Reading Midwest Asian America in Celeste Ng's *Everything I Never Told You*

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Year over year, I hold up a worn copy of Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1975) in front of my students and dramatically tell them that this book changed my life, how it is the first book I read in which the characters and their problems resembled my lived experience.[1] At 19, I didn't know Kingston's memoir of growing up Chinese American in Stockton, California, in the 1950s, the daughter of immigrants who arrived prior to World War II and run a laundry business, only narrowly paralleled my own life as the mixed race daughter of a Filipina immigrant and a White man, since divorced, who grew up in the poor working class in Toledo, Ohio, in the 1990s and early 2000s. However imperfect, the feeling of recognition was so strong upon reading *The Woman Warrior* that I changed my college major, setting me on the path to a PhD in English. I usually don't tell students, however, that Kingston's was the *only* work of Asian American literature I would read in my undergraduate English curriculum and that, although graduate school drastically expanded my exposure to Asian American literature, I have only experienced such a strong shock of recognition one other time: when I read Celeste Ng's *Everything I Never Told You* (2014), a novel about a mixed race Chinese American family living in Middlewood, Ohio, a fictional college town emplaced an hour west of Toledo, set in the 1970s.[2] The Lee family includes James, a professor of American history at Middlewood College and a Chinese American who grew up in Iowa; Marilyn (née Walker), a White woman from Virginia who

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once dreamed of being a doctor; and their three children: Nath (18), Lydia (16), and Hannah (10). Beginning with Lydia's death, the novel is a heart-wrenching exploration, as the title suggests, of everything this family holds back, never daring to say aloud to one another: the things they think about most deeply, fear most terribly, or desire most ardently. I devoured the novel the first time through, hardly believing that I was reading—for the first time in the pages of a book—a story about people who were *really* like me, mixed race Asian Americans located in the region that I call home.

Ng's debut novel, *Everything I Never Told You*, has achieved wide commercial success and won numerous literary prizes; it has been translated into more than thirty languages and is currently slated for cinematic adaptation.[3] Literary scholar Roberta Wolfson notes that what makes Ng's writing so widely appealing may be its "universal themes like the complexities of parent-child relationships, the growing pains of adolescence, and the impact of race, gender, and class on social interactions."[4] Yet, as novelist Toni Morrison has said, literature that is beloved for its universality is almost always "about a particular world."[5] In this article, I explore the particular world that Ng crafts for the Lees in Middlewood, Ohio, arguing that we read the novel as Midwestern Asian American literature. Very little scholarship on *Everything* has been published at this juncture though colleagues across Asian American and multiethnic literature studies are exploring its themes of mixed race intimacy; gender and sexuality; silence, trauma, and the transgenerational; mental health; and more. In that emerging work and in popular reception, I believe the particularities of the Midwest are overlooked; if addressed, Middlewood is often read as a signifier of racial and ethnic isolation in suburban America. Turning to popular reception, some Goodreads reviewers dismiss the place as an overwrought rhetorical trope. One writes, for example, that the small-town, Midwestern setting makes the racism the Lees experience feel exaggerated and unrealistic.[6] Given that Celeste Ng grew up in Ohio herself and, admittedly, compelled by my own personal ties, as I join the emerging scholarly conversations, I read Middlewood as deliberately and expertly crafted to evoke questions about Asian American experience in the Midwest. On one hand, *Everything*'s rendering aligns with popular notions that characterize the U.S. Midwest as "a hinterland where Asian people do not reside and have no desire to visit" in literary scholar Thomas X. Sarmiento's words. On the other, its emphasis on place provokes readers to reimagine narrow visions of the Midwest and offers Asian American readers located in this region powerful assertions that "we are here" and our stories matter.[7] In this article, I contemplate the Midwest as a stage for unbelonging and out-of-placeness for the Lee family, exploring how this novel captures the impact of the White gazes of their town to make the Lees, as racially marked bodies, feel incongruous against the backdrop of "typical America." In doing so, I argue, the novel archives the ways bodies

absorb and process the psychic injuries of what literary scholar Koritha Mitchell terms "know-your-place aggressions" and how the cumulative traumatic effects of these transmit across generations.[8] For the Lee children especially, these know-your-place aggressions continuously remind them that, although they have never lived any other place, theirs is *not here*, in Middlewood, Ohio.

Asian American literature of the Midwest, as Sarmiento writes, offers representation not so much of Asian Americans out of place in the heartland, but rather narratives revealing how "dominant US cultural attitudes and practices cast people of Asian descent as forever foreign throughout the nation."[9] To some degree, because of a national racial framing, there are similarities in Asian American experience anywhere/everywhere in the United States.[10] But, as sociologist Monica Mong Trieu discusses, in the Midwest, Asian Americans must contend with this racialization while simultaneously navigating how non-Asians perceive and define themselves *as Midwesterners*, nearly always to the exclusion of Black, Indigenous, and other people of color. Scholar of regional literature Kent Ryden observes that the Midwest is "often blithely considered in popular thought to be the most representative and all-American of regions."[11] More explicitly, in a conversation with historian Tobias Higbie, *The New York Times* writes that "stock images of heartland America tend to turn up few faces of color, whether on the farm or in nostalgic manufacturing. When people use the term, [Higbie] suspects, they're often envisioning a white version of the Midwest without its most diverse pockets."[12] In the introduction to the *Journal of Asian American Studies* special issue on the Midwest, sociologist Pawan Dhingra notes that popular depictions perpetuate ideas that the region is nonurban, racially homogenous, and home to "a simple, wholesome way of life," where people embody "a 'traditional' American character of a supposed commitment to family values (rarely defined), independent determination, and military pride."[13] In these examples, as Trieu writes, the slippage between "American" and "White" in the popular imagination of the Midwest not only "embraces Whiteness as the dominant and normative narrative," but also erases the identities and the physical presence of people of color (t)here, whether in its major cities or in small towns such as *Everything*'s Middlewood. Racial exclusion, then, plays an instrumental role "in the process of defining who is part of America's heartland" and who, decidedly, is not.[14]

