Queer Asian American Belonging and Narrative in Everything Everywhere All At Once (Kwan & Scheinert, 2022) and Sewing Patches Through Performance (D'Lo, 2021)

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ABSTRACT:
This paper aims to outline how ethnicity and sexuality intersect for second-generation queer Asian Americans. I delineate three difficulties that second-generation queer Asian Americans may face in the process of coming out and reckoning their own identity: 1. The influence of traditional Asian cultures on queer attitudes of parents, 2. Acculturation complicating communication between parent and child, and 3. The intersection of being queer and ethnic at the same time in a heteronormative, white society. Within this framework, I will conduct a comparative critique of how the movie *Everything Everywhere All At Once* and the essay *Sewing Patches Through Performance* portray the conflict and resolution between a first-generation Asian immigrant and their queer child. These two works showcase the importance of understanding the unique space that queer Asians occupy in extending support toward them and the significance of personal narratives in shaping queer lives.

Influence of Asian Culture on Queer Attitudes

According to Natalie Newton (2019):

> "Across cultures, heterosexuality is instrumental in the maintenance of patriarchy and the heteronormative family in reproducing the 'race' and 'nation'. Within this construct, homosexuality and transgenderism undermine the family power structure in terms of gender crossing, disturbing male dominance and female subordination, and perpetuating nonreproductive sexuality and non-heterosexuality" (p. 260).

Because of this, queerness is generally perceived as a threat across all patriarchal and heteronormative societies. However, there are unique historical and cultural factors that contribute to varying degrees and modes of expression of queer attitudes in Asia.

Economic differences can often explain differences in attitudes toward queerness, but cultural factors are equally important. (Inglehart & Baker, 2000) Though industrialized, Western countries typically have more tolerant attitudes toward queerness compared to developing countries, there are variations that economic development alone cannot predict. Studies have shown South Korea and Japan both have low rates of acceptance to their Western counterparts despite also having advanced economies due to a combination of their cultural backgrounds and recent social developments. (Smith, 2011) Thus, it is necessary to explore culture in creating attitudes toward queerness.

As a first-generation Asian American interacts with their queer child, they will necessarily act out the cultural attitudes instilled within them. However, attempting to make any broad statement about queer attitudes in Asian culture is fundamentally reductive because to do so would be to force all the different ethnic and racial groups of Asia under a single umbrella. Though a Pakistani and a South Korean have very little in common, both are still counted as being Asian. With Asian Americans, however, it is possible to speak about the general experience of being racialized and treated as an "other" in American society. According to Han (2015), "identity formation for Asians in the United States is more a reflection of common experiences they found within western border than the discrepant histories and cultures of their homelands." (p. 5) Forces of racialization will be addressed with more depth in the later discussion of intersectionality.

The protagonists of *Everything Everywhere All At Once* and *Sewing Patches Through Performance*, are Chinese and Indian, respectively. To provide context for the behavior of the parents in the analysis of those two works, what follows will be a brief discussion of how culture, religion, and colonization have affected Chinese and Indian attitudes. Still, as both China and India consist of extraordinarily diverse populations across immense geographic regions, the following discussion is by no means a comprehensive summary.

Chinese Attitudes

Some scholars believe that Chinese attitudes towards homosexuality were largely shaped by a blend of traditional Confucian values and Western Christian values (Kwok & Wu, 2015). Though traditional Chinese religions such as Buddhism do not harshly condemn homosexuality, homosexuality does come into conflict with concepts of filial piety and traditional gender roles (Akerlund & Cheung, 2000).

In ancient China, homosexuality was widely accepted among the social elite, and depictions of same-sex behavior can be commonly found in works of art and poetry. Homosexuality was often a privilege of the imperial elite who preferred the company of male concubines over that of their wives. As proof, in *Passions of the Cut Sleeve: the male homosexual tradition in China*, Hinsch (1992) quotes this piece of writing from the Liu Song dynasty: “All the gentlemen and officials esteemed it. All men in the realm followed this fashion to the extent that husbands and wives were estranged” (p. 56). The Song Dynasty (960-1279) found a change in attitudes towards same-sex behaviors, most likely due to the rise of Confucianism, which opposed homosexuality by denouncing sexuality and pleasure as “destructive to spirituality” and emphasizing “prominence of continuation of family names through reproduction and respect to ancestors” (Akerlund & Cheung, 2000). Opposition to homosexuality solidified in the 19th and 20th centuries, as a result of Westernization in the late Qing Dynasty and the early Chinese Republic (Kang, 2009, p. 3).

