

Chapman University

Chapman University Digital Commons

Film Studies (MA) Theses

Dissertations and Theses

Spring 5-2023

Balancing Multiple Worlds: The Multiverse and the Fractured Asian American Experience in *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022)

Austin Kang

Chapman University, auskang@chapman.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/film_studies_theses



Part of the [Film and Media Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Kang, Austin. "Balancing Multiple Worlds: The Multiverse and the Fractured Asian American Experience in *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022)." Master's Thesis, Chapman University, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.36837/chapman.000478>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Dissertations and Theses at Chapman University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Film Studies (MA) Theses by an authorized administrator of Chapman University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact laughtin@chapman.edu.

**Balancing Multiple Worlds: The Multiverse and the
Fractured Asian American Experience in
Everything Everywhere All at Once (2022)**

A Thesis by

Austin Kang

Chapman University

Orange, CA

Dodge College of Film and Media Arts

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Film Studies

May 2023

Committee in charge:

Nam Lee, Ph.D., Chair

Federico Pacchioni, Ph.D.

Stephanie Takaragawa, Ph.D.

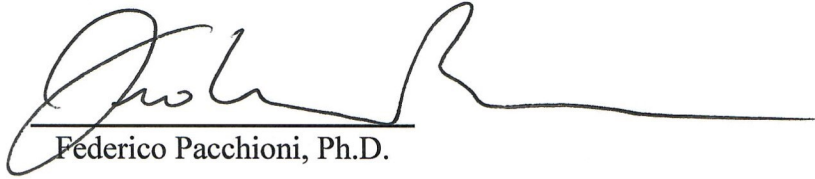


CHAPMAN UNIVERSITY
DODGE
COLLEGE
OF FILM AND MEDIA ARTS

The thesis of Austin Kang is approved.



Nam Lee, Ph.D., Chair



Federico Pacchioni, Ph.D.



Stephanie Takaragawa, Ph.D.

April 2023

Balancing Multiple Worlds: The Multiverse and the Fractured Asian
American Experience in
Everything Everywhere All At Once (2022)

Copyright © 2023

by Austin Kang

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to express my gratitude to my thesis chair, Dr. Nam Lee, for her unending support in both the writing of this thesis and my experience as a film scholar who once studied chemistry. My thesis and time as a graduate student would not be what they are without her care and resourceful perspectives. Second, I am deeply indebted to my time in chemistry as well as the thinkers that have substantiated my love of film, all of which becomes personally amalgamated in this thesis. I am also thankful to my second readers Dr. Federico Pacchioni and Dr. Stephanie Takaragawa for their sincerity in pondering and discussing my thesis.

Above all, this work is humbly dedicated in loving memory to my Korean American family, my partner, and my Asian American community. I can never fully express my love and care for them, but I hope, through this thesis, that they know I see them or that they are seen. I could not have written this thesis without my personal understanding of and love for my own family and community.

Thank you all.

ABSTRACT

Balancing Multiple Worlds: The Multiverse and the Fractured Asian American Experience in

Everything Everywhere All at Once (2022)

by Austin Kang

This thesis examines the ways in which the 2022 film *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022) employs the philosophical ideas concomitant with the multiverse hypothesis in order to narrate an emotionally poignant, yet somewhat typical story about a multi-generational Asian American family. This thesis argues that the film uses its characters as vehicles to not only illustrate the multilayered nature of Asian American realities through the allegory of “auto verse-jumping” across the multiverse, but also to philosophically contemplate and respond to the existence of the multiverse via its presentation of conceptual parallels. The film employs the hypothetical existence of the multiverse—the multiverse hypothesis—as a means to delve into the Asian American immigrant experience, focusing specifically on Evelyn and Joy as representations of the first- and second-generation Asian American experiences. These characters are intrinsically tied to the philosophies of nihilism, free-will/determinism as seen through the lens of Leibniz’s “Best of All Possible Worlds,” and Taoism. Within this framework, this thesis underscores the significance of the aesthetics and iconography that present the synergy between the multiverse experiences and the Asian American in-betweenness: the fluctuations across different aspect ratios to present alternative universes; a highly stylized form of split screen to express fragmented consciousness; the use of diverse Chinese dialects to signify generational differences, and the significance of the icons attributed to Evelyn (googly eye), Joy (everything bagel), and Waymond (cookie).

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
ABSTRACT.....	v
1 INTRODUCTION: EVERYTHING EVERYWHERE ALL AT ONCE AS A MULTIVERSE FILM ABOUT ASIAN AMERICANS.....	1
2 THE MULTIVERSE HYPOTHESIS AND EVERYTHING EVERYWHERE ALL AT ONCE.....	4
3 EMBODYING ASIAN AMERICAN INTRACULTURAL AND INTERGENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES: THE IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE AND THE SELF-HATING ASIAN	9
4 CONFRONTING THE MULTIVERSE: NIHILISM AS “ASIAN AMERICAN PESSIMISM”	25
5 CONCLUSION: THE GOOGLY EYES (RED PILL) OR THE BAGEL (BLUE PILL)	45
REFERENCES.....	47

1 Introduction: Everything Everywhere All at Once as a Multiverse Film About Asian Americans

As a concept, variations of the ideas regarding the multiverse, e.g. alternate realities based on choice-driven events, have been around for centuries. In the cinema, the multiverse hypothesis has been employed without either unique or substantial narrative significance or philosophical contemplations of the theory itself, and the concepts regarding time travel and the multiverse have been intertwined or conflated. A quick Google search on movies about the multiverse will undoubtedly offer results that include films about time travel. Depictions of the multiverse are generally intertwined with plots involving time travel, the two of which may be independent phenomena scientifically. Multiverse and/or time travel films tend to have narratives centered around cosmic events and/or technological discoveries, which may alter the characters' sense of time and, more rarely, of individuality, identity, and reality.

While most multiverse movies, such as Paul W.S. Anderson's *Event Horizon* (1997), James Wong's *The One* (2001), and Sam Raimi's *Doctor Strange: Madness of the Multiverse* (2022), present the ineffability of the multi/universe as an indifferent construct and thereby utilize multiverse concepts merely as a conceptual starting point for the film, the Daniels' *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022) contemplates the existence of the multiverse in terms of Asian American realities, rooting the cold, scientific perception of the universe within human emotion relating to personal identity, in a vein similar to that of *Another Earth* (Mike Cahill, 2011). In doing so, *Everything Everywhere All at Once* utilizes the multiverse hypothesis to not only tell a story of Asian Americans centered around choice and fragmentation, but also communicate how the existence of the multiverse may corroborate and/or interrogate human

existence and knowledge. The film therefore explores human identity and reality in terms of both the racialized bicultural identity of Asian Americans and humanity writ large, and it grounds the generally scientific perceptions of an apathetic universe through its characters, where further innovations in the multiverse hypothesis bring them and humanity closer to understanding the nature of the universe(s) and the interaction of the physical matter within it.

In this thesis, I examine how *Everything Everywhere All at Once* employs the philosophical ideas concomitant with the multiverse hypothesis in order to express an emotionally rich, yet somewhat typical story about a multi-generational Asian American family. I argue that the film uses its characters as vehicles not only to relate the experience of “auto-verse-jumping” across the multiverse as an allegory of the multilayered nature of Asian American experiences and realities, but also to philosophically contemplate and react to the existence of the multiverse through its presentation of conceptual parallels.

First, I analyze the film’s representation of the Asian American experience by scrutinizing the characterization of the Wang family, detailing the specificities of their respective cultures and relative upbringings. Additionally, I place it in the context of Asian American history, examining how such representations within these relationships are negotiated and get extended to greater collective preoccupations of American culture, particularly through Joy (Stephanie Hsu). Second, I then interweave their narratives with the philosophies of Gottfried Leibnitz’s Best Possible World and Friedrich Nietzsche’s active nihilism, as I discuss the characters Evelyn (Michelle Yeoh) and Joy respectively. These philosophies are useful as they are a large portion of the philosophical discourse that contemplates the possibility of a multiverse and the meaning of its existence to human identity and reality, which for Evelyn and Joy becomes so insignificant and obliterated in the face of the multiverse. I then discuss the

significance of kung fu and its driving philosophy Taoism in relation to the Wang family's newfound experiences with the multiverse in the context of the Everett or Many-Worlds Interpretation (MWI) of quantum mechanics.¹

Overall, I explore how the film employs the hypothetical existence of the multiverse—the multiverse hypothesis—in order to contemplate the Asian American immigrant experience, and I aim to analyze Evelyn and Joy specifically in terms of the first-generation and second-generation Asian American and tie them to the philosophies of nihilism, free-will/determinism, and Taoism. Within these contexts, I also highlight the significance of the aesthetics and iconography that present the synergy between the experiences of the multiverse and Asian American in-betweenness: the fluctuations across different aspect ratios to present alternative universes; a highly stylized form of split screen to express fragmented consciousness; different Chinese dialects to denote generational differences, and the significance of the icons attached to Evelyn (googly eye), Joy (everything bagel), and Waymond (cookie).

¹ The many-worlds interpretation asserts that there is no wave function collapse. In consequence, all possible quantum measurements are thus realized and definitively possible in some other world or universe. Methods for measuring the quantum states of human consciousness have yet to be discovered. MWI also accounts for subjective experience of wave function collapse.

2 The Multiverse Hypothesis and Everything Everywhere All at Once

In the cinema, science fiction has been employed to offer an imagining of alternative futures and/or worlds that closely imitate our own but have been severely impacted by a technological innovation that has yet to be pragmatically utilized or discovered by human beings.² These films tend to scrutinize humanity, projecting the evolution of certain cultural practices and questioning the identity and reality of humanity's future, very similarly to *Everything Everywhere All at Once*. For example, in predicting the genesis of AI, the Wachowski's *The Matrix* (2000) contemplates the devolution of human existence as it struggles to survive against the new species it created, commenting on humanity's need for belief and self-understanding in the face of uncertain reality, perception, and self-preservation. Bong Joon Ho's commentary on climate change in *Snowpiercer* (2014) begins with the release of a new chemical into the atmosphere intended to heal the ozone layer but instead masks the earth from the sun; a man-made global ice age then forces the surviving humans onto an immortal train, the system in which the humans must now choose how to ethically survive in Foucault's biopolitical anthropocene.³ And traveling through space via a wormhole is not just a theory in Christopher Nolan's *Interstellar* (2015), as humanity tries to find a new earth after destroying the planet they

² Steven M. Sanders, "An Introduction of the Philosophy of Science Fiction Film," in *The Philosophy of Science Fiction Film*, ed. Steven M. Sanders (University Press of Kentucky, 2008), 1-18. In this three part anthology, Sanders compiles essays that examine the various philosophies of specific sci-fi films. Although the philosophies of my thesis would be relevant to all three parts, the aspects of the multiverse I discuss are most relevant to part one "Enigmas of Identity and Agency" in which the five authors discuss the nature of personal identity, moral agency, and what it means to be human.

³ G. Andersen & Nielsen, E. B., "Biopolitics in the Anthropocene: On the Invention of Future Biopolitics in *Snowpiercer*, *Elysium*, and *Interstellar*," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 51, no. 3 (June 2018), 615-634. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jpcu.12689>

were born on, forcing them to rethink space, time, and, most importantly, gravity and reconsider if humanity belongs on Earth to its end.

The multiverse hypothesis is the central topic of my analysis of *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, a philosophical science fiction comedy centered around the notions of chance, free-will, and identity. Theories about time travel and the multiverse can be intertwined or completely distinct. Understandably, these theories can be extremely puzzling, hence the need to distinguish the multiverse perspective that grounds my discussion.

