

Family Secrets and Narrative Structure in Celeste Ng's *Everything I Never Told You*

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Celeste Ng's novel *Everything I Never Told You* (2014) has been said to combine some stock ingredients of literary thrillers with other less customary features that complicate its classification in that genre. Although we learn from page one that the protagonist of the novel, sixteen-year-old Lydia Lee, is dead, discovering who is behind the possible murder of this Chinese American girl proves to be one of the lesser mysteries in the story. While the reader remains intrigued by the forces/people that may have driven Lydia to her demise, other enigmas—related to the other members of the Lee family—keep cropping up and turn out to be closely linked to the protagonist's fate. This article explores the secret-saturated structure of the novel, which moves back and forth between the Lees' speculations about Lydia's death, the impact that the event has on their lives and the protagonist's own version of the story. Ng delves deep into the issues of gender, race and other types of otherness that spawn most of the secrets driving the story. Assisted by theories expounded by Frank Kermode, Derek Attridge and other scholars, the article highlights the centrality of family secrets as a structuring principle in Ng's novel.

Keywords: family secrets; narrative structure; Celeste Ng; *Everything I Never Told You*; Asian American literature; trauma fiction

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Secretos de familia y estructura narrativa
en *Everything I Never Told You*, de Celeste Ng

La novela de Celeste Ng *Everything I Never Told You* (2014) ha sido descrita como una mezcla de los rasgos típicos de las obras de suspense con otros menos habituales en las mismas que complican su clasificación como tal. Aunque sabemos desde el principio que la protagonista de la novela, Lydia Lee, ha aparecido muerta, descifrar quién está detrás del asesinato de la joven chino-americana es sólo uno de los misterios del libro. Si bien el lector o lectora se pregunta qué motivos o personajes pueden haber llevado a Lydia a la muerte, otros enigmas ligados al destino de la protagonista —relativos a los demás miembros de la familia Lee—surgen a lo largo del relato. Este artículo estudia la estructura de la obra, repleta de secretos, que se mueve entre las especulaciones de los Lee sobre la muerte de Lydia, el terrible impacto que esta tiene en ellos y la versión de la protagonista de su propia historia. Ng indaga en cuestiones de género, raza y demás tipos de alteridad que están en el origen de los secretos que impulsan el relato. Ayudado por ideas propuestas por Frank Kermode, Derek Attridge y otros críticos, el artículo destaca el papel de los secretos de familia como principio estructurador de la novela.

Palabras clave: secretos de familia; estructura narrativa; Celeste Ng; *Everything I Never Told You*; literatura asiático-americana; narrativa de trauma

What always interests us is the sense concealed in the proclamation. If we cannot agree about the nature of the secret, we are nevertheless compelled to agree that secrecy exists, the source of the interpreter's pleasures, but also of his necessary disappointment.
(Kermode 1979, xi)

The summer Lydia fell in the lake, the summer Marilyn went missing: all of them had tried to forget it. They did not talk about it; they never mentioned it. But it lingered, like a bad smell. It had suffused them so deeply it could never wash out.
(Ng 2014a, 124)

I. INTRODUCTION: ON THE CENTRALITY OF FAMILY SECRETS

As psychologists and social researchers well know, secrets have a tremendous—if often paradoxical—potential to unite people, but also to divide them (Goffman 1956; Blaker 1986). From workplace conspiracies through all sorts of marital disloyalties to shame of one's individual difference(s), secrets pervade almost every dimension of our existence. Although there have always been skeletons in the closet, their forms and functions changed radically over the twentieth century, thus affecting the relations between individuals and social groups in multiple and profound ways (Simmel 1950, 330). While secrets permeate every sphere of social life, most social psychologists would agree that they have particular importance in the context of family circles, where dilemmas regarding privacy, silence and communication become particularly complex (Roman and Blackburn 1979). Because families are conceived as support systems, a significant part of our identity as well as our power to build strong relationships depend on the mutual trust and fluent communication we develop at home. Even though Erving Goffman (1956, 86-87) and other sociologists such as Sandra Petronio (1991) have claimed that family secrets may help to maintain group cohesiveness, most specialists concur that the effects of family members keeping information from each other and from outsiders can become very toxic. Social psychologists and therapists are profoundly aware of how family secrets often trouble us by estranging family members from each other, generating tensions, inhibiting relationships with outsiders or even thwarting development at crucial points (Shaef 1986; Pennebaker 1990). Likewise, literary scholars have become increasingly aware of how these types of secrets, while being powerful narrative contrivances that drive readers' desires toward a certain "plenitude" of signification, are rarely fully elucidated due to the intricacy of their associations (Kermode 1979, 125-26; Brooks 1984, 90-92).