The phrase "all-American" suggests the presumed Whiteness and normativity of the Midwest is meant to logically extend to the broader nation, something literary scholar Christine Kim calls the "project of transnational whiteness" that structures a vast empire the United States has built around the world.[15] Yet this "all-American" racial homogeneity is also leveraged to eclipse the outsized influence of U.S. empire globally through a contradicting but equally popular narrative that disparages the Midwest

as "a parochial backwater" confined within "a peculiar temporal state" as Ryden and literary scholar Adam Ochonicky, respectively, have written.[16] The region is "consistently rendered anachronistic" precisely because these idealized or "authentic" American traits and values "are no longer detected elsewhere, if they ever existed at all."[17] This imagined insulation from the "progress" experienced by the rest of the country coupled with the racial exclusion discussed suggest that the region would not only be unwelcoming to Asian people and other marginalized groups, but would likewise be undesirable to them, whether in the 1970s or the 2020s. This narrative results in the Midwest being continuously imagined as far removed from international border crossings and ports of entry and, thus, isolated from the forces of globalization by which U.S. empire is made and its capitalist systems work.[18] Such moves of fantastic geographical and geopolitical imagination are their own kind of border, what Latinx studies scholar Sujey Vega calls the "wall in our heads," which I discuss in detail.[19] In other words, the very presence of the "perpetually foreign" Asian subject becomes an important signifier of transnationalism. Thus, on one hand, national scripts about race and region make Midwesterners prone to looking upon Asians and Asian Americans as threatening signs of global encroachment. On the other, the Asian subject *being (t)here* signals that the Midwest—indeed, as part of the U.S. nation—is always already global, firmly within rather than exempt from the transnational flows of people, goods, and information that crisscross the earth.

Although the action of *Everything* largely takes place inside the Lee family home, Ng carefully connects this family to national and global forces of geopolitical import, including the *Loving v. Virginia* decision, NASA's lunar missions, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Cold War; of these, I discuss the Cold War in greatest detail in the remainder of this article. Whereas the Lees may consider their daily lives trivial and isolated, the novel shows readers how their experiences in Middlewood are linked with and textured by multilayered historical contexts. In particular, *Everything* showcases how their experiences of Asian racialization are never isolated from wider patterns of discrimination and ideological thought that, on a global scale, continuously imagine the Midwest as homogeneously White and normative and as the all-American "heart" of the country. My reading suggests that *Everything* is significant, yes, because it represents Midwestern Asian Americans to us and because it represents us to others well beyond, and in doing so, the novel opens conversations about the conceptual boundaries we are conditioned to enact and reinforce to maintain the fiction that Asians are anomalous to the Midwest, an illusion that covers over the routes by which we come to be (t)here. That is, as I detail, *Everything I Never Told You* makes visible how the American Midwest is tethered to rather than bracketed away from the United States' operations as a global force in the world.

Welcome to Middlewood

Everything I Never Told You begins with the ordinary, suburban routines of the Lee family on the morning following Lydia's death by drowning. Her mother, Marilyn, has just received a phone call from the high school inquiring about Lydia's absence. As Marilyn wonders where her daughter could be, her mind first goes to the news headlines about the latest "Son of Sam" shooting in New York City, setting up a contrast between small-town Ohio and the global metropolitan space that so often projects "America" to the rest of the world. Marilyn shudders at the terrifying randomness of the world beyond her home, but she dismisses such a dramatic fear, reminding herself that such gruesome things do not happen (t)here, in "humble" Middlewood:

> which calls itself a city but is really just a tiny college town of three thousand people, where driving an hour only gets you to Toledo, where a Saturday night out means the roller rink or the bowling alley or the drive-in, where even Middlewood Lake, at the center of town, is really just a glorified pond.[20]

In parentheses, Ng writes that Marilyn is wrong about the lake: "It is a thousand feet across, and it is deep."[21] Although readers have learned from the opening line of the novel that "Lydia is dead," this parenthetical is the first hint at the cause of death.[22] But more, Marilyn's error calls readers to reevaluate the judgments we make based on surface-level impressions and assumptions. In her shallow evaluation of the lake, Marilyn parallels the behavior of the townspeople, who make superficial assessments about members of the community who defy the social norms that construct (nuclear) family and middle-class life, such as her own, seemingly the town's only mixed race family, or their neighbors Dr. Janet Wolff, a working single mother and her son Jack. Just as Marilyn underestimates the depth and the danger presented by the lake, her daughter's death brings into focus how she misreads Middlewood's simplicity and miscalculates how deeply her family feels the magnitude of racist exclusion there.

Although the novel opens with a gut punch—"Lydia is dead"—it is important that her family does not know this yet, proceeding through their mundane morning routines. The reader is caught up in descriptions of mother preparing breakfast in the kitchen; of father fumbling with the radio dial, scanning for "WXNP, Northwest Ohio's Best News Source" on the commute to work; of children sleepily dressing themselves for school and making their way to the dining table, allowing audiences to almost forget that ominous fact that hangs over the familiar suburban morning.[23] This detailed examination of the Lees' morning, on one level, creates contrast between a "normal" life before and an altered life after tragedy, but on another, it plays with audience expectations about race, which has

not yet been introduced in those first two pages of the novel. Or, rather, by not explicating their racial difference, Ng leaves it open for readers to default to codes of heteronormativity that always already racialize the family as White in the standard picture of suburban life in the Midwest. That normative image is shattered the moment Nath, from the corner of his eye, mistakes his mother for his sister:

> It happens sometimes—their faces so alike you'd see one...and mistake her for the other: the same elfish chin and high cheekbones and left-cheek dimple, the same thin-shouldered build. Only the hair is different, Lydia's ink-black instead of their mother's honey blond. [Nath] and Hannah take after their father—once, a woman stopped the two of them in the grocery store and asked, "Chinese?" and when they said yes, not wanting to get into halves and wholes, she'd nodded sagely. "I knew it," she said. "By the eyes." She'd tugged the corner of each eye outward with a fingertip. But Lydia, defying genetics, somehow has her mother's blue eyes, and they know this is one more reason she is their mother's favorite. And their father's too.[24]

With a paragraph, the serene and familiar image of suburbia turns, reintroducing the family as Chinese American and hinting at the ways interracial marriage and mixed race experience—anomalous in 1970s Middlewood—will be central to understanding this narrative.

