

Are We What We Watch?: An Interrogation of Current East Asian American Representation in  
Popular Movies

Undergraduate Research Thesis

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by

Elisabeth Burns

The Ohio State University

Project Advisor: Professor Martin Joseph Ponce, Department of English

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## Introduction

For decades, Asian Americans in Hollywood were relegated to playing racist caricatures of what White audiences believed Asians to be — that is, if they were able to get roles on the big screen at all. Yellowface - the practice of White people playing Asian characters - and whitewashing the practice of Asian characters being turned into White ones - worked to render Asian Americans and their experiences invisible for a broader Western audience.<sup>1</sup> Despite this history of poor, and often racist, imagery of Asian Americans, recently, things have begun to change. Hollywood has seen a boom in Asian American representation in the last 15 years, with a jump from 3.4% of all characters in movies being Asian in 2007 to 15.9% in 2022, a majority being of East Asians (Smith et al. 3). This increase in East Asian Americans in popular media can be seen through the release of movies and tv shows such as *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* (2018), *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), *Minari* (2020), *Turning Red* (2022), *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022), and *Beef* (2023) among others which found themselves to be incredibly popular. Despite this new visibility that East Asian Americans suddenly have within a popular media landscape perhaps looking like progress, much of this representation fails to depict the complex realities of Asian American<sup>2</sup> life. Instead, it often perpetuates racial

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<sup>1</sup> I first came into contact with the scholarly discussion of Yellowface and Asian American representations in an Intro to Asian American Studies course during my freshman year at The Ohio State University with Dr. Eunice Uhm. She assigned readings from books such as *Orientalism: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* by Robert G. Lee and a chapter titled "Race and Representation: Asian Americans" by Sonia Shah. This class is also the course where I first encountered Osajima's chapter describing the model minority myth which I cite in this paper and where I first critically engaged with interracial relationships and families and the role that race inevitably plays in these intimate spaces through the reading of the article "A Dilemma of Intimacy" by Anne Anlin Cheng and the New Yorker article that preceded the novel *Crying in H-Mart* by Michelle Zauner which I later read as part of another class. These encounters allowed me to think critically about representation, racial identification, and stereotypes in an academic setting and had been foundational in my understanding of Asian American positionalities as I still build off these works in the present.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this paper I use the term Asian American broadly rather than other common terms such as AAPI or APIDA that are used to describe the pan-ethnic categorization of people who find themselves part of the same political grouping. I did this as Pacific Islanders find themselves facing different struggles and stereotypes within media than other members of the AAPI/APIDA notions – not to leave these

stereotypes that surround East Asian Americans<sup>3</sup> with narratives that reinforce ideas of US exceptionalism, multicultural or colorblind redemption narratives (as defined by Corinne Mitsuye Sugino and further elaborated later) and an East Asian approximation to Whiteness. I define East Asian approximation to Whiteness as a concept similar to honorary Whiteness, a racial status that preserves White racial privilege by elevating select non-white communities as closer to White, while maintaining the centrality of Whiteness in the pre-existing racial hierarchy (Bonilla-Silva, qtd. in Wong 66). But whereas honorary Whiteness is granted by the dominant White racial class, East Asian approximation to Whiteness occurs when East Asians, or more specifically East Asian Americans, locate themselves within proximity to Whiteness — defining themselves, rather than allowing others to define them.

Recent movies that have found wild popularity among American audiences, both Asian and non-Asian, such as *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* (2018) and *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), portray East Asians as commodified, idealized, essentialized, and fungible figures, and, in doing so, produce hollow representations of East Asian Americans. In both movies, the model minority myth as well as various character traits that are imposed onto the movies' leads work to portray characters who can be quiet, respectable, and strong all at once, while working within a predetermined social hierarchy rather than against it. In contrast, the recent movie *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022) does the opposite. The movie challenges what popular representation of East Asian Americans can look like through its depiction of the complexities of

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individuals out in any malicious sort of way. Similarly, I decided not to use the APIDA acronym despite the benefits in acknowledging Desi Americans as part of the Asian American grouping as Asian American as a term still does encompass South Asians, and South Asian is often a more inclusive term than Desi is as it covers more countries.

<sup>3</sup> In this paper, I specifically focus on East Asians because East Asian Americans face different forms of stereotyping and social struggles from Southeast Asians. Even though South Asians face similar stereotyping in popular media in regard to the model minority myth, the current media landscape is still dominated by East Asian stories.

an Asian American reality and its deeply intimate, absurd, and almost uncomfortable story - in the process, confronting White audiences with this reality. It demonstrates that East Asian Americans are complicated beings with histories and feelings that can't be muted — not even within a Hollywood dominated by White ideations.

When put into conversation with one another, these three movies can better paint a picture of what “good” and “bad” Asian American representation looks like, while also recognizing that representation doesn't always equate meaningfulness. Even representation that needs work can be extremely meaningful to those represented.

## **Methodology**

When selecting what movies would be best used to examine current representation of East Asian Americans, there were several factors to consider; accessibility, popularity, and release date were the most important for the purposes of this paper. *To All the Boys I've Loved Before*, *Crazy Rich Asians*, and *Everything Everywhere All at Once (EEAAO)* are all relatively recent movies — the first two having been released in 2018, and *EEAAO* coming out in 2022. All three of them came out following the #OscarsSoWhite movement, which appears to have been a wakeup call to Western audiences about the lack of representation in not only popular but critically acclaimed films. Additionally, these movies are highly accessible: *Crazy Rich Asians* and *Everything Everywhere All at Once* both received box office releases before being added to streaming services, while *All the Boys I've Loved Before* was released straight onto Netflix. Since popular culture is intrinsically tied with the masses, using movies that are easily accessible to a large range of people would be best when examining what “popular representation” is currently doing.

All of the movies chosen coincidentally feature specifically Asian American *women* as the leads in the film. Although that was not a conscious decision that I had made, the fact is still important in thinking about the roles Asian American women play in the creation of popular media and the construction of cultural identity. Hollywood has continuously depicted Asian American women in a way that binds together their race, sexuality, and physical body, painting a highly stereotyped picture of Asian American women that becomes central to the idea that people hold of them. And, according to Charleen Wilcox, this creates a “social demand for Asian/American women to be quiet, passive, and eager-to-please model minorities” (Wilcox 27). The image of the docile Asian American woman, in my opinion, lends itself to popular imaginations of Asian American women as they become an agreeable way in which the Asian identity can be expressed. Seen as culturally passive subjects, audiences are easily able to project their own ideas of Asian Americans onto these women. Two of the movies chosen for this project, *Everything Everywhere All at Once* and *Crazy Rich Asians*, break the mold of the passive Asian/American woman, while *To All the Boys I’ve Loved Before* seems to align with it. The differences in how the Asian American women within the three movies are depicted helps to juxtapose them against one another, and their featuring of Asian American women creates a bridge between the movies that goes beyond just racialized depictions of Asian Americans to gendered ones as well.

