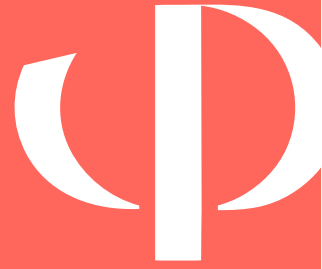


# Asian and Asian American Philosophers and Philosophies



FALL 2023

VOLUME 23 | NUMBER 1

## SPECIAL ISSUE ON IDENTITY AND SOLIDARITY

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# Asian and Asian American Philosophers and Philosophies

A. MINH NGUYEN, EDITOR

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## FROM THE EDITORS

### *Contemporary Multicultural Perspectives on Identity and Solidarity*

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This issue on “Identity and Solidarity” has two parts. The first part comprises a set of five papers on that theme. Three of the papers are drawn from a session titled “Black and Asian Solidarities” organized by Audrey Yap and held at the 2023 Annual Meeting of the American Philosophical Association Central Division. The remaining two are drawn from a session titled “Asian American Identity: A Focus on the Immigrant Experience” organized and chaired by Dien Ho and held at the 2022 Annual Meeting of the American Philosophical Association Eastern Division. Both sessions were arranged under the auspices of the APA Committee on Asian and Asian American Philosophers and Philosophies in the wake of the recent wave of anti-Black and anti-Asian violence in 2020. This issue thus reflects that recent history and its contents seek to situate those events in a larger social and historical context, namely, that of US-led global white supremacy.

The second part of the issue is a deep and wide-ranging conversation between the editors, A. Minh Nguyen and Yarran Hominh, along with Arnab Dutta Roy, a scholar of modern world literature and postcolonial and decolonial studies, and the Pulitzer Prize-winning Vietnamese American author and academic Viet Thanh Nguyen. This ninety-minute conversation took place via Zoom on March 14, 2023, and was transcribed by Vivian Nguyen and Brent Robbins. It touches not only on themes central to Viet Thanh Nguyen’s writings but also on a variety of other issues: the value of philosophy and Nguyen’s philosophical influences; Asian American culture, identity, and politics; whiteness, racial capitalism, and the politics of respectability; the challenges and possibilities of the academy; the inherent multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary of the critical studies of race and ethnicity; three waves of Asian American Studies; Edward W. Said and *Orientalism*; Ocean Vuong and *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*; Maxine Hong Kingston and the complexities of coming to terms with one’s identity and culture; Milan Kundera, so-called minority writers, and

the novel of ideas; growing up in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, and San Jose, California, and how Nguyen’s upbringing and early life affect the kinds of writing that he engages in; his refugee experience and new memoir *A Man of Two Faces* and the dominant narrative of the grateful refugee in resettlement; the importance of narrative for shaping the ways in which people see the world and engage with the world; history, misrepresentations and omissions, corrective representations, and the functions of art; the use of humor in working through trauma; the pain of writing and the process of writing; the relationship between Nguyen’s academic work and creative work; cancel culture and its discontents; *Everything Everywhere All at Once*; Ke Huy Quan and the Academy Awards; the HBO adaptation of Nguyen’s *The Sympathizer*; and what it was like for students in Southwest Florida to read this 2015 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel around the time Hurricane Ian hit them. Central to that conversation was thus that larger context of global white supremacy in which the aforementioned set of papers situates our recent history. And it is of course that larger context that raises the difficult questions of identity and solidarity with which this issue deals.

A key part of that context, as the papers in this issue identify, is the way in which white supremacy mobilizes intra-minority racial conflict for its own purposes. Whiteness protects itself through a divide-and-conquer strategy. It creates and emphasizes differences between racialized minority groups in order to set them against each other. On the differences, for example, as Claire Jean Kim and many of the papers in this issue note, a dominant form of Asian American minoritization functions along a dimension of *foreignness*, whereas a similarly dominant form of African American minoritization functions along a dimension of *inferiority*.<sup>1</sup> Thus anti-Asian oppression historically takes the form of exclusion justified by fear of and grudging respect for “the model minority,” whereas anti-Black oppression takes the form of state-sanctioned violence. (Of course, these are generalizations that also draw on white supremacist stereotypes even as they are real differences between the groups.) A central part of the assimilationist drive behind the model minority myth involves taking one’s place in the American racial order. And that requires participation in anti-Black violence. Attempts to foster solidarity (and ways of conceptualizing solidarity) among racially minoritized groups should therefore take this conflict into account.

The accounts of interracial solidarity offered in this issue reflect this conflict in at least two related ways. The first is practical and political. Solidarity is not just an attitude or simply a state of affairs. It is a practice and a process, something that must be built and continually maintained

through collective action. That practice requires certain virtues, both epistemic and ethical/political. One that many of the contributors to this issue emphasize is *attention*. Céline Leboeuf argues that part of the way white supremacy functions to set racialized minority groups against each other is that proposed solutions to the problems that one group faces often exacerbate problems that another group faces. For example, one “solution” proposed to address an increase in anti-Asian hate crimes is increased and intensified policing. Yet increased and intensified policing—even if it were to help reduce anti-Asian hate crimes—would support and further entrench the essentially anti-Black institution of the police. A kind of intersectionally informed attention to how racist social structures set up and reinforce these conflicts is necessary for coming up with solidaristic practices and policies (for example, Leboeuf writes, addressing homelessness and mental health) that could properly address the problems that people suffer under white supremacy.

Another form that this attention might take is attention to forms of internal heterogeneity within racialized groups. Drawing on Patricia Hill Collins’s notion of “heterogenous commonality,” Emily S. Lee argues that paying that kind of attention (e.g., to the internal heterogeneity of the group “Asian American women”) may help us think of interracial solidarity in different ways.<sup>2</sup> For if racialized groups are internally heterogenous, as intersectionality theorists argue, solidarity across racial divides becomes much more similar to building solidarity and community within a racialized group. There is no *general* problem of interracial solidarity, though of course there may be particular contextual and historical difficulties in building solidarities between particular racialized communities. Solidarity across as well as within groups becomes a matter of finding and building “heterogenous commonalities.” One way that such work occurs, Lee reminds us, is by refusing to equate certain races with certain classes (as does the model minority myth, for instance, in figuring Asian Americans as upwardly mobile) and paying attention to the different class identities within racial categories: the intersections between race and class.

We should keep in mind, however, as Tracy Llanera reminds us, that what are often taken to be virtues may be politically or morally ambiguous and our relationship to them may be ambivalent or conflicted. Llanera argues in her paper that resilience should be understood in that way. Resilience is often taken solely as a virtue, as an admirable human quality or a positive feature of human agency that different forms of oppression build in the oppressed. Resilience enables people to continue on and survive in the face of their challenges and sufferings. While Llanera doesn’t want to deny that resilience is in this way a good thing for an individual or a group to possess, something to be honored and valued, that it is necessary to survive the depredations of racialized capitalism reveals its dark side. Resilience is only necessary under conditions of injustice, as Llanera so well describes, drawing on her own experience as a Filipino philosopher both in the Philippines and in the Global North. Llanera argues further that focusing on resilience’s positive side can obscure how it can be weaponized. Applauding resilience may function to obscure the need for structural

change. It can be—and often is—taken as an individual solution to structural problems. This ambivalence is very well captured in the Tagalog folk wisdom that Llanera cites:

*Ang tao ay kawayan ang kahambing  
Sumusuko’t umaayon sa hagupit ng hangin  
Hindi sumasalungat kundi nagpupugay  
Upang hindi mabakli ang sariling tangkay*

To a bamboo, a man can be compared—  
It surrenders its will to the whipping wind  
It does not oppose it, but in obeisance it gives praise  
That it may preserve its bough from a shattering fate<sup>3</sup>

The second aspect of the accounts of solidarity that responds to intra-minority racial conflict is metaphysical: the question of identity. Tina Rulli, responding to a recent shift in discourse from POC (“People of Color”) to BIPOC (“Black, Indigenous, and People of Color”), argues that the identity category “Asian American” is a model for thinking about identity in a more general sense, insofar as it does not pick out pre-existing and fixed cultural or racial commonalities, but seeks to *build* political power *through* creating an identity category that enables certain kinds of political action. Identity categories serve political purposes, for Rulli. In that way, like other political phenomena, they are subject to change. What they do is provide a central organizing term that allows for Collins’s “heterogenous commonality”—a way of recognizing similarities and differences jointly. Rulli turns this “political, not metaphysical” point into a call for solidarity on the basis of POC as a whole. One recognizes, in political psychologist Efrén Pérez’s words, that “one’s unique identity as Black, Asian or Latino is nested under a broader POC category.”<sup>4</sup> What people of color have in common, for Rulli, is that they are subject to white supremacy. And so, for Rulli, the term “POC” better expresses that basis for solidarity and resistance than the term “BIPOC.” Indeed, Rulli argues, the use of “BIPOC” is liable to erode solidarity. It is worth emphasizing that this point of Rulli’s can hold true in general even if one thinks that in many contexts it may be important to center the particular and particularly violent forms of oppression and domination that Black and Indigenous people face in the contemporary United States.

Youjin Kong defends intersectionality against recent criticisms leveled at it: that intersectionality *fragments* and *divides* instead of building full-throated unity and commonality in the way that some critics think essential to a left politics. Kong argues that such criticisms rely on what she, following Elizabeth Spelman, calls a “pop-bead” metaphysics of identity.<sup>5</sup> On that metaphysics, each identity category is an additional “bead” that is “popped” onto a necklace that is the sum of those identities. Kong claims that to operate according to this metaphysics is to conceive of identity in a fixed and static way. This is contrary to the conception of identity that best underlies intersectionality analysis, on which identity is not fixed but fluid. Identity is fluid precisely because it is not just something that one *has* but also something that one *does*. Identity is a starting point for praxis. It is *not* best conceived as a limitation on how one sees the world and what one does. That is, Kong argues, identity *shifts* according to how one is situated in

relations of power and how one acts on the basis of those relations and to change those relations.

To illustrate this conceptual point, Kong draws on the example of the Black and Asian Feminist Solidarities group, a collaboration between Black Women Radicals (BWR) and the Asian American Feminist Collective (AAFC). That collaboration foregrounds both the intra-minority conflicts between Black and Asian American communities and the histories of solidarity and community building that have accompanied those conflicts. AAFC, Kong notes, drew on those histories in order to define a way of being Asian American that is centered on resistance to oppression and solidaristic identification while recognizing and rejecting the insular and white-serving forms of Asian American identity captured in the concept of “the model minority.”

The papers and conversation in this issue exemplify a broad conception of philosophy as universal while arising from and speaking to situated problems and issues. Philosophy practiced in this way partakes in the challenges and the possibilities raised by the theme of “Identity and Solidarity.” It takes identity as a starting point without being limited by it, and seeks universality through something akin to solidarity, through speaking to and across differences to find and to build “heterogenous commonalities.” In that way, the theme of “Identity and Solidarity” not only comprises a particularly important pair of political concepts to be theorized for us today in light of the particular social and political challenges we face. But it also defines a larger methodological problematic for philosophical inquiry engaged with the world and its problems.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank Nhi Huynh, Youjin Kong, Céline Leboeuf, Emily S. Lee, Tracy Llanera, Vivian Nguyen, Brent Robbins, and Tina Rulli for their helpful comments and suggestions on an earlier draft of this introduction. Vivian and Brent are currently serving as our editorial assistants, and we are grateful for their outstanding contributions to the editing of this issue. Brent’s work is underwritten by the Honors College of Florida Gulf Coast University, from which he graduated in May 2023, and we would like to thank the FGCU Honors College for their generous support. Lastly, tremendous thanks to Erin Shepherd, APA Publications and Communications Coordinator, for her extraordinary patience and understanding during the preparation of this issue.

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## ARTICLES

### *The Future of Black and Asian Solidarities*

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#### ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic saw a rise in harassment and violence against Asian Americans, and with it, a powerful protest movement. At the same time, millions of Americans took to the streets to protest the murder of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin. Both responses belie the power of racialized hatred in the United States. Yet, if we look at the forms of oppression that Black Americans and Asian Americans experience, one notices striking differences. Police brutality, for instance, affects more Black Americans than Asian Americans. Similarly, harmful tropes about Blacks and Asian Americans differ: African Americans are negatively portrayed as lazy or violent while Asian Americans, though touted as “model minorities,” remain caricatured in TV and film and experience the psychological downstream effects of their status as “model minorities.” These differences between the Black and Asian oppressions raise pressing questions: Should we combat these oppressions separately? Or can we form solidarity across these groups? What would be the basis for such solidarity? To shed light on the future of Black and Asian solidarities in the United States, I want to bring to the table three thinkers: Iris Marion Young, Audre Lorde, and Diane Fujino. Young helps bring out the differences between the forms of oppression Asian Americans and African Americans face. Lorde teaches us the importance of coalition-building. And Fujino’s work highlights the particularities of Black and Asian solidarities.

#### INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic saw a rise in harassment and violence against Asian Americans, and with it, a powerful protest movement. At the same time, millions of Americans took to the streets to protest the murder of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin. Both responses belie the power of racialized hatred in the United States. Yet, if we look at the forms of oppression that Black Americans and Asian Americans experience, one notices striking differences. Police brutality, for instance, affects more African Americans than Asian Americans. Similarly, harmful tropes about Blacks and Asian Americans differ: Black Americans are negatively portrayed as lazy or violent while Asian Americans, though touted as “model minorities,” remain caricatured in TV and film and experience the psychological downstream effects of their status as “model minorities.” These differences between Black and Asian oppressions raise pressing questions: How do we combat them? Separately? Or can we form solidarity across these groups? What would be the basis for such solidarity? To shed light on the future of Black and Asian solidarities in the United States, I want to bring to the table three thinkers: Iris Marion Young, Audre Lorde, and Diane Fujino. First, Young helps bring out the differences between the forms of oppression Asian Americans and African

Americans face. Second, Lorde teaches us the importance of coalition-building. Third, Fujino's work highlights the challenges in forging Black and Asian solidarities.

### **PRESENT: RACIALIZED OPPRESSION IN ITS MANY FORMS**

To elaborate on the differences between Asian American and African American experiences, I here appeal to Iris Marion Young's classic essay "Five Faces of Oppression." According to her, oppression is a structural phenomenon.<sup>1</sup> This implies that power is not necessarily concentrated in the hands of one individual or group of oppressors. Rather, our institutions and everyday relations serve to oppress different social groups. According to her, oppression can consist of violence, exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, and cultural imperialism. For Young, whenever a social group experiences any one of these facets, that group is oppressed.<sup>2</sup> Thus, social group X may be subject to violence while social group Y may encounter cultural imperialism. Still, both groups would count as oppressed. While she leaves open the possibility that hers is not an exhaustive list, it offers a fruitful starting point to examine the similarities and differences between the oppression of Asian Americans and African Americans.

Let me begin with violence since this facet of oppression has come to the forefront in recent discussions of African American and Asian American experiences. In particular, I would like to focus on two types of violence: the use of excessive and sometimes fatal force by police officers and hate crimes. As I noted above, African Americans face greater violence at the hands of police officers than Asian Americans do. According to one source, "the rate of fatal police shootings among Black Americans was much higher than that for any other ethnicity, standing at 38 fatal shootings per million of the population as of March 2022."<sup>3</sup>

Of course, this data does not imply that Asian Americans live free of violence. One form of anti-Asian American violence that has garnered increased attention is hate crimes. By this term, I mean crimes that originate in a bias against an individual based on their perceived belonging to an oppressed social group. As the federal government defines it, "hate crime laws include crimes committed on the basis of the victim's perceived or actual race, color, religion, national origin, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, or disability."<sup>4</sup> Although on average the incidence of hate crimes against African Americans is higher than that against Asian Americans, the reported number of hate crimes against Asian Americans rose by 7 percent from 2019 to 2020, with 116 reported simple assaults and 47 reported aggravated assaults.<sup>5</sup> During the same period, the rate of hate crimes against African Americans rose by 40 percent.<sup>6</sup> The uptick in hate crimes against Asian Americans at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic speaks to the biased and hateful associations made between the illness and Asian descent.

Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to present more detailed statistics, the above-mentioned numbers already indicate that the patterns of violence against

African Americans and Asian Americans vary in kind and have evolved differently over time.

Let me now turn to another face of oppression discussed by Young: cultural imperialism. Young writes:

To experience cultural imperialism means to experience how the dominant meanings of a society render the particular perspective of one's own group invisible at the same time as they stereotype one's group and mark it out as the Other. Cultural imperialism involves the universalization of a dominant group's experience and culture, and its establishment as the norm.<sup>7</sup>

For example, heteronormativity upholds that only heterosexuality is normal and casts other forms of sexuality as deviant. First, heteronormativity erases the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer individuals, and then it condemns their sexual and/or romantic lives as abnormal.

African Americans and Asian Americans both face cultural imperialism in the United States today. Yet, the shape that this aspect of oppression takes is different. Consider stereotypes of both races. Stereotyping is a useful entry point as it is a significant manifestation of cultural imperialism. When a dominant social group imposes its cultural values, it marks other social groups as deviant and reduces individuals to tropes.<sup>8</sup> More specifically, let us zero in on stereotypes about Black and Asian masculinity. As many Black thinkers, ranging from Frantz Fanon to George Yancy, have said, Black men are stereotyped as hypersexual and primitive.<sup>9</sup> Susan Bordo, in her work on masculinity, emphasizes that with this stereotype comes the association between Black masculinity, sexual excess, and large genitals: "White Europeans have performed the same projection onto racist stereotypes of the overendowed black superstud."<sup>10</sup> By contrast, Asian male bodies are stereotyped as feminine. Indeed, in "From 'Little Brown Brothers' to 'Queer Asian Wives,'" C. Winter Han observes, "[e]arly European writings about the 'Orient' were filled with the sexual politics of colonization that marked 'Oriental' men as feminine while at the same time constructing European men as masculine."<sup>11</sup> He adds that "[c]ontemporary media products also achieve the feminization of Asian male bodies by often juxtaposing a large white male body with a small Asian male body, thus using the smaller Asian man to highlight the masculinity of white men."<sup>12</sup> The framing of white masculinity as normative casts both Black and Asian masculinity as deviant: "While on the surface, the way that black male bodies and Asian male bodies are portrayed in popular media may represent polar opposites, they both help to mark white male bodies as the 'norm' by which others are compared."<sup>13</sup> Thus, we see that stereotypes about Black and Asian masculinities originate in white cultural imperialism.