In the philosophy of the multiverse hypothesis, a “world” is perceived on a much grander scale, wherein a world is conceptualized as a *collection* of one or more simple universes. A simple universe contains a cosmic system like our own.⁴ Furthermore, there is potentially a limitless number of worlds. In other words, there may exist an infinite number of worlds that contain one or more simple universes. Each of these worlds is considered on various scales, limited by human perception and its understanding of time and the natural world. Thus, at times in this thesis, multiverse is used to reference the term world, such that there is a limitless number of multiverses as well, and that *a* world is one multiverse. However, my discussion will not extend to an infinite number of worlds but focused on one multiverse as presented in the film.

In addition, the “multiverse” is considered, in general, one hypothesis of the three theories of time travel, distinct from the “dynamic timeline” and “fixed timeline” theories of time travel.⁵ Though there exists only a handful, some time travel films do in fact attempt to employ

⁴ Michael J. Almeida, “The Multiverse and Divine Creation,” *Religions* 8, no. 12 (January 1, 2017): 1–10. <https://discovery-ebSCO-com.libproxy.chapman.edu/linkprocessor/plink?id=8915d5e5-9f78-32b8-9260-86ea512d3809>

⁵ In the case of a dynamic timeline, events in the past may be altered to have a definite impact on the present. For example, the narrative of the film *Looper* (Rian Johnson, 2012) employs a dynamic timeline in which the protagonist alters the future by removing himself from the equation. However, the principle of the dynamic timeline can result in time paradoxes, colloquially known as the “grandfather paradox.” (If you went back in time to kill your grandfather, how could you have been born to commit the crime?) In order to reconcile the grandfather paradox, the

time travel as a means for self-understanding of one's choices, history and identity. However, given that the theories of time as being dynamic and fixed are seemingly cyclical, the existence of alternative versions of reality and of ourselves by traveling back in time seems highly unlikely, wherein chance is constructed precisely and consistently among the distinct possibilities within any event in time.

Theories of the multiverse, on the other hand, can reconfigure our understanding of determinism, free-will, and identity. The multiverse film *Another Earth* (2011) and the animated series *Rick and Morty* (Adult Swim, 2013-) present phenomenal thought experiments on the experience of a cosmic event or technological invention that opens a way by which people can interact with multiple versions of themselves from a distant place in space or, in another sense, the multiverse.⁶ In addition, Robert Lepage's *Possible Worlds* (2000) and Jaco Van Dormael's *Mr. Nobody* (2009) profoundly contemplate the multiverse's impact on human consciousness and its sense of causality but are driven by loose or poetic narratives containing a string of episodic conversations that ultimately becomes too impersonal in understanding the authentic identity of the protagonist. Apart from these texts, the cinema has seemingly been unconcerned with contemplating the philosophical implications of the phenomena that establishes the premises of their narratives and characters' identities. Above all, beyond special effects, tinting,

Novikov self-consistency principle theorizes that the probability of an event occurring that alters the past and creates a time paradox is zero. This is the underlying principle of the fixed timeline, which asserts that changes made to the past in order to alter the present are futile: all events in time are fixed. (Even if Hitler was murdered as a child, a different man would have risen to become "Hitler." See Michael Spierig and Peter Spierig's *Predestination* (2015).) Christopher Nolan's *Tenet* (2020) is an emblematic text that reframes time travel as "time inversion" and attempts to visualize events in time in a way that reconciles the dynamic and fixed timelines without the multiverse.

⁶ The characters in *Coherence* (James Ward Byrkit, 2013) are stuck in an Asimov Cascade, which is not quite the multiverse but can offer a very similar phenomenological simulation. Although the characters are not robots, their replications seem to mimic each other in decision-making rather than containing drastically different desires from other variations of themselves, including themselves. In this context, the characters do not show complete differences in identity and behavior. I also suggest an episode of *Rick and Morty* "Mortyplicity" (season 5, episode 2) in order to witness the thorough extent to which the Asimov cascade can be philosophically examined.

and set design, all of these films about “the multiverse” do not provide significant aesthetic markers that distinguish the universes, with many utilizing simple parallel editing in an attempt to capture the experience of the multiverse, or they may even forgo parallel cutting and bring audiences across the universes by simply following its characters who travel in space. None of these films can be read in a truly quantum context.

On the other hand, in *Everything Everywhere All at Once* the multiverse is not deployed merely as a fictional device that is nearly irrelevant to its story beyond a jumping off point and is instead loaded with substantial narrative and emotional weight in relation to its characters’ personal, life-altering choices as well as chance in both personal encounters and in events of the natural world. There is no contrived causal loop and no time travel by which the characters try to change their lives. Instead, the characters jump across universes, and their ability to do so has had intense ramifications on their psychologies that ultimately force them to reflect on the validity of meaning with which humanity attempts to embellish the universe and themselves, including personal identity. In this context, the film’s characters’ interactions with the multiverse become more similar to those characters in science fiction films who experience a new discovery, which can range from AI to biochemical solutions to gravitational communication, and their philosophical contemplations of their newfound knowledge.

Furthermore, in addition to employing cross-cutting and parallel editing to establish space, *Everything Everywhere All at Once* utilizes varying aspect ratio to indicate within which universe the scene takes place and present the tumultuous psychological experience of auto verse-jumping. After Evelyn auto verse-jumps for the first time, aspect ratios specify the main universe (in which most of the film takes place), peripheral universes (universes with aspects that

vary only slightly relative to the main), and the past: aspect ratio 2.39:1 is meant indicate the main universe; ratio 2.00:1 indicates the peripherals; and 1.33:1 indicates Evelyn's flashback.

In order to present Evelyn's immersion into the multiverse and auto verse-jumping, the film uses stupendously rapid cuts, paired with changes in aspect ratio, to present Evelyn's subjectivity that experiences no wave function collapse.⁷ In an attempt to capture all of the Evelyns in the multiverse, the image violently cuts across a countless number of distinct Evelyns, all of various forms and identities. However, the cuts augment in speed so quickly that the Evelyns become indistinguishable, a core contemplation on difference in identity in the face of infinitesimality, which I elaborate on with Joy later in this thesis. (Is it possible for humanity to ever present or perceive true infinity in any form, such as film?) In line with the philosophies of the multiverse hypothesis, the film follows the Everett Interpretation of quantum mechanics as it easily (and nearly unnoticeably) accesses completely different spaces and realities just as its characters can, an aesthetic unachieved by multiverse films of the past. By visually communicating the phenomenology of auto verse-jumping, *Everything Everywhere All at Once* clearly explores the validity of human knowledge and the meaningfulness of experiences in an entirely innovative way. More importantly, these techniques are used to highlight the Asian American immigrant experiences, especially the intracultural and intergenerational differences among its characters.

⁷ Hypothetically speaking, before a person makes a choice, they are within a wave function comprised of the superposition of multiple quantum eigenstates based on time, space, and energy. Once they make a decision, however, the interaction with the external world forces the wave function to collapse and reduce to a single eigenstate. The reality of time and space beyond that decision is said to no longer exist or even be a possibility, and the decision is an irreversible process.

3 Embodying Asian American Intracultural and Intergenerational Differences: The Immigrant Experience and the Self-Hating Asian

Centered around a family of Chinese American immigrants, *Everything Everywhere All at Once* becomes highly specific to and reflective of Asian American experiences. As such, the film follows the dramatic conflict among the members of the Wang family, which is falling apart. The parents Evelyn and Waymond (Ke Huy Quan) are about to enter a divorce, and the fraught relationship between Evelyn and her daughter Joy has devolved into nothing but friction and miscommunication. Evelyn's father Gong Gong (James Hong) is also visiting, another stressor for Evelyn and her family. On the same day Joy brings her girlfriend in the hopes of informing her grandfather of her sexuality and the Wang family needs to go to the IRS for their auditing appointment, Evelyn is informed by an alternate Waymond, from the "Alphaverse," that the multiverse exists, and an evil entity named Jobu Tupaki, who is later revealed to be an alternate version of Joy, is roaming across it to eradicate all existing versions of Evelyn and her universes. With the ability to travel the multiverse and experience limitless physicality across universes, both Joy and Evelyn become apathetic and destructive. With Waymond's help, however, Evelyn obtains the power to adopt a different strategy towards her daughter in order to salvage their relationship: rather than attempting to outmatch Joy, Evelyn finds a way to reconnect to her daughter as the only person who could remotely understand her.

Everything Everywhere All at Once is therefore a dramatic film that takes an intimate look at an Asian American family in the same lineage as *The Joy Luck Club* (Wayne Wang, 1993), *The Farewell* (Lulu Wang, 2019), and *Minari* (Lee Isaac Chung, 2020). Its performances

and aesthetics contain clear indicators that establish the family as Chinese American immigrants and make the film fundamentally rooted in its bicultural identity, its Asian Americanness. First, there is a hybridity to the languages spoken among the family members that is highly indicative as generational markers. Gong Gong, a visitor from China, cannot speak any English (apart from the alternate versions of himself). As part of an older Chinese generation, Gong Gong speaks only Cantonese, while Evelyn can speak both Mandarin and Cantonese, as her upbringing was during a time when the Chinese government sought to nationalize the language with Mandarin. Evelyn and Waymond as first-generation Chinese Americans can speak some English but clearly prefer their native tongue, Mandarin. Joy, as a second-generation Chinese American, is a native English speaker who can speak Mandarin with relatively poor vocabulary. Between the parents and Joy in particular, Chinese and English are used in an amalgamated way that generally only immigrants—Chinese or not—may be familiar with.

Second, the characterization of the family's assimilation into American society constructs the backbone of the narrative. It is important to address the relevant Asian American history to understand how the film subverts the normally frustrating stereotypical depictions of Asian Americans that are rooted in the many policies of the past that continue to persist in more nuanced ways, particularly in business ownership and leadership. Between 1882 to 1943, Chinese Americans were not permitted by law to immigrate into the United States.⁸ Moreover, the barriers to entry for business remained until the repeal of the Magnuson Act with the Immigration Act of 1965.⁹ In other words, Chinese immigrants were prevented from accessing

⁸ <https://exhibits.stanford.edu/riseup/feature/timeline-of-systemic-racism-against-aapi>. The Exclusion Act of 1882 and the Geary Act of 1892 were of the harshest immigration policies that the federal government enforced to restrict Chinese immigration until the Magnuson Act in 1943.

⁹ With the Magnuson Act, Chinese immigration and naturalization were finally (slightly) permitted by law, though the ban of Chinese-owned businesses continued in most states.

occupational or fiscal opportunities that would enable them to provide themselves and their families with better lives, unless they had been able to remain in the U.S. for multiple generations. (This is not to suggest that a family attains social mobility as long as they remain in the country longer.) Many faced intense financial adversity, solitude, and acute racially motivated hate crimes. American policy changed in 1965 with the Immigration Act that ended the national origins system and was further loosened by the Immigration Act of 1990 that established a flexible worldwide cap. While these changes in legislation have enabled the entry and social mobility of Asian Americans, Asian Americans continue to feel the impact of the restrictions of the past, capped by the “bamboo ceiling” and designated as perpetual foreigners.¹⁰

All of these restrictions place unquantifiable limitations on Asian immigrants and their ability or even willingness to assimilate. In the case of the Wang family in *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, Evelyn and Waymond are first-generation Chinese Americans: during adulthood, they met, got married, and moved to the United States where they have been the owners of a laundromat ever since, a business commonly owned by Asian immigrants.¹¹

Although the ages of each character are not specified in the film, we can presume Joy to be in her mid-twenties and her parents in their mid-forties or fifties. Given that they lived in America for some time before having Joy, it is also likely that Evelyn and Waymond immigrated during the late-1980s to early 1990s, when they could have directly benefitted from looser restrictions in immigration¹² but continue to feel restrictions to business ownership and cultural institutions.