Furthermore, concepts of an emphasis on outward deference and collectivism over individualism all contribute to the suppression of queer identity. The concept of Ying and Yin posits a male-female relationship as the most harmonious, with homosexual relationships being a threat to this harmony (Akerlund & Chung, 2000). In Analects 4:18, Confucius promotes deference for the sake of maintaining stability and hierarchical systems in place: “In serving your father and mother, remonstrate with them gently. On seeing that they do not heed your suggestions, remain respectful and do not act contrary. Although concerned, voice no resentment” (Ames and Rosemont 1999, p. 93). Conformity is encouraged to ensure “the smooth functioning of the social unit, whether that be family, friend-group, work-unit, department, and so on” (Shanklin, 2023). To occupy a queer identity that is not traditionally allowed is “to reject the validity of that tradition and, by extension, of the family whose foundation rests on that very tradition itself.” (Leong & Wat, 1996, p. 76) Queer people who do not conform to traditional expectations are viewed as “‘morally wrong and bringing ‘shame to their families,’” (Akerlund & Chung, 2000) and many families are desperate to hide the fact that their children might be queer for fear that they might tarnish family honor.

Indian Attitudes

In India, traditional religions and the criminalization of homosexuality under British colonial rule informed current attitudes toward homosexuality. In ancient India, similar to China, homosexuality was portrayed in “paintings, sculptures, and erotic carvings in temples of

Khajuraho, Ambernath Shiva, Bhuvaneshwar Rajarani, Bagali Shiva, and Konark" (Kanika, 2017). Traditional texts such as Kamasutra, Arthashastra, and Dharmashasthra also contain mentions of homosexuality, where homosexuality is portrayed in both positive and negative lights. Though homophobia is generally seen as a sin in religions such as Hinduism and Islam, a nonjudgemental acknowledgment of homosexuality and same-sex love can be perceived. In early Buddhist texts, homosexuality was portrayed neutrally; sexual acts between two members of the same sex were punished, but only to the extent that heterosexual acts of the same magnitude were (Font, 2021). Sometimes, homosexuality is interpreted in a positive light in Indian culture. Concepts of a "third sex" have existed in India for nearly three thousand years: ancient Jain thinkers argued that there were three types of desire: male, female, and a third one, all of which could be experienced by anyone regardless of biological sex (Rocher & Jaini, 1993).

Homophobic beliefs were reinforced, however, when the British Raj imposed their rule on India. Under Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code in 1861, homosexual acts were criminalized. Attitudes that consider homosexuality a disease persist (Kanika, 2017). Homosexuality is perceived as something that is inherently "un-Indian," a foreign element to a heteronormative Indian society before Mughal and British colonization. LGBTQ+ people are often sent to conversion therapy camps or religious institutions so that they may be "cured" of their homosexuality. However, recent years have seen large improvements. In 2009, the Indian Supreme Court decriminalized homosexuality by striking down the provisions of Section 377. Large Indian corporations have openly expressed their support of the LGBTQ+ community, and there is queer representation in Bollywood films (Kay, Mahajan, & Schultz, 2023).

Acculturation

Acculturation is the process through which an individual integrates and interacts with the culture that they are newly placed in with the culture that they originated (Sam & Berry, 2016). In the resulting cultural divide between a first-generation immigrant parent and their second or third-generation child, there may be conflicting cultural values that will complicate the process of coming out and communication between parent and child.

While immigrant parents tend to stay true to the culture they came from, "Immigrant children tend to quickly adopt American values and standards, creating generational schisms and challenges to parental control and authority" (Pyke, 2000). As conceptions of what constitutes thus differ across different cultures, a divide – both cultural and linguistic – usually forms between immigrant parents and their children. In a study comparing Korean and Vietnamese Families to American Families, the researchers found that whereas American values emphasize "psychological well-being and expressive love", Korean and Vietnamese values emphasized "instrumental help and support" (Pyke, 2000) Although children in Korea perceived strictness to be a sign of love and dedication, children of immigrants in America viewed strictness negatively and associated it with a lack of warmth.

When a parent defines love differently from their child, they may have difficulty in seeing the negative consequences of their actions. "Emotional expressiveness, including displays of affection, is discouraged, while self-control is emphasized" (Pyke, 2000) in East Asian cultures, making it significantly harder for a child to communicate their difficulties. American concepts of individuality go in direct contrast with the Asian values of conformity and filial piety, and an Asian child is beholden to their family even after they have left the household and entered society as a full-grown adult. An Asian parent who regards suppressing the matter of their child's queer to be necessary for preserving social honor will have difficulty understanding the need for their child to

come out. Furthermore, the economic hardships that immigrants typically face increase the burden of expectations on children, who are expected to forge a good life (i.e. succeed economically and build a family) to compensate for their parents' sacrifices (Kwok & Wu, 2015). But even if a queer Asian child succeeds in an academic sense, they will sometimes be seen as having failed their role due to their lack of ability to create a traditional family.

