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Motherhood in the Multiverse: Melodrama and Asian American

Identity in *Everything, Everywhere, All at Once*

by

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of the requirements for the degree of
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ABSTRACT

In what follows, I look to the visual and narrative composition of the multiverse between *Everything, Everywhere, All at Once* (The Daniels, 2022) and *Doctor Strange: Multiverse of Madness* (Sam Raimi, 2022) to develop a more precise understanding of the superhero blockbuster as a contemporary expression of sensation melodrama. To do so, I use two depictions of maternity to excavate two very different approaches to the multiverse: one that externalizes social conflict, which it answers with individuated and exculpatory violence, and another that internalizes social conflict, which it answers through collective care. I introduce the blockbuster's mobilization of the multiverse and the symptoms of its escapist logics through visual composition and action sequences that influence external / internal narrative crises. *Everything, Everywhere* reconfigures these tropes in order to articulate the pivotal role of maternal care in opening new possibilities, straying away from dominant representations of Asian American women as simple or subservient. It also reshapes an agentive image for the Asian American hero in the immigrant mother, previously reserved for male characters in cinema. The implicit involvement of the larger scale of the world redresses the xenophobic and racial violence against Asian Americans and immigrants in general. Looking to how the film exhibits Asian American identity and interdependency within its narrative suggests a path for progressive politics, I argue, that reshapes collectivity and care as central in departing from the racial stereotypes that dominant media generally maintain.

INTRODUCTION

The multiverse is a concept that beyond the observable universe, other universes may exist as well. The origins and histories can be seen in studies of physics, astronomy, and cosmology as well as works of literature, particularly in science fiction and comic books. In this hypothetical group of multiple universes, different fictions whose stories takes place in the same world(s) are brought together thanks to a crossover strategy that includes the use of transnarrative characters. For Hollywood, it supplies a blueprint of forming a potential number of properties and stories to merge unlike a traditional singular narrative approach. *Dr Strange: Multiverse of Madness* (Sam Raimi, 2022) carries on the programmatic narrative of the Marvel Cinematic Universe timeline and introduces the multiverse in the form of multiple television series and film. The film is a sequel that teams Doctor Strange with a mysterious teenage girl from his dreams who can travel across multiverses, to battle multiple threats, including alternate universe versions of himself, which threaten to wipe out millions across the multiverse. The events of the film converge with Wanda Maximoff, a member of the Avengers who also seeks to take advantage of the multiverse.

In the same year of its release, *Everything, Everywhere, All at Once* (The Daniels, 2022) tells a multiverse story amongst an Asian American family. The narrative is centered around Evelyn, an immigrant mother who runs a failing laundromat while overwhelmed by anxious feelings about her father's excessive expectations, an audit on the family business, and her perceived lack of success. Evelyn enters her narrative as consistently non extraordinary while Wanda has been established as a superhero, embodying exceptional powers but seeks to begin

return to her imagined domesticity. In comparison, both films feature multiverse narratives structured around maternal figures as they navigate between loss and exacting violence in response to their relationship with their children. These tales of alternative realities are centered on parenthood, and motherhood. Following the aftereffects of the COVID 19 pandemic, both films depict motherhood through the multiverse which interrupts Wanda and Evelyn's linear path.

Dr. Strange introduces Wanda directly after the events of *WandaVision*, in which Wanda casts projections of her husband and children after taking over the town of Westview.

WandaVision saw critical success as the show was self-reflexive about its own status as television in which Wanda plays out her alternate reality in the style of decade-defining TV shows. *WandaVision* offered a nuanced critique of loss, grief and abandonment, tying together complex trauma in what Jill Staufer refers to as "ethical loneliness." (9) Staufer offers this term when one's grief and loss are ignored or diminished, when society refuses to properly attest to both individual and collective suffering. *Multiverse of Madness* essentially reduces Wanda to the pathos of anger, a mother without her children willing to sacrifice everything to get them back. In her pursuit to reunite with her children she created in the bubble universe of Westview, a terrestrial (fantasy) world where she still has her partner, Vision—Wanda is now willing to kill hundreds, seen as a fair exchange to return to the reality she "deserves."

Everything, Everywhere, All at Once views the multiverse as a point of crisis that expresses multiplicity. Evelyn as the aging Asian immigrant is the protagonist and with her ordinary presence comes motherhood pit against individuated violence within the crisis. Where typically crisis in the blockbuster is seen as external or otherworldly, *Everything Everywhere* centralizes crisis as internal between Evelyn and her conflicting relationship with her daughter.

The crisis is between Evelyn's inability to understand her daughter's struggles, while Evelyn herself cannot manage her failing business and marriage. This move within the narrative departs from the dominant forms of the superhero blockbusters as the internal struggle between family and the mother/daughter relationship.