¹⁰ Buck Gee, Denise Peck, and Janet Wong, “Hidden in Plain Sight: Asian American Leaders in Silicon Valley,” *The Ascend Foundation* (May 2015): 1-32.

¹¹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2D4ugtzo2dQ&ab_channel=AJ%2B. In this video, Anna Kook features laundromats in New York and Oakland owned by Asian immigrants, many of whom work and live within the same buildings as their businesses. Laundromats were one of the few businesses that allowed Asian immigrants to be self-employed and earn income, given the exclusion of Asians for obtaining business licenses.

¹² Immigration act of 1965 and 1990 loosened restrictions on immigration, and both policies were significant as they also extended to Asian immigrants, contrasting previous immigration laws that were specifically tougher on Asian immigration.

The struggles of their experiences are explicitly communicated through Evelyn, and how those issues get extended to subsequent generations is expressed through their daughter Joy.

Another major way the film roots itself in its Asian Americanness is through the archetypes of the characters that appropriate stereotypical notions of Asian Americans, wherein each member of the family is representative of Asian American stereotypes. As a person uploads their consciousness to the verse-jumping system, they have a chance to see their life flash before their eyes, including their accomplishments, regrets, and moments that are both cherished and tragic. As Evelyn sees her life as a movie, audiences get to see Evelyn as an immigrant, a wife, a daughter and mother. In hopes of a better life, as with many immigrants, Evelyn takes a leap of faith in Waymond to leave her family in China and move with him to America. However, Evelyn and Waymond's marriage is failing, as Evelyn has become so apathetic and distant from the needs of her loved ones.

After beginning excited, young, and hopeful, Evelyn now experiences interpersonal struggles with her family, especially her daughter, and regret with her career aspirations, both of which have led her to believe she lives a pitiful and unfulfilling life. Joy does not want to be around the house anymore because Evelyn consistently miscommunicates her affections, and Evelyn devalues her husband's attempts to ensure the security of their family. Waymond's cheery and playful nature makes him appear foolish, weak, and undesirable for Evelyn, who believes she alone must manage the problems her family faces and behaves as such. In fact, this makes her so emotionally negligent of Waymond that he is now asking for a divorce. Evelyn is against forgoing the sacred promise she once made with Waymond, and Waymond claims he only has divorce papers to compel them to discuss their marriage. As Evelyn verse-jumps for the first time, however, she not only sees her life, as I just discussed, but she also experiences the

alternate realities and memories in which she never married Waymond nor immigrated to America. Because she thought all of her other lives were phenomenally greater than the one she is living, Evelyn's ability to auto verse-jump only exacerbates her sentiments of resentment, regret and frustration and ultimately accepts the divorce, despite Waymond's true intentions. She believes that Waymond has been holding her back from enjoying a life like the alternate ones she saw of herself and clearly does not respect him as a husband, which I elaborate on later in my discussion of the multiverse.

Furthermore, now stubborn and fastidious, Evelyn seemingly embodies the stereotypical Tiger Mom, especially in the Alphaverse where she pushes Alpha Joy to her limits.¹³ In the Alphaverse, Alpha Evelyn is the head of the organization that invented verse-jumping technology and wishes to understand and harness its abilities, such that an individual may auto verse-jump without the need for the technology. Alpha Waymond explains to Evelyn that Alpha Evelyn was unable to auto verse-jump but forced her daughter, Alpha Joy, to the edge so that she may achieve what Alpha Evelyn could not. Alpha Evelyn is frustrated and regretful of her own life that she essentially coerces her daughter away from failure. Therefore, allegorically speaking, Evelyn is representative of first-generation immigrants who came to America for a better life, only to discover that they could have been better off in their homeland without each other. She and her husband are the immigrants who have been restricted by language and cultural

¹³ Scarlett Wang, "The 'Tiger Mom': Stereotypes of Chinese Parenting in the United States," *Applied Psychology Opus*, accessed Nov, 8, 2022, [https://wp.nyu.edu/steinhardt-appsych_opus/the-tiger-mom-stereotypes-of-chinese-parenting-in-the-united-states/#:~:text=The%20%E2%80%9Ctiger%20mom%E2%80%9D%20is%20the,Hymn%20of%20the%20Tiger%20Mother](https://wp.nyu.edu/steinhardt-appsych_opus/the-tiger-mom-stereotypes-of-chinese-parenting-in-the-united-states/#:~:text=The%20%E2%80%9Ctiger%20mom%E2%80%9D%20is%20the,Hymn%20of%20the%20Tiger%20Mother.). In this media article, Wang explores the pillar theory of parenting authority as it relates to Chinese parenting in order to oppose the most salient, stereotypical representation of Chinese parenting—the tiger mom. The tiger mom is, she states, the prevailing stereotype of Chinese parenting in America, wherein Americans perceive tiger moms to be highly controlling, strict, and severe almost to the point of abuse. Tiger moms tend towards the extreme in pushing their children towards the success that the parent defines, which, as studies show, generally do not result in the children leading emotionally and mentally positive lives. In fact, many Chinese and other Asian parents do not subscribe to the tiger mom parenting style.

barriers, facing inscrutable bureaucratic and political roadblocks their entire lives, but Evelyn, as the Tiger Mom, is breaking her family apart, especially her daughter who is drifting away.

It becomes apparent that for both Evelyn and Joy, their experience as an Asian American immigrant is a chaotic and arduous one in which they face “language and communication barriers” as they “traverse across multiple, conflicting cultural systems” within their family’s immigrant in-between cultural status.¹⁴ For Evelyn, she is constantly balancing the needs of her multiple worlds, that compels a grueling tug of war on her psyche established from the start. Like many immigrant mothers, Evelyn develops “a profound sense of isolation” due to the “marked environmental and cultural changes.”¹⁵ As a family of Chinese immigrants, language and cultural barriers make it extremely difficult for the Wangs to have a fine-tuned relationship with the nation’s bureaucratic systems, as a result of the historical policies previously discussed. For example, IRS agent Ms. Deidre (Jamie Lee Curtis) questions the Wang’s suspicious claims to multiple “businesses” and unkempt accounting. As Ms. Deidre explains the Wang’s “gross negligence” towards their expenditures and book-keeping, Evelyn expresses her indignance with the system’s use of terminology that makes it extremely difficult for non-native English speakers to comprehensively understand. Ms. Deidre coldly replies, “I thought you were going to bring your daughter to translate.” Still, it is widely known that taxes are difficult to complete properly and a stressful time for many, including native English speakers. The dependency of Asian parents on their children in matters that require English as presented by the Wangs may resonate deeply with many Asian and Asian American audiences.

¹⁴ Mali Mann, “Modern Motherhood, Modern Mothering, and New Family Constellations,” in *The New Motherhoods*, ed. by Salman Akhtar, (Rowman & Littlefield, 2016): 193.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Solitary in her adversities, Evelyn at times fails to successfully navigate her interpersonal relationships and fulfill her maternal duties. As an immigrant mother, Evelyn not only has to consider the needs and cultural perspectives of her father, but also of her own family and her new home country, encompassing the conflict between “dominant parenting styles in the culture of origin and those in the new cultural environment.”¹⁶ Within her own family, Joy wants to come out to her grandfather and reveal her queer sexuality by introducing her girlfriend Becky (Tallie Medel). She enlists her mother’s help, given that Joy already struggles to communicate in Mandarin. However, Evelyn, concerned that her father would ultimately reject Joy’s vulnerability and create even greater friction in the family, is unable to stand up for and support her daughter. Given that it had been immensely challenging for Evelyn to appease her father her whole life, she cannot help but be hesitant to do anything that would distance her father once again after being separated from him since she had left China so many years ago.

Although Evelyn claims that she is accepting of her daughter’s relationship, it is evident during their conversations that Evelyn is absent-minded or apathetic towards her daughter’s internal struggles. Evelyn fails to be empathetic towards her daughter’s needs, and rather than acting as a support system, Evelyn consistently breaks Joy down, such as calling her fat instead of gently suggesting that she lose weight. Like many stereotyped Asian immigrant parents, Evelyn is ignorant to her child’s inner needs and conceptualizations of the world. That in their desperate attempt to ensure perfection in the lives of their children, Asian parents may have parenting styles that clash with the culture their children are a part of, putting them at risk for undesired interpersonal distance and friction. As a result, Joy, as with many second-generation Asian immigrant children, resides in a state of no-man’s land, forever stuck balancing two

¹⁶ Mali Mann, *Ibid.*, 195.

different worlds without generational support, similar to her first-generation immigrant mother, who remains in a hectic struggle to adapt to a new world with no one before her to help her except her husband.

Ultimately, Evelyn (and Jobu/Joy) feels tragically alone in her racial struggles and everyday experiences in America. Although Evelyn chose to come to America, she resents that her father had let her leave much too easily, that it meant nothing to him to let his daughter go. Like many first-generation immigrants, from the moment she left her home country, she became separated from her family. While this is not always an issue, like Evelyn's, these immigrant families tend to be physically and emotionally too distant, and the relationships are evacuated of substance. As Evelyn is desperate to move beyond her life as a laundromat owner, so too are many immigrants left wondering or dreaming about what their lives could have been like had they found greater success or never left their home country. Despite opportunities for growth, greater autonomy, and gender equivalence, there remains "civic systems of oppression, including racism and sexism."¹⁷ At what cost did they immigrate, and was it worth it given the amount of hurdles in policy, business, and culture?

As an extension of her mother's generational pain, Joy, too, struggles between multiple worlds with her bicultural identity, the in-betweenness that characterizes their sense of belonging (or lack thereof) to either her nuclear family or nation writ large. There are two versions of Joy that are mainly shown. There is Joy, and, in the prison-like torture chamber in which Alpha Joy was trained, Jobu Tupaki (which I will use interchangeably with Joy henceforth) was born. Jobu/Joy seeks to expunge all versions of her mother from existence as Joy experiences feelings of low self-worth and negative affection every time she interacts with Evelyn. Both versions of

¹⁷ Ibid., 194.

Joy/Jobu are representative of the common experiences of many second-generation Asian Americans that are characterized by intense feelings of frustration and anger due to conflicts in the nuclear family and the national culture.

As Jobu/Joy guides Evelyn in seeing the multiverse through her eyes, she reveals her intense feelings of despair and hopelessness that manifest themselves into hate and anger, which Evelyn also experiences for her own reasons. In doing so, the film establishes a contentious intergenerational dialogue between the first-generation mother and her second-generation daughter. On their journey across the multiverse, Jobu/Joy presents an “everything bagel” to Evelyn that Jobu/Joy made out of boredom from the mundanity of life. Joy compiles on the everything bagel all that which is known to humanity, physically or virtually, presumably in the hopes of uncovering some meaningful truth. (It is interesting to note that many of these images are gleaned from the internet, which I discuss further later in this thesis.) More importantly, Joy explains that the bagel collapsed on itself, suggesting its inherent meaninglessness. In fact, the bagel is visually presented as a black hole, a final destination that sucks out and destroys materiality and, more importantly, the human constructed meaning attached to existence.

For Jobu/Joy, then, the everything bagel represents her ultimate truth: nothing matters. Jobu/Joy believes that committing suicide is therefore the only way to rid of the suffering of life, especially the guilt and pain that comes with accomplishing nothing, and suggests that she and her mother to enter the everything bagel—destruction and death. As a first-generation Chinese American and as her mother, Evelyn understands the thought process Joy wisely expresses, but she later refuses to follow her daughter in pursuing death as the answer to the meaninglessness of life. Still, Joy, as an allegory of the second-generation Chinese American, remains disturbed by the lack of meaning of her existence, for different but closely related reasons from her mother.