From the onset of *Everything*, Ng plays with the ways the Midwest is familiar to readers, those based in the United States and those beyond, through popular representations that circulate globally and characterize it as the most representative and "all-American" of places, a sturdy heartland that retains its commitment to the nation's most prized ideals. Ng is conscious, too, that, on the other hand, these representations consistently disparage the middle of the country as a "middle of nowhere," as empty and flat "flyover country," a vast array of agricultural fields where the presence of people is dwarfed by the dominance of grain silos and water towers, for example, as Marilyn thinks an hour of driving "only gets you to Toledo" or as James fiddles with the knob to break through the radio static. It is typical, as Ng does here, to include stereotypes about the region in writing about the Midwest, which can reify them for audiences elsewhere. But literatures of the Midwest also undertake important work of challenging these dominant imaginings and bringing nuance to them, particularly "by telling stories of people and places whom the conventional regional narratives leave out."[25] As *Everything* asserts from its third page, it is the racialized experiences of mixed race Asian Americans in the Midwest that take center stage in this narrative, a group that is perhaps

doubly underrepresented in Asian American literature as a result of both their multiracial status and their regional location.

Although Ng is among a growing number of Asian American authors who represent the Midwest, Asian American narratives have traditionally followed dominant immigration patterns, "recording and representing the experiences of Asian American immigrants to predominantly West Coast (and some East Coast and Hawaiian) geographical spaces."[26] Those narratives located beyond this typical Asian American geography have frequently been lumped into an "east of California" paradigm, which "continues to provincialize and marginalize other sites and spaces within Asian American studies," resulting in failures to recognize the vastness of the United States in every direction and the many global factors that "move" people as Jigna Desai and Khyati Y. Joshi write in their work on Asian Americans in the U.S. South.[27] Depictions of Asian American experience in the Midwest challenge the California-centric lenses, bringing nuance to the sweeping geographies to its east, and begin to reckon with the cultural "unexpectedness of Asian Americans in the heartland."[28] By setting up only to unsettle the imagined normativity of Midwestern suburban space in *Everything*, in her very craft, Ng forces readers to pause and reexamine their assumptions, thinking twice about what we believe "typical America" looks like, who are its inhabitants, and how we may be misreading the world around us.

"Practically the Only Chinese People"

In the months leading up to her death, such misreading is a theme of Lydia's friendship with Jack Wolff, a social pariah because Dr. Wolff allegedly lets him "run wild" while she works long shifts at the hospital.[29] Jack and Lydia first bond over their failing grades in physics, a junior-level course that Jack (a senior) is taking for the second time and in which Lydia is the only sophomore. Nath (also a senior) warns Lydia away from Jack, a "bad boy," who has a reputation for hooking up with girls in his Volkswagen Beetle. Although she will later find out that Jack is queer, Lydia is drawn to him almost as a rebellion to what everybody expects of her as much as by the possibility of teenage romance and a deep desire to call even one person her friend. Under the guise of studying for physics after school, they smoke cigarettes and talk for hours in Jack's car. With genuine curiosity, one day Jack asks Lydia what it is like for her family to be "practically the only Chinese people in the whole of Middlewood."[30] Lydia hesitates to answer, lost in her own thoughts:

> Sometimes you almost forgot: that you didn't look like everyone else. In homeroom or at the drugstore or at the supermarket, you listened to the morning announcements, or dropped off a roll of film or picked out a carton of eggs and felt like just another

> someone in the crowd. Sometimes you didn't think about it at all. And then sometimes you noticed a girl across the aisle watching, the pharmacist watching, the checkout boy watching, and you saw yourself reflected in their stares: incongruous. Catching the eye like a hook. Every time you saw yourself from the outside, the way other people saw you, you remembered all over again. You saw it in the sign at the Peking Express—a cartoon man with a coolie hat, slant eyes, buck teeth, and chopsticks. You saw it in the little boys on the playground, stretching their eyes to slits with their fingers—*Chinese*—*Japanese*—*look at these*—and in the older boys who muttered ching chong ching chong as they passed you on the street, just loud enough for you to hear. 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 in the scene, as if you'd been cut out and pasted in. *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 you tried to forget about it. And you did, until it happened again.[31]

In the end, Lydia simply tells Jack, "I dunno. People decide what you're like before they even get to know you."[32]

I quote from the novel at length to highlight how carefully Ng tries to make readers understand the Lees' experiences of racism and unbelonging in the small, enclosed world of Middlewood. Ng triply repeats the word "watching," for example, which creates the discomforting feeling Lydia is being surveilled. To no avail, Lydia searches for a "historical origin, true or not, for the difficulty [her family has] 'fitting in,'" ultimately concluding that the problem is their Asian-ness: "incongruous."[33] She internalizes the notion that she is a "foreign body" out of harmony with its surroundings and, therefore, unnatural to the order of things in Middlewood without questioning the inflexible limits the town has placed around who can belong and whose presence is always deemed suspicious. This town-wide practice of surveillance is not merely indicative of older or more conservative times than our own (i.e., the 1970s) or due to the Lees' status as "isolated ethnics" in Middlewood but part of a larger pattern produced by the Cold War milieu under which Lydia grows up.[34] Although the United States made significant progress in the Cold War period (1945–1989) in opening pathways for immigration and refuge from Asia and toward citizenship for Asian immigrants and refugees, these integration strategies were entwined with containment policies and rhetoric that constructed Asian-ness as menace determined to "invade and corrupt America. Asian-ness, it suggested, was something to be kept out of the United States at all costs," as literary scholar Christina Klein writes in *Cold War Orientalism*.[35]

In this way, it is imperative we reimagine places like Middlewood, solidly located in the Midwest, *as a border*, which Vega writes about in *Latino Heartland.* Whereas U.S. Americans typically understand borders to be "the territorial demarcation of one nation vis-a-vis another," borderlands theorist Gloria Anzaldúa's work demonstrates that borders are often conceptual more so than physical, "set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*."[36] For Anzaldúa, borders are not merely there in physical space but are *enacted*, emerging anywhere "two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory."[37] Although U.S. Americans may anticipate the presence of non-Whites in border areas such as the Southwest or coastal, global cities such as New York or Los Angeles, in the far interior of the country—America's heartland—non-Whites appear as threats to the body politic that "defy and complicate the image of a homogenous nation."[38] They become, as Vega writes, "subject to the 'wall in our heads,' or the internal bordering that transplants geopolitical borders onto social interrelational obstacles."[39] In other words, upon seeing racialized people (t)here, indisputably American (White) residents of the Midwest have learned across generations to suspect some violation of the boundaries that supposedly keep "them" at a safe distance from "us." Such notions have led, over centuries, to a culture in which regular people feel "deputized" to act upon that suspicion, manifested in the surveillance and know-your-place aggressions that Lydia recalls in the passage, meager attempts to investigate where people are from, how they came to be here, and imply they might think twice about staying.[40]

