

# Beyond Norms and Realities: Reading Queer in *Everything Everywhere All at Once*

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## Abstract

This paper examines the film *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, portraying a Chinese-American family navigating complex familial dynamics. The film, featuring stellar performances by Ke Huy Quan, Michelle Yeoh, and Jamie Lee Curtis, garnered Oscars and marked a historic win for Asian women in the Best Actress category. Beyond its sci-fi front, the movie transcends genre boundaries, contributing significantly to new queer cinema. This paper argues that the film disrupts essentialist notions of race, sexuality, and gender by exploring diverse themes. Drawing from queer theory, this paper analyzes the film's problematization of gender norms and Asian American stereotypes, as well as the encouragement of critical spectatorship in viewers. The analysis identifies the film's deliberate use of queer codes, inviting viewers to think beyond conventions. The film confuses normative thinking, as demonstrated through Ke Huy Quan's character, Waymond, who blurred assignments of masculinity and femininity. Finally, the analysis extends this critique to Asian American representation, interrogating stereotypes associated with the model minority myth. Through the film's well-crafted storytelling and excellent performances by actors, this paper's analysis demonstrates how a queer reading can encourage thinking beyond 'normal.'

## Keywords

Model minority, queer theory, film studies, racialization, gender, sexuality



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### **Introduction**

In *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, the portrayal of a Chinese-American family navigating complex familial dynamics unfolds. The narrative commences by vividly capturing the protagonist, Evelyn Wang's, unsettling morning. Engaged in cooking breakfast for the family and preparing paperwork for the looming Internal Revenue Service (IRS) audit of the family's business, Evelyn sets the stage for a storyline fraught with familial tensions. Amidst the chaos, she deals with her husband, Waymond Wang's childishness while disapproving of her daughter, Joy Wang's queer relationship. As they head to the IRS office, Alpha-Waymond, from an alternative universe, occupies Waymond's body through advanced technology, explaining to Evelyn the existence of various universes and an impending evil named 'Jobu Tupaki.' The film explores Evelyn's navigation of various universes while running away from Jobu Tupaki. Evelyn transfers her consciousness to multiple universes, through the method of 'verse-jumping,' where she effortlessly acquires skills contingent on her circumstances. As she begins to experience glimpses of life in these various universes, she is gradually drawn into Jobu Tupaki's conviction that "nothing matters" (Kwan & Scheinert, 1:01:00). However, as she interacts with Waymond in multiple universes, an epiphany strikes Evelyn, prompting her to recognize that life is innately meaningless unless one gives it meaning. Following this realization, she mends the problems she created in the numerous universes and finally approaches her daughter to rekindle their contentious relationship.

The actors Ke Huy Quan (Waymond), Michelle Yeoh (Evelyn), and Jamie Lee Curtis (Dierdre) all won Oscars for their performances (Lee, 2023). This was a salient moment, marking the first time an Asian woman has won an Oscar for the category, 'Best Actress' (Lee, 2023). This film is among the many new films that use the idea of a metaverse, representing that alternate parallel universes exist all at once. Despite its sci-fi aspect, the film *Everything Everywhere All at Once* transcends the need to belong to one genre, encompassing a wide range of genres. Among the many genres it belongs to, this award-winning film makes a significant contribution to new queer cinema, weaving powerful themes of family dynamics and the immigration experience with queer possibilities. The film's queerness is a critical point of analysis. The film portrays the intricate lives of characters such as Waymond and Evelyn, deviating from fixed categories of race, gender, and sexuality. Further, the film critically troubles societal norms and encourages viewers to question and redefine 'normal' and 'reality.' It is

without doubt that the film resists the hegemonic ideals of mainstream culture and seeks to set a precedent for future Asian American films (Coe, 2023). Drawing from queer theory, this essay posits that *Everything Everywhere All at Once* subverts essentialist understandings of the 'norm' by queering the 'gaze,' masculinity and femininity, and Asian American representation.