Another important note to be made about the selection of the three movies featured in this project is that there is a four year gap from the release of *To All the Boys I’ve Loved Before* and *Crazy Rich Asians* to the release of *Everything Everywhere All at Once*. While four years may not seem like that big of a deal in the grand scheme of things, these four years (2018-2022) were huge for the Asian American community. In 2020, the global COVID-19 pandemic spurred the

spread of anti-Asian rhetoric as China, and subsequently Chinese Americans, were blamed for the spread of COVID-19, which, through the homogenization of Asian Americans within the dominant White view, impacted the entire community, as hate crimes against Asian Americans spiked. One 2020 survey found that more than 30% of respondents had seen someone blaming the Asian population for the spread of Covid-19 virus, and anti-Asian hate crimes increased by 145% in the 16 largest cities in the U.S. (Han et al. 3517). This increase in anti-Asian hate, along with the larger movement of Black Lives Matter that was taking place in 2020, led to huge social justice movements online resulting in the creation of the hashtag #StopAsianHate. Although this may not have had a direct impact on how *Everything Everywhere All at Once* was produced or marketed, the renewed social justice movement within the Asian American community certainly had the possibility to impact Asian audience perceptions of *Everything Everywhere All at Once* as the community was coming out of such a difficult time. Additionally, the difference in genre and institutionalized recognition between *EEAAO* and the other two movies is something to consider when comparing them on a surface level. But, when deciding what qualified “good” and “bad” representation for this project, neither of these things had a large impact — interpreting their representation, rather than their perceived prestige, took precedence.

Defining what constitutes popular within this paper is also critical in explaining the parameters within which these movies were chosen. In this regard, I use the structuralist view of popular culture as a “site of struggle between the subordinate groups and the forces of ‘incorporation’ operating in the interests of dominant groups” in which popular culture becomes the terrain where negotiation and exchange between the empowered and the marginalized take place (Storey 10). I do this in attempts to examine the role that representation may play within Hollywood to mediate the realities of people of color and communicate them to those outside of

themselves. The post-structuralist understanding of meaning making as a process wherein signifiers produce more signifiers, making meaning a momentary, unstable stop in a continuous flow of interpretations is also incorporated in the paper (Storey, 131). This is done so to contextualize how this continual process to understand what current representation means to audiences and thus the meanings derived from it, can change. It was important to keep both ideas in mind as I built my own understanding of how Asian American representation is utilized in today's film industry and how individuals are engaging with and drawing meaning from it.

### ***To All the Boys I've Loved Before* and East Asian Approximation to Whiteness**

A fun film that resonated with young audiences both Asian and non-Asian American, *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* was part of a larger trend of increased Asian American representation, having been released on August 17th, 2018, just two days after *Crazy Rich Asians*. The film is a Netflix original based on the book of the same name by Jenny Han, the first book in a trilogy that rocketed her into international fame. The movie stars Lana Condor as Lara Jean (Song) Covey, a half-White, half-Korean teenager whose five love letters to her former crushes get sent out by her well-meaning but nosy younger sister, Kitty. Three of these letters go to boys at her high school: Lucas James, who comes out as gay to Lara Jean after receiving the letter and becomes one of her close friends; Josh Sanderson, who, at the time, was her neighbor, close friend, and older sister's boyfriend; but most importantly, one of these letters is sent to Peter Kavinsky, a student athlete and the most popular boy in her grade. These letters make Lara Jean, who had previously felt invisible, suddenly feel hypervisible. This is evidenced by both Peter and Josh showing up during her gym period with her letters in hand. In a panic to avoid Josh, Lara Jean tackles Peter and kisses him in an attempt to throw Josh off.



Her decision to tackle Peter kicks off an entire elaborate scheme, in which the two start fake dating to make their respective romantic interests jealous: Josh, in Lara Jean's case, and Jen in Peter's, who is his ex-girlfriend and Lara Jean's high school bully. Part of this plan involves Lara Jean showing up to support Peter during his lacrosse games and going to parties with him to make things more believable. In exchange, Peter begins writing Lara Jean a small love letter every week. Quickly, Lara Jean and Peter settle into a new rhythm of life as Lara Jean finally gains some social currency through her association with Peter and begins to make new friends, while Peter finds himself growing more and more comfortable with the Covey family. Initially, their fake relationship seems to have accomplished what both of them hoped it would, as Josh and Lara Jean settle back into a sense of normalcy once he accepts that she and Peter are dating, and Jen becoming jealous of Lara Jean and Peter's relationship. But, they continue fake dating even after their plan seems to have worked, and Peter even convinces Lara Jean to go on the ski trip with him. She has fun at first but is quickly brought back to Earth after a video of her and Peter making out in a hot tub goes viral. Peter's hesitance to confront Jen about leaking the video, and the fact that Jen knew where Peter would be (implying that he had planned to meet her if Lara Jean hadn't shown up first) become Lara Jean's breaking point, and she breaks off their (fake) relationship.

The video continues to haunt Lara Jean until Peter decides to stand up for her in the hallway of their school. Later, she corners Jen to confront her about the video, something she likely would not have done before gaining a new sense of self-confidence through dating Peter. During this, Jen tells her why she's been so mean to Lara Jean, and Lara Jean finally realizes that she was never "invisible" to her entire school. After this confrontation with Jen and a talk with Josh, Lara Jean comes to the conclusion that she doesn't really want to break up with Peter and

that he had cared about her for their entire fake relationship. So, she does what anyone would do in her situation: she gets over her fear of driving, drives to the school where Peter has lacrosse practice, and runs to give him one last love letter. He tells her that he won't read it — she must read it to him. In the letter, she admits to really liking him, and he tells her that he's in love with her in response. The movie ends with them kissing in the middle of the lacrosse field with Lara Jean's voiceover saying she'd always dreamt of falling in love in a field, harkening back to her love of historical romance novels and the first scene of the movie where she's fantasizing about Josh, but she just never expected it to be one where people play lacrosse. And through the rest of the trilogy of books and movies, Lara Jean and Peter come out of all their ups and downs even stronger than before to get their own version of a romantic, happy ending.

This film is not only fun, but in many ways, it presents new possibilities for Asian American characters in popular media. As a mixed-race Asian American woman, the character of Lara Jean expands on what Asian American representation could include, and it addresses one of the biggest issues with Asian American representation by making the category more inclusive by expanding on what is included within the category of Asian American. Additionally, her relationship with Peter as an interracial couple continues to build on the legacy of media in the aftermath of anti-miscegenation clauses. These clauses such as the Production Codes, which lasted from 1930 to 1956, were arms of Jim Crow segregation and made it impossible for actors of color to portray characters in relationships with White actors (Whaley 167). This legacy has included other mixed-raced couples that feature one Asian American pair.

But, in the case of *To All the Boys I've Loved Before*, it seems as though Peter and Lara Jean portray what a couple would look like in a post-racial world: the pair is never once seen discussing their difference in positionalities together, and race is not something that is addressed

within the context of their relationship at all during the movie. This idea that race could be so inconsequential to their relationship that it doesn't even need to be addressed does, in some ways, provide the audience with new possibilities of what Asian American relationships could be, but it also reinforces a colorblind lens. Colorblind racial theory - or rather Colorblind racism - is an ideology that explains racial inequality as the outcome of nonracial dynamics. Instead of placing minorities as lesser due to moral or biological inferiority, with colorblind racism, White individuals "rationalize minorities' contemporary status as the product of market dynamics, naturally occurring phenomena, and Blacks' [broadly people of color] imputed cultural limitations," according to Bonilla-Silva (Bonilla-Silva, 2). This ideology is often rhetorically used to combat claims of ongoing racial discrimination, and it tends to erase the real problems of racism through the perpetuation of a "post-racial" society in which people no longer "see race."