Encountering the underlying hostility in the townspeople's gazes over and over conditions Lydia to see herself "from the outside, the way other people saw [her]"—as a caricatured "coolie" figure on the sign for the Peking Express restaurant, as lacking English language skills to express herself or comprehend, as a nearly disembodied pair of slanted eyes—unintelligible except as a sign of the foreign, always already other-than-American. In this way, Lydia and other members of her family are disciplined, choosing their words or actions wisely so as to avoid association with the "wrong kinds" of Asian-ness:[41] Nath affirming they are Chinese, "not wanting to get into halves and wholes" with the woman in the grocery store, for instance,[42] or James, looking on in total silence when the children at the pool tease Nath during a game of Marco Polo: "chink can't find China!"[43] In the day-to-day mundanity of life, they can often forget that they look different, but the bliss of such forgetting is always temporary; at any moment, as Zora Neale Hurston articulated, the Lees are once again thrown "against a sharp white background," and their respite is disrupted by various, but predictable, forms of know-your-place aggression meant to remind them, regardless of their tenure in the small college town or their lack of claim to any other place, theirs is *not here* in Middlewood.[44]

Although literary scholar Koritha Mitchell's phrasing, "know-your-place aggression," seems cumbersome, it performs important cognitive work to counter the minimizing connotations that accompany the widely used term "microaggression." When cultural understandings of "micro-" often lead the mind to "small" or "minor," Mitchell's "know-your-place" returns us to the work of examining relationships between microcosm and macrocosm—the ways that microaggressions are local-scale models through which we can understand social hostilities on macroscales such as the nation—and, as my discussion of Cold War Orientalism suggests, across the globe. Her phrasing is also important because it explicitly names the violent functions of so-called microaggressions as opposed to implying these are of inconsequential size and impact. That is, they keep the target feeling unsettled and unsafe to reify the dominance of those with social power. In an interview included in the backmatter of *Everything*, Ng explains that microaggressions can be "[m]ore insidious than those moments of outright hostility...maybe more powerful," in part because they are constant, as Lydia observes of the stares she encounters day in and day out for all the years of her life.[45] It is near impossible to convey to those who do not experience this firsthand how "jarring" it is to always have your difference pointed out to you "at a glance" or how "startlingly often" one is pulled back, just when they feel "normal," by a stare or an offhand remark.[46] As Lydia's reverie suggests, no matter how subtle or seemingly innocuous, the recurring gestures that firmly place her as an outsider, as possible threat, condition her to be hypercautious and on guard, disallowing her from feeling safe enough to fully express herself even in the growing intimacy she shares with Jack.

Documenting the enhanced scrutiny experienced by the Lees and their conditioned responses to it are not simply a matter of historical accuracy for *Everything I Never Told You*'s 1970s setting; importantly, these also resonate for the novel's contemporary Asian American readers, who may continue to experience such surveillance in what media and cultural studies scholar Jodi Kim calls the "protracted afterlife" of the Cold War.[47] Whereas binary constructions of Cold War history overemphasize the United States' ideological conflict with the Soviet Union, Kim stresses its triangulation through China. When the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 "ends" the Cold War, she notes, there was no change to U.S. geopolitical relations with China, an "unfinished business" that continues to define U.S.–China relations. Kim's theory is supported by numerous contemporary examples: within the first year of the novel's publication, for instance, CNN and *The Atlantic* both published feature stories that examine the rising numbers of Chinese international students attending U.S. colleges and universities and the ways once all-American college towns are being reshaped to respond to the needs and interests of this group.[48] As CNN notes, the trend is "most pronounced" in the Midwest, where struggling

or empty storefronts on quintessential "Main Streets" are finding new life under investment from Chinese businesses—a situation that can quickly turn from economic boon to "invasion" if unchecked. In one town, for example, they observe that "bubble tea shops outnumber Starbucks three to one."[49] Such patterns of Orientalist suspicion have resurfaced again and again from the time of *Everything*'s publication through the present, fueled by U.S. President Donald J. Trump's "trade war" with China; the U.S. race to establish 5G technology first; ongoing paranoia about U.S. user data security and Chinese ownership of the TikTok app; anti-Asian hate, violence, and fatalities related to the COVID-19 pandemic; various state legislative measures to block property ownership by Chinese nationals or to constrain educational partnerships with Chinese institutions; and more.[50]

Making Middle America "Typical"

In Middlewood, it seems the only other Asian people may be the proprietors of the local Chinese restaurant, with whom the Lees do not interact (James "does not care for" Chinese takeout), and Louisa Chen, a twenty-three-year-old graduate student, "the first Oriental student" James has seen in his courses in his eighteen years teaching at the college.[51] If there are other people of color, they do not appear in the pages of this narrative, making the Lees' experiences with racial antagonism appear in high relief against the background of the small, northwest Ohio town. "Middlewood" is a choice name for the setting, which I read as an allusion to the early 20th century "Middletown studies" that helped craft popular imaginaries of Middle America that continue to define the region today. Taking place in Muncie, Indiana, the Middletown studies were believed to be "the first substantive social-science studies conducted on American people."[52] When the researchers arrived in 1924, Muncie was a growing industrial city, in large part due to the discovery of natural gas reserves in the region in the 1880s, which attracted manufacturers; the best known perhaps was the Ball Brothers glass manufacturing company, headquartered in Muncie in 1889. Ball began and is best recognized still, as a manufacturer of plastic, metal, and glass food and beverage containers, but importantly the company also established a foothold in the aerospace and technology industries beginning in the 1950s as part of the Cold War boom in such research, which it maintains today.[53] Whereas many industries have since left Muncie, the city of just under 70,000 is home to Ball State University and is consistently ranked one of the most affordable college towns in the country.[54]

The New York City–based researchers Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd documented their findings in the book *Middletown* (1929), which enjoyed wide popular circulation and has codified an idyllic vision of the Midwest as "all-American" for nearly a century now—read: homogeneously