While Joy does not experience the exclusion towards Chinese immigrants as she is part of the second generation, Joy does experience different socio-political barriers that bar her access to the national culture. She seemingly experiences detrimental levels of imposter syndrome, which tends to be exacerbated by the conflicts within her family and outside of it, and her experience can be read as an internalization of the model minority stereotype, a term used to champion Asian Americans as the epitome of successful assimilation. By both their parents and nation, Asian Americans are expected to perform better than their peers of other races.¹⁸ These social expectations can commonly lead to instances of concerning or poor mental health as found by sociologists Jennifer Lee and Min Zhou. And when the Asian child “underperforms,” the pressure for success, which is exacerbated by tiger mom parenting, can be intensely overwhelming. Although Joy is not presented to be the “model minority” Asian, she experiences acute feelings of self-hatred and searches for her mother’s love. On the other side of the same coin, Jobu Tupaki achieves auto verse-jumping successfully with Alpha Evelyn’s tiger mother parenting. As a result, however, Jobu becomes an embodiment of “minor feelings” of hate and destruction towards herself and everyone around her.¹⁹

¹⁸ Jennifer Lee and Min Zhou, “Comparing Success Frames,” in *The Asian Achievement Paradox*, (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2015), 93-114. In their book *The Asian American Achievement Paradox* sociologists Jennifer Lee and Min Zhou debunk the model minority myth. By examining U.S. immigration policy and statistics across various minority groups, including Asians, Blacks, and Latinos, the sociologists demonstrate that the system is purposefully constructed such that Asian Americans *appear* to be attaining much greater leaps in social mobility than any other racial group. More importantly, they scrutinize the statistical data through interviews among the racial groups, during which they uncover the many shared and unshared struggles specific to their race.

¹⁹ In her book *Minor Feelings*, Cathy Park Hong coins the phrase “minor feelings” which she defines as “the racialized range of emotions that are negative, dysphoric, and therefore untelegenic, built from the sediments of everyday racial experience and the irritant of having one’s perception of reality constantly questioned or dismissed.” This term is undoubtedly applicable to Asian Americans: Hong extracted the phrase by finding parallels between comedian Richard Pryor’s racial comedy and the Korean concept of *han*, both of which are rooted in experiences of pain and unending adversity. More specifically, Hong describes the imposition of American optimism upon Asian Americans, such that Asian Americans experience feelings of dysphoria due to feelings of self-doubt and condemnation arising from problems out of their control, while also being told that they do not experience such problems by Whites. This phenomenon is closely tied to the Model Minority stereotype and the intense feelings of Imposter Syndrome.

As the second-generation Chinese American child, Joy adopts Evelyn's feelings of loneliness, despair and anger to her identity. In reference to the coming-out attempt, Joy shows her lack of language competency as she tries to introduce Becky as her girlfriend to her grandfather but seems unable to remember the right word. It seems that Joy, as with any child, must depend on her parents, especially her mother as the "transmitter of cultural values, traditions, beliefs and modes of behavior," in order to know her family and remain connected to her heritage.²⁰ But even that becomes severely complicated when the parents themselves struggle to communicate with their children. In this context, the family conflicts among the Wangs are almost tragic. It seems inevitable that the distant family finally breaks apart unless they choose to understand and accept each other's distinct internal struggles.

Joy's inability to speak Mandarin in order to effectively communicate her romantic relationship status, and therefore her sexuality and identity, to her grandfather is largely indicative of her acculturation from her Chinese heritage as a second-generation child. Being U.S. raised, Joy "acculturates faster and across more life domains than her immigrant parents, thus creating a values gap that may contribute to misunderstandings or family conflicts," even more so than in European immigrant families.²¹ As a result of these acculturation differences, "feelings of guilt, shame, sadness, and other depressive symptoms are likely to develop in these emerging adults" and exacerbate the effects of perceived racial discrimination, or stereotyping, on depressive symptoms.²²

²⁰ Mali Mann, *Ibid.*

²¹ Hsiu-Lan, Cheng, Shu-Ping Lin and Chu Hui Cha. "Perceived Discrimination, Intergenerational Family Conflicts, and Depressive Symptoms in Foreign-Born and U.S.-Born Asian American Emerging Adults." *Asian American Journal of Psychology* 6 (2015): 108.

²² *Ibid.*

As discussed previously, Evelyn, representing the first generation, faces language and cultural barriers that have hindered her ability to succeed in her passions and life goals. Similarly, in addition to the struggle for acceptance within her family, Joy cannot seem to find meaning in her accomplishments, in her life choices in society. Referring back to the bagel scene, Joy believes that the truth of the everything bagel—that nothing matters—supplies relief, and she gains followers, as shown by the individuals who draw a black circle on paper, which they then staple to their foreheads. Although Evelyn hopes that Joy doesn't truly believe that notion, Joy/Jobu replies, "Feels nice doesn't it? If nothing matters, then all of the pain and guilt you feel from making nothing of your life...goes away." For Joy, the shame and guilt of accomplishing nothing, or even appearing to, can be unbearable; the meaninglessness of anything outside of the high value of success is too devastating.

It has become quite evident that second generation Asian Americans experience intergenerational and intracultural conflict and its psychological impacts much more acutely than other immigrant groups, especially White immigrants. To only place value on the best can seem insurmountable for a child who is pushed to achieve only the best, as expected by both the families and (non-Asian) peers of Asian Americans. In Joy's failure "to meet the stereotypical expectations of both in-group and out-group members," she "incurs feelings of self-doubt and embarrassment."²³ Both "loss of face and intergenerational family conflict are associated with depression" more for Asian Americans than their European immigrant counterparts.²⁴

²³ Z. Kalibatseva, Leong, F. T. L., Ham, E. H., Lannert, B. K., & Chen, Y. "Loss of Face, Intergenerational Family Conflict, And Depression Among Asian American and European American College Students." *Asian American Journal of Psychology* 8, no. 2 (2007): 126-133. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/aap0000067>.

²⁴ In Kalibatseva et. al., "Loss of Face, Intergenerational Family Conflict, And Depression Among Asian American and European American College Students," loss of face refers to the danger of losing one's reputation, honor, prestige, or social value in other people's eyes. Previous studies have shown that shame, as a result of loss of face, are associated with higher levels of distress, as society withdraws their approval and support from the individual experiencing loss of face.

“Intergenerational conflict may be more common...because of the expectations for individuals to form an independent identity” in mainstream U.S. society that values individualism and clashes with Joy’s culture at home. Although many of these second-generation Asian Americans may feel more shame than other ethnic groups, they also seek less professional help due to their cultural perceptions of shame.²⁵ For Joy, it seems she only wishes to turn to her mother for help, searching for the one Evelyn who can cross the multiverse.

In addition to the adversities of the solitary immigrant and bicultural child, *Everything Everywhere All At Once* also addresses Asians as being in the state of “perpetual foreigner.”²⁶ In the first confrontation Evelyn has with Jobu Tupaki, the police arrive to ameliorate a disturbance (one caused by Jobu). As she walks down the hall with a pig, Jobu is told by a police officer that she and her pig cannot be here.²⁷ Jobu replies, “Is it that I *can’t* be here? Or that I’m not *allowed* to be here?” While Evelyn and Waymond demand that she respects the police offer, Jobu refuses to be subdued and continues to state that she “*can* physically be here, but that *you are not allowing* me to be here.” In this scene through Jobu/Joy and her pig, the film addresses the systemic institutions that formulate policies to construct a system that rejects the economic and social mobility of Asian Americans by designating them as outsiders perpetually.

²⁵ Dominic W. So & Frank Y. Wong, “Alcohol, Drugs, and Substance Use Among Asian American College Students,” *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs* 38, no. 1 (March 2006): 35-42. In this study, the psychologists found, in corroboration with other psychological studies, a positive correlative relationship between substance abuse and Asian American acculturation.

²⁶ Y. Joel Wong, Owen, Jese, Tran, Kimberly, Collins, Dana, and Claire E. Higgins, “Asian American Male College Students’ Perceptions of People’s Stereotypes About Asian American Men,” *Psychology of Men and Masculinity* 13, no. 1 (2012): 75-88.

²⁷https://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/Chinese_Customs/pig.htm#:~:text=A%20pig%20represents%20luck%2C%20overall,sense%20of%20humour%20and%20understanding. This website explains the pig as a representation of overall good fortune. To be associated with the pig is a complement as it symbolizes many fine qualities of the individual, including designating them as a hard-working, peace loving person. In this context, the rejection of Joy and her pig metaphorically speaks to America’s continuous enforcement of designating Asians as foreigners who are undeserving of the wealth that they supposedly take away from xenophobic Whites.

Furthermore, although Asian Americans have not been ascribed a strong out-group identity, they are denied a strong in-group identity.²⁸ Especially due to their physical features, lack of cultural knowledge, and speech patterns, some Asian Americans try to change in order to assert their identity in situations when they feel they have to prove their belonging. One form of adaptation is by depending on their more English proficient children, as previously discussed in relation to the scene between the Wangs and the IRS. Still, many Asian Americans are impacted negatively from such constant exclusion from the majority culture, whereby many are “more often offended and angry,” which rings true for Joy and Evelyn as well.²⁹

Despite being designated (and at times self-designated) as White adjacent by other racial groups, then, Asian Americans too, the film suggests, are indeed a part of a larger system that intends to keep them out or down and drives many into a state I refer to as “Asian American Pessimism,” a term I borrow from Anne Anlin Cheng’s notion of “Asian-pessimism.”³⁰ To be constantly designated as an outsider over 150 years of being in America, Asian Americans are angry. Though the exclusivity may not always be visible systemically, Asian Americans feel it culturally, with boiling anger that has festered over time through each subsequent generation. Even within a single generation, as shown through Joy, the complexity of balancing one’s loss of heritage while simultaneously attempting to assimilate can be significantly overbearing on the psyche.

²⁸ Cheryan, S. and B. Monin, “‘Where Are You Really From?’: Asian Americans and Identity Denial.” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 89, no. 5 (2005): 717-730. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.89.5.717>.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 726.

³⁰ Anne Anlin Cheng, “‘Everything Everywhere All at Once’ is a deeply Asian American film,” *The Washington Post*, May 4, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2022/05/04/everything-everywhere-asian-american-pessimism/>. In her review of the film, Anne Anlin Cheng, in asserting the film’s deep roots in Asian Americanness, borrows from the concept of Afro-pessimism to address the stark Asian-pessimism of the film. Afro-pessimism, holds that “Black lives are endlessly inflicted and informed by anti-Black animosity and experiences of pain and loss.” I believe this sentiment echoes the “minor feelings” Cathy Park Hong discusses in her book that Evelyn and Joy experience.

For someone who believes that the ethics of violence are null given that how we even treat one another does not matter, Joy/Jobu uses kung fu and alchemy-like powers to doom the entire multiverse. Kung fu, and its underlying philosophy that I address later in this thesis, grounds *Everything Everywhere All at Once* within a starkly East Asian viewpoint. Semiotician Seiko Nitta proposes that martial arts in the cinema lies within two opposing directions of interest, the first being “Asian self-expression accented by a sense of resistance to western cultural preoccupations” and the second being “the US production of an Oriental other simultaneously exotic enough and accommodating to its principles of cultural circulation.”³¹ More importantly, she claims that if a film were to suggest mastery of martial arts, it also means to suggest a mastery over everyday life; it therefore “has to deny the general image of martial arts; namely the system of masculine fighting skills.”³² For the Wang family, kung fu is performed to act as a metaphorical mode of resistance to the systemic forms of oppression, as previously discussed, and rejects the masculine violence normally concurrent with kung fu films, as discussed with the character of Waymond later in this thesis.