While I cannot examine each face of oppression within the space of this paper, one point emerges from this discussion: there is overlap between the faces of oppression that African Americans and Asian Americans are subject to. Nonetheless, my analysis has also revealed that within each category, the experiences of these races diverge. What unites the Asian American and African



American experiences is the positioning of whiteness as dominant. Both Blacks and Asian Americans are cast as Other and are vulnerable to violence, cultural imperialism, and other types of oppression. Even seemingly “positive” stereotypes—think of the trope of Asian Americans as “model minorities”—originate in white domination and are harmful.<sup>14</sup> Not only do experiences of oppression differ, but the called-for responses to these different experiences may also lie in tension with one another. As I shall soon explore through Diane Fujino’s research, the rise in hate crimes against Asian Americans has fueled a call for greater policing. At the same time, Fujino argues that an increased police presence can harm Blacks because they already face disproportionate police violence. How, then, can we build solidarity across oppressed social groups that face different forms of oppression? Should each social group only fight for its own freedom?

### FUTURE: FREEDOM, SOLIDARITY, AND NEGOTIATING DIFFERENCES

To respond to these questions, we need to take the argument a step further and study a second feminist theorist: Audre Lorde. In her 1981 address “The Uses of Anger,” Lorde contends, “I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own.”<sup>15</sup> Lorde’s point is this: enjoying freedom, in a true or authentic sense, depends on others’ having freedom too. In her talk, directed at a feminist audience, she claims that when feminists sow divisions between themselves—for example, when white feminists only attend to issues relevant to them—they fail to recognize aspects of their own lives that others embody. Specifically, Lorde says that when we fail to recognize others, when we silence their concerns, we both contribute to their oppression and risk furthering our own oppression. For instance, Lorde explains that if she were to dismiss Black lesbians who, unlike her, choose not to become mothers, she would be dismissing a part of herself: “if I fail to recognize them as other faces of myself, then I am contributing not only to each of their oppressions but also to my own.”<sup>16</sup> Lorde concludes that we need to recognize the interrelations between different forms of oppression. And as a corollary, we must combat not only the forms of oppression that affect us but also those that affect others.

Let me add that this is a point made by other Black feminists, such as bell hooks. While Lorde, in “The Uses of Anger,” worries about white feminism’s failures, hooks takes aim at Black male authors who focus exclusively on dismantling racism without heeding the ways different forms of oppression coalesce. As a result, many of these thinkers become complicit in sexism or classism, to name a few forms of oppression. Commenting on hooks’s works, Maria del Guadalupe Davidson writes, “On hooks’s view, the struggle against oppression cannot be piecemeal but instead must grapple with the matrix of all types of oppression.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, for both hooks and Lorde, liberation, when not combated in a spirit of solidarity, alienates us from one another.

To return to Asian American and African American experiences, Lorde’s point is all too salient. Suppose, for

the sake of argument, that Asian Americans were freed from oppression while African Americans were not. In such a situation, I submit that Asian Americans would be vulnerable to racism. Why? If Black Americans are still subordinated, then given the history of racialization in the United States, this would imply that whites would still enjoy racial privilege. If white domination persists, then by the same token, Asian Americans would risk seeing their oppression reappear. For example, if whiteness were to remain enshrined as the culturally dominant way of understanding society, then Asian Americans would not truly be free from cultural imperialism and thereby from oppression. And by the same token, African Americans would not be free either. In this case, according to Lorde’s logic, only when we dismantle all racial hierarchies in the United States will all oppressed groups enjoy freedom.

Thus far, I have claimed the following. First, Black Americans and Asian Americans are both unfree in the United States today, as both races face various forms of oppression. Second, based on the empirical research I have cited, their shackles, to borrow Lorde’s expression, differ from one another. Third, if Asian Americans were to be liberated and Blacks were not, or vice versa, then neither group would be truly free. If these claims are correct, then fighting oppression and forging intergroup solidarities go hand in hand. Yet, *how* do we forge solidarities when groups have different experiences of oppression? Here, I will ground my argument in the work of Diane Fujino.

One of Fujino’s starting points is the observation that treating anti-Asian and anti-Black racism separately neglects *intersectionality*—the fact that certain groups experience multiple forms of oppression. We cannot neatly separate individuals using racial categories alone since they may belong to multiply oppressed social groups. For example, treating these forms of racism separately would disregard any overlap between the oppressions of LGBTQ Asian Americans and LGBTQ African Americans. Consequently, we would not recognize the common experiences that these groups share and thus the preexisting bases for Black and Asian solidarities. On this point, the experience of “coming out,” while fraught with difficulties for individuals of any race, can be especially trying for members of racial minorities. This is supported by evidence that non-White individuals are less likely than Whites to come out to parents and more likely to experience depression.<sup>18</sup> In this example, treating African American and Asian American oppressions as neatly separate would prevent us from understanding the commonalities in these groups’ experiences of anti-LGBTQ oppression and the solidarity that they could forge from their shared experiences. More generally, if we neglect intersectionality and overlook similarities between Black and Asian American experiences of oppression, then we are left with an impoverished understanding of Black and Asian solidarities.

Building on this observation, Fujino makes a noteworthy point about policy. She asserts that taking intersectionality into account implies prioritizing the experiences of the most vulnerable groups. She rightly points out that we should shun any idea of “oppression Olympics”—that is, the ranking of different groups as more oppressed than

others. Nevertheless, we may need to organize our activism in a way that recognizes intersectionality and starts with those groups that are most disadvantaged. Take the case of sexual violence. This is a form of violence that affects Black and Asian women, among other populations. As we know, Black trans women are a particularly vulnerable population. According to the Human Rights Campaign's 2020 report on violence against trans and gender-non-conforming individuals, the "epidemic [of anti-trans violence] disproportionately impacts Black transgender women, who comprise 66% of all victims of fatal violence against transgender and gender non-conforming people."<sup>19</sup> And as the shooting of six women of Asian descent in 2021 in Atlanta demonstrates, sexual and racial violence also come together for Asian Americans. If we take Fujino's point on board, then forging Black and Asian solidarities would involve bringing to the fore and finding solutions to these different forms of sexual violence. This is not to disregard other types of oppression and the need to combat them. However, it is to say that these instances of violence are especially alarming and demand our attention. In sum, when we take intersectionality into account, we gain a better sense of the vulnerabilities of groups that are multiply oppressed.

In addition to intersectionality, Fujino contends that we need to consider the *structural nature of oppression*—a point that dovetails with my earlier discussion of Young. For Fujino, when we think of oppression in structural terms, we can better understand the sources of different forms of oppression and better appreciate the challenges in combating them. Instead of targeting instances of oppression piecemeal, we can grasp their underlying logic and craft more sophisticated solutions to them. Consider the cases of police brutality against African Americans and military interventions in Asian countries.

With regard to police violence, let me return to a problem that I alluded to earlier: the tension between addressing hate crimes and leaving certain communities vulnerable to police brutality. Commenting on the idea of hate crimes, Fujino claims, "the narrative of 'hate crimes' fosters a problematic focus on the individual—their attitudes, feelings, bigotry—and thus erases the structural violence of policing, militarism, White supremacy, racialized heteropatriarchy and more that fuel individual attacks."<sup>20</sup> If we focus on addressing anti-Asian hate crimes by increasing police and thus better targeting individual perpetrators of such racism, we risk solidifying an institution—the police system—that harms African Americans more than any other race. And this is a point to which some Asian Americans have become increasingly sensitive. As *The New York Times* has recently reported, there is a growing rift between older Asian Americans, who favor increasing police presence in areas affected by anti-Asian hate crimes, and younger Asian Americans, who want to find solutions outside of traditional policing, such as addressing homelessness and mental health issues.<sup>21</sup> The question raised, then, is how to protect marginalized groups from violence while acknowledging the realities of police brutality. While there is no easy answer to this question, the point is that by thinking of violence against Asian Americans structurally rather than at a surface level, we can recognize the broader

context of these forms of violence and the probable effects of different solutions to them.

On a similar note, Fujino suggests that US militarism is another institution that perpetuates racism. She shows that military interventions may be linked to violence against Asian Americans by appealing to the work of Christine Ahn, Terry Park, and Kathleen Richards. In "Anti-Asian Violence in America Is Rooted in US Empire," these authors explain that military interventions in Asian countries have destroyed lives, torn families apart, and impoverished communities. They add that "Asian women are particularly harmed by US militarism and foreign policy—economically, socially, and physically."<sup>22</sup> For example, prostitution around US military camps in Korea has contributed to the exploitation and exoticization of Asian women overseas. These phenomena have had implications in the United States: "as the US military steadily reduced its troop presence in Asia, camptown establishments, facing social upheaval and economic uncertainty, began sending their madams and sex workers to US domestic military sites through brokered marriages with US servicemen."<sup>23</sup> This argument helps make sense of the Atlanta shootings. Instead of focusing on the bigotry and sexual repression of one individual, we need to step back and examine the conditions that lay the ground for such tragedies.

These observations about US militarism not only shed light on anti-Asian sentiment but also relate to my earlier points about police brutality. All in all, we need to target structural issues when dismantling racial oppressions. Racism—whether anti-Black or anti-Asian—is not merely a matter of individual hatred or bias; rather, it is sustained by institutions.

## CONCLUSION: THE FUTURE OF BLACK AND ASIAN SOLIDARITIES

Let me conclude by reviewing some of the main points of this paper. To begin, by drawing on Young, I described how Asian Americans and African Americans experience forms of oppression that are both similar and different. For example, both groups face cultural imperialism, but the tropes about Asian Americans and those about African Americans diverge. Moreover, by appealing to Lorde, I claimed that we ought not to treat these forms of racism separately. Instead, we should think that the freedom from oppression of one group is connected to the freedom from oppression of another group. Finally, using Fujino's work, I have argued that part of the task of resisting these forms of racism will lie in prioritizing the needs of the most vulnerable groups and recognizing the structural nature of oppression. Thus, the future of Black and Asian solidarities will lie in greater attention to intersectionality and structural racism. To be sure, we will face challenges in building coalitions since anti-Black and anti-Asian oppressions differ. But this is no excuse to abandon solidarity; rather, the need to combat race-based forms of oppression becomes all the more pressing.

## NOTES

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## Acknowledging Intra-Minority Conflict, towards Heterogenous Commonality

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### ABSTRACT

In light of the recent reports of increased rates of hate crimes, especially violent hate crimes, against Asian Americans, this paper examines intra-minority conflict. This paper focuses on intra-minority conflict because the videos that dominate incidences of violence against Asian Americans feature a young black male. White men still perpetuate the majority of the violence against Asian Americans, about 75 percent.<sup>1</sup> Yet, there is a tendency in the United States to focus on intra-minority conflict. Intra-minority violence comprises about 25 percent of anti-Asian hate crimes. This paper aims for developing solidarity among minority groups to work to counter such strategies of divide and conquer. This paper explores the intersectionality of race and class as the lens to better understand the intra-minority conflict and aims toward developing a heterogenous commonality among identity groups. Keeping in mind that the experience of one marginality does not guarantee understanding the experience of another marginal position, how can we promote recognizing our internal heterogeneity or heterogenous commonality?

### INTRODUCTION

Considering the recent reports of increased rates of hate crimes, especially violent hate crimes, against Asian Americans, I am motivated to think about intra-minority conflict. I focus on intra-minority conflict because the videos that dominate incidences of violence against Asian Americans feature a young black male. White men still perpetuate most of the violence against Asian Americans, about 75 percent.<sup>2</sup> Yet, there is a tendency in the United States to focus on intra-minority conflict.

This focus coheres with a history in the West of promoting images of African American men as violent. I focus on this intra-minority conflict because 25 percent of anti-Asian hate crimes constitute intra-minority violence. I aim towards more solidarity among minority groups to work towards countering such strategies of divide and conquer.

### PRELIMINARY THOUGHTS

Let me begin with a broader picture of hate crimes in the United States. As much as the current focus is on anti-Asian American hate crimes in the wake of COVID-19 and the horrible naming and handling of the pandemic by the former president of the United States, I recognize that Asian Americans do not represent the predominant recipients of hate crimes. In 2019, "58 percent of reported hate crimes were motivated by anti-Black bias, while a far smaller proportion, 4 percent, were motivated by anti-Asian bias. About 14 percent were motivated by anti-Latino bias."<sup>3</sup> And although Stop AAPI Hate's numbers list that, in 2020, the number of self-reported incidents of racially motivated attacks was 9,081, these numbers were from 2019 to 2020,



and comprised 16.6 percent of the physical assaults for this time. Asian Americans are still not the primary targets of hate crimes in the United States. Again, I note this—not to diminish the significance of the increased number of anti-Asian hate crimes—but to provide perspective, especially since within this paper, I focus on intra-minority conflict.

Second, let me say that I am ashamed of Soon Ja Du's shooting of fifteen-year-old Latasha Harlins—what most people attribute as the final spark for the LA riots of 1992. I was in college during this event. I grew up cashiering at small Korean grocery stores in predominantly Black neighborhoods in New York City, so I claim some awareness of the circumstances Ms. Du experienced. I am sure Ms. Du experienced much stress with financial and safety concerns. But I am still ashamed. As Korean American poet Cathy Park Hong writes, "I am ashamed that Du got off with a light sentence of community service. I am ashamed of the store clerks who followed black customers around, expecting they'd steal, for not trying harder to engage with their adopted neighborhood."<sup>4</sup> Daniel Haggerty describes shame as about the self.<sup>5</sup> He writes, "[w]ith shame, we experience . . . an evaluation of our character . . . in the eyes of our community."<sup>6</sup> David Kim firmly establishes the possibility of feeling shame not because of any act committed by the self, but because of a pre-existing suppressive social order.<sup>7</sup> Shame intricately links with one's community's standing in the greater society. Minority existence is representative existence. Group identity overdetermines individual identity, or minority identities share a linked fate. Hence, the actions of another Korean American woman represent me, and so, I feel shame for Ms. Du's actions. To be clear, I am not concerned that I might have behaved similarly to Ms. Du; I never owned a gun, nor do I have any intentions of owning a gun. Nevertheless, Ms. Du's action represents me. I am distinctly aware that because Ms. Du is an Asian American, she received such a light sentence; an African American woman or man would not have gotten off so lightly. I am not saying that I wish Ms. Du received a harsher sentence. This is to admit the social structural inequities of this country's legal system.

Keeping these two preliminary contexts in mind, intra-minority conflict, specifically between Asian Americans and African Americans, or between Asian Americans and Latin Americans, exists. Minorities enact 25 percent of anti-Asian hate crimes. This paper focuses on this 25 percent and so I begin by recognizing this tension, perhaps even aggression felt towards one minority by another.

I have felt intra-minority conflict. As I said, I grew up working in small grocery stores in economically challenged areas of New York City. I distinctly felt the tension from African Americans. These are not African American academics—these are African Americans who struggle economically. My experiences with this population group have not been entirely tense, but there have always been some aggressive tones. Currently, I feel tension from some of my Latin American male students. Again, not all, but a few every year while teaching at my current institution, a Hispanic-Serving Institution, I sense the questioning of my ability to know, especially philosophical knowledge, or perhaps just my position of authority. I am not sure if it centers around

gender or race. Most likely, it combines both. Like so many people with intersectional identities, certainty is a luxury.

To be clear, this sort of intra-minority tension exists even within one minority group, from African Americans against African Americans, as pointed out by Audre Lorde, and among Asian Americans.<sup>8</sup> Is the tension a result of the social structural situation where tokenism prevails, competitively positioning one minority against another? Or does the tension arise because of the suppressive social order about one's group identity, so that a minority subject desires distance from their own identity group as Kim suggests? I do not know.

With these preliminary thoughts, I do not mean to de-emphasize the unacceptable numbers of anti-Asian hate crimes or provide excuses for the anti-Asian hate crimes. But I do not, sweepingly and easily, vilify those who have committed anti-Asian hate crimes. Rather, I consider the constraints of the current social structural situation, the history, and the consequent positioning of the various minority groups with and against each other. In other words, I focus on positioning Asian Americans as the scapegoats.

### INTERSECTIONALITY

Anti-Asian violence may be about xenophobia.<sup>9</sup> In our historical times, in metropolitan areas, along with xenophobia, there is also xenophilia, as an exhibition of cosmopolitanism in all its capitalistic and cultural sense.<sup>10</sup> But in considering intra-minority conflict, rather than fear of or desire of the foreign, I treat intra-minority conflict as an intersectional conflict between race and class.

Intersectionality studies forwarded the necessity of an intersectional lens in discussions of race. An intersectional lens facilitates perceiving the competitive positioning of oppressions both intra and intergroup. Aimee Carrillo Rowe writes that "the 'race to innocence,' a politics based in a hierarchy of oppression, compels us to invest in our particular marginality through the erasure of our complicity in oppressing others."<sup>11</sup> Without awareness of the intersectionality of oppressions, those who experience one oppression can be positioned in contrast and in competition with those who experience other oppressions overlooking Maria Lugones's analysis of the intermeshedness of oppressor ↔ oppressed conditions. Yen Le Espiritu explains the history in which Asian American women's advancements followed from the detriment of Asian American men.<sup>12</sup> Within the context of the racist de-masculinization of Asian American men, Asian American women gained feminist advances. In this case, proliferating racism served as an entryway for feminist concerns. Sumi K. Cho explains further that, historically, Asian American women have been situated against white women and African American women.<sup>13</sup> Cho's work illustrates the competitive positioning of women of color. Racism ultimately undercuts feminist possibilities by challenging coalition building among women of color and women in general. Dominant groups do not only activate these strategic intersectional uses of racism and sexism. Members of marginalized groups—because of the intermeshedness of the oppressor ↔ oppressed condition—slip into employing such strategies as well.<sup>14</sup>

Most of the analysis on intersectionality centers on the intersections between race and sex. Focusing on the recent episodes of intra-minority hate crimes targeting Asian Americans calls for attending to the intersections between race and class. For at the heart of the aggression on Asian Americans from other minorities lies the achievement of a certain class status by Asian Americans in the United States.