According to Evan Imber-Black, “any given secret may help to paralyze our sense of self and our position vis-à-vis others” (1998, 10), which makes secrets likely to hamper the maturation process of the various individual members of a family and their relationships with each other. The creation of a secret usually wedges a barrier between those family members who share it and those who do not, and corrodes their relationships. Whether you are an outsider or an insider, the effects tend to be equally unwholesome: “Living outside a central family secret can shape identity and behavior, generate feelings of self-doubt, distance and suspicion, and contribute to key decisions that are made without sufficient information. Living inside a secret may propagate a strange mixture of responsibility, power, anxiety, protectiveness, shame, burden, and fear” (Imber-Black 1998, 7). Both in reality and in fiction, secrets are seen to generate obscure feelings we urgently wish to disencumber ourselves of, but which usually prove too complex and impenetrable to resolve (Kermode 1979, 145).

Karen Blaker (1986), Ann Wilson Shaef (1986) and Imber-Black (1998) have all provided useful advice about how, when and with whom family secrets should be shared on the often tortuous journey from secrecy to openness. Nevertheless, they are also quick to admit that it is rarely easy to figure out the best ways and situations in which to reveal a family secret, since this very much depends on the motives behind the creation of the secret and the inner dynamics of the particular family (Shaef 1986, 27-30). If the power of family secrets to damage identities and relationships has given rise to much academic literature and debate, one should not be surprised by its incredibly productive influence on narrative fiction (Read a Latte 2018). Any search engine will promptly reveal that the number of websites listing novels that deal with family secrets and the types of impairments they precipitate is quite overwhelming. As Jason Allen notes, “secrecy makes for a riveting story, and family secrets often inform the tension and energy of some of my favorite literary works” (2019). Indeed, several renowned writers, such as Sarah Addison Allen, Lisa Gardner, Kate Morton and Maggie O’Farrell, have made family fibs and secrets the main fuel for the fire of their conflict-ridden, mesmerizing narratives. Although often classified as thrillers or mystery novels, their books include subtle meditations on yearnings, feelings of guilt, identity struggles, generational divides and unconfessed fears that raise their literary stature well above the standards typical of those genres.

At first glimpse, Celeste Ng’s widely acclaimed debut novel *Everything I Never Told You* (2014) partakes of many of the characteristics observed in the aforementioned writers. To begin with, the novel has been described as a mystery or crime thriller, bringing together many of the staple ingredients of the genre: a dead girl, a local bad boy as the main suspect, a police investigation and so on (Fallon 2014; Ng 2017b). In fact, the book opens with the disappearance and death of a young Chinese American girl of sixteen, Lydia E. Lee, who one morning fails to show up for breakfast with the rest of her family in their home in Ohio: “Lydia is dead. But they don’t know it yet. 1977, May 3, six thirty in the morning, no one knows anything but this innocuous fact: Lydia is late for

breakfast” (Ng 2014a, 1). Although the reader learns of the protagonist’s tragic fate in the first line of the novel—and so does the family shortly after—as the story unfolds we realize that Lydia’s mysterious death is just one of the many enigmas concerning the Lee family. While the mixed-race progenitors—James and Marilyn—and their three children look like a happy family, it soon transpires that there are hidden fault lines in the family unit that have already caused difficulties and much sorrow in the past. When two police officers visit the Lees to gather information about the missing girl, the older one looks at James closely as a memory arises in his mind: “‘Now, your wife also went missing once?’ he says. ‘I remember the case. In sixty-six, wasn’t it?’” (13). To which the father only replies: “‘That was a misunderstanding, [...] ‘A miscommunication between my wife and myself. A family matter’” (13). This early revelation sets the tone of the novel, which, as becomes increasingly clear, is only partly about the people and forces that may have driven Lydia to her premature demise in the local lake. Indeed, the story grows more captivating and intriguing as the reader realizes that the secrets and deceits of each family member have inflicted serious wounds on their own minds and their relationships with the others, and that these enigmas are at the root of the central catastrophe (Wilson 2014). As Alexander Chee wrote in his review of the novel, “Ng has set two tasks in this novel’s double heart—to be exciting, and to tell a story bigger than whatever is behind the crime. She does both by turning the nest of familial resentments into at least four smaller, prickly mysteries full of the secrets the family members won’t share” (2014). It is these smaller mysteries, then, that become the propulsive forces driving the narrative forward and, in turn, allowing the reader to connect certain critical events in the story to their obscure origins in the family’s deep-seated dysfunctions.