In order to subdue her daughter, Evelyn must learn to auto verse-jump across universes to embody versions of herself that have been trained in kung fu or other relevant skills that are serendipitously helpful in her confrontations against Jobu Tupaki, including singing, pinkie push-ups, and sign spinning. To clarify, Evelyn is not going back in time to have her past-self learn kung fu such that her present self would be trained. Instead, Evelyn learns kung fu as she “uploads” her consciousness to her other bodies across the multiverse, similar to Neo in *The Matrix*. As she transfers her consciousness to her other selves across the multiverse, Evelyn’s

³¹ Keiko Nitta, “An equivocal space for the protestant ethnic: US popular culture and martial arts fantasia,” *Social Semiotics* 20, no. 4 (September 2010): 379. DOI: 10.1080/10350330.2010.494392.

³² *Ibid.*, 385.

mind merges with the memories of her other selves in order to gain their specialties, along with their experiences, psychologies, and emotions as byproducts. More importantly, Evelyn gains these skills in an effort to fight fire with fire; metaphorically speaking, Joy's hate against Evelyn's hate; their intergenerational and intracultural minor feelings collide. Indeed, Evelyn and Joy's unique skill to auto verse-jump compels them to treat everything around them with disillusionment and apathy. And like Joy/Jobu, Evelyn succumbs to anger from the debilitating truth, that the existence of the multiverse expunges the meaning constructed from human knowledge and experiences, as she and her daughter spiral into their nihilistic attitudes.

4 Confronting the Multiverse: Nihilism as “Asian American Pessimism”

Because the film thematically focuses on chance and free-will, this thesis also emphasizes the discourse centered around those themes and perspectives in relation to the multiverse. As such, in this section, I analyze the characters of Evelyn and Joy in terms of Nietzschean ideas of nihilism and read the film as a representation of Leibniz’s “Best of All Possible Worlds” through Evelyn. Additionally, I discuss these philosophies alongside Taoism—the philosophy of kung fu—in order to analyze the significance of the mother’s “style” of kung fu that her daughter inherits. And in doing so, I continue my elaboration of Evelyn’s character arc and her (and Joy/Jobu’s) experience with the multiverse as allegories for the experiences of many Asians in America.

In the film, both Evelyn and Joy/Jobu Tupaki, have the ability to auto verse-jump and are the only two human beings in existence across all worlds who are able to do so without the verse-jumping technology. Alone in their abilities and their struggles, Evelyn and Joy/Jobu are the only people who could remotely understand what the other experiences. Across the infinitely possible worlds there exist infinite variations of being, and Evelyn and Joy can embody *all of those possibilities*, if they so choose, absorbing their alternates’ memories and experiences throughout the process. Though not explicitly explained, auto verse-jumping is surmised as the ability to transfer one’s consciousness to that of an alternate version of oneself, thereby completely replacing one’s reality with another, whether that reality contains human beings with hot dog shaped fingers or has even been able to sustain the existence of life whatsoever. Most minds cannot withstand the overwhelming strain on their brains, resulting in death. If the mind

can overcome the load, it becomes fractured. As shown via split screen, Joy and Evelyn’s mind or consciousness becomes fragmented across the different versions of themselves, and simultaneously without proper control, which is an astronomically terrifying experience to ponder.

In addition, as an expert verse-jumper who has met thousands of Evelyns in order to find the Evelyn that can defeat Jobu Tupaki, Alpha Waymond believes Evelyn to be *the* Evelyn. He sees it so clearly—Evelyn is good at nothing and failed to complete any of her *many* goals or achieve her dreams: she is living her *worst* self. In the context of the multiverse, all of the other Evelyns have become majorly successful or at least highly skilled in their endeavors, while Evelyn has none, which she herself believes. As part of the layers that characterize Evelyn as the first-generation Chinese American immigrant, it is precisely because Evelyn had so many strong desires, which concretize her alternative life paths, that she can easily auto verse-jump to so many other life paths of hers that exist across the multiverse. Individuals who are highly successful do not have as many alternate life paths because they have devoted so much of their time and energy to those specific skills, eventually attaining success. These individuals generally made all the “right” and self-assured choices for success and have fewer diverging events in their lives because they completed all they sought to, unlike Evelyn who has no accomplishments in this reality. No other timelines or realities can exist because, for some people, the intensely desired accomplishments are all achieved within the same one.

The ability to auto verse-jump, to experience endless possibilities and identities, has provided Evelyn and Joy with a revised perspective on the existence of humanity: it is even more meaningless than previously thought. It is widely recognized that human beings are an insignificant speck in the infinite pool that is time and space, that people and the truths they

create are ultimately valueless in the face of a cold, apathetic, and seemingly God-less universe. The existence of the multiverse only compounds such existential thoughts, such that human beings must now recognize that their identities are drained of their uniqueness: any decision that one could have made does in fact exist, which invites contradiction and seemingly makes the deliberation behind one's choices across all of time meaningless and purposeless.

In this context, *Everything Everywhere All at Once* philosophically questions the implications that arise if humans were to ever discover the existence of a multiverse as represented by Evelyn and Joy's reactions to their new understanding of their place in the multiverse as human beings. The first to recognize this meaninglessness, Joy/Jobu Tupaki ventures to find the singular version of her mother that truly understands her (which is only possible if that specific Evelyn can auto verse-jump), destroying everything else in her path. Joy had faced the constant difficulty of feeling accepted by her parents and fulfilling their expectations, resulting in her own self-disparagement, and her experience with the multiverse has only compounded her feelings of resentment, (self-)hatred, and guilt. As a result, Joy/Jobu creates the "everything bagel", a bagel compiled with every existing form of materiality, that functions similarly to a blackhole that destroys everything within it.

Joy finds the meaning attached to anything physical to be a lie. At one point in the film, both Evelyn and Joy hit rock bottom in their desire to actively live—they would rather be rocks in an alternate universe. This universe, Joy explains, was not cosmically fine-tuned³³ to give life a chance of forming on their Earth. She then goes on to state her thesis: humanity's reality of the universe is limited by their collective knowledge of it, and every new scientific discovery can

³³ The design hypothesis asserts that a supernatural force or being (God) created the conditions that were right for life to form. On the other hand, the theory of cosmic fine-tuning is such that the evolution within the universe has made the universe pre-disposed to forming the multiverse, which would ultimately bolster evolution in creating life by offering a different set of possible states, probabilities, or chances.

serve as jarring reminder of the loneliness and stupidity of humankind in not just an ever-expanding universe, but in an infinite number of them. Alongside language, the scientific method serves to discover truths about the natural world, including humans. And in the face of grand, serendipitous discoveries, human knowledge can be largely disrupted and alter the perceived reality of the universe by human beings, the primary example being the discovery of the sun as the center of our solar system.

Still, as Joy suggests, a new discovery is never the end, and there will be another that, presumably, forces us to use language and science to reframe our understanding of existence and our preconceived notions as a collective species.³⁴ Furthermore, the utter meaninglessness and insignificance of the vastness of human knowledge and its constructed meaning have made Joy voracious for some semblance of certainty from her mother. In staring into the abyss of the everything bagel, Joy experiences insurmountable feelings of anxiety due to limitless uncertainty, whereby death seems a preferable alternative to the human condition. Her disbelief in knowledge is debilitating, and she hopes her mother can offer her an alternative truth from her own. For Joy, the everything bagel serves as a representation of death, which Joy determines to be the only honest truth about existence. And in practicing this truth, Joy wishes to choose when and how she dies, on her own terms.³⁵ Joy wishes to control the singular certainty of death in her life, while also taking the rest of the universe alongside her towards it, worshipping it religiously.

³⁴ In his essay "On Truth and Lies in the Nonmoral Sense," Nietzsche claims that, although language is the primary mode by which human beings conceptualize their existence and the world around them, the indeterminacy or flexibility of meaning within language compels language as the first step in humanity's self-deception, which ultimately makes the search for truth futile. In other words, in seeking truth, humanity utilizes language to its self-deception, which invalidates the very nature of a truth once it has been "discovered." Humanity must transcend the myths and illusions it has constructed through language in order to experience a life of total freedom, including the choice of the time of one's death.

³⁵ In Nietzsche's essay "On Free Death," he claims that to die correctly, people must choose when they die per their preference. This is not to suggest that suicide specifically is the best manner by which to terminate one's life, rather to have the freedom and control over one of the absolute truths in life: death.

The everything bagel rests above an altar within a pristine, white marble cathedral, where Jobu/Joy and her followers worship the bagel, wearing black circles as emblems of the everything bagel of meaninglessness and death.

In her desire to find a new perspective beyond the anarchy she perceives within the uncertainty of human knowledge and the subatomic world, Joy is thus framed as an active nihilist, invoking Nietzsche's ideas on nihilism and epistemology.³⁶ Referring to the aforementioned rock scene, for Joy, "there is no standard, no formation, no ground upon which one can make knowledge claims, nothing to justify our belief that any particular claim is true."³⁷ To extend this logic to morality: "if there exists no grounds for making objective claims about knowledge and truth, then there exists no grounds for making objective claims about right and wrong."³⁸ In this context, Jobu/Joy's use of martial arts is clearly aimless, destructive, and representative of her minor feelings; her single mindedness for the destruction of everything including herself makes her unsympathetic towards any and all aspects of life, including her family. In this state, Joy loses her morality and purpose beyond total annihilation in her search for meaning in life.

Similarly, Evelyn also adopts the perspective of nihilism once she sees the universe(s) through Joy's eyes, but in a more passive way. While Joy is physically destructive, sabotaging the worlds she traverses, Evelyn is a passive nihilist and, like Joy, becomes largely doubtful about the meaning of knowledge and her existence.³⁹ As a result, Evelyn becomes increasingly apathetic and destructive towards her personal relationships, though non-violently unlike Joy,

³⁶ <https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2019/9/23/leonard-finding-purpose-nihilism/#:~:text=However%2C%20there%20exists%20another%20group,be%20bound%20to%20follow%20it.>

³⁷ Nolen Gertz, "Nihilism," published in association with *The MIT Press*, February 27, 2020, <https://aeon.co/essays/if-you-believe-in-nihilism-do-you-believe-in-anything>.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

and struggles to provide Joy with an alternative certainty that may imbue life with meaning. After peering into her alternate lives as she verse-jumps, Evelyn discovers that she is living the worst possible version of her life and becomes desperate to experience the joy that her alternate realities offer. But after speaking to her daughter, she realizes that the reality she experiences is founded upon nothing—the memories, choices, and experiences she deemed personally unique become insignificant in the context of the multiverse. Thus, as Joy shows her the meaninglessness of choice, free-will and notions of identity, Evelyn no longer desires any alternate life paths for herself, cynical and hard-hearted towards her own identities and everyone around her.

Unlike Neo who finds belief after configuring his existence in *The Matrix*, Evelyn and Joy discard their truths, knowing that their identities and choices are contradicted within the multiverse—death and destruction are the only avenues for escape from these powerful contradictions. In several scenes Joy explains her rationale as she attempts to persuade her mother to view the world through her eyes. For example, as Evelyn learns to auto verse-jump, Joy states, “You can see how everything is a just a random rearrangement of particles in a vibrating superposition.” Joy sees the construction of the physical universe (including humans) as arbitrary and purposeless, therefore meaningless; the existence of any material object is insignificant because it was dictated by random chance. Thus, Joy reduces the uniqueness of objects and individuals to the seemingly random quantum arrangement of their particles. In the case of humans, another scene, paying homage to Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), goes back in time to the primates that immediately preceded the human species. A primate with hot dog shaped fingers takes the life of another primate with hands similar to those of humans—this serves as the explanation for the universe in which Evelyn has hot dog shaped

fingers that she is initially disgusted by. The absurdity of human beings existing with hot dog shaped fingers seemingly dissipates from the perspective of evolution throughout time due to chance. Chance is therefore a motif integral to *Everything Everywhere All at Once* as chance establishes the root cause of the stochasticity of the universe, the uncertainty in human perceptions, and the chaos that ensues as those perceptions collide.