This intersectionality involves the visibility of race, where the visibility of Asian American embodiment is still predominantly associated with the foreign. This foreignness does not only circumscribe an association with evil, or a fear of difference, but about who is deserving, who has a right to the benefits of this country. Hence, the astuteness of the earliest Asian American movements' strategy of challenging perceptions that Asian Americans are all foreigners. I must admit that challenging this perception of Asian Americans as foreigners feels especially urgent. Although I am an immigrant, because I came to the United States as a child, the United States comes closest to any sense of home for me. I tried living in South Korea, after college in my attempts to find myself, in some authentic sense, and I felt even more like a foreigner there.<sup>15</sup> So I call the United States home, even as I do not feel completely at home. Reading about the recent refugee crisis, Hannah Arendt's work on the importance of citizenship for recognition as human, and George Takei's biography during the Japanese Internment depicting the power of state intervention, the condition of statelessness leaves me with existential fear. So challenging perceptions of Asian Americans as foreigners loom exigent.

The intersectionality encircling anti-Asian hate crimes also hinges on a perception that all Asian Americans occupy a certain class status. The model minority myth promotes the stereotype that all Asian Americans fare well economically. This perception does not accurately depict all Asian Americans, especially considering the breadth of the identity group Asian Pacific Islander, where at least three specific identity groups—the Hmong, Cambodians, and Laotians—have the lowest average household incomes in this country, lower than Latin Americans' and African Americans' average household incomes.<sup>16</sup> These statistics do not deny that some Asian Americans enjoy economic security. But positioning all Asian Americans as economically successful is essentializing. I do not accept that some sort of merit-based economy actually functions. Nor do I affirm the capitalistic drive of more is better. So Asian American movements challenge the model minority myth, that all Asian Americans fare well economically.

Looking more closely at the intersection between race and class, consider that for Black Americans, their hypervisible embodied identity leads to a ready association with the lower economic classes, a view that the African American community aims to dispel. Whereas the visibly embodied identity of Asian Americans leads to ready associations with the higher classes. Both close associations are essentialistic and lead to unhelpful overdeterminations and stereotypes. Hence, following Patricia Hill Collins and my earlier work articulating the difference between race and class—let us remember all oppressions are not the same.<sup>17</sup> In this

framework of intersectionality, as some of the early critics made clear, to speak about intersectionality is to challenge conceptions of oppressions as similar. Clearly, we need to challenge conceptually collapsing a particular race with a particular class.

These two misguided perceptions, the positioning of Asian Americans as foreigners and the model minority myth, these intersections of race and class are at the heart of anti-Asian violence. Contra the slogan that "we are all in it together," some of us fared better than others during the pandemic. With the pandemic's nickname as "the Chinese flu," for people struggling with the difficulties of the pandemic, they may feel justified in directing their frustration by scapegoating Asians, whether American or not. But underlying this immediate trigger for this instance of venting (cathartically or not) on Asian Americans lies this intersectionality between the race-based positioning of Asian Americans as foreigners and the class-based myth that all Asian Americans hold economically advantageous positions.<sup>18</sup> These two misguided perceptions serve as the social structural lens or norm for blaming Asian Americans for the pandemic.

As earlier mentioned, minorities also internalize these perceptions, these frameworks for some sort of felt justification for blaming Asian Americans for the current pandemic. Minorities internalize dominant narratives about other minorities, even if they recognize that dominant narratives about one's own minority identity group can be incorrect. As José Medina makes clear, sensitivity to the functioning of one marginality does not necessarily provide any insight into the functioning of other marginal experiences.<sup>19</sup>

### TOWARD HETEROGENOUS COMMONALITY

There is clearly a need for better relationships among Asian Americans and other minority groups. I am not laying blame. Segregation exists among the different minority groups from both social structural inequalities as well as cultural and individual limitations in language and choices. Such segregation has sedimented into disinterest. I can only be responsible for myself and my community. I can begin with acknowledging the Asian American communities' desire to be white, and capitalistic desires that situate us competitively, so my personal economic advantage is juxtaposed against another's lack.

Recognizing the intersectional domains of intra-minority conflict, let me end with the hopeful speculations of the possibility of Collins's notion of "heterogeneous commonality." Regarding African American women, Collins writes:

Shared group location is better characterized by viewing Black women's social location as one of a heterogeneous commonality embedded in social relations of intersectionality. Despite heterogeneity among African American women that accompanies such intersections, differences in Black women's experiences generated by differences of age, sexual orientation, region of the country, urban or rural residence, color, hair texture, and the like

theoretically can all be accommodated within the concept of a shared standpoint.<sup>20</sup>

Collins is critical of the notion of intersectionality alone serving to theorize group identity. As such, she grounds the ideas of intersectionality within standpoint theory. Anna Carastathis applies Collins's work on conceptualizing groups as a heterogeneous commonality onto the coalition-building work among Latin American lesbian women.<sup>21</sup> Collins and Carastathis forward recognizing the internal heterogeneity of groups as a bridge to think about relations between women of color. Carastathis more specifically writes, "if identity categories are coalitions—constituted by internal differences as much as by commonalities—then this changes how we think about the political task of coalitional organizing. The emphasis shifts from forming coalitions across group differences to recognizing that groups are already internally heterogeneous."<sup>22</sup> For, after all, the process of determining what is common and what is different relies upon our focus, our project at hand.

I wrote the following in an earlier article articulating the internal heterogeneity even within one group identity, in this case Asian American women:

Membership in a group has been metonymically conditioned; groups may prioritize certain group features, and de-emphasize or not accept other features. . . . The difficulty does not lie solely in the question of intentional attempts at exclusion. [There are] difficulties of determining which identities and which differences matter at any one time—for these decisions guide the projects of the group. Because of the malleability of delineating differences depending on the project at hand and the current circumstances, the question of which differences matter and do not matter remains up for negotiation.<sup>23</sup>

Beginning with acknowledging the internal heterogeneity within one group identity such as Asian Americans can serve as the bridge to conceptualize the commonality with another group identity such as African Americans or Latin Americans. One can acknowledge this while recognizing that our internal heterogeneity is not simply a source of conflict and inability to work together but a source of strength in diversity. Identity groups are already incredibly diverse. Admitting such diversity and difference can serve as the framework to think about heterogeneous commonality to conceptualize intragroup heterogeneity—towards envisioning forging alliances for minorities maligned and oppressed in the United States and guarding against the strategy of divide and conquer.

Envisioning the possibility of recognizing our heterogeneous commonality, in acknowledging the existence of intra-minority conflict in instances of minorities participating in anti-Asian hate crimes, my hope is that through coalition-building work, we recognize our heterogeneous commonality.

NOTES

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2. Yam, "Viral Images."
3. Yam, "Viral Images."
4. Cathy Park Hong, *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning* (New York: One World, 2020), 61.
5. Daniel Haggarty, "White Shame: Responsibility and Moral Emotions," *Philosophy Today* 53, no. 3 (2009): 304.
6. Haggarty, "White Shame," 306.
7. David Kim, "Shame and Self-Revision in Asian American Assimilation," in *Living Alterities: Phenomenology, Embodiment, and Race*, ed. Emily S. Lee (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2014), 116.
8. For example, many Asians do not like the Japanese because of the history of their occupation in so much of Asia. Of course, the tension between women is so well known that they have been parodied.
9. David Kim writes, "In the catalogue of anti-Asian social realities, classic biology-invoking racism has been profound. But this has typically been combined with or inflected by a deep sense that Asian American women and men are cultural outsiders or otherwise foreign, alien, or un-American, with related concerns about their being inscrutable, unassimilable, or a sully threat to the nation's values. This is xenophobia, and for critical purposes, it can be unmoored from its etymological link to fear and conceptualized instead as civic ostracism, produced by agents of institutions, on account of the perceived cultural otherness of its target." See Kim, "Asian American Philosophy and Feminism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Philosophy*, ed. Kim Q. Hall and Ásta (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 140–41.
10. Kim writes, "For Asian American women, there is often a shift from xenophobia to a xenophilia in which they are regarded in terms of a positive alterity, an exotic otherness. The sense of otherness is permeated by many historically specific sexual paradigms in which the idea of Asian women's different 'looks' and bodies is mingled with an imagined psychology of demureness, passivity, and willingness to please." See Kim, "Asian American Philosophy and Feminism," 141.
11. Aimee Carrillo Rowe, "L Is for ...: Longing and Becoming in the L-Word's Racialized Erotic," in *Convergences: Black Feminism and Continental Philosophy*, eds. Maria del Guadalupe Davidson, Kathryn T. Gines, and Donna-Dale L. Marcano (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2010), 93.
12. Yen Le Espiritu, "Class and Gender in Asian America," in *Making More Waves: New Writing by Asian American Women*, eds. Elaine H. Kim, Lilia V. Villanueva, and Asian Women United of California (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), 139.
13. Sumi K. Cho writes, "Asian Pacific women are particularly valued in a sexist society because they provide the antidote to visions of liberated career women who challenge the objectification of women. In this sense, the objectified gender stereotype also assumes a model minority function as Asian Pacific women are deployed to 'discipline' white women, just as Asian Pacific Americans in general are used against their 'nonmodel' counterparts, African Americans." See Cho, "Asian Pacific American Women and Racialized Sexual Harassment," in *Making More Waves: New Writing by Asian American Women*, eds. Elaine H. Kim, Lilia V. Villanueva, and Asian Women United of California (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), 166.
14. Camisha Russell writes that "Collins briefly traces the history of this problematic of black gender norms, identifying it in the work of both W. E. B. Du Bois and E. Franklin Frazier, who considered deficient gender ideology among African Americans a factor in, but not the primary cause of, African American poverty and political powerlessness." See Russell, "Black American Sexuality and the Repressive Hypothesis: Reading Patricia Hill Collins with Michel Foucault," in *Convergences: Black Feminism and Continental Philosophy*, eds. Maria del Guadalupe Davidson,

Kathryn T. Gines, and Donna-Dale L. Marcano (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2010), 206. See also Shireen Roshanravan, "Motivating Coalition: Women of Color and Epistemic Disobedience," *Hypatia* 29, no. 1 (Winter 2014, Special Issue on Interstices: Inheriting Women of Color Feminist Philosophy): 41–58.

15. The DACA recipients have voiced a similar situation, a situation I completely understand and empathize with.
16. See Emily S. Lee, "The Ambiguous Practices of the Inauthentic Asian American Woman," *Hypatia* 29, no. 1 (Winter 2014, Special Issue on Interstices: Inheriting Women of Color Feminist Philosophy): 151–52.
17. See Patricia Hill Collins, *Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998); and Emily S. Lee, "A Problem with Conceptually Relating Race and Class: Regarding the Question of Choice," *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 38, no. 2 (2017): 349–68.
18. But these ready associations of a particular race with a particular class are not completely true to reality. I know it isn't about reality but the pervasiveness of the perception. Hence, why so much of my early work analyzes how much perception is not simply about a relation to truth, a vehicle for simply receiving information, but that perception structurally holds two sources of bias: 1) perception focuses on that which one already knows (or believes one knows); and 2) perception cannot see one's own positionality, one's own situatedness in the world.
19. Specifically, José Medina writes, "a heightened sensitivity with respect to one kind of insensitivity does not at all guarantee any special sensitivity with respect to other forms of insensitivity. In other words, what is learned in one context of injustice or as a result of certain experiences of oppression should not be assumed to be immediately transferable to other contexts of experiences of oppression." See Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and the Social Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 201, emphasis in original. See also Trina Grillo and Stephanie Wildman, "Obscuring the Importance of Race: The Implication of Making Comparisons between Racism and Sexism (or Other Isms)," in *Critical Race Feminism*, ed. Adrienne Katherine Wing (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 49.
20. Collins, *Fighting Words*, 224.
21. Anna Carastathis attributes Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw with this insight to conceptualize identity groups as coalitions. Carastathis writes, "the integration of all aspects of our individual identities is crucial to achieving the internal balance missing in one-dimensional political movements." See Carastathis, "Identity Categories as Potential Coalitions," *Signs* 38, no. 4 (Summer 2013, Special Issue on Intersectionality: Theorizing Power, Empowering Theory): 942.
22. Carastathis, "Identity Categories as Potential Coalitions," 945.
23. Lee, "Ambiguous Practices," 149.

## Recreating Asian Identity: Yellow Peril, Model Minority, and Black and Asian Solidarities

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### ABSTRACT

Does intersectionality divide marginalized groups (e.g., women) along identity lines (e.g., race, class, and sexuality)? In response to the criticism that intersectional approaches to feminist and critical race theories lead to fragmentation and division, this paper notes that it relies on an ontological (mis)understanding of identity as a fixed entity. I argue against this notion of identity by engaging in a detailed

case study of how Asian American women experience their Asian identity. The case study demonstrates that identity is lived not as a pre-given static object but rather as a fluid and flexible process: what Asian identity means varies according to how this identity is related to the dynamics of power. I propose a tripartite taxonomy of identity-power relationships exhibited in Asian American women's lives, in which identities are 1) constructed by and 2) used to reproduce power as oppression, as well as 3) used to build power as resistance. In particular, I explore Black and Asian feminist solidarities to show that those at the margins recreate their identities and, in doing so, build positive forms of power such as resistance and solidarity. The criticism that intersectionality leads to fragmentation does not hold, as it is grounded in a flawed notion of identity that fails to consider how identities are actually lived in their changing relationships to power—especially how marginalized groups, such as women of color, build solidarity to resist oppression by recreating their identities, rather than being fragmented into smaller and mutually exclusive subgroups.

### INTRODUCTION

Intersectionality—the idea that racial, gender, and other forms of discrimination are not separate but intersect and operate together—has gained tremendous popularity in feminist and critical race theories over the last few decades.<sup>1</sup> However, in more recent years, there has also been a "mushrooming intersectionality critique industry."<sup>2</sup> In this paper, I examine and respond to recent critiques of intersectionality. Specifically, I analyze the notion of *identity* implicitly assumed in the critiques and propose an alternative notion by engaging Asian identity.

The paper begins by analyzing two major critiques of intersectionality: the infinite regress critique and the incommensurability critique. Both critiques take intersectionality to fragment marginalized groups (e.g., women) along identity lines (e.g., race, class, and sexuality). Underlying this interpretation, I argue, is the metaphysical assumption that identity is a *fixed entity*. This is a misunderstanding of identity that neglects how identity is actually lived by marginalized groups.

I explore several cases of Asian American women's experiences of "Asian"<sup>3</sup> identity in the US context, including growing anti-Asian racism amid COVID-19, internalization of the model minority myth, and Black-Asian feminist solidarities. Using this case study, I demonstrate that identity is less like a fixed object but more like a *fluid process*, where its meaning changes according to how it is related to power. I identify and discuss three characteristic types of the identity-power relationship shown in Asian American experiences: construction of identity by power-as-oppression, reproduction of power-as-oppression, and creation of power-as-resistance through reconstruction of identity. The third type of identity-power relationship is presented where Asian American women build solidarity with Black women to challenge structural white supremacist patriarchy and construct a new identity as a feminist "we." Given that the underlying notion of identity as a fixed entity fails to reflect marginalized groups' experiences, especially how they reshape their identities as starting points of



solidarity praxis, the critiques of intersectionality do not hold.

### FRAGMENTATION CRITIQUES: IDENTITY AS A FIXED ENTITY

Let us take a closer look at the two strands of critique. The first claims that intersectionality incurs an *infinite regress*, that is, “the tendency of all identity groups to split into ever-smaller subgroups.”<sup>4</sup> The association of intersectionality with infinite regress has become so influential that it has been examined by many intersectional scholars.<sup>5</sup> This strand of criticism interprets intersectionality as impeding generalizations about group interests (of, for example, women) or even about subgroup interests (of, for example, women of color, Black women), as there is “a potentially endless list of hybrid positions or cross-cutting groupings that can be yielded (such as [B]lack working class, lesbian, young, poor, rural, disabled and so on).”<sup>6</sup> As the regress goes on, there would be no group, and the individual would become the only cohesive unit of analysis.<sup>7</sup>

Another line of critique is that intersectionality results in the increase of *incommensurable* identities. Naomi Zack contends in her oft-cited critique that intersectionality does not help to make feminism inclusive but rather fragments women into multiple discrete identities. According to Zack’s interpretation of intersectionality, each specific intersection of race and class represents a distinct kind of gender identity mainly because intersectionality rejects the additive analysis. Black working-class women, for example, are not the women in the white feminist sense who are in addition Black and in addition working-class. Instead, Zack claims that intersectionality construes Black working-class women as having their own gender identity, which is distinguished from those of women of other races and classes such as white middle-class women’s gender identity. This way, different intersections are reified as “different kinds of female gender [that] may be perceived to be so distinctive as to be virtually incommensurable.”<sup>8</sup>

Zack argues that the multiplication of women’s discrete identities reinforces the exclusion of women of color: once the identities of women of color become incommensurable with those of white women, life situations of women of color are understood as a problem belonging only to their own identities, rather than a problem that “women” face. This way, intersectionality causes “*de facto* racial segregation,” which fixes women of color at their specific intersection and merely allows them to create their own feminisms while keeping the status quo dominance of white feminism intact.<sup>9</sup>

In sum, in both types of critique reviewed here, intersectionality is interpreted as a matter of division or fragmentation. The infinite regress critique is the claim that every time different identity categories (such as race, class, sexuality, etc.) are factored in, women are *fragmented* into even finer subgroups. The incommensurability critique is the claim that these subgroups end up having irreconcilably different identities. As each intersection of race and gender (e.g., Black women, white women) or of class and gender (e.g., working-class women, middle-class

women) is reified as a distinct identity, women, the critics argue, are *fragmented* along the lines of race and class.