As the title of the novel suggests and the second epigraph to this article illustrates, the story focuses closely on the kind of secrets that the family members cannot bring themselves to tell each other or the police, and which readers gradually begin to suspect are related to Lydia’s tragedy. Family secrets of various kinds and intensity—from the parents’ vicarious ambitions to the siblings’ poignant jealousies—are seen to make the group increasingly vulnerable as they become the engine pulling the narrative forward. A review of the novel cogently argues that the circumstances of Lydia’s drowning are simply used “as a springboard to dive into the troubled waters beneath the calm surface of her Chinese-American family” (Kirkus Reviews 2014). Although Lydia was a seemingly conscientious student and the apple of her parents’ eye, we learn early on in the novel that there were important facts that she had withheld from them:

Nath’s [Lydia’s elder brother] seen Lydia at school, how in the cafeteria she sits silent while the others chatter; how, when they’ve finished copying her homework, she quietly slides her notebook into her bookbag. After school, she walks to the bus alone and settles into the seat beside him in silence. [...] Lydia has never really had friends, but their parents have never known. [...] He’s amazed at the stillness in her face, the way she can lie without even a raised eyebrow to give her away. (Ng 2014a, 15)

The reader grows disturbed by the gaps and distortions present in the perceptions that the different family members have of Lydia and of each other, which only emerge after the protagonist's death. As will be seen below, the narrative is structured to follow the shifting and clashing perspectives of the family members—Lydia included—as they speculate about the events that led to the girl's death. In this sense, it is the family's partial revelations about themselves, which provide the main twists and turns in the story and ultimately cast light on the protagonist's condition—rather than the “whodunit” aspect of her fate—that make the book engrossing (Wilson 2014).

2. SECRETS AND NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

The first epigraph to this article comes from the preface of Frank Kermode's collection of essays *The Genesis of Secrecy*, in which the author undertakes the study of “problems of interpretation” in texts characterized by their “mystery or secrecy” (1979, 144). Although Kermode centers his attention on Biblical texts, he states that the kind of mystery and “impenetrability” (145) found in the Gospels is equally observable in the best secular literature—say, that by William Shakespeare, Gustave Flaubert or William Faulkner. In Kermode's opinion, it is works that challenge our interpretative skills by being “hopelessly plural, endlessly disappointing” that are most likely to fill us with pleasure as we reach for “explanations of the unfollowable world” (145). Ng's novel undoubtedly displays many of the qualities that Kermode associates with those sacred texts in that it invariably conceals as much as it reveals in the process of reading. In this sense, Hector Tobar has remarked that Ng's main forte is her ability to pull together the many “strands of this complex, multigenerational novel,” while at the same time remaining tactful about the “emotional wounds [or secrets] that have scarred the family” (2014). One of the reasons why Ng manages to achieve both a significant degree of intimacy and an emotional distance from the characters' struggles and failures is her adept use of an omniscient narrator who guides the reader through the labyrinthine journey. After having heard about Lydia's disappearance and the discovery of her corpse in the lake, the narrator introduces the first remarkable twist in the story:

How had it begun? Like everything: with mothers and fathers. Because of Lydia's mother and father, because of her mother's and father's mothers and fathers. Because long ago, her mother had gone missing and her father had brought her home. 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 had been impossible. (Ng 2014a, 25)

Although the main line of the story remains firmly anchored in the events that ensue after Lydia's decease in the mid-1970s, the reader travels back and forth between the Lees' memories of past episodes decades ago and their current afflictions. In fact, Mark Lawson has stated that in the first half of the novel we hear as much about the protagonist's

parents' courtship and dreams as about Lydia's own (2014). These early chapters show the immense anxieties that both James and Marilyn had experienced in the 1950s due to racial and gender bigotry, and how these anxieties came to deeply affect the rapport between them. After falling for each other, they realized that there were family matters on both sides they preferred not to share: "A few months later, when they married, they would make a pact: to let the past drift away, to stop asking questions, to look forward from then on, never back" (Ng 2014a, 49). Evidently, this is not the healthiest policy on which to build a marital life together, since the secrets they have kept from each other are seen to emerge at different points and jeopardize the unstable balance in their home (Lee 2018, 28). Kermode observes that in narratives of this kind, where hidden feelings abound, there is the risk of "a debauch of the imagination" (1983, 142), with secrecy and distortions likely to undermine the process "towards clarity and propriety" (136). A good instance of these simultaneous yet conflicting pulls—towards closure and unfathomable enigmas—is found in the sections devoted to Marilyn's desertion of the family home in the mid-1960s, right after she visited her mother's house in Virginia when the latter died of a stroke. Not only is the family profoundly hurt and destabilized by Marilyn's decision, but she herself is no longer the same person after she comes to realize the "sad and empty life" her mother had led: "Was she sad? She was angry. Furious for the smallness of her mother's life. *This*, she thought fiercely, touching the cookbook's cover. *This is all I need to remember about her. This is all I want to keep*" (Ng 2014a, 83; italics in the original). The early chapters of the novel reveal that both Marilyn and James suffered traumas when they were still very young that have visibly misshaped their personalities and caused them to wreak unconscious pain and frustration on their offspring through the projection of their own aspirations onto them.