My emphasis on interpersonal relationships as a response to social crises is influenced by Virginia Held's *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global*. Whereas other moral theories demand impartiality above all, Held examines care as foundational to principles of virtue as it seeks to maintain relationships by contextualizing and promoting the well-being of care-givers and care-receivers in a network of social relations. It pictures society modeled after the relation between mother and child as the intention and goal of mothering is to give of one's care without obtaining a return of a self-interested kind. Through this framework, I analyze *Everything Everywhere's* presentation of mother / childcare as it challenges dominant methods of social dilemmas through interpersonal relations and reconciliation of mother / daughter.

In what follows, I look to the narrative and visual composition of the multiverse between *Everything, Everywhere, All at Once* and different scenes from *Doctor Strange: Multiverse of Madness*. I compare the different depictions of motherhood within their approaches to two different forms of melodrama conventions; the superhero blockbuster as a contemporary expression of sensation melodrama while the other wraps the multiverse around the internal conflict between mother and daughter, a maternal melodrama that never loses sight of its emotional core. In "Multiverse, Motherhood and Melodrama" I introduce the blockbuster's mobilizing of the multiverse and the symptoms of finding a way out through its visual composition of its action sequences. *Everything Everywhere* reconfigures stereotypes of model minority to articulate a vision of the Asian Immigrant as the new hero of the blockbuster. I

analyze the alternative choices of violence as seen through an emphasis of maternal care and interdependence. Through sequences that move away from the tropes of the blockbuster's acceptance of uncertain violence, the pivotal role of maternal care opens new possibilities of fighting crisis through reconciliation and reveals paths of redemption both in film and media and implicitly to the spectator.

Following "Multiverse, Motherhood and Melodrama," I look to what the multiverse proposes for Asian American identity in my second subsection, "Identity Affirming Multiverse." I analyze sequences from *Everything, Everywhere, All at Once* and how it utilizes the concept of the multiverse to challenge stereotypical portrayals of Asian Americans in film. Asian Americans were targeted during the COVID-19 outbreak in January 2020, fueling widespread fear—along with the rapid spread of misinformation. According to Stop AAPI Hate, more than 9,000 anti-Asian incidents have been reported since the beginning of the pandemic. The connections between the film's release and the pandemic cannot be ignored as the social and economic precarity of the outbreak is implicitly reflected in the film. The film's success prompted reports that Asian Americans had "arrived" after decades of marginalization in the public imagination and places the tumultuous disparity of Asian Americans since the pandemic against the backdrop of how well a film performs as a blockbuster. Unlike the MCU, *Everything, Everywhere, All at Once* reflects visions of Asian Americans beyond the widespread misinformation that took storm since the COVID 19 outbreak and, instead, embraces the multiverse in overcoming systemic differences and stretching the meaning of Asian American as wildly varied but connected by a shared identity.

MULTIVERSE, MOTHERHOOD, AND MELODRAMA

As stated in the introduction, the inherent threat of the multiverse lurks as an outside force that bends narratives and converging timelines together. The multiverse accentuates the external conflict between heroes and villains as seen in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) by expanding universes that take characters across points of crisis. The externality of the multiverse removes superheroes from their more terrestrial grounding while still leaving those in need of safety completely exposed and vulnerable to an even larger existential threat. In comparing *Multiverse of Madness* to *Everything, Everywhere, All at Once*, we find two depictions of motherhood that excavate two different approaches to the multiverse: one that externalizes social conflict, which it answers with individuated and exculpatory violence, and another that internalizes social conflict, finding strength in variance. In this section, I seek a precise understanding of both films responsible for their approaches to two different forms of melodrama conventions; the superhero blockbuster as a contemporary expression of sensation melodrama while the other wraps the multiverse around the internal conflict between mother and daughter, a maternal melodrama that never loses sight of its emotional core.

The first instance we see the external conflict between characters, motherhood and the multiverse, appears in Dr Strange's confrontation with Wanda Maximoff. Strange seeks Wanda's help in attempting to control the inherent threat of the multiverse only for Wanda to reveal her motive to manipulate the multiverse to her advantage after grieving the loss of her

children and her family. The setting of Wanda's home in the middle of an apple tree plantation slowly washes away into clouds of red to reveal Wanda's fractured psyche and aftereffects of her internal grief. The clouds of red and her fabricated setting becomes even grand in comparison to her terrestrial home of Westview in *WandaVision*. Both these settings are reconstructions of Wanda's internal suffering, but *Multiverse of Madness* further establishes Wanda's sinister nature as a result of losing her family. In response to Strange's motion of help, she says, "You break the rules and become a hero. I do it, and I become the enemy. That doesn't seem fair." This character shift suggests empathy and ambivalence in Wanda's internal struggles as seen differently in *WandaVision* – a show that explored Wanda's grief and loss in a community that refused to bear witness to both collective and individual suffering.