The interpretation of intersectionality as fragmentation, however, relies on a problematic understanding of identity. It assumes a view close to what Elizabeth Spelman calls the “pop-bead metaphysics,” where each identity category, such as race, gender, and class, is analogized as a bead that can be popped into other beads to form a necklace—one’s identity as a whole.<sup>10</sup> While Spelman’s metaphor is originally intended to illustrate the relationship between the beads/identities, I use it to describe the characteristics of each bead/identity. As a metaphysics of identity, the pop-bead view makes the following two flawed assumptions.

First, it assumes that (racial/gender/class/etc.) identity is already given as a thing that does not change. For example, the bead labeled “Asian” exists even before someone lives as an “Asian” in specific sociohistorical contexts through interactions with other people, communities, and society. This means that the “Asian” identity stays the same regardless of what the subject does with this identity and what relationships they build with the power dynamics of society. That is, identity is a *fixed entity* that remains the same across all contexts and occasions. One’s having “Asian” identity is like taking a pre-made, unchanging bead labeled as such, and thus, it remains the same whoever takes it.

This characteristic of identity makes it possible to put people in stable distinct groups according to their identities. If “Asian” identity is a *fluid and flexible process*, as I will show later, different people—or even the same person—who live as “Asian” may experience or build different narratives of what it means to be “Asian.” During this meaning-making journey, they may find commonalities/intersections as well as differences/tensions with those who live with other racial identities. (I will explain this in detail in Section 3 of the case study). In contrast, according to the pop-bead metaphysics, racial groups are clearly demarcated from one another in the same way that the bead labeled “Asian” is an ontologically different entity from other beads labeled “Black,” “Latinx,” and so on.

This is the view of identity that the criticisms of intersectionality rely on (see Figure 1). The infinite regress critique can be put as follows: women, or the group of people who possess the bead labeled “woman,” are divided into smaller groups according to whether they insert this bead into those labeled “Asian,” “Black,” or “White.” In a like manner, Asian women are further divided into smaller subgroups once different class identities are popped into the “woman” and “Asian” beads that they have. And the same goes for sexuality, disability, age, and so on. The incommensurability critique is the claim that the end products—namely, the sum of identity categories analogized with pop-bead necklaces—are mutually exclusive. Although Asian women and Black women have the same bead labeled “woman,” as it is inserted into two ontologically distinct entities, namely, the two beads labeled “Asian” and “Black,” respectively, it ends up constituting necklaces that are “so distinctive as to be virtually incommensurable.”<sup>11</sup>

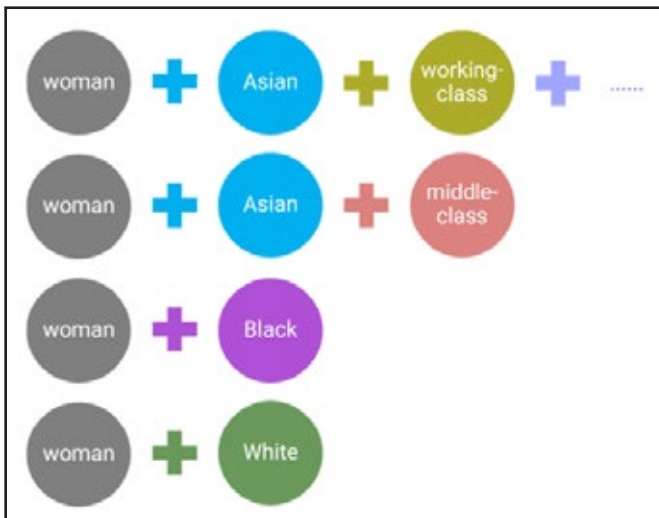


Figure 1. The View of Identity (e.g., “Asian” Identity) as a Fixed Entity

## CASE STUDY: EXPERIENCES OF ASIAN IDENTITY

### THREE TYPES OF IDENTITY-POWER RELATIONSHIPS

Contrary to the critics’ static view, identity is experienced in a fluid and flexible process. I argue that the critics are so preoccupied with the abstract inquiry of how women would be *divided by* the intersection of identities that they neglect what women who exist at the intersection of multiple forms of oppression, such as women of color, are actually *doing with* their identities. To demonstrate this point, the following sections engage in a case study. I analyze different ways in which Asian American women experience their Asian identity and show that what it means to be Asian varies according to how it is related to the dynamics of power. The term “power” is used here to refer to two distinct forms: the negative form of power as structural oppression<sup>12</sup> and the positive form of power, such as solidarity and empowerment,<sup>13</sup> that resists oppression. I maintain that what an identity—especially a marginalized racial, gender, or other group identity—is and means changes depending on the way in which the identity is linked to the negative and positive forms of power. The charge of fragmentation is a misunderstanding of intersectionality, which is grounded in a misunderstanding of identity that fails to consider how identities are actually lived in their changing relationships with power. There are at least three different types of relationships between identity and power:

1. Construction by oppression: By this term, I refer to cases in which the power of structural oppression is manifested in *constructing* meanings of an identity.
  - In Section 1 below, I discuss what it means to be Asian during the COVID-19 pandemic. The intersecting structure of xenophobic, racial, and gender oppression operates to attach the “yellow peril” label to Asian bodies.

2. Reproduction of oppression: There is a tendency that marginalized groups, in order to survive in an oppressive society, conform to the meaning of their identities as constructed by the oppressive structure. This survival strategy *reproduces* the power of oppression.
  - Section 2 examines how living up to the name of “model minority” has been a tactic for many Asian Americans to blend into the white-dominated US society.
3. Resistance to oppression: By reshaping and redefining their identity as a center of *resistance* to structural injustice and transformation towards a just society, marginalized groups create new forms of power as solidarity and empowerment.
  - Section 3 discusses Asian American efforts to break up the acquiescent model minority stereotype and to speak up against racism. I focus on how Asian American feminist movements redefine what it means to be Asian and build solidarity with Black feminists to dismantle the oppressive structure.

### 1. ASIAN AS YELLOW PERIL: ANTI-ASIAN RACISM AMID COVID-19

Since COVID-19 spread across the US, there has been a spike in anti-Asian hate incidents where non-Asian Americans blame Asian Americans for the pandemic. Stop AAPI Hate, a national coalition documenting COVID-related racist incidents against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, collected almost 11,500 reports nationwide from March 2020 to March 2022.<sup>14</sup> Some firsthand experiences reported include the following:

- I was emptying my trash into a public trash can at a rest stop and a man walked towards me asked me where my mask was, shoved me back and said if anyone should be wearing a mask it is people like you. He mocked by pulling his eyes back to resemble slant eyes and bowed to me. (Marin County, CA)<sup>15</sup>
- I got into the elevator (mask on) so I could get my mail from the lobby. The elevator opened on the 4th floor and this unmasked white woman yelled “OH HELL NO” when she saw me. The elevator door opened on the 1st floor and she gets out of the elevator and looks me up and down and goes, “You f\*\*king Chinese people, you’re not going to get away with this, we’re going to get you.” (Portland, OR)<sup>16</sup>

In the racist rhetoric underlying these incidents, Asian means “diseased,” “dirty,” and “dangerous”: Asians are “evil aliens” who have brought the virus to the US and spread it.<sup>17</sup> As such, Asians in the US (either US-born or immigrant) are not fully accepted as Americans, no matter how hard they try to be exemplary minorities hoping for acceptance (see the next section). That is, Asian Americans

are seen as “perpetual foreigners,” who are not part of America at best, and “yellow perils,” who pose a threat to America at worst.

Xenophobic racism is not the only form of oppression that operates here to shape Asian identity to mean the yellow peril/perpetual foreigner. It intersects with other axes of oppression, such as gender and age, to exacerbate racist attacks on women and elders, who are often seen as “easy targets.”<sup>18</sup> In January 2021, eighty-four-year-old Vicha Ratanapakdee, who went for a morning walk in his San Francisco neighborhood, died after being violently shoved to the ground.<sup>19</sup> Two months later, eight people, including six Asian women, were killed by a gunman who attacked Asian-owned spas in Atlanta, Georgia.<sup>20</sup> Asian women have also reported two times more hate incidents than Asian men to the Stop AAPI Hate initiative. Executive directors of the initiative suggest several factors that make Asian women more vulnerable to hate incidents. One is the sexist stereotype that “women are not going to fight back, are more vulnerable, less likely to respond, and so when people feel like they have a license to [harass someone], they [are going to] go after people who may appear to be vulnerable.”<sup>21</sup> This is especially the case for Asian women, who are racialized-sexualized as docile and shy. COVID-19 has been used as a rhetoric for perpetrators to inflict and justify harassment and misogyny against Asian women, who they think are weak and less likely to stand up for themselves. Other explanations for the gender disparity in COVID-related hate incidents include unequal caregiving responsibilities under patriarchy. The housework that women are expected to do, such as grocery shopping, takes them outside the home and makes them more vulnerable to racial harassment on the streets.<sup>22</sup>

In sum, the power of racism, xenophobia, sexism, and ageism is manifested in *constructing* the Asian-as-yellow-peril identity. The location of Asian American women at the intersection of racial and gender oppressions shapes their multilayered experiences of being Asian during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## 2. ASIAN AS MODEL MINORITY: NOT SPEAKING UP AGAINST RACISM

In their influential book *Myth of the Model Minority*, Rosalind Chou and Joe Feagin point out that the “model minority,” which seems like a compliment, is in fact an oppressive and damaging label that puts pressure on Asian Americans to conform to the white-dominated racial order. Calling Asian Americans “model minorities” enables whites to differentiate themselves from people of color and to disparage other people of color (especially Black and Latinx people) as “problem minorities” that do not attain as high educational or career achievements as do the model minorities. The stereotype also sustains the myth that all Americans of color can achieve the American dream just like the “model” minorities, who work hard and do not challenge the status quo of racial hierarchy that has whites at the top but are eager to assimilate into it. To keep the “top subordinate” title and avoid racial hostility, Asian American communities have often conformed to the “success-driven, assimilationist Asian” stereotype.<sup>23</sup>

This conformity is expressed in the form of Asians’ attacks on other Asians who speak up for change. Chou and Feagin discuss the case of an Asian American student organization in a large US university. The organization published a report on problems faced by Asian American students on campus and made suggestions on how the university could better address their needs, such as hiring an Asian American mental health counselor and ensuring more Asian American representation in student government. The report drew positive responses from the university administration and other students of color. However, this student organization was accused by fellow Asian American students of “making Asian Americans look bad.”<sup>24</sup> As one member of the organization recalled, “[T]hat was the most hurtful because a lot of the criticism came from our own community. . . . [P]eople were saying, ‘Why do you have to rock the boat?’ People saying, ‘Why are you looking for trouble? Why are you seeing things that aren’t there? I’ve never experienced racism. It must not exist.’”<sup>25</sup>

This case illustrates how the identity of “model minorities who do not cause a ruckus” has been embraced and internalized by many Asian Americans. For Asian American students, as Chou and Feagin note, “fear of white backlash trumped even modest actions to bring campus change.”<sup>26</sup> Taking the model minority identity to be “their ultimate ticket into gaining social acceptance,” the students hoped that the actions for change would not “ruin it for the rest of them.”<sup>27</sup> This kind of acquiescence may be understood as a survival technique that individual Asians employ to protect themselves from white retaliation. However, it ultimately contributes toward maintaining the root cause of such retaliation—that is, the racist structure of US society—by discouraging Asian communities from subverting it. Here, the power dynamics surrounding the Asian identity can be put this way: the power of structural racism operates to *forge* the Asian-as-model-minority identity and is *reinforced* through Asians’ conformity to this meaning of being Asian.

## 3. ASIAN AS CRITICAL RACE FEMINIST: BLACK AND ASIAN SOLIDARITIES

As it turns out during the pandemic, embracing the acquiescent model minority identity and not speaking up does not protect Asians against hate and violence. Asians who have denied the existence of racism as a structure can no longer downplay it as they become more publicly scrutinized and vulnerable to verbal and physical attacks in their everyday lives.

The growing critical awareness of racism creates room to denaturalize and deconstruct the “Asian = apolitical” identification and to reconstruct Asian identity in a way that means active engagement in anti-racist politics. Asian American feminist movements, among others, have built cross-racial solidarity with other communities of color to oppose racial and intersecting injustice.

Black and Asian Feminist Solidarities, a collaborative project between Black Women Radicals (BWR) and the Asian American Feminist Collective (AAFC), is an example of such solidarity. As part of this project, BWR and AAFC co-hosted a panel discussion titled “Sisters and Siblings in the

Struggle” on April 30, 2020. The participants had a critical conversation on the following aspects:

Between the histories of xenophobic racism, medical experimentation and surveillance, prejudice in (and out) of the public health system, the violence of white capitalist heteronormative patriarchal supremacy and more, Black and Asian American communities are disproportionately experiencing the detrimental impacts of [COVID-19]. In New York and across the nation, there is an increase of xenophobic racism and violence against Asian Americans. Reports have shown that in states and cities such as Louisiana, Chicago, Milwaukee, and Michigan that the majority of those who are infected and dying from [COVID-19] are Black. While there are well-documented tensions between Black and Asian American communities, there is an equally long history of Black and Asian solidarities and community building both in the United States and abroad. How can Black and Asian American feminists engage in a critical dialogue on the impacts of COVID-19 in their respective communities? What can we learn from the long history of solidarity between our communities? More importantly, how can we continue to build Black and Asian feminist solidarity in this moment?<sup>28</sup>

This example of solidarity presents two important points that are relevant to our discussion. First, Asian feminists who work toward cross-racial feminist solidarity create new narratives of what it means to be Asian. They reject the version of Asian identity authorized by the dominant power—i.e., the model minority identity that has drawn “hostile boundaries against other nonwhite groups while ‘protecting and serving’ white supremacy”<sup>29</sup>—and redefine their Asian identity as a starting point of solidarity with other feminists of color, to subvert the intersecting structure of white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy. *By recreating Asian identity, Asian feminists challenge the negative form of power as structural oppression and wield new forms of power as solidarity, resistance, and liberation.*

Second, solidarity among feminists of color suggests that the fragmentation criticism of intersectionality fails to reflect the actual experiences of women of color and other multiply oppressed groups. As examined earlier, the criticism presupposes the notion that identity is a fixed, static thing, like a pop-bead or some other pre-made/pre-given object, that stays the same whoever has it in whatever contexts. One implication of this pop-bead metaphysics is that two or more individuals either have identical identities or distinct identities. So the criticism of intersectionality for fragmenting women unfolds as follows: Black women and Asian women have the same beads labeled “woman,” which are popped into two different beads labeled “Black” and “Asian” each and end up constituting two distinct necklaces (i.e., “Black woman” and “Asian woman”); this way, once race is factored in and the intersectionality of gender and race is considered, women are fragmented along racial lines into distinct—and virtually incommensurable—subgroups.

This is an incorrect understanding of identity and intersectionality. As the case here shows, identities and solidarities of women of color are not an either-or matter. That is, it is not the case that *either* Black and Asian women have the exact same identity as “woman” (and thus solidarity is possible) or they have completely different identities as “Black” and “Asian” (and thus solidarity is impossible). Rather, their solidarity becomes possible when they recognize tensions as *well* as similarities between Black and Asian communities within the oppressive structure and *transform* themselves. This is the process that Allison Weir calls “transformative identification.” Weir writes:

Transformative identification involves a recognition of the other that transforms our relation to each other, that shifts our relation from indifference to a recognition of interdependence. Thus identification with the other becomes not an act of recognizing that we are the same, or feeling the same as the other, or sharing the same experiences. . . . [Instead,] this kind of identification transforms our identities: through identification with the other we transform ourselves, and we construct a new “we”: a new identity.<sup>30</sup>

Weir discusses three kinds of identification that the process of transformative identification involves: identification with feminist ideals, identification with each other, and identification with feminists as a resistant “we.”<sup>31</sup> In the case at hand, Black and Asian women create cross-racial solidarity by dedicating themselves to, or *identifying with*, critical race feminist ideals of challenging white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy. They *identify with* each other and *identify with* themselves as a “we,” that is, “sisters and siblings in the struggle” who fight together against intersectional oppression. Given that women of color are transforming themselves and constructing a new identity as a feminist “we,” the criticism that intersectional analyses and practices fragment women into smaller, mutually exclusive subgroups is misplaced.

### CONCLUSION: IDENTITY AS A FLUID PROCESS

Thus far, I have explored some of the ways in which Asian identity is related to negative and positive forms of power. I have proposed a tripartite taxonomy of identity-power relationships as exhibited in Asian women’s lives (see Table 1): 1) As exemplified by anti-Asian hate amid COVID-19, the power of intersecting oppressions—including racism, xenophobia, and sexism—*constructs* Asian identity to mean the yellow peril. 2) The Asian-as-model-minority identity, which many Asian Americans have internalized to avoid racial hostility, conforms to the status quo racial order and is thus used to *reproduce* the power of oppression. 3) Breaking the stereotypes and pejorative labeling, and redefining Asian as an identity with liberatory potential, Asian feminist movements create new positive forms of power such as *resistance and solidarity*.