Lawson has described *Everything I Never Told You* as "an acute portrait of family psychopathology," since "Ng brilliantly depicts the destruction that parents can inflict on their children and on each other" (2014). Lydia is, of course, the main victim of her parents' hidden agendas as she never imagines what may motivate her mother's obsession with her studies or her father's fixation with her social relations. She feels terribly guilty when her mother deserts the family for two months when she is only five and believes she is to blame for her leaving: "It's not your fault, her father had said, but Lydia knew it was. They'd done something wrong, she and Nath; they'd made her angry somehow. They hadn't been what she wanted" (Ng 2014a, 137). Marilyn's dereliction had already made evident the crumbling pillars on which the marriage was founded, for in a few weeks after Lydia's death we see all the family members unleashing sentiments they had never voiced. As noted in a review of the novel, "these long-hidden, quietly explosive truths, weighted by issues of race and gender, slowly bubble to the surface of Ng's sensitive, absorbing novel" and suck the reader along "like a strong current" (Kirkus Reviews 2014). These observations are reminiscent of Kermode's examination of those "restricted codes" or secrets that narratives often contain, but that readers seldom pay enough attention to, although they "would make another and rarer kind

of sense” (1983, 152). This point is well illustrated by Marilyn’s decision near the end of the first half of the novel, when after her short-lived sojourn away from the family she learns that Lydia has lost her mother’s cookbook and decides to channel into her daughter her own thwarted dreams of becoming a doctor (Wilson 2014):

It was a sign, Marilyn decided. For her it was too late. But it wasn’t too late for Lydia. Marilyn would not be like her own mother, shunting her daughter toward husband and house, a life spent safely behind a deadbolt. She would help Lydia do everything she was capable of. She would spend the rest of her years guiding Lydia, sheltering her, the way you tended a prize rose: helping it to grow, propping it with stakes, arching each stem toward perfection. (Ng 2014a, 147)

Although never made explicit, it is quite clear that Marilyn’s—and her husband’s—hopes and expectations about their blue-eyed daughter are among the most influential factors in the protagonist’s dysfunctional development. Like Lydia herself, readers also suspect that complying with her parents’ unvoiced dreams may turn into an impossible task—yet, we also hope that her determination to please them will help her to bear the burden: “Inside, Lydia could feel it: everything that was to come. One day the books would have no pictures. The problems would grow longer and harder. [...] The knowledge hovered all around her, clinging to her, every day getting thicker. Everywhere she went, it was there. But every time her mother asked, she said *yes, yes, yes*” (150; italics in the original). Kermode refers to this type of “knowledge” that foretells the origins of events as “the hidden god of secrets” (1983, 153) and, as is the case in *Everything I Never Told You*, it may well become the structuring principle of a novel that pairs sequences and connectivity with other more “wild or misty” elements (Kermode 1983, 153), leading readers towards a different significance of the text. The next two sections attempt to unravel this double movement in a narrative that uses secrets—but is also used by them—to portray the complicated lineaments of a dismal family downfall.

3. WHAT TEARS THE LEE FAMILY APART?

Fiona Wilson has argued that “there are no sudden realizations, but the gradual peeling back of the layers is no less compelling as we crawl towards the conclusion in Ng’s portrait of a brittle family and the burden of difference” (2014). And so, if there are any answers to the Lee family’s falling apart after Lydia’s death, they lie well beneath the surface. In fact, if anything becomes evident in the first half of the novel it is the high degree of exposure of the Lee family to contextual factors and the fact that their secrets—linked to their otherness—make them even more vulnerable. Although Marilyn and her Asian American husband seem to have succeeded in forming a functional family, it is clear that there are aspects of each of the family members’ lives that could easily imperil it. Marilyn’s desertion had already caused some fissures in the family structure, but it is of

course Lydia's death that awakens ghosts that had remained dormant for years but that now come to agitate it even more profoundly. Some reviewers have rightly remarked that Lydia was to a great extent the tether binding the family together and when she goes missing the others find themselves unmoored and drifting away from each other (Fallon 2014; Wilson 2014). Right after her mother's return home, Lydia realizes her own fundamental role in the family: "And Lydia herself—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 2014a, 160). But, of course, the pressure to become "the all-American physician" that her parents dream of is too heavy a burden for a teenage girl to come to grips with (Lawson 2014).