Communication is further complicated when concepts of queerness aren't in a parent's conceptual or verbal lexicon. On a basic level, a child may not be well versed in the language that their parents are most familiar with. On a deeper level, the languages that the parents use may lack sufficient vocabulary to describe concepts of queerness. In Asian communities, "there is not a need to talk about 'it' [queerness] because it is only a problem for white people." (Leong & Wat, 1996, p. 76) This is not to say that queer people don't exist in Asian communities. Rather, because more queer people may remain closeted due to social and cultural expectations compared to the sexually liberal American, people conceive of queerness as a "white disease."

Intersectionality and Identity Formation

Intersectionality is a framework used to understand the unique struggles or privileges caused by a person's various social and political identities (e.g. gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, etc.). Intersectionality challenges single identity politics, the concept that discrimination across a group is equal, and posits that people have to face interlocking societal expectations based on a variety of factors. The point of intersectionality is to build coalitions among diverse groups. According to Kimberly Crenshaw (1991), "Through an awareness of intersectionality, we can better acknowledge and ground the differences among us and negotiate how these differences will find expression in constructing group politics. (p. 1299)"

Though coming out is often marked as a pivotal point in the development of a queer person's identity, it is not necessarily so. Some academics have framed coming out as more than just a personal decision but also as a social obligation to battle prejudice, proof of an individual's "commitment to the identity of being gay in a heterosexual society" (Han, 2015, p. 158). In the introduction to *Overcoming Heterosexism and Homophobia: Strategies That Work*, Williams (1997) argues that "the single most effective way to change homophobic attitudes is through one-to-one personal contacts. . . . Thus we need more research to suggest the best ways to encourage more lesbigay persons to come out to their relatives, friends, and co-workers." Bridgewater (1997) argues that "coming out as a prime method for reducing negative attitudes and acts of prejudice against sexual identity minorities while increasing the wellbeing of gays, lesbians, and bisexuals" (Sears & Williams, p. 65). While this may be true in some scenarios, it also implies that people who do not come out have "yet to prove themselves as honest and open" (Rasmussen, 2004).

It is important to recognize that the fight for LGBTQ+ rights in America includes queers of color as well. For people who are both ethnic and queer, coming out is a constant negotiation rather than a momentary revelation. By acknowledging intersectionality we acknowledge that a queer Asian American must contend not only with being ethnic in a predominantly white, heteronormative society and being queer in their ethnic communities, but also the unique intersection of difficulties that their different identities create. Those who endorse their traditional Asian background may have difficulty developing a queer identity because their culture rejects homosexuality. On the other hand, people who strongly identify with US queer culture are likely to face difficulties in being racialized and stereotyped (Chung & Katayama, 1998).

In *Asian American Sexualities: Dimensions of the Gay and Lesbian Experience*, Wat (1996) highlights this conflict between identities as the central "paradox" that queer Asian Americans have to face. Because "we refuse to talk about being gay and being Asian at the same time," (p. 77) queer Asian Americans are forced to choose between their different identities. Ones who remain in a hostile ethnic community can be forced to separate themselves from their sexual identity or remain closeted to not be ostracized. On the flip side, they may turn their backs on their ethnic and cultural communities to feel as if they have a safe space to practice their sexuality. "The separation is complete, and the paradox is preserved," (p. 77) Wat writes. It is not that a queer identity can't be developed for queer Asian Americans, but that it becomes difficult when reckoning with a multitude of different identities at once.

The intersection of race and identity is exemplified in the story of Akanke, a black lesbian author, who speaks about her decision to remain in the closet as a university student in *Challenging Lesbian and Gay Inequalities in Education* (1994). As a black woman, Akanke required her Black community for support against racism. However, if she chose to come out, her community would have rejected her, and she would've been left bereft of support. Her race is something that she cannot control in her day-to-day life, but her choice to come out is. She concludes that the benefits of staying closeted "far [outweigh] any desire to openly assert my sexuality" (Akanke, 1994). By choosing not to come out, she maintains some amount of agency over her identity.

