Translating Love:

Denaturalizing Motherhood, Daughterhood, and the Asian American Experience

by

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For Mom, 할머니*, Abby, and every woman*

who has learned to love

in this messy, aggravating, beautiful world.

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Author's Note: This thesis contains mentions of gendered violence, gun violence, and sexual assault.

Abstract

This thesis offers up an analysis of motherhood and daughterhood in contemporary Asian American popular literature. I take an intersectional approach to studying Michelle Zauner's *Crying in H Mart*, Ruth Ozeki's *My Year of Meats*, and Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert's *Everything, Everywhere, All At Once*, each of which differ vastly in genre and form, but are, at their core, stories about the complicated nature of motherhood, especially in the context of issues such as race and immigration. In my first chapter, I will examine the ways in which Zauner reckons with her relationship with her mother and her culture, as a mixed race woman, in the face of grief. Next, I pivot to demonstrate the ways in which Ozeki denaturalizes motherhood and reproduction by calling upon historical and contemporary forms of violence directed against women. This chapter is a theoretical account of Ozeki's questions about who has the privilege to reproduce and what implications this has for the future. In my final chapter, I examine the ways that the form of the multiverse and traditionally Asian symbols and beliefs provide a framework with which the directors demonstrate the importance of radical acceptance as a form of love. While each artist presents different representations of mother-daughter relationships, they are united in their efforts to challenge white American ideas about what motherhood and love can and should look like.

Keywords: mother-daughter relationship, motherhood, daughterhood, Asian American, Asian American literature, intersectionality, racism, racial imposter syndrome, acculturative family distancing, reproduction, immigration, love

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Short Titles

HM: Zauner, Michelle. 2021. *Crying in H Mart: A Memoir*. 1st ed.

TF: Ozeki, Ruth. 2015. *THE FACE: A Time Code*.

MY: Ozeki, Ruth L. 1998. *My Year of Meats*.

EE: Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert, dirs. 2022. *Everything, Everywhere, All At Once*. A24.

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Introduction

> "I will look after you and I will look after anybody you say needs to be looked after, any way you say. I am here. I brought my whole self to you. I am your mother."
>
> —Maya Angelou, *Mom & Me & Mom*

My mother is the strongest, fiercest, and most loving person I know — the daughter of immigrants from Korea, she grew up in southern California, navigating the complexities of assimilation as one of the only Asian people in her school and functioning as the in-house translator for my grandparents. She is the definition of the giving tree:[1] she gave up any chance at a social life to raise her younger brother, moved to Korea after high school in accordance with her parents' wishes, and quit her job to raise my sister and me. My mother's gifts to me, as her daughter, are both small and large — they are woven so subtly into the fabric of my psyche, that I can hardly distinguish where she stops and I begin. So, when she was diagnosed with Stage III cancer at the end of 2018, I felt like I was losing a part of myself.

In the months following, I spent every waking moment doing the only thing I knew how to: reading and writing. There were no words to describe my emotions, but at least there were words to describe the science: I can tell you anything you need to know about progesterone positive breast cancer, human epidermal growth factor receptor 2, and lymph node metastasis. I think I was hoping that if I knew enough, it would change things. But no amount of reading or writing can prepare you to cope with the pain of grieving someone who is still alive.

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[1] Silverstein 1964. Ultimately, *The Giving Tree* is a story about unconditional parental love and the unsustainability of self-sacrifice. It is about giving so much, because of a love so deep, that it destroys the parent. My mother has the tendency to do this for the people she loves — to give, and to give, and to give, until she has nothing left to offer.

I felt like I was holding my mother like water in my hands:[2] I wrote down everything I could about her, documenting every word and moment so that she couldn't possibly fade into oblivion. When my insomnia left me staring at my ceiling for hours on end, I would sneak into our kitchen, quietly recreating her oi muchim recipe or making myself a bowl of gyeran-jjim, the only food I could stomach as I watched the chemotherapy eat away at the person who had loved me into existence. I eagerly cooked, cleaned, and studied, attempting to make myself the perfect daughter: anything to make the process easier for her.

By some miracle, after 13 months of treatment, the 16 rounds of chemotherapy, 24 rounds of radiation, and surgery, were successful. But our relationship, and my relationship with myself, was forever changed. I now have a deeper appreciation for my mother and everything she has done and continues to do for me: I notice when she gives me the perfectly cooked kalbi straight from the grill, saves her crispy rice from the bottom of her bibimbap bowl for me, or stocks up our refrigerator with my favorite fruit for when I return home from school for break.

Sixteen months into my mother's remission, Michelle Zauner released her memoir about the death of her mother, *Crying in H Mart*. It took me months to work up the courage to buy the book, and then several more months to take it off my shelf and start reading it. Within the first few pages, I found parts of my story in hers: a half-Korean woman who was grieving the loss of her mother to cancer and finding solace through her profound connection to food and cooking as a means of reconnecting with her mother and herself. In the emotionally demanding work of cooking, Zauner is able to care for her mother while continuing to learn from her. This simultaneously reverses the child-parent role while also giving Zauner a place to root herself in

[2] Bridgers 2020. My parents and I have always had a special connection to the moon: my favorite book growing up was *Goodnight Moon*, and when I was a toddler, I would beg them to read it to me every night. My mother would tell me she would capture the moon to give it to me one day just to show me how much she loved me — a line I later discovered in Bridgers' song: "If I could give you the moon, I would give you the moon." Now, living over 2,000 miles away from home, I find comfort in knowing that, no matter how far apart we are, we are always looking at the same moon.

her own childhood and identity. While I cannot claim that every nuance of Zauner's life mirrors my own, she captured a lived experience that so many know. Places like H Mart[3] are portals to another person, time, and place — a reminder of when I used to roam the aisles, picking up a box of Melona bars while I was waiting for my mother to get out of treatment. Or of those trips to the market as a kid, when my grandmother and my mother would load the cart with nori rice crackers, black sesame mochi, and jars of fresh kimchi to bring home.

Crying in H Mart was the first book I read where I felt seen. It was also the first place where I saw my mother, and my grandmother, in ways I had never been able to in the hundreds of books I read before. It felt like I was looking up at the sky, watching clouds dissipate as new constellations appeared, each telling a new story and creating a new universe. It was here that I found my passion for reading Asian American literature. It gave me the chance to connect with myself and find my identity: the collective perspectives that these texts presented offered up a new, kaleidoscopic vision of all the ways it feels to be Asian American. In my day-to-day life, I have found that the "problem" of Asian America is often framed too simply as a family struggle between first and second generations: there is a reductive way in which Asian American culture, and parenting style specifically, are discussed, that minimizes the cultural and political incommensurabilities of Asian American existence, suggesting that westernized, universalized love shared by mothers and daughters is the solution to healing from centuries of oppression. Literature, however, allows us to better understand society and the world around us. The power of storytelling is rooted in its ability to highlight lived experiences that readers can directly

[3] H Mart is an Asian supermarket chain. The "H" stands for han ah reum, a Korean phrase that translates roughly to "one arm full of groceries." For many, H Mart is a liminal space in which the world is centered around the Asian American identity, rather than existing as a footnote in the single "ethnic" aisle that exists in American grocery stores.

connect to and also learn to call into question; it is not constrained by a specific genre, character arc, or prescribed narrative structure.

I write this thesis to confront myths about the traditions and needs of Asian mothers and daughters, illuminating the complexities of Asian American family dynamics and denaturalizing the figure of the mother. I will examine contemporary East Asian narratives that display parent-child relationships and offer up alternative expressions of love, with a specific focus on more palatable, familiar, and popular texts, each of a different genre. I made this choice in order to reveal the ways in which such accessible texts reckon with the discrepancies between reality and attempts to capture it. In Michelle Zauner's *Crying in H Mart*, Ruth Ozeki's *My Year in Meats*, and Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert's (known as "the Daniels") *Everything, Everywhere, All At Once*, the intersectional identities of the texts' mothers and daughters provide a complex set of relationships that challenge conventional, traditional Euro-American constructs of familial relationships. I hope to shed light on the alienation of both figures: the mother who is thrust into a culture completely unfamiliar to her, and the daughter who is growing up in a culture and a physical location they are unable to share with their mother. The result of the parent's immigration to the U.S. produces a truncated and simplified role definition for the mother. I define "role definition" as the constructed system of beliefs about what being a parent, and in this case, a mother, means. They are systematic and expected by society, often boxing a mother into a specific framework. Children of immigrants grow up observing how their parents' marginalization was markedly different from their own as native English speakers and natural born citizens of the United States. Across these texts, there is a thread of love that endures across generations and places, weaving an unbreakable bond between families. This love is often

overshadowed by criticism of its modes of expression, but I will refocus readers, calling into question Western conceptions of love and what a mother-daughter relationship should look like.

It would be impossible to capture the nuances of motherhood, the immigrant experience, and the hundreds of other lenses through which to think about these issues in a single thesis. I chose to narrow the subject of my thesis to East Asian narratives because of my proximity to these communities; these are primarily stories of Korean, Japanese, Chinese, and Vietnamese people. I have also chosen to focus on mother-daughter relationships for two reasons: 1. I have a particular interest in the bonds between women and the role of Euro-American gender constructs on scholarship related to mothers and daughters; 2. These narratives tend to be the most prevalent, as opposed to father-daughter, father-son and mother-son relationships. I also will be using transliteration to write the various words that appear in different languages across my texts. This decision stems from my own lived experience of using Latin letters to spell out Korean words since I was a child: there is something beautiful about the accessibility that transliteration offered me, as a mixed race child who never had the opportunity to learn Korean.

In the first chapter of my thesis, I will examine Zauner's *Crying in H Mart*, shedding light on the complex identities that mothers and daughters hold, especially in the context of race and immigration. This memoir depicts the ways in which alienation is uniquely complicated in mixed race families, where children are displaced from their own racial groups and their sense of selfhood, a phenomenon known as "racial imposter syndrome."[4] The denial of racial and ethnic identities to these people, especially at a young age, fractures their internal sense of belonging and impacts the relationship they are capable of having with their identity and subsequently, their parents. Mixed race children are forced to confront the physical ambiguity of their own bodies, in the search for wholeness. Under the surface, children must also reckon with their knowledge

[4] Lacey, n.d.

of a mother language and of their ethnic culture in the search for self. This disconnect further complicates the relationship that the child can have with their parents. Zauner is left to reckon with her grief in conjunction with a loss of direct connection to her culture and a realization that her mother also faced challenges in balancing her own multitude of identities.[5]

In my second chapter, I will build upon my analysis of the oppression of Asian women and forms of control administered over their bodies in Ozeki's *My Year of Meats*. This chapter will further examine the challenges and constitutive violence immigrant women face that is inherent to privilege itself, whether it be patriarchal (v. women), human (v. animal), or racial (v. minority subordination) forms of privilege, all of which are central to the aspirations of the American dream that many immigrants aspire to achieve. The theoretical groundwork of this chapter is inspired by and rooted in the brilliant work of pioneers including Kimberlé Crenshaw, Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, Marie Anna Jaimes Guerrero, Angela Davis, Gloria Anzaldúa, Leslie McCall, and Sumi Cho, all of whom brought intersectional framework to the forefront of discursive spaces. In addition to intersectionality theory, I will utilize feminist, ecofeminist, and queer theory to demonstrate the complex challenges that Jane, her mother, and any woman living in America faces in their everyday lives. In this novel, storytelling becomes a mode of advocating and fostering relationships between mothers and daughters. Jane is a documentarian and storyteller by nature, shedding light on the corruption of the agricultural industry and the violence and betrayal women face across the country, and her mother becomes a storyteller as an act of love, sharing intimate details about her struggles with infertility and motherhood with Jane in a moment of support. Sharing stories becomes a means of survival, between mother and child.