Although her young age is certainly one of the factors that make Lydia vulnerable to her parents' longings, there are other constitutive features of her family's identity that further complicate her situation. First, there is her father's compulsion to try to make his children feel fully integrated in the Midwest town where they live—something that he himself has never managed to do. As a matter of fact, one of his dearest ambitions is that his adored daughter will never have to live through the kind of slights that he has often endured from colleagues and acquaintances. One of the major sources of secrecy within the Lee family is precisely the imperative that all its members feel to become "normal" and hence invisible in their community. Nath's wish not to become a replica of his father, Lydia's desire to pass for the popular girl she is not and Marilyn's efforts to be a proper homemaker, all push them to beget secrets and lies that undermine the family's cohesion. In an interview appended to the novel, the author described her own difficulties in adapting to the Midwest culture as an Asian American young girl: "Even when you feel like you belong, other people's reactions—even stares and offhand remarks—can make you feel that you don't, startlingly often. I drew on that to imagine the experiences of James, Lydia, Nath, and Hannah [Lydia's younger sister], or at least their reactions to those experiences" (2014b, 6). It is evident in the novel that those reactions are deeply affected by the characters' exposure to reminders that they are not perceived as ordinary people in the community. One of those cruel reminders of the family's alterity reaches them a few days after Lydia's funeral in the form of a newspaper article about the tragic event: "*As one of only two Orientals in Middlewood High—the other being her brother, Nathan—Lee stood out in the halls. However, few seemed to have known her well*" (Ng 2014a, 109; italics in the original). James's reaction to the news items revealing some facts about his dear daughter and how she was perceived by others is particularly telling of the attitude most family members take when this type of revelation is made: "Each time he sees one, he folds the newsprint over itself, as if wrapping up something rotten, before Marilyn or the children spot it. Only in the safety of his office does he unroll the paper to read it carefully" (109). Like the rest of the family, James finds it difficult to admit that his daughter was not the person he thought she was and so he tries to hide from himself and others any evidence pointing in a different direction.

Like Mitchell Katsu Lee (2018), Wilson observes that Ng's novel turns into "a poignant exploration of the effects" that the loss of a child or a sibling has on a family already troubled by racial and cultural tensions that are never expressed (2014). Although the author only refers to those tensions rather obliquely, it becomes clear that Lydia's parents hold grudges against each other that only surface when they begin to respond differently to the discoveries made in the course of the investigation into their daughter's real life. For example, a severe fracture becomes patent in the couple when, after a visit from police officers during which they begin to hint at the possibility of suicide, Marilyn overreacts to her husband's compliant attitude regarding the officers' theory: "I would think you'd want to know, too. But listen to you. *Of course, officer. Thank you, officer. We can't ask for more, officer.* [...] 'I know how to think for myself, you know. Unlike some people, I don't just kowtow to the police'" (Ng 2014a, 116; italics in the original). Naturally, Marilyn is conscious of the explosive effect that the use of the Anglicized Chinese term *kowtow*—alluding to stereotypical Oriental submissiveness—is going to have on her husband. Yet, in the confusion of her outrage, she is ready to throw that vicious dart at his heart. In his award-winning book *The Singularity of Literature*, Derek Attridge maintains that a powerful artistic creation takes place "when an artist succeeds in exploiting the tensions, contradictions, or fissures in the cultural environment" in such a way that a new entity and conceptual paradigm—arising from differences in gender, race, generation and so on—comes into being (2004, 18-19). As Attridge sees it, the uniqueness of a literary work lies primarily in the writer's ability to move outside the existing conventions that give coherence to the cultural fabric in order to delve into other possibilities of expression. This is what secrets provide in the case of Ng's innovative novel, giving a radical twist to traditional mysteries.

Another example of a secret heightening the conflict between James and Marilyn and pushing the disruptive tendencies in their marriage to the limit is James's short-lived affair with his assistant at work, Louisa Chen. Although never stated explicitly, it is obvious that this romance finds its roots both in the profound trauma caused by his daughter's demise and the growing schism in the couple: "Everything about her [Louisa] is different: the flex of her limbs, the texture of her skin. [...] Afterward he falls asleep with Louisa still atop him. Since Lydia was *found*—the only word he can bear to use for it—the little sleep he's had has been restless" (Ng 2014a, 71; italics in the original). Just as his wife can only find relief from the unbearable pain in furtively revisiting her daughter's room, James's sole consolation seems to derive from his clandestine visits to his lover. Each family member develops his or her own secret strategies to cope with the mourning process, which only increases the distance that already existed between them prior to Lydia's disappearance.