White, Protestant, and working middle class. As political scientist Himanee Gupta-Carlson notes in her own study of race and place in Muncie, *Middletown* captivated the national media and readers across the nation, who saw in its pages a reflection of an "ordinary" and ideal American citizen. In the idealized Middletown, people "remained loyal to their families, were optimistic that life was changing for the better, were dedicated to improving the lives of their children and future generations, firmly believed in Jesus Christ and his divinity, and were devout followers" of the local high school sports teams.[55] As historian Sarah E. Igo writes, Middletowners "rose earlier in the morning than their employers," their modest homes "lacked spare rooms and parlors," and "schoolgirls desired silk rather than cotton stockings."[56] Gupta-Carlson suggests that the Lynds intended these as criticisms about the anachronism and naïveté of the people they studied, suggesting that they did not understand the national and global forces that shaped their lives and their town. As a result of the publisher's marketing and reviews in the media, however, audiences read the inhabitants of Middletown as similar to themselves or as people they should strive to be like: humble, wholesome, hard-working, and thus deserving of middle-class comforts. An important consequence of this popular reception is that, for decades following *Middletown*, Muncie became the harbinger of "American tastes" through market research and product development testing, which Igo documents in her book *The Averaged American*. But, as Gupta-Carlson emphasizes, it was important to readers' strong identification with the imagined Middletown that certain details of Muncie did not appear in the book's pages: the mythological, "typical America" that *Middletown* constructed was possible because the study deliberately excluded data on Black residents and because the site was specifically chosen for its lack of a substantial "foreign-born population" compared with all large American cities.[57] Much like the "stock images" of the Midwest conjured today, the unspoken Whiteness of this imagined Middletown has been essential to its enduring afterlife in defining "typical America."

Although the industrial working-class profile of 1920s Muncie does not seem to match the quiet, small college town drawn in *Everything*'s narrative, it is significant that neither "Middletown" nor "Middlewood" are real places, but instead crafted ones. Meant to anonymize the true Muncie, the name "Middletown" not only referenced the study site's geographical location in the "middle" of the country, but also the idea of the book representing the "median" in terms of the data set collected. That quantitative data, however, was assigned qualitative values through *Middletown*'s narrative and then through the popular circulation and consumption of the text as a result of which what lay "in the middle" soon became synonymous with the "average" and with the "typical." Although it has been nearly 100 years since the Lynds arrived in Muncie to conduct their research, which should suggest the picture *Middletown* offered is out of date, as discussed

in the introduction, popular discourses continue to characterize the Midwest through the filters *Middletown* presented, whether individual people know its history or not, which frame how readers will imagine *Everything*'s Middlewood. Given that Ng has used the true names of other places in the settings of her fictional stories—the Cleveland suburb Shaker Heights in *Little Fires Everywhere* (2017), Cambridge, Massachusetts, and New York City in *Our Missing Hearts* (2022)—I read the naming of "Middlewood" as deliberate, meant to recall these tendencies to associate the middle with the average and the Midwest with "typical America" and to explore what this means for her Asian American characters.

CNN's "Culture Clash in Iowa City," published within the first year following *Everything*'s publication, offers a compelling example of the enduring legacy of *Middletown* in defining the Midwest, its relationship to the "all-American," and whether or how Asian Americans fit into it. The article begins with the familiar vision of the "iconic Hamburg Inn, the diner where presidential candidates have stumped for decades" for the Iowa caucus, contrasting it with the faces in the city's lunchtime crowds. Diners increasingly hail from "faraway cities like Beijing, Shanghai, Dalian, Shenzhen, and Wuhan" and the Maseratis, BMWs, Audis, and Mercedes-Benzes they drive, navigating the streets side-by-side with the "souped-up Ford F-250s and Dodge Rams preferred by natives."[58] Setting "natives" in binary opposition to the Chinese international students, CNN conveys anxiety about a kind of "foreign invasion" being staged in "typical America," where Chinese economic power threatens the utilitarian lifestyles of the Iowans taking lunch breaks in their workday and driving pickup trucks. Rather than sticking to the shadows of the campus, wholly focused on their studies, Chinese international students dare to make their presence known: not just by *being there* in town but especially by flexing their financial capital, whether engaging in the leisure of eating lunch off-campus or consuming luxury European commodities.[59] CNN's framing here echoes nationalistic ideas that U.S. industries are threatened by "global business practices that undermine US values of fair labor pay and conditions," which have characterized narratives about the decline of manufacturing and loss of jobs in the Midwest's so-called "Rust Belt."[60] The imagined "Asian invasion" of Midwestern college campuses and "Main Street" businesses and misplaced blame about the outsourcing of industrial labor that once thrived in this region, suggests the United States is under attack from all sides and codes the ways Asians and Asian Americans will be perceived across the Midwest regardless of the diverse forces that draw them to the region or how long they have been here, something *Everything* explores. Although its "humble" college town of 3,000 in 1977 seems to capture a very different world than CNN's feature on Iowa City in 2015, home to a Big 10 flagship university, what the two share are the ways each index that educational institutions serve as gateways for global connection. Educa-

tion, after all, is what brings James and his parents to the Midwest—to Iowa, in fact—in the first place.

(Atypical) Paper Trails Through the Midwest

Like so many other Chinese immigrants in the early 20th century, his parents arrived first in California, where James was born. Through a recommendation from a "paper brother," however, they undertook a secondary migration for the opportunity to secure steady work at Lloyd Academy, an elite boarding school in Iowa where their son could receive an education *if* he passed the entrance exam.[61] In this allusion to the "paper son" loophole, *Everything* draws attention to the United States' 60-year "Chinese exclusion" period (1882–1943). When Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, it was the first federal law to restrict immigration based on national origin and only the second immigration law of any kind for the young nation. Initially, it restricted the immigration of poor laborers, leaving opportunities open for people such as merchants, scholars, and diplomats. "Paper sons" were typically laborers with forged paperwork suggesting patrilineal relation to men in the unrestricted classes, allowing them to enter the United States in defiance of those exclusion laws. Their relationship could not simply exist on paper, however. Chinese immigrants were subject to intense scrutiny, detainment, and interrogation at Angel Island, a detention center in the San Francisco Bay, where they might have to account in great detail for the business dealings and identities of their fictive kin. Thus, "paper families" were required to communicate and coordinate with one another, all members doing their part to ensure the legitimacy of the group as much as safeguard oneself.[62] As the novel shows, paper families functioned as important networks not only in moving someone from China to the U.S. West Coast but possibly across the United States in a greater sense.