Table 1. The View of Identity (e.g., “Asian” Identity) as a Fluid Process

Identity-Power Relationship	Example
1. Construction by oppression	Asian = Yellow Peril
2. Reproduction of oppression	Asian = Model Minority
3. Resistance to oppression	Asian = Critical Race Feminist

Taken together, the cases of Asian women’s experiences demonstrate that identity is “fluid and changing, always in the process of creating and being created by dynamics of power.”<sup>32</sup> Identity is not experienced in a way that the fragmentation criticism pictures it to be. It is not that identity such as Asian is already there, as if it were some tangible object like a bead and thus having Asian identity were like possessing the pre-given thing. Identity is situated in a fluid process, in which the subject navigates at least three different relationships with power. Asian identity—what it is and what it means to have this identity—is being made as the subject lives as *Asian* through these changing relationships between identity and power. In short, the cases collectively show that the view of identity as a fixed entity does not hold in actuality, and therefore, the criticism of intersectionality that relies on this flawed view of identity cannot hold as well.

The view of identity as a fluid process could provide a clearer picture of intersectionality. Insofar as Asian identity is lived through the fluid process of meaning change, that Asian race and female gender are “intersecting” indicates that race and gender are experienced together as an *interrelated, multilayered process* in Asian women’s lives, rather than that Asian women are reified into one fixed intersectional location. In this regard, multiply and intersectionally marginalized groups, such as Asian women and Black women, are not divided into discrete incommensurable identities. Instead, these women may join each other during their respective journeys of navigating identity-power relationships, in order to build solidarity—that is, in order to deconstruct the meanings of their respective identities as constructed by white supremacist patriarchy, redefine Black and Asian identities as “center[s] of meaningful social change,”<sup>33</sup> and create a new common identity as a critical race feminist “we.”

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

A more detailed version of this paper, with additional cases and discussions, is published as Youjin Kong, “Intersectional Feminist Theory as a Non-Ideal Theory: Asian American Women Navigating Identity and Power,” *Ergo* 9, no. 33 (2023): 848–77, <https://doi.org/10.3998/ergo.2622>.

**NOTES**

1. Rooted in Black feminist thought, the idea that multiple forms of oppression are “interlocking” has become a gold standard in feminist scholarship since Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw coined the term “intersectionality” to refer to it. See Combahee River Collective, “The Combahee River Statement [1977],” in *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, ed. Barbara Smith (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 264–74; and Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, no. 1 (1989): 139–67, available at <https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8>.

2. Vivian M. May, *Pursuing Intersectionality, Unsettling Dominant Imaginaries* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 98.

3. In this paper, the term “Asian” will be used interchangeably with the term “Asian American” to mean *Asian in the US*. I will use these terms in their broadest sense to encompass diverse Asian populations in the US: Asians of different citizenship statuses (e.g., US citizen at birth, foreign-born naturalized citizen, and foreign-born non-citizen), Asians who identify themselves as “American,” as well as those who do not.

4. Nancy Ehrenreich, “Subordination and Symbiosis: Mechanisms of Mutual Support Between Subordinating Systems,” *University of Missouri-Kansas City Law Review* 71 (2002): 267.

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11. Zack, *Inclusive Feminism*, 8.

12. Marilyn Frye, *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1983); and Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

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## What Does Black and Asian American Solidarity Look Like?

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### ABSTRACT

I advocate for Black and Asian American solidarity, using the debate over shifting language for our unified identity, from POC to BIPOC, as a frame for understanding the risk of dissolving solidarity. The Black and Asian American experiences are distinctive. Does difference in experience undermine the possibility for solidarity? The big tent of *Asian American* can be instructive for how to forge solidarity despite differences. Asian Americans organized in the 1960s to bring diverse ethnic groups together under a shared identity for the sake of increased political power. Likewise, Black and Asian Americans share the common experience of living under White supremacy, even though this oppression manifests differently in our lives. Indeed, White supremacy functions to create tension between our respective communities. But solidarity is still possible if we attend simultaneously to the differences of our experiences and social capital while recognizing the common source of our oppression and the rich history of our shared activism.

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The occasion for this essay was an invitation in the summer of 2021 to participate on a panel at the Annual Meeting of the American Philosophical Association Central Division to discuss "Black and Asian Solidarities." At the time, the COVID-19 pandemic was dominating our lives, leaving its heaviest burdens with communities of color. African Americans died from the disease at a rate more than double that of White Americans.<sup>1</sup> Asians and Asian Americans were scapegoated for the pandemic, with a steep rise in reported hate crimes and harassment.<sup>2</sup> That past spring, the Atlanta spa murders, in which six of the eight victims were Asian, and the murder of four Sikh Americans in Indianapolis put Asian and Asian American communities on high alert. Black Americans continued to be harassed and murdered by the very state that should instead protect them. The nation was still reeling from the brutal murder of unarmed Black citizen George Floyd by the police a year before. That spring, Daunte Wright, also unarmed, was shot and killed during a traffic stop. There were 203 documented killings of Black citizens by the police in 2021.<sup>3</sup> Communities of color in the United States were in crisis.

In this same period, shifting linguistic conventions signaled cracks in the foundation of interracial solidarity. BIPOC became the *en vogue* moniker among those in the know. *Black, Indigenous, and People of Color* replaced *People of Color*, a decades-long term of solidarity coined by Black activists in the 1960s and adopted in the '90s by various communities of color to decenter Whiteness, replacing "non-white" and "minorities."<sup>4</sup> *People of Color*, POC, signifying a unified, big tent coalition of non-white minorities, is now considered by some as inappropriate for the times.

The move to BIPOC was motivated by the concern that POC was being used too broadly and nonspecifically, and the particular and severe oppression of Black and Indigenous Americans was obscured under the large umbrella. POC elided these differences and, in doing so, could function as a tool for promoting a diversity palatable to Whites. A board meeting—or a philosophy department—could boast of its diversity credentials without having a single Black or Indigenous member. In contrast, BIPOC, it was proposed, would center the experiences of Black and Indigenous people. The rise of BIPOC—not just the acronym but the sentiments behind it—suggests that we are no longer standing tightly together.

The threat to POC solidarity is more than merely linguistic. A rise in anti-Asian hate crimes spurred a call for more policing in Asian communities. Increased policing threatens Black Americans, who are disproportionately stopped, harassed, arrested, and killed by the police. Hmong American Officer Tou Thao's role in the murder of George Floyd was a catalyst for many Asian Americans to interrogate the anti-Black racism in their families and communities. Asian and Black Americans were being pitted against one another on another front as well. The United States Supreme Court recently heard two cases challenging the use of race in college admissions on the alleged grounds that Asian American students were denied admission due to affirmative action for Black and Latinx students.<sup>5</sup>

What is the state of the rainbow coalition? Are we still standing together? Or are our interests too often in opposition to one another? Is the united identity of People of Color still worth fighting for? Or do we need to stand apart to achieve justice? Perhaps American racism, in its many forms, makes it impossible for us to stand together in solidarity anymore.

I reject this thesis. Now more than ever is the time for Blacks and Asian Americans to stand in solidarity. But simply insisting on it without attending to the differences of our experiences is superficial and hollow.

In what follows, I make the case for Black and Asian American solidarity despite the considerable differences in our experiences. The tenor of my thought is not merely or even particularly philosophical. It is political and historical. But knowledge of politics and history is perhaps what is missing in the lost sense of interracial solidarity. My primary focus is on Black and Asian relations, although my concerns generalize to the broader coalition of People of Color. My goal is to make sense of the possibility for solidarity among communities often intentionally put into conflict with one another. I argue that solidarity is only possible when we can simultaneously attend to a pillar of commonality in our experiences while acknowledging and honoring the different ways White supremacy manifests in our lives.

The concept of solidarity offers a puzzle in practice. Solidarity is standing in unity despite differences. The word “solidarity” connotes—indeed, it requires—these differences, for we do not need solidarity from those who are exactly positioned as we are. We need solidarity and allyship from others to achieve political power. Solidarity signals strength in a coalition of people with different experiences and social power. But in practice, solidarity can be challenging. The ever-present differences and diversity in social capital among those standing together can threaten to undermine common fellowship.

The puzzle of solidarity despite differences recurs in a fractalized form in the Asian American experience itself. *Asian American* is a broad, politically conceived coalition of diverse communities who share little else in common with one another than having recent ancestry on the Asian continent. *Asian American* was coined during the creation of the Asian American Political Alliance in 1968 by Berkeley graduate students Emma Gee and Yuji Ichioka, who were inspired by the Black Power and American Indian Movements of the time.<sup>6</sup> But prior to its ascendance, people falling under the category did not identify as sharing much in common. People were Japanese American, Chinese American, Filipino American, and so on. Many of their countries of origin were political enemies or rivals. But in the US context, *Asian American* gave diverse and divided communities a pole to organize and unify around. The term itself was a catalyst for political power.

To this day, we can challenge *Asian American* as a big umbrella term itself; it echoes problems similar to *POC* and *BIPOC*. *Asian American* includes about fifty ethnic groups with more than one hundred different languages. While providing a nexus of political power for small minority

communities, aggregate claims about *Asian Americans* paper over important differences and oftentimes in damaging ways. Asian Americans as a whole have a higher median income than the national median.<sup>7</sup> But this fact masks the reality that the wealth is not equally distributed among subgroups. The disparities can be attributed to differences in education level and immigrant histories. Indeed, Asian Americans are the most economically divided racial or pan-ethnic group in the US.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, in the US context, East Asians are centered, often obscuring the representation of other Asian groups.<sup>9</sup> For instance, the unique experiences of South Asians, who endure colorism and Islamophobia, are oftentimes rendered invisible by the American conception of *Asian American*.

Yet despite the vast differences, as political scientist Karthick Ramakrishnan says, what unites Asian Americans is a “history of exclusion” with successive bans on communities becoming US citizens, first the Chinese, then Indians, then Japanese and Koreans.<sup>10</sup> To this day, one thing Asian Americans experience in common is the status as perpetual foreigners. We are asked where we *really* come from. Our status as and allegiance to America is always under suspicion. In the mildest cases, this is experienced as a repeated, exhausting microaggression. In its most pernicious form, it has manifested in concentration camps, immigration exclusion, travel bans, and violent hate crimes. These experiences unite us. There can be solidarity around a core issue of marginalization despite deep differences among communities.

Just as Asian Americans can stand in solidarity together despite significant differences between them and their experiences of oppression, so too can Asian Americans and Black Americans stand together in solidarity if we identify the pillar of commonality in our experiences. That common pole has always been living as non-white in a system of White supremacy.

But finding unity in that fact can easily escape us. White supremacy manifests differently in Asian and Black lives. These differences often veil what we have in common. This is not by accident. Whiteness in the US has always been defined in opposition to Blackness. And it is this Black-White logic of White supremacy that also shapes the Asian American experience as often explicitly in opposition to Blackness.

Political scientist Claire Jean Kim’s work illuminates and details this logic.<sup>11</sup> Kim challenges the view that there is a racial hierarchy in the US that orders the races along a single dimension, with Whites on top, Blacks on the bottom, and Asians and others in the middle. She rejects a “single scale of status and privilege” while acknowledging that Asian Americans have been racialized relative to Whites and Blacks and not independently of the White-Black binary.<sup>12</sup> Kim suggests that a two-dimensional *field* of racial positions can better capture the multiple dimensions of racial hierarchies and posits that Asian Americans have been racially triangulated relative to Whites and Blacks on two distinct axes. The axes are those of superiority/inferiority and insider/foreigner.<sup>13</sup> White supremacy puts Whites in the superior position when it comes to innate abilities

and culture and Blacks in the most inferior position. White supremacy grants Asians “relative valorization” compared to Blacks, where Asians are seen as culturally or racially better than Blacks, although inferior to Whites. But at the same time, Asians are seen as ineradicably foreign and unassimilable on those same racial and cultural grounds. Thus, despite the racist inferiorization of Black Americans, African immigrants were granted naturalization rights half a century before Asians, who were denied immigration to the US or naturalization for much of the late 1800s through the 1950s.<sup>14</sup> Inferiority and un-assimilability are separable and distinct dimensions of racism. Asians, Blacks, and Whites stand in a triangulated position along the two dimensions, with Whites seen as superior insiders, Blacks deemed as inferior insiders, and Asians as foreigners, racially superior relative to Blacks. This triangulation served the purpose, Kim says, of ensuring, post-slavery, that Asians would be “a cheap and plentiful labor supply while hindering the permanent formation of a second degraded caste seeking inclusion in the polity.”<sup>15</sup> In brief, Asian Americans filled a labor gap left by Black emancipation, but it was in the interest of Whites to ostracize them from full citizenship status and use them as a wedge for further denigration of Black Americans.

Our communities’ positions in this field of racialization define the character of our oppression. Often this positioning makes it seem that Asian Americans have less in common with our Black compatriots than we do. If we fall prey to that misconception, we can see all the differences and none of the commonalities.

The key is in learning that our oppression has the same source even if our experiences of it are vastly different. The model minority myth offers a vivid example. Asian Americans are often called the *model minority*, a designation intending to set us apart from other non-whites. But this “honorific” is no praise at all. It is a racist tool of oppression. It implies that the relative prosperity of Asian Americans is due to their work ethic and cultural emphasis on education and signals the failure of other minorities to live up to American ideals. Indeed, the moniker came on the scene at the same time the Black Power Movement was fomenting as a way of undermining their civil rights efforts.<sup>16</sup> The message sent: *Stop complaining about racism; see, the Asians have prospered on hard work alone.* Further, it implies a false analogy between our communities’ arrival stories in the US; unlike immigrant groups, most Black Americans’ ancestors were brought here against their will and faced centuries of disadvantage, death, and discrimination. At the same time the myth denigrates Blacks, it confines Asian Americans. It sends a tempting message to Asian Americans that if we are obedient, silent, and do not rock the boat, we will be granted an honorary status. It is an indecent proposal of proximity to Whiteness.

Where does this leave Black and Asian solidarity? Again, solidarity is about togetherness despite differences. Only focusing on the difference leads to the dissolution of solidarity into siloed factions. *BIPOC* is a step in the direction of dissolution. Only focusing on commonality results in superficial solidarity that is not sustainable. *POC* without attention to the diversity of our experiences risks this ill.

Solidarity can only be maintained if we can see our united cause in our disparate experiences as racial minorities in the US. To stand in solidarity, we must attend to difference and unity simultaneously.

On the side of difference, we need to do the work of learning how White supremacy affects each of us differently. We need to disaggregate *racism* as some unified concept into its particular manifestations in the lives of differently raced people. The shift to *BIPOC* is instructive here. *BIPOC* doesn’t do the necessary work. On its own, it is an example of lazy activism. It highlights difference without data. People can still use the acronym broadly and crudely without educating themselves about the particular oppressions that various minority groups face. For instance, we often lack statistics on how various institutions and practices affect Indigenous people. Centering Indigenous people when discussing issues without actually knowing how they are affected allows us to pose as if we’re addressing their issues when we in fact are not doing that work.<sup>17</sup>

On the other hand, understanding racism as a field of positions with more than one axis of oppression means it’s not always appropriate to center only Black and Indigenous people. *BIPOC* used to discuss state-sanctioned violence fails to center Latinx people who are killed by the police at a rate nearly double that of Whites.<sup>18</sup> *BIPOC* would be inapt to use in referring to the spike in violence that Asian Americans are enduring in a racialized pandemic. *BIPOC* is the wrong term for discussing the experiences of Asians, Latinx folk, and those racialized as Middle Eastern, who are seen as perpetual foreigners and the targets of xenophobia. Understanding racism as multidimensional is not compatible with a racial dialogue that centers the experiences of only some marginalized groups.

On the other hand, the oppression of Black and Indigenous Americans in total is often and regularly the most severe. In attending to our differences, those of us with relative privilege must focus attention on their causes. We cannot insist on a unified *POC* if we are not doing the work to lift up the most marginalized communities in our midst. We do not earn solidarity if we do not show up for them, leaving their needs obscured or neglected. We must build and maintain solidarity around a shared experience of oppression while always acknowledging our differences in social capital. And Asian Americans must be especially attuned to the ways in which we are used by White supremacy and tempted with proximity to power. We should never forget that the offer of relative valorization is not an offer of equality and that it comes at the cost to solidarity with our Black and Brown compatriots.

On the side of unity, we must learn about our shared history. There is a strong, robust, decades-long tradition of Black and Asian solidarity. The media would have you think we are mostly at odds. When people think of Black and Asian relations, they often recall the 1992 Los Angeles riots and the murder of Latasha Harlins by Soon Ja Du. Or the debate about affirmative action in college admissions, where Asians have been depicted as the victims of a policy intended to help Black and Latinx students. That our interests are opposed, that we are at odds with one



another, is the dominant narrative. That is a narrative mostly written and disseminated by a White media.