Although it is evident that much of the responsibility for the implosion of the Lee family falls on the shoulders of the parents, who become completely estranged from each other after the protagonist's death (Lee 2018, 28), Lydia's siblings do little to try to heal the psychological wounds either. On the one hand, Nathan, her older brother,

has always held some rancor against her because their parents have always treated Lydia as their darling, paying little attention to his and Hannah's achievements. This animosity becomes very clear when, after Lydia fails a test at school, she expects some support from him but, instead, he remains silent and relishes the victory of soon being admitted to Harvard: "He didn't want to remember all the times his father had doted on Lydia but stared at him with disappointment flaring in his eyes, all the times their mother had praised Lydia but looked over and past and through him, as if he were made of air. He wanted to savor the long-awaited letter, the promise of getting away at last" (Ng 2014a, 172). Even though Lydia and Nath had been really close, especially after their mother's desertion, the latter feels the unfairness of being treated differently and having to conceal his sister's missteps. His resentment grows especially strong when he is compelled to hide from his parents the fact that Lydia had been hanging around for months with Jack Wolff, a neighbor that Nath hates and that he suspects had something to do with his sister's fatal end. On her part, Hannah is only ten years old and, consequently, too innocent to fully understand some of the intricate—and toxic—family dynamics. However, she is extremely curious and observant for her age, which makes her an invaluable source of information for the reader, but also a dangerous secret sharer for her sister. As Tobar has noted, Ng "is especially adept at describing interior spaces and the subtle ways in which brothers and sisters come to know about each other's lives" (2014). Besides the jumps in time, it is these shifts between the perspectives of the family members that allow the reader to come to understand the secrets that have made them blind to important aspects of the "real" Lydia. Attridge believes that it is this kind of "formal inventiveness" that accounts for the possibility of the emergence of new subject matters and conceptual frameworks in fiction, which move beyond existing conventions of interpretation (2004, 107-109).

4. THE MOST MOMENTOUS SECRETS IN THE NOVEL: LYDIA ELISABETH LEE

According to Wilson, although *Everything I Never Told You* is structured around the events that led to Lydia's death and the clashing theories of the family members, "learn[ing] about who Lydia really was [is] the biggest 'mystery' of them all" (2014; see also Chee 2014). While readers are much absorbed by the prehistory of the calamitous event and the family members' attempts at finding an explanation for it, what proves most riveting is discovering what has turned the protagonist into the person she is. In Chee's opinion, Lydia Lee carries the burden "of being the first of [her] kind" in the novel and that makes the pressure of fulfilling everybody's hopes far too great. Wilson adds that Lydia's struggle is especially tough because she is hauling "the hopes and expectations of two generations" and those dreams do not necessarily coincide (2014). This becomes evident when, soon after Marilyn discovers her husband's affair, she begins to pour forth hostile comments at him for having encouraged Lydia to be just an ordinary girl: "A thick bitterness coats her tongue. 'Do what everyone else is

doing. That's all you ever said to Lydia. Make friends. Fit in. But I didn't want her to be just like everyone else.' The rims of her eyes ignite. 'I wanted her to be exceptional'" (Ng 2014a, 243). It is the fact that Lydia has been pressurized to perform and shape her identity according to the divergent dictates of her progenitors that has transformed her into the secretive, taciturn individual she is. Her enigmatic character also makes the reader's task of unpacking her motivations especially challenging and engrossing (Attridge 2004, 79-80).

In her book *Articulate Silences*, King-Kok Cheung takes issue with criticism that has valorized voice and speech over all other forms of communication and with Asian American scholars who have deemed silence—especially women's—to be fraught with unfavorable connotations. According to Cheung, not only can silence and secrets “speak many tongues, varying from culture to culture” (1993, 1), but they fulfill different functions and generate “varying meanings” (3). Ng would probably agree with this critic that silences and secrets have generally harmful effects on their keepers. However, they can also be immensely revealing about the fears, feelings of shame, envy or guilt of the characters (Ng 2014b, 9). As noted above, although there are signs from the very beginning of the novel that Lydia has kept key aspects of her life from both her parents and her siblings, she has managed to preserve the image of the dutiful daughter and diligent student, particularly with her mother: “Marilyn doesn't even wait for him [a police officer] to finish. 'Lydia was very happy. She loved school. She could have done anything. She'd never go out in that boat by herself'" (Ng 2014a, 110). Even though all members of the family are shocked by Lydia's sudden disappearance, in retrospect they begin to realize that her life may not have been as pleasant and easy as they had assumed. For instance, when her mother visits Lydia's room after her funeral and looks for the diaries that she has been giving to her every Christmas since she was five, she is terribly disappointed:

The key is missing, but Marilyn jams the tip of a ballpoint into the catch and forces the flimsy lock open. The first page she sees, April 10, is blank. She checks May 2, the night Lydia disappeared: Nothing. Nothing for May 1, or anything in April, or anything in March. Every page is blank. She takes down 1976. 1975. 1974. Page after page of visible, obstinate silence. She leafs backward all the way to the very first diary, 1966: not a word. All those years of her daughter's life unmarked. Nothing to explain anything. (74)

