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Multi-universal and Multi-faceted: *EEAO*

In a time of surface-level changes in Hollywood representation, *Everything Everywhere All At Once* is distinct for its nuanced portrayal of Asian-Americans. Despite continual efforts toward racial inclusivity and cultural competence, Hollywood's tendency toward certain thematic tropes has prevented the creation of nuanced and three-dimensional BIPOC characters. For Asian-Americans, this means Orientalist teachings of the past are continually reproduced in contemporary portrayals of Asian-Americans in Western media. Orientalist tropes curse Asian-American narratives to focus on second-generation immigrant protagonists whose lives are antagonized by their "backward" first-generation parents' perpetually-archaic beliefs, effectively establishing their Asian-ness as other-ness; *Everything Everywhere All At Once* (*EEAAO*) circumvents this Orientalist trope and its resulting dehumanization of Asians by centering the story's narrative around Evelyn, her struggle with generational trauma and her eventual emotional growth.

Orientalism in film feeds off a racist history that establishes Asians as backward and overly-traditional peoples, marking them an easily dehumanized "other." As more Chinese immigrants flooded into the U.S., national panic regarding immigration and its effect culminated in the passing of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, banning Chinese immigrants for ten years. As Erica Lee writes in her article "The Chinese Exclusion Act," "[The Act racialized] Chinese immigrants as permanently alien, threatening, and inferior on the basis of their race" (Lee 38).

By narrativizing them as "permanently alien" and "inferior," the exclusion of Chinese immigrants could be justified as both reasonable and necessary, effectively marking them as a perpetual "other" within the U.S. that must be naturalized before being considered a true American. The racialization of Chinese immigrants also supports Professor Chris Finley's description of Orientalist beliefs, stating "[Orientalism] makes it seem that people exist in the past, that they don't exist within reason, and that people need to be naturalized" (Lecture on Orientalism). Asian-Americans are forever frozen in an archaic image of traditionalism and otherness.

Unlike most Hollywood productions, *EEAAO*'s unique take on Asian-American narrative avoids reproducing these long-lasting problematic views through its plot. The other-ing of Chinese-Americans in history has been reflected in the common narrative trope of second-generation kids who must forsake their first-generation immigrant parents in their search for friendship or acceptance in America. This trope can be seen anywhere in popular media, from *Fresh Off the Boat*, where Eddie is regularly antagonized by his Chinese mother, to *Gilmore Girls*, where Lane and her mother are constantly fighting over differing morals. As *Slaying the Dragon: Reloaded* critiques, "If [characters] pretend they're white, and erase all of their Asian pasts [. . .] then they are an equal [. . .] they are full human beings" (Kim). This repetitive plot point implies the main character's Asian-ness is an ailment that must be overcome by forsaking their own culture and by buying into the belief that their first-gen parents are unreasonable antagonists. However, *EEAAO* avoids this trope by presenting Evelyn, a first-generation American, as the main protagonist. Additionally, Evelyn and her daughter, Joy, seem to equally antagonize each other. The true heart of the conflict in *EEAAO* is Evelyn and Joy's inability to communicate with each other. Through Evelyn's tireless attempts to save Joy's alternate self,

Jobu Tupaki, the audience understands Evelyn loves Joy although she does not understand her. Through Joy's angst and Jobu Tupaki's ultimate plan to descend into the Everything Bagel with Evelyn, the audience understands Joy does not see Evelyn as a villain, but rather, wants her comfort. Although there is a mild disconnect between Joy and her heritage as a result of her second-gen upbringing, Joy never intentionally forsakes her Chinese heritage. In fact, Joy makes active efforts to introduce her white girlfriend to her Asian family's traditions and quirks, such as when Joy attempts to introduce Becky to her grandfather in Cantonese. Although small, these details significantly avoid recreating Orientalist beliefs of Western superiority over the East. As specified in *Slaying the Dragon: Reloaded*, Orientalist views dictate the belief that "Asian women need to be saved from the East by the West. The East is evil and threatening and must be destroyed." (Kim). Joy and Becky's healthy interracial relationship dispels the myth that Joy would ever need to be "saved" from her Eastern heritage. Additionally, *EEAAO* manages to resist the second-gen versus first-gen trope altogether, avoiding the binary concept that one generation must be correct over the other. Instead, Evelyn and Joy are both at fault for their problems, and ultimately, they are both responsible for the resolution of their problems. In Eve Tuck's article, "Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities," Tuck writes about the differences between damaging and desirable narratives. She writes, "Damage-centered research is a pathologizing approach in which oppression singularly defines a community" (Tuck 413). Alternatively, "Desire-based research is concerned with understanding complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives" (Tuck 416). When the same binary plot-point of how a second-generation Asian-American has been damaged by their culture is told and retold through film, the racist and Orientalist views of the past trickle further into our contemporary perceptions of Asian-Americans. Non-Asian and Asian-Americans alike internalize the message that there is

something inherently wrong with Asian culture, forcing them into a never-ending cycle of only ever acknowledging how a lack of assimilation has been a detriment. However, *EEAAO* represents a contrastingly positive and hopeful desire-based representation of Asian-Americans. In acknowledging the way that both Evelyn and Joy's stories and relationships benefit from their cultural connection, they no longer retell a narrative of damage by their Chinese heritage, but instead, of how their stories are made more complex and sincere by it.