Evelyn's and Joy's personal philosophies mirror much of the contemporary philosophical discourse regarding the multiverse, specifically those that have returned to Gottfried Leibniz's theodicy. Although the focus on evil might seem specific to humanity, Leibniz's theodicy emphasizes the consideration of all forms of evil, including the "cruelty" exercised by nature. Leibniz sought to answer a metaphysical question of evil: if God intervenes in our lives, why does he not prevent such cruelties from occurring? Is evil a part of His creation? Leibniz argues that we do, in fact, live in the "best of all possible worlds" because God chose not to make a better world for a good reason that we could not possibly comprehend, since we have no means by which to measure the goodness in our world or the evil that we experience. Indeed, Leibniz claims, the existence of such evil is necessary to serve as the criteria by which good acts are evaluated. For *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, apart from the "cruelties" of the unknowable natural world, there exists no external evil—it arises within the characters through their nihilistic attitudes.

Leibniz's theory of best of all possible worlds is significant to the debates centered around the possibility of the existence of the multiverse due to its concurrent philosophical implications regarding free-will and determinism. As my primary example in the context of film and media, philosopher Toufic El-Khoury applies Leibniz's theory of *best possible world* to the film adaptations of DC Universe comics, specifically to understand the characterization of

Owlman, who, similar to Joy, is the only one who truly understands the debilitating implications of the multiverse.⁴⁰ As it is for Owlman, Joy, too, “realizes the vanity of [her] actions, with the actions of [her] doubles on other earths nullifying [her] *raison d’être* of [her] actions.”⁴¹ Joy’s decision to erase all reality means no other version of herself can make an alternative, contradictory choice. She wishes to eliminate the contradictions of meaning that in turn formulates everything as meaningless, as indicated by her notion of the meaninglessness of everything—dictated by the random arrangement and superpositions of particles within everything. Ultimately, the existential crises that Evelyn and Joy tumultuously and angrily experience are rooted in aspects of the human condition, a desire to overcome its own ignorance to the random acts of “evil” by the universe and humanity’s place within its seemingly apathetic cruelty.

Joy’s experience with the multiverse is also reflected in her character as a second-generation Asian American. As I have previously stated, Joy’s experiences are an extension of her mother’s, with additional nuances that are relevant to Joy’s specific generation as an American girl. As indicated by the psychological studies addressed earlier in this thesis, second-generation Asian Americans, while not being completely deracinated, do experience a loss of heritage, which is also reflected through Joy. Furthermore, studies have indicated that some aspects of Joy’s experiences in her mental and emotional struggles are widespread, beginning

⁴⁰ El-Khoury, Toufic, “The Problem of Evil in DC Universe Animated Movies, 2007-2016: DC Multiverse, an Ironic Illustration of Leibniz’s Theodicy?” *Journal for Religion, Film and Media* 3, no. 1 (January 1, 2017): 59–74. doi:10.25364/05.3:2017.1.4. In this article, El-Khoury discusses the thematic evolution of the comics and their respective film adaptations within the DC Universe. He distinguishes the themes and characterizations across three phases: (1) the Golden Age, during which the heroes are perfect and infallible, (2) the Silver Age, when the comics sought greater realism and questioned the morality of its heroes, and (3) the Iron Age, which further emphasizes the darker themes of the Silver Age and its “existential pessimism.” With regard to the Iron Age in particular, he focuses on the rising elements of multiple universes, or the multi-verse, as well as the comics’ increasing predilection for discussing or evaluating the origins of evil.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 67.

from a young age. There is a crisis in American girlhood: “growing up in a social media culture [and the internet], with impossible beauty standards, online hate, academic pressure, economic difficulties, self-doubt, and sexual violence” has compelled one in three high school girls in the U.S. to consider suicide.⁴²

While the multiverse has yet to be discovered scientifically, the internet, I contend, encapsulates a pseudo-multiverse. Through the internet, individuals can learn of different nations—or “worlds”—and peoples, especially on social media and the news. Americans today, especially the youth, are bombarded with loads of information from around the globe and have trouble navigating the incessant waves of information. In fact, the Daniels, the directors of *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, intended to focus on the experience of young Americans with the internet.⁴³ The internet has clearly impacted American youth psychology in a significantly detrimental way including shortened attention spans, changes in long-term memory recall patterns, delayed adulthood and decreased mental health, especially due to the endless number of violent and tragic images and videos from all over the world. In this context, the experience of auto-verse jumping becomes similar to the experience of ADHD, which for many Asian Americans gets left undiagnosed due to cultural leanings regarding mental health.

In relation to the film *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, then, Evelyn’s attention is constantly pulled away to other universes and alternate realities, comparing her own reality to others and causing her “clay pot to leak” and uncontrollably experience other worlds’ realities. On the other hand, Joy is representative of a “child of the internet”, which includes the younger

⁴² Donna St. George, Katherine Reynolds, and Lindsey Bever, “The Crisis in American Girlhood,” *Washington Post*, February 17, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2023/02/17/teen-girls-mental-health-crisis/>.

⁴³ Hanh Nguyen, “The Daniels on the ADHD theory of “Everything Everywhere All at Once,” Paper cuts and Butts,” *Salon*, April 17, 2022. <https://www.salon.com/2022/04/17/everything-everywhere-all-at-once-daniels-adhd/>.

generation, especially Gen Z, that has been exposed to the internet from an early age.⁴⁴

Furthermore, the disparity between parents and children of utilizing the internet compounds the differences in acculturation rates across ethnic groups and within Asian American communities, which exacerbates the psychological conditions in second-generation Asian Americans due to intergenerational cultural conflicts previously discussed.

Through Evelyn, however, I argue that *Everything Everywhere All at Once* presents the discovery of the multiverse as another moment at which humanity rediscovers its own significance and reframes the creation of meaning through choice within Leibniz's theodicy of Best of All Possible Worlds. The uniqueness of one's identity as based on choice seemingly becomes obliterated in the face of the multiverse. At the cathedral of the everything bagel, Jobu Tupaki/Joy hands Evelyn a book that looks similar to Dr. Seuss's *Oh the Places You'll Go*, and inside the book it explains how to perceive their split consciousnesses, "I am your daughter. Your daughter is me. Every single version of Joy is Jobu Tupaki." In addition, as previously discussed, Evelyn also experiences the same phenomenon but becomes a passive nihilist, indifferent in her treatment of others. In this state of mind, Evelyn and her alternates across the multiverse are presented as unharmonious with their respective realities, destroying their connections with everything around them, especially their loved ones. One Evelyn signs the divorce papers; another stumbles in her singing performance; another ruins her co-worker's career; and eventually in another universe, another Evelyn stabs her husband Waymond with broken glass.

Evelyn's fragmented consciousness, as she gains the ability to auto verse-jump, directly reflects Schade's concept of vectorial choice, and the split screen, paired with rapid cross cutting,

⁴⁴ Meg Shields, "'Everything Everywhere All At Once' And How to Survive Being Very Online," published on July 21st, 2022, accessed October 20, 2023 <https://filmschoolrejects.com/everything-everywhere-all-at-once-very-online/>.

is reflective of her fractured psychology.⁴⁵ As mentioned previously, verse-jumping strains the mind, such that to verse-jump for an extended duration would invite contradiction and chaos, overburdening the mind with clashing consciousnesses. In more than one instance, the film uses special effects to make shots appear fractured like broken glass to indicate Evelyn's divergent consciousness as she stumbles to focus her mind on just one universe (and adapts to vectorial choice). As Evelyn learns to auto verse-jump, the number of fractures increase and within each distinct piece is a superimposed image of an alternate Evelyn from a different world. On the other hand, if such cerebral adversities were overcome, Alpha Waymond warns of a consequence he believes to be worse than death: the individual could auto verse-jump, which is what Alpha Evelyn pushed Alpha Joy to do, inadvertently creating Jobu Tupaki.

The chaos Evelyn's mind experiences as it attempts to focus itself amidst the noise of the infinite number of consciousnesses through the auto verse-jumps is surely reflected in her daily life as an immigrant even before her experience in the multiverse. Evelyn must "put different conscious emphasis on different realities that co-exist in parallel—under certain conditions;" she must make "vectorial choices" as both an auto verse-jumper within the multiverse and as an immigrant in America.⁴⁶ From the intersecting problems relating to the IRS or her family, Evelyn experiences mayhem in the "worlds" of her own life. In the "world" of her marriage, the growing distance Evelyn has with her husband reaches a breaking point of divorce. In the

⁴⁵ Christian D. Schade, "Free will in the clustered-minds multiverse, and some comments on S. Sarasvathy's 'choice matters'." *Mind & Society* 19, (July 2020): 323–330. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11299-020-00241-5>. In this article, philosopher CD Schade argues that, via the multiverse hypothesis, human free-will does in fact exist, not as an illusion. Single-universe explanations, Schade claims, can only allow for the existence of free will as an illusion, especially due to the irreversibility of choices and/or action and that consciousness cannot be responsible for any decisions. On the other hand, the multiverse hypothesis, based on the Wheeler/DeWitt equation, links general relativity and the Schrödinger equation and adds a physical explanation to a theory usually pondered by philosophers or social scientists, while also eliminating time as a variable. In this context, there is no objective appearance of wave function collapse, thereby allowing the alternative choices distinctly real possibilities.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 326.

“world” shared with her daughter, the attempts at communication between Evelyn and Joy fail them both so deeply, such that Joy no longer wants her mother involved in her life. In the “world” shared with her father, Evelyn feels neglected and abandoned, a generational pain that she brings to the world she shares with her daughter. And in the “world” shared with her nation, the IRS only creates more legal problems and worries that compound the issues in all of her other “worlds.” Although they constantly collide in Evelyn’s everyday life, these “worlds” are also psychologically so separated such that Evelyn may maintain her sanity and composure but also must choose which to prioritize in balance with the others. It is apparent that Evelyn struggles in her vectorial choices, to configure her priorities across her family and business.

Although Evelyn and Joy/Jobu are the central characters in the film, Waymond’s subversion of his stereotypical characterization is an essential influence on the changing perspectives and behavior of his family.⁴⁷ Representative of the stereotypical Asian male, Waymond is presented as emasculated and unfit to lead his family, especially in Evelyn’s eyes. After peering into her alternate lives, Evelyn believed that Waymond held her back, that her life could have been so much better if he weren’t in it. However, in another universe, in which Evelyn did not follow Waymond to America and becomes a famous actress, Waymond unexpectedly appears, looking successful and sophisticated, and represents what sociologists Kelly Chong and Nadia Kim term the “Model Man.”⁴⁸ Evelyn pursues him affectionately, but

⁴⁷ Hanh Nguyen, “The Daniels on the ADHD theory of “Everything Everywhere All at Once,” Paper cuts and Butts,” Salon, April 17, 2022. <https://www.salon.com/2022/04/17/everything-everywhere-all-at-once-daniels-adhd/>. Director Daniel Kwan comments on his desire for the film’s focus on the Asian American male experience as one that is filled with isolation and an inability to love yourself.

⁴⁸ Kelly H Chong and Nadia Y Kim, ““The Model Man:’ Shifting Perceptions of Asian American Masculinity and the Renegotiation of a Racial Hierarchy of Desire,” *Men and Masculinities*, (November 2021). They argue, based on interviews of U.S.-born and -raised, middle-class, heterosexual Asian American men, that these Asian men were re-thinking their masculinity in alternative forms. Asian men are increasingly combining aspects of both White and Asian masculinity, which the authors term “The Model Man”. More specifically, Asian men are renegotiating their position in the hierarchy of romantic preference by co-opting the currently accepted strategies in terms of White

Waymond pauses and, most importantly, he says something that reframes how Evelyn sees the man she no longer wishes to be bonded to:

“You tell me that it’s a cruel world, and we’re all running around in circles. I know that. I’ve been on this earth just as many days as you. When I choose to see the good side of things, I’m not being naïve. It is strategic and necessary. It’s how I’ve learned to survive through everything. I know you see yourself as a fighter. Well, I see myself as one too. This is how I fight.”