*To All the Boys I've Loved Before*, while looking like a win for the Asian American community - because it features a mixed-race Asian American character who can just be a normal girl and have her own happy ending - tends to push Lara Jean's racial positionality to the side. Though on the one hand it begins to erase her Asianness, on the other hand, it simultaneously reinforces a myriad of Asian American stereotypes by imposing them upon her character. These stereotypes range from not being able to drive to being the non-confrontational, innocent nerd that fits within the archetype propagated by the Model minority myth. Additionally, it is established almost immediately in the movie that Lara Jean's mother died when she was young, and this disconnect with her Korean heritage through the absence of her original, and likely strongest, link to Korean culture, results in an essentialized version of Korean and broadly Asian American culture, as items like Yakult and Kombucha become stand-ins for other forms of cultural expression in the movie. The perpetuation of popular stereotypes, and the

flattening of Lara Jean and the Asian American - or even more broadly the mixed-race American - experience goes even further and begins to express a sort of East Asian approximation to Whiteness that is only heightened by her predominately White school, her upbringing, with her White father becoming her cultural keeper, and her romance with Peter, a popular White boy. And, while the representation of Asian Americans and their lived experiences within popular media doesn't necessitate the depiction of racialized trauma in order to properly convey the racial identity of the characters, *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* handles Asian American representation in a way that seems to ignore the importance of racial identity altogether — something which problematizes its representation of Lara Jean, her relationships, and how this movie contributes to a larger body of popular Asian American media as a body of work.

Within the film, the neglect of Lara Jean's Asian identity and the ways it impacts her relationships with herself, her family, her friends, and Peter, is mostly attributed to the removal of Lara Jean's mother from the plot. Lara Jean's mother is said to have died when she was a young child, shortly after her little sister Kitty was born, as Kitty makes a comment about not being able to remember their mother. She is hardly seen or spoken about in the movie, save for passing comments, a sentimental story from Lara Jean's father, and a single picture of her in Lara Jean's room. The death of Lara Jean's mother parallels a larger trend in popular media of the removal of the Asian father, which can be seen in *The Joy Luck Club* (1993) and *Gilmore Girls* (2000-2007), and is discussed within David Oh's book *Whitewashing the Movies: Asian Erasure and White Subjectivity in U.S. Film Culture*, in which he conceptualizes whitewashing as "a symbolic intervention of Whiteness that erases Asian/American subjectivity by replacing and displacing it with White subjectivity, thus rendering Asian/Americans as objects in their own stories" (Oh 3). The book not only looks at the historical practices of Whitewashing in media -

practices such as yellowface or making characters of color White - but also looks at more contemporary efforts to erase Asian subjectivity as well, such as the erasure of Asian fathers in popular media in attempts to avoid depictions of and conversations surrounding complicated family dynamics in Asian families.

Lara Jean's close connection to her father, Dan Covey, and the death of her mother, then, not only work to put her into biological and social proximity to Whiteness through being raised within a White household, but also mirrors this larger trend of erasing Asian fathers. Dan Covey's Whiteness, similar to the full-on erasure of Asian fathers in the lives of the daughter in *The Joy Luck Club* and the mysterious absence of Lane Kim's father in *Gilmore Girls*, prevents the exploration of a complicated father-daughter relationship that is often depicted due to the common trope of the uncaring Asian fathers and their culturally U.S. American children (Oh 124). And while loving Asian American parents have become more popular in recent years, the notion of unconditionally loving Asian/American men, but more broadly parents, is still largely incomprehensible to a non-Asian audience. *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* continues to make the idea of an unconditionally loving Asian family incomprehensible and makes the exploration of any Asian familial dynamics impossible through the removal of the only parent with whom Lara Jean could have experienced Asian familial dynamics. In doing so, Lara Jean is then only viewed through a White framework, as she was raised within a White household. It's impossible for her to be raised in an Asian household without the presence of her mother, and this continues to erase the importance of her Asian American identity.

Lara Jean's racial identity is not only largely ignored within her household, but also within her relationship with Peter. Her relationship with Peter Kavinsky places her into proximity to Whiteness within a romantic context, but interestingly, due to the relative lack of

racial importance within the film, her proximity to Whiteness through Peter doesn't come out of a perceived desire to date a White man. Here, I find it important to separate my own readings of Lara Jean and Peter's relationship from the rhetoric of MRAsians, also known as the Asian American men's rights movement, that has grown popularity on the internet recently. The MRAsians movement is defined as movement that co-opts lenses of gender and critical race studies to "disavow the manosphere's implied Whiteness while it positions Asian American male grievances in fundamental opposition to feminism," and in extreme cases it has led to the harassment of Asian American women (Liu 95). This misogynistic movement that vents their anger at Asian American women, feminists, and Asian American women in interracial relationships is one that must be acknowledged when engaging with the notion that Lara Jean's relationship places her in proximity to Whiteness; it is important to note, however, that through the erasure of racial importance in the film, this rhetoric is not mirrored within this paper and has no place in the larger conversation of Lara Jean and Peter's relationship.

Instead, her romantic proximity to Whiteness is something that is interpreted and internalized by an audience that has likely seen the Asian woman-White man romance trope several times before. This common romance trope, that may have contributed to the mindset of the MRAsians, generally reinforces ideas about the desire for Whiteness being "the mediated norm" and the colonizing impulse for White men, and possibly the audience's, desire to possess the bodies of Asian women, while also subtly rejecting the idea that Asian women would date Asian men, which also works in line with the gendered stereotypes regarding the feminization of Asian men (Kang qtd. in Oh 57). But once again, because of the movie's lack of racial importance and Lara Jean's lack of attention to Peter's Whiteness and vice versa, Lara Jean

doesn't find herself desiring Peter because of his racial positionality nor does she actively effeminize Asian men — especially as there are no Asian American men present in the film.

Lara Jean's relationship with Peter, once again, expands on what Asian American romance can look like following the end of anti-miscegenation laws. But instead of being one that reckons with how racial difference impacts intimate relationships, it's often the site in which Lara Jean's racial identity is flattened the most: dialogue surrounding their different positionalities doesn't exist within the film, and Lara Jean is seen conforming to and benefitting from a White system of social currency rather than challenging it as an Asian American woman. This shift in behavior can be seen as Lara Jean comes out of her shell during her fake relationship with Peter, and, through this, the audience can see her change in order to fit in with the people at her high school more and more, hinting at the need to conform to Whiteness or at least the standards of her White classmates in order to maintain a status worthy of Peter, her popular White partner. The audience gets to see her entering a sphere of social influence that was off limits to her before, as suddenly she's being invited to parties, sits with the cool kids at lunch, has more friends, and even goes on the ski trip that year. Lara Jean's rising social status after beginning a relationship with a White man and her need to change in order to gain White acceptance through her peers follows an even larger trend in recent Asian American media, in which Asian American films are considered successful only when White audiences are able to enjoy and resonate with them.

The desire for acceptance from White audiences could also explain all of the ways in which East Asian American stereotypes are reinforced within the film: they fit into the dominant ideas of Asian Americans, and, therefore, do not question a non-Asian audience's assumptions or opinions on Asian Americans. Within the first half hour of the movie, it is established that Lara

Jean is a quiet, high achieving student, who is definitely not part of the popular world that Peter occupies, which is noted by her high school bully Jen on their first day of school. In addition, she is seen backing her car into Peter on the same day, and her little sister is seen repeatedly complaining about how poor of a driver she is, which doubly reinforces the racialized and gendered stereotypes that Asian people, and women specifically, are bad drivers. The reaffirmation of dominant stereotypes about Asian Americans, Lara Jean's upward social mobility within the context of her high school's social currency, and the color-blind lens that the movie uses through the erasure of racial importance within the context of her various relationships all fall into line with the idea of the multicultural redemption narrative, in which characters of color find themselves fitting into White systems of power.