Queer Asian American men specifically are often hyper-feminized in the American gay community. Historically, Asian men have been racialized to be stripped of their masculinity. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Asian workers were excluded from various occupations and were relegated to what was perceived as feminine occupations such as laundry workers, domestics, and cooks. Not being able to work in masculine occupations "contributed to the formation of a gendered Asian male in the white mind." (Han, 2015, p. 28) In the contemporary gay community, a rice queen is typically a white Caucasian male who seeks out Asian sexual partners. The feminization of queer Asian males is evident in this description of a gay Asian man in a magazine: "Jamie is playful and mischievous. There is a boy still playing inside… He exemplifies exactly what is most enticing and most mysterious about all of Asia itself" (Atkins & Hagland, 1998, p. 278). By characterizing this man named Jamie as playful and mischievous, the writer strips him of his masculinity. Furthermore, Jamie is subject to an Orientalist view of Asia as some place of exotic sexual desire.

Because queer Asians practice their identities in both ethnic and queer spaces, they "vacillate between being gay, being Asian, and being gay and Asian at the same time, depending on the situation" (Han, 2015, p. 157). In *Geisha of a Different Kind,* Han interviews a drag queen and asks if he has come out to his family. The drag queen responds, "I've been gay for so long now, what does it matter?" (Han, 2015, p. 157), This response indicates that for the drag queen, his legitimacy as a queer person is not determined by whether or not he is out to his family because he already practices his identity in a way that feels comfortable to him. He has no reason to mention it to his family, especially when it would lead to further conflict. Further on, Han notes that many active drag queens remain closeted to their own families to avoid being disowned or rejected. This separation of identity isn't necessarily harmful; rather than rejecting their identity by choosing not to come out, they are simply negotiating it.

Social Support

This paper addresses coming out specifically within the context of biological families, but it is important to know that there are many other forms in which a queer person's journey can progress. Some studies have shown that having social support has shown to be stronger in reducing negative mental health for queer people than for heterosexual people (Mustanski & Liu, 2013; Rutter, 2006). The concept of a chosen family–a support system created not necessarily through biological kinship–has been popularized in the LGBTQ+ community in response to violence or rejection that queer people often have to face when they disclose their identity to their biological family (Hunyh, 2022).

Queer Belonging and Narrative in Media:

In choosing these works I wanted to discover how different authors attempted to answer the difficulties outlined above. *Everything Everywhere All At Once* (Kwan & Scheinert, 2022) emphasizes empathy in surmounting communication barriers and understanding the inscrutable belongings of queer Asians, while *Sewing Patches Through Performance* (D'Lo, 2021) reveals the importance of narrative and art in reshaping relationships and queer lives. Being a movie, *Everything Everywhere All At Once* provides a highly idealized, fictionalized scenario in which a parent and child are reconciled. As an essay, *Sewing Patches Through Performance* is based on a real-life experience between the author and his mother. The former highlights the ideal that parents should strive toward, and the latter provides a more grounded reflection on the path to be taken.

Empathy in Everything Everywhere All At Once

The movie *Everything Everywhere All At Once* depicts the struggle between Evelyn, a first-generation Asian immigrant, and her lesbian child Joy. Jobu Tupaki—the name given to a version of Joy who ascends to a higher plane of being after a horrific accident—traverses the multiverse, searching for a version of Evelyn who can finally understand and accept her. Joy, unable to find meaning to her existence, decides to end her own life but is saved by Evelyn when she also becomes a multiversal being. By experiencing reality across multiple universes, Evelyn can realize the past wrongs that she did to Joy and empathize with Joy's plight. Though occurring against a supernatural backdrop spanning fantastical depictions of a supposed multiverse, Joy's struggle with Evelyn is representative of a broader queer experience: her constant searching for an ideal Evelyn represents the inscrutable belonging of a queer Asian child, stuck in a liminal space between different identities and expectations, much as queer Asians are placed at an intersection of different identities. Evelyn's initial inability to communicate properly with Joy, along with her homophobia, depicts how Asian American identity and intergenerational trauma influence parental attitudes, while their eventual reconciliation highlights the importance of empathy and unconditional love in supporting a child.

Though Evelyn claims to be accepting of Joy's identity, she considers Joy's homosexuality to be a mark of shame. When Joy brings her girlfriend Becky over to her house, Evelyn is visibly annoyed: "Now I have to cook more," (0:03:54) she complains, making it clear that Becky is not a welcome presence but a burden. Evelyn misgenders Becky, calling her "him," using the lack of gendered pronouns in the Chinese language as an excuse. Furthermore, Evelyn ridicules the masculine way Becky dresses, firmly adhering to strict gender roles that deem how a woman should act. Later, when Joy attempts to introduce Becky to her grandfather as her girlfriend, Evelyn shuts Joy down, saying that Becky is nothing more than a "very good friend," (0:10:11).

