ancheta, *Race, Rights, and the Asian American Experience* (Rutgers University Press, 1998), 42–60.
42. Sara Ahmed, "The Organisation of Hate," in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Routledge, 2004), 58.
43. Hong, "Stand Up," 55-7.
44. Truong Tran, *Book of the Other: Small in Comparison* (Kaya Press, 2021), 7.
45. Tran, *Book of the Other*, 93–95.
46. Takeo Rivera, "Introduction," in *Model Minority Masochism: Performing the Cultural Politics of Asian American Masculinity* (Oxford University Press, 2022), xxii.
47. Rivera, "Introduction," xx.
48. Eleanor Ty's *Asianfail* (University of Illinois Press, 2017) speaks of model minorities who become "disenchanted" with living lives as ostensibly perfect citizens; erin Khuê Ninh's *Ingratitude: The Debt-Bound Daughter in Asian American Literature* (New York University Press, 2011) uses political economy to understand model minority subjecthood as a type of discipline that hails Asian American daughters to be "debt-bound" ideal citizens to their families and the nation; Anne Anlin Cheng's *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (Oxford University Press,

2000), David L. Eng and Shinhee Han's *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation: On the Social and Psychic Lives of Asian Americans* (Duke University Press, 2019), and Takeo Rivera's *Model Minority Masochism: Performing the Cultural Politics of Asian American Masculinity* (Oxford University Press, 2022) approach the model minority through psychoanalytic frameworks.

49. Melissa Eriko Poulsen, "The Weight of the Past: Mixed-Race Materiality in Post-Racial Asian American Literature," *MELUS* 47, no. 2 (2022): 33–54, https://doi.org/10.1093/melus/mlac041.

50. Eriko Poulsen, "The Weight of the Past," 19.

51. The uncertainty Ng sustains around Lydia's death follows what Pamela Thoma cites as the metaphysical detective story, which lacks closure. See Pamela Thoma, "Neoliberal Detective Work: Uncovering Cosmopolitan Corruption in the New Economy," in *Asian American Women's Popular Literature: Feminizing Genres and Neoliberal Belonging* (Temple University Press, 2013), 111–151.

52. The anxiety around Asian Americans who "pass" as a model minority is linked to histories of mixed-race identity and miscegenation. In particular, the figure of the mixed-race, Asian and white child contains questions around whether they will offer a "solution" to racial griefs. *Everything I Never Told You's* racial paranoia coalesces around the relationship between a Chinese man and a white woman, and the sudden death of their mixed-race child. As Susan Koshy writes about Asian-white miscegenation, while the "dominant" storyline is between white men and Asian women which emerged out of American military intervention in the Pacific Wars, the "recessive" storyline remains the "Asian man-white woman dyad…[which] typically employed the cultural impossibility and sexual danger of incorporating Asians into the nation." See Susan Koshy, *Sexual Naturalization: Asian Americans and Miscegenation* (Stanford University Press, 2004), 132, 22. Spencer Tricker argues that the Eurasian is too often overdetermined in critical mixed-race studies, interpreted as a national and historical allegory such as a "referendum on the history of racial injustice, the promise of an anti-racist society, or the resolution of imperial or other geopolitical conflicts abroad." Spencer Tricker, "Japanese Atmospheres and the Pleasures of Belonging: Winnifred Eaton and Sadakichi Hartmann," *MELUS* 49, no. 3 (2024): 1–25. Other key studies that speak to the allegorical readings placed on the Eurasian include Jolie Sheffer, *The Romance of Race: Incest, Miscegenation, and Multiculturalism in the United States, 1880–1930* (Rutgers University Press, 2013) and Emma Teng, *Eurasian: Mixed Identities in the United States, China, and Hong Kong, 1842–1943* (University of California Press, 2013). While Ng clearly calls on these frameworks in her novel, uncovering these major allegorical readings around interracial intimacy is not the focus of my article so much as how "model minority" Asian Americans experience minor strains of microaggressions that draw into question whether racial harm is happening. Indeed, Lydia Lee never truly passes for white, and to cite Tina Chen's work on Asian American double agents, she is not concerned with Asian Americans who are actually "imposturing whiteness" but rather performing identity in ways that explore "the interrelationship between the real and the fake, and its recognition of how both are inextricably intertwined in the formation of Asian American identities." See Tina Chen, *Double Agency: Acts of Impersonation in Asian American Literature and Culture*, xx, xxv.

53. Jackson, *Racial Paranoia*, 202.
54. Ahmed, "The Organisation of Hate," 57.
55. Ahmed, "The Organisation of Hate," 45.
56. Celeste Ng, *Everything I Never Told You* (Penguin, 2014), 1.
57. Celeste Ng, "Sometimes Taking Things Out Counts as Writing," interview by Anne Stameshkin, *Fiction Writers Review*, January 18, 2022, https://fictionwritersreview.com/interview/sometimes-taking-things-out-counts-as-writing-an-interview-with-celeste-ng/.
58. Ng, *Everything I Never Told You*, 60.
59. Ng, *Everything I Never Told You*, 200.
60. Ng, *Everything I Never Told You*, 76.
61. Ng, *Everything I Never Told You*, 159.
62. Ng, *Everything I Never Told You*, 158.
63. Harvard University, where Ng sets part of her novel, also happens to be the location where the psychiatrist Chester M. Pierce initially conducted research on microaggressions in 1970. While Ng never explicitly references this history, leaving it veiled corroborates the argument I am making about Ng's novel as ultimately obscuring the founding story of racial harms.
64. Ng, *Everything I Never Told You*, 25.
65. Ng, *Everything I Never Told You*, 37.
66. Ng, *Everything I Never Told You*, 251.
67. Ng, *Everything I Never Told You*, 45.
68. Ng, *Everything I Never Told You*, 49.
69. Ng, *Everything I Never Told You*, 40–41.
70. Ng, *Everything I Never Told You*, 54–55.
71. Ng, *Everything I Never Told You*, 274–75.
72. Ng, *Everything I Never Told You*, 271.
73. Ahmed, "The Organisation of Hate," 59.
74. Ahmed, "The Organisation of Hate," 59.
75. Ahmed, "The Organisation of Hate," 59.
76. Ahmed, "The Organisation of Hate," 60.
77. Ng, *Everything I Never Told You*, 116.
78. Ng, *Everything I Never Told You*, 242.
79. Ng, *Everything I Never Told You*, 116.
80. Ng, *Everything I Never Told You*, 48.
81. Ng, *Everything I Never Told You*, 282.

82. Ng, *Everything I Never Told You*, 252.
83. Ng, *Everything I Never Told You*, 137.
84. Ng, *Everything I Never Told You*, 247.
85. Ng, *Everything I Never Told You*, 137, 146.
86. Ahmed, "The Organisation of Hate," 59.
87. erin Khuê Ninh, *Passing for Perfect*, 7.
88. Ng, *Everything I Never Told You*, 177.
89. Ng, *Everything I Never Told You*, 290.
90. Ng, *Everything I Never Told You*, 290.
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