On the idea of a multicultural redemption narrative, Corinne Mitsuye Sugino defines these narratives as the ones that “do the material and symbolic work of producing limited imagination of what it means for Asians to resist racism, by reducing racism to something that can be overcome through upward mobility within an established power matrix” (Sugino 6). This provides a system in which Asian American representation within these multicultural redemption narratives focuses on the liberation from oppression through the vertical movement within the system, rather than the destruction of the current power hierarchy in total. Lara Jean's upward mobility within the context of high school popularity dynamics can almost be seen as “resisting racism,” because, although she was ostensibly bullied because she was a nerd and not because she was Asian, it can be inferred that her character is made to be a nerd because of her Asianness. Thus, her conforming to the White standards of popularity set by her predominantly White high school could be seen as her overcoming a sort of racialized confinement that had placed her in the bottom of the social hierarchy; however, it also abides by



pre-existing structures of power, in the same way that multicultural redemption narratives focus on liberation from oppression through vertical movement within a system rather than the destruction of current hierarchies. Additionally, the character of Lara Jean limits the imagination not just of how Asians can resist racism, but what Asian Americans can be: she continues to fit into these boxes that are set by the comfortability of a White audience, as she first fits the stereotypical image of an Asian nerd, before transforming into a quasi-popular student that gains her social status through White acceptance.

*To All the Boys I've Loved Before*, with its happy ending and Asian American protagonist, is not only a popular movie but one that has become incredibly meaningful for many young people within the Asian American community who find themselves resonating with Lara Jean. Its popularity is evidenced by it being watched by over 80 million Netflix subscribers (Kaplan) and the rise in young adult literature such as *Love Boat, Taipei*, which also centered Asian American young adults and reached the NYT bestseller list (Gandhi). The meaning that Asian American audiences have been able to draw from this movie needs to be recognized in order to acknowledge the fact that representation, even when it perpetuates racist stereotypes or erases the importance of racial identity, can still have the ability to be meaningful to some audiences. But, at the same time, the representation of Lara Jean's Asianness, or relative lack thereof, within *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* works to create a movie that commodifies Asian American experience: Lara Jean's experiences as an Asian American woman are erased, resulting in an almost exploitative use of an Asian American character to cater to growing demands for more equal representation, without doing the work of trying to change the system under which Asian American characters have been limited, caricatured, or erased. Additionally, the lack of acknowledgement of Lara Jean's racial identity prompts the idea of Asian American

fungibility, as nothing in Lara Jean's story marks her as uniquely Asian. Since race is not portrayed as a defining feature in the film in regard to Lara Jean and her relationships, almost anyone could be swapped out with Lana Condor, who plays Lara Jean, and the plot would still make sense. Asian American fungibility, and the lack of importance regarding Lara Jean's Asianness within the film, implies that Asian Americans are replaceable or placed in such close proximity to Whiteness that their racial identities no longer have an impact on their lives. This continues to perpetuate the invisibility of Asian Americans even when they have representation in popular films that make Asian American bodies hypervisible.

Through the commodification of Lara Jean's racial identity and the perpetuation of Asian American fungibility, *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* finds itself in the category of recent popular films that boast Asian American representation without enacting social progress. And, like these other films, it falls into the traps of messianic visibility, a concept that explains the process in which audiences equate representation with progress or documentation of racial justice. *Crazy Rich Asians* is a prime example of messianic visibility, and within the next section, the ways in which it fails to promote true progress toward racial justice will come to light.

### ***Crazy Rich Asians* and Messianic Visibility**

Continuing with the idea of messianic visibility that is glimpsed in *To All the Boys I've Loved Before*, the movie *Crazy Rich Asians* and the culture surrounding its release amplifies this idea and the perceived importance of Asian American representation in popular media. One of the highest grossing romantic comedies within the last decade (Bruncati) and the first film since *The Joy Luck Club* to boast an all-Asian cast, *Crazy Rich Asians*, which is based on the book of the same name by Kevin Kwan, was released on August 15th, 2018 and was a huge box office success, seeing support from audiences both Asian and non-Asian Americans. The movie stars

Constance Wu as Rachel Chu, an economics professor at NYU and daughter of a Chinese immigrant, as she travels to Singapore with her boyfriend Nick Young, to attend his best friend's wedding and meet his family for the first time. Rachel soon realizes that her boyfriend is not just any history professor, as Nick surprises Rachel with a first-class flight to Singapore and reveals that his family is incredibly wealthy. With only the international flight to process this information, Rachel is quickly thrown into an entirely new world — that of the ultra-rich.

Initially, it seems like Rachel may be able to fit in with the people around Nick, including Nick's best friend Colin and his fiancée Araminta, as they spend the evening together jumping from hawker stall to hawker stall enjoying a variety of food and their time together. Rachel's, and possibly the audience's, excitement for her adventures in Singapore continues as she goes to visit a college friend, Pek Lin, who she hasn't seen in years, and who also turns out to be extremely wealthy. However, during her lunch with Pek Lin and her family, Pek Lin reveals Nick isn't from just any wealthy family; instead, his family is the richest and most powerful family in Singapore, having been one of the very first families to come from China and start developing in the country. Pek Lin also informs Rachel about the possibility of Nick's family being "posh" and "snobby" because of their status, and offers to give her a new outfit to help her fit in more at Nick's grandmother's tan hua party, where Rachel will meet the entire family. Most importantly, it's where Rachel will be meeting Nick's mother Eleanor and his grandmother, endearingly known as Ah Ma, both of whom are powerful matriarchs within the family.

However, when Rachel goes to meet Eleanor, she realizes that it will take a lot more than a shiny dress and attempts to connect with Eleanor through kindness and replicating culturally oriented mannerisms to win her over, as Eleanor oozes disdain for Rachel and her Americanness.

It's not just Eleanor, though, that Rachel seems to misstep with, as she has a myriad of awkward interactions during the course of the party. The party isn't all bad, however, as Rachel meets Oliver, Nick's cousin, who runs errands for the aunts, and gets closer with Pek Lin. These two will eventually become her allies in her attempts to prove Eleanor wrong. Not to mention, during the party she seems to earn the favor of Nick's grandmother, who offers to teach her how to make her dumplings and invites her back to do so.

After Rachel has a disastrous time at Araminta's bachelorette party, she goes back to Nick's grandmother's house to make dumplings with the family, including his two aunts, Oliver, Eleanor, Astrid (his favorite cousin), and his grandmother. Rachel, who doesn't have a large family, enjoys her time listening to his family joke around and tell stories while folding dumplings. It's during this time together that Nick's grandmother doubles down on her affection for Rachel. This obvious affection for Rachel deepens the rift between her and Eleanor, as Eleanor never had the favor of her mother-in-law. This ultimately pushes Eleanor to corner Rachel and tell her point blank that she will never be enough for her son. Despite Rachel's best efforts to combat Eleanor's claims by showing up to Colin and Araminta's wedding in a gorgeously elaborate dress and making friends with an esteemed guest, Eleanor is relentless and reveals that her private investigator found out the truth about Rachel's family history that had been hidden from her by her mother.

It's during this confrontation that Rachel loses the approval of Nick's grandmother and she runs away from the party saying that she doesn't want any part of Eleanor's family. In a depressive state, she ghosts Nick for days, and only gets out of bed once her own mother flies to Singapore to comfort her and come clean about why she fled China. Her mother's presence gives her the confidence to see Nick, and he proposes to her there on the spot, even offering to walk

away from his family for her. But, before we find out what she said, Rachel confronts Eleanor at a mahjong hall where they compete in a tense game of mahjong, during which Rachel asks Eleanor why she has so much disapproval for her. During the game, Rachel folds her winning hand and walks away from Eleanor, admitting that she turned Nick down because of the position Eleanor put them in. Despite losing the game of mahjong, Rachel walks away a winner: she tells Eleanor that she knows she's enough, and that when Nick finds another woman and Eleanor has the family she imagines, she owes it all to her. This changes Eleanor's mind about Rachel, and she ends up giving Nick her own engagement ring for him to re-propose to Rachel with, which he does just as she's boarding her flight. This time, she says yes.