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[5] Mothers often forgo their own identities to give themselves, wholly, to their children. When a mother immigrates, they must also, oftentimes, physically leave behind parts of themselves in their homeland. In addition to personal challenges, there are systemic difficulties that moving to the United States invokes; this is a problem, not just for Asian American women, but any woman immigrating to the U.S.

Toni Morison said it best: “Narrative is radical, creating us at the very moment it is being created.”[6] Telling the stories of ourselves, and of our origins, is an essential act of self-advocacy; each of the authors and directors behind these stories utilize their prospective genres to tell their story of selfhood, and of history. To write, and to tell stories, is to make and sustain a culture that would otherwise fade. It is the minoritization of Asian-ness in the United States that creates a need to write against erasure in the first place. Embedded narratives within each of these texts provide a space in which love manifests itself and comes to represent deeper lessons about survival and identity for the children of immigrant parents. Not only do these stories come to illustrate mothers’ love for their daughters, but they become modes of giving for daughters to show their admiration for their mothers’ personal sacrifices, as oftentimes, their mothers’ perspectives are overlooked.

Motherhood and love is at the center of *Everything, Everywhere, All At Once*, a film that defies traditional notions of genre and form. In this final chapter, I examine key scenes from this film that track Evelyn’s path towards radical acceptance of her daughter Joy. The multiverse form provides a setting which enables Evelyn to experience her alternate life paths and come to terms with her own failures in order to foster a loving relationship with Joy. Through Kung Fu, Tao, and Buddhist ideologies, the Daniels demonstrate the process of radical acceptance and the importance of extending kindness and love to all, even when it feels impossible.

[6] Morrison, 1993.

I. Identity and the Mixed-Race Body in *Crying in H Mart*

> "And as any mixed-race person will tell you—
> to be half of two things is to be whole of nothing."
>
> —Gabrielle Zevin, *Tomorrow, and Tomorrow, and Tomorrow*

"Racial imposter syndrome" is, at its core, a belief that a person does not have a right to claim a part of their identity.[7] While racial imposter syndrome can be difficult to define, as it is experienced differently based on an individual's lived experiences, it is common amongst people who are mixed race. Alienation, which is already experienced by Asian American mothers and daughters across the country, becomes uniquely complicated in mixed race families, where children are displaced from their own racial groups and their sense of selfhood. These children are left to prove who they are, while processing the disconnect between how people, including their loved ones, see them and how they see themselves.

In this chapter, I will move from what, at first, may appear to be the physical appearance of Zauner, but will become increasingly complicated when studied in tandem with the external validation she receives, such as compliments or praise, especially that which comes from her mother. I will then turn to the medium through which she understands and expresses herself on a deeper level: language. This section will investigate how Zauner uses and inhabits and, in some cases, fails to inhabit her mother language, Korean. In the next section, I will examine how Zauner's feelings of being "incomplete" manifest in her decisions to engage with their culture. Finally, I will examine how she simultaneously grapples with the grief of losing her mother and a loss of her own identity and relationship with her physical body.

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[7] Lacey, n.d.

In their search for wholeness, mixed race children must continually confront their physical ambiguity that being mixed race confers upon children forces them to confront this in their daily lives. Zauner writes about her experience in reckoning with her identity in both the physical space she was in, and within herself.[8] Zauner, who has a Korean mother and a white[9] father, writes about her connection to her physical body, and her face in particular, from a young age. She recounts a specific instance in which her mother tells her that double eyelids are attractive, something to strive for. "It was the first time I could remember being happy to have inherited something from my father, whose crooked teeth and too-long dip between nose and mouth I rued constantly. I wanted to grow up to look just like my mother, … but in that moment, what I wanted more than anything was to have the double lid" (*HM*, 32). This marks a shift from Zauner originally wanting to identify with her mother and her Korean characteristics to an appreciation for a physical trait inherited from her father. Her mother explains that Zauner's Korean family members have undergone double eyelid surgery, blepharoplasty, a procedure that is common in Korea. Zauner, who spends much of her life trying to impress her mother, learns that meeting Westernized beauty standards is a means to receiving validation from her mother.

Zauner's relationship with her physical appearance is further complicated by her physical setting: she explains that, in different physical settings, she was either classified as Asian or white, but nothing in between. "In Eugene, I was one of just a few mixed-race kids at my school and most people thought of me as Asian. I felt awkward and undesirable, and no one ever complimented my appearance. In Seoul, most Koreans assumed I was Caucasian, until my mother stood beside me and they could see the half of her fused to me, and I made sense. Suddenly, my 'exotic' look was something to be celebrated" (*HM*, 33). Zauner's mother must be

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[8] Zauner 2021.

[9] I have chosen to lowercase the term "white" because of the history of capital-W "White" being used as a term by white supremacists.

alive and present in her life as proof that she is, in fact, Korean. It is as though the people around her — both her white peers and native Koreans — did not believe her when she claimed her mixed race identity. Furthermore, while intended to be a simple observation or compliment, the word "exotic" is synonymous to "foreign." The "Orientalization" of Asian women as the "Exotic Other" in discursive practices in the United States is the byproduct of Western military involvement in Asia and the Pacific Islands and neocolonial attitudes regarding the social position of women of Asian heritage, even within American borders.[10] There is a history of sexual fetishization and objectification of Asian women, who are exoticized and regarded as desirable because of their foreignness.[11] This added dimension further complicates Zauner's relationship with her Korean identity: while her Koreanness is being recognized by outsiders, the way in which she is associated with it is inherently oppressive and harmful, stemming from a history of colonization and imperialism.

Zauner recounts an exchange she had with an ajumma, a Korean woman, at a jjimjilbang, a Korean bathhouse. The woman asks Zauner if she is Korean, and Zauner struggles to answer her. "She looked into my face as if searching for something. I knew what she was looking for. It was the same way kids at school would look at me before they asked me what I was, but from the opposite angle. She was looking for the hint of Koreanness in my face that she couldn't quite put a finger on. Something that resembled her own" (*MY*, 226). Zauner desperately wants the ajumma to see her Koreanness and to validate it: as they speak, she searches for recognition, hoping that this will affirm her identity. She explains that the woman is searching for "something that resembled her own," as in searching for something that resembles her Koreanness, making a distinction between herself and the woman. The familiarity, coupled with hesitancy, from the

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[10] Uchida 1998.
[11] Azhar 2021.

ajumma sends Zauner into a spiral in which her Koreanness metamorphoses into something unrecognizable.

Beyond the complicated task of coming to terms with their identity, mixed race people must face the history of relationships between the ethnicities and cultures they share. Ruth Ozeki, in *The Face*, challenges herself to spend three hours gazing into her own reflection, a variation of an observation experiment established by Jennifer Roberts, who assigns her students to observe a single work of art for three hours and make a detailed record of observations, questions, and speculations that arise.[12] This is meant to help students learn to *see* works of art. As Ozeki learns to see her face, she reflects on the history that has culminated in her physical appearance. Ozeki, who was born in 1956, 11 years after World War II, writes about how her Japanese mother and caucasian father's people were at war with each other, and that, from a young age, she embodied the tension between history and her very existence. She writes, "With all these primal and contrary passions eddying below the surface of my skin, it's no wonder people found my face disturbing" (*TF*, 33). Her physical body is a direct reminder of sex and difference, which was more explicit during the 1950s and 60s when America was racially and ethnically segregated in more overt ways than it is in contemporary society. While Ozeki must confront the disgust with which she is met, she also learns to embrace the physical manifestations of her Japanese traits, as reminders of her mother, and her rich history.

She writes about how she came to terms with her background through her reflection on her physical appearance. She writes: "I like my cheekbones. They are my mother's cheekbones, and her father's cheekbones… As I get older, sometimes I can see small glimpses of his face and my mother's in mine, and I like that" (*TF*, 57). Ozeki compares faces to works of art, admiring the ways in which they map out the features of one's ancestors and the love they were born out

[12] Ozeki 2015.

of. Even after her mother's passing, Zauner will continue to carry bits and pieces of her mother, not only in her memory, but in her physical body.

Zauner's relationship with her culture is further complicated by their relationship with her mother language and the ways in which communication is impacted by shared language erosion. Zauner writes, "Every time my mother spoke Korean, the text sprawled out before me like a Mad Lib. Words that were so familiar mixed with long blanks I couldn't fill in" (*HM*, 60). Communication is essential to parent-child relationships, and when Zauner is unable to fully understand her mother, the disconnection is exacerbated and she is left feeling inadequate.

The denial of racial and ethnic identities to these people, especially at a young age, breaks their internal sense of belonging and impacts the relationship they are capable of having with their identity and subsequently, their parents. Zauner recounts her tumultuous relationship with her mother and her denial of her own identity through acts of rebellion specifically targeted towards her mother. In one anecdote, she writes that she attended Hangul Hakkyo, Korean language schools. She observes: "Most of the kids there were full Korean, and I struggled to relate to the obedience that seemed to possess them, inculcated by the united force of two immigrant parents. … Perhaps by nature of my mixed upbringing, I always felt like the bad kid, which only made me act out more" (*HM*, 81). Korean is known as a heritage language,[13] passed down from the first generation of immigrants to the United States, and Hangul Hakkyo is a significant part of Korean American culture.[14] Zauner remarks that, despite her attendance at the language school, she never became fluent in Korean, a decision she would regret later in life. By choosing not to engage with the culture, Zauner was able to feel a sense of control over her life and her relationship with her identity. Being unable to communicate with her Korean family

[13] A heritage language is a language other than the dominant one given social context. It is often learned by speakers at home when they are children and often resembles a connection to a person, family, or community.
[14] Kim 2011.

members was no longer something Zauner had no free will in, but became an active choice she was making.

In practicing an exercise of her ability to choose, Zauner is also, and at the same time, cutting off an aspect of her capacities to connect with Korean culture, a decision she regrets later in life. When Zauner is speaking to the ajumma at the jjimjilbang, she feigns her knowledge of the language: "I mimicked the Korean mumbles of understanding, wanting so badly to keep up the charade, pretending to understand long enough to catch a glimpse of a word I recognized, but eventually she asked a question I failed to comprehend, and then she too realized that there was nothing left for her to relate to. Nothing more we could share" (*HM*, 226). It is ironic that, after years of longing to resemble her white peers, Zauner was consumed by fear that her Koreanness would be unseen by this ajumma.