But that is not an accurate picture. We should educate ourselves, each other, and others about the Bandung Conference in 1955, where representatives of twenty-nine African and Asian countries came together in Bandung, Indonesia, to advocate for peaceful coalition and decolonization during the height of the Cold War. We should learn about and elevate the status of Asian and Black civil rights leaders who worked in solidarity. Thích Nhất Hạnh, a Vietnamese Buddhist monk and peace activist, and Martin Luther King, Jr. came together to denounce the Vietnam War, jointly playing a pivotal role in the American peace movement. We may learn briefly of Malcolm X in our history classes—he, too, is pushed to the margins. But how many know of Yuri Kochiyama, a Japanese American political activist who spent time in the Japanese American concentration camps after Pearl Harbor, joined Malcolm X's Organization for Afro-American Unity, and was by his side when he was assassinated? She worked tirelessly for Japanese American reparations, African American rights, and even Puerto Rican independence. What about Grace Lee Boggs, a Chinese American philosopher who worked as an activist in Detroit for the Black Power Movement? We should celebrate our joint accomplishments. The pivotal Supreme Court case *Loving vs. Virginia* about a marriage between a White man and a Black woman, which won the right to interracial marriage, was supported by the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund and the Japanese Americans Citizens League. And more generally, Asian Americans owe their own advancement of civil rights to the tireless and deadly work of Black civil rights activists.<sup>19</sup>

Some of these histories have not been made visible and prominent. That, too, is intentional. A history of solidarity between Black and Asians is a threat to White supremacy. But they combat the narrative that Asian and Black interests are at odds with each other. We have a rich history of solidarity. Imagine how things would look if both our communities knew that and celebrated these alliances. The May 19 Project (Kochiyama's birthday) is working to promote the history of AAPI people in solidarity with other communities.<sup>20</sup>

We must become literate in the history of racism more generally. We must have a complex understanding of White supremacy and all of its tentacles. Understanding the various manifestations of White supremacy allows us to be more critical and perspicacious witnesses and advocates. For example, with the recent rise in violent anti-Asian hate crimes is a media narrative suggesting that the main perpetrators of these crimes are Black men. This is due to a viral video of a Black man attacking Asian elders in the Bay area. But the majority of hate crimes against Asians or any group are perpetrated by White men.<sup>21</sup>

Literacy in White supremacy has enabled Asian American activists to adopt nuanced critiques of White supremacy. Knowing our history and the history of White supremacy tells us that redlining in real estate placed Asian Americans and Black Americans in proximity to each other contesting over scarce resources. The tension between

our communities was by design and it distracts from the main source of disadvantage—White control over the lives of People of Color. The same literacy enables us to take a sophisticated approach to the problem. While some are calling for more police presence in Asian neighborhoods, Asian American activists recognize that the solution cannot be in more policing, which brings danger to communities of color. In San Francisco, Asian, Black, and Latinx community members stood up alongside their elderly Asian neighbors, volunteering to escort them to the local grocery store and ensure their safety.<sup>22</sup> This is a vivid example of how a shared understanding of White supremacy and the varied ways it manifests for different groups can enable us to act in solidarity.

When we are literate in the history of White supremacy, we are not fooled by its many guises. Take affirmative action in college admissions. The issue has been framed as one in which Asian Americans are the victims of programs aimed at benefiting underserved Black and Latinx students. The main plaintiffs in the case are White conservatives with a history of challenging race-based policies, who have convinced some Asian Americans to their side.<sup>23</sup> But when we know our history, we know we are being used to serve White interests. As Kim says,

The valorization of Asian Americans as a model minority who have made it on their own cultural steam only to be victimized by the “reverse discrimination” of race-conscious programs allows White opinion makers to lambast such programs without appearing racist—or to reassert their racial privileges while abiding by the norms of colorblindness. It allows them to displace what is fundamentally a White-non-White conflict over resources (higher education, jobs, businesses, contracts) onto a proxy skirmish between non-Whites, thus shifting attention away from the exercise of White racial power.<sup>24</sup>

When we know how this logic works, we cannot be fooled. Framing the debate as a conflict between non-Whites hides the preferential treatment of mostly White legacy students and children of donors.

Next, our solidarity must be visible. There is so much worry about virtue signaling and slacktivism. But there is value in visible, audible, and present solidarity for one another. We must ensure our solidarity is not superficial. True solidarity is costly. To stand together requires taking risks and doing hard work. But making that work visible is still important. People cannot know they are supported if they cannot hear you. When Asians for Black Lives show up at rallies and protests in support of police reform, we make our solidarity visible. Black citizens decrying the anti-Asian hate crimes reminded us that we are not alone.

There is still a need for an identity as People of Color, and I hope this identity is possible and sustainable if we do the work. We cannot afford to be divided. POC is itself a powerful identity above and beyond a particular racial or ethnic identity. We have evidence to support this claim. Political psychologist Efrén Pérez found in a survey of

African American, Latinx, and Asian Americans that stronger identification with the POC label indicated stronger support for Black Lives Matter and support of DACA.<sup>25</sup> He says, "Identifying as a 'person of color' means viewing oneself as an interchangeable member of a shared group, where one's unique identity as Black, Asian or Latino is nested under a broader POC category."<sup>26</sup> He also found that this shared solidarity decreases under test conditions where differences in group oppression are made salient, for instance, when it is explicitly stated that the legacy of slavery cannot be compared to the hardships of undocumented immigration. This suggests that our solidarity depends on seeing each other in a common cause. As I've suggested here, we can do that all the while attending to our different experiences and needs.

At times it may seem there are cracks in the coalition of People of Color, and we may need to go our separate ways to address our respective marginalizations. Proponents of BIPOC signal this strategy. But solidarity is what is needed instead: standing closely together not despite our differences but in acknowledgement of them. Our power is in a unified identity as People of Color.

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*The Ambivalence of Resilience*

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ABSTRACT

This paper claims that human resilience is ambivalent. Resilience is the ability to withstand and recover from adversity and return to efficient, everyday functioning; in the media, the term "resilient" is used frequently as a term of commendation for COVID-19 health-care workers, typhoon survivors, victims of racism, and adjunct faculty. I argue that the resilience of these groups should neither be uncritically celebrated nor completely rejected. What

is at stake is a better understanding of how to recognize, honor, and respond to the plight and fortitude of resilient individuals and groups. Part I of the essay talks about the positive features of human resilience. Part II shows how these positive aspects of resilience are tied to its negative aspects. Part III applies my insights on resilience in terms of immigration and the politics of group identity in the Global North. Both perspectives highlight the ambivalence that I deal with as an early career Filipina philosopher. Part IV concludes by accounting for the ambivalence that results in misrecognizing or taking human resilience for granted, framed in the Philippine academic context.

## I. INTRODUCTION

There is something discomfiting about referring to certain groups of people as resilient. Resilience refers to the ability to withstand and recover from adversity and return to efficient, everyday functioning. Say you're a frontliner in a world being ravaged by COVID-19. When you can perform your work well in the face of death and despair, being praised for your resilience can bring up bewilderingly difficult feelings. On the one hand, the compliment applauds your well-earned heroism; on the other, it confirms your wretched fate.

Many of my Filipino family members and friends in the health sector have had a rough ride in the global pandemic. Being resilient in their jobs is praiseworthy. Faced with chronically stressful, dangerous, and sometimes hostile circumstances, that a nurse in intensive care can keep working is exemplary. That she can find room for joy and hope while risking her life every single day is extraordinary. But being congratulated for one's resilience in these conditions is also patronizing. That health-care workers are expected to cope more easily with trauma, or that they even have to demand better pay and safer working conditions from their employers, is the social consequences of being seen as resilient. Indeed, the pernicious rhetoric of migrant Filipino health-care workers as resilient heroes has been around for decades.<sup>1</sup> As Joy Sales points out:

By the 1990s, 10 percent of the national GDP came from migrant remittances and the economy became increasingly dependent on labor export. Part of this process was the commodification of Filipino migrant workers and their branding as "ang bagong bayani" or the country's "modern-day heroes."<sup>2</sup> Employers around the world have praised Filipino workers for their "resiliency" and work ethic. Meanwhile, these workers remain underpaid, underemployed, and disposable. For example, Filipinos comprise about 1% of the US population, yet they represent 7% of healthcare workers (about 150,000 people), and as of August 2020, 30 percent of the 193 registered nurses who have died from COVID-19 are Filipino.<sup>3</sup> These statistics reveal a dark underbelly to the "heroes" narrative: Filipino labor is essential, but their lives are not.<sup>4</sup>

The rhetoric of resilience sweetens oppression into virtue. In being typecast as resilient, health-care workers are gaslit into compliance and needless sacrifice when their

suffering could be eased even in times of emergency by, for a start, paying them well and being firm about public vaccination mandates. Filipino health-care workers (mostly women), along with other historically oppressed and marginalized groups and cultures, have had to endure the ethnocentric condescension and the intergenerational harm that accompanies being seen as a member of a resilient group. Understandably, the word "resilient" can trigger discomfort, suspicion, and resistance in people who receive them as compliments, especially when the praise is given by those who have not had to suffer the same level of hardship, neglect, or misfortune.

In this picture, human resilience appears ambivalent. This may appear confusing, given how human resilience is usually depicted in popular books as an unqualified good. As John Stuhr points out, the current market treats resilience as "a mental toughness strategy; an emotional power; a spiritual strength; or a hard-won wisdom. . . . Some identify resilience as an art. Others claim it is a science. All of these books approach resilience as a key component of happiness and well-being."<sup>5</sup> I hope to make sense of this disjunct and explore the ambivalence of human resilience. The idea of resilience, of course, is ubiquitously engaged in psychology and trauma studies, feminist and gender studies, climate and development studies, and political ecology. However, with the exception of pragmatism, feminist political philosophy, and philosophy of education, it remains underexplored in philosophy.<sup>6</sup> This paper is an attempt to engage the idea of resilience philosophically. The resilience I am interested in is the ability of vulnerable individuals and groups to cope, survive, and rebound from systematic adversity; in the media, the term "resilient" is frequently used as a term of commendation for COVID-19 health-care workers, typhoon survivors, victims of racism, and adjunct faculty. I argue that the resilience of these groups is ambivalent in character and should neither be uncritically celebrated nor completely rejected. At stake in this interpretation is a better understanding of how to recognize, honor, and respond to the plight and fortitude of resilient individuals and groups. Part I of the paper talks about the features that lend human resilience a positive valence. Part II shows how these positive aspects are tied to its negative aspects. Part III applies my insights on human resilience in terms of immigration and the politics of group identity in the Global North. Both perspectives highlight the ambivalence that I deal with as an early career Filipina philosopher. Part IV concludes by accounting for the ambivalence that results in misrecognizing or taking human resilience for granted, framed in the Philippine academic context.

## II. THE UPSIDE OF RESILIENCE

Being ambivalent about something means simultaneously having opposed and contradictory attitudes about it. Critical theorists, for instance, have recently interrogated the ambivalence of the politics of recognition, pointing out that recognition carries features that are grounds for both optimism (as recognition can affirm a person's individual being and self-realization) and deep suspicion (as recognition can entrench uneven, one-sided, or inescapable relations of dependence).<sup>7</sup> My hunch is that human resilience should be understood in a similar

manner. Like the politics of recognition, human resilience is ambivalent. The upsides and downsides of being a resilient person cohabitate in a tense, complex, but unsurprisingly natural way.

A positive feature of human resilience is that it is hard-won. It results from facing something difficult or strenuous or from surviving challenging experiences. Persons discover that they are resilient if, in the face of a moral challenge or a tragedy, they bend and not break. An image that captures the idea of human resilience, one familiar to the Filipino consciousness, is that of a bamboo swaying in the wind.<sup>8</sup> As folk wisdom in Tagalog goes:

*Ang tao ay kawayan ang kahambing  
Sumusuko't umaayon sa hagupit ng hangin  
Hindi sumasalungat kundi nagpupugay  
Upang hindi mabakli ang sariling tangkay*

To a bamboo, a man can be compared—  
It surrenders its will to the whipping wind  
It does not oppose it, but in obeisance it gives  
praise  
That it may preserve its bough from a shattering  
fate<sup>9</sup>

The wind is a force of nature, independent of and external to our human existence. A human being must learn to move with its blasts, or yield if needed, to grow hardily and elegantly. Resilience is a quality of character you come to acquire when you learn how to dance with the wind. It is a beautiful, compelling image, but hardly visible to anyone in the midst of a thunderstorm or a never-ending monsoon.

The view of resilience as earned is hardly controversial. Pragmatist philosophers, for example, think of human resilience as an outcome, whether their accounts treat it as a disposition, an adaptive process, a form of wisdom, a virtue, a feature of communities, a moral value, or an amoral concept.<sup>10</sup> The consensus that resilience is produced by overcoming adversity illuminates why, in my view, the idea lends itself well for describing the lived experience of vulnerable or marginalized groups and their struggle for social amelioration. Not only do resilient persons and groups recognize that they can rely on their developed capacities in future crises, but their existence in the world also confirms and justifies how we can distinguish who's wrong and who's right in the fight for social justice.

Indeed, another positive aspect of human resilience is the clarity it brings in our evaluation of oppressive conditions and systems. It initially seems that resilience can be used as a description for just about any group or social structure that manages to have some kind of staying power. One could say that racists and Filipino nurses are equally members of resilient groups: both have a necessary role to play in keeping the wheels of the neoliberal agenda turning. But both White supremacy and capitalism can be better understood as part of the dominant global milieu, responsible for legitimizing and weaponizing the norms and social practices that the rest of us have to follow. The people who benefit from the privilege of their whiteness, and those who control more than 90 percent of the world's

resources, do not struggle in the way that members of vulnerable groups do; the status quo not only ensures the survival of the former but also predicates their continued existence and success. Unlike the case of historically oppressed people, the endurance of hegemonic identities and groups in our global society is not exceptional. In short, we need to separate the idea of resilience as a product of resistance against oppression from the resilient features in our social life that are supported and enabled by oppressive systems.<sup>11</sup> The former is what we ought to honor and admire; the latter is what we destroy and rebuild from.

### III. WEAPONIZING RESILIENCE

The fact that human resilience is earned, and that its existence participates in orienting our understanding and response to oppressive conditions and systems, are reasons for its recognition and celebration. But the affirmative aspects of resilience are married to its negative aspects; in short, the rewards and costs of human resilience are intertwined. What is worth drawing attention to is how the charge of human resilience can be hermeneutically *shaping*: it can enable a particularly damaging sense of expectation from resilient individuals and groups.<sup>12</sup>

The most damaging aspect of resilience is the fact that it can be weaponized by persons and institutions in power. Resilient persons are resourceful and are adept at bouncing back from continuous, sustained, and systematic exposure to harms and challenges. Their endurance, I claim, further endangers the lot of already oppressed persons and groups. Exploiters of resilience can turn the earned self-protective capacity of medical workers, asylum seekers, and sexual abuse survivors into a distraction or an excuse for neither accounting nor correcting harms or injustices. Worse, resilient persons who fall prey to the hero narrative may come to believe that their oppression is something they ought to be grateful for, since it has transformed them into stronger or better versions of themselves. Put differently, parading certain people and groups as resilient can be a way of controlling them and keeping their revolutionary energies at bay. The political and psychosocial harms stemming from the weaponization of the term inspired Vinita Srivastava to host the *Don't Call Me Resilient* podcast. In her article in *The Conversation*, she states:

I believe we should always celebrate resilience: the human ability to recover or adjust to difficult conditions. But for many marginalized people, including Black, Indigenous and racialized people, being labelled resilient—especially by policy-makers—has other implications. The focus on resilience and applauding people for being resilient makes it too easy for policy-makers to avoid looking for real solutions.<sup>13</sup>

Like Srivastava, I think that the exploitative praise of human resilience does not entail that we reject what is valuable about it. There is something deeply amiss in failing to acknowledge the strength and courage of individuals and groups that deserve this recognition. But our awe and acknowledgement of human resilience are not enough. While it makes sense to take pride in human resilience, we should also be cautious of the sociopolitical function



it performs and question whose interests this compliment truly serves.

To summarize my argument: the positive and negative aspects of human resilience stand in direct relation with each other, making it absurd to celebrate the good without accounting for the bad.<sup>14</sup> Our task is to learn how to live with the ambivalence of human resilience. What is at stake in doing so is our capacity to authentically honor the complexity and endurance of resilient individuals and groups and at the same time mitigate the risk of their continued exploitation. More importantly, the ambivalence of resilience can expose the structural conditions that compel people to become resilient in the first place. As Srivastava puts it, we need to be “in search of solutions for those things no one should have to be resilient for.”<sup>15</sup>

#### IV. RESILIENCE IN THE GLOBAL NORTH

My resilience as a Filipina philosopher matters. Being reminded of the ambivalence of my condition shores up tense, conflicting, and sometimes violent feelings. In the next paragraphs, I translate how my analysis of human resilience as ambivalent undergirds my lived experience as a “world”-traveling Filipina philosopher.<sup>16</sup> In this section, I apply my insights on resilience in relation to the challenges of academia in the Global North.

Becoming American can still be arguably cast as an aspiration for many Filipinos today, a dream borne by the lingering shadow of American colonialism and cultural imperialism. In the Manila of the '90s where I grew up, entering the US was like traveling to Filipino Mecca. I remember my jealousy as a ten-year-old kid, when a friend with money said she spent most of her summer in *America-h* while I spent mine baking deep brown in the hot provincial winds of Cabiao, Nueva Ecija; I remember my mother's boasts when we were granted multiple entry B1/B2 US travel visas, her face beaming: “we don't look poor and we don't look like *TNTs*.”<sup>17</sup> I was nineteen when I first set foot in California and met extended relatives I didn't even know existed; more of them have moved to the US since then. The mantra behind Filipino intergenerational immigration is this: *life is always better there than here*. I regret not questioning this claim when I left the Philippines at twenty-six, a decision I made in haste out of opportunity and quiet desperation.

I am not an American. My US immigrant petition was approved during the editing stage of this paper; in Australia, where I lived close to ten years, I am a permanent resident. That I am considered as a Filipino whose existence is judged as “acceptable” or even “desirable” in these two rich countries leaves a bittersweet taste. The ambivalence of my story of resilience looks like this: every step I take, in embassies, college rooms, and philosophy seminars, where doors have been jackhammered open by outsiders before me, feels simultaneously like a boon and a burden. That my professional circumstances allow me to move to different places for work is seen by other Filipinos as enviable. But in this picture, the standard of achievement is set so low that it keeps surprising me when what I accomplish surpasses what I have been engineered to hope. That I could even aspire to be a philosophy professor

or publish books with non-Filipino presses did not cross my mind until I was in my thirties; philosophers bred in lower middle-class Manila just didn't have ambitions of that sort. My capacity to dream about what I can do as a scholar was so constrained that I owe much to the grace of feminist philosophers and philosophers of color for expanding my imagination. A reward of my resilience is a good sense of understanding how much hardship I can take. When people complain about the bad practices of academia in the Global North, I look back at my experience of teaching and research in the Philippines and think, “Oh, this? This is easy,” knowing that the conditions and pay would be worse if I returned home. A cost of this resilience is this nagging, lonely feeling that, given the privileges I have earned and enjoy now, I have no choice but to succeed. But success is a strange, metamorphic beast in academia: I struggle to articulate what the goal of a Filipina philosopher success story is even supposed to be.