### **Theorizing 'Queer' in Film Studies**

The term 'queer' and 'queerness' are used as umbrella terms to encompass non-straight sexualities and genders (Doty, 1998). Initially, 'queer' was used by activists to describe a "community of difference" (Benshoff & Griffin, 2004, p. 5). Following these political and activist movements, academics theorized 'queer' as a form of analysis, arriving at queer theory (Doty, 1998). A core tenet of queer theory is questioning what is considered normative (Green, 2002). Queer theorists have obscured the categories and classifications that society has imposed, particularly with gender and sexuality (Green, 2002). By destabilizing normative understandings of gender and sexuality, queer theory has also questioned expressions of masculinity and femininity (Azhar et al., 2021). Among numerous queer theorists, Judith Butler (2006) played a pivotal role in introducing the concept that gender and sexuality are 'performed,' positing that these social constructs derive meaning through performances categorized as 'masculine' or 'feminine.' Traditional gender expectations view men as assertive, rational, and decisive, whereas women as sensitive, polite, and friendly (Prentice & Carranza, 2002). Such gender logics prescribe and proscribe a set of values, behaviours, and characteristics considered as 'feminine' for women and 'masculine' for men (Prentice & Carranza, 2002; Worthen, 2021).

When one goes against these gender stereotypes or societal norms, they are deemed 'deviant' (Prentice & Carranza, 2002; Worthen, 2021). Psychiatrists coined the term 'sexual deviance' to describe what they perceived as "unusual sexual behavior," a label historically applied to pathologize homosexuality as 'abnormal human behaviour' (De Block & Adriaen, 2013, p. 266). While sexual deviance has long been associated with homosexuality (De Block & Adriaen, 2013), it can be understood in relation to gender deviance. Worthen (2021) contends that the "condemnation for deviant gender performance is inextricably tied to the performance of sexuality" (p. 102). For instance, a male athlete who does not conform to "strong, masculine... and hyper-heterosexual" characteristics may face societal backlash and be deemed 'deviant'

(Worthen, 2021, p. 103). Therefore, straying from 'gender rules' or 'gender norms' can be understood as sexual and gender deviance (Worthen, 2021).

The repudiation of gender and sexual deviance within society can be manifested most extremely through violence against queer people (Worthen, 2021). However, it can also be identified through the portrayal of negative stereotypes of queer people within early film and cinema (Davies & Smith, 2000; Li-Vollmer & Lapointe, 2003). Early films reproduced normative ideas of gender and sexuality. Gay men were depicted using stereotypical features such as being overly flamboyant and effeminate for comedic relief (Benshoff & Griffin, 2004). Further, queer characters were portrayed as villains, predators, and murderers, existing in films to only face death, “often in quite brutal ways” (Benshoff & Griffin, 2004, p. 90). Because there was a typical film trope of tragedies being tied to queer characters, the phrase ‘bury your gays’ was coined in response (Cover & Milne, 2023). These examples suggest that initial films with queer characters conflated sexual and gender deviance with tragic endings, implying that those who go against the norms of society will be punished (Benshoff & Griffin, 2004; Davies & Smith, 2000). There has been a notable transformation in the portrayal of queer individuals in media, with a shift toward more positive and affirming depictions (Donovan, 2016). Queer theory can offer a profound understanding of the historical and contemporary context of queer depiction within film.

Queer theory has extended its influence to the realm of film and cinema studies, giving rise to the concept of queer cinema (Benshoff & Griffin, 2004). This cinematic domain goes beyond a mere portrayal of queer characters; it involves a nuanced exploration that delves into the subtleties, encouraging interpretations that blur the lines of gender and sexual categories (Doty, 1998). Academics and activists alike were imbued with social movements like AIDS activism, growing a closer relationship between queer theory and film (Benshoff & Griffin, 2004). Finally, new queer cinema emerged, aiming to question essentialism and explore the intersections of sexuality with gender, race, and class (Benshoff & Griffin, 2004). New queer cinema, having roots in theory, rose as an oppositional and political force to what is considered ‘mainstream’ (Morrison, 2006). Queer theory will be employed in the following paragraphs to analyze the film’s depiction of complex themes and characters.