One of the key indicators of racial imposter syndrome is feeling unrecognizable, not only on a physical level, but on a cultural level as well. After enduring these feelings in her early childhood, Zauner began to efface her Koreanness. In one instance, she recalls asking her mom to stop packing her lunches. This request is particularly significant because the act of making food is considered the Asian love language. Zauner defends her question, writing, "'You don't know what it's like to be the only Korean girl at school,' I sounded off to my mother, who stared back at me blankly. 'But you're not Korean,' she said. 'You're American'" (*HM*, 96). Her mother makes a clear distinction between herself and her daughter, alienating Zauner in a moment when she is already feeling lost. The generational differences between a woman born and raised in Korea and one born and raised in America leads to intergenerational cultural dissonance.[15] This concept is not only applicable to mixed race children, but, more generally, to second generation

[15] Choi, He, and Harachi 2008.

immigrants who are "Americanized." In this moment, it feels as though Zauner is being disowned and abandoned by her own mother.

Zauner only begins to realize the impactful role her mother had in her life when her mother was diagnosed with Stage IV Pancreatic cancer. Her mother could no longer take care of her; she had to take care of her mother. Throughout her mother's battle with cancer, Zauner utilizes food and cooking to express her love for her mother. She spends countless hours learning Korean recipes and perfecting her cooking to match that of her mother. However, she recounts a scenario in which Kye, her mother's friend who visits to help care for her mother, confronts her over her reservations about giving her mom soft-boiled eggs. Kye scoffs, telling her that this is how they eat eggs in Korea:

> I had spent my adolescence trying to blend in with my peers in suburban America, and had come of age feeling like my belonging was something to prove. Something that was always in the hands of other people to be given and never my own to take, to decide which side I was on, whom I was allowed to align with. I could never be of both worlds, only half in and half out, waiting to be ejected at will by someone with greater claim than me. Someone full. Someone whole. For a long time I had tried to belong in America, wanted and wished for it more than anything, but in that moment all I wanted was to be accepted as a Korean by two people who refused to claim me. You are not one of us, Kye seemed to say. And you will never really understand what it is she needs, no matter how perfect you try to be (*HM*, 107).

Again, Zauner is left with the impression that she is not enough, feelings that are exacerbated by her fear of failing her mother, who had been cooking Korean food as an expression of love for her since she was a child. Ozeki touches on this in her work, referencing a proverb[16] when

[16] Heywood 1546.

verbalizing the complicated feelings associated with being mixed race: “She is nother fyshe nor fleshe, nor good red hearyng” (*TF*, 35). This phrase indicates that she — Ozeki — is incapable of being categorized as one thing or another: she is a combination of multiple races and histories, making it impossible for there to be a single distinct category she can fall into. Ozeki continues, explaining that humans enjoy utilizing social categories to simplify the complexities of everyday life. She writes of the “human love of taxonomies and our need to identify, classify, and pin down meaning with words” (*TF*, 35). However, there is no world in which Ozeki can fit into a binary, making her feel as though she is both the observed and the observer, simultaneously feeling like she is systematizing those around her, while being unable to fit into a category herself.

As aforementioned, my mother gives all of herself, and she always has, to the people she loves. But as a consequence of this sacrifice, she, too, has lost aspects of her own identity as a part of motherhood. This phenomenon is common amongst mothers specifically, who often lose parts of their identity after giving birth. Studies show that mothers often feel unpreparedness, lack of control over their lives, incomplete maternal feelings and unstable relationships with their loved ones after giving birth: these symptoms may lead to the development of postpartum depression. Furthermore, women of Color are more likely to experience postpartum depression and less likely to receive treatment for it. Daughters themselves often view their mothers solely as a mother because that is what they see most directly and interact with most throughout childhood. However, after her mother passes away, Zauner begins to view her mother as a whole person after seeing her in different environments, and particularly in her homeland interacting with her family from whom she has been physically removed.

During a trip to Korea, Zauner begins to see her mother in a new light:

> Halmoni would take bites from the core so none of the fruit would go to waste, while my mom ate the perfectly cut slivers, just as I did when she cut fruit for me at home. It never occurred to me that she was trying to make up for all the years she'd spent away in America. It was difficult to even register that this woman was my mother's mother, let alone that their relationship would be a model for the bond between my mother and me for the rest of my life (*HM*, 28).

Zauner begins to recognize the hardships her mother faced in immigrating to the United States; something she had not thought about throughout her childhood. It is clear that this move had a lasting impact on her mother, with the guilt haunting her even decades later. Zauner begins to see herself in her mother after spending years of her childhood searching for ways to resonate with her. She describes this scene as if it is an out-of-body experience, viewing her grandmother as a mother and her mother as a daughter. Zauner also opens up a space to demonstrate the ways in which food and cooking has played a generational role in demonstrating love. Kosiso Ugwueze writes about the role of physical space in her review of *Crying in H Mart* and "Jubilee," Zauner's third record. Ugwueze draws readers' attentions to the physical and emotional contrasts throughout both works, highlighting the differences between the United States and Korea throughout the trip that Zauner depicts. In this new environment, Zauner's mother becomes a daughter and sister, but she also becomes a niece, cousin, and granddaughter, complicating her own relationship with herself. To Zauner, Korea represents a completely different life and identity that challenges the traditional notions of home and belonging. Her discovery of the dynamic communities and identities that her mother had become a catalyst for a journey of her own self-discovery. Korea, for Zauner, is not just a geographical location; it becomes a

transformative space where the intersections of personal and cultural narratives converge, reshaping her perspective on life and identity.

As Zauner continues to recount her trip with her mother, her mother shifts, taking on the traits of a friend figure as opposed to a guardian. Finally set free in her home country, her mother flourishes, finding excitement in feeling safe and coddled. They both sneak into the kitchen late at night, raiding her grandmother's refrigerator and eating leftovers together. Not only does this shape their relationship, bringing them closer and giving them the space to form new memories, but it demonstrates Zauner's mother's playfulness and lighthearted nature. The dichotomy between this character and her mother's character when in the United States is unmistakable: the weight of being in a different country, far from her family, facing multi-layered oppression, and carrying the sole title of mother, as opposed to daughter or sister, clearly has an impact on her. Zauner describes what it felt like to see her mother mourning the loss of her mother after she passed away: "I'd never seen my mother's emotions so unabashedly on display. Never seen her without control, like a child. …I didn't think about the guilt she might have felt for all the years spent away from her mother, for leaving Korea behind" (*HM*, 35).

As Zauner reconciles with the realization of the complexity of challenges her mother faced and the array of roles she had in her own — and other's — lives, she is also grieving a loss of direct connection to her culture. After her mother passes away, Zauner questions whether or not she had any claim to Korea or her mother's family. There is an additional self-imposed responsibility to engage with her culture as proof of her mother's existence, as her mother is no longer there to do it for her, while concurrently forging her own identity. "I was what she left behind. If I could not be with my mother, I would be her" (*HM*, 224). Zauner embarks on an unrealistic journey to "becoming her mother" as a coping mechanism for losing her.

As Zauner searches for herself, and for her mother within herself, she explains that she feels that she physically looks less Korean after her mother passes away. Her dialogue with the ajumma consummates a long search for identity. At one moment, Zauner can feel the old woman looking at her, and she struggles to find the words to illuminate her Koreanness for the ajumma. The longer the two women talk, the more profoundly alienated Zauner feels from not only her culture but her physical identity. She writes, "I no longer had someone whole to stand beside, to make sense of me. I feared whatever contour or color it was that signified that precious half was beginning to wash away, as if without my mother, I no longer had a right to those parts of my face" (*HM*, 226). When confronted with skepticism about her Korean identity, her mother was always standing by her side, as living proof of her Koreanness. However, her mother can no longer stand beside her, both physically and metaphorically, so people are unable to see "the half of her fused to me." Zauner realizes that her mother was always by her side, protecting her from the doubts people had about her Koreanness.

Ozeki describes faces: "time batteries, and maybe even works of art" (*TF*, 135). One's physical appearance is an amalgamation of countless generations of people who loved one another. The face is physical proof of one's ancestors, and the joys and experiences they have lived through that have left physical lines and permanent impacts on the way we live. As Zauner comes to terms with this, and the multitude of challenges she and her mother have faced, both separately and together, she learns that loving herself is, in many ways, loving who and where she came from. I began with this memoir because it lays out the complexities of mother-daughter relationships in a way that is simple and powerful. The next chapter, which will examine a text of a different genre, has different ambitions that are more sociologically complex, but highlight many of the same challenges that Zauner and her mother faced as a result of their identities.

II. "This Ever-Shrinking World":

Intersectionality, American Violence, and Reproduction in *My Year of Meats*

> "The nameless yellow body was not considered human
> because it did not fit in a slot on a piece of paper.
> Sometimes you are erased
> before you are given the choice of stating who you are."
>
> —Ocean Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*

The issue of identity and motherhood is often simplified when examined exclusively through a feminist lens; the limitations of gender as a single analytical category have been challenged by theorists since the introduction of intersectionality as a method, disposition, heuristic and analytical tool. In using different lenses to understand the complexities of a person's lived experiences, the interplay between motherhood and identity undergoes a profound reevaluation. I've discussed the theoretical underpinnings of this chapter in my Introduction. Here, I demonstrate the ways in which Ruth Ozeki, in *My Year of Meats*, not only embraces Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality but intricately weaves the different aspects of identity into a narrative that unravels the complexities of sexism, racism, environmentalism, transnationalism and control: the abstractness of these concepts is grounded in the physical body and material conditions of capitalist production through the narrative of the meat industry. I will couple the work of the aforementioned theorists with ecofeminist theory of Greta Gaard[17] and the

[17] Gaard and Gaard 1993. Gaard defines ecofeminism: "In their analyses of oppression, socialists, animal liberationists, ecologists, and feminists each distinguish between privileged and oppressed groups, where the privileged are upper- or middle-class, human, technologically and industrially "developed," male, and the oppressed are poor or working-class, nonhuman animal, "undeveloped" nature, and female, respectively. Ecofeminism describes the framework that authorizes these forms of oppression as patriarchy, an ideology whose fundamental self/other distinction is based on a sense of self that is separate, atomistic."

work of queer theorists, like Judith Butler[18] and Sara Ahmed, to challenge the relations of power in normative cultural institutions and "disturb the order."[19] Ozeki brilliantly weaves together so many complex issues into one coherent story; her intricate narrative requires intensive theoretical framing, leading to a dense chapter that covers an array of issues that are seemingly unrelated to one another, but, at their core, all connect to the experiences and expectations of motherhood. In this chapter, I will explore the discussion of motherhood and daughterhood on a darker, more physiological and sociological level, starting with physical violence, and then moving to violence in culture and the legal, food, and healthcare systems. While the individual sections of this chapter may initially seem irrelevant in my analysis of mother-daughter relationships, the processing of Asian women, biologically, culturally, and legally, has a direct impact on their ability to have children and relationships they are able to form with their child.

