literature

MDPI

Article

Intersectional Awakenings: Celeste Ng's *Everything I Never Told You* as Dialectical Reprisal of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Maxine Hong Kingston's "No Name Woman"

Hannah W. Nahm

Department of English, Palomar College, San Marcos, CA 92060, USA; hnahm@palomar.edu

Abstract: This essay defies the literary ghettoization of Asian-authored narratives and interrogates the space delineated as mainstream American feminist literature by placing Ng's *Everything* in dialogue with Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Kingston's *Woman Warrior* (focusing on the first chapter, "No Name Woman"). It proposes a dialectical reading of Ng's contemporary novel as a synthesis of Chopin's and Kingston's works and shows how Ng accounts for the reality and complexity of our intersectional identities—mixed racial parentage, nonbinary sex, or gender. Ng underscores the urgency of considering intersectional bodies and communities, especially relevant to our current times. It calls for a reading that accounts for both White people and people of color, both men and women, and both straight and queer. It reevaluates the thorny questions of the ethics of motherhood and intergenerational trauma that Chopin's and Kingston's narratives explore. This article encourages ongoing conversations about interethnic and intersectional fissures and affinities.

Keywords: Asian American literature; cross-racial feminism; intersectionality; ethics of motherhood; intergenerational trauma; Celeste Ng; Maxine Hong Kingston; Kate Chopin

check for updates

Academic Editor: Gillian Dooley

Received: 15 April 2025
Revised: 9 June 2025
Accepted: 14 June 2025
Published: 16 June 2025

Citation: Nahm, Hannah W. 2025. Intersectional Awakenings: Celeste Ng's *Everything I Never Told You* as Dialectical Reprisal of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Maxine Hong Kingston's "No Name Woman". *Literature* 5: 14. https://doi.org/10.3390/literature5020014

Copyright: © 2025 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

1. Introduction

In her 1982 essay, "Cultural Mis-readings by American Reviewers," Maxine Hong Kingston wryly bemuses how the reviews of *The Woman Warrior* (1976) were largely favorable but still managed to make her "stomach turn" (Kingston 1982, p. 55). Many critics "praise the wrong things" and traffic in "the stereotype of the exotic, inscrutable, mysterious oriental" (p. 55). As she relates, the worst of such "school of reviewing" is by Michael T. Malloy in *The National Observer* (1976): "'The background is exotic, but the book is in the mainstream of American feminist literature.' He disliked the book because it is part of the mainstream" (p. 55). What infuriates Kingston here is, in the words of Amy Tan, a demand for writers of color to be segregated into the "literary ghetto" (Tan 2003, p. 307).

The literary ghettoization of Asian-authored literatures remains a concerning reality. Four years before the publication of her critically acclaimed novel, *Everything I Never Told You* (2014), Celeste Ng wagered that once her book is published, "someone out there will call me 'the next Amy Tan'" and "mean it as a compliment. But it won't make me happy" (Ng [2010] 2011). Ng's unhappiness, she clarifies, has nothing to do with Tan per se (whose writing she admires) but everything to do with the reviewers' penchant for comparing ethnic writers exclusively to others of the same ethnicity. She predicts to be thrown into the "segregated Asians-only pool" with Kingston, Tan, or other writers who identify as Chinese American, not based on commensurable literary qualities but on "just our shared culture"

(Ng [2010] 2011). Similar to Kingston's umbrage with her reviewers, what rattles Ng here are literary segregationist practices and the corresponding devaluation and simplification of works by ethnic writers. While such comparative practice is a marketing strategy (it sells more books), it sends the "reductive" message that "we're all telling the same story"; and "[w]orst of all, such comparisons place undue weight on the writer's ethnicity," distilling the story, however complex, into one primarily "About Being Chinese" (2010–2011).

The tenuous position of writers of Asian origin and the dominant society's ongoing segregationist and reductive impulses make Malloy's 1970s criticism of *The Woman Warrior* still relevant. The critic's implication is especially troubling: the "mainstream of American feminist literature" centers White women's experiences; women of color do not belong in this space. This attitude is the literary version of what Koritha Mitchell calls "know-your-place aggression", with its underlying "message. . . [that] certain people do not belong" and are therefore less deserving of the privileges and accolades accorded to Whites (Mitchell 2018, pp. 258–59).

This essay defies the literary ghettoization of Asian-authored narratives and interrogates the space delineated as mainstream American feminist literature by placing Ng's *Everything* in dialogue with Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) and Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (focusing on the first chapter, "No Name Woman"). Given the institutional division between mainstream (with its de facto overrepresentation of White writers) and ethnic literatures, one can easily read these narratives as racially, politically, and aesthetically discrete: the first is about mixed-race coupling and identities; the second about Whites; and the third about Chinese (or Chinese Americans). Not surprisingly, then, even as Kingston's text has long broken into the coveted core of American literature and often been taught alongside Chopin's "classic" novel, there remains a dearth of literary criticism that compares these feminist narratives, and none to date that compares all three authors. Additional obstacles that discourage a comparative reading are the wide span of publication dates (1899, 1976, and 2014) and the narratives' disparate historical settings (late 19th century New Orleans/Louisiana Gulf Coast; early 20th century rural China/1960s San Francisco; and the 1970s fictional suburb of Ohio). These barriers of time and space can effectively perpetuate the mainstream-ethnic literary divide.

This article proposes a dialectical reading of Ng's novel as a synthesis of Chopin's and Kingston's works that allows us to transgress historical boundaries that can reinforce literary segregation. Prima facie, it may seem improbable to compare three texts from different periods with wide-ranging settings; yet these works share telling concerns regarding gender and race. While each of the three texts has generated robust critical reading, this essay is the first to intersect the three texts to highlight their common gender and thematic concerns.[1] It shows how Ng accounts for the reality and complexity of our intersectional identities—mixed racial parentage, nonbinary sex or gender. While Chopin's protagonist is Caucasian and Kingston's narrator and her nameless aunt are Chinese, the central character of Ng's novel, Lydia Lee, intersects both: Caucasian and Chinese. Like her literary predecessors, Ng too plumbs the water metaphor to imagine female agency and defiance of familial and cultural demands. All three female characters face death by drowning, and their motivations to make the plunge into the watery wake are similar—for personal agency, sexual liberation, and freedom from social or familial dictates. However, in the figure of Lydia, Ng underscores the urgency of considering intersectional bodies and communities, especially relevant to our current times. It calls for a reading that accounts for both Whites and people of color, both men and women, and both straight and queer. It reevaluates the thorny questions of the ethics of motherhood and intergenerational trauma that Chopin and Kingston explore. Ng's novel reminds us to make the plunge, however difficult at times, to broach conversations about interethnic, intersectional fissures and affinities.

2. Intersectional, Dialectical, and Desegregationist Approaches to Reading Ng, Chopin, and Kingston

This comparative essay is informed by the critical insights of intersectionality. As Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge articulate, intersectionality posits that social categories of identity—including race, sex, gender, class, and nation—are "not discrete and mutually exclusive" but that they are "interrelated and mutually shaping one another" (Collins and Bilge 2020, p. 2). Intersectionality as a critical tool promotes an inclusive and expansive analysis by moving away from identity categories as oppositional either/or but "embrac[ing] a both/and analytical framework" (Collins and Bilge 2020, p. 33). We can call this inclusive aspect of intersectionality "relationality," a term that encompasses such inter- and intragroup-affirmative words as "'coalition,' 'solidarity,' 'dialog,' 'conversation,' [and] 'interaction'" (p. 33). Through intersectional analyses that bring together Ng, Chopin, and Kingston, we can update Chopin's fin de siècle novel and Kingston's twentieth-century narrative in ways that are especially timely for the twenty-first century; in particular, they help to transcend the divisive polemics of us versus them and encourage us to focus instead on the possibility of cross-racial feminist connection and solidarity.