It is important to recognize that Evelyn's hostile attitude toward Joy isn't only a result of her conservative attitudes toward gender and marriage, but also a combination of her familial trauma and Joy's inability to fulfill traditional Asian expectations. Evelyn's homophobia is only a contributing factor, not the root cause of her strained relationship with Joy. As a first-generation Asian immigrant, Evelyn's relationship with Joy is colored very much by how her father treated her. Because sons are valued more in Asian households because of their ability to carry on the family name, Evenlyn's father treated Evelyn with little care. When Evelyn announces her relationship with Waymond to her family, her father doesn't hesitate to immediately disown her. As a result, Evelyn conceptualizes family as a place of little support. Because Evelyn does not feel as if she belonged in her childhood, she fails to recognize Joy's love for Becky in the same way her father disavowed her love for Waymond. Evelyn's trauma extends even to her life in America, away from her parents. Because she engaged in a marriage that they didn't approve of, she feels a heavy burden to succeed and prove them wrong. Everything from her unsuccessful marriage to her failing laundromat is seen as a sign of her incompetence. Joy's homosexuality, in Evelyn's view, is just another failure of hers to be criticized by her father. As such, Evelyn is desperate to hide Joy's identity despite knowing how important it is for Joy to be out of the closet.

As a second-generation Asian immigrant, Joy has to navigate numerous sets of expectations that she cannot possibly fulfill. Evelyn feels as if there is something "wrong" with Joy because she is unable to reckon with the reality that her child is independent of her expectations. She constantly searches for a version of Joy to "get back" even though such a person does not exist. Joy has to be academically stellar, proper, upright, and capable of building a traditional family. From Joy's failing grades to her tattoos, everything about her is contrary to Evelyn's expectations – just like how Evelyn was to her father. Because Joy routinely fails to live up to Evelyn's expectations, Evelyn considers Joy's homosexuality not as a legitimate struggle, but simply another form of rebellion.

Furthermore, Evelyn is unable to communicate her emotions directly with Joy because of a cultural divide. At the beginning of the movie, Joy storms out of the laundromat after Evelyn refuses to let her come out to her father. Right as Joy is about to leave, Evelyn attempts to create a vulnerable moment, but all she says in the end is "You have to try and eat healthier. You are getting fat," (0:11:04). Evelyn's intent is clear. She wants to say that she loves Joy, but she is not accustomed to forthright expressions of emotion in her culture. Instead of proving her love for Joy, she makes passive-aggressive comments that alienate Joy. Although Joy recognizes Evelyn's concern, it is ultimately meaningless, as Evelyn still does not completely accept Joy's identity.

Joy's problems extend further than just whether or not Evelyn can finally understand her: she also faces a relentless nihilism and an inability to believe that life—especially her own—is one worth living. In this, *Everything Everywhere All At Once* reaffirms the reality that queer children do not solely face problems regarding their sexuality and that difficulties with their identity inform a larger set of issues that they have to confront. After transcending to a higher state of being, Joy can feel the pain of being rejected by Evelyn across every single universe and comes to believe life is nothing more than a series of fractured events that amount to no purpose, happiness a brief flicker in an expanse of pain. Joy searching for someone who can "see what I see" (1:34:39) and provide a reason for her to exist parallels the queer Asian struggle to find a community that can accept both their ethnic and sexual identities.

However, Joy's grief still finds its roots in her inability to be understood by her mother. In constantly searching for different versions of Evelyn to understand her existential struggle, she secretly reenacts her struggle to have Evelyn accept her sexuality. Though Evelyn is unable to provide an answer to the meaning behind Joy's suffering, it is evident that Joy is still in desperate need of her. Assuming that life contains nothing more for her, Joy resigns herself to throwing herself into an all-powerful bagel-like black hole that she created. However, right before she's about to commit suicide-by-bagel, Joy puts her hand in Evelyn's and says, "At least this way, I won't have to do it alone," (1:42:35). In this moment, it becomes clear that at heart Joy is a wounded child yearning for the protection and love of her mother in the face of overwhelming difficulty. As Evelyn gazes into the bagel, she experiences the numerous failures of all the Evelyns across the multiverse and comes to the same conclusion that Joy does: in the end, nothing she does amounts to anything. She joins Joy in her plan to commit suicide.