The beginning of my analysis of *My Year of Meats* can be framed by one key scene. Upon recounting stories from her childhood, Jane explains that, at twelve years old, she conceptualized reproduction as the opportunity to give birth to someone destined to ascend as the future "King of the World"; thus, she embarked on a mission to amalgamate the most ideal spouse she could. In an effort to learn more about reproduction, Jane checked out Alexis Everett Frye's *Grammar School Geography*[20] in order to better understand race and the role it plays in reproduction. Decades later, after stealing the book from the Quam[21] Public Library, she reads the Preface:

[18] I am particularly interested in Butler's questions: "What happens when I begin to become that for which there is no place within the given regime of truth?" and "What, given the contemporary order of being, can I be?"
[19] Ahmed 2006, 161.
[20] More than a century after its publication, the content within the pages of *Grammar School Geography* was deemed not only false, but pernicious. The textbook, which was used in classrooms across the country, contained claims such as the white race being the most advanced, the "black savages of middle Africa" being ignorant and leading "lazy, shiftless lives" and the "yellow race" being "eager to learn how the white men do all kinds of work."
[21] Jane grew up in Quam, Minnesota where she and her mother were the only Asian people in the entire town. The town name is fictitious, but there is a member of the Minnesota House of Representatives of that name.

> In this book, **man** is the central thought. Every line of type, every picture, every map, has been prepared with a single purpose, namely, to present the *earth as the home of man*, — to describe and locate the natural features, climates and products that largely determine his industries and commerce, as well as his civic and other relations, — thus bringing REASON to bear on the work (*MY*, 154).

Jane points out that it is not Frye's use of the generic "man" that she is interested in. Rather, she is interested in something greater: "The conflict that interests me isn't *man* versus *woman*, it's *man* versus *life*. *Man's* REASON, his industries and commerce, versus the entire natural world. This, to me, is the dirty secret hidden between the fraying covers" (*MY*, 154). Ozeki is interested in women's reproductive agency, and suppression, in the context of interconnection of broader cultural issues such as sexism, racism, biotechnical innovation, and reproductive justice. In this scene, Ozeki is referencing the Lockean theory of property.[22] In essence, Locke argues that a settler's claim to land is about making optimal use of the land, which subsequently makes the land productive; in order to achieve success, settlers must produce everything the land can to exhaustion. This ideology serves as a rationale for the agriculture industry that Ozeki depicts. Yet, the natural world operates outside this productivity-centric framework. Ozeki's exploration of "man versus life" is not only significant because she asserts that natural resources have been commoditized through the expansion of capitalism, but also because of the way she suggests that the essence of white patriarchal America lies in striving for maximum production against the will and survival of nature.

[22] Locke 1824, 108. John Locke had stakes in companies responsible for settling the New World.

Soo Yeon Kim posits that this text promotes "epistemic violence"[23] because it assumes that "all women must long for family and maternity."[24] However, I argue that this critique not only ignores substantial aspects of the novel's ideological complexity, but also fails to grasp Ozeki's central argument, namely the notion that regardless of whether or not women "long for family and maternity," they have no power over their ability to reproduce. While Ozeki does not explicitly dispute the "celebration of motherhood," it is crucial to recognize that this text does not promote epistemic violence; asserting that the desire to have children is inherently anti-feminist constitutes an argument that, in itself, runs counter to feminist principles. Ozeki raises questions about the fundamental role of reproduction, exploring the notion that pregnancy and motherhood are constrained by involuntary factors. Further, first-wave feminism naturalized pregnancy and motherhood in its critique of the "natural"; in *My Year of Meats*, the conditions for reproduction are not to be assumed. Ozeki draws attention to infertility which is, in this narrative, created and exacerbated by patriarchal and capitalist structures. While the two main characters in this text, Jane and Akiko, both long to have maternal roles in their personal lives, this does not mean that Ozeki is promoting the idea that all women must want to have children. Her point is that regardless of what women want, they do not have a choice in many cases because of the control that is exerted over them: Akiko experiences amenorrhea due to the abusive relationship she endures, leading to the development of bulimia nervosa fueled by anxiety. Meanwhile, Jane grapples with infertility challenges, hindering her ability to conceive and resulting in a miscarriage — an outcome directly linked to the control exerted over her mother, who was compelled to take a harmful hormonal drug during pregnancy. In heralding

[23] Kim claims that epistemic violence is exerted by "American" wives and mothers upon those untied to family and monogamy. This form of violence arises from a narrow understanding of feminism "exclusively achieved in familial and conjugal terms."
[24] Kim 2015, 34.

Jane and Akiko's diverse narratives and telling the stories of women living across America through the production of *My American Wife!*,[25] Ozeki makes the argument that no two experiences of pregnancy and motherhood are the same, prompting readers to ask what it means to be a woman, what we put in our bodies, and how our offspring will survive and reproduce in the world we create.

For the purpose of this chapter, I focus primarily on Jane and her journey with reproduction in the context of American ideals that are embedded within the natural world they inhabit. Ozeki is focused less on motherhood, and more on how "being"[26] shapes and is shaped by the world around us. This world is one of oppression and violence across sectors and species. As Julie Ann Pavlick writes, "Violence is at the forefront of the novel. There is violence in the lives of the women, in killing the animals, and also in America. The novel exposes the fallacy of the American dream which is violence towards minority groups."[27] Ozeki emphasizes the conceptual similarities between sources of harm, including overt violence such as sexual assault and more subtle examples of violence caused by patriarchal privilege, capitalist expansion, and dehumanizing forms of labor, without conflating the distinct problems that result from different forms of violence. It is in this context that the novel offers evidence for a need to expand our understanding to include structural as well as individual sources of harm.

I. At Face Value: Physical Violence

Violence in Ozeki's novel exists in both simpler, more conventional forms and insidious forms in which agents of harm can elude the culpability for such violence. While I will begin this

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[25] In the novel, *My American Wife!* is a documentary-style Japanese television show sponsored by an American meat-exporting business that Jane is responsible for producing.

[26] Ozeki is interested in how the act of existence, in the context of oppressive and corrupt structures and ideas, is shaped and will change as time passes.

[27] Pavlick 2020, 102.

chapter with a few scenes that display short causal chains of harm such as sexual assault, these moments are important because they lay the foundation for a larger analysis of media productions, corporations, regulatory agencies, and structures of government which endanger women and the future of reproduction.

Joichi Ueno,[28] a representative of BEEF-EX[29] and the abusive husband of Akiko, serves as a prime example of several forms of harm Ozeki depicts. He is known to have a lust for "big-breasted Texan women," whom he claims are "happy-go-lucky" and symbolize femininity and maternal tendencies, as opposed to "scrawny" Japanese women like his wife. Laura Williams points to the ways Ueno describes women's body parts in butcher's terminology, using words like "tenderloin" and "rump":

> The use of butcher terminology to describe sexualized human body parts in this scene equates gastronomic pleasure with both sexual pleasure and pornographic visual pleasure. Although it is used here to ridicule Ueno, it captures the character's deep investment both in the sexual objectification of women's bodies as well as his valorization of meat as an expression of Western heterosexual masculinity.[30]

Ueno objectifies and "cuts up" the female body into consumable parts. The woman's body is not an integrated whole, but commodified and sexualized at the same time. After a night of drinking, Ueno locks Jane in a room and begins to try to rape her until she is able to escape him. Ueno's lust for Jane stems from his erroneous belief that Jane is fertile and would make strong offspring: it is this fact that Ozeki draws readers' attention to in order to convey a broader

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[28] Ueno's full name is Joichi Ueno, but after visiting Texas for a work trip, he decides to change his name to "John" after John Wayne (his last name is pronounced "Wayne-o"). He claims the reason for this change is because the name Joichi is not modern enough.
[29] BEEF-EX, the Beef Export and Trade Syndicate, is a national lobby organization that represents American meats, livestock producers, packers, purveyors, exporters, grain promoters, pharmaceutical companies, and agribusiness groups. It is the sponsor of *My American Wife!*.
[30] Williams 2014, 256.

message about reproduction. Jane literally does not have a say in Ueno's attempts to assault her, nor does she have a say in her ability, or lack thereof, to reproduce. The morning after the attempted rape, Jane and Ueno return to life as normal: Ueno does not acknowledge his actions, nor does he ever apologize to Jane, a decision that is heart wrenching, but unsurprising. The entire scene, while a serious and scary moment in Jane's life, takes up less than a page and is quickly glossed over as Ozeki quickly moves back to the primary plotline. Her choice to brush Ueno's attempt to rape Jane to the side is emblematic of the way sexual assault is treated in the real world. After the attack, Jane begins to feel "queasy" (*MY*, 110), a common reaction to sexual assault, and acknowledges that this is the psychological toll of experiencing such a traumatic event. Weeks later, she again begins to feel "queasy" (*MY*, 140), and shortly after missing her period, Jane finds out that she is pregnant. Ozeki draws a parallel between both scenes through her repetition of the word "queasy." In both instances, Jane experiences a lack of control, one being a biological response to something psychological and the other being purely biological. This underscores the complex intersection of women's experiences, where factors beyond their control can profoundly impact their physical and mental well-being. Women lack control over their physical bodies in both settings: one being horrific and violent, the other being regarded as one of the most beautiful experiences a person can have.

Weeks later, when Jane is speaking with Kenji, the New York office producer of *My American Wife!*, she tells him that Ueno tried to rape her, to which he responds: "Jane, you don't understand how these things work" (*MY*, 228) and changes the subject to baseball. This scene situates the intimate workings of the female, childbearing body within the social politics of collusion between global television and corporate agribusiness. The informality with which Kenji treats Jane's confession illustrates a larger quality of the entertainment industry, where its

history is entrenched in oppression of minorities. In her discussion of the novel, Shameem Black remarks: “These collaborative worlds of media and meat take their greatest toll upon the lives of women, specifically at the charged sites of their sexuality and fertility.”[31] The sexual violence that pervades Jane’s life stems from Ueno, who is desperately seeking control and ownership of his wife’s, the Texan prostitutes’, and Jane’s reproductive capacities. Jane does not understand that unveiling Ueno’s attempt to rape her will change nothing, both in her own life and in the bigger picture. Rape and sexual assault are embedded in the culture of the entertainment industry, and, the desire for control is inherent in patriarchal society, where such treatment of women has existed for centuries.

II. “We are a Grisly Nation”: The Culture of Violence in America

The history of America is a history of violent conquest: since 1776, violence has been embedded in the fabric of this country. Ozeki remarks that violence is pervasive in American culture: “Traveling across America, they were astonished at how deeply violence is embedded in our culture, how it has *become* the culture, what’s left of local color. We are a grisly nation” (*MY*, 89). As the Japanese crew, which consists only of men, tours across the country, they marvel at American drinking culture, consumerism, and entertainment; at face value, these concepts may not seem linked to gender or race, but they are entrenched within patriarchal, racist structures.

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[31] Black 2004, 227.

Ozeki writes that the men in her crew are uniquely drawn in by Jack Daniel's,[32] Wal-Mart,[33] and American hard-core pornography, each of these simultaneously being a symbol of patriotism and transgression. Throughout the text, the male crew members frequently engage in binge drinking as a means of unwinding after a taxing day's work. American drinking culture in and of itself can be considered violent — excessive alcohol consumption can erode inhibitions, cloud judgment, and escalate the likelihood of aggressive behavior.[34] The crew is also captivated by the "sheer amplitude of America," which they find in Walmart, the "capitalist equivalent of the wide-open spaces and endless horizons of the American geographical need and wonder" (*MY*, 35). They adorn their motel walls with images of women from *Hustler*[35] and marvel at gun culture and the simplicity of purchasing firearms. As Jane observes the men reveling in the perceived luxuries of American life, she discerns that the essence of her show lies in "re-creating for Japanese housewives this spectacle of raw American abundance" (*MY*, 35). The ultimate goal for *My American Wife!* is about generating a feeling of *want*, both in the sense of lack and desire.