Given some key resonance among the three narratives—in particular, the motif of death by water and female agency—I propose that Ng's novel offers both an intertextual homage to and intersectional reprisal of her predecessors' works. How does our reading of Ng's novel both affect and is affected by Chopin's and Kingston's texts? I imagine this Chopin-Kingston-Ng triadic relationship within the broad framework of the Hegelian dialectical model, which would enable us to "see beyond confrontation and contention to an equally important factor of dependency and complementarity" and "open. . .the way to their possible resolution" (Fox 2005, p. 41). Hegel theorizes that oppositions and contradictions are intrinsic to every concept, being, or relationship and that everything inheres to the logic of three "moments or shapes" (Maybee 2020).[2] For Hegel, the contradictory tension between the first two moments is not so much a negation but what he terms "*aufheben*," which Michael Allen Fox translates as "dialectical supersession," meaning, at once, negation, preservation, *and* transformation (Fox 2005, pp. 45–46; also cf. Maybee 2020). In other words, contradictory tension does not result in a logical cancellation of the two positions but leads to a synergistic "emergence" of the third moment that unifies and augments them (Fox 2005, p. 45). When we read Ng's novel alongside Chopin's and Kingston's works, we recognize not only the engagement of the latter two in a dialectical tension but also Ng's reprisal of her literary precursors' narratives. At the same time, Ng's novel can be read as a transformative reconciliation of Chopin's and Kingston's thematic clashes, particularly in terms of the ethics of motherhood and intergenerational trauma. In retrospect, Ng's thematic visions were already extant in *The Awakening* and in the "No-Name Woman" chapter of *The Woman Warrior*.

By placing Ng and Kingston in dialogue with Chopin, this essay aims to disrupt the segregationist politics of mainstream versus minority literary classifications and thereby make transparent the invisible Whiteness that permeates so-called "classic," "mainstream," or "great American literature."[3] Such a comparative study is relevant given the dominant society's ongoing tendency to segregate and thereby minimize the intertextual and cross-racial contours and complexities of Asian-authored texts. Reading Kingston alongside Chopin with Ng as a throughline is especially useful as the latter novel transgresses the identity symmetry between the author and the central characters; that is, whereas the author is Chinese American, the pivotal character (Lydia Lee) is mixed-race, creating what Stephen Sohn calls "racial asymmetries" (Sohn 2014, pp. 19, 21). Historically, Asian American fiction has been read largely as autobiographical or ethnographical, assuming the author's race as identical to that of the protagonist's; this places, in effect, the writer in the

position of a "native informant" who represents the "authenticity" of a given culture (Sohn 2014, pp. 5, 21). By "conflating the author specifically with historian, autoethnographer, or autobiographer," this undue focus on racial representation not only denies "the possibility of Asian American creativity and artistry," but it can distract from the socio-political insights of writers who stray from the racial-authenticity formula (p. 16, 19).[4] Works that subvert this expectation can be useful in challenging reductive criteria for what constitutes Asian American literature.

3. Awakenings and Reckonings: Symbolism of Water in Chopin and Kingston

In *The Awakening* and "No-Name Woman," the water metaphor stands for feminist agency, as the fluid property of water contrasts the rigidity of varying socio-cultural expectations and oppressions. While both authors consider the themes of maternal accountability and the intergenerational legacy of women's plight, Chopin privileges the perspective of bourgeois White womanhood and reduces motherhood to oppression. Kingston, in turn, calls attention to Chopin's racist feminism and complicates the themes by centering the experiences of women of color.

Set in the late 1800s in New Orleans and the Louisiana Gulf Coast, *The Awakening* follows the life of Edna Pontellier, who struggles between her unhappy marriage and her inchoate desire for independence and sexual fulfillment. When her extramarital love affair with Robert Lebrun goes awry, Edna returns to the Grand Isle, the seaside resort where she had first encountered her lover, and the novel ends with Edna swimming away from the shore. In Chopin's novel, the sea metaphor symbolizes Edna's sexual awakening and validation of her artistic and individual agency. Consider the following passage, which serves as a refrain both early in the novel and near the end: "The voice of the sea is seductive, never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting her soul to wander in abysses of solitude. . .. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace" (Chopin 2018, pp. 16, 116). The sea is likened to a lover who speaks to Edna in a "seductive" "voice" that offers her an alternative to the patriarchal voice of her colonel father and to the memory of her patronizing husband, who threatens to disrupt her calm resolve in the final scene. The sensuous touch of the sea poses a stark contrast to the strident movement of one imaginary "cavalry officer" (p. 116)—no doubt the same one of her girlhood fantasy—suggesting that Edna would find no succor in a masculinist world. Romantic and lyrical, the narrative language renders Edna's final moment as poetic justice. Edna is, in a sense, declaring herself as an artist with a "courageous soul that dares and defies"—the precise qualities that even her fellow artist friend, Mlle. Reisz, has heretofore doubted Edna to possess (p. 116). The ending of the solitary Edna swimming out to meet the sea is also an act of (anti-)maternal defiance, disentangling herself from the cares of motherhood to prioritize her inner child. Having stripped herself "naked" and feeling strangely "delicious. . . like some new-born creature," she wades deeper into the water; and "[s]he did not look back now, but went on and on, thinking of the blue-grass meadow that she had traversed when a little child, believing that it had no beginning and no end" (p. 116). Edna longs for an ahistorical eternity where she is beholden to no one and tethered to no past or future. By evoking Edna as a child, the water metaphor personifies the maternal "womb of life," a nurturing space where Edna is free to venture on her feminist quest (Ammons 1991, p. 74).

Whether authorially intentional or not, the narrative reveals that this romantic rendition of feminist defiance is not universal but solely reserved for upper-class, White womanhood that colludes in the racist and classist oppression of women of color, particularly Black women.[5] Perhaps the most egregious example of this is Edna/Chopin's

comparison of motherhood to slavery: "The children appeared before her like antagonists who had overcome her; who had overpowered and sought to drag her into the soul's slavery for the rest of her days" (p. 115). This analogy unmasks, as various critics have observed, Edna's quest as one of racial and class privilege, one where Edna/Chopin "linguistically and thematically appropriate[s]" "black suffering, slavery, and oppression" for the advantage of bourgeois White women while dismissing the "complexity of blacks' own lived experience" (Taylor 1989, p. 157).[6] As Ammons puts it, Edna is able to ride into the romantic sea "in a glorious burst of Emersonian free will" because "Black women will raise her children" (Ammons 1991, p. 74). Edna's freedom from maternal and other domestic labor "is purchased on the backs" of Black and other women of color of the working class "whose namelessness, facelessness, and voicelessness record a much more profound oppression" in the novel than Edna's position, exposing her to be both an "oppressor as well as oppressed" (Ammons 1991, pp. 74–75). In short, the analogy "reveals the limitations of contemporary southern women's racist feminism" (Taylor 1989, p. 200).

If *The Awakening* portrays Edna *not* as one who champions the universal liberation of women but exclusively that of White bourgeois women, Chopin seems complicit in endorsing this racist feminism through her oblique and romantic portrayal of Edna's death. The ambiguity of the ending raises sufficient doubts as to whether her eventual death is suicidal or accidental. Given that Edna is fatiguing fast as she swims farther out into the sea, we know that there is no turning back; she will drown. Yet the narrative remains firmly stylized, placing the emphasis on the triumph of Edna's individuality and act of defiance.[7]

Chopin's authorial decision to close the curtain from our viewing of Edna's drowning bolsters the ending as victorious, and we can illuminate this point by contrasting *The Awakening* with a comparable, albeit male-authored, nineteenth-century novel that features the drowning death of another headstrong, independent woman: Zenobia in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance* (1852). As Coverdale, the narrator of the novel, describes, drowning is the "ugliest" form of death, as it renders the corpse abhorrent and even obscene to behold: "Were I to describe the perfect horror of the spectacle" and the "marble image of [her] death agony," he cautions, "the reader might justly reckon it to me for a sin and shame" (Hawthorne 1991, p. 235). He ponders how Zenobia would have sorely miscalculated had she based her mode of death on the romantic and bucolic image of love-shorn "village maidens" who make drowning deaths look "graceful" and "decorous"; for Zenobia's corpse is an outrage to her former self: "Six hours before, how beautiful! At midnight, what a horror!" (p. 236).

Yet the ending of Chopin's novel seemingly leaves no foreshadowing of the grimness that lies ahead. If Edna's family is lucky, it will be able to gather her remains, which would no doubt be as ghastly as Zenobia's contorted body. The closest approximation of Edna's fate is the "bird with a broken wing… beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water," a highly symbolic portraiture that only heightens the romance of the final scene as it implies that Edna, like the bird, has the natural right to be free; yet her wings are torn off—disabled—by unnatural forces (Chopin 2018, p. 116). The narrative curtain falls with the "hum of bees, and the musky odor of pinks," which are redolent of life and fertility, not death and decay. Chopin thus romanticizes Edna's subversive gesture.