Following this confrontation between Wanda and Strange, the trope that *Multiverse* relies upon is that of the vengeful, destructive mother made manifest in Wanda. Dr. Strange and America Chavez are left as the only survivors of the attack on Kamra-Taj. Wanda possesses her "other self" in Westview, shambling after Dr. Strange and America Chavez covered in blood, animating the body of another. In Wanda's onslaught her body contorts in pain, terrifying both Strange and America Chavez, but signals Wanda as barely human and more monstrous. Here, Wanda is simultaneously the object and driver of horror. Often, horror presents women as monsters, depicting their monstrosity vis-à-vis motherhood. Their transgressions as monsters intervene in dominant forms. These monsters are presented as failed mothers and rather than adopting the role of woman as doting mother and caregiver, these women seek to gain more power, sometimes sacrificing their children in the process. The "archaic mother," a term film scholar, Barbara Creed uses to illustrate the demonized image of the monstrous feminine. This

monstrous-feminine trope is “constructed as a negative force—[and] is represented in her phantasmagoric aspects in many horror texts, particularly the science fiction film” (55). Creed challenges this patriarchal view in highlighting the lurking imagery of mother as the sole origin of life. These misconceptions of female sexuality and the connection between monstrosity and women’s reproductive bodily functions conjointly recovers the male gaze as its central focus. Here, the female character in horror becomes monstrous when they are robbed of their particularity or individuality, instead subsumed by tropes or stereotypes of the monstrous-feminine. Justifying her decision to kill Chavez, take her powers, and destroy anyone who attempts to stop her, Wanda tells us, again and again, “I’m not a monster. I’m a mother.” Wanda opposes her monstrous image, returning to her controlled fantasy while engaging in individuated violence under the aegis of her maternal image. We feel sympathetic towards Wanda’s internal suffering, but the multiverse’s role transforms Wanda as the villain of *Strange*’s narrative. In her pursuit to regain her family, proves to not only succumb to individuated violence but reflects Wanda’s exculpation and constructs her maternal image as a negative force. Wanda’s representation in *Multiverse of Madness* only serves to replicate the monstrous feminine archetype, that women’s entire sense of identity and moral rectitude comes from their relationship to motherhood, and that one of the greatest threats to society, and indeed the multiverse, is an unhinged mother.

Within the focused masculine identity of the superhero franchise, the genre of the woman’s film melodrama resurfaces as a provocative contention of a villainous image. Melodrama films derives from a subgenre of drama films that typically appeals to the overwrought, sentimental emotions of the spectator. They tend to use plots that often deal with crises of human emotion, failed romances or friendships, tragedy, emotional and physical

hardship. Significantly too, recent scholarship on film melodrama has gestured toward the superhero blockbuster. For Linda Williams, melodrama elicits “sympathy for the virtue of beset victims” and rehearses “the retrieval and staging of virtue through adversity and suffering” (15). Specifically, a sequence where Wanda possesses her alternate self begins with a point-of-view shot behind a set of stairs that goes unnoticed inside the alternate Wanda’s home. The point-of-view shot pushes Wanda and our gaze to creep behind the alternate version of Wanda as we intrude her domestic space; in turn, the shot elicits Wanda’s crawling, multiversal presence. Thrown back against the current of unneutral winds inside alternate Wanda’s home, this sequence offers an illustration of what film scholar Scott Ferguson argues about the post-1970s blockbuster’s reduction of “abstraction to the haecceity of an unsurpassable physics” (173). In his book *Declarations of Dependence*, Ferguson critiques the blockbuster physics that repress mediation through external material encounters and destruction. The aesthetic form of post 1970s blockbuster action suppresses the alternate Wanda’s movement, in which the sequence intercuts between a closeup shot of bowls flying across the room, while the alternate Wanda struggles to regain her balance. The imminent possession sequence features Wanda’s multiversal presence as an unnatural wind but takes shape in the form of an active camera converging with the imbalance of the temporal space. Here, the horror elements of the mise-en-scene, namely the flickering lights and overall dark tones of the house signal a change from familial safety to a seething uneasiness in tone and visuality. This aesthetic arrangement of movement and action not only delivers a nervous sensorium around the maternal figure and her surroundings - but presses them closely together, suppressing screen movement’s abstraction to the essence of the blockbuster’s physics.