For James' parents, the move away from California to Iowa is a kind of refuge, offering the prospect of escape from the ethnic ghetto and the destitution of the Great Depression. In contrast to contemporary ideas celebrating the West Coast's ethnic enclaves, when the Lees arrived in the Depression years, spaces such as Chinatown had for decades served as racialized zones of disempowerment and perceived unproductivity associated with deviance, filth, and crime.[63] Chinatowns were created and their boundaries maintained through discriminatory policies and practices always designed "to tell the inhabitants…to remember their place" in the social hierarchy.[64] Although the Lees had succeeded in crossing the border, in California, they found that immigration laws had ripple effects in state and local law and in social practice, greatly narrowing how and where Asians could live. When Mr. Lee's paper brother must return to China, his employers at Lloyd ask him to recommend "reliable" friends to take on the groundskeeping and maintenance work. His letter explains, "They like

the Chinese...they feel we are quiet and hardworking and clean."[65] Thus, the Midwest's lack of population centers for Asian immigrants creates ideological distance from the ghettoized conditions of the West Coast, offering hope that the Lees might find there the freedom and economic opportunity that attracted them to the United States to begin with, and through education in particular, they might ensure a better life for their son. The novel marks a Chinese presence in the Midwest through both the Lees and the paper brother's stories, however small their numbers, but also offers important context for the factors that pulled them to or from each place—transpacifically from China to the United States, from California to the Midwest, and back again. However unlikely a place Iowa seems in imagining narratives of immigration to the United States, they sought economic stability, a greater sense of mobility, and the American Dream (t)here in the Midwest.

Through James' childhood history, *Everything* sets up an important comparison between the migration of James's parents from the West Coast to the Midwest and James's own *back* (t)here from the East Coast following his studies at Harvard. As he completes his PhD, James interviews for positions "in New Haven, in Providence," at "Columbia. Johns Hopkins. Stanford," but he has his heart set on a coveted opening within Harvard's own history department.[66] Shortly after he is turned down, they learn that Marilyn is pregnant, leading to "an offer at last from humble Middlewood College, accepted with relief."[67] James is not unusual in wishing for a professorship at peer institutions in the Ivy League, nor for striving, perhaps, to build his career in places where he might find more racial and ethnic affinity to be available. Yet James is ultimately disciplined most by a need for economic stability to provide for his family. Thus, James's initial and return migrations to the Midwest are important reminders that it is not usually individual volition but an intersection of many social forces—not least of which is economic survival—that move people from one place to another, including to the Midwest or from it. In spite of James' world-class education at both Lloyd Academy and Harvard University and even after 18 years on the faculty at Middlewood College, however, his presence in the Midwest continues to signify the global for others. Although James "enjoys the surprise" on people's faces when he explains that yes, *he* is the American History professor, Ng notes "a barb of defensiveness" when they blink in return, still questioning with their eyes; "Well, I *am* American," he emphasizes.[68] Or, in another example, "a receptionist in the provost's office thought he was a visiting diplomat from Japan and asked him about his flight from Tokyo."[69] The novel's initial perspective from Marilyn Lee implies Middlewood's smallness is not only because of its population and land area, but because the city and region are inconsequential to the greater workings of society. For Marilyn, Middlewood "calls itself a city but is really *just* a tiny college town" and its lake "is really *just* a glorified pond,"

suggesting the town takes on airs of self-importance that may not match reality. "[D]riving an hour gets you *only* to Toledo," a larger city that remains of minimal significance in her eyes.[70] Hosting a diplomat from Japan, however, offers a counternarrative: small colleges as much as large universities link improbable places well within the United States to the world far beyond, playing a role in the nation's foreign policy relations during a critical time. The Cold War context, in which Japan is a "junior partner" to the United States, once again cannot be overlooked in understanding this detail.[71] Public understanding of the Cold War's stakes may also drive the recurring sense of surprise about James' field of expertise. In another subject area—science, math, engineering, Asian area studies, or languages—he might "make sense" to them as these were fields into which Asian immigrants and Asian Americans alike were recruited to fulfill geopolitical and military needs for research, teaching, and labor during the Cold War.

Writing these allusions to the Cold War and Asian/American presence into the Midwest across two generations, Ng's *Everything* challenges the reigning transnational images that equate the American heartland with Whiteness, recasting the region as racially ambiguous. Here, I use "racial ambiguity" in the sense advocated by literary and critical race studies scholar Jennifer Ho, who refuses its common use as a descriptor for (White) people's inability to easily place racialized bodies via visual assessment. The assumption that race can be read on the body is a fiction of "common sense," which Ho writes was "created to uphold a system of inequity, in which certain races are subject to oppression by others."[72] Ho proposes reconceptualizing ambiguity instead as a hermeneutic we can use to reinterpret racial ideologies, arguing "[o]nly ambiguity accepts the full truth of race in its continuously changing permutations across time and space."[73] Although wisdom that race is socially constructed is widely acknowledged so as to now seem cliché, U.S. Americans have been far less willing to reckon with what it means to construct race. That is, as a society, the United States has not developed a clear understanding of what concepts of race are invented *to do*, nor has this nation deeply engaged with *how* to fundamentally challenge the material importance racial categorization still carries in our society, particularly when it comes to "reading" bodies and organizes them into "place."

Stuck in the Middle with Blue Eyes

In the novel, perhaps there is no greater sign of racial ambiguity than Lydia's blue eyes. To her siblings, those blue eyes grant Lydia special favor with their parents because they underscore her striking resemblance to their mother, and they are partially correct. A sort of "biological mirror," Marilyn sees herself in Lydia and projects onto her daughter her own unfulfilled dreams of becoming a doctor. For James, Lydia's embodiment signals her proximity to Whiteness, which fills him with hope that Lydia

could "fit in" as he never could. Outside of her family, her eyes are a point of curiosity, an incongruity that does not align with "common knowledge" about phenotype. Lydia explains to Jack, for instance, that she has blue eyes because "[m]y mom's American," to which Jack responds, "I've never seen a Chinese person with blue eyes" and "I thought brown eyes won out."[74] This allusion to the commonplace Punnett square activity taught in middle and high school science classes acts as a subtle indictment of the systemic but often unvisible ways oversimplified logics about race *are taught* and become ingrained even for "hybrid" subjects such as Lydia. "Defying genetics," Lydia's blue eyes signal not so much her ambiguity as a mixed race person but, more importantly, the ambiguity of race itself, revealing race to be an untenable schema that often fails to neatly and squarely link bodies to consistent sets of observable physical features, fixed geographic spaces, and linear cultural histories and expressions.