Yet for all its aestheticization of Edna's final moments, the narrative nonetheless gestures—however momentarily—toward the ethics of motherhood and the intergenerational haunting to come. Even as she swims on and does not turn back, the thought of her boys gives her momentary pause: "[B]ut Raoul and Etienne!" (p. 123). Prior to Edna's brief homage to her children, we recall the pivotal scene of Adèle Ratignolle's childbirth that whisks Edna away from Robert Lebrun and ultimately cuts the prospects of their

consummation asunder. The symbolism of childbirth raises the question of the ethics of motherhood; as inconvenient as the children may be for Edna's newfound awakening, she is still accountable to them. We should also recall Adèle's foreboding exhortation, "[T]hink of the children! Remember them!" (p. 111). Albeit now in rare use, one of the definitions of "remember" is "To put together again, reverse the dismembering of" (OED). Hence the word "remember" is suggestive of ensuing intergenerational trauma; Edna's death would leave her children psychically dismembered. Another obscure yet noteworthy definition of "remember" is "To provide with a new member or load-bearing component" (OED). To "remember the children," then, is to recognize the consequences of one's maternal actions on the psychic wellbeing of one's children, who are, after all, members of the human community laden with attendant burdens.

Furthermore, despite the novel's appropriation of Black suffering in the service of White bourgeois feminism, the comparison of White middle-class motherhood to slavery troubles the romantic and ahistorical portrayal of Edna as the eternal child. By invoking the atrocity of slavery, it entangles itself in the messy space of historical materiality in at least two ways. First, in a world with so much suffering and injustice, Edna is not childlike but rather childish in her solipsistic romance. Second, this motherhood-slavery analogy is profoundly faulty in the larger historical context. Indeed, it lays bare the gaping chasm between Edna's struggles to be free of being a "Mother-Woman" and the antebellum Black women's forced labor to mother White children while being denied that title in their personal lives. Unlike the racially and socio-economically privileged Edna, historically, for Black women during slavery especially, motherhood was a precarious state. Their children did not belong to them legally, and motherhood could be sundered at the whim of the enslaver. As Dorothy Roberts argues, the history of institutionalized racism in the U.S. hinged centrally on "regulating Black women's reproductive decisions" from the time of slavery onward (Roberts 1997, p. 6). Edna's equation of motherhood with oppression oversimplifies the complexity of Black motherhood.[8]

While Chopin's novel invokes the symbolism of the sea to imagine female liberation and self-expression, this vision is far from universal feminism but one reserved for White, upper-middle-class womanhood. While it touches on the themes of the ethics of motherhood and the intergenerational legacy resultant from sexist oppression, it oversimplifies motherhood as one of oppression and elides how we can remedy the cycle of intergenerational trauma. In its emphasis on the primacy of White women's individual freedom, the novel by default assumes the labor to be taken up by Black women and other women of color.

*

In 1969, the same year Kingston graduated from Berkeley, Chopin's erstwhile ill-received and long-forgotten novel found a champion in a young Norwegian scholar and made its way into reprint (Koloski 2009, pp. 4–5). The rising tides of the sexual revolution and second-wave feminist movement aided the novel's quick launch into the stratosphere of feminist literature (pp. 5–6). At this historical juncture, "most white feminist literary criticism" unproblematically received Edna's story as a universal female experience (Ammons 1991, p. 75). Kingston, fresh from her training at Berkeley—the academic hotbed of political activism during the 1960s—and a burgeoning writer of color, would have taken note.[9] She published *The Woman Warrior* in the following decade after Chopin's novel firmly secured its status as a canonical feminist text. While critics have tended to focus on Kingston's treatment of Chinese or Chinese American culture and history and their influence in her work,[10] the writer herself has remarked that "her biggest literary inspirations" were "Virginia Woolf and the traditions of African-American writers before her" (Ma 2014).[11] Throughout

her writing career, Kingston has drawn copiously from Western tradition and explored cross-cultural themes, including in *The Woman Warrior* (Ludwig 1997, pp. 2–3).[12] Indeed, as is well known, Kingston's genre-defying text is not about authentic historicization of China or its culture; rather, it is about the Chinese American narrator trying to make sense of her bicultural heritage by interrogating accepted binaries, including fact versus fiction, history versus mythology, and reality versus imagination (PBS NewsHour 2019). In Kingston's own words, the book is about "the power of imagination" and "crossing borders against the law" (ibid.). We can then read Kingston's autofiction, particularly the chapter "No Name Woman," as the woman writer of color's boundary-crossing response to, and complication of, Chopin's problematic treatment of female liberation, ethics of motherhood, and intergenerational legacy.

Contrary to the romantic brushstroke Chopin uses in *The Awakening*, in "No Name Woman," Kingston applies a dark tonal hue to the water metaphor. Whereas Chopin's language leaves the question of Edna's death open-ended, Kingston's narrative unfolds with the mother's matter-of-fact pronouncement that the young Maxine's "father had a sister who killed herself. She jumped into the family well" (Kingston 1989, p. 3). The narrative goes on to depict in graphic, macabre details the final moments of the titular woman whose crime, according to the villagers, is conceiving an extramarital child of unknown paternity: the villagers' brutal raid; the tearing of live animal flesh and splattering of blood; and the looting and plundering of the family storehouse (p. 4). In place of the redolence of flowers that adorns Edna's final moments, Kingston's narrative bombards the olfactory sense with a pungent mixture of blood, "spilled preserves," and the foul odor emitted from a "pigsty" (p. 5).

If Chopin and Kingston both use the fluid property of water to envision women's identity and sexual desires, the metaphor of the well is symbolic of the No Name Woman's circumscribed subjectivity. There are no vast horizon and open sea for the nameless aunt but only the human-contrived black hole of the well containing captive water. The narrator's rendition of the aunt's final moment reflects this entrapment: "She turned on her back, lay on the ground. The *black well of sky* and stars went out and out and out forever; her body and her complexity seemed to disappear. She was one of the stars, a bright dot in blackness, without home, without a companion, in eternal cold and silence" (p. 14; my emphasis). Constrained and sullied by the misogynistic ethos that threatens to swallow up her body and subsume her human "complexity," for the eponymous woman, the entire universe is an entrapping well. She plunges to her death, which is both a capitulation and a rebellion. She falls into the unnatural "roundness" demanded by the village folk (p. 13), a roundness reminiscent of the titular woman's pregnant belly, which signifies the patriarchal claim over women's reproductive agency. At the same time, she claims her rightful place, as reflected by the one dot of starlight she imagines as herself. As told by the narrator, the aunt commits a "spite suicide" by drowning in the family well (p. 16). This act of revenge has a quality of social protest, given that one of the idiomatic meanings of "revenge" in Chinese is to "report a crime" (p. 53); hence she is bodily reporting the crime committed against her by her family and the larger patriarchal society. It is also her symbolic gesture to claim self-care as a requisite of kinship. The figure of the well invites such wordplay as wellness, wellbeing, and welfare. Thus the nameless woman bodily conveys that her human complexity—including her unorthodox sexuality and maternity—is not an aberration but integral to the wellbeing of the larger community. As the contrasting water imagery (sea versus drinking well) intimates, Kingston rejects Chopin's romanticization of a woman's death. Remarkably, the village where the titular woman lives is "near the sea" (p. 9). Despite this access to the ocean, the fact that the No Name Woman opts for the constricted space of the well points to Kingston's rejection of monocultural conceptualization of women's agency and sexuality.