While I do not intend to claim that these things exist in a vacuum in America, the logic behind these forms of "entertainment" comes from a history of colonization and oppression.

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[32] Risen 2016. Ozeki's choice to use Jack Daniels as a symbol for American culture and tradition is two-fold/multilayered: it is the best selling whiskey in America, having won an award naming it the "most patriotic spirit brand in America." Hence, it has become symbolic of American drinking culture and pride, which are inextricably entwined. However, this patriotic company was built by the work of slaves. Nathan 'Nearis' Green, an enslaved distiller, taught Daniel Call how to make whiskey. Enslaved men not only made up the bulk of the distilling labor force, but they often played crucial skilled roles in the whiskey-making process. In the same way that white cookbook authors often appropriated recipes from their black cooks, white distillery owners took credit for the whiskey. Owners of the distillery have claimed that it was never a conscious decision to leave Green, and his family members who built the foundation of the company, out of its story. It was not until 2016, 150 years after the distillery was first founded, that Green was recognized as the brand's first master distiller.

[33] Four years after the publication of *My Year of Meats*, Walmart entered the Japanese market.

[34] I have chosen not to delve into the details of America's drinking problem on individuals, those around them, and culture as a whole, but many studies such as Kathryn Graham and Michael Livingston's "The Relationship between Alcohol and Violence – Population, Contextual and Individual Research Approaches," Kajol V. Sontate et al.'s "Alcohol, Aggression, and Violence: From Public Health to Neuroscience," and Aleksandra J. Snowden's "The Role of Alcohol in Violence: The Individual, Small Group, Community and Cultural Level" have found causal relationships between different forms of violence and consumption of alcohol.

[35] *Hustler* was among the first major American magazines to feature graphic photos of female genitalia and simulated sex acts.

Ozeki skillfully draws out the impact of such exploitation on women of Color, asking readers to consider the impact this has on ideas about productivity and reproductivity. Kim argues that Ozeki's "revamping of Americanness" in *My Year of Meats* reinforces "reductive binaries of pure/hybrid, local/global, and rootedness/mobility."[36] However, Ozeki is doing the opposite of celebrating American culture: I argue that Ozeki exposes the corrupt nature of man's way of being and the ways binaries fail to capture lived experience of anyone who is not a white cis-gendered heterosexual man. She is focused on a larger question about how systems of control, which are embedded in American life, shape the way that life itself continues in the world.

III. Othered Bodies: Oppression in the Legal System

Over the course of America's history there have been inherently violent, systematic endeavors on a national scale to impede the reproduction and establishment of communities of Color within the country. The legal system, wielded strategically, has played a pivotal role in institutionalizing and perpetuating these efforts, further entrenching obstacles for immigrants in their pursuit of reproductive and societal autonomy. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was the first federal attempt to target a specific group of people and limit immigration. Thirty five years later, the Immigration Act of 1917, also known as the "Asiatic Barred Zone Act," further criminalized immigration from Asia. The United States has a deeply fraught and esoteric history with Asian women and immigration. The "Yellow Peril," which emerged in the late 19th century and legitimized the subjugation and enslavement of Asian people, aimed to create the Asian as a perpetual foreigner. Therefore, Asian women were considered threatening because if they had children in America, those children would be citizens. However, at the same time, many women

[36] Kim 2015, 34.

were forced into prostitution in order to support their families, and, in many cases, they were kidnapped and sold to generate profit. While the experiences of Asian women in sex work differed based on time period and ethnicity, there are overarching commonalities in these experiences.

The irony of the Yellow Peril and anti-Asian rhetoric manifests itself in Jane's notion of the "King of the World." Through her research, Jane determines that hybridity is vigor, contradicting cultivated ideologies about white purity. Despite such contradictions, first- and second- generation immigrants continue to live under duress and with little inoculation against the virulent strain of nativism that has informed centuries of American immigration policy. The reality is that Asian people were not worthy of being recognized, the lasting consequence is that our humanity has become amorphous: without shape, form, difficult to define, and easily labeled a "China virus"[37] no matter where we are born or raised, what our respective histories are, or what our individual humanity provides. In an 1884 issue of the *El Paso Daily Times*, it was reported that a white railroad worker had been accused of killing an unnamed Chinese man. In his decision, judge Roy Bean, citing Texas law that prohibited the murder of human beings, defined a human only as white, African American, or Mexican and the case was ultimately dismissed.[38] Ocean Vuong, in his memoir *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, writes of the history of Asian American representation: "The nameless yellow body was not considered human because it did not fit in a slot on a piece of paper."[39] It was not until 1870 that a category for people of Asian descent was added to the U.S. Census, 80 years after the first Census was conducted. It was only in 2010 that the categories for people of Asian descent were updated to

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[37] While anti-Asian racism has come to the forefront of the media and mainstream politics since the rise of COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, this rhetoric is not new. It has existed for centuries. It is also important to note that, in the year 2020, Asian women were the victims in nearly two-thirds of anti-Asian harassment incidents that were reported. This, too, while upsetting, is not surprising.

[38] Griffin Bovee et al., n.d.

[39] Vuong 2019, 63.

include the following: "Chinese," "Japanese," "Filipino," "Korean," "Asian Indian," "Vietnamese," and "Other Asian."[40] Even with the most recent change, many Asian people have been deemed as the "Other," yet again. As someone who has had to check the "Other" box on countless occasions, I cannot emphasize enough how this experience intensifies our awareness of our identities within our own country.[41] All simply because it is not worth putting in the time or energy to change these structures.

Ozeki references anti-Asian violence herself, telling the story of Yoshihiro Hattori, a 16-year-old Japanese exchange student who was shot and killed after mistakenly going to the wrong house for a Halloween party. While the example she chooses is not a story of a mother or daughter, Hattori was one of the many immigrants who has been ignored by the U.S. legal system. Hattori, and his homestay brother, Webb Haymaker, rang the doorbell of Rodney Peairs, both dressed in costume. Peairs opened the door, and when Hattori began to walk towards him, Peairs shot him in the chest. Ozeki writes: "Guns, race, meat, and Manifest Destiny all collided in a single explosion of violent, dehumanized activity" (*MY*, 89). She points out that American gun culture made it completely normal for Peairs to have a gun. She also foregrounds the shooting with Peairs' occupation as a butcher, which is an important detail in her narrative. In the pages prior to her discussion of Hattori's death she writes: "The challenge for meat marketers is clearly how to 'de-humanize' meat" (*MY*, 80). Peairs, who has an objectifying attitude towards both the bodies of animals and of Color, kills a Japanese man without batting an eye. In the white racist imagination, both animals and people of Color become interchangeable: there is a refusal

[40] Kambhampaty 2020.

[41] According to the 2020 Census Barriers, Attitudes, and Motivators Study Survey, Asian Americans were the least likely of any racial group to report that they intended to complete the U.S. Census. Only 55% of Asian Americans said they were "extremely" or "very" likely to fill out the Census form, compared to 69% of white people, 65% of Latino and Latina people, and 64% of Black people. During World War II, the government used Census data to track down people of Japanese descent and imprison them in internment camps. In addition to questioning the safety of offering up personal information to the government, language barriers, feelings of neglect, and lack of familiarity with the Census all play a part in discouraging Asian Americans from participating.

to see life in either, making them easily disposable. The legal and food systems, both used to process bodies, are grounded in racist, patriarchal ideas about what makes someone, or something, worthy of life. Police initially released Peairs without charge, and when he later faced trial, he was acquitted by a jury after only three hours of deliberation. These issues are at the heart of Butler's work. She calls the violence that haunts *My Year of Meats*, and the American criminal legal system, into question: "Whose lives can be marked as lives, and whose deaths will count as deaths?"[42] The animals' lives and the non-white, non-cis male fictional characters of this text are dehumanized, but by including Yoshihiro Hattori in her story, Ozeki illuminates a tangible example of the dehumanization experienced outside the pages of her story.

IV. Biological Violence: DES and Sterilization Projects, Women as Animals

As the story unfolds, Jane discovers dirty truths about a man-made estrogen, diethylstilbestrol (DES), a drug developed by an American pharmaceutical company that was used, legally, to treat both cattle and women for vastly different issues. The synthesization and use of this drug is inherently patriarchal, rooted in an American desire for control over animals and women, who at many points during the story, become interchangeable with one another. While prescribed to women to prevent miscarriages, it instead led, many years later, to birth defects, cancer, and infertility in the women whose mothers took the drug. Because of the profit it generated, however, the evidence of the harm it was causing to womens' bodies was ignored. Ozeki writes: "cheap meat is an inalienable right in the U.S.A., an integral component of the American dream" (*MY*, 126). The impact of the phrase "cheap meat" is two-fold: First, it signifies the capitalist agenda of the agriculture and meat industries. Second, it is indicative of the women whom Ueno, the porn industry, and "man's reason" see as objects made for

[42] Butler 2004.

consumption. Even after almost a decade of negotiating with drug companies and the meat industry to ban DES, however, it was sold and used illegally and can still be found in feedlot cattle today. No farmer who has been found to use illegal DES implants has been prosecuted.

After months of working as a champion of the American meat industry, Jane discovers that DES has impacted her, too, causing her to have a miscarriage due to deformities in her uterus and cervix after her mother had been prescribed the drug. When asking her mother about her pregnancy, her mother recounts the medical advice and prescriptions given to her: "Everything crazy then, and I don't speak good English at all. Maybe sure I take some pill, some vitamin, I don't remember. It was bad time. Doctor say I am *so* delicate." (*MY*, 156). As Jane starts to connect the dots, she realizes that her mother was given DES:

> Of course old Doc Ingvortsen, the family doctor in Quam, decided she was delicate. And from there, it would have been only a reasonable precaution. After all, he was used to treating large-bodied Swedes and sturdy Danes, with ample, childbearing hips—the farthest east he'd probably ever imagined was Poland or possibly the Ukraine. But Ma was Japanese. My birth certificate, signed by this doctor, lists her race as "yellow." And she was narrow. Doc must have … seen the ads. So he gave her a prescription, probably about 125 milligrams of diethylstilbestrol … To keep me in place, floating between her delicate hips (*MY*, 156).

Ozeki's repetition of the word "delicate" to describe Jane's mother's body calls attention to discourses of racialized gender stereotypes. The word choice ironically makes an excuse for Doc Ingvortsen: it is completely "natural" for a doctor to slip up in this practice of medication that is incredibly lethal. Williams writes: "Doc Ingvortsen's classifying of her mother as 'yellow' demonstrates the objectification of her body as a result of these racial stereotypes that embed her

more deeply within the biopolitical 'care' of the doctor."[43] Coupled with stereotypes associating Asian women's bodies with diminutive frailty, DES is administered for Jane's mother's own "good" and for the "good" of the fetus she carries.