The conflict in EEAAO is resolved through empathy, communication, and unconditional love. Just before mother and daughter are about to commit suicide-by-bagel, Deidre, their tax auditor, who had so ruthlessly pursued them before, decides to give them yet another extension on their overdue payment deadline. Joy dismisses this act of compassion as another "statistical inevitability" (1:43:56), but it is a purposeful change caused by empathy and communication. When Evelyn asks Waymond why Deidre gave them an extension, he says "I just talked to her" (1:44:11). It is then revealed that Deidre had been divorced in the past, and, after hearing about Waymond's decision to divorce Evelyn, recalled her circumstances and decided to be kind to Evelyn. Deidre's actions prove the power of empathy to create change in the most unlikely scenarios. This is contrary to how Evelyn acted throughout the entire movie. In the beginning, Evelyn refuses to understand Joy's frustrations, making snide comments about Becky and her weight instead of attempting to reason with her. In confronting Jobu Tupaki, Evelyn refuses to try and understand her motive, Just like how Waymond emotionally appealed to Deidre, telling her about their divorce, Evelyn resolves to do the same for Joy. In doing so, *Everything Everywhere All At Once* stresses that it is especially important for immigrant parents, who may not initially understand the unique struggles that their queer child undergoes, in extending empathy and support.

By undergoing multiple universal shifts and experiencing a torrent of different memories across the multiverse, Evelyn steps into the unique space that Joy occupies. However, rather than becoming more discouraged, Evelyn concludes that even if her efforts have ended in despair, there is still worth in continuing to fight for the mere possibility of happiness. In every universe that Evelyn seems to fail, she sees herself standing back up again, lifted with the support of her sausage-fingered girlfriend, a debased raccoon chef, and Waymond. The sheer ludicrousy of the events she experiences causes her to realize that though life is fundamentally absurd, its very absurdity provides reason to continue living. Happiness is transient, ephemeral, prone to be blown away by the merest gust of pain that comes a person's way. Simultaneously, no matter how much pain is in a person's life, there is always joy to come. This is exemplified when Waymond says to Evelyn in another world, "In another life, I would have really liked just doing laundry and taxes with you," (1:48:03). Although the laundromat was a confining place for Evelyn, it was also the place where she and Waymond shared their love, and the place where they raised their beloved daughter Joy. Even in the mundanity of having their kitchen table sprawled with tax forms and paperwork, they had found a certain bliss. Not entirely sustaining, but still desirable. Evelyn regains her desire to fight and pursues the possibility of dragging Joy up from her depression and preventing her suicide.

In the final confrontation between Joy and Evelyn, direct communication is essential in bridging the gap between mother and daughter. To Joy, kindness is meaningless in the face of her pain. Life is nothing more than a series of “fractured moments, contradictions and confusions” (1:38:07) with only a few moments where anything makes sense. But Evelyn knows that Joy has happiness in her future, and will stand with Joy in her pain until they can reach it. When Evelyn confronts Joy to stop her, Joy immediately assumes a fighting stance, but Evelyn spreads her arms out wide. Her message is apparent: Evelyn will love and embrace Joy, no matter what sort of path Joy chooses to take, and continue supporting her until she can recover. Her previous tension with Joy was caused by a refusal to empathize with Joy due to her stubborn perception of who Joy should be. However, her stance is now marked by unconditional acceptance. The answer that Everything Everywhere All At Once presents is for parents to enter the unique space that their queer children occupy, facing an intersection of race, ethnicity, and sexuality all at once. It beseeches parents to immerse themselves in the pain that their children face daily, to empathize with them, and to stand with their children so that they may have at least one person with whom they can share their inscrutable belongings.

The scene suddenly switches to Evelyn reaching out for Joy just before she drives away from the laundromat, paralleling the beginning of the movie. Contrary to the beginning, however, Evelyn speaks without any pretense, expressing what she truly feels. She ironically affirms that she has always viewed Joy as a failure, saying “You *are* getting fat,” (2:05:38) but she also says from the bottom of her heart that “no matter what, I still want to be here with you” (2:06:35). Even though Joy is “stubborn, aimless, a mess,” (2:00:22) the simple fact that they are mother and daughter is more than enough reason for Evelyn to continue supporting. In response to nihilism, Evelyn presents the same solution that Waymond and Deidre did: overwhelming kindness. Though Joy dismisses it as unsubstantial, unconditional love and support from Evelyn become the answer to her existentialism. No matter how badly she fails, Joy will always have a person she can rely on, and knowing so grants her the courage to persist even in pain, weather disappointments, and celebrate the small joys. Joy finally gives in, and as mother and daughter embrace each other, they repeat to each other, “Nothing matters” (2:09:59). Because nothing matters, they can be whoever they want to be and make up for all their lost time despite their past differences. Because nothing matters, they are free.

In the final scene, the entire family goes to Deidre to discuss their taxes, as if nothing had happened. Evelyn is momentarily enveloped in a whirlwind of sound and color, showing how she still maintains the omniscient perspective that she gained. For parents to understand their children, they have to constantly be engaged in the world that their children live in.