As does Chopin, Kingston, too, considers the analogy of U.S. slavery vis-à-vis women's subjugation; yet unlike Chopin, who, as we have seen, co-opts slavery for bourgeois White women's experience, Kingston invokes slavery in all its violence and trauma and returns the focus back on the lives of women of color. Kingston's description of the villagers donning "white masks" to carry out their violence (p. 4) evokes the terrorist activities of the Ku Klux Klan in the U.S. cultural imagination, and this transcultural allusion makes sense given how, as previously noted, Kingston was deeply informed by the African American literary tradition (Ma 2014). Kingston's allusion here thus invites a reading informed by the Black Studies lens. The nameless aunt's persecution and subsequent erasure from history are not unlike those of myriad Black women of the African Diaspora, including Margaret Garner, Harriet Jacobs, Mary Prince, and others, whose voices, motives, and interiority elude official record.[13] To study their lives and access their subjectivities, we must turn, as Toni Morrison has shown, to creative imagination and unofficial archives (Morrison 2014, p. 1075).[14] As Morrison does for Sethe (modeled after Garner) in *Beloved*, Kingston uses what Morrison calls "literary archaeology" (Morrison 2014, p. 1075) to excavate and reconstruct the subjecthood of her forgotten ancestor. Contrary to Chopin's Edna, whose perspective is privileged, the life of the nameless aunt and her subjectivity must rely on the empathy, commitment, and creativity of the young niece. As Maxine imagines, the aunt could have been impregnated by the same rapist who might have ended up joining the other villagers in pilfering and plundering her family home and driving the aunt to her death (Kingston 1989, pp. 6–7). Conversely, she could have been in love, and like Hester Prynne of Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*, protecting her lover by taking his name to her grave (pp. 8–9, 11).[15] Or she could have simply been a "wild woman" who enjoyed sex (p. 8). These shifting and often contradictory versions underscore the precariousness of defining the aunt's womanhood and sexuality as well as the complex subjectivity of the narrator, who is tasked to exhume the forgotten kin's life while she herself struggles to define her selfhood.

In contrast to Chopin's unexamined rendition of the oppressor-oppressed positionality, Kingston consciously elucidates women's complicity in the oppression of fellow women. The story is first told by the adolescent narrator's mother to serve as a cautionary tale to discourage sexual misconduct. Brave Orchid personifies patriarchal authority when she warns the daughter, "Now that you have started to menstruate, what happened to her could happen to you. Don't humiliate us. You wouldn't like to be forgotten as if you had never been born" (p. 5). The mother represents herself as the ever-present villagers—the "us"—who are vigilantly watching, ready to punish wayward women. Similarly, the village women participate in the looting, destruction, and punishment of the aunt. Kingston uses the symbolism of pregnancy to capture this female-against-female violence and its unnaturalness. The mother's cautionary story begins with her noticing her sister-in-law's round, pregnant belly, one she calls "a protruding melon of a stomach" (p. 4). The text thus establishes this roundness as symbolic of pregnancy and women's attendant sexuality. The villagers, often led by females, appropriate this roundness and use it for violent ends: as symbolized by the "round moon cakes and round doorways, the round tables of graduated sizes that fit one roundness inside another," the village folk conscript everything, including the female reproductive motif, as part of the collective "talisman," demanding "roundness"—that is, ceaseless conformity—from its members (p. 13).

Moreover, Kingston critiques Chopin's logic of maternity as oppression and complicates the ethics of motherhood. Unlike Edna, for whom children are oppressors and for whom motherhood can be outsourced to exploited women of color, for Kingston's titular woman, motherhood is a forbidden privilege. In taking her newborn with her to their joint deaths, she performs an act of love according to the narrator: "Carrying the baby to the

well shows loving. Otherwise abandon it. . . Mothers who love their children take them along" (p. 15). If Edna detaches herself from her children to protect her inner child even at the ironic cost of her own life, the nameless aunt claims her forbidden motherhood as an essential part of her identity, even unto death. Despite her own insufferable hardship post-raid, she takes the care and deliberation to give birth inside a pigsty "as a last act of responsibility" to "protect" her newborn not only from the violent throng but also to confuse and ward off the jealous gods.[16] Anticipating the breast milk motif and the ghostly Beloved in Morrison's namesake novel,[17] the aunt suckles the newborn "ghost" and marvels at the baby's "preciousness, lovely as a young calf, a piglet, a little dog" (p. 15). As in Brave Orchid's double-speak, these animal pejoratives all mean the opposite; the nameless mother knows that despite its diminutive frailty, the newborn is "human after all" (pp. 15–16).[18] The No Name Woman empathizes with the child who would inherit the legacy of shame and trauma: "At its birth the two of them had felt the same raw pain of separation, a wound that only the family pressing tight would close" (p. 15). Deprived of this tight-knit family, the aunt cradles her infant to the fatal well. She knows that the newborn's future will be unbearable, especially if it is a girl, and given that the child, once grown, would have no way to provide ancestral offerings to her mother (p. 15).

Yet as the dark imagery of the No Name Woman's death augurs, this literary archaeology comes at a traumatic cost. Kingston follows the faint trail of Chopin's novel and deliberates on the intergenerational haunting to come. As recent trauma studies practitioners have theorized, trauma and the ensuing struggle to find language for the traumatic event are passed down through the generations and are re-lived by the descendants (Griffith 2006, p. 354). Hence the narrator, Maxine, bodily experiences the transgenerational trauma of the aunt's violation and erasure (p. 354). Even as she uses empathic imagination to devote endless pages to the aunt's memory, Maxine cannot quell the traumatic ambivalence she feels toward her ancestor, who, after all, kills her own child. The sinister imagery of the aunt as a ghost lying in wait to drag in her next victim (the adolescent narrator) raises the troubling contradictions of the aunt's double infanticide-suicide, which is at once the ultimate selfless act of maternal love and one that is profoundly selfish, one that drags the child along with oneself into the worst kind of death in the Chinese tradition. This may be why Maxine, who is a kind of surrogate daughter of the aunt, feels uncanny terror toward the elder. "My aunt haunts me—I do not think she always means me well. . .. The Chinese are always very frightened of the drowned one, whose weeping ghost, wet hair hanging and skin bloated, waits silently by the water to pull down a substitute" (p. 16). The ominous imagery here seems to underscore the fatal cost at which women struggle for their agency, a cost inherited by the next generation.

4. Traces of Chopin's *The Awakening* and Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* in Ng's *Everything*

Ng's novel has trace elements of both Chopin's and Kingston's narratives. Set in the fictional town of Middlewood, Ohio, and spanning multiple decades of the twentieth century, it opens with the mysterious disappearance and death of a mixed-race teen named Lydia Lee. In the ensuing parental journey to locate her, the novel underscores the importance of accounting for our intersectional identity categories. Lydia is the product of a marriage between a White mother and a Chinese American father, Marilyn and James Lee. Each parent has faced struggles of their own related to their gender, class, or race: Marilyn is raised by a single working mother who nonetheless adheres to the strictures of the midcentury gender norms, raising her daughter to equate her life's success to marrying a "wonderful Harvard man" (Ng 2015, p. 51). Marilyn defies these domestic expectations and strives for a career in medicine until she marries James. Like Edna Pontellier in *The*

Awakening, she is torn between motherhood and individual passion; like Edna, she abandons the children for a time to pursue her personal dream. Unlike Edna, however, she eventually returns to her family, only to live her dreams vicariously through her daughter.

James, for his part, comes from a Chinese immigrant family, raised in an upper-class, all-white Boston suburb where his parents' employment as a school custodian and cafeteria worker becomes a source of his shame. He grows up having "never felt at home"; even as he eventually pursues "the most quintessentially American subject he could find—cowboys"—and becomes a professor of History at Harvard, James remains feeling like an imposter who will be asked to "leave" at any moment (pp. 44–45). Like Maxine in *The Woman Warrior*, James is deeply ambivalent about his bicultural heritage and wishes Lydia to be a sociable "all-American girl" accepted by her White peers in the way he never was. As for Lydia, the angst she feels about herself as an Asian-presenting female living among a White majority evokes similar anxieties felt by Maxine: through the racist gaze of White classmates, neighbors, and random strangers on the street, Lydia internalizes her self-image as a walking racial stereotype, akin to the "sign at the Peking Express—a cartoon man with a coolie hat, slant eyes, buckteeth and chopsticks" and speaking the nonsensical language of "*ching chong*" (Ng 2015, p. 51).