*Crazy Rich Asians* stands out as a vibrant film that depicts realistic tensions between Asians and Asian Americans and the unique lived experiences of the Asian Americans it follows, while featuring an all-Asian cast and a happy ending. However, as alluded to previously, the film also perpetuates ideas of messianic visibility. It doesn't just continue these ideas though: *Crazy Rich Asians* may be the pinnacle of messianic visibility as defined by Melissa Phruksachart in her article "The Bourgeois Cinema of Boba Liberalism," which was written in part as a direct response to the film and the way in which its top-down marketing strategy promoted the film as something like an antidote to institutional and internalized racism. In the article, Phruksachart defines messianic visibility as "an overinvestment in the idea that insistently normative cinematic identification possesses transformative, even curative, political and personal potential" (Phruksachart 61). She identifies trends such as #GoldOpen - a call to action on social media by Gold House that encouraged Asian American celebrities, media professionals, nonprofits, and community organizations to buy out entire theaters on opening weekend for the movie, which resulted in 350 theater buyouts across the country (Yang, qtd in. Lopez 145) - as part of a larger

problem with *Crazy Rich Asians* and how it contributes to messianic visibility. #GoldOpen encouraged the idea that a minoritized group could achieve personhood only upon their recognition as marketable, even if they don't realize it, and, through doing this, it contributed to the messianic visibility's trait of demanding labor toward racial catharsis (Phruksachart).

With Phrukachart's idea of messianic visibility in mind, audience engagement and the movie's marketing become incredibly important when thinking about what messages *Crazy Rich Asians* sends to those watching and engaging with it. The rhetoric that surrounded its release was based on White acceptance and valuation, suggesting that Asian American media would need to find value within a White dominated market in order to be successful and, indeed, for the creation of Asian American media in the mainstream to continue (Wong 66). In promoting this idea that Asian American support for film is synonymous with support for Asian American generally, this creates the circumstances under which messianic visibility takes place, and, in doing so, the movie, while hailed as groundbreaking, instead reinforces the existing power structures within Hollywood. Jon Chu, the director of *Crazy Rich Asians*, personally finds himself working within the system rather than tearing it down — which may be understandable as someone who works within the industry but doesn't align with the notion that racial progress needs to be made which is something the people hailed *Crazy Rich Asians* for doing. As he stated in an interview about the movie, he wanted it to convey that “old, classic, Hollywood movies could have starred Asians with just as much style, just as much pizzazz” (Tseng-Putterman). Chu's statement - along with Kwan's assertion that “the story transcends race,” made after seeing White men admit to crying during the film (Sugino) - convey a desire to align Asian Americans and Asian American subjectivity with their White counterparts. While this tries to break past the stereotype of the perpetual foreigner for Asian Americans (Wong 66), it places the movie and its

subjects in closer proximity to Whiteness through the centering of Whiteness, relationships to Whiteness, and White acceptance. And from this point of view, for Asian Americans to gain White acceptance, they must continue to exist within structures of power that promote White supremacy, even if their media seems to indicate that those structures are disappearing. This is what Corinne Mitsuye Sugino addresses with her idea of multicultural redemption narratives, which can be seen in both *Crazy Rich Asians* and *To All the Boys I've Loved Before*.

The multicultural redemption narrative, defined by the production of “a limited imagination for what it means for Asians to resist racism by reducing racism to something that can be overcome through upward mobility within an established power matrix,” in both *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* and *Crazy Rich Asians*, conditions audiences to reinvest in the same power dynamics that have historically marginalized them through the inclusion of diverse faces (Sugino 6). Audiences coming to watch *Crazy Rich Asians* had already encountered the notion that investing in the movie, despite the ways in which its representation and production reinscribe existing power structures, would mean investing in social progress. But through the upward social and class mobility that is demonstrated through the Young family’s immense wealth - demonstrated in the opening scene that shows Eleanor buying an entire hotel after her family was turned away at their door subsequently using her wealth to “overcome” or “beat” racism - the movie itself implies the possibility of racial reconciliation through capitalist means. This furthers the idea that the film’s success within the market would somehow equate to racial progress, while also teaching the audiences the function of mimicking power instead of abolishing it. The focus on the class status of the Young family is also important to the discourse of the model minority myth. Although the term is used mainly in the US context and heralds Asian Americans and their successful assimilation into society as proof of the values of

American meritocracy and capitalism, *Crazy Rich Asians* places the model minority myth on a global scale for an American audience.

The model minority myth - a term first coined in the 1960s in articles by both the *New York Times* and *U.S. News and World Report* about Japanese and Chinese Americans and has since spread to apply to Asian Americans more broadly - characterizes Asian Americans as people who are high-achieving economically and educationally, hardworking, deferential to authority figures, and good at math and science (Osajima). This stereotype is often used in popular media by American filmmakers when constructing Asian American media in order to create characters that appeal to a broader audience and become legible through the upholding of dominant ideas about Asian Americans. In *Crazy Rich Asians* specifically, the model minority myth, along with the assumption that the Asians in the film are not too exotic - as evidenced by their Christianity, class, and education status - work to create subjects that meet the criteria for White acceptance. The fact that the film was seen as a landmark for Asian Americans while also catering to a White perspective and putting pressure on Asian audiences to make the film appear successful in White dominated markets perpetuates the idea that Asian liberation is only possible within the confines of vertical movement through an existing hierarchy of power, limiting the imaginations of Asian Americans for the possibilities of true racial liberation, wherein Asian Americans are not confined to approximating the highest form of domination, rather they are able to be true equals without upholding systems of White supremacy. And, while the representation of Asians and Asian Americans within *Crazy Rich Asians* may have been significant in that it was the first all-Asian cast in 25 years, the way it engages with the model minority myth and does little to recognize racial inequality only works to commodify the Asian



American experience; that is, the representation worked to move the market, but not to effect social change.

White audiences' reception of the movie shouldn't just be considered in how it portrayed a model minority and assimilationist view of Asian Americans though. It should also be considered when thinking about the depiction of US exceptionalism within the film, as the conflict between Eleanor and Rachel pits neo-Confucian against American ideals. From their first meeting, the movie communicates that Eleanor represents a sort of Asian conservatism. For example, she remarks, "following one's passions, how American," in response to Rachel's description of her career. The audience later realizes that Eleanor is upholding a tradition of filial piety, one that demands individuals uphold their responsibilities to their family, through the way she treats Nick, as well as the importance of family values throughout the film. Eleanor's response also implies that Rachel, with her freedom to follow her passions and willingness to do so, becomes the representative of the classic American idea that in the US anything is possible if you try hard enough. And, though set in Singapore, the Young family's Chinese heritage seen by the use of Cantonese during the dumpling scene, Chinese cultural conventions throughout the film, and the opening quote from Napoleon regarding China, all point to the importance of Chinese culture within the film. In her article "Crazy, Rich, When Asian: Yellowface Ambivalence and Mockery in *Crazy Rich Asians*" Wong uses the Napoleon quote at the beginning of the film, "Let China sleep, for when she wakes, she will shake the world," specifically to point toward China being at the center of the geopolitical imagination of Asia in *Crazy Rich Asians*. She states:

... the allusion to China and the predominant focus on Chinese characters and culture in its portrayal of multiracial Singapore suggest that it is China and not Singapore that is

central to the geopolitical imagination of Asia in CRA. CRA's villainizing of the Chinese/China must thus be read in the context of geopolitical race relations between the U.S. and China. (Wong 67)

This, then, frames both Eleanor and her values - and by extension China and its values - as the antagonists of the film, replicating the tense relationships between the U.S. and China and the villainization of China in Western media within the struggle between Eleanor and Rachel.