Furthermore, this sequence's overall contracting experience around sensations of falling and impact, conducts the action blockbuster as an expression of sensation melodrama conventions. The sequence stagnates time and holds the frame at an angle, while the alternate Wanda struggles to find her balance. After she looks up at her kitchen window, her reflection reveals a sinister Wanda inside her terrestrial setting while simultaneously faded into the background outside of her home. In Wanda's possession, she slowly turns and walks to her children, breaking into tears in rejoining with her children. Even though they are not strictly *her* children, Wanda is able to feel something other than anger. In the moment where Wanda rejoins her children, the sequence is further defined by a mixture of pathos and action, though weight can be shown toward the sentimental (feminine) drama. Wanda's overwrought emotions are on display in a closeup shot revealing the sequence's impulses towards sensation melodrama conventions as she is reduced to individuated violence and rage. It reifies patriarchal ideas that women's emotions are unmanageable and dangerous, that their rage is out of place and inappropriate to an idealized domestic motherhood and caregiving role. From Wanda's closeup to a reverse shot of her children, each figure, including the spectator, suggests an overwhelming spatial compression between a demonized image of the mother enveloped in sensation melodramatic conventions.

Everything, Everywhere, All at Once intervenes in the superhero blockbuster by setting up an internal conflict between motherhood and work. Unlike the MCU's contraction towards violence from the beginning, *Everything, Everywhere*, instead focusses on a family drama that sets up the internal conflict and the detached unfamiliarity of an immigrant family before a spectacular multiverse breaks them apart. Both *Multiverse of Madness* and *Everything Everywhere* place their mothers within a multiverse story. Wanda's suffering

comes at the expense of losing her family and being a caregiver to her children. Evelyn on the other hand, still has her family but struggles to navigate between her familial responsibilities while keeping the family laundromat business running. Unlike the sole focus of the multiverse in the introduction to *Multiverse of Madness*, Evelyn's narrative sets up the family drama and social issues before the multiverse interrupts her domesticity. Each character of the Wang family goes through their own type of existential conflict. The introduction of the Wang family carries an uneasy tension built by a tracking shot of Evelyn's constant change of location from her living room to her laundromat, while her family tries to get her attention. The front door to Evelyn's home is a door to the laundromat that reads, "Employees only," suggesting that one must go through the business in order to get to their home. The sign prioritizes being an employee first, conforming towards dominant societal expectations of the hardworking immigrant, while family life becomes secondary. This imbalance between work first and family second, while struggling to uphold the dominant standards and tensions that immigrants face in their shared lived experience piece together the internal conflict necessary for the multiverse to break open.

Evelyn feels mentally and emotionally alone while she shares the same space with her husband and her daughter. The opening scene illustrates the family's struggle to connect with each other shown by the claustrophobic cinematography. Each character is framed at an uncomfortably intimate proximity in an already cramped house. While Evelyn sits at the center of table, we see her husband, framed away from the center, giving an impression of space and detachment. They are physically close to each other, but we are shown how distant they are from reaching a consensus. Her husband tries to get her attention, but in the opening scene, Evelyn refuses to look directly at him. He must physically turn her in her chair away

from her work and reassure her anxieties about her father's judgment of her. The shot cuts back to reveal more of the apartment, including a photo of Evelyn as a baby held up by her father. Despite Evelyn and her husband being out of focus, the shot quickly cuts back to a focused shot of her getting up and returning to her anxieties. The internal conflict between motherhood and her work sets up Evelyn's detachment from her mundanity while also building the overwhelming experience she dreams of escaping from. The internal conflict within Evelyn's family differs from Wanda's external conflict that places her in the terms of manipulating the multiverse in her introduction. Before we see the multiverse interrupt Evelyn's domesticity, the film lays out her maternal constraints and melodramatic conventions first.

We can describe the maternal melodrama as a subgenre that subjects a struggling mother (often single), who prioritizes work for their child but reveals a space of miscomprehension between them as they both suffer. These qualities are present in Evelyn's relationship to her daughter. In the same opening sequence where Evelyn walks away from her familial interruptions, crossing between her home and the laundromat, the visual composition suggests isolation between mother and daughter. When we first meet her daughter, Joy, she feels alienated from her mother both interpersonally and at the level of wanting her queerness to be recognized. When Joy tries to introduce her girlfriend, Becky, to her grandfather, Evelyn physically steps in front blocking both Joy and Becky out of the frame. Evelyn weaponizes Joy's struggles with Cantonese and rejects Joy's identity in place of revealing the truth to her grandfather. The internal conflict between mother and daughter positions Evelyn both as a physical and linguistic barrier. We can see from the lack of an honest and healthy communication often goes hand in hand with Evelyn's detached

relationship to her family. The melodramatic format allows the protagonist to work through their difficulties or surmount the problems with resolute endurance. We can use this format and the inherent threat of the multiverse to further identify how Evelyn becomes the hero of her narrative, reconciling with her traumas through collectivity and interdependence.