### **Queering the Gaze**

The film promoted the adoption of a 'queer gaze' by urging viewers to discern queer motifs throughout its narrative. McNealy (2021) describes the queer gaze as a means to “imagine seemingly impossible alternatives to our current world order” (p. 461). This statement encapsulates the film's philosophical themes, intentionally embedded as a queer code. The film had philosophical themes of nihilism and absurdity, arguing that existence has no inherent value or meaning (Toabnani, 2023). This exciting play on philosophy has a parallel to queer theory, more particularly the depiction of alternative realities that seem ‘absurd.’ The prominent theme of nihilism and absurdity also reflects how humans conceptualize what is ‘normal’ and what is not. In one reality, hot-dog fingers are normal (Kwan & Scheinert, 2022, 0:58:27); in another, raccoons can speak and control humans by pulling on their hair (Kwan & Scheinert, 2022, 1:06:21). Thus, what is ‘normal’ in one reality may be outlandish in another. These themes “challenge viewers to question their beliefs and perceptions of reality” (Toabnani, 2023, p. 43). The film extends ideas of normalcy to morality, questioning the arbitrary allotment of what is considered ‘right’ versus ‘wrong’ (Coe, 2023). This is demonstrated through Jobu Tupaki’s statement, “‘Right’ is a tiny box invented by people who are afraid and I know what it feels like to be trapped inside that box” (Kwan & Scheinert, 2022, 1:33:12). Despite having these philosophical roots, there is a prominent relation to queer theory in its attempts to challenge normative thinking. The film aims to interrogate the universalizing of truth and meaning, similar to postmodernism which underlies queer theory (Benshoff & Griffin, 2004). The wave of postmodernist thinking coincides with queer theory by questioning categorization and rejecting definitive identity markers (Kirsch, 2020). Thus, there is no objective truth nor reality but numerous ones, all at once (Toabnani, 2023). Viewers are then tasked to view the film through a ‘queer gaze.’ The mere display of queer people is not what creates this lens, but through the use of queer-coded elements of philosophy, viewers are encouraged to read between the lines.

### **Queering Masculinity and Femininity**

Waymond’s character aims to subvert gender expectations and assignments. Waymond is portrayed as ‘feminine’ in *Everything Everywhere All at Once*. Namely, Evelyn perceives Waymond as playful and light-hearted to a fault. This idea is reiterated through his habit of placing googly eyes on items in the house as well as dancing with a customer (Kwan &

Scheinert, 2022, 0:08:25). Furthermore, Waymond's demeanour in the film, especially during his interactions with Evelyn, suggests a passive and compliant nature as he obediently follows Evelyn's instructions, such as cooking noodles and checking the pot (Kwan & Scheinert, 2022, 0:02:19). In contrast to Waymond's behaviours, personality, and character, Evelyn is portrayed as more stereotypically 'masculine.' She is the family's matriarch, from taking care of the business to dealing with the turmoil of familial relationships. This stark contrast between Evelyn and Waymond suggests a form of gender deviance in which the typical traits associated with men and women are not conformed. Initially, viewers are encouraged to agree with Evelyn's rejection of Waymond's behaviours, viewing him as inept and meddling with Evelyn. But slowly, the film undermines this initial conception by showing that Waymond's 'feminine' personality is a saving factor in numerous situations. This is reflected in the scene where Waymond convinces Deirdre, the IRS agent, to extend the deadline for submitting their tax returns. While Evelyn initially repudiates Waymond's 'feminine' attributes by stating, "my silly husband... probably making things worse" as she spots him attempting to reason with Dierdre (Kwan & Scheinert, 2022, 0:24:27; 1:43:30), Waymond is successful in securing an extension to submit their taxes. Waymond's feminine-coded behaviours later become a pivotal catalyst in shaping Evelyn's outlook on life. This is reflected in the film's climax when Waymond contends, "The only thing I do know is that we have to be kind. Please be kind. Especially when we don't know what's going on" (Kwan & Scheinert, 2022, 1:46:35). Such a statement becomes an epiphany for Evelyn to shift her perspective on life. Waymond's character and embodiment of what can be read as 'feminine' is a means to challenge traditional assignments of masculinity and femininity. Waymond's demonstration of gender deviance highlights the nonsensical imposition of gender norms. Embracing what feels most natural to oneself over conforming to societal norms thus becomes a powerful strength.

Through Ke Huy Quan's beautiful performance of his counterparts, Alpha Waymond and CEO-Waymond, he demonstrates the performativity of gender and sexuality. Alpha Waymond starkly contrasts Waymond's personality and demeanor. Alpha Waymond is portrayed as serious, stoic, and sharp-witted. Similarly, CEO-Waymond is portrayed as wealthy, wise, and sophisticated with his slicked-back hair and tuxedo. These two can be coded as 'masculine' through their demeanours and appearances. However, the similarity between CEO-Waymond and Waymond is their 'feminine' shared values of kindness and optimism, reinforcing the fluidity of

masculinities and how gender is performed. CEO-Waymond shares his wisdom in a scene with Evelyn, stating, “When I choose to see the good sides of things, I’m not being naive. It is strategic and necessary” (Kwan & Scheinert, 2022, 1:46:11). Both Waymonds, despite acting and appearing as polar opposites, have similar worldviews that can be considered ‘feminine’ (Prentice & Carranza, 2002). Although appearing as a contradiction, one can simultaneously have a ‘feminine’ trait (i.e. valuing kindness) and appear ‘masculine.’ All in all, Key Huy Quan’s gender performance aims to destabilize traditional understandings of masculinity and femininity, highlighting society’s arbitrary assignments to gender.