The novel's invocations of Kingston's narrative (and, by association, Chopin's novel) make sense given the profound influence *The Woman Warrior* has had on Ng's personal life and her own writing. In the 2019 PBS interview, Ng relates the (trans)formative impact Kingston's book has had on her since her adolescence, college years, and today (Flock 2019). Elsewhere in a joint interview with Kingston, Ng remarks that she continues to return to her literary predecessor's narrative, as each reading offers her "something new" (PBS NewsHour 2019). Ng cannot "emphasize" enough "how significant the book is; it is impossible to talk about Asian American literature—arguably, about American literature, period—without discussing it" (ibid.). Ng's reminder here that Kingston's feminist text constitutes mainstream American literature invites us to read it alongside Chopin's *The Awakening*, which has remained a required reading in U.S. literature syllabi since Kingston's college years in the late 1960s to Ng's in the 2000s. As Ng has related in her annotations of a passage from Kingston's "No Name Woman," the misogyny that the eponymous woman faces and her feminist aspirations go beyond Chinese or Chinese American cultural experiences; as Ng puts it, "the truth is that virtually every culture on earth is patriarchal and male-centered. . . It's not a Chinese thing; it's a human thing, and one that I hope we can change" (Flock 2019).

5. Reprisal and Reconciliation of Chopin and Kingston in Ng's *Everything*

Celeste Ng's *Everything* claims its literary kinship with Kingston's and Chopin's works by following in its predecessors' lead of interweaving women's agency tightly with the water symbolism. In doing so, Ng's novel presents itself both as an homage to and reprisal of Chopin's and Kingston's thematic clashes. Chopin's novel implies that motherhood, and by implication, children's lives, are subordinate to a woman's quest for her wellbeing. Kingston's narrative rejects this categorical dismissal of motherhood by portraying a self-sacrificing mother in the nameless aunt whose identity is inseparable from her child's. Yet Kingston's tale portends the darker implication of this maternal model, which implies that the newborn's life is as valuable as it is serviceable to the mother. Through the water motif and the mother-daughter dynamics of Marilyn and Lydia, Ng further troubles the complexities of maternal ethics and the effects of a mother's actions upon her children.

In a sense, Lydia is both the progeny of Chopin's Edna and Kingston's titular aunt, the child who gets left behind as well as the one who gets taken to her death. In other

words, Marilyn's actions play a traumatic role in Lydia's self-perception and life trajectory. Upon the death of her estranged mother, Marilyn renews her resolve to pursue medicine and promptly abandons her young children, Lydia and Nath, in the care of their father. In a scene reminiscent of Edna's seaside awakening, Marilyn's reawakened resolve is symbolized by a water metaphor. Stepping out of her car during a storm, Marilyn embraces the pouring rain with arms "spread. . . wide", welcoming the pelting "rain drip into" her mouth (p. 86). Paralleling Edna, who strips herself of the garbs of convention, Marilyn too "peeled off her blouse and skirt and stockings and shoes" and cast this "sad little heap beside the [Betty Crocker] cookbook" once belonging to her deceased mother (p. 86). Marilyn's baptism in the rain is her symbolic rejection of replicating her mother's legacy of domesticity; she is peeling off and casting aside the social conventions of matrimony and motherhood that weigh her down. Like Edna's ecstasy at having shorn herself of her social garb, Marilyn "admired" her nude body, and she pledged to "*never end up like* that", meaning like her mother, whose life can be reduced to a careworn cookbook (p. 86; original emphasis). However, like Edna, whose dream of sexual intercourse with Lebrun is dashed by Adèle Ratignolle's difficult childbirth, Marilyn's newfound dream is dashed once and for all when she realizes she is pregnant with her and James's third child.

She returns home and begins the life of an otherwise self-sacrificing homemaker but with a caveat: she will push Lydia to "do everything she was capable of" (p. 147), which, in Marilyn's mind, and as Lydia knows too well, is her daughter becoming a "*doctor*" (p. 163). We can glean Marilyn's selfish self-sacrifice in her objectification of Lydia as a gardener's showpiece: "She would spend the rest of her years guiding Lydia, sheltering her, the way you tended a prize rose: helping it grow, propping it with stakes, arching each stem toward perfection" (p. 147). In staking her longings and dashed dreams to her daughter's future, Marilyn is in a sense the nameless aunt who plunges not just herself but her child to their deaths, or the weeping ghost that lies in wait for the next substitute. Ironically as well, Marilyn comes to resemble Maxine's mother in their common drive to control their daughters: In her quest to spare Lydia from becoming prey to patriarchal subjugation, Marilyn becomes a strange bedfellow to Brave Orchid, who often serves as a patriarchal proxy in demanding gender conformity from Maxine.[19] In other words, while Marilyn pushes her daughter to pursue a career that defies gender norms and spare her daughter the fate of "normative motherhood"—the cultural demand for mothers to be self-sacrificing—Marilyn's own allegiance to that damaging ideal causes irreparable trauma to Lydia (O'Reilly 2023, pp. 170–73).

Indeed, Marilyn's actions have intergenerational consequences, most notably on her favorite child. The young Lydia (then but six years old) blames herself for the disappearance of her mother: "It's not your fault, her father had said, but Lydia knew it was. . .. If her mother ever came home. . . [s]he would do everything her mother told her. Everything her mother wanted" (p. 137) True to her self-promise, upon her mother's return, Lydia fashions herself into a yes-child who doggedly strives to please her mother: "Ever since that summer without her mother, their family had felt precarious, as if they were teetering on a cliff. . . . [Lydia] had been so afraid" (pp. 272–73). But in the process to please, Lydia loses herself, her eventual physical drowning but a materialization of the figurative drowning she has faced under the parental weight.[20]

The lake scene of Lydia's drowning synthesizes the elements of both Chopin's and Kingston's narratives. It casts Lydia's death at once romantically (much in the way we see in Edna's death scene) and naturalistically (similar to the scene leading up to the death of the No Name Woman). Consider the following passage, which occurs moments after Lydia returns to the lake where she once nearly drowned to confront her fears:

> Above her the moon was coin-round, perfect. Beneath her the boat rocked so gently that she could hardly feel its motion. Looking up at the sky, she felt as if she were floating in space, completely untethered. . . . . Carefully, she got to her feet, spreading her arms as the boat swayed. . .. She would kick her way to the dock and reach up to the planks and pull herself up out of the water. . . .She looked down at the lake, which in the dark looked like nothing, just blackness, a great void spreading beneath her. It will be all right, she told herself, and she stepped out of the boat into the water. (pp. 275–76)

The romantic imagery here is a paean to Chopin's Edna by the sea. Evocative of Edna as an eternal child, the gentle rocking of the boat hints at Lydia as a newborn, and the placid moonlit sky illuminates the promises of her agency in that rebirth. Lydia's struggle has been to be her own person apart from being the idealized child of her parents and the proxy of her mother's unrequited dreams. In this scene, Lydia vows to "begin again. She will tell her mother: enough. . . .She will give her father back his necklace and his book"; in short, "she will stop pretending to be someone she is not. From now on, she will do what *she* wants. Feet planted firmly on nothing" (p. 275). Her plunge into the lake (even though she cannot swim) is a figurative declaration of her liberation, her decision to take her life into her own hands, to take the risk of being an independent agent, sink or swim. Though the family may never know conclusively, the reader understands that Lydia's death is an accident, not a suicide. Her death, then, is not one of self-defeat but one of daring and courage, much like Edna's.

Lydia's death by drowning is also an homage to Kingston's No Name Woman, as it is—however inadvertently on Lydia's part—a kind of "spite suicide" that will haunt her family for life. As much as the imagery of the quoted passage evokes romantic possibilities and renewal, it portends ill omen. The "great void" and blackness of the lake recall the dark void of the No Name Woman's sky and drinking well that encapsulate her social entrapment. The language here, with Lydia "floating in space, completely untethered" and her feet not touching ground, casts her as a kind of haunting spirit, not unlike the oft-terrifying ghost of the nameless aunt who haunts the imagination of her niece. In lockstep with Kingston, Ng rejects facile romanticization of a woman's untimely death. Through reverse-chronological narration, the novel describes in unflinching minutia the goriness of Lydia's corpse, which her father has to identify: "[T]here is only half a face left, barely preserved by the cold water of the lake; the other half had already been eaten away" (p. 58) The subsequent autopsy report tells James more than a parent should ever know about one's child, including "the color and size of each of her organs, the weight of her brain.. . . That in her stomach were snippets of lake-bottom weeds, sand, and six ounces of lake water. . .. That due to the low temperature of the water, she had not yet decomposed, but that the skin of her fingertips was just beginning to peel off, like a glove" (p. 69). Thus, the lake scene underscores both the possibilities and challenges facing Lydia and others of mixed race and complex intersectional identities. Even as the novel's reverse-chronological structure emphasizes the Lee family's trauma in the face of Lydia's vanishing and death, as I will show, the ending offers hope, redemption, and the possibility of social change.