Along with the different depictions of maternity in their respective conflicts, we can compare the depiction of the multiverse and how it derives different outcomes for both women. In both films, Wanda and Evelyn similarly travel the multiverse through their minds, accessing their inner consciousness to their alternate selves. The scene where Wanda possesses her alternate self begins with a close-up shot that pans up from Wanda's face and zooms in above her head. The shot becomes a point-of-view that follows a red glow reflecting Wanda's fractured state of mind in her possession, she stays in her alternate self's body. *Everything, Everywhere* establishes the entry to the multiverse through the "verse jump," the ability to retrieve one's alternate self's skills while simultaneously being present in the mind of their multiversal consciousness. Evelyn's first verse jump places her in the setting of the IRS office where she brings her father and husband to their audit appointment. In between Evelyn's momentary mental absence from her mundane realism, the sequence highlights Evelyn's choice to experience traveling the multiverse. She follows steps to push a button on her Bluetooth device paired to her consciousness, sending her anywhere she chooses. In a closeup shot of Evelyn's closed eyes, her face narrows as the lens shifts mid-shot. The sequence briefly slows down time before the shot pushes Evelyn all the way back into a closet, revealing a cracked frame that places Evelyn simultaneously sitting in the auditing session and in the closet. Between the two entrances of their respective multiverse journeys, Wanda stays in the alternate world, possessing and manipulating the multiverse to

her intrusive advantage. The role of the multiverse extends Wanda's destructive path, reaffirming individuated violence through the monstrous-feminine. Meanwhile, Evelyn chooses her multiverse path to intrude on her domestic realism. Her response to the threat of the multiverse, reveals Evelyn's split between the multiverse and her reality. The role of the multiverse for Evelyn suggests multiplicity of self is not a hazard, but a way to expand one's potential.

In revealing Evelyn's multiplicity, the spectacular multiverse interrupts her domestic realism by placing the mother in a dangerous setting where blockbuster action is privileged over the maternal family drama. Evelyn and her family are due for an appointment with the IRS as her realism is reflective of her struggles to assimilate within American institutional standards. The relationship between the IRS agent and Evelyn demonstrates the hierarchical imbalance between dominant American institutions and foreign immigrants. The threat of failing to conform to institutions like the IRS reflects an immigrant realism that the multiverse interrupts and exaggerates to the degree of an action sequence between the IRS and Evelyn. The IRS agent, Diedre, leaps from the top of the stairwell to attack Evelyn in a sequence reminiscent of *The Matrix* and the shot of Morpheus flying down to Neo during their fight in the dojo. The homage to *The Matrix* borrows blockbuster aesthetics of bullet time, a visual effect used to slow down time during an action scene and pan around a subject.

As Evelyn faces Diedre, this moment extracts Evelyn's ability to verse jump, while also placing her as the action star fighting against an external threat. As a response to the exaggerated institutional violence, she verse jumps to a universe that reshapes her life path had she not chosen to leave with her husband. The action sequence switches between the more cinematic widescreen ratio of 2.39:1 to flashback sequences of Evelyn's alternate path

set in 4:3. The flashback sequences reflect a home movie aesthetic and explore Evelyn's path to stardom as a result of her leaving her husband. The scene plays like a send-up of wuxia kung-fu movies from the 1970s. Mixed with images of constructive editing in between Evelyn's montage sequence, this path takes after a wuxia story, which typically features a young male protagonist who experiences a tragedy – here, separating from her husband Waymond – and goes on to undertake several trials and tribulations to learn several forms of martial arts from various fighters. The film's multiverse reimagines this masculine visuality through Evelyn's montage sequence. By placing Evelyn as the focus of the wuxia story, it enables a woman to take on the agentive, powerful roles typically reserved for male characters in cinema. It reinstates the non-extraordinary figure, now multiply revealed as extraordinary through its celebration of its Asian cinema conscious forms.

The depiction of the multiverse derives different outcomes for Evelyn and differs from what we have seen in *Multiverse of Madness*. Wanda initiates violence in her sole drive to find a way back to her children in her imagined safe suburbia. Her rage becomes uncontrolled, and the multiverse only extends her destructive path. On the other hand, Evelyn takes on these abilities to fight Diedre, defending herself from the violent institutions that are set up to fail individuals like herself. The threat of tax fraud, a trickling fear that supersedes both education and personal integrity, is a test for the multilingual, “non-American” family to fail. The multiverse comes as a revelation that opens a path for Evelyn to defend herself against violent American institutions. As Evelyn defends herself, the multiverse reshapes her as powerful and expands her potential.