Through the recreation of the conflict between the United States and China on a very personal level with the conflict between Eleanor and Rachel, the movie then also creates a sort of U.S. exceptionalism narrative, as Rachel beats Eleanor with her passion and determination despite Eleanor's power and wealth. And, as American ideals trump those seen as traditionally Asian ideals, *Crazy Rich Asians* seems to communicate the idea that, while the Youngs, or more broadly read as Asians as whole, may be extremely wealthy, they will in some ways always be morally corrupt or poor. By contrast, in America you can start off as the daughter of a poor immigrant mother and not only rise to a higher socioeconomic class, but also rise past Asian ideologies, instead subscribing to those of the American Dream, as Rachel has in the film. This point blank comparison between the American Dream mentality, one that is hyper-individualistic, and filial piety, a principle that helps to create a collectivist mindset, also creates a conversation between East and West that lacks nuance as it points to one as wholly good and one as wholly bad, while largely ignoring the flaws in the American Dream and the potential benefits of a collectivist mindset. This lack of nuance creates a one-dimensional representation of Asians, Asian Americans, and the relationships that occur between them, as ideological differences within families are often a point of contention that families have to mediate, rather than there being a clear winner or loser. And through this one-dimensional representation,

similar to the representation of the model minority, the Asian American identity gets commodified and packaged so that White audiences are able to understand it, but only on their terms — terms which erase the complicated lived experiences of Asian Americans so as to not question dominant opinions of them.

Although in different manners, *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* and *Crazy Rich Asians* do similar symbolic work in displaying diverse faces in popular media while commodifying the experiences of Asian Americans in order to gain a sort of White acceptance and, subsequently, do little work toward racial progress. In many ways, especially with the conflict between Eleanor and Rachel, *Crazy Rich Asians* showcases the tensions to be had within Asian family structures - something that was impossible in *To All the Boys I've Loved Before*, due to the loss of Lara Jean's mother and its colorblind discourse - and creates characters and scenarios that are uniquely Asian. But, despite the fact that the scenarios are Asian American within the film, it doesn't erase the fact that the image of Asian American experiences being depicted in this box office hit are images that White people hold of Asian Americans in order to find success under a preexisting, power hierarchy. Both of these movies have similar pitfalls, and one of the largest of these is their depiction (or perhaps lack thereof) of the Asian family unit, which leads this discussion to the film *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, a film which heavily features the dynamics within intergenerational family units, and questions the possibility of colorblindness, model minorities, and U.S. exceptionalism through the showcasing of the Wang family and the struggles they face together.

### ***Everything Everywhere All at Once* and Absurdist Breakthroughs**

*Everything Everywhere All at Once* is an A24 film by Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert that was initially released at the South by Southwest film festival on March 11th, 2022, before

getting a wide theatrical release on April 8th, 2022 and grossing over \$100 million (Rubin). The film stars Michelle Yeoh, Ke Huy Quan, and Stephanie Hsu as Evelyn, her husband Waymond, and their daughter Joy, respectively as they find themselves to be key figures in a conflict that spans the multiverse. It follows the couple, working class laundromat owners who are struggling to keep their business afloat, as they handle their tax audit. But, during their IRS meeting, Alpha Waymond, a Waymond from a different universe, makes contact with Evelyn and gives her a headset. Alpha Waymond writes down a set of instructions for Evelyn that include switching shoes to the wrong feet, closing her eyes and imagining she's in the janitor's closet, and pressing the green button on her headset once she's done these things. After following these instructions, Evelyn is transported into the janitor's closet in another universe to meet up with Alpha Waymond where he explains who he is and warns her of a great evil that is destroying the different universes in the multiverse. Their time is limited, however, as this version of Waymond is killed by a different universe's version of Dierdre, the tax auditor, who is a follower of Jobu Tupaki, the great evil who is wiping out universes.

The audience soon finds out that Jobu Tupaki is some multiversal version of their daughter Joy, as she verse-jumps from the burner universe Alpha Waymond took Evelyn to during his explanation into their universe, where Alpha Waymond has come back to get Evelyn out of a tricky situation at the IRS. He continues to explain that every decision in life creates a different timeline, or universe, and the farther away you get from the universe you know, the bigger the differences are from compounding decisions. In his universe, Evelyn was a scientist who was the first to make contact with other universes. She found a way for people to temporarily connect their consciousness with another version of themselves, giving them access to all their memories, skills, and emotions, which was termed "verse jumping." Verse jumping is

how Alpha Waymond contacted Evelyn to begin with, how Jobu Tupaki has followed Evelyn into her universe, and how Evelyn will learn to fight in the movie. But it also requires the individual to do strange or uncomfortable things, like chewing chewed gum, eating an entire tube of chapstick, or placing paper cuts in between your fingers, among other improbable actions that act as the launchpads seen within the film. Evelyn isn't entirely sold on the importance of verse jumping or fighting against Jobu Tupaki, until Alpha Waymond begins describing the subtle shifts in the universe that have resulted from Jobu Tupaki's actions; because of these shifts, nothing feels quite right and everyone is left wondering "How can we get back?"

Shortly after Waymond informs Evelyn that he has been looking for someone to stand up to Jobu Tupaki and that he believes it to be her, the two are interrupted by the Dierdre from the burner universe (the universe Alpha Waymond had originally taken Evelyn to that has succumbed to Jobu Tupaki), who now has the skills of a sumo wrestler. Evelyn, who has largely been thrown into this multiversal war against her will, is suddenly forced to learn to verse jump in order to protect herself, which begins the long string of different universes with which she makes contact as she uses the skills of different versions of herself as a kung-fu master and famous actress. This is the first of many universes that she jumps to throughout the movie, some of which include universes where everyone has hot dog fingers, where she's a hibachi chef and her competitor has a raccoon controlling his actions, and where she's a Beijing Opera singer, among many others. She's able to get them out of trouble for the time being, and Waymond finally explains how Joy became Jobu Tupaki: Evelyn had pushed her too hard when training how to verse jump and her mind became fractured in the Alphaverse. Instead of dying like most would have, Alpha Joy (Jobu Tupaki) now experiences every universe all at the same time, giving her the ability to command the infinite knowledge and power of the multiverse. In

experiencing this, she's lost morality and any belief in objective truth. Waymond gets done explaining this just as Jobu Tupaki finally finds them in Evelyn's universe, and this is when Evelyn is forced to confront Jobu Tupaki - and the fact she's not truly her daughter - for the first time.

Once cornering Evelyn, Jobu Tupaki explains the everything bagel she created by putting literally everything, such as her hopes and dreams, every dog breed, personal ads on craigslist, sesame, poppy seed, salt, etc., onto a bagel to reveal what she believes to be the truth, which is that nothing matters. It's here when Evelyn's father, Gong Gong, who they'd taken to the IRS with them to avoid leaving him alone with Joy's girlfriend Becky, comes back, and subsequently throws Jobu Tupaki into a wall to get her away from Evelyn. They detain Joy after this, but Evelyn refuses to let anyone hurt her daughter. She instead tries to understand Joy in an attempt to save her, even as the fighting continues with people from the Alphaverse coming to try to eliminate Jobu Tupaki. It's during these fight scenes in the IRS building that Jobu Tupaki is able to find Alpha Waymond in his universe and kill him. Evelyn, while facing Jobu Tupaki, begins to split into the various versions of herself, as she begins to see everything everywhere all at once and ends up back in the laundromat for their Lunar New Year party that they'd originally planned, before going on a walk through several different universes with Jobu Tupaki, and coming to see the everything bagel in person. Here, she begins to experience every universe at the same time as Jobu has done.