6. Conclusion: (Re)tracing the Elements of Coalitional Feminist Solidarity in Ng, Chopin, and Kingston

Significantly, even as *Everything* channels both Chopin's and Kingston's female characters—one who locates her feminist agency in solitude and the other through transgenerational storytelling—the final emphasis of Ng's novel is female empowerment through intersectional, cross-racial solidarity. In retrospect, Ng's thematic visions were already extant to varying degrees in Chopin's and Kingston's narratives. In particular, Ng's focus

on the affinities of cross-racial, feminist, and queer struggles helps us to surmise the seeds of cross-racial feminism and homoeroticism latent in Chopin's and Kingston's narratives.

The ending of *Everything* places Lydia's beloved brother Nath and her younger sister Hannah by the lake alongside Lydia's only friend Jack Wolff, whose White privilege belies his vulnerability as a queer male and whose same-sex desire for Nath has possibly made him the target of the latter's homophobic rage (pp. 288–89). In the final scene, Nath willingly plunges into the lake that has claimed his sister's life, as he wants to "imagine. . . Lydia sinking"; but try as he might, he cannot, for he "has already learned how not to drown" (p. 290). This moment underscores the limits of empathy and the long journey ahead in forging intersectional, intergroup solidarity. Nath's intersecting identity as a mixed-race male is different from Lydia's; he cannot replicate her lived experience. This passage cautions against viewing intersectional coalition as a ready panacea for social change.[21] Nonetheless, Nath's willing plunge into the lake speaks to the possibility of a coalitional nonessentialist feminism. Despite his desperate attempts to flounder and "dive underwater," Nath "focuses" on swimming to the dock so as not to "lose sight of [Hannah's] face" (p. 292). In other words, Nath commits to preventing Hannah from also falling victim to the fatal lake. But all along, Jack has been standing guard protecting her, and when Nath emerges from the water, "Jack's. . . hand stretches down toward him," which Nath is ready to "take" (p. 290). This foreshadows a pivotal moment of growth and eventual acceptance for Nath, as earlier in the scene, he has physically lashed out at Jack; when the latter does not fight back but rather looks at Nath "tenderly" as "if he wants to reach out and put his arms around him," Nath's homophobic rage intensifies, and he strikes him again (pp. 288–89).[22] For her part, Hannah, far from a helpless damsel in distress, intervenes to "shield Jack" by "battering her brother with her palms, shoving him away" (p. 289). Here the novel implies that Hannah is the next generation of Lydias who will not drown but who will survive and fight back, buoyed up by the coalitional support of those like Nath and Jack, who each embodies socially vulnerable identity. As Lydia's sister, Hannah embodies a composite of women—White, Chinese, and mixed race. By placing Hannah in the symbolic lake but not having her face a solitary ending like her sister, the novel implies the viability of cross-racial, nonessentialist feminism. Hannah's advocacy of Jack anticipates an intercommunal solidarity that can break through the traumatic cycle of women's struggle for agency and intergenerational trauma. The novel bolsters Nath's eventual reconciliation with Jack by presenting a future moment when Nath will look "at the small bump that will always mar the bridge of Jack's nose and wants to trace it, gently, with his fingers" (p. 290). The tender care Nath shows toward Jack in this future moment parallels the tender longing Jack reveals to Nath in the present. The novel imagines the three of them walking home, bruised and battered, true, but "[d]espite this, they will be strangely aglow, all of them, as if they've been scoured. It will take a long time to sort things out" (p. 290). Again, the novel cautions against quick and easy solutions, but in the tableau of the weary yet radiant trio walking home in solidarity, we glimpse a hopeful future.

We can see how Chopin's novel, despite its outward White and class privileges, also leaves itself open to cross-racial, intersectional feminisms. Structurally divided into "thirty-nine parts," the novel invokes the "potentially universal experience of pregnancy", which "crosses class, race, religious, and national lines" (Ammons 1991, pp. 75–77). Moreover, in its lyrical and repetitive narrative rhythm as well as its portrayal of White women's profound reliance on Black maternity and maternal wisdom, *The Awakening* is steeped in "black women's consciousness" and African American culture (pp. 76–77). In this way—and perhaps despite the author's conscious awareness—Chopin's novel anticipates a feminist vision that embraces cross-racial and cross-class solidarity. Moreover, through the sensuous

friendship of Edna and Adèle Ratignolle, the novel hints at the alliance of homoeroticism and feminism. Drawn to Adèle's "excessive physical charm" and emboldened by the Creole woman's "sensuous" "candor," Edna begins to let go of her "habitual reserve" (Chopin 2018, p. 16). In her friend's arms, Edna is "flushed" and "intoxicated" as if by "wine, or like a first breath of freedom" (p. 21); through Adèle's "gentle caress," Edna's incipient passions and romantic recollections begin to stir (pp. 19–21). The novel daringly goes as far as to imagine the two women's "bond" and "sympathy" as (romantic) "love" (p. 16). It would not be far-fetched to say, then, that Edna's sexual awakening begins homoerotically.

We can also detect the potential crossing of homoeroticism and feminism in Kingston's "No Name Woman." The chapter hints at the taboo of same-sex eroticism when Maxine discusses the villagers' hypervigilance against "incest" and their use of linguistic means to transform every man and woman into harmless kin (Kingston 1989, p. 19). Despite this societal hyper-policing against sexual unorthodoxy, Kingston's text leaves the reader to sense something homoerotic about the narrator assuming the role of the no-name aunt. In enacting the scenes of the aunt's stolen moments of sensuality [e.g., "To sustain her being in love, she often worked at herself in the mirror, guessing at the colors and shapes that would interest" her secret lover (Kingston 1989, p. 9)], Maxine is in a sense flirting incestuously with her aunt. *Everything*'s vision of intersectional solidarity between women's rights and the queer movement, therefore, finds latent encouragement in both Kingston's and Chopin's works.

This essay has mapped the story of three feminist American writers—Ng, Chopin, and Kingston—engaged in a dialectical conversation across time and race about imagining female agency through the water motif. *Everything* presents itself both as an homage to and reprisal of *The Awakening* and *The Woman Warrior*. Through the reading of Ng's novel, we can recognize the dialectical debate between Chopin and Kingston about maternal ethics and the intergenerational legacy of women's oppression. Ng's novel, as a synergistic product of its literary predecessors, envisions women's empowerment through intersectional solidarity and cross-racial feminism, a vision latently shared by its literary forebears. We can hear the contrapuntal voices of the three authors when we remove literary segregationist barriers.

This essay contributes to the ongoing discussion about the strategic usefulness yet problematic bifurcation of standard versus minority literary sub-canons. As unwieldy as it is to capture the lived experiences of peoples of myriad ethno-racial origins, Asian American literature can be harnessed to combat social inequity through coalitional unity and representation. Yet it also runs the risk of over-representing some ethnic groups (e.g., Far East Asian) over others, as well as playing into the "orientalist expectations" for writers to play "the role of ambassador of Asian American and at times even Asian cultures" (Schultermandl 2008, p. 293). Moreover, the existence of distinct minority sub-canons can ironically perpetuate the marginalization of the very literatures they are established to steward.[23] The grim consequence can be one where U.S. mainstream literature remains predominantly White and where minoritized literatures are deemed "separate but *not equal*" (Guillory qtd. in Schultermandl 2008, p. 291). Through cross-racial analysis, this essay short-circuits such generic barriers and exposes the arbitrariness of literary canon formations.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

[1] While the majority of scholarship on Ng's *Everything* has focused on family dynamics (e.g., mixed-race struggles, familial secrets, intergenerational trauma) and race (e.g., anti-Asian racism, internalized racism), critics have seldom explored Ng's novel from an intertextual lens, and none to date has placed all three authors (Ng, Kingston, and Chopin) in a conversation. Junhe Liu (2024) interfaces Ng and Kingston from the perspective of trauma studies to explore the intergenerational effects of internalized racism and thereby argues that Ng updates the central role of trauma in the Asian American experience. O'Reilly (2023) compares Ng's *Everything* and Ng's second novel, *Little Fires Everywhere* (2017), to explore the intergenerational legacy of "normative motherhood"—a term the critic defines as the racist, sexist, and classist institutionalization of motherhood, which polices and obstructs women's agency and reduces maternity to one of self-sacrifice (O'Reilly 2023, pp. 9–11). Like O'Reilly, my essay engages with the interrelated themes of the ethics of feminism and motherhood and their impact on future generations. As does Liu, this essay places Ng in dialogue with Kingston; however, my essay makes an original contribution by interpolating a third term of Chopin. I thereby go beyond Liu's discussion of Asian American literature and into the contested boundaries of mainstream (White) versus ethnic literary classifications. For a comparative reading of Ng's *Everything* and Jean Kwok's *Searching for Sylvie Lee* (2019) that examines the intersection of anti-Asian racism and maternal influence, see Khalaf (2024). For a study of the connection between *Everything*'s narrative organization and the theme of family secrets, see Ibarrola-Armendariz (2021).