Art in Sewing Patches Through Performance

In *Sewing Patches Through Performance*, D’Lo recounts the friction between him and his mother after coming out and the painstaking journey that it took to regain her love. D’Lo can begin working toward a functioning relationship with his parents when he invites his mother to a performance of a monologue in India and communicates with her through art. *Sewing Patches Through Performance* demonstrates not only the importance of feeling seen and loved by family in a queer person’s growth but also the power of narration to interpret and influence the personal.

When D’Lo comes out, he is unable to narrate his existence, and thus unable to reckon with his identity. He shares this short exchange between him and his mother: “I say, Please let me make sense of this by talking about it in the open. She says no” (p. 57). A narration of his

story is vital to D'Lo for him to make sense of his own identity. Because his mother prevents him from narrating his own story, he cannot "make sense" of who he is. Through this, D'Lo suggests that identity is more than just a personal sense of self – the way that society perceives and allows for queer narratives equally as important. Furthermore, D'Lo also suggests that family recognition of a child's queerness is especially important in ensuring that they feel legitimate in their existence.

D'Lo has to navigate numerous sets of expectations. He reckons with both the expectation to succeed and craft a traditional family placed upon him by his immigrant parents and their disdain for queerness. D'Lo is considered a failure by his parents because his occupation as a performer opposes the normal expectations for immigrant children and also because he fails to fulfill the roles of his assigned gender at birth. When Amma is watching D'Lo perform the monologue, it is evident that up until that point she had not truly considered her son's occupation to be legitimate: "It seemed that she would always be in shock that people enjoyed me" (p. 61). Furthermore, even though her son's having an audience at all in India proves his ability to be accepted, Amma sees D'Lo's identity as nothing more than a mark of shame: "These people are Indian, and they won't like to hear about it [being gay]" (p. 61).

Demonstrated by the difficulty that D'Lo has in communicating with his mother, traditional Asian restrictions on emotional vulnerability also complicate the dynamic between the two. Amma shuts D'Lo out, refusing to speak whenever they touch upon a subject that discomforts her. D'Lo explains his mother's coping mechanisms by stating that "denial's river runs deep in our brown bodies" (p. 58). Just as she would shut out a bad memory, Amma refuses to confront D'Lo's transsexuality and neglects to repair their damaged relationship. D'lo dryly remarks later on in the story, "I thank America for introducing me to therapy," (p. 62) and how "in order to make any changes, I really had to make the first move" (p. 62). It is he who has to constantly reach out to his mother, inviting her to his performances and attempting to empathize with her. His mother is rarely an active participant in the matter; she is passive, choosing to accept or deny the requests and pleas of her child.

One of the points D'Lo repeatedly emphasizes throughout the narrative is how essential his mother is to his well-being. Throughout the narrative, D'Lo's love for his mother is palpable. He describes her with wonder and reverence: she is "a spirit woman, an incredibly mystical and magical being, a woman who becomes more childlike as she gets older" (p. 58). He calls himself a "dramatic romantic," imagining that his mother is with him throughout every stage of his life, watching over him through his best and worst moments. When he comes out, his world becomes "off-kilter", and he is left without a reference point to understand who he is. It is only when he manages to regain the love of his mother that he finally feels like he has "a place in this world" (p. 63). The importance that D'Lo attaches to his mother's affection demonstrates the importance for all queer children to have a safe space where they can return to practice and develop their own identities, whether that be in the form of family or friends.

Storytelling and performance feature as heavy themes throughout the essay because of their power in narration and encouraging empathy. Through his performance and his writing of an essay, D'Lo redefines the narrative between him and his mother and grants his identity legitimacy.

Storytelling is first established as a theme in how Amma tells stories as a way to cope with moving to a foreign land. She tells D'Lo stories of her brothers and sisters, almost idealizing them by omitting unsavory parts of who they are and casting them in a fond light. This is not framed as a negative action by D'Lo, but rather a necessary one. For Amma, who has uprooted

herself from her homeland and her loved ones to move to America, what happened is less important than how it is remembered. She needs to have “memories that create order” (p. 58) to assuage “the life of chaos” (p. 58) she leads. For D’Lo, performing is of equal performance. It is his way of communicating to the world and proving his existence.