### **Queering Asian American Representation**

Azhar et al., (2021) argue that “gender and sexuality are inseparable from racial identities” (p. 286). To comprehensively analyze gender and sexuality, it is imperative to scrutinize how race is embedded in these categories (Azhar et al., 2021). In Shek’s (2007) literature review of Asian American masculinity, they found that Asian American men are perceived through “white perspectives” (p. 383). That is, viewing Asian American men as “asexual while at the same time patriarchal and domineering” (Shek, 2007, p. 384; Azhar et al., 2021; Ponce, 2021). These characteristics associated with Asian American men are historicized in the profoundly racist legislation and laws enacted by the American government (Shek, 2007). This historical context shapes the public perception of Asian men today (Shek, 2007). Waymond challenges the imposition of asexuality by being portrayed as someone eager to save his marriage. His desire for a stable relationship is apparent in his longing glances at the elderly Asian couple in the IRS office and in the scene where he sits with Evelyn in the car, hoping to mend their relationship. (Kwan & Scheinert, 2022, 0:13:12; 0:42:57). Additionally, Waymond’s gender deviance, seen through his femininity, challenges the idea of an authoritative man. Throughout the film, he is compliant and easygoing, rejecting all stereotypical notions given to Asian American men (Shek, 2007).

The film deliberately appraises the popular model minority myth as an attempt to queer Asian American representation (Coe, 2023). The idea of the model minority myth is a product of the United States during the Cold War period, contending that Asian Americans are just like their white counterparts: they are “economically self-sufficient, politically quiescent, and nuclear family-oriented” (Ponce, 2021, p. 101). Such an idea has roots in racism, heteronormativity, and

neoliberalism (Ponce, 2021; Coe, 2023). Additionally, queerness in relation to Asian Americans is placed in between extremes: receiving “honorary white status” by conforming to the dominant heterosexual culture or being subjected to rampant homophobia in ‘unassimilated’ immigrant communities (Ponce, 2021, p. 102). The film challenges racist and heteronormative understandings of Asian American families through its portrayal of the family’s raw struggles with capitalist systems and the gradual acceptance of queerness. The film’s beginning exhibits Evelyn’s sense of restlessness, a symptom of capitalism’s enforcement of efficiency (Heron, 2019). Similarly, Evelyn states, “I’m no good at anything” (Kwan & Scheinert, 2022, 1:03:31). The idea that one needs to be good at one thing, in other words, ‘specialize’ is an outcome of neoliberalism (Heron, 2019). This model minority myth places the Wang family as “failed Asian Americans” that “‘make nothing’ of their lives” (Coe, 2023, p. 42). This sense of failure that the film portrays is not without a happy ending. Despite succumbing to capitalist expectations, which are at odds with the model minority myth, the family managed to rectify their conflicts. Furthermore, the film follows the journey to acceptance of Evelyn’s queer daughter, Joy. At first, Evelyn hesitates due to her fear of her father, Gong Gong, and his potential reaction. However, following her epiphany, she confidently introduces Becky to Gong Gong as Joy’s girlfriend. Although initially appearing confused, Gong Gong later learns to accept Becky alongside Joy’s queerness (Kwan & Scheinert, 2022, 2:08:47). These realities depicted in the film aim to subvert the idea of a model minority myth.

### **Conclusion**

This essay argued that *Everything Everywhere All at Once* challenges normative understandings of race, sexuality, and gender through the queering of the ‘gaze,’ sexuality, and Asian American representation. As illustrated, *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, is a brilliant production, critiquing various forms of oppression and problematizing dominant ways of thinking. This essay addressed the philosophical elements of the film, positing that viewers are encouraged to think beyond the film’s surface. By delving into Ke Huy Quan’s gender performances, this analysis demonstrates how gender categories of what men and women ‘should be’ are blurred in the film. This notion is echoed in Waymond’s gender deviance as a redemptive element rather than a disadvantage. Finally, this analysis addressed the prominent model minority myth, showcasing the film’s deliberate confrontation of Asian American



stereotypes. The film's combination of an Asian American family, philosophical themes, and the use of a metaverse form an enticing plotline, engaging viewers to think critically. All in all, this cinematic piece contributes to the ongoing discourse in film studies and queer theory, leaving a powerful mark in history through the storytelling of queerness.

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