[2] According to Hegel, the first moment is the state of "understanding", where "concepts or forms have a seemingly stable definition or determination"; the second is the "dialectical" or "negatively rational", which destabilizes the first "moment of understanding" from its "one-sidedness or restrictedness" (Maybee 2020).

[3] For an influential study of the invisible power of racial Whiteness in the U.S. cultural imaginary, see R. Dyer (1997). For an essay that interrogates the discursive dominance of racial Whiteness in contemporary feminist studies, see Rebecca L. Clark Mane (2012).

[4] (White) literary establishment is not exclusively guilty of reading Asian American literature as a representation of cultural authenticity; some critics in the Asian American literary community have also contributed to this reductive reading. The tendency of both Chinese and Chinese American critics to read works by Asian American writers as ethnography, for instance, is what accounted for all the vicious attacks on Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior. For further details on the controversy surrounding Kingston's debut autofiction and the question of cultural authenticity, see note11 of this essay; see also Cheung (1993), particularly note 5, p. 74.

[5] In recognition of Black and White as both historically constructed racial terms, I will be capitalizing both throughout this article. For a discussion on the usefulness of capitalizing racial Blackness and Whiteness, see Kwame Anthony Appiah, "The Case for Capitalizing the B in Black," *The Atlantic*, 18 June 2020. www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/06/time-to-capitalize-blackand-white/613159/ (accessed on 15 January 2024).

[6] For discussions on the elements of race and class in *The Awakening*, see Ammons (1991), Anna Shannon Elfenbein (2009), Anne Goodwyn Jones (1981), and Taylor (1989). For an essay that reads Chopin's novel using Toni Morrison's axiom of the "Africanist presence" in seemingly raceless, White-authored texts, see J. Dyer (2002).

[7] My reading thus differs from both Ammons, who sees the ending as one of dead-end and defeat for both the protagonist and Chopin the author, an ending that "plunges" them "into a killing silence from which neither returns" (Ammons 1991, p. 75), and Elfenbein, who reads Chopin as deliberately portraying Edna's end as one of selfish upper-class White privilege (Anna Shannon Elfenbein 2009, p. 180).

[8] The 1857 case of Margaret Garner is an excellent example, one that was widely published, discussed, and fictionalized—even in Chopin's time—and later served as the basis for Toni Morrison's Pulitzer-Prize winning 1987 novel Beloved (Carroll 2019). To save her children from the fate of being forced back into enslavement, Garner, who was a fugitive living in Ohio at the time, commits infanticide (Carroll 2019). For Garner, Chopin's analogy of her motherhood to slavery would be deeply ironic, as it is from the claws of slavery that the former attempts to rescue children; unlike Edna/Chopin, for whom motherhood is a given and a burden to cast off, for Garner and sundry Black women since the antebellum period, motherhood must be fought for, sometimes at the dearest cost of life.

[9] For a detailed history of political activism at UC Berkeley and other college campuses in the San Francisco Bay Area and the origin of the term "Asian American," see William Wei (1993).

[10] The most famous example of such reading is Frank Chin's scathing evaluation of Kingston's works, especially *The Woman Warrior*. Chin accuses Kingston of false representation of Chinese culture and tradition. For the overview of the Chin-Kingston literary feud, see Cheung (1993), especially note 5, p. 74. As Elliot H. Shapiro (2001) mentions, over the years, various critics (Elaine Kim, Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong, Shirley Geok-lin Lim, Leslie Bow, and Robert G. Lee) have written about the feud. (p. 20).

[11] Remarkably, like Edna Pontellier and No Name Woman, Woolf also ended her life by drowning.

[12] For instance, Elliot H. Shapiro (2001) discusses the dazzling range of Kingston's cosmopolitan, multi-generic, and multi-ethnic intertextuality in her first novel, *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* (1989).

[13] Harriet Jacobs was a formerly enslaved woman in the U.S. and the author of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). Mary Prince was a Caribbean-born author of *The History of Mary Prince* (1831), considered the first published female slave narrative. For the study of the lives of these women, see Jenny Sharpe (2003).

[14] For literary criticism that uses the literary archaeological methodology, see Jenny Sharpe (2003).

[15] Various scholars have commented on the link between Kingston's "No Name Woman" and Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter, including the similarities between the No Name Woman and Hester Prynne as well as the Chinese village in the narrative resembling Puritan America (Ludwig 1997, p. 47). In her 1987 interview, Kingston remarks that she was consciously "thinking about. . .Hawthorne and The Scarlet Letter as a discussion of the Puritan part of America, and of China, and a woman's place" (qtd. in Ludwig 1997, p. 47).

[16] The chapter introduces early on that Chinese immigrants practice the tradition of confusing the capricious gods by "diverting their courses, misleading them with crooked streets and false names" (p. 5). This is similar to Brave Orchid's opposite signification as described above. By this logic, the aunt giving birth in the pigsty denotes how much she loves her newborn and treasures motherhood.

[17] In terms of the breast milk motif, three scenes from Morrison's *Beloved* come to mind: first, the rape scene where Schoolteacher and his pupils steal Sethe's milk meant for her baby (Morrison 1988, p. 17); second, Sethe's determination to cross into Ohio to nurse her waiting daughter Beloved (p. 94); and third, Sethe nursing Baby Denver while holding the deceased daughter Beloved: "So Denver took her mother's milk right along with the blood of her sister" (p. 152).

[18] Maxine's mother often uses the tactic of what I would call double-speak; that is, she tells her daughter the opposite of what she means. As Brave Orchid later admits to Maxine, all the years that she has told her daughter that she is "ugly," she has meant the "opposite": "We [Chinese] like to say the opposite" (Kingston 1989, p. 203).

[19] I want to thank one of my anonymous reviewers of the special issue of *Literature* for this insight.

[20] The symbolic weight of being a "yes-child" to her parents explains why Lydia welcomes the fall when Nath pushes her into the lake one summer out of jealousy: "Lydia felt relief so great she had sighed in a deep choking lungful. She had staggered so readily, fell so eagerly, that she and Nath both knew: that she felt it, too, this pull she now exerted, and didn't want it. That the weight of everything tilting toward her was too much" (Ng 2015, p. 154).

[21] Intersectionality as a social justice framework is promising in theory, and it has been widely embraced by coalitions of feminist and queer movements, but how it plays out in practice, whether it ensures equity among variably marginalized members, remains an ongoing question and challenge (Evans and Lépinard 2019, pp. 5–6).

[22] I contend that Nath's violence against Jack is homophobic whether he is consciously aware in the moment or latently so. Based on the novel's plot, one can plausibly explain Nath's rage as the culmination of his suspicion that Jack is implicated in Lydia's death; however, the homoerotic language of the passage (Jack's "tender" gaze and his embracing gesture toward Nath) invites us to read between the lines. Nath senses Jack's romantic feelings toward him, which promptly triggers both Nath's homophobia and the realization that Jack is innocent of his sister's death.

[23] Schultermandl argues that "the very suggestion of a mainstream/minority literature can be seen as an affirmation of existing power divisions in American society" (p. 293). Kandice Chuh (2019) argues that the structural distinction between mainstream and multi-ethnic literatures marginalizes the latter, as it implies that ethnic literatures are outside of (and therefore subordinate to) canonical literature proper (pp. 15–17).