The most significant act of storytelling comes when D’Lo performs a comedic monologue where he assumes a fictional version of his mother. He, as Amma, complains about how her daughter has turned out to be “a gay,” (p. 60) and how it is such a foreign concept to her because, after all, there are “no gays in Sri Lanka” (p. 60). But D’Lo’s performance is more than a mere comedic retelling of his mother’s fussiness and conservative attitudes – it is a way for Amma to “air her grievances” (p. 61) in a lighthearted way. He performs with a knowingness, transforming the anger and turmoil in their relationship into something that they can look over and laugh. And most importantly, through his performance, D’Lo is finally able to have an honest exchange with Amma. He states, “I believe it was the first time she felt seen by me, her child [...] the person she didn’t know she needed understanding from” (p. 61). Because Amma is emotionally closed to D’Lo, she is unable to have a vulnerable conversation with her son. D’Lo’s performance, however, surmounts the barrier imposed by Amma’s reluctance to be open and communicates his desire to be reconciled with her, bridging a gap seemingly uncrossable. Because D’Lo can continuously empathize with his mother despite their differences, he can reach his mother’s heart.

The final act of storytelling comes in a car ride several years after the performance that began mending their relationship. Amma recounts how, when D’Lo was born, she had visited a chatrakaran, who congratulated her on having given birth to a boy. Amma corrected the chatrakaran, saying that she had given birth to a girl, but the chatrakaran insisted otherwise. This story is significant in that it suggests that D’Lo is spiritually a man, but also that Amma has become vulnerable enough with D’Lo to open her heart to him. Here, storytelling becomes another way to communicate intimacy. The story, hitherto unknown to D’Lo, becomes a message from Amma that she has truly accepted him.

The writing of the essay itself is equally as important in establishing D’Lo’s legitimacy as a queer person. In the introduction, D’Lo himself states that by interpreting and retelling the events in his own life, he asserts his truth against his Amma’s “Sri Lankan denial or selective amnesia” (p. 58). He reclaims his identity and proves to himself that “though I am not what she hoped for, I am possibly more.”. The chapter detailing the ensuing turmoil after he came out is the shortest of all the chapters. Of the fight that occurred when he came out, he writes “It all came out, and not without a pop, bang, or boom…” (p. 59). He trails off without providing any further detail, and then the chapter ends. The very next chapter details their reconciliation, and the event concerning his coming out is never touched upon in depth again. Queer stories tend to focus on the process of coming out and the turmoil that results but, here, D’Lo subverts the conventional narrative by deliberately omitting the particulars of the fallout. In doing so, he diverts the reader’s attention to what is truly important: the reconciliation between parent and child. Just as Amma used storytelling to cherish the memory of her loved ones, D’Lo uses narrative to redefine himself not as the trauma or rejection he faced, but as the love he ultimately managed to regain. Retelling his recollection of events, he chooses what defines him as a person.

Conclusion

In this paper, I concluded the difficulties that queer Asian Americans have to face in the process of coming out regarding 1. The influence of traditional Asian cultures on queer attitudes of parents, 2. Acculturation complicating communication between parent and child, and 3. The intersection of being queer and ethnic at the same time in a heteronormative, white society.

Both of the works I analyzed in the latter part of my paper demonstrated the difficulties discussed above while also emphasizing unique points. *Everything Everywhere All At Once* demonstrates the vitality of love in supporting a queer child, while *Sewing Patches Through Performance* further bolsters the importance of unconditional love while also emphasizing the importance of narrative in impacting the lives of queer people. Traditional expectations against queerness were dismantled by the parental figures as they determined that providing support to their child was more important than conformity. Cultural barriers between parent and child were surmounted in the former by having Evelyn empathize with Joy's pain by becoming a multiversal being herself, and in the latter through D'Lo's usage of art and performance as a medium for communication. Joy's inscrutable belongings can be understood by Evelyn through said multiversal experience, and Amma can step into the world of D'Lo through their shared exchange of stories. However, what should happen when a child is unable to find a loving relationship with their family?

Both *Sewing Patches Through Performance* and *Everything Everywhere All At Once* end with their conflicts resolved into neat little bows. In the end, Evelyn and Joy can restart their lives with a newfound empathy for each other, and D'Lo concludes his essay by describing how Amma's love made him feel he had regained "a place in this world." However, the conclusion in *Everything Everywhere All At Once* is a result of preternatural circumstances, all beyond the realistic capabilities of an actual queer child. In *Sewing Patches Through Performance*, D'Lo is mostly alone in his struggles. He admits that he has to navigate his identity "without societal rites of passage," (p. 62) as being a second-generation transmasculine Tamil Indian isn't an experience many can claim to have. Both of these works present "solutions" to their conflicts, but, as every person's situation is unique, these "solutions" may not apply to everybody.

Educating to prevent discrimination is part of the broader struggle. The other is our responsibility as a society to collectively provide support to marginalized groups. Having social support is vital in preventing stress, and for queer people, being connected to other queer people is especially significant for improved identity and health. As mentioned earlier in the paper, chosen families in the queer community have become especially important in supporting queer people.

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