Sterilization projects have taken place over the course of American history, acting, quite overtly, as a form of control over women of Color and calling into question who gets to reproduce, at what time, and where.[44] Ozeki situates violence against women as a concern of public health and wellbeing of future generations, a political strategy that has the ability to garner the support of a wider audience. Gaard elaborates on the ecofeminist critical perspective present in *My Year of Meats*; her perspective can be used to analyze the novel's explicit connections between nonhuman animals' experiences and female-bodied human experiences within structures of power. Gaard writes:

> Women's lives and bodies are similarly erased through associations between women and animals that treat both as objects worthy of subordination: "rape racks" enable the insemination of female animals against their will; references to women as "chicks, "bunnies," or "pussy" objectify and subordinate women as sexualized bodies available for male control. The majority of industrialized animal agriculture relies on controlling the lives and commodifying the reproductive capacity of the female: hens are caged for their eggs; cows are repeatedly impregnated and their calves are stolen from them hours after birth so that the milk meant for newborns can be used by humans (Cohen and Otomo 2017); sows are confined in farrowing crates so tight they are unable to move or nuzzle their young. In making the connections between wild and domesticated animals as

[43] Williams 2014, 259.
[44] Smith 2003. America has a long, forgotten history of eugenics forced sterilizations against poor women, disabled women, and women of Color. Throughout the 20th century, nearly 70,0000 people, overwhelmingly working-class women of Color, particularly Black women, Latina women, and Native American women, were sterilized across the country.

> subjects worthy of moral and feminist concern, ecofeminists draw on and develop feminism's ethic of care.[45]

In the weeks prior to Jane's assault, Ueno begins to comment on Jane's identity as a mixed- race woman. At one point, he tells her she is a "good example of hybrid vigor" (*MY*, 43). He goes on: "We Japanese get weak genes through many centuries' process of straight breeding. Like old-fashioned cows. Make weak stock. But you are good and strong and modern girl from cross breeding" (*MY*, 43). He talks to her, and about her, as if she is an animal, adopting terms such as "stock" and "cross breeding" directly from the vocabulary of the meat industry. Ueno's remarks are similar to the way Jane thought about reproduction when she was a child: they are both programmed to think about the strength of the next generation, and to have an innate desire to create the best version of offspring possible. After she decides that she will make the choice to keep the baby, Jane visits Dunn's slaughterhouse, falls, and is knocked unconscious during the butchering of a heifer. When she wakes up, she is covered in blood, but it cannot be deciphered if it is animal or human blood: "How much of this blood is slaughtered cow and how much is my baby?" (*MY*, 303). Her experience is similar to that of the cow, both of which have been treated as disposable and unworthy of reproducing. At the time of her mother's pregnancy, DES was figured as a wonder drug that would render normal gestation "more normal" because it was making a "natural, biological, and normal" process more effective." Writing about her research process for the novel, Ozeki makes explicit the blurred boundary between women and livestock, exemplified by DES: "Suddenly the metaphor was no longer simply a literary conceit. It was frighteningly real: women weren't just like cows; women and cattle were being given the identical drug, with equal disregard for safety."[46] Through biotechnology, animal bodies are no

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[45] Gaard 1993, 4.
[46] Ozeki, Ruth. 1998. "Conversation with Ruth Ozeki," Backmatter, *My Year of Meats*.

longer incommensurable with human bodies. Williams points to Ozeki's conflation of production and reproduction: "Human reproductive health is placed on a continuum with livestock production, and as the text and Jane's documentary filmmaking nears its climactic revelation of a slaughterhouse killing floor, the biopolitical forces governing animals' lives and women's bodies begin to look more and more alike."[47]

The use of drugs like DES under the guise of providing safety to women, has led, in Ozeki's novel and in the real world to, as Black puts it, a "literally and metaphorically deformed future generation."[48] The appropriation of the reproductive capacities of women has had lasting consequences on the future of mankind rendering race-specific fears about reproduction meaningless. You don't have to worry about what the demographics of your country are going to be if there is no future for the country at all.

V. From Experience to Representation: Storytelling as a Mode of Resistance

It is not until Jane explains how she lost her baby that her mother shares her own story of miscarriage. After Jane asks her mother why she did not share this with her before, her mother replies, "Why say? Not your business. Now it your business, so I say" (*MY*, 310). This experience from Jane's mother, one that she never thought she would have to share, is now being passed along to her daughter. While Jane and her mother face and respond to the harm done by DES differently, their parallel experiences, along with the other women in *My Year of Meats*, call attention to recurring agents of violence and allow them to connect on a deeper level after having experienced a tumultuous relationship over the course of the novel. Storytelling becomes a method of survival by which Jane reconciles life events she had no control over. While she is not

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[47] Williams 2014, 260.
[48] Black 2004, 232.

survived by a child, her documentation of the illegal hormone ring becomes her legacy. Jane's project unveils a scandal within the meat industry and sheds light on the "media controversy over reliability in television and the power of corporate sponsorship to determine content and truth" (*MY*, 358).

After telling her mother about the miscarriage, her mother tells Jane to "get back on the horse," a nod to cowboys, a quintessentially American symbol that is present throughout *My Year of Meats*. However, as Ozeki wrote in the first chapter, both cows and cowboys were introduced by the Spanish (*MY*, 15) and Black men were amongst the first cowboys in the country.[49] The diverse history of this symbol of the American West has been manipulated in classrooms and the media for centuries, to project a dominant narrative that reinforced the oppression of histories and lives. In using this phrase to console her half-Japanese, infertile daughter, Jane's mother reclaims the notion of the "American" cowboy. In the same way that Jane uses her documentary form to reclaim her own experience with DES, her mother uses talk-story form to connect with her daughter and share her life experiences and lessons in a moment of comfort.

Ultimately, the capitalist culture of overproduction and the racist structures built into the healthcare and agricultural systems in America make human existence unsustainable. It manufactures an inability to reproduce and forces its people to find new modes of survival. In the end, even the people who have historically benefited from such structures are not immune to their corruption. As Ozeki opens with:

> Being half, I am evidence that race, too, will become relic. Eventually we're all going to be brown, sort of. Some days, when I'm feeling grand, I feel brand-new—like a prototype. Back in the olden days, my dad's ancestors got stuck behind the Alps and my

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[49] Rabitsch, 2022.

> mom's on the east side of the Urals. Now, oddly, I straddle this blessed, ever-shrinking world (*MY*, 15).

"The ever-shrinking world" is an ironic repurposing of the idea that the world is becoming increasingly connected with one another on multiple levels. Not only are cultures and populations physically blending as people immigrate to different parts of the world, but media and new, innovative modes of storytelling, such as Jane's documentary-style exposé, also serve as a form of connection between families and communities.

III. Transcending Time and Space:

Radical Acceptance as a Form of Love in *Everything, Everywhere, All At Once*

I learned to make my mind large,
as the universe is large,
so that there is room for paradoxes.

—Maxine Hong Kingston, *Woman Warrior*

The concept of the multiverse, and variations of this phenomenon, like alternate realities shaped by individual choices, have been a dilemma in the field of physics and a goldmine for the entertainment industry for the past century. The first seminal introduction of parallel universes to the public sphere and popular discourse can be traced to the landmark film, *The Wizard of Oz*. Since its release in 1939, blockbuster films including Star Trek and the multi billion dollar franchise, Marvel Entertainment, have profited from the notion that there are multiple realities and that we're surrounded by a multitude of parallel selves. The themes and motifs present in these films, however, merely serve as a canvas for Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert's *Everything, Everywhere, All At Once* (*EEAAO*), which harnesses the multiverse trope, a historically white, male-dominated narrative, and apply it to the life of Evelyn Quan Wang, a working class Chinese immigrant, who runs a laundromat with her husband, Waymond, and lesbian daughter, Joy.

EEAAO contains more twists and turns than the noodles Evelyn cooks in one of the first scenes of the film.[50] It is an absurd, overwhelming film, laden with teen angst, the hardships that

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[50] In Chinese culture, longevity noodles symbolize long life. According to tradition, the chef can't cut the noodle strands, and each strand needs to be eaten whole – no breaking it before you eat it. The importance of the concept of consuming noodles, or life circumstances, wholly and its relevance to the themes of *Everything, Everywhere, All At Once* will become increasingly clear over the course of this chapter.

low income immigrants face, and cosmic chaos, which is precisely what makes it so brilliant. It's messy and complicated and frantic and there are many loose ends that are left unresolved: this is the life of an Asian American. Trailers and promotional materials for the film sold it as a martial arts fantasy, and while it is, as *The New York Times* film critic A.O. Scott put it, a "metaphysical multiverse galaxy-brain head trip," it is, at its core, a heartfelt drama, comedy, and story of immigration and mother-daughter love.

EEAAO challenges conventional conceptions of genre and form, taking inspiration from comedy, horror, science fiction, action, romance, drama, adventure, and absurdism to name a few.[51] Its multi-genre approach is crucial to its message, which is centered on the message that the lives of immigrant women are complex and shaped by a multitude of factors, identities, relationships, and experiences.

The film opens with the chaos of Evelyn's current world: she is surrounded by receipts, talking in an amalgamation of Chinese and English, straddling both her worlds. She is a tiger mom[52] whose critical nature and cynicism has a negative impact, not only on those around her, but on herself. Even in the first few scenes, Evelyn fails at everything she attempts and the audience watches as it feels like her life goals are slipping away, as she fights to hold on to what she has. Her laundromat business is in danger of being seized by the IRS; her husband, Waymond, is preparing to serve her divorce papers; and her dying father, Gong Gong, is hypercritical of her life decisions, most notably of her decision to immigrate from China and marry her husband. Her daughter, Joy, is pulling away from her because of her criticism of her life decisions, from getting tattoos to her sexuality to her decision to drop out of college. Everything seems to be going wrong for Evelyn and her family, and this all culminates in a scene

[51] While the genres listed are some of the primary genres present in the film, there are elements of many other genres as well.
[52] Chua 2011.

when Evelyn, Waymond, and Gong Gong are in an elevator, on their way to speak to an IRS agent. Waymond puts on a headset, looks at Evelyn, and begins to talk to her about the multiverse and gives her instructions she must follow in order to save the world. For the sake of clarity, I will use "Evelyn" to describe the Evelyn the audience is first introduced to in the film. This is where she learns about verse-jumping, which is the act of temporarily linking one's consciousness to another version of themselves, accessing all their memories, skills, and emotions. Alpha Waymond,[53] an expert verse-jumper, has spent years chasing after thousands of Evelyns in order to find the one who can defeat Jobu Tupaki,[54] the villian who has been traveling from universe to universe, destroying everything in her path in the search for the "right" Evelyn to talk to. Jobu was created in the Alphaverse when Alpha Evelyn pushed her daughter too hard in an attempt to train her to verse jump. Her need to push her daughter to her limits, which resembles the same core tiger-mom characteristics that Evelyn has, caused Alpha Joy's mind to fracture and experience every world and every possibility at the same time, giving her the ability to command the infinite knowledge and power of the multiverse. As a result of her experience and newfound understanding of individual existence within the multiverse, Alpha Joy lost any sense of morality and objective truth, causing her to take on a new identity as Jobu. When Evelyn tries to explain her choices in parenting Joy, Jobu responds:

> Jobu: I know the joy and the pain of having you as my mother.
>
> Evelyn: Then you know, I would do, only do, the right thing for her. For you.