Ironically, when Marilyn had given Lydia her first diary, she had told her that the purpose of the gift was “writing down [her] secrets” (74), which is precisely what the blank pages of her diaries hide after she is gone. In fact, the evidence produced by the police investigation and the few clues that the family themselves find all point in the direction that nobody was truly aware of what was going on in Lydia's mind during the last months of her life. As is the case with her parents, Lydia prefers to remain hermetic about the problems she has in dealing with her differences. Again, right at the heart of

the novel, Marilyn makes a discovery in the lining of Lydia's bookbag that shows her just how blind she was to certain aspects of her daughter's life. Through a small tear in the lining, "she pulls an open package of Marlboros. And, beneath that, she finds something else: an open box of condoms" (119-20). The present-day reader might not think anything especially remarkable about these items being found in a teenage girl's possession; however, Marilyn's reaction speaks volumes of both her limited knowledge of her daughter and her unbreakable faith in coming to know her somehow: "the outlines of Lydia's life—so sharp and clear before—begin to waver. Dizzy, she rests her head against the side of Lydia's desk. She will find out everything she doesn't know" (120).

And yet, despite her parents' and siblings' best efforts, Lydia remains a mystery until the end of the novel. It is true that in the second half the reader learns about the things that had most troubled the protagonist lately: her declining grades at school, her problems making friends, her father's possible affair and the prospect of Nath's departure. As noted above, all these difficulties are added to the burden of having to respond to everybody's hopes, without being able to share that responsibility—which is quite common among teenagers belonging to minority groups. Most likely, Nath should have been that "secret sharer" ready to somehow alleviate her burden, since "only [him] had made it bearable all that time. Every day, since kindergarten, he saved her a seat—in the cafeteria, a chair across the table from him; on the bus, his books placed besides him on the green vinyl seat. [...] They never discussed it, but both came to understand it as a promise: he would always make sure there was a place for her" (166). However, Lydia makes two terrible blunders that definitely alienate her from the person who could have been her closest ally in the family: she secretly begins to go out with Jack and she hides Nathan's letter of admission to Harvard. These two unwise moves not only show the protagonist's difficulties in dealing with her current circumstances, but they are also signs of the perverse habit Lydia has developed of trying to hide certain realities from others.

Kermode speaks of these secrets as signals of "a surplus of sense [...], an indication of larger existence, of something seen as it were 'across' the story" (1983a, 20) and adds that these deep shadows in the story are "quite strongly marked if one looks for them" (22). It could be said that these shadows emerge in Ng's novel when we catch sight of the lies and secrets that Lydia feels compelled to concoct in order to deal with her family's expectations. Not only does she frequently brush off the deceptions she needs to work out so as to be perceived as the "perfect" girl, but she forgets about certain social stereotypes and prejudices, which also has a profound impact on her life. When Jack asks her what it is like to be one of the few Chinese people in Middlewood, in her mind she goes through a long list of experiences that remind her of precisely that:

You saw it when waitresses and policemen and bus drivers spoke slowly to you, in simple words, as if you might not understand. You saw it in photos, yours the only black head of hair in the scene, as if you'd been cut out and pasted in. You thought: *Wait, what's she doing*

there? And then you remembered that *she* was *you*. You kept your head down and thought about school, or space, or the future, and tried to forget about it. And you did, until it happened again. (Ng 2014a, 193; italics in the original)

Lydia's answer to Jack's question is both clarifying about her predicament and sad: "People decide what you're like before they even get to know you. [...] They think they know all about you. Except you're never who they think you are" (193). Unfortunately, in Lydia's case it is not just acquaintances and strangers that mistake her for what she is not, but her own family and friends too find it difficult to gain access to her inner self. This may be due to the surrounding culture, which in Attridge's words includes "habitual practices, mental frameworks, affective predispositions, and material conditions" that set the boundaries between "insiders" and "the others" (2011, 682). This connects Ng's novel to other works by Asian American writers—especially women, such as Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts* (1976) and Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* (1981)—who have also struggled with problems of biracialism, intergenerational tensions, genre and identity (Grice 2002).¹ On the other hand, there is also the protagonist's—Chinese American—"idioculture" (Attridge 2011, 283), that is, their habit of keeping their preferences, memories, traumas, capabilities and emotional tendencies to themselves. It is these two forces that explain the different ways in which Ng's novel conveys its meaning(s) to the reader by simultaneously concealing and revealing significant elements of the protagonist's inner nature—an inner nature deeply distressed by the type of family she belongs to and the sociohistorical context in which her harrowing story takes place (Lowe 1996, 4-6).