After she and Evelyn share a moment of understanding together as rocks, Jobu Tupaki reveals that the everything bagel wasn't created to destroy everything, as the Alphaverse had thought, but rather herself. Evelyn, shortly after, shares special moments with Waymonds of various universes, with her Waymond telling her to be kind — something which through his

silliness in all of her memories he's able to convince her to do. She continues to fight for her daughter with kindness, facing her own father and his treatment of her, and refusing to treat Joy the way he had treated her. It takes her expressing her feelings and desire to always be with her daughter, as she is and not as she could be, despite all of the hardship and her willingness to cherish the specks of time that do make sense, to convince Joy to stay. The family begins to cry together in the parking lot of the laundromat as mother and daughter embrace upon finally understanding one another, and the movie ends with Joy going with her parents to their IRS appointment this time. Only this time, Evelyn has accepted Becky, she and Waymond are a more happy couple, and their IRS appointment goes better.

*Everything Everywhere All at Once (EEAAO)* is an emotional story about Asian immigrant families trying to connect despite cultural and ideological differences and the challenges they face both within and outside of the home, all the while being an absurdist comedy. The film fits both definitions of absurdism set by Oxford Languages, a branch of the *Oxford English Dictionary*: it is defined as “An illogical, incongruous, or ridiculous thing” or “The philosophy, first propounded by Albert Camus, that human beings exist in a purposeless, chaotic universe in which attempts to find meaning are futile,” and the movie is not short on scenes that are purposefully bizarre and feature the existential dread of existing in a world where nothing makes sense (“Absurdism”). The movie is incredibly ridiculous in its hilarity, offering scenes such as Jobu Tupaki turning a police baton into a dildo, or an entire universe where humans evolved with hot dog fingers. And in doing so, it creates moments that prompt a certain level of uncomfortability that people likely don't expect to see when encountering Asian American media. Because Asian Americans are often perceived as docile, model citizens within dominant thought, the absurdist moments, like Alpha Waymond beating security officers with

his fanny pack while resisting arrest, and Joy dressing a security guard like Carmen Miranda and dancing with him before using him as a human shield, confront the expectations that dominant audiences have for Asian Americans. Direct confrontation with a new Asian American subjectivity in which they turn out to be different than expected can create uncomfortable moments for White Americans, who are forced to expand how they define Asian American and confront why they expect Asian Americans to act any differently from the wackiness seen in the film.

The film is doubly uncomfortable, though, as many Asian immigrant mothers, from what I've gathered anecdotally from members of my own community (one that is largely Chinese American with many having their own immigrant parents), find themselves disliking, misunderstanding, or rejecting the film. Many of these Asian immigrant parents might struggle to connect with the movie because it holds up a mirror to private aspects of their lives, as they could see themselves reflected in Evelyn, a woman who struggles to understand and empathize with her daughter. Or, they could be uncomfortable with the usage of the multiverse as a tool for expanding on the Asian immigrant experience. Anne Anlin Cheng elaborates in her *Washington Post* article "'Everything Everywhere All at Once' is a deeply Asian American film," saying, "the multiverse acts as a metaphor for the immigrant Asian American experience, or a convenient parable for the dislocations and personality splits suffered by hyphenated citizens. It also becomes a rather heady vehicle for confronting and negotiating Asian-pessimism." Asian-pessimism is her play on Black-pessimism, in which lives are endlessly inflected and informed by anti-Black animosity and experiences of pain and loss (Cheng). The uncomfortability experienced by both non-Asian and Asian American audiences does the work in making both the "in" and "out" groups rethink their own definitions of Asian American subjectivities and creates



questions of what Asian Americans could be if not the model minority, as the model minority myth is blown to smithereens in the film.

*Everything Everywhere All at Once* is a movie that rejects the model minority myth, as well as the idea of US exceptionalism that is seen in other films, through the use of absurdism and its anti-authoritarian nature. It continues to prove that East Asian immigrants will not always have the opportunities for success within the United States, even if they pull themselves up by the bootstraps and work hard. Evelyn and Waymond's immigration story is far from the ideal as they, despite their best efforts, own a failing laundromat with rude customers that's on the verge of being foreclosed upon, and, with the hardships they've faced after immigrating to the United States, their family is in shambles. The idea of US exceptionalism and the possibility of an American Dream is dismantled through their laundromat as well, as it harkens back to the exclusion of Chinese immigrants in the workforce, relegating them to wash clothes in Exclusion-era California, and reminds those watching about the historical past of Chinese immigrants. Additionally, no one in the Wang family - in Evelyn's initial universe - is highly educated or high achieving, two markers of the model minority myth, as it is established that Joy dropped out of college, and it is implied that neither Evelyn nor Waymond are highly educated, as the model minority myth would expect them to be.

Joy as a daughter, despite her filial piety in continuing to come back home despite the pain it causes her, also takes apart the model minority myth as she is unable to be the model Asian American child. In her book *Ingratitude: The Debt-Bound Daughter*, Erin Khuê Ninh states, "The assimilationist, individualist, upwardly mobile professional class of the model minority is, for familial intents and purposes, Asian America's model children" (Khuê Ninh, 11). Through saying this, Ninh identifies the trend that the model minority myth is not just

propagated by a White, dominating class, but it is also replicated within Asian immigrant households as they expect their children to become the model minority the dominating class has identified. This perceived need to become the model minority and subsequent replication of the model minority within Asian immigrant households and by Asian parents is directly linked to "tiger parenting" as Asian parents push their children to succeed in the ways they couldn't.

Joy's sexuality is another point of contention between her and her mother; Evelyn struggles to understand her daughter's homosexuality. This heteronormative expectation is not unique to the model minority myth, but its upholding by Evelyn within the Wang household speaks to another way in which Joy has failed to be part of the dominating class as a young, gay, Asian American woman. But in *EEAAO*, Evelyn's acceptance for her daughter by the end of the movie, despite the fact Joy is not the model child, breaks through the mold of model minority replicating parents and does the symbolic work of showing the audience that other options for familial relationships are available for Asian immigrant families.

Additionally, Jobu Tupaki's nihilistic destruction of various universes in attempts to find the Evelyn that could finally understand her fits the secondary definition of absurdism while also defying the notion of US exceptionalism, as Jobu Tupaki is, in part, a result of her parent's failed American Dream. The traumas experienced by the American children of Asian immigrant parents are undoubtedly wrapped up in the feeling of loss associated with the failing of the American Dream for Asian immigrant parents. This feeling of loss, along with institutionalized racism, inform the first generation experience, as they are expected to compensate for familial losses by "successfully navigating hostile social and political waters" which heightens the stakes of racialized failure (Ninh 5).

*Everything Everywhere All at Once* is a deeply moving movie that, in its absurdity, is truly about the desire to be understood by those you love and who love you in the face of existential dread. It also beautifully depicts the struggles of intergenerational families in Asian/Asian American households, specifically in the context of the mother-daughter relationship. The nuance present within *EEAAO*'s depiction of the mother-daughter relationship and the tension that arises from immigrant parents having differing values from their American-born children differs from the other two movies. *Crazy Rich Asians* created a good-bad dichotomy when thinking about Asian values versus American values, and *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* eliminated the possibility of creating a nuanced mother-daughter relationship through the death of Lara Jeans' mother. The tension between Evelyn and her father also contributes to creating a dynamic depiction of familial relationships, as his harshness toward her and disappointment in having a daughter translated into Evelyn's relationship with Joy — until the end of the movie when Evelyn refuses to continue treating Joy as Gong Gong had treated her.