However untenable, the carefully crafted dialogue of this scene also demonstrates how deeply embedded the schema of race is in U.S. society. Common language practices, for example, still "[presume] the steadfast coherency of racial identities and treat race as if it were immutable—as if one's racial identity neatly maps onto an unchanging set of behaviors, values, and ideals that can tell us something about who this person is, by virtue of which racial category she or he identifies or can be slotted into."[75] As I note in the introduction, a common example of this is the interchangeable use of "American" to mean "White," something Lydia does in reference to her mother. Thus, Marilyn's unspoken Whiteness juxtaposes sharply with the way James regularly has to remind his interlocutors "well, I *am* American," always on guard to stake claim to both cultural and national (birthright) citizenship.[76] The dialogue with Jack reveals that the same is also the case for Lydia. Any claims she has to America or to Whiteness continue to be undercut in the language of Jack's responses, which overemphasize *Chinese*-ness without acknowledging that Lydia's father and she are both *Chinese American* and that she and her siblings are *mixed race*. Even with specific knowledge and evidence of racial complexity sitting right before their own eyes, U.S. Americans take comfort in social codes that continuously demand for one identity category or another to "win out" and allow cognitive shortcuts about race to prevail well into our present. Consequently, racially marked subjects are disciplined early and often to "fall in line" with the U.S. aversion to ambiguity as Lydia does when she describes Marilyn as "American" and as Nath and Hannah do earlier in the story, "not wanting to get into halves and wholes" when the (White) woman stops them in the grocery store and inquires "Chinese?"[77]

Implicitly, the woman asks the children "where are you from?"—a know-your-place aggression that already presumes "Middlewood" to be an impossible answer, foreclosing their ability to claim their hometown or the American Midwest as spaces they belong. Although the Lees

never encounter physically violent reactions to their presence, the novel's careful cataloging of know-your-place aggressions such as this one and more demonstrate the strength with which visions of the Midwest and the United States *as White* endure—among other ideas about the fixity of race—insinuating themselves even without conscious recognition. *Everything*, thus, illustrates the entanglement of the imagined region with the ideological projection of transnational Whiteness, under which Asian American claims to Midwestern-ness are treated as dubious because U.S. society views this group as perpetually foreign and alien. They are, rather, "always seen as a recent immigrant" whose body is associated with "immigration and borders, globalization and contemporaneity," processes that are treated as unequivocally distant from the American Midwest both geographically and conceptually.[78] By the third generation, the Lee children exist in contradiction to dominating stereotypes that erroneously link their bodies with recent immigration, and they signal the ongoing and perhaps never-ending process of making the region as well as the nation. Region, then, is like race in that it may be best taken as ambiguous, always responding to change across its vast spatial areas and over time.

The Lees' story in *Everything* works against the multifaceted project of transnational Whiteness by giving representation to Asian American experience in the Midwest, asserting that Asian Americans *are (t)here* and demonstrating what it is like to be (t)here, which includes the tragic and uncomfortable realities such as the Lees experience, which are often suppressed in favor of narratives celebrating assimilation and "immigrant success."[79] In this way, I argue that Ng's work is an effective counternarrative to dominant discourses about the Midwest precisely because it does not take the Lees to be representative of Asian American experience in this region or in small towns and suburbia. She crafts them with an exacting specificity and intricate complexity that is shaped not just by their present relationships with each other and with Middlewood but just as much by the geopolitical forces of the past, present, and future that have defined the region and the global, generational histories that led them to be (t)here.

Notes

1. Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior* (New York, Vintage International, 1975).

2. Celeste Ng, *Everything I Never Told You* (New York, Penguin, 2014).

3. "Translations of *Everything I Never Told You*," Celeste Ng website, n.d., https://www.celesteng.com/foreign-editions-einty.

4. Roberta Wolfson, "Celeste Ng," in *Encyclopedia of Contemporary American Fiction, 1980-2020* (Wiley & Sons, 2022), 1.

5. Quoted in Lisa A. Long, "A New Midwesternism in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*," *Twentieth Century Literature* 59, no. 1 (2013): 119.

6. "Everything I Never Told You," GoodReads.com, n.d., https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/18693763-everything-i-never-told-you.

7. Thomas X. Sarmiento, "Literary Perspectives on Asian Americans in the Midwest," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature Online* (Oxford UP, 2019), 1 and 3, https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.896.

8. Koritha Mitchell, "Identifying White Mediocrity and Know-Your-Place Aggression: A Form of Self-Care," *African American Review* 51, no. 5 (2018): 253–62.

9. Sarmiento, "Literary Perspectives," 2.

10. Monica Mong Trieu, *Fighting Invisibility: Asian Americans in the Midwest* (Rutgers UP, 2023), 5.

11. Kent C. Ryden, "Writing the Midwest: History, Literature, and Regional Identity," *Geographical Review* 89, no. 4 (1999), 512.

12. Emily Badger and Kevin Quealy, "Where Is the Heartland? Mostly in Our Heads," *The New York Times*, 3 January 2017 (accessed May 30, 2023) https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/01/03/upshot/where-is-americas-heartland-pick-your-map.html.

13. Pawan Dhingra, "Introduction to *Journal of Asian American Studies*, Special Issue on the Midwest," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 12, no. 3 (2009): 241.

14. Trieu, *Fighting Invisibility,* 5.

15. Christine Kim, *The Minor Intimacies of Race: Asian Publics in North America* (Urbana: U Illinois P, 2016), 61.

16. Ryden, "Writing the Midwest," 528. Adam Ochonicky, *The American Midwest in Film and Literature: Nostalgia, Violence, and Regionalism* (Bloomington, Indiana UP, 2018), 9.

17. Ochonicky, *The American Midwest*, 9.

18. This is despite the Upper Midwest (North Dakota, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan) sharing vast land and aqueous borders with Canada to the North and despite Midwestern cities such as Chicago, Minneapolis, and Detroit hosting large international airports.

19. Sujey Vega, *Latino Heartland: Of Borders and Belonging in the Midwest* (New York: NYU Press, 2015), 7.

20. Ng, *Everything*, 7.

21. Ng, *Everything,* 7.

22. Ng, *Everything,* 1.

23. Ng, *Everything*, 1–2

24. Ng, *Everything*, 3.

25. Ryden, "Writing the Midwest," 523.

26. Jennifer Ho, "Southern Eruptions in Asian American Narratives" in *Asian Americans in Dixie* (Urbana: U Illinois P, 2013), 221. I should note that Celeste Ng is not herself mixed race, but the daughter of immigrants from Hong Kong, though she is now the parent to a mixed race son. For more on Asian American writing and the Midwest, see Roger Bresnahan, "Asian American Literature" in *Dictionary of Midwestern Literature, Vol. II: Dimensions of the Midwestern Literary Imagination* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2016), 76–80.