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[53] "Alpha" is used to signify all characters who come from the Alphaverse, where verse-jumping was first discovered.

[54] In an interview with *The New Yorker*, the Daniels said they wanted to choose a completely meaningless name for the main villain of their story, which is how they landed on "Jobu Tupaki". This name aimed to epitomize the nihilism that comes with the radical relativism of postmodernity that Jobu experiences. However, Stefan Schultz, a writer for *Medium*, found that Jobu Tupaki actually does mean something: "pocket gun" in a southern Indian dialect. Thus, Schultz explains: "the directors involuntarily show us that it is impossible to create something completely meaningless. Even if you try, there is always a language or dialect in which your random utterance actually means something."

> Jobu: "Right" is a tiny box invented by people who are afraid. And I know what it feels like to be trapped inside that box (*EE*, 1:32:45).

It is evident that Evelyn's tiger mom tendencies have caused Jobu to feel "trapped." The "boxes" that Jobu describes exist on two levels. In the original universe, Evleyn traps Joy in a box because of her identity and unconventional ideas about the world around her that refuse to conform with the traditional Chinese beliefs of her mother. In the context of the multiverse, Jobu is trapped in a box because of the auto-verse jumping abilities she has. In every universe, Jobu realizes that she is trapped in some form because of her mother's desire to create the "perfect daughter," and it is this realization that causes Joy to develop a nihilistic perspective towards the world around her. One's attempts to belong can overwhelm an individual subject so much that it feels as though nothing matters: there are so many possible life paths to occupy, and to choose to occupy one is, in some ways, to invalidate others. By verbalizing her nihilistic views and their origin to her mother, Jobu is able to help Evelyn understand the impact of her words and actions. Alpha Waymond teaches Evelyn about verse-jumping, feeling that she is *the* Evelyn because this one is living her worst self. When Alpha Gong Gong, Evelyn's father, questions this Evelyn's ability to defeat Jobu, Alpha Waymond responds:

> I've seen thousands of Evelyns, but never a Evelyn like you. You have so many goals you never finished, dreams you never followed. You're living your worst you. …Can't you see? Every failure here branched off into a success for another Evelyn in another life. Most people only have a few significant alternate life paths so close to them. But you, here, you're capable of anything because you're so bad at everything (*EE*, 1:03:04).[55]

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[55] I transcribed all quotes in this chapter as they were spoken in the film. Several of the characters speak in broken English or do not speak grammatically correct because they are not a native speaker of the language.

In the multiverse, all of the other Evelyns have become majorly successful or at least highly skilled in their endeavors, while this Evelyn has none, something that she herself believes. Themes from the Buddhist principle that compassion arises when one meets one's own suffering with love, arise as *EEAAO* begins to transform into a parable in which the Wang family must suffer failure in other universes before learning compassion in the one they currently inhabit. The Daniels' decision to incorporate aspects of Buddhism is key because of its origins in Asian culture: while the foundations of Buddhism can be traced back to India, as opposed to the east Asian region, it is widely practiced across Asia today.[56] Evelyn's identity as a first generation, lower class Chinese immigrant, wife, and mother, has forced her to abandon many of her dreams, making her unsuccessful and causing more diverging events in her life. While these characteristics are deemed weaknesses and cause Evelyn's goals to be unattainable, Evelyn's multitude of failures give her an unmatched power that allows her to transcend time and space and ultimately save her daughter and the world. The multiverse exposes the truth about how American society structures life opportunities for minorities. Powered by the love she has for her daughter, Evelyn makes the decision to fracture her own mind,[57] despite the risks this process poses, in an effort to save Joy. In what becomes the ultimate sacrifice, Evelyn's mind becomes fragmented across the different versions of herself, as shown via the split screen camera angles. The audience is taken with Evelyn through this chaotic scene as she struggles to grasp her identity across the different universes she is traveling and experiencing.

As Evelyn begins to have encounters with Jobu, she tries to put the pieces together to understand how her daughter could have ended up a villain. In her first encounter with Jobu,

[56] "Buddhists" 2012. Approximately half those who practice Buddhism are practitioners of Mahayana schools in China.

[57] This is a feat that only one other has ever survived: Jobu Tupaki.

Evelyn learns about the everything bagel, a black hole that destroys everything that comes near it:

Figure A: Jobu begins to lead Evelyn into the everything bagel.

> *Jobu:* I got bored one day and I put everything on a bagel. Everything. All my hopes and dreams, my old report cards, every breed of dog, every last personal ad on Craigslist, sesame, poppyseed, salt. And it collapsed in on itself. Because, you see, when you really put everything on a bagel, it becomes this. The truth.
>
> *Evelyn:* What is the truth?
>
> *Jobu:* Nothing matters.
>
> *Evelyn:* No, Joy. You don't believe that.
>
> *Jobu:* Feels nice, doesn't it? If nothing matters, then all the pain and guilt you feel for making nothing of your life goes away (*EE*, 1:00:27).

When explaining her outlook on life, Jobu references superposition, a phenomenon in quantum mechanics in which a quantum system can be in multiple states at the same time: "You can see

how everything is just a random rearrangement of particles in a vibrating superposition…You see how everything we do gets washed away in a sea of every other possibility. You're everywhere. You're like me" (*EE*, 1:30:03). Jobu, and Joy, sees the construction of the physical universe (including humans) as arbitrary and purposeless, therefore meaningless; the existence of any material object is insignificant because it is dictated by random chance. Thus, she reduces the uniqueness of objects and individuals to the seemingly random quantum arrangement of their particles. However, unlike in the first scene, Evelyn now truly understands what it means to have a fractured mind. Jobu's acknowledgement of her mother being similar to her now closes the distance they have both experienced from each other for their entire relationship as a result of acculturative family distancing (AFD).[58] According to Wei-Chin Hwang, AFD is, "the distancing that occurs between immigrant parents and children that is a result of immigration, cultural differences, and differing rates of acculturation."[59] AFD occurs on two scales: 1. communication, which the audience witnesses through the language barrier between Evelyn, whose first language is Chinese and who speaks broken English at times, and Joy, whose first language is English and who bears the burden of acting as the translator between Evelyn and the IRS, and 2. cultural differences, which is demonstrated through Evelyn's refusal to accept and embrace Joy's sexuality due to her traditional Chinese upbringing. Wendy Ho writes about the impact of AFD: "The traumatic translation of devalued, ambitious Chinese immigrant mothers from their motherland to an inhospitable country and the assimilation of their second-generation English-speaking Chinese daughter into mainstream America cause serious fractures in their relationship and communications with each other."[60] Up until this point, Evelyn has been operating under the assumption that Jobu's goal was to kill her. When Alpha Waymond

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[58] Hwang 2006.
[59] Hwang 2006.
[60] Ho 1993, 30.

explained to Evelyn that Jobu was looking for her, she assumed this search was prompted by a desire to harm her. However, Jobu clarifies to her mother that this was never her intention: "All this time. I wasn't looking for you so I could kill you. I was just looking for someone who could see what I see. Feel what I feel. And that someone is you" (*EE*, 1:35:15). She wanted her mother to see and truly experience what she was going through: Jobu was searching for radical acceptance. Prior to Evelyn's mind being fractured, she was unable to see what Joy saw because of AFD. Even on the brink of suicide, Jobu plans to succumb to the everything bagel's power alongside her mother, demonstrating her desire to have her mother's approval and exist closely with her, through the complicated relationship they have with one another. Jobu wants Evelyn to "feel what she feels," bringing the need for compassion, as emphasized in Buddhism, back to the fore.

As Jobu presents Evelyn with the everything bagel, Evelyn begins to experience the feeling of dread that has been haunting her daughter. The camera cuts from one universe to the next, and chaos ensues. Music begins to play rapidly, matching the glitches Evelyn experiences as she morphs into different versions of herself across mediums, involuntarily auto verse-jumping at breakneck speed. Jobu explains; "Not a single moment will go by without every other universe screaming for your attention. Never fully there. Just a lifetime of fractured moments, contradictions, and confusion. With only a few specks of time where anything actually makes any sense" (*EE*, 1:38:08). The rapid verse-jumping culminates in Evelyn's transcendence to a universe in which she and Joy are two rocks.

Figure B: Evelyn and Joy as rocks.

The camera cuts to a quiet scene overlooking Anza-Borrego Desert State Park, a low-stimulation universe the Daniels chose to act as the emotional fulcrum of the chaotic verse-jumping that Evelyn and the audience had been experiencing for nearly seven straight minutes. The entire scene is subtitled, without voice overs embedded, making an abrupt, eerily shift to three minutes of silence. In an interview with *Vanity Fair*, the Daniels give Michelle Yeoh credit for the decision to use subtitles, as she compared it to a "zen garden."[61] This is the first scene where the audience witnesses a palpable connection between mother and daughter where they are laughing together, an odd sight because it's just two rocks and text displayed on the screen. Daniel Kwan explains that this scene acts as a breaking point through which Evelyn and Jobu bond over the nihilistic idea that nothing matters. However, he remarks that they react to this concept in "two completely different ways."[62] Jobu says to Evelyn: "I was hoping you would see something I didn't…that you would convince me there was another way," to which Evelyn asks, "What are you talking about?" (*EE*, 1:41:51). It is at this moment, Jobu explains that she created the bagel

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[61] Ford 2022.
[62] Ford, 2022.

to destroy herself. The everything bagel is representative of the nihilism that Jobu experiences. It symbolizes her depression and hopelessness and becomes the only method of suicide she can turn to after fracturing her mind. The audience learns that Jobu has yet to sacrifice herself to the everything bagel because she was waiting for her mother, so that they could face their suicide together. Even in this universe, Jobu is still craving approval from her mother. Evelyn and Jobu are the only two human beings in existence across all worlds who are able to do so without the verse-jumping technology. Alone in their abilities and their struggles, Evelyn and Jobu are the only people who could remotely understand what the other experiences. Across the infinitely possible worlds there exist infinite variations of being, and Evelyn and Joy can embody all of those possibilities, if they so choose, absorbing their alternates' memories and experiences throughout the process.