With the two intergenerational relationships displayed within *EEAAO*, filial piety and the duty - or even desire - to be with your parents even if it is painful is displayed by both Evelyn, as she takes care of the father who rejected her, and Joy, as she continues to visit Evelyn even if she doesn't understand her. This tension, between wanting to be around someone because they're family and feeling as though you have the responsibility to care for them despite the indescribable feelings of hurt that comes with being with them, is something that many young Asian American women with immigrant parents grapple with. And, through the depiction of the very intimate relationship between mother and daughter, *EEAAO* creates a very real image of Asian Americans even amongst all of the outlandish elements of the film and, in a broader sense, it creates a very real image of Asian America with the way in which Evelyn is depicted.

The use of code switching within *Everything Everywhere All at Once* is something that makes this film not only undeniably Asian, but it also reflects the multiple directions that Asian immigrants are pulled in when trying to juggle their lives in the United States. In an article for *Film Quarterly*, Jason Coe identifies code switching for Asian immigrants as a resource for adapting to, resisting, or asserting power, saying that the practice indicates “multiple belongings and allegiances, but each switch illustrates a shift in power dynamics based on how that code is normalized in a given space” (Coe). Code switching also works against an assimilationist view of Asian Americans, as it heightens their difference through the use of their native languages, making the code switching in *EEAAO* a reminder of the realities of Asian immigrant households. It also highlights how communication in immigrant households can prove difficult, contributing to the struggle to connect as Joy struggles to think of words in Mandarin when speaking to Gong Gong and, unlike her parents, she does not confidently speak Mandarin throughout the film. Code switching is also a parallel for verse-jumping, as verse-jumping, like speaking one’s native language, becomes a means for self-empowerment; Asian immigrants may find themselves feeling more comfortable or more articulate in their native languages, and verse-jumping provides more confidence and skill to the characters of the movie.

While featuring the complex realities of the lived experiences of Asian Americans, *Everything Everywhere All at Once* literally nods to our own reality. The film features real clips of Michelle Yeoh in past red carpets while she verse-jumps into her alternate universe where she’s an actress, and makes several references to *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, which Michelle Yeoh starred in as a martial artist. The clever nods to the world that we actively live in is a subtle reminder that the struggles within the movie are very real for Asian Americans, and it makes it impossible for the audience to think that the things happening in the movies are entirely

fictional. Because, while there is not a multiversal, omnipresent being going around destroying universes with the ability to alter reality at will, there are still the experiences of the Wang family, Joy's feeling of nihilism and struggle with depression, and intergenerational tensions that haunt many Asian Americans in our own reality.

*Everything Everywhere All at Once* stands out against other Asian American films as one that is deeply personal despite its absurdity, as it creates very real images of Asian Americans that have been filtered more through an Asian American lens rather than the White lens that dominates Hollywood. It also embodies the idea that Coe puts forth, that genres are personal: they shape lived experience and are a mode of cultural creation, as the film works to create new ways for the recognition of Asian Americans for all audiences, and presents new ways of understanding for Asian immigrant families (Coe). In doing this, it provides an alternative to other forms of representation like those present in *Crazy Rich Asians* and *To All the Boys I've Loved Before*, films that largely align themselves with dominant structures of power and ideologies of Asian Americans. So, while representation may not fall within a true black-white binary as meaningfulness can be made from any form of representation, *Everything Everywhere All at Once* does still provide the best depiction of the complicated lived experiences of many Asian Americans and Asian immigrant households.

## **Conclusion**

The significant increase in Asian American representation that Hollywood has seen in the last 15 years has brought about new questions regarding what "good" and "bad" representation of Asian Americans looks like and what their larger social implications may be, as audiences engage with newer popular images of Asian America. And, though the line between "good" and "bad" representation is one blurred by the fact that both have the potential to be personally

meaningful, movies like *To All the Boys I've Loved Before*, *Crazy Rich Asians*, and *Everything Everywhere All at Once* stand out in their usefulness in parsing out the differences between representation. The first two movies, in many ways, reinforce White images of Asian Americans through the use of common stereotypes - such as the model minority myth - while simultaneously coming off as progressive, simply because they feature Asian American leads. Due to the commodification, essentialization, and approximation of the East Asian American experience to Whiteness experienced within *Crazy Rich Asians* and *To All the Boys I've Loved Before*, it becomes easy to label them as “bad” representation. On the other hand, *Everything Everywhere All at Once* and its representation of Asian immigrant failings, familial tensions, and hardship in order to create a more dynamic and, in many ways accurate, depiction of East Asian Americans, can be easily labeled as “good” representation.

Despite having evaluated the weaknesses or strengths within each of these movies, I still struggle to label them as “good” and “bad,” because of the meaning that even bad representation can create for individuals. Therefore, I think it is important to acknowledge that “bad” representation can still be good for those engaging with it, if they are able to find meaningfulness within it while also recognizing that it is “bad” because it often upholds dominant structures of power. That being said, bad and good representation are both integral in the process of cultural identity construction and the personability of genre Coe alluded to earlier. It is both “good” and “bad” representations that shape lived experience and form modes of cultural creation for Asian Americans by creating new ways in which they can be understood on a large scale both by others and by themselves. Juwen Zhang, a folklorist and professor of Chinese Studies, defines this phenomena of cultural identity construction happening in part through the engagement with media as filmic folklore. Filmic folklore, as defined by Zhang, is:

an imagined folklore that exists only in film, and is a folklore or folklore-like performance that is represented, created, or hybridized in fictional film... Filmic folklore imposes or reinforces certain stereotypes (ideologies), and signifies certain meanings identified and consumed (as “the truth”) by a certain group of people. (Zhang 267)

And as cited by Zhang, filmic folklore can then be integral in the cultural identity construction at group, and even national, levels.

Using the idea of filmic folklore, the abstractions of the lived experiences of Asian Americans in popular film, good and bad, are important in the process of constructing a cultural identity for Asian Americans as they engage in a myriad of different manners of representation. This creates a critical need for better representation, because even if bad representation is meaningful, it has the potential to negatively impact cultural identity construction. If Asian Americans begin to create their cultural identity with harmful images of Asian Americans that are projected onto Asian characters in media, they could end up replicating the systems under which they’ve been oppressed. It could create an environment in which Asian Americans are not only defined (or rather confined) by White ideations of Asian Americans but could end up actively striving to achieve the standards set by the dominating class similar to the replication of the model minority myth in Asian immigrant households.

But what defines good representation? Though I have struggled with this question throughout the duration of the project because the category of good representation is so broad, I have come to the conclusion that good representation would be any form of representation that depicts the realities of Asian Americans. The depiction of the complicated lived experiences of Asian Americans creates dynamic characters that question dominant ideations of Asian Americans, while often providing a new way for Asian Americans to be understood by

audiences. And, unlike bad representation that upholds systems of White supremacy and dominant power structures, good representation works to dismantle these things. While this seems idealistic, the creation and massive success (even within the institution of the Academy) of *Everything Everywhere All at Once* proves that it is possible. But it's not just possible, it's paramount. A move toward better, more dynamic, more complex representation of Asian Americans provides Asian Americans a better, stronger base for cultural identity construction and racial uplift as they can finally imagine themselves outside of the bounds set for them.



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