In conclusion, both narratives highlight their engagement with motherhood while revealing different outcomes for Wanda and Evelyn. The multiverse for each maternal figure

uncovers their strengths and abilities. Action in the *Multiverse of Madness* is centered around an externalized setting and conflict. The external conflict in Wanda's manipulation of the multiverse conditions individual action in extreme moral alignments that effectively ends in the demonized image of the maternal figure. Both films are responsible for their approaches to two different forms of melodrama conventions: the superhero blockbuster as a contemporary expression of sensation melodrama. Yet *Everything, Everywhere, All at Once* wraps the multiverse around the internal conflict between mother and daughter, a family melodrama which is interrupted by the spectacular multiverse. Here, the non-extraordinary figure comes to be multiply revealed as extraordinary and highlights Evelyn's embrace of the multiverse. The multiverse opens opportunities for the Asian American maternal figure to retell and reconstruct their excellence by embracing variance.

IDENTITY AFFIRMING MULTIVERSE

In addition to my analysis of the convergence between the multiverse and motherhood, *Everything, Everywhere, All at Once* utilizes the concept of the multiverse to challenge stereotypical portrayals of Asian Americans in film. By highlighting Evelyn's "failures" in her domestic life, her reluctant refusal to conform to harmful patriarchal and racist structures challenges the model minority myth. The experience of being Asian in the United States is rigidly defined by a framework of success and failure. Asian American studies scholar erin Khuê Ninh argues in "Passing for Perfect: College Impostors and Other Model Minorities", that the term "model minority" refers to a framework that has been internalized even by those who attempt to resist its social impacts (276). In this section, I argue that the multiverse disrupts Evelyn's perceived lack of success, highlighting her failures to resist the model minority and finds strength in variance through the film's exploration of Asian American identity. Through the film's engagement with motherhood, collective action and care opposes essentialized identity as the multiverse actively works to contest dominant racist representations by stressing cultural differences.

In her perceived lack of success, the non-extraordinary figure of Evelyn is played by Michelle Yeoh, a global icon of Chinese-U.S. media. Yeoh has been a major star for decades—she was a giant in the golden age of Hong Kong action cinema, starring in dozens of films and earning a reputation for executing daring stunts. Like Elvis in *Jailhouse Rock*, the film presents an extraordinary figure playing a seemingly non-extraordinary figure, only to be (multiply) revealed as extraordinary. In Evelyn's verse jump to defend herself against

the IRS agent, and in turn, the dominant structures that are oppressively confining, she enters a universe that celebrates her as a movie star like Michelle Yeoh. The sequence cuts between real-life, red-carpet footage of Yeoh in various movie premieres, revealing Evelyn as extraordinary. Her success comes at the expense of leaving her husband when she says, “saw a life without him; it was beautiful.” Here, the multiverse shows Evelyn’s path away from her domestic life, mirroring the extraordinary path to stardom that Michelle Yeoh has experienced. Evelyn’s initial excursion into the multiverse confirms her life would have been better without her husband. In her alternate path of leaving her husband, the film suggests the multiverse’s ability to reimagine the departure from confining relationships, allowing Evelyn to explore her multiple opportunities through variance. By showing a path that excludes structures that have historically suppressed women’s ambitions, the multiverse reimagines success and expands Evelyn’s identity as more than just someone’s wife. The film’s self-reflexive multiverse challenges Evelyn’s own notions of success and what she can achieve. Yeoh’s presence as both an action star playing a non-extraordinary figure that resurfaces her as extraordinary through the multiverse suggests that Evelyn sees her inner potential and opens herself up to new possibilities.

Evelyn embodies the type of mundane existential despair, prioritizing the laundromat business and being the caregiver for her family, while she is keenly aware of what she has not accomplished. Evelyn’s perceived lack of success points towards the attempt to uphold the standards of the model minority myth, revealing the pressures to achieve excellence. The term “model minority” refers to a minority group, often Asian Americans, stereotypically perceived as academically, economically, and culturally more successful than other racial groups. The model minority myth bolsters the illusion that racism is free of critique in the

United States. It promotes the notion of the United States as a transcendent society that accords equal opportunity to all, regardless of race, class, gender, or sexual orientation, and equitably rewards individual hard work and labor through economic upward mobility. According to this incorrect notion, those who fall behind do so because of their own poor choices. Earlier in the film, Evelyn reassures herself that her “English is good.” This exchange happens privately between herself and her daughter whilst prepping for the night’s family dinner. This moment highlights an internal anxiety in Evelyn who feels she must prove her defiance to her immigrant status, suggesting her struggle to assimilate to American culture which structured her (and other groups’) exclusion.