As Evelyn begins to reflect on the different universes she has witnessed, she realizes that what she wants more than anything is to return to her universe, even though it is the one where she is least successful. She tells Deirdre: "No. I'm going back to my Joy. To my family. To my life. A happy life" (*EE*, 1:33:35). Evelyn begins to realize that, while she had a negative outlook on her life in the universe she came from, she took the mundaneness of her life for granted: she is slowly learning the importance of radical acceptance in achieving love and happiness. As Evelyn begins to come to terms with this, the theme of kung fu begins to emerge as a more apparent motif. In one flashback to a different universe, Evelyn recalls a mentor telling her: "Kung Fu is not about combat. Even this cookie can be Kung Fu…" (*EE*, 45:42). She returns to this same scenario about Kung Fu not being about combat again when she is mid battle in the film. In a series of chaotic scenes across various universes, Evelyn begins to use her kung fu to fight back against the Alpha people who have been ordered by Alpha Gong Gong to stop Evelyn from

reaching Jobu and stop her from surrendering herself to the bagel (*EE*, 1:21:25). When Evelyn comes to, in the universe she started in, she sees Waymond speaking with Deirdre, the IRS inspector. She is initially pessimistic, assuming that he is making things worse for their situation, but a moment passes, and Deirdre leaves without making a scene. Waymond turns to her and says that all he had to do was talk to her. The scene comes to a close and Evelyn begins to auto verse-jump again, seeing Waymond practicing kung fu in every universe, acting as the kind mediator, even when empathy is not due. One of the Waymonds turns to Evelyn:

> You think I'm weak don't you? All of those years ago when we first fell in love your father would say I was too sweet for my own good. Maybe he was right. You tell me that it's a cruel world and we're all just running around in circles. I know that. I've been on this earth just as many days as you. When I choose to see the good side of things, I'm not being naive. It is strategic and necessary. It's how I've learned to survive through everything. I know you see yourself as a fighter. Well, I see myself as one too. This is how I fight (*EE*, 1:46:23).

The film then cross cuts to another Waymond who is desperate to stop the violence that has ensued after Alpha Gong Gong ordered the Alpha people to attack Evelyn and let Jobu commit suicide. He cries out: "Please, can we just stop fighting? I know you are all fighting because you're scared and confused. I'm confused too…The only thing I do know is that we have to be kind. Please, be kind, especially when we don't know what's going on" (*EE*, 1:45:20). As Evelyn embraces Waymond's perspective, she chooses to extend her compassion even to her adversaries, offering hugs as a gesture of comfort and understanding, rather than resorting to aggression. Evelyn combines different Asian cultural motifs: kung fu, Taoism,[63] a Chinese philosophy that is

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[63] Mark 2016.

rooted in acceptance as a means of achieving harmony, and the symbolism of the circle.[64] In her process of fighting against the Alpha army, Evelyn begins to put googly eyes on the foreheads of her enemies, something Waymond does to bring joy and lightheartedness to their lives, even in a time when each of the characters is experiencing challenges.

Figure C: Evelyn places a googly eye on her own forehead, symbolic of her decision to channel her "inner child" in order to defeat Alpha Gong Gong's fighters.

Again, the audience can see elements of Buddhism surface as the googly eye becomes a symbol for joy and the child mind. At a speaker event hosted by the Empty Gate Zen Center in 1977, Zen Master Soen Sa Nim[65] said: "Child's mind is Buddha's mind. Just seeing, just doing is truth."[66] Those who practice Zen Buddhism believe that enthusiasm and freethinking is lost in many adults, and, hence, the ultimate goal should be to reclaim our child mind in order to live more fully. Film studies critic Austin Kang remarks: "The bagel and the googly eyes are

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[64] In Chinese culture, circles symbolize oneness and unity; it is a harmony between yin and yang. Circles bear importance because they are a symbol of something coming full circle.
[65] Zen Master Soen Sa Nim was the founding teacher of the Kwan Um School of Zen, and the seventy-eighth Patriarch in his line of Transmission in the Chogye order of Korean Buddhism.
[66] "Child's Mind Is Buddha's Mind" 1977.

antithetical representations of different truths through which individuals could find harmony with the Tao."[67]

In one of the final scenes of the film, Alpha Gong Gong tries to stop Evelyn from saving Jobu. Evelyn responds across universes, addressing both Alpha Gong Gong and Gong Gong, and the film oscillates between the two universes as Evelyn talks:

> Alpha Gong Gong: Evelyn, let her go.
>
> Evelyn: I can't, Father. I am no longer willing to do to my daughter what you did to me. How did you let me go? How on earth did you do it so easily? It's okay if you can't be proud of me. Because I finally am. You may see in her all of your greatest fears squeezed into one person. I spent most of her childhood praying she would not end up like me. But she turned out to be stubborn, aimless, a mess. Just like her mother. But now I see. It's okay that she's a mess. Because just like me, the universe gave her someone kind, patient, and forgiving to make up for all she lacks. Father. This is Becky. She is Joy's girlfriend. Girlfriend (*EE*, 1:59:41).

Evelyn realizes that she cannot let Joy go. She has inherited many of the same approaches to parenting that her father had. But then she realizes that she cannot simply let Joy go. In what I consider to be the most important scene of this film, Evelyn overtly expresses her love for Joy and the lessons she has learned through her verse-jumping adventures:

> Evelyn: Stop calling me Evelyn! I. Am. Your. Mother! (Followed by Evelyn embracing Jobu as Jobu tries to push her into the bagel).
>
> Joy: Seriously? Can you please just stop! Mom. Just…just stop. Good for you. You're figuring your shit out. That's great. I'm really really happy for you. But I'm…I'm tired. I

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[67] Kang 2023, 38.

don’t want to hurt anymore and for some reason when I’m with you, it just…It just hurts the both of us. So let’s just go our separate ways, okay? Just let me go.

Evelyn: Wait. You are getting fat. And you never call me even though we have a family plan. You only visit when you need something, and you got a tattoo, and I don’t care if it’s supposed to represent our family, you know I hate tattoos. And of all the places I could be, why would I want to be here with you? Yes, you’re right. It doesn’t make sense. …Maybe it’s like you said. Maybe there is something out there. Some new discovery that’ll make us feel like even smaller pieces of shit. Something that explains why you still went looking for me through all of this noise. And why, no matter what, I still want to be here with you. I will always, always, want to be here with you (*EE*, 2:03:37)

Conclusion

> And I realized when you look at your mother,
> you are looking at the purest love you will ever know.
>
> —Mitch Albom, *For One More Day*[68]

Almost half a century ago, Maxine Hong Kingston shocked the world with the publication of her autobiographical novel, *Woman Warrior*. 13 years later, Amy Tan wrote *The Joy Luck Club*, a distinct semi-autobiographical fictional story, but similarly groundbreaking novel portraying the social realities of Chinese immigrant mothers and their daughters. Hong Kingston and Tan paved the way for Asian American authors around the country through their talk-story narratives, breaking through the bamboo ceiling by telling the stories of multidimensional Asian American women and the complex challenges they face within oppressive patriarchal and imperialist narratives and structures. Wendy Ho writes: "While rupturing the silences and stereotypes associated with Asian American women, Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan, as daughter-writers, invent alternative literary-political strategies and positionings, which advocate the importance of reclaiming their Chinese mothers' stories in China and America."[69] These narratives are built on a collective sense of self that redefines the Asian American experience by weaving together personal histories and a broader reckoning with Chinese heritage and identity.

[68] While this thesis has been one that focuses on mother-daughter relationships, and is, in many ways, a way for me to express my love and gratitude for my mom, I cannot finish writing it without acknowledging the impact my dad has had on my life, my relationship with my mom, and my relationship with my own identity. He is my hero and the reason why I found my love of reading in the first place. Mitch Albom is one of his favorite authors and, similarly to my dad, he has taught the world invaluable lessons about empathy, gratitude, and love.

[69] Ho 1993, 34.

Michelle Zauner's *Crying in H Mart*, Ruth Ozeki's *My Year of Meats*, and the Daniels' *Everything, Everywhere, All at Once*, would not have been possible without the work of Hong Kingston and Tan. Both women lay the foundation for contemporary Asian American literature and established a space in which these stories could be viewed as valuable and important. In this thesis, I began by discussing Zauner's approach to coping with grief and reckoning with her own connection to her Korean heritage through the lens of her mother's life and death; next, I utilized intersectional, ecofeminist, and queer theory to analyze Ozeki's display of reproduction and confront questions about who has the privilege to reproduce and the implications this has on the future of mankind; finally, I considered how aspects of Buddhism, Tao, and Kung Fu are key in radical acceptance and fostering a loving relationship between Evelyn and Joy. Each of these texts is vastly different from one another in genre, plot, and language. Yet, at their core, they are stories of the hardships Asian American women face every day and the complicated, loving connection between immigrant mothers and their daughters. The Asian American experience, and the experiences of motherhood and daughterhood, are nuanced and cannot be summed up in a single theory, story, or thesis. While critical theorists, especially those studying feminist theory, have studied mother-daughter relationships for decades, studies of such relationships often fail to acknowledge the role that race and immigration play in motherhood and daughterhood.

Adrienne Rich was a pioneer in exploring the relationship between the patriarchy, motherhood, and mothering, drawing attention to the "unwritten story" of mother-daughter relationships. Since the publication of *Of Woman Born*, the gap in literature on the cathexis between mother and daughter and the challenges they face has been filled by voices in theology, art, sociology, and psychoanalysis. Marianne Hirsh discusses the importance of Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born*:

> There can be no systematic and theoretical study of women in patriarchal culture, there can be no theory of women's oppression, that does not take into account woman's role as a mother of daughters and as a daughter of mothers, that does not study female identity in relation to previous and subsequent generations of women, and that does not study the relationship in the wider context in which it takes place: the emotional, political, economic, and symbolic structure of family and society.[70]

While Hirsh makes connections to key aspects of feminist theory, both she and Rich overlook the roles of race and immigration in motherhood and mothering. Hirsh argues that generations of women create the structure of family in society, but the reality is that these structures are toxic and oppressive for women of Color. Her Western approach to understanding mother-daughter relationships is less useful when considering the ways in which Asian immigrant mothers and their second generation Asian American daughters bond and express their love for one another. Hence, it is essential that we study the social realities of Asian American mothers and daughters within the context of emotional, political, economic, symbolic, *and* racial structures. While Hirsh argues that we must read Rich to understand the experiences of motherhood and daughterhood, I argue that we must engage the work of artists like Hong Kingston, Han, Zauner, Ozeki, and the Daniels to understand both the immigrant mother experience and the socialized, assimilated daughter experience.

This project was born out of a desire to understand what my ancestors have experienced and to explore my heritage in an academic setting. My grandmother, a first generation immigrant from Korea, risked everything for the sake of her family: she made the ultimate sacrifice for love. My mother, similarly, has made sacrifices to make sure that I, her half Korean, Americanized daughter, could have everything I wanted and more. As I delved into research and

[70] Hirsh 1981, 202.

writing for this thesis, I found a deeper sense of gratitude and understanding of the magnitude of their sacrifices and love, and for that, I am forever grateful. The most valuable lesson I learned in this process can be summed up by Zauner's words: "Love was an action, an instinct, a response roused by unplanned moments and small gestures, an inconvenience in someone else's favor. In fact, she was both my first and second words: Umma, then Mom. I called to her in two languages. Even then I must have known that no one would ever love me as much as she would." Love can be so easily lost in translation, especially when acculturative family distancing, coupled with centuries of oppression, plague our everyday lives. Ozeki never fails to remind us of the existential challenges facing our society today: climate change, racism, sexism, poverty, war, inequities in the healthcare system, the list goes on and on. But, if anything, it is in the face of these challenges that we must remind ourselves of the importance of loving those around us, and how much those around us love us.

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