5. CLOSING REMARKS: THE *DÉDOUBLEMENT* OF READING

In the prologue to his classic volume on narrative theory *Reading for the Plot*, Peter Brooks says that more than in plot, he is interested in plotting: "that which makes a plot 'move forward,' and makes us read forward, seeking in the unfolding of the narrative a line of intention and a portent of design that hold the promise of progress toward meaning" (1984, xiii). Had Ng's *Everything I Never Told You* been a conventional literary thriller or crime story, one would have assumed that what "makes us read forward" is finding a solution to the mystery that the protagonist's death poses. Nevertheless, as the narrative unravels, the reader becomes increasingly aware that it is the things unsaid, the secrets kept by Lydia and her family, that constitute "the play of desire in time that makes us turn pages and strive toward narrative ends" (Brooks 1984, xiii). Like Brooks, in this article I have argued that secrets are "the motor forces that drive the text forward, [...] the desires that connect narrative ends and beginnings, and make of the textual middle a highly charged field of force" (xiii-xiv). In fact, the textual middle in the case of Ng's novel

¹ Like Lydia, the protagonists of *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts* and *Obasan* (1981) also experience the harmful effects of keeping family secrets.

encompasses all the secrets that remain opaque and “tend to resist all but abnormally attentive scrutiny, reading so minute, intense, and slow that it seems to run counter to one’s ‘natural’ sense of what a novel is, a sense which one feels to have behind it the history and sociology of the genre” (Kermode 1983, 138). At this point, Kermode speaks of a *dédoublément* of the activity of reading for, while there are still some staple elements of the genre—such as its partial revelations—there are others that may drive the “intense” reader toward “concern and disappointment” (140). One could easily argue that this is the case with Ng’s text since it foregrounds secrecy as one of the most prominent features in human relations and also shows our anxiety when dealing with characters—and texts—devoid of definite closure: “And tomorrow, next month, next year? It will take a long time. Years from now, they will still be arranging the pieces they know, puzzling over her [Lydia’s] features, redrawing her outlines in their minds” (Ng 2014a, 291).

In the same way that Lydia’s closest kin find her character and behavior quite ungraspable and have serious difficulties in accepting their own involvement in her fate, we readers are also baffled by our difficulties in comprehending the nature and significance of the secrets in the novel (Lee 2018, 26). It is true that the set of promises that Lydia makes to herself before she jumps into the rowboat on the lake grants us a few insights into the sense of her secrets—the pressures she felt, the dependencies she developed, the errors she made. However, it is not certain that even if she had survived the pressures of the moment, she would have managed to be the person she wishes to be: “And as she made this last promise, Lydia understood what to do. How to start everything over again, from the beginning, so she would never again be afraid to be alone. [...] Gently she lowered herself into the rowboat and loosed the rope” (Ng 2014a, 275). After all, if there is something that the novel makes crystal clear, it is that the secrets that most of the key characters keep are as much related to issues of race and gender, family dynamics and the deadweight of expectations, as to their personal fears and limitations (Connors 2014). In this sense, it is hard to conceive that Lydia Lee could have grown into a sociable and confident teenage girl given the circumstances of her particular family and the social context at large.

To conclude, like Ng’s second novel, *Little Fires Everywhere* (2017a), her debut novel *Everything I Never Told You* also tackles such thorny issues as failed attempts to leave one’s past behind, the huge secrecy in families as well as race and gender tensions (Ng 2017b). Although disguised as literary thrillers, both works prove very demanding in terms of narrative structure and the search for closure. As this article hopes to have shown, these novels necessitate what Attridge calls a “creative” type of reading, since the high levels of family secrecy, multiple perspectives and uncertain motivations require both special attention to the works’ singularity and alterity and awareness of the two horizons of expectations at play (2011, 688). One can only hope to do justice to this kind of fiction by moving beyond some of their generic and thematic categorizations and using of all available critical and cultural resources in an attempt to make sense of their possible fissures and distortions (López 2021, 4-5).

These confounding elements—which become most apparent in Ng’s *Everything I Never Told You* in the family secrets that operate as a structuring principle—can also be detected in the subtle stylization of the discourse, characterized by restraint and understatement, and in the use of particular metaphors—letters, books, gifts, etc. But those, of course, are topics for other scholarly contributions.²

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² The research underpinning this article was carried out under the auspices of the projects “Derechos humanos y retos socioculturales en un mundo en transformación” (IT1224-19), funded by the Basque Government, and “New Wests” (PGC2018-094659-B-C21), funded by the Spanish Ministry of Economy, Industry and Competitiveness (MINECO).

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Received 14 August 2020

Revised version accepted 15 February 2021

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