The aftermath of Evelyn’s denial of Joy’s queer identity results in a sequence that centers their challenging relation and the tipping point of their internal conflict. The exterior setting of the laundromat parking lot opens their temporal space for one last reflection of honesty between mother and daughter. Evelyn is centered in the frame while Joy is placed in the corner of the shot, which suggests a power imbalance between the two figures. This moment for intimate reflection in hopes to connect with her daughter worsens when Evelyn reminds Joy that she needs to eat healthier, commenting on her body image. The experience of the Asian American mother through Evelyn suggests the complications between being honest with her daughter while neglecting to see past her flaws to accept her daughter as she is. Recent discussions in Asian American media and culture have focused on the role of the “tiger mom” in the success of Asian American youth. For instance, Asian American studies scholars like Jennifer Lee and Min Zhou have suggested that Asian American culture fosters obedience to parents and elders creating an environment of high achievement as a result of this “tiger” parenting (164). In the case of Evelyn, her blunt and direct characteristic fills a

type of tiger mom. However, the sequence highlights Joy's disappointment in her mother, and values their conflict as painful and in need of reconciliation. The stereotype of the tiger mom negates the considerable diversity and heterogeneity of Asian Americans. While the film initially displays Evelyn in a similar way, the multiverse breaks open her linear path in defying the limitations and damaging representations of the tiger mom stereotype.

In Lisa Lowe's study of heterogeneity, hybridity, and multiplicity, she offers these terms as tools to understand Asian American Differences that challenge dominant discussions of authenticity and what it means to "be" Asian American. She argues for the profound generativity of the concept of difference in cultural politics. She defines "heterogeneity" as the pluralism within the group of Asian Americans; "hybridity" as cultural intermixing due to (often involuntary) histories; and "multiplicity" as the positioning of everyone along multiple axes of power (67). By alternatively defining Asian American racial constructions and its cultures through the term's heterogeneity, hybridity, and multiplicity, Lowe questions the orientalist binaries that historically constricted considerations of Asian American culture. By the same token, these terms characterize Evelyn as she begins to understand herself better with dueling versions of her identity in professions that are traditionally associated with Asian culture. The value of the spectacular multiverse affirms itself as a metaphor for unlocking her identities but leads Evelyn in her choice to embrace collective care and dependence. In another universe, Evelyn chooses to stay with her father and eventually becomes a classically trained opera singer. This version of Evelyn finds success without ever immigrating to the United States, with her previously detached father, by her side. In this renewed relation between father and daughter, Evelyn can achieve her dreams of finding success through her talents while keeping her father close to her. This

alternate life path signifies dependence and trust between Evelyn and her father; a characteristic that is absent in Evelyn's own relation to her father, who constantly reminds her of her failures. By highlighting her different life paths, Evelyn comes to understand her gradual reliance on caring, parental relations and her own heterogeneity, defying the harmful representation of the tiger mom stereotype.

Evelyn uncovers her infinite potential as the multiverse reveals her different talents in her fulfilled alternate lives. By leaving her husband to become a global action star or staying with her father to become a renowned opera singer – the multiverse reveals her alternate paths returning a notion of success, uncovering more than what she experienced and felt as a mother. However, the Evelyn who began her multiverse journey is due to resolve her internal conflict between her family, namely reconciling with her daughter. The film's final note on the multiverse and Evelyn's dueling multiplicity brings into view her reliance on internality and collective care through the final reconciliation between herself and her daughter. Care ethics maintains that morals are centered on interpersonal relationships and care as a virtue. Virginia Held specifically avoids calling it a feeling but rather sticks to describing it as, "work" or "practice" that reconceptualizes the dichotomy of public and private between persons as interdependent and not "self-sufficient" or "individualistic." Held describes the contrast in its value such as, "trust, solidarity, and mutual concern, and empathetic responsiveness" (21). We can understand *Everything Everywhere All at Once's* narrative restructuring of the multiverse that convenes interdependence and collective care through its engagement with motherhood.