EEAAO's centering of Evelyn's first-generation narrative also aids the film in providing a nuanced and complex understanding of Evelyn's character. Historical representations of Asian-Americans in film have long lacked refinement, resulting in two-dimensional stereotypes. For Asian women in particular, these stereotypes have pigeon-holed them in either the role of the "Dragon Lady" or the "Lotus Blossom." Hanying Wang states in their article, "Portrayals of Chinese Women's Images in Hollywood," "Eastern women in Hollywood movies are always depicted either as a "Dragon Lady," a threatening image; or a "[Lotus Blossom]," a submissive image. There are only binaries, no middle ground" (Wang 87). These images are created and recreated with storylines that involve straight-faced, cold-hearted villainesses, or conversely, quiet, weak girls in need of perpetual saving. "Dragon Lady" and "Lotus Blossom" characters are impossible to empathize with because they lack depth and character development. Their actions exist within the vacuum of belief that Asian-ness is other-ness and unreasonable. This is why *EEAAO*'s focus on Evelyn's backstory and actions is so important. Although Evelyn is a truly flawed character, the audience feels a distinct empathy for her and her choices because Evelyn's character has depth, a capacity for growth. In the opening scene, a forward zoom closes in on Evelyn as she sits at the dinner table with stacks of tax forms. The music grows louder, there is food on the stove, and her husband adds to the chaos by interrupting her work. The

tumultuous environment makes the audience empathize with Evelyn when she later snaps at Joy. Although Joy's disappointment when Evelyn ignores her questions is understandable, the audience feels more empathy for Evelyn. Her preoccupied nature is a natural result of the responsibilities she holds for the sake of her family. Her tough exterior, without nuance, can be easily mistaken for another rendition of the cold-hearted "Dragon Lady," however, given the complexities of her work environment and family life, the audience views her as a caring yet overwhelmed mother. Even Evelyn's evolving generational relationships with her own father, Gong-Gong, and her daughter, Joy, add to her character. In Laura Zornosa's article in the New York Times, Zornosa analyzes *EEAAO*'s representation of generational trauma. Zornosa notes, "Trauma can shrink the imagination [. . .] if your main reference points for life's possibilities emerged out of traumatic experiences. To heal, we need to be able to see farther than what we've known and been exposed to" (Zornosa). Although first-gen immigrant parents are often negatively portrayed in film, their character flaws are never given the context of the trauma they may have endured in the process of immigrating. *EEAAO* avoids this two-dimensional representation by providing context to Evelyn's past. When a younger Evelyn first pursued her dreams of moving to America with her husband Waymond, Gong-Gong emotionally abandoned Evelyn. Since then, Evelyn has been determined to impress Gong-Gong. The poignant flash-back scenes depicting a young Evelyn looking back to her stoic father as she leaves her family home, to the scene of a pregnant Evelyn sitting alone as her father declines her calls, allow the audience to empathize with the traumas Evelyn endured in her youth. These emotional scenes establish the generational trauma that informs Evelyn's actions and reactions. With the pressure of Gong-Gong's presence, Evelyn is resistant toward letting him know the laundromat is being audited and she cuts off Joy's introduction of Becky, instead introducing Becky as Joy's "good

friend" rather than her girlfriend. Although frustrating to watch, the audience never finds her actions incomprehensible. When Evelyn finally recognizes how her own trauma with her father has haunted her relationship with Joy, she tells Gong-Gong, "I am no longer willing to do to my daughter what you did to me. [. . .] It's okay if you are not proud of me, because I finally am" (Kim). Followed by a tearful heart-to-heart with Joy, Evelyn shows a clear determination to not repeat Gong-Gong's mistakes. The narrative's focus on Evelyn's generational traumas, her determination to better her relationship with Joy, and her eventual growth, all culminate in a nuanced and complex understanding of Evelyn; Evelyn is never presented as unloving, nor is she presented as unlovable. She is simply human, capable of making mistakes, but also capable of redeeming herself.

Everything Everywhere All at Once sets itself apart from the vast majority of Hollywood films that claim to represent the Asian-American experience. Whereas other productions continually, although sometimes unknowingly, reproduce a history of Orientalist and racist notions that have proven harmful to Asian-Americans, *Everything Everywhere All at Once* makes active efforts to either avoid or dispel those same notions. The unique plot and storytelling style, the nuanced narrative of Evelyn, and the hopeful tone, all contribute to why the film is not only critically acclaimed, but also so popular amongst Asian-American audiences. The film is relatable and hopeful in a way that other "Asian-American" stories in Hollywood are not, and teaches a lesson in how desirable representations of healing, of culture, and of love, can be more important than recreating hurtful stereotypes.

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