This conundrum leads me to my point about resilience and politics in academia. One story that stuck with me is Professor Emerita Ruth Millikan's recollection about teaching philosophy for the first time, shared in a meeting of the UConn Society for Women in Philosophy (SWIP). Not having had a woman philosophy professor in the 1960s when she was doing her PhD, she realized she didn't know how to inhabit this role. She had to compose her version of a woman philosopher on her own while she taught classes filled with male students. Fortunately, being the “first of its kind” in academic philosophy is becoming rarer globally, owing to the resilience of non-traditional philosophers who had to be the first. Indeed, the reward of collective resilience has something to do with discovering that we aren't just being resilient for ourselves, but that our resilience is linked to the resilience of others. This reward is tied to its cost: the recognition that we are bound together by our multifarious experiences of being kept out of the academy. The scourge of academia, after all, is rooted in its exclusionary practices across disciplinary ranks and traditions. But when we meet persons whose lifeworlds intimately intersect with ours, we experience the joys of respect and friendship and become part of unique projects of self-creation. María Lugones mentions this phenomenon in her description of “the experience of ‘outsiders’ to the mainstream of, for example, White/Anglo organization of life in the US and stresses a particular feature of the outsider's existence: the outsider has necessarily acquired flexibility in shifting from the mainstream construction of life where she is constructed as an outsider to other constructions of life where she is more or less ‘at home.’”<sup>18</sup> In light of rarely feeling at home anywhere in academia, Lugones recommends that women of color wilfully (and playfully) “world”-travel: that we learn to navigate these spaces skilfully and creatively, and in the spirit of learning, understanding, and loving. It is for this reason that groups like the APA Committee on Asian and Asian American Philosophers and Philosophies are valuable to me. Our hard-won resilience in academia has a collective aspiration: we're all interested in creating a future where relations of equality and respect are at the forefront. And while that remains out of our reach, we adapt to a resilient form of living, one that allows us to cohabit worlds that are not designed for our success and to engage in the various processes of transforming them.

## V. RESILIENCE AND PHILOSOPHY IN THE PHILIPPINES

So far, I have highlighted how being resilient in academia can give rise to simultaneously opposing sentiments, mostly in the spectrum of pride and resentment, coupled with experiences of loneliness and camaraderie. I'll end this essay by taking up a challenging question: What happens when this resilience is misrecognized, taken for granted, or deliberately ignored? Interestingly, the misappropriation or neglect of resilience can give rise to more ambivalent responses, ranging from feelings of vindication to deep disappointment. Take, for instance, colleagues or students who are convinced that your place in academia is rooted in your being brown and a woman. Never mind how impressive your CV is or how well you teach; the essential bit is the shade of your skin and gender preference. You're proven right in knowing that our social ills remain as monstrous and damaging as ever, and you are also damned for your continued participation in the academic industry. I have nursed wounded egos of friends and mentees, including my own, who have had to deal with this prejudice.

This dissatisfaction is resonant in the academic markets of the Global North, where the catchwords of "diversity," "equality," and "inclusion" can take on pernicious forms. But the academic spaces in the Global South have their own malaises, too; in the Philippines, it takes the shape of invalidation, dismissal, and erasure of women's voices. One reason I left my country is that my future in philosophy seemed stunted there, given the resentment and misogyny against Filipina philosophers. Now that I'm in a less precarious situation, I'm committed to exposing and addressing the factors that have pushed me away, knowing that they continue to harm other women like me. I'm an active member of Women Doing Philosophy (WDP), an organization that aims to create and claim spaces that promote the scholarly, professional, and personal flourishing of Filipina philosophers.<sup>19</sup> Academic philosophy in the Philippines is toxic to women.<sup>20</sup> But instead of recognizing our serious and ongoing concerns, the Philosophical Association of the Philippines (PAP),<sup>21</sup> the largest and most prestigious national philosophy organization in the country, is failing to respond appropriately to gender-based trauma and to support the well-being of Filipina philosophers. PAP's response to WDP's initial refusal to collaborate in February 2021—a decision based on the traumatic experiences of our members in PAP conferences, which include sexual harassment—is to ignore and delegitimize the existence of WDP. Even with 124 members globally, with more than twenty-five public philosophy projects in the last three years, and with most members working in Philippine academic institutions, Women Doing Philosophy is not mentioned by the PAP organizers in their call for papers, in the program of the event "On the Philippine Gender Turn and the Anthropocene" (November 2021, funded by a *Hypatia* Diversity Grant), or in this recent assessment of gender-based philosophical and activist discourses in the Philippines,<sup>22</sup> as if their Filipina colleagues weren't at the brink of staging an academic revolution. This negligence is inexcusable. Why discount the voices of hurt and angry women in the Philippines? Why is their activism excluded

from the narrative of feminist philosophy being crafted by the PAP? Why are feminist philosophers in positions of power complicit in their silencing? Except for a few, why are men who recognize what's wrong in the culture of philosophy in the Philippines so quiet?<sup>23</sup>

Circling back to the beginning of this essay: while being called resilient can be discomfiting, not being recognized as such is as equally disturbing—a confirmation of just how much and how deeply ambivalence structures resilience.

### NOTES

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2. Anna Romina Guevarra, *Marketing Dreams, Manufacturing Heroes: The Transnational Brokering of Filipino Workers* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009); Robyn Magalit Rodriguez, *Migrants for Export: How the Philippine State Brokers Labor to the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010); and Jodesz Gavilan, "What You Need to Know about Overseas Filipino Workers," *Rappler*, December 5, 2015, accessed July 24, 2023, <https://rappler.com/newsbreak/iq/overseas-filipino-workers-facts-figures> (cf. Sales, "Activism as Essential Work," 595).
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4. Sales, "Activism as Essential Work," 595.
5. John Stuhr, Review of *Pragmatist and American Philosophical Perspectives on Resilience*, eds. Kelly A. Parker and Heather E. Keith, *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society: A Quarterly Journal in American Philosophy* 56, no. 4 (2020): 624.
6. See Kelly A. Parker and Heather E. Keith, eds., *Pragmatist and American Philosophical Perspectives on Resilience* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2019).
7. Heikki Ikäheimo, Kristina Lepold, and Titus Stahl, eds. *Recognition and Ambivalence: Judith Butler, Axel Honneth, and Beyond* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021).
8. See Joseph Z. Tiangco, "Understanding the Filipino Philosophy of Resiliency: *Katatagang-loob* [Emotional Strength/Resiliency] and Its Phenomenological Considerations" (57–76) and Florentino Timbreza, "The Filipino Value of Non-Violence" (145–56) in *Filipino Cultural Traits: Claro R. Ceniza Lectures*, ed. Ronaldo M. Gripaldo (Washington, DC: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2005).
9. Timbreza, "The Filipino Value of Non-Violence," 154. I thank Jonathan Ray Villacorta for the English translation of this Tagalog saying and Darlene Demandante for the copy of *Filipino Cultural Traits*.
10. See Parker and Keith, eds., *Pragmatist and American Philosophical Perspectives on Resilience*.
11. Of course, resilience as a description is not exclusive to members of historically marginalized groups; one could aptly use the adjective "resilient" to describe any individual or collective that can survive or recover from a personal tragedy or a natural disaster. We shouldn't begrudge others of its use. What the paper is concerned about is how this term is deployed in a ubiquitous and uncritical manner in our sociopolitical milieu and in relation to members of these vulnerable groups.
12. See "Resilience | With David Bather Woods, Serene Khader, Mark Neocleous, and David Westley," *Forum for Philosophy*, March

10 2021, accessed July 24, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hWXgy7WJbAo>.

13. Vinita Srivastava, "Listen to 'Don't Call Me Resilient': Our Podcast about Race," *The Conversation*, January 28, 2021, accessed July 24, 2023, <https://theconversation.com/listen-to-dont-call-me-resilient-our-podcast-about-race-149692>.
14. For more writings on the topic of resilience, see *Resilience: The Brown Babe's Burden*, the first collection of writings by Filipina philosophers (in progress, under contract with Routledge).
15. Srivastava, "Listen to 'Don't Call Me Resilient.'"
16. María Lugones, "Playfulness, 'World'-Travelling, and Loving Perception," *Hypatia* 2, no. 2 (1987): 3–19.
17. TNT is abbreviation for the Filipino phrase "tago ng tago" (or "always hiding"), a label for illegal Filipino aliens in the United States who are eluding immigration authorities.
18. Lugones, "Playfulness, 'World'-Travelling, and Loving Perception," 3.
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20. See Noelle Leslie dela Cruz and Tracy Llanera, "Combatting Toxic Cultures in Academia," <https://www.facebook.com/womendoingphilosophy/videos/159199226214761>; Christine Tan and Kelly Agra, "Tremulous Speech: Other-ed and Silenced Subjects Talking Back to Philosophy," <https://www.facebook.com/ghettonian/videos/171426341785693>; Jeniel Dasig, "A Reflection on Misogyny and Women Doing Philosophy in the Philippines," <https://www.facebook.com/PUPArtsAndLettersOfficial/videos/423962045762619/>; and Danna Aduna and Reese Ungson, "Complainers' Dictionary," accessed July 24, 2023, <https://beyondthegetto.substack.com/p/complainers-dictionary>.
21. Philosophical Association of the Philippines, Inc., accessed July 24, 2023, <https://sites.google.com/view/pap73/home>.
22. See Hazel T. Biana, "A 'Gender Turn' in Philosophical Discourses in the Philippines," Special Issue on Marginalized and Underrepresented Voices, *Social Ethics Society Journal of Applied Philosophy* (2022): 108–27.
23. Von Katindoy, "When an Ending Is a Beginning," *The Philippine Daily Inquirer*, December 28, 2021, accessed July 24, 2023, <https://opinion.inquirer.net/147989/when-an-ending-is-a-beginning>.

be a refugee, he admits, is, however, deceptively hard. Because the anguish of existing in a permanent state of homelessness is a predicament that most people rarely experience firsthand, there is often a tendency to objectify the pain, to make the experience "aesthetically and humanistically comprehensible," to "banalize its mutilations," and to understand it as "good for us."<sup>1</sup> Rare is the literature that can meaningfully and empathetically capture the scale, depth, and magnitude of the suffering of those who are today displaced and rendered homeless by modern warfare, colonialism, and "the quasi-theological ambitions of totalitarian rulers."<sup>2</sup> It is not surprising therefore, as Said suggests, that the most enduring stories about being an exile come from those who have personally been exiled themselves, ones like Faiz Ahmad Faiz, Eqbal Ahmad, Joseph Conrad, and Mahmoud Darwish, who have embodied the experiences of living without a home, without a fixed identity, and without a country. Pulitzer Prize-winning Vietnamese American writer and academic Viet Thanh Nguyen, a refugee himself, is one such rare voice in American literature today, a voice that has been a relentless force in making visible, through storytelling, the highly diverse and multifaceted experiences of Vietnamese refugees arriving, settling, and living in different parts of the United States since the Fall of Saigon in 1975.

Viet was born in Ban Mê Thuôt, Việt Nam (spelled as Buôn Mê Thuôt after 1975) and came to the US with his family as a refugee in 1975, and was initially settled in Fort Indiantown Gap, Pennsylvania, one of four camps that were set up for Vietnamese refugees. After earning a PhD in English from the University of California, Berkeley in 1997, Viet moved to Los Angeles for a faculty position at the University of Southern California, where he is currently serving as University Professor, Aerol Arnold Chair of English, and Professor of English, American Studies and Ethnicity, and Comparative Literature. Prior to gaining prominence as a creative writer, Viet was already a noted academic with influential publications in areas of American Literature, Ethnic Studies, and Asian American Literature and Cultures. Some of his notable academic publications include *Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America* (Oxford University Press, 2002) and an edited collection titled *The Displaced: Refugee Writers on Refugee Lives* (Abrams Press, 2018), which features essays by displaced writers from a wide range of locations, including Afghanistan, Bosnia, Chile, Ethiopia, Hungary, Iran, Latvia, Mexico, Ukraine, and Vietnam. Viet's debut novel, *The Sympathizer*, a spy novel set during the Vietnamese refugee crisis of the 1970s, won the 2016 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. The novel also won many other prestigious awards, including the Center for Fiction First Novel Prize, the Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Fiction from the American Library Association, the Asian/Pacific American Award for Literature in Fiction from the Asian/Pacific American Librarians Association, the Edgar Award for Best First Novel from an American Author from the Mystery Writers of America, and the Dayton Literary Peace Prize. Viet's other notable works of fiction include a collection of short stories titled *The Refugees* and a second novel, *The Committed*, which is a sequel to *The Sympathizer*. In his memoir, *A Man of Two Faces: A Memoir, a History, a Memorial*, which is set to be released in October 2023,

## INTERVIEW

### *Memory, Identity, Representation: A Conversation with Viet Thanh Nguyen, Pulitzer Prize-Winning Author of The Sympathizer*

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## INTRODUCTION

The modern age, Edward W. Said poignantly observes, is largely the age of the refugee, an era of displaced people from mass immigration. Writing about what it means to



Viet reflects on his own life journey as a creative writer, an educator, an academic, an activist, a family man, and a refugee, connecting personal events to larger historical trajectories of colonization, refugeehood, and nationhood. Viet's writings, both creative and academic, are a poignant meditation on the complexities of coming to terms with one's identity and culture, especially in the face of current global problems such as the climate crisis, mass immigration, mass displacement, war, and colonialism. His fictions highlight in fundamental ways that the modern stories of immigration and exile are never monolithic. As his novels and short stories reveal, the process of arriving in a new country and starting a new life can be relatively smooth for some. For others, such as the protagonist of *The Sympathizer*, it could be a process filled with the horrors of violence, loss, and unthinkable tragedies. In this long-form interview, which we conducted via Zoom on March 14, 2023, at 4:45–6:15 p.m. EST, Viet offers a detailed glimpse into his life and everyday experiences as an educator, a thinker, a writer, an activist, and a human being, reflecting not only on what it means to survive in the current US political climate as a refugee, a person of color, and a member of an ethnic minority, but also on what it takes to build and foster communities of resistance and solidarity dedicated to empowering—and improving the lives of—the most vulnerable and disenfranchised in our society.

## CONVERSATION

**Minh:** Where did you grow up and what was it like, Viet?

**Viet:** I came to the United States in 1975 and settled first in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, lived there for three years, and then moved to San Jose, California, where I grew up from 1978 to 1988, and then I left my parents' home and became a young adult. Those thirteen years in Harrisburg and San Jose would be how I would define my growing up. In Harrisburg, I had a happy childhood because I didn't realize what was actually taking place with my parents' refugee experience and the entire context of race and war that would eventually become major concerns for me. I was somewhat oblivious to the context of a refugee camp and being a refugee and the fact that we were resettled first through Fort Indiantown Gap in Pennsylvania, which I've finally written about in the memoir I just finished. I talk more in the memoir about being a refugee in the context of settler colonialism and indigeneity, things that I was not thinking about as I was growing up. 1978 to '88 in San Jose was a deeply influential period for me because then I became conscious of myself as an other, watching my parents struggle to survive as refugee shopkeepers living a very difficult existence, hit by violence, worried about all the relatives that they left behind in Vietnam that they were sending money home to because it was obviously a difficult time in Vietnam, as well. I gradually became aware of all these issues around labor, around religion because my parents are deeply Catholic, and I, despite being sent to a Catholic school, came out an atheist. And politics, anti-communist politics, politics of the war in Vietnam that the United States and Vietnamese refugees were still fighting in their imagination. All of that would lead to the emotional damage that would become my material as a writer.

**Minh:** Congratulations on the completion of your memoir. I look forward to reading it.

**Arnab:** That memoir sounds amazing. I do look forward to reading it as well. How did you end up in your current interdisciplinary academic niche? How do you see the relationship between your academic work and your creative work? In particular, does your storytelling serve any pedagogical purpose?

**Viet:** I became an English major first in college because I deeply loved literature and reading, but I never thought about becoming a professor or becoming a writer until I also became an ethnic studies major. Ethnic studies is inherently interdisciplinary, and obviously the reason why is because it is responding not as much to a disciplinary problem as it is to a historical, political, cultural problem, which is identity, ethnicity, or race. Those types of issues need to be addressed in an interdisciplinary way. For me, interdisciplinarity becomes crucial because it is a methodological response to a world that has been fragmented and divided by the impact of colonization. Fragmented and divided not only in terms of national borders, racial borders, and ethnic borders, but also in terms of disciplinary borders. Singular disciplinary approaches have limitations in addressing a global system of colonization and oppression, which has an interest, I think, in doing things like creating a discipline of English, which is fascinating and beautiful, but also obviously may have certain unquestioned kinds of national and disciplinary assumptions. Becoming interdisciplinary was, number one, absolutely necessary for me to understand what it was to be an Asian American or a person of color or so-called minority in the United States. Then when I started to grapple more seriously with the legacy of the war in Vietnam and its aftermath, it was also obvious to me that I could not address my questions and obsessions purely through a disciplinary approach. My book *Nothing Ever Dies* is a mélange of different kinds of disciplinary tactics that I undertook. Honestly, to be interdisciplinary for me means to be sort of an amateur in a lot of these disciplines with the hope that the assortment of amateurish approaches would add up to a greater whole than the individual parts, and I hope that I was able to achieve that in *Nothing Ever Dies*. None of the disciplines that are deployed in that is as deep as a disciplinary specialist could be, but the whole assortment I felt gave me a larger picture of the war in Vietnam and its aftermath and memory.