27. Jigna Desai and Khyati Y. Joshi, "Discrepancies in Dixie: Asian Americans and the South," in *Asian Americans in Dixie* (Urbana: U Illinois P, 2013), 23.

28. Sarmiento, "Literary Perspectives," 4.

29. Ng, *Everything,* 17.

30. Ng, *Everything,* 192.

31. Ng, *Everything,* 192.

32. Ng, *Everything*, 193.

33. Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race* (New York: Oxford UP, 2001), 82.

34. For more on "isolated ethnics," see Trieu, *Fighting Invisibility*, 53–9.

35. Christina Klein, *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945-1961* (Berkeley: U California P, 2003), 37.

36. Vega, *Latino Heartland*, 7. Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Press, 1987), 3.

37. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, Preface, n.p.

38. Vega, *Latino Heartland*, 7.

39. Vega, *Latino Heartland,* 7.

40. For more on the "deputization" of ordinary citizens, see "Ruth Wilson Gilmore Makes the Case for Abolition" *Intercepted* Podcast, June 10, 2020, https://theintercept.com/2020/06/10/ruth-wilson-gilmore-makes-the-case-for-abolition/.

41. Klein, Cold War Orientalism, 37.

42. Ng, *Everything,* 3.

43. Ng, *Everything,* 90.

44. Zora Neale Hurston, "How it Feels to be Colored Me" (1928), *Mules and Men: An E-Text Edition*, "Ways of Seeing," University of Virginia, http://xroads.virginia.edu/~MA01/Grand-Jean/Hurston/Chapters/how.html.

45. "A Conversation with Celeste Ng," in *Everything I Never Told You* (New York: Penguin, 2014), 5.

46. "A Conversation with Celeste Ng," 5–6.

47. Jodi Kim, *Ends of Empire: Asian American Critique and the Cold War* (Minneapolis: U Minnesota, 2010).

48. Wayne Drash, "Culture Clash in Iowa: The Town Where Bubble Tea Shops Outnumber Starbucks," *CNN*, Great American Stories, July 2015 (accessed May 24, 2023), https://www.cnn.com/interactive/2015/07/us/culture-clash-american-story/. Matt Schiavenza, "The Tenuous Relationship Between American Universities and Chinese Students," *The Atlantic*, Education, 30 May 2015 (accessed May 24, 2023), https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2015/05/american-universities-are-addicted-to-chinese-students/394517/.

49. Drash, "Culture Clash in Iowa."

50. Senate Bill 83 passed in the Ohio State Senate in May 2023, and as of this writing, is under review in the House. If passed, the bill would closely monitor and significantly limit Ohio public higher education institutions' interaction and academic relationships with institutions, businesses, and citizens of the People's Republic of China. At the time of this writing, other U.S. state legislatures have passed or are considering laws that prohibit Chinese nationals from buying property, limiting operations of Chinese-owned businesses, and similarly impacting higher education, including in Florida, Texas, and Louisiana. See: "Senate Bill 83," The Ohio Legislature, 135th General Assembly, n.d. (accessed June 6, 2023), https://www.legislature.ohio.gov/legislation/135/sb83. Kyle A. Jaros and Sara A. Newland, "Federal Anti-China Sentiment is Increasingly Seeping into State Laws," *The Hill*, Opinion, 28 April 2023 (accessed June 6, 2023),

https://thehill.com/opinion/international/3975855-federal-anti-china-sentiment-is-increasingly-seeping-into-state-laws/.

51. Ng, *Everything*, 202 and 9.

52. Himanee Gupta-Carlson, *Muncie, India(na): Middletown and Asian America*. (Urbana: U Illinois P, 2018), 9.

53. "History and Time," Ball Company, Our Story (accessed May 17, 2023). https://www.ball.com/our-company/our-story/history-timeline.

54. "About Muncie," Ball State University (accessed May 17, 2023), https://www.bsu.edu/about/muncie.

55. Gupta-Carlson, *Muncie, India(na)*, 23.

56. Sarah E. Igo, *The Averaged American: Surveys, Citizens, and the Making of a Mass Public* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2008), 71.

57. As Gary Younge writes in *The Guardian*'s series about the 2016 U.S. presidential election, "The View from Middletown," Muncie's immigrant population *was* small because laborers were often recruited instead from parts of Appalachia. See Younge, "The View from Middletown: A Typical US City That Never Did Exist," *The Guardian*, Election 2016: The View From Middletown, 15 October 2016 (accessed May 17, 2023), https://www.theguardian.com/membership/2016/oct/18/view-from-middletown-us-muncie-america.

58. Drash, "Culture Clash in Iowa."

59. It is beyond the scope of this analysis, but it may be worth noting how the threat of foreign influence seems especially heightened given the references to Iowa's "iconic" role in U.S. presidential election cycles.

60. Dhingra, "Introduction," 241.

61. Ng, *Everything,* 41.

62. For more on "paper sons," see Mae Ng, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2003), Chapter 6.

63. See Yoonmee Chang, "Enclave," *Keywords for Asian American Studies* (New York: NYU Press, 2015), 71–3. Nayan Shah, *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco's Chinatown* (Berkeley: U California P, 2001).

64. Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* (Cambridge, Harvard UP, 2016), 42.

65. Ng, *Everything,* 41.

66. Ng, *Everything,* 49–50.

67. Ng, *Everything*, 50.

68. Ng, *Everything,* 9, emphasis original.

69. Ng, *Everything*, 9.

70. Ng, *Everything*, 7, emphasis mine.

71. Lisa Yoneyama, *Cold War Ruins: Transpacific Critique of American Justice and Japanese War Crimes* (Durham: Duke UP, 2016).

72. Jennifer Ho, *Racial Ambiguity in Asian American Culture* (Rutgers: Rutgers UP, 2015), 4.

73. Ho, *Racial Ambiguity*, 4.

74. Ng, *Everything*, 192.

75. Ho, *Racial Ambiguity*, 5.

76. Ng, *Everything,* 9, emphasis original.

77. Ng, *Everything*, 3.

78. Desai and Joshi, "Discrepancies in Dixie," 1.

79. Ng, *Little Fires,* 10.