The final sequence breaks away from the cinematic spectacle of the multiverse and reintroduces a new Evelyn back to her realism and conflict with her daughter. The sequence

cuts from the cinematic widescreen ratio of 2.39:1 to the standard 1.85:1, the aspect ratio with which the family drama began. The sequence and the film circles back to the laundromat parking lot. Evelyn and her daughter, Joy, are the only figures in focus in a shot that reveals an out-of-focus parking lot. The visual composition suggests their unbroken intimate space, excluding any external interference. Evelyn unloads her frustrations on Joy but acknowledges that of all the places she could be, she will always want to be with her daughter. Despite all the versions of Joy that could be perfect, Evelyn accepts her daughter as her daughter, just as she accepts her current path against all alternate versions. In Evelyn's recognition of her own excessive striving and obstinance toward her daughter, the multiverse interrupts her reality, only to lead Evelyn back to her reality. Evelyn blocks out the multiversal possibilities of how things could be for her individual aspirations, choosing to center herself in the present by embracing dependence and creating meaning and purpose with her daughter. Furthermore, the reconciliation between Evelyn and her daughter as reflection of her vulnerability and dependence differs to the depiction of maternity in *Wanda* and the multiverse. Action in the *Multiverse of Madness* is centered around an externalized setting and conflict. The external conflict in Wanda's manipulation of the multiverse conditions individual action in extreme moral alignments that effectively ends in the demonized image of the maternal figure. In both the introduction of Dr. Strange and in Wanda's individuation, every version of these characters ignores collective or team-based action in their reliance of taking advantage of a multiverse through their individuated action. The multiverse becomes a manipulated space that grows apart from internality and perpetuates the absence of multiplicity within the shared multiverse.

CONCLUSION

Just as *Multiverse of Madness* illustrates the demonized monstrous-feminine trope in Wanda, Evelyn defies the dominant representations of the “tiger mom” stereotype and the demonized image of the Asian American mother through her engagement with collectivity and interdependence. At the film’s conclusion, the sequence reveals Evelyn’s embrace of her non-perfect life path above all other alternate universes. Evelyn accepts her reality in which she reshapes meaning and purpose with her daughter, revealing a trusting and vulnerable union between them. In the film’s conclusion, neither Evelyn nor Joy had to let go of their identity or their values and instead learned to repair their relationship. This moment is a radical departure from dominant representations of Asian American women as simple or subservient. Instead, Evelyn and Joy’s reconciliation inspires a futurity for spectators to embrace loved ones through vulnerability and collective care. The reliance on interdependence in Evelyn’s repaired relationship critiques the harmful representation Asian Americans and immigrants faced during the COVID-19 pandemic. The aftermath of the pandemic saw widespread misinformation spread across media that led to racially motivated attacks against people of Asian and Pacific Island descent being treated as scapegoats solely based on their race.

The film is inextricably tied to the COVID-19 pandemic - a time period which left people contemplating their own internal conflicts, experiencing the weight of personal trauma. Evelyn in her maternity represents a specific demographic, routinely marginalized in stereotypes of silence and subservience. The film emphasizes Evelyn’s internal conflict in

her failures of upholding her family while being contracted to hierarchical structures that, in turn, fail individuals like her. The spectacular multiverse, as opposed to the sensation spectacle of the MCU's multiverse, uncovers a more reflexive viewing that encourages multiplicity and heterogeneity towards the Asian American image. *Everything, Everywhere's* multiverse depiction of Asian American culture answers what Lowe calls a "two-fold argument," in which multiplicity and heterogenic difference disrupts the hegemonic relations between "dominant" and "minority" positions (72). The film sets a seemingly non-extraordinary figure amongst her own family drama, only to be revealed as extraordinary through a spectacular multiverse.

The multiverse disrupts Evelyn's perceived lack of success, highlighting her non-extraordinary character as strong willed in resisting to conform to dominant stereotypes such as "model minority" and "tiger mom." The film finds strength in vulnerability and dependence through the film's exploration of alternate passages of Evelyn's life, reflecting multiple avenues celebrating Asian American identity. Through the film's engagement with motherhood, collective action, and care, it opposes essentialized identity as the multiverse actively works to contest dominant racist representations of Asian American women and immigrants. It highlights that, through variance, the outcomes of her multiverse journey led her to accept her present moment, showing vulnerability towards her daughter and encouraging caring relations that come in the form of reconciliation. As opposed to the MCU's multiverse in which its own essentialized identity evinces externality, individuation, and exculpation, *Everything Everywhere All at Once's* multiverse produces a pluralistic

Asian American culture that actively works to contest dominant/racist representations by stressing cultural differences.

I highlight this intervention of the multiverse not only to celebrate its expansion of racial identities, but rather to interrupt histories that narrate Asian American media representation as moving from stereotype and / or occlusion in the past to self-representation, authenticity, and visibility in the present. This is not to invalidate histories and structures of racism that unequivocally persist. It is, rather, an attempt to solidify the histories of racialized media representation in ushering new forms of representation that the multiverse films grant for the Asian American image. More specifically, I hope that my analysis of the multiverse's role in refiguring Asian Americans can help us think about, first, what it means to desire accurate representation in popular culture, and second, the consequences of associating such claims to realism with liberal narratives of feminist progress and futurity.

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