References

Ammons, Elizabeth. 1991. *Conflicting Stories: American Women Writers at the Turn into the Twentieth Century*. New York and Oxford: Oxford UP.

Carroll, Rebecca. 2019. Overlooked—Margaret Garner. *The New York Times*. January 31. Available online: https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/obituaries/margaret-garner-overlooked.html (accessed on 15 June 2023).

Cheung, King-Kok. 1993. *Articulate Silences: Hisaye Yamamoto, Maxine Hong Kingston, Joy Kogawa*. Ithaca and London: Cornell UP.

Chopin, Kate. 2018. *The Awakening*. Edited by Margo Culley. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, pp. 4–116.

Chuh, Kandice. 2019. *The Difference Aesthetics Makes: On the Humanities "After Man"*. Durham: Duke UP.

Clark Mane, Rebecca L. 2012. Transmuting Grammars of Whiteness in Third-Wave Feminism: Interrogating Postrace Histories, Post modern Abstraction, and the Proliferation of Difference in Third-Wave Texts. *Signs* 38: 71–98. Available online: https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/665810 (accessed on 21 January 2024). [CrossRef]

Collins, Patricia Hill, and Sirma Bilge. 2020. *Intersectionality*, 2nd ed. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Dyer, Joyce. 2002. Reading 'The Awakening' with Toni Morrison. *The Southern Literary Journal* 35: 138–54. Available online: https://www.jstor.org/stable/20078354 (accessed on 3 January 2024). [CrossRef]

Dyer, Richard. 1997. *White: Essays on Race and Culture*. London and New York: Routledge.
Elfenbein, Anna Shannon. 2009. Reckoning with Race in The Awakening. In *Awakenings: The Story of the Kate Chopin Revival*. Edited by Bernard Kolosky. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, pp. 173–83.
Evans, Elizabeth, and Eléonore Lépinard, eds. 2019. Confronting privileges in feminist and queer movements. In *Intersectionality in Feminist and Queer Movements*. New York: Routledge, pp. 1–26. [CrossRef]
Flock, Elizabeth. 2019. Why This Description of the Chinese-American Experience Resonates with Celeste Ng. *PBS News Canvas*. August 19. Available online: https://artscanvas.org/books/why-this-description-of-the-chinese-american-experience-resonates-with-celeste-ng (accessed on 18 May 2025).
Fox, Michael Allen. 2005. *The Accessible Hegel*. New York: Humanities Press.
Griffith, Jennifer. 2006. Uncanny Spaces: Trauma, Cultural Memory, and the Female Body in Gayl Jones's "Corregidora" and Maxine Hong Kingston's "The Woman Warrior. " *Studies in the Novel* 35: 353–70. Available online: https://www.jstor.org/stable/29533769 (accessed on 21 February 2024).
Hawthorne, Nathaniel. 1991. *Blithedale Romance*. Oxford and New York: Oxford UP.
Ibarrola-Armendariz, Aitor. 2021. Family Secrets and Narrative Structure in Celeste Ng's Everything I Never Told You. *Atlantis Journal of the Spanish Association for Anglo-American Studies* 43: 168–85. [CrossRef]
Jones, Anne Goodwyn. 1981. *Tomorrow Is Another Day: The Woman Writer in the South, 1859–1936*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP.
Khalaf, Abeer Mohammed Raafat Mohammed. 2024. Condemned Isolation in Celeste Ng's Everything I Never Told You (2014) and Jean Kwok's Searching for Sylvie Lee (2019): The Failure to Blend in. *Egyptian Journal of English Language and Literature Studies* 13: 13–34. [CrossRef]
Kingston, Maxine Hong. 1982. Cultural Mis-readings by American Reviewers. In *Asian and Western Writers in Dialogue: New Cultural Identities*. Edited by Guy Amirthanayagam. New York: Macmillan, pp. 55–57.
Kingston, Maxine Hong. 1989. *The Woman Warrior*. New York: Vintage International.
Koloski, Bernard, ed. 2009. *Awakenings: The Story of the Kate Chopin Revival*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP.
Liu, Junhe. 2024. Celeste Ng in Conversation with Maxine Hong Kingston: Intergenerational Trauma and the Asian American Experience in Everything I Never Told You. *Arts, Culture and Language* 9: 1. [CrossRef]
Ludwig, Sämi. 1997. Celebrating Ourselves in the Other, or: Who Controls the Conceptual Allusions in Kingston? In *Asian American Literature in the International Context: Readings on Fiction, Poetry, and Performance*. Muenster: Lit Verlag, pp. 37–55. Available online: https://www.academia.edu/3101826/_Celebrating_Ourselves_in_the_Other_Or_Who_Controls_the_Conceptual_Allusions_in_Kingston_Asian_American_Literature_in_the_International_Context_Readings_on_Fiction_Poetry_and_Performance_Eds_Roc%C3%ADo_Davis_and_S%C3%A4mi_Ludwig_M%C3%BCnster_LIT_Verlag_2002_35_53?hb-g-sw=3101819 (accessed on 1 November 2023).
Ma, Zheng Yuan. 2014. Award-Winning Maxine Kingston Tells the Story of Her Family History, Immigration. *The Stanford Daily*. May 12. Available online: https://stanforddaily.com/2014/05/12/award-winning-maxine-kingston-tells-the-story-of-her-family-history-immigration/ (accessed on 11 November 2023).
Maybee, Julie E. 2020. Hegel's Dialectics. In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Winter 2020 ed. Edited by Edward N. Zalta. Stanford: Stanford University. Available online: https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2020/entries/hegel-dialectics/ (accessed on 1 October 2023).
Mitchell, Koritha. 2018. Identifying White Mediocrity and Know-Your-Place Aggression; A Form of Self-Care. *African American Review* 51: 253–62. [CrossRef]
Morrison, Toni. 1988. *Beloved*. New York: Penguin Books.
Morrison, Toni. 2014. Site of Memory. In *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, 3rd ed. Edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Valerie A. Smith. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., vol. II, pp. 1071–78.
Ng, Celeste. 2011. Why I Don't Want to Be the Next Amy Tan. *HuffPost*. March 18. Updated 25 May 2011. First published 2010. Available online: https://www.huffpost.com/entry/why-i-dont-want-to-be-the_b_342340 (accessed on 5 December 2023).
Ng, Celeste. 2015. *Everything I Never Told You*. New York: Penguin Books.
O'Reilly, Andrea. 2023. "What Finally Dragged Her under the Water and Who Carried the Spark": The Intergenerational Trauma of Normative Motherhood in Celeste Ng's Everything I Never Told You and Little Fires Everywhere. In *Normative Motherhood: Regulations, Representations, and Reclamations*. Edited by Andrea O'Reilly. Bradford: Demeter Press, pp. 169–88. [CrossRef]
PBS NewsHour. 2019. Maxine Hong Kingston and Celeste Ng Answer Your Questions About "The Woman Warrior". Available online: https://www.pbs.org/video/now-read-this-1567024532/ (accessed on 20 May 2025).
Roberts, Dorothy. 1997. *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*. New York: Pantheon Books.
Schultermandl, Silvia. 2008. (Breaking out of) the "Literary Ghetto": Where to Place Asian American Writers, Or De-essentializing Canon Formation. *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies (HJEAS)* 14: 287–302. Available online: https://www.jstor.org/stable/41274431 (accessed on 10 December 2023).

Shapiro, Elliot H. 2001. Authentic Watermelon: Maxine Hong Kingston's American Novel. *MELUS* 26: 5–28. Available online: https://www.jstor.org/stable/3185494 (accessed on 21 February 2024). [CrossRef]
Sharpe, Jenny. 2003. *Ghosts of Slavery: A Literary Archaeology of Black Women's Lives*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
Sohn, Stephen Hong. 2014. *Racial Asymmetries: Asian American Fictional Worlds*. New York: NYU Press.
Tan, Amy. 2003. Required Readings and Other Dangerous Subjects. In *The Opposites of Fate: A Book of Musings*. New York: Putnam, pp. 299–303.
Taylor, Helen. 1989. *Gender, Race, and Region in the Writings of Grace King, Ruth McEnery Stuart, and Kate Chopin*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP.
Wei, William. 1993. *The Asian American Movement*. Philadelphia: Temple UP.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.