I never wanted to become a professor. That was not something that I was aware of growing up. The word "professor" was never mentioned in my house. I wanted to



Figure 1. Viet Thanh Nguyen. Photograph taken by Hopper Stone, Society of Motion Picture Still Photographers (SMPSP).



be a writer as a kid, but I became a professor because it was my day job. That was my way of paying the bills, and it still is. I prefer to keep my life separated in this way because being a professor as a day job can be challenging. It's got all the typical problems that having a day job would entail. Being a writer, in contrast, is my passion. Because it's not tied to an employer or something like that, I don't have any of the usual day job complaints that many people have, including writers who are doing that as their profession, for example, as creative writing professors. I never want to go down that road. But being a writer and being committed to the importance of storytelling has been important for me as a teacher and a public lecturer because I think most people outside of academia respond to stories. Academics may think they (academics) don't respond to stories. They respond to theories and philosophies and arguments and so on. But in fact, I think a lot of academics secretly do respond to stories, and most people outside of academia do prioritize stories. Storytelling becomes a great method, for me, of persuasion. I can use storytelling to advance arguments and theories and philosophies in ways that are not academically structured but would hopefully deliver a philosophical conclusion to my audience at the end of the story, whether the audience are my students, whether the audience is a general public of some kind.

I do believe that academic argumentation can be delivered narratively. I differ from a lot of my colleagues in this way. *Nothing Ever Dies*, for example, is a book that was written as a narrative. I wrote that book in a very linear fashion, from beginning to end, telling the story and structuring the book in a way in which, contrary to the usual academic fashion, the entire argument is not put at the beginning, but instead the argument reveals itself as the narrative goes along. Hopefully, that makes the book compelling to read from a narrative point of view.

**Yarran:** Viet, you've already said a little bit about this, but would you expand a little more on how your upbringing and early life affect the kinds of writing that you engage in, whether creative, academic, or otherwise?

**Viet:** I think of the early reading that I did in the San Jose Public Library because I didn't own any books of my own. We were too poor for that, or my parents had other concerns besides books. The immersion that I had in the San Jose Public Library was a deeply intellectual and emotional experience for me as a child and an adolescent, and it imprinted on me a certain passion for narrative, for poetry, for images, and for beauty. Looking back on it, it was very clear, obviously, that almost everything I was reading was not about people like me. Most of it was about white people. Most of it was about Europeans. In retrospect, I don't actually have a problem with that because I think that those writers that I was encountering were not writing with

someone like me in mind, and that's perfectly fine. Their works still spoke to me through the beauty and power of their voices and their art. One of the things I've carried away from that experience now as a writer is, of course, that I believe in narrative and beauty and art, but I also believe that I don't have an obligation to try to speak to certain audiences. If I, as a young Vietnamese refugee boy, could respond viscerally to Philip Roth or to Balzac or to William Makepeace Thackeray, then people who are English or Jewish or Russian should be able to respond to my works, too, even if I'm not writing for them. I absolutely believe in that. I also believe that it is important to have books and narratives featuring people like you or like me. The content of it does matter, but the art of it should transcend the content as well. That's one of the biggest takeaways as I reflect back upon the impact of that self-education I had in the library and in literature.

**Minh:** Was your family supportive of your personal, academic, and professional journeys, including your ambition and aspiration to become a writer?

**Viet:** I'm lucky that my parents were a little bit liberal in regards to education. They prioritized high standards in educational accomplishment for my brother and me, and my brother set that standard very high by going to Harvard and Stanford. That was just supposed to be what we were supposed to do in our family, and I was the failure because I went to my last choice college. But they were liberal in the sense that they didn't make me become a doctor or a lawyer. They did not throw a fit when I became an English major, and my older brother helped out a lot by saying, "Tell them you're still doing pre-med," and then telling me to do pre-law when I quit pre-med, and so I was able to hold them off. But then when I said, "I'm going to get a doctorate in English," they were actually okay with

that because it was still a doctorate. They weren't thrilled, but they were still okay with that. But the expectation was always that I had to get a job, so there was intense pressure on me to find a job as a professor, which is not an easy thing to do.

I never did tell them that I was going to become a writer. That was going too far. It was way too hard to explain that to my parents because there are no degrees. There's no job. I couldn't say someone was going to hire me as a writer. I did that on my own. I did it secretly, and I think the first inkling that my parents had that I was doing this kind of stuff was when some of my early short fiction was translated into Vietnamese. I remember I brought home to my parents a story that is in *The Refugees* as "The Other Man." It had a different title when it was first published. But "The Other Man" had been translated into Vietnamese, and so I brought the story home and gave it to my father, a businessman, deeply Catholic, culturally conservative. "The Other Man" is about a Vietnamese refugee man

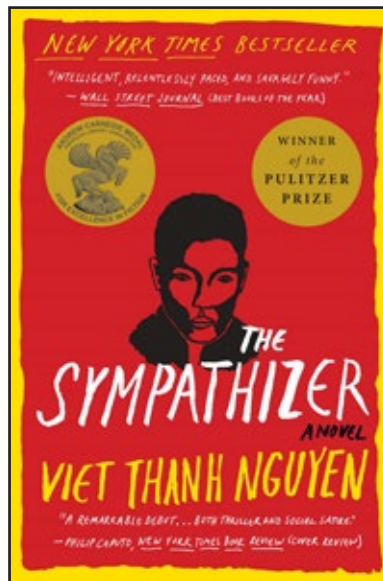


Figure 2. Cover illustration. Designed by Christopher Moisan. *The Sympathizer*, by Viet Thanh Nguyen, Grove Press, 2015. Front cover.

who comes to San Francisco in 1975 and discovers he's gay, and there's explicit sex in the short story. My father never mentioned that short story to me again. The next inkling they had of my writerly ambitions was when *The Sympathizer* was published, and I brought it home. He was very proud of that book. He wanted me to take a photograph of him holding the book, and he's been proud of all my books since then. I don't think he's read them, but I don't think that's necessary. They've already suffered enough. Why make my parents read my books, too? But the thing is, I think they've accepted the writerly identity, and it doesn't hurt that *The Sympathizer* won the Pulitzer Prize. That solved all my problems, any credential problems with my career as a writer, for my parents.

**Arnab:** I'll actually be teaching "The Other Man" next week in my class. So this is amazing. A speculative question: If you had not pursued writing or academia, what would you have done as a profession?

**Viet:** I would be an unhappy, depressed, and alcoholic lawyer at this point.

**Minh:** Like the protagonist of *The Sympathizer*, you are a big fan of whiskey, is that right?

**Viet:** Whiskey, yes. Thankfully, I've cleared my desk for this video interview. I did have a bottle of whiskey right here as of last night.

**Yarran:** What would you change about the profession of writing and academia, in particular your disciplines, and how might we go about actualizing that change?

**Viet:** I think what I would change about the nature of academia, and it also affects writing because so much American writing is carried out in academia, is the corporate nature of the university. I'm at a university that is intensely focused on its endowment, its fundraising, its hospital system, its real estate, its political influence, and so on. The work of intellectuals in general but also very specifically the work of humanists and artists is either window-dressing in a system like this or highly marginalized or both. I think there's a distinct relationship between the corporatization of American academia and this outcome where intellectual work, the humanities, and art is undervalued. The solution? I don't know if there is a solution. I think that the American university system is completely embedded in the operations of American capitalism. I don't see a way of undertaking this radical transformation. I think that potential solutions would probably have to take place alongside and outside and within the university in incremental ways in terms of collective education, free education, projects like that. I try to think of what my life would be like if I resigned or retired from academia, and I think that there's great nobility in teaching, for example, and I would like to continue that but outside of academia and with other kinds of projects. Again, within academia, simply because of the way that the university has become so deeply entrenched within corporate relations, I'm very pessimistic that we can change that part of it.

**Yarran:** To follow up quickly, you mentioned earlier the importance of narrative for shaping the ways in which people see the world and engage with the world. I wonder what you think of that as a role that you like teaching outside of the academy. First, I wonder in what forms you have engaged in that activity. Second, do you think that narrative in general is a form of doing that outside of the academy?

**Viet:** I think that the narrative work, for me, takes place outside of the academy in the times when I go out and engage with non-academic audiences. I give a lot of public lectures, and I've written a lot for magazines and newspapers. Narrative is a really important strategy in both those cases in terms of telling stories that ultimately try to present arguments and persuade people. The academic thinking that we're all engaged in has been very important to formulating some of these ideas, but most people don't want to hear academic arguments delivered in an academic way. Narrative becomes a vehicle for trying to carry out my pedagogical work outside of the academy. For example, when I give public lectures to audiences of a few hundred to several hundred people in Idaho or Minnesota or Virginia, where I'm going tomorrow, I feel that for forty-five minutes or an hour and a half, I have this audience. Most of them haven't gotten up and walked out on me. They'll listen, right? They'll listen.

I tell jokes, and I tell stories. I get them comfortable and then deliver the punches that narrative allows me to do. Over the last several years, the lectures have started off with my refugee experience and my parents and so on and so forth and worked their way through representation and Asian American issues and the Vietnam War and ended up with a critique of the American dream as a euphemism for settler colonialism. I'm telling people in all these different places, including West Point, where I also had to go give one of these lectures, that this is a country that's built on democracy and freedom and also on genocide, enslavement, war, and colonization. I think that's kind of an accomplishment. I don't think most Americans in many of these places hear that, especially from someone like me, a Vietnamese refugee who they expect to come out there and give them a narrative of gratitude or rescue. My lectures and the other stuff that I write for newspapers and magazines are designed to give a different narrative to unsettle settler colonial assumptions that become so embedded that many of us who are Vietnamese refugees or Asian Americans are wrapped up in that.

**Minh:** A follow-up question, please. Have you ever been cancelled or been close to being cancelled?

**Viet:** No idea.

**Minh:** That means you haven't?

**Viet:** I think that, for example, when *The Committed* was published, it was reviewed on the front cover of *The New York Times Book Review* by Junot Díaz, whose writing I greatly admire. I tweeted about it, and then people got mad because Junot Díaz had been cancelled. Therefore, me accepting the endorsement of Junot Díaz was therefore

me endorsing whatever he'd done or allegedly done. That wasn't quite cancellation, but it was getting to the point where a few hundred people were like, "Woah! How dare you!"

**Arnab:** Twitter is a dangerous, dangerous place.

**Viet:** That's one reason why I said that Twitter is a cesspool. And why I got out. Let me say one thing. Real cancellation is, in fact, there because in Vietnam most of my books are not allowed to be published in Vietnamese, and we weren't allowed to shoot *The Sympathizer* in Vietnam. I think that is cancellation but by government power, which is the real cancellation. And I've been told that there are some Vietnamese Americans who don't like me because they think I'm a communist. The Vietnamese Government thinks I'm an anti-communist. There are many Vietnamese Americans who think I'm a communist. Now, they refuse to read my work. So is that cancellation? I think that basically is. Maybe things are being said in Vietnamese that I haven't heard of because I don't follow the Vietnamese media and social media that closely.<sup>3</sup>

**Minh:** Thank you for that clarification. *APA Studies on Asian and Asian American Philosophers and Philosophies* is a journal published by the American Philosophical Association. It comes as no surprise that most of our readers are presumably philosophers. Your work—creative, academic, or otherwise—is very philosophically informed. For instance, as pointed out in the Acknowledgements, you "have discussed, drawn from, or quoted in the text" of your novel *The Committed* the following authors, many of whom are philosophical thinkers broadly construed, and their works: Theodor Adorno, Louis Althusser, Simone de Beauvoir, Walter Benjamin, Aimé Césaire, Hélène Cixous, Jacques Derrida, Frantz Fanon, Antonio Gramsci, Che Guevara, Ho Chi Minh, Julia Kristeva, Emmanuel Levinas, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Voltaire. What do you think the value of philosophy is? How important is philosophy to your own work? Who are your philosophical influences and why?

**Viet:** I think, obviously, philosophy broadly defined is really important to me but also generally important to everybody. Our lives as Vietnamese refugees, for example, have been completely shaped by Adam Smith and Karl Marx or by Western notions of democracy and freedom and things like that carried out from Rousseau onwards. There's that sense of the general importance of philosophy, but then there's the academic sense of philosophy, which is oftentimes completely boring. I remember trying to take an intro to philosophy course at UCLA, walked in and sat for one day, and then I walked out. "This is so boring! I don't get it." That's a remarkable accomplishment by an academic professor to make philosophy boring, but he did it.

I remember, though, when I was a kid, one of the books that I picked up in the San Jose Public Library and really loved was Voltaire's *Candide*. That's philosophy masked as a fable, and it totally worked. I was probably twelve or thirteen or even younger when I read that book. Obviously, I didn't get it, most of it, but I was entertained by it. Looking back upon something like that as I wrote *The Committed*, I see part of what I'm doing in *The Sympathizer* and *The Committed* is carrying out a Candidian story with my narrator. I was convinced that novels could be vehicles for philosophy, and that's not an original thought. Look at Dostoevsky and those other major influences on me. I think people, in general intelligent readers, are perfectly capable of engaging with philosophy when it's expressed in a narrative fashion, for example. That was the part of the commitment behind *The Committed*, and in *The Committed*, the philosophy is more explicit than it is in *The Sympathizer*. I think *The Sympathizer* is a very philosophically driven novel, but most of that philosophy is sublimated behind action. In *The Committed*, I wanted to make the philosophy a little more explicit because it is a novel that is about a deeply traumatized person whose life has been shaped by philosophical ideas, who has to rebuild himself and therefore engage with his own philosophical foundations and question them. I felt that there was a narrative reason in *The Committed* for there to be an explicit discussion of certain philosophical and

political ideas. Some American readers, I think, reacted by saying, "Why is there so much philosophy in this novel? It feels like a graduate seminar." This was from book reviewers. They weren't quote, unquote "average" readers. They were book reviewers who were perplexed by the appearance of philosophy in a novel. This is, to me, an indication of how middlebrow American literary culture is that even specialists have a hard time grappling with the presence of philosophy in a novel, whereas the French, who, I assume, would be offended by the novel because it's very critical of French stuff, were like, "no problem." There was never a question from French audiences about the philosophy in the novel. They were perplexed by the fact that I didn't like Johnny Hallyday, their French rock icon.

For me, writing *The Committed*, it's a novel about gangsterism and crime and about philosophy as a form of action. That's where I find philosophy to be really powerful. It is about ideas, obviously, but to me, the most important philosophy that I engage with is the philosophy that thinks about the implication of ideas into our everyday lives where they manifest as action—not necessarily as graphically entertaining as gangster shootouts, as it is in *The Committed*. But going back to the Karl Marx idea, here's somebody who wrote incredibly dense philosophical work that would then lead to mass revolutions and millions of people dead. That's real action right there. That's where I

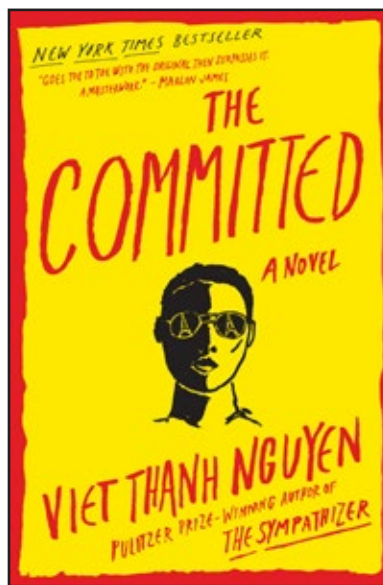


Figure 3. Cover illustration. Designed by Christopher Moisan. *The Committed*, by Viet Thanh Nguyen, Grove Press, 2021. Front cover.



find philosophy to be really alive or present in the works of people like Sartre, Fanon, Kristeva, and so on.

**Minh:** Would you consider your novels to be novels of ideas in the tradition of people such as Milan Kundera?

**Viet:** I hope so. I hope other people think so, as well. I think part of the problem here is that within the culture of the United States, a writer like me is seen first and foremost as a minority writer, a Vietnamese refugee writer, an Asian American writer, and therefore assumed to be writing about those adjectives versus writing about the non-marked issues that occupy the so-called “great novelist,” whether they’re great American novelists or they’re great European novelists. The great American novelist can write about America, and the great European novelist can write about ideas. You brought up Kundera. No one has a problem calling him a novelist of ideas, but when was the last time a so-called minority writer was called a novelist of ideas?

We’re supposed to be writing about our identity and our trauma and all that. All of which is important, but to me part of the project of my own writing is to argue implicitly and sometimes explicitly, which is when people got annoyed, that there are ideas at stake in these so-called identity issues that have been placed upon us and that some of us willingly take up. The memoir is very explicit about this. In fact, the memoir is called *A Man of Two Faces: A Memoir, a History, a Memorial* because it’s partly about me and my family but also about the history and the ideas and so on. To a certain extent, the memoir gives an explanation about why it is that a Vietnamese American novel is also a novel of ideas so long as the novelist can reject the framing that is placed upon the novelist by a racist white supremacist society that doesn’t believe a refugee can write about America, that instead, a refugee can only write about being a refugee. I think, for me, I’m definitely a writer of ideas but also a writer of identities and a writer of action. None of these things is irreconcilable for me.

**Arnab:** The theme of this special issue is “Identity and Solidarity,” two concepts central to Asian and Asian American studies and to the ethnic studies disciplines more generally. How have those two concepts played a role in your work and in your life?

**Viet:** Identity and solidarity have been absolutely crucial to my own intellectual, political, artistic development so far as identity and solidarity work dialectically with each other. Obviously, I don’t think solidarity is possible without identity, and identity by itself, without solidarity, is a deeply problematic place to be. For me, growing up in San Jose, my only identity was a confused one, being a Vietnamese refugee who knew he was different but didn’t

have a political language for talking about that difference. I think that is still true today for many people. People without a political consciousness, without a sense of solidarity, without a sense of history treat their identities in ways that can be deeply reactionary and, by being reactionary, can affirm the very histories that produce their identities as negative identities in the first place.

Coming to Berkeley as a student and becoming an Asian American was really crucial for me. That’s an identity, a deeply politicized, historicized identity. But I chose to become an ethnic studies major instead of an Asian American studies major because I also believed in solidarity. I believed that if being an Asian American