At the same time, the film cross cuts with another Waymond from a different world who desperately exclaims:

“Please, can we just stop fighting? I know you are all fighting because you’re scared and confused. I’m confused too...The only thing I do know is that we have to be kind. Please, be kind, especially when we don’t know what’s going on.”

Referring back to Schade’s discussion of free-will in the multiverse, I argue that Evelyn’s decision to marry Waymond is not something pre-determined. Indeed, as indicated by the scene discussed above, *if given the chance*, Evelyn would make this vectorial choice again and again, as would Waymond. Despite Evelyn’s previous feelings of regret and resentment, Evelyn would therefore make the decision to be with Waymond across any universe at *some point in time* based on a specific choice. Rather than appearing trapped in the cyclical nature of events trapped in time as in time travel films, Evelyn *chooses* to remain “trapped” in the outcome, that being marrying Waymond. In these two concurrent moments, Evelyn reconfigures and respects the identity of the man she loves, adopting the power of Waymond’s googly eyes for herself.

hegemonic masculinity’s emphasis on economic power and the “best” parts of the model minority stereotype, including politeness, nurturance and obedience. As a result, the Asian American male becomes an image of the smart, hardworking, economically successful, and family-devoted man that competes with White masculinity.

In addition, I assert that the cookie serves as a metaphor for Waymond’s philosophy, which strives for peaceful and empathetic coexistence with others and the world—the prerogative of Taoism. More importantly, Evelyn adopts Waymond’s philosophy and tries to transmit those values to her daughter Joy/Jobu. In the film, there is a plethora of circular forms as well as contrasts between black and white, and I would like to focus on the googly eyes and the bagel in alluding to the Tao. In Chinese culture, a circle is meant to suggest “oneness”, “fulfilled”, “perfection”, and “unity.”⁴⁹ Additionally, the Tao is considered to be “a transcendent force and the source of all creation,” with which Taoists seek to be in harmony.⁵⁰ Thus, Taoist’s life goals are to master humility, compassion, and moderation, recognizing that everything is interconnected such that everything an individual does affects the world around them. As an example, Yin and Yang is a well-known circular symbol with a sinuous line that cuts through the middle to suggest the oneness of the conflicting forces within everything.

Similarly, in *Everything Everywhere All at Once* the bagel and the googly eyes are antithetical representations of different truths through which individuals could find harmony with the Tao. On one hand, the bagel serves a metaphorical representation of death as the perfect equalizer. Humanity has no opportunity to disrupt the balanced, intertwined ecosystems of the world and returns to it through death. On the other hand, the googly eyes are representative of the pursuit of balance in life, in trying to find better ways of coexisting with the world and each other. Googly eyes are prevalent throughout the film, and they are introduced by Waymond, who stamps them on objects around his home and laundromat to spread whimsy and kindness.

⁴⁹ Kane Gao, “More than just a circle and a square: Shapes in Chinese Culture,” *Allegravita*. Last modified, April 23, 2012. <https://allegravita.com/2012/04/23/more-than-just-a-circle-and-squares-shapes-chinese-culture/>.

⁵⁰ Golden Lion Academy, “Kung Fu Philosophy and the Tao of Kung Fu,” accessed October 24th, 2022. <https://www.goldenlion.com.au/kung-fu/history-kung-fu/philosophy/#:~:text=Kung%20Fu%20is%20grounded%20in,later%20established%20the%20Shaolin%20Temple.>

As previously discussed, Evelyn finds Waymond's approach to their dire audit comically meaningless and futile. And while auto verse-jumping to train in kung fu, her master from an alternate world asserts, "Kung fu is not just about combat. Even this cookie can be kung fu." The cookies Waymond prepares, from his caring recollection in hopes of loosening Ms. Deidre's grip on their audit, therefore becomes an incredibly meaningful form of Waymond exercising his philosophy. In this context, Waymond, as the father of the family, is similar to the kung fu master who provides the moral pursuits of the film.⁵¹ Martial arts scholars Veronika Partiková and George Jennings employ Lakoff and Johnson's Contemporary Theory of Metaphor, which perceives metaphor not merely as a way of speaking and writing but as a way of thinking and being, to understand how kung fu can serve as a community-oriented practice that results in close interpersonal relationships that are akin to those within families.⁵² These scholars emphasize "effort and time investment, the mastery rather than goal orientation" of a specific task or way of being. In *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, kung fu thus becomes less of a tool for violent confrontation and more of a mastery over an all-encompassing way of being kind to others. Believing in the power of the cookie, henceforth, Evelyn refuses to fight with the hate and anger that Joy/Jobu is driven by. For Evelyn, to give in to the hate, in the face of such constant pain, exclusion, and uncertainty, means to also believe that nothing ethically matters: aggressive violence is not the answer to retaliate against such systemic or cultural oppressive forces.

Put differently, *Everything Everywhere All at Once* is about a daughter who wants to commit suicide while deeply depressed and, out of desperation and anger, confronts her mother, who attempts to persuade her otherwise. The following conversation is from the climax:

⁵¹ Xing Huang et. al., "A Study of Chinese Kung Fu Films Based on the Analysis of Uses and Gratifications Theory," *International Journal of Contents* 18, no. 1 (March 28, 2022): 40–55. doi:10.5392/IJOC.2022.18.1.040.

⁵² Veronika Partiková and George Jennings, "The Kung Fu Family: A Metaphor of Belonging across Time and Place," *Revista de Artes Marciales Asiaticas* 13, no. 1 (January 1, 2018): 35–52.

Joy: *“I don’t want to hurt anymore, and for some reason when I’m with you—it just hurts the both of us. Let’s go our separate ways. Just let me go.”* (The film cross cuts with Joy/Jobu leaping into the everything bagel to commit suicide.)

Evelyn: *“Maybe there is some new discovery out there to make us feel like even smaller pieces of sh-t. No matter what, I still want to be here with you. I will always, always want to be here with you.”*

Joy: *“So what? You’re just going to ignore everything else? You can be anything anywhere. Why not go somewhere where your daughter is more than just this? Here, all we get is a few specks of time where any of this actually makes any sense.”*

Evelyn: *“Then I will cherish these few specks of time.”*

Clearly for Joy, our world is not the best possible world, and Joy, as Evelyn once did, believes she is not the best version of herself. Still, despite her confidence on her path of destruction, she has remained unsure of her truths, hoping her mother can enlighten her to another truth beyond suicide. Among the inscrutable and seemingly random superpositions of particles and the stochasticity of the universe, only a “few specks of time” are somewhat comprehensible for Joy.

Evelyn believes that these few specks of time can retain enough meaningful value to subjectively designate their universe as the best of all possible worlds, that our universe is fine-tuned enough to create even just a few moments in individual lives that can supply them with enough meaning to make them worth living in spite of the existence of the multiverse. At first, Evelyn was repulsed by a universe in which humans have hotdog-shaped fingers. In her disgust, Evelyn fails to be curious, to seek to understand the value of that identity. However, after changing her kung fu style to that of Waymond’s, Evelyn obtains the ability and/or desire to

glean value, to find something to value within anything. No longer does Evelyn fight Joy/Jobu and her followers with physical dominance. Instead, Evelyn retaliates by punching with joy and stamping them with googly eyes, which she can only do by knowing their desires, fetishes, aspirations, and dreams—the aspects that drive them. To Evelyn, within every single world and individual, there is “always something to love.” The film also rapidly cross cuts across her alternate selves in the multiverse to present the intertwining nature of the multiverse and the interconnectivity between the Evelyns and the relationships they destroyed out of apathy and selfishness: as Evelyn changes the superposition of the particles of the everything bagel stapled to the foreheads of those around her in her universe into googly eyes, so are all of her relationships across the multiverse mended. That even in a world with people with hot dog shaped fingers, by whom we may be disgusted, those people can still construct meaningful human experiences and embellish the multiverse with meaning. In this manner, Evelyn indicates that it is only through precisely understanding these differences can we truly perceive the value of their identities and forms.

Evelyn’s value system comprised of these specks may seem contentious to Joy, who lacks the life-experience of her mother and thereby cannot reflect upon her past(s) and embellish her life with meaning to the extent Evelyn can. As Joy/Jobu embodies all of her possible identities, she, unlike her mother, cannot value even herself nor understand her mother’s logic in choosing to remain in their ‘originating universe’ with her even though she can be anyone anywhere. Joy may see her mother as committing the inverse gambler’s fallacy in order to value our universe, as philosopher Neil Manson notes.⁵³ Humanity’s limited understanding of the

⁵³ Neil A. Manson, “Cosmic Fine-Tuning, the Multiverse Hypothesis, and the Inverse Gambler’s Fallacy,” *Philosophy Compass*, August 6, 2022. DOI: 10.1111/phc3.12873. In his essay, Neil Manson explains that the multiverse is a result of cosmic fine tuning for life, such that the multiverse hypothesis renders cosmic fine-tuning

universe, Joy emphasizes, cannot submit that the existence of the multiverse implies that our world had been specifically fine-tuned for life and/or that our universe could possibly be the best of all possible worlds. Yet both Evelyn and Joy agree that the potential “possibilities” of the multi/universe cannot be known in terms of what is definitively known through writing, or even scientifically and therefore “objectively.”⁵⁴ In the vastness of the multiverse, there is always a better universe, and to claim otherwise would be to deny that “there is no best criterion for delineating worthiness.”⁵⁵ For those who refuse to believe that we live in the best of all possible worlds, the question becomes a matter of formulating an objective standard that the quality of the worlds God, or even cosmic fine-tuning/evolution, had created must meet. For Joy, the limited perceptions and random arrangement of the multiverse, together, cannot retain any objective value by which humanity can measure meaning.

Creating such a standard is seemingly unfeasible, based on our current understandings of the multi/universe, in both its design or natural construction, and how to attach value to any given object, event, or action across it. By what means, then, can we prove why *this* specific universe rather than *some* other universe had been fine-tuned for life, especially in a way that allows people to find value within it? Our standards of “goodness” falsely evaluate the goodness of any given universe due to our limited perceptions and understandings of the universe, which

unsurprising. Manson’s rejection of the Requirement of Total Evidence and support for the Predesignation Requirement can be disqualified for my argument for two reasons: (1) the hypothesis then becomes grounded on known elements that seems to only restrict our furthering of definitively understanding the universe, and (2) he disregards differences in identity (of objects or people) as inconsequential to the ‘goodness’ or any quality of a given universe.

⁵⁴ Mark Satta, “Evil Twins and the Multiverse: Distinguishing the World of Difference between Epistemic and Physical Possibility.” *Synthese: An International Journal for Epistemology, Methodology and Philosophy of Science* 198, no. 2 (February 1, 2021): 1157. <https://discovery-ebSCO-com.libproxy.chapman.edu/linkprocessor/plink?id=fac245c8-5e70-32d7-9393-d68c3e8cfc68>.

⁵⁵ D.K. Johnson, “The Failure of the Multiverse Hypothesis as a Solution to the Problem of No Best World,” *Sophia* 53, (February 2014): 453. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11841-013-0397-6>.

Joy realizes.⁵⁶ These values are difficult to ponder because of humanity's inability to perceive methods by which to compare and commensurate the five possible goods used to measure the goodness of the universe: happiness, virtue, simplicity, freedom, and diversity (of scientific phenomena).

The understanding of the stark differences between the identities of Evelyn is essential for Evelyn to be able to evaluate her own. And despite the contradictory decisions their alternate selves may make, the decisions each makes in their respective universes remain significant, especially in their interconnectivity as suggested by the cross-cutting and split screen.⁵⁷ That in another sense, the quantum states of our minds and bodies as a collective human species indeed share the same quantum field, that being the Tao, with each choice having an impact around it. By what method can we evaluate the value of the interrelatedness of everything in our universe?

For Evelyn, each world has a subjective standard of goodness that each individual must determine for themselves after accepting the "meaninglessness" of the universe, including the cherished time a person spends with their loved ones with hot dog shaped fingers or with their imperfect children, the extensions of themselves. At first glance, throughout all the absurdity of life, no universe seems cosmically fine-tuned for life or even created by God for the sake of optimizing life. But upon experience and reflection, like Evelyn, a person can come to understand how they have constructed their own unique goodness with others during their lifetime. Though they are few and unpredictable, the specks of happiness and freedom found from the love within human connection are powerful certainties that defy death as the ultimate

⁵⁶ Michael J. Almeida, "The Multiverse and Divine Creation," *Religions* 8, no. 12 (January 1, 2017): 1–10. <https://discovery-ebSCO-com.libproxy.chapman.edu/linkprocessor/plink?id=8915d5e5-9f78-32b8-9260-86ea512d3809>.

⁵⁷ Refer to my discussion of the scene in which all Evelyns across the multiverse ruin her personal relationships simultaneously.

truth. To perceive these specks of love requires the discarding of disgust, judgement, othering, and exclusion as well as the understanding of the inner worlds of others, all of which are connected.

5 Conclusion: The Googly Eyes (Red Pill) or the Bagel (Blue Pill)

With their newfound measurement of goodness, the Wang family becomes whole once again, even stronger than before, in this comedy of remarriage. Beyond death and taxes, they have rediscovered a certainty they all already have known—they love each other. They now practice kung fu in the same way: in the face of the utter inscrutability of the universe, they wish to treat others with kindness as a form of resistance against cultural hate, in addition to its systemic forms. As the second-generation Asian American, Joy adopts her parents' approach to the systemic obstructions and limitations akin to her parents'. While Joy's parents have been around for model minority stereotyping, which still heavily persists, Joy's experience with Imposter Syndrome presents itself as an extension of her parent's experiences, all of which are indicative of the enraging and overwhelming facets of American culture that continue to afflict many young Americans of marginalized groups that may not feel an acute sense of belonging and thereby experience double consciousness like Joy. Still, through Joy, the West meets the East: the nihilistic ideas and inherent meaninglessness meets the fundamental interconnectedness and harmony of the Tao; the everything bagel meets the googly eyes.

The multiverse and the ability to auto verse-jump supremely blurs the reality of the verse-jumper, epistemologically and perceptually. This thesis has focused on the philosophies of nihilism, Best of all Possible Worlds, and Taoism in order to express the psychologies and ideas of Evelyn and Joy, which find parallels within current the philosophical discourse around the multiverse. However, the film can be read in other philosophical perspectives, primarily Absurdism. Additionally, an aesthetic component this thesis does not address, though alludes to,

is the intertextuality of *Everything Everywhere All at Once*. The film treats other films as other “realities” and/or worlds that stand in parallel with its own, in addition to our own. In a similar vein, this thesis has not focused on Evelyn’s realities that coincidentally includes moments from actress Michelle Yeoh’s life. Additional research that explores the relationship between multiverse concepts and film intertextuality could be helpful in analyzing multiverse film aesthetics as furthering the blur between fiction and reality, especially between the lives of Evelyn and Michelle Yeoh, whereby art imitates life and vice-versa unequivocally.

Within one’s own nation, to be required to extrapolate the goodness within a country filled with draconian laws and malicious hate crimes against Asians and many marginalized or ethnic groups seems absurd. While it may feel easy to succumb to hate and anger, *Everything Everywhere All at Once* begs us to consider what that would mean in terms of living together. We can choose to give into the anger and the aggression and consume the everything bagel. Or like Evelyn and Joy (and Neo), we can don the googly eyes and decide, in spite of the false promises found within the narratives of the land of opportunity and freedom, to find the specks of love among all of the noisy hate. To still say even with minor feelings: I choose to be here with you.

References

- Almeida, Michael J. "The Multiverse and Divine Creation." *Religions* 8, no. 12 (January 1, 2017): 1–10. <https://discovery-ebsco-com.libproxy.chapman.edu/linkprocessor/plink?id=8915d5e5-9f78-32b8-9260-86ea512d3809>.
- Buck Gee, Denise Peck, and Janet Wong. "Hidden in Plain Sight: Asian American Leaders in Silicon Valley." *The Ascend Foundation* (May 2015): 1-32.
- Cheng, Anne Anlin. "'Everything Everywhere All at Once' is a deeply Asian American Film." *Washington Post*, May 4th, 2022. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2022/05/04/everything-everywhere-asian-american-pessimism/>.
- Cheryan, S., & Monin, B. "'Where Are You Really From?': Asian Americans and Identity Denial." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 89, no. 5 (2005): 717-730. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.89.5.717>.
- Chong, Kelly H, and Nadia Y Kim. "'The Model Man': Shifting Perceptions of Asian American Masculinity and the Renegotiation of a Racial Hierarchy of Desire." *Men and Masculinities*, (November 2021). <https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X211043563>.
- Dominicus W. So & Frank Y. Wong. "Alcohol, Drugs, and Substance Use Among Asian American College Students." *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs* 38, no. 1 (March 2006): 35-42.
- Donna St. George, Katherine Reynolds, and Lindsey Bever, "The Crisis in American Girlhood," *Washington Post*, February 17, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2023/02/17/teen-girls-mental-health-crisis/>.
- El-Khoury, Toufic. "The Problem of Evil in DC Universe Animated Movies , 2007-2016: DC Multiverse, an Ironic Illustration of Leibniz 's Theodicy?" *Journal for Religion, Film and Media* 3, no. 1 (January 1, 2017): 59–74. doi:10.25364/05.3:2017.1.4.
- Johnson, D.K. "The Failure of the Multiverse Hypothesis as a Solution to the Problem of No Best World." *SOPHIA* 53, 447–465 (2014). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11841-013-0397-6>
- G. Andersen & Nielsen, E. B. "Biopolitics in the Anthropocene: On the Invention of Future Biopolitics in Snowpiercer, Elysium, and Interstellar." *The Journal of Popular Culture* 51, no. 3 (June 2018), 615–634. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jpcu.12689>.
- Gertz, Nolen. "Nihilism." Published in association with *The MIT Press*, February 27, 2020, <https://aeon.co/essays/if-you-believe-in-nihilism-do-you-believe-in-anything>.

- Hong, Kathy Park. *Minor Feelings*. New York: One World, 2020.
- Hsiu-Lan, Cheng, Shu-Ping Lin and Chu Hui Cha. "Perceived Discrimination, Intergenerational Family Conflicts, and Depressive Symptoms in Foreign-Born and U.S.-Born Asian American Emerging Adults." *Asian American Journal of Psychology* 6 (2015): 108.
- Huang, Xing, Jong-Yoon Lee, and Shanshan Liu. "A Study of Chinese Kung Fu Films Based on the Analysis of Uses and Gratifications Theory." *International Journal of Contents* 18, no. 1 (March 28, 2022): 40–55. doi:10.5392/IJOC.2022.18.1.040.
- Jennifer Lee and Min Zhou. "Comparing Success Frames." *The Asian Achievement Paradox*, 93-114, New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2015.
- Kalibatseva, Z., Leong, F. T. L., Ham, E. H., Lannert, B. K., & Chen, Y. "Loss of Face, Intergenerational Family Conflict, And Depression Among Asian American and European American College Students." *Asian American Journal of Psychology* 8, no. 2 (2007): 126-133. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/aap0000067>.
- Liu, J., Liang, C. T. H., Ngyuen, D., & Melo, K. "A Qualitative Study of Intergenerational Cultural Conflicts Among Second-Generation Chinese Americans and Taiwanese Americans." *Asian American Journal of Psychology* 10, no. 1 (2019): 47-57. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/aap0000121>.
- Lyle, R. R., and D. R. Gehart-Brooks. "Postmodernism and Divorce: Reflections on Gergen's Notion of the Saturated Self in Relation to Modern Divorce." *Family Journal-Alexandria VA-*, January 1, 1999. <https://discovery-ebSCO-com.libproxy.chapman.edu/linkprocessor/plink?id=13889fdc-b5f0-3e0a-966f-9ca075f9421d>.
- Mann, Mali. "Modern Motherhood, Modern Mothering, and New Family Constellations," in *The New Motherhoods*, ed. by Salman Akhtar, (Rowman & Littlefield, 2016): 193.
- Manson, Neil A. "Cosmic Fine-Tuning, the Multiverse Hypothesis, and the Inverse Gambler's Fallacy." *Philosophy Compass*, August 6, 2022. <https://discovery-ebSCO-com.libproxy.chapman.edu/linkprocessor/plink?id=4ba7376c-6cce-38ac-83b2-8ede5316490c>.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. "On Truth and Lies in Nonmoral Sense." <https://www.austincc.edu/adechene/Nietzsche%20on%20truth%20and%20lies.pdf>
- Nitta, Keiko. "An equivocal space for the protestant ethnic: US popular culture and martial arts fantasia." *Social Semiotics* 20, no. 4 (September 2010): 377-392. DOI: 10.1080/10350330.2010.494392.
- Park, Michael. "Asian American Masculinity Eclipsed: A Legal and Historical Perspective of Emasculation through U.S. Immigration Practices." *Modern American* 8, no. 1 (March 15, 2013): 5–17. <https://discovery-ebSCO-com.libproxy.chapman.edu/linkprocessor/plink?id=4ba7376c-6cce-38ac-83b2-8ede5316490c>

com.libproxy.chapman.edu/linkprocessor/plink?id=e563d740-7181-3323-a7f2-1e861b223a85.

Partiková, Veronika, and George Jennings. "The Kung Fu Family: A Metaphor of Belonging across Time and Place." *Revista de Artes Marciales Asiaticas* 13, no. 1 (January 1, 2018): 35–52.

Satta, Mark. "Evil Twins and the Multiverse: Distinguishing the World of Difference between Epistemic and Physical Possibility." *Synthese: An International Journal for Epistemology, Methodology and Philosophy of Science* 198, no. 2 (February 1, 2021): 1153–60. <https://discovery-ebSCO-com.libproxy.chapman.edu/linkprocessor/plink?id=fac245c8-5e70-32d7-9393-d68c3e8cfc68>

Sanders, Steven M. "An Introduction of the Philosophy of Science Fiction Film," in *The Philosophy of Science Fiction Film*, ed. Steven M. Sanders (University Press of Kentucky, 2008), 1-18.

Schade, C.D. "Free will in the clustered-minds multiverse, and some comments on S. Sarasvathy's 'choice matters'." *Mind Soc* 19, 323–330 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11299-020-00241-5>.

Strickland, Lloyd. "Determining the Best of All Possible Worlds." *Journal of Value Inquiry* 39, no. 1 (March 1, 2005): 37–48. <https://discovery-ebSCO-com.libproxy.chapman.edu/linkprocessor/plink?id=3d76f4e5-eea2-36be-9021-254f993416ca>.

Y. Joel Wong, Owen, Jese, Tran, Kimberly, Collins, Dana, and Claire E. Higgins, "Asian American Male College Students' Perceptions of People's Stereotypes About Asian American Men," *Psychology of Men and Masculinity* 13, no. 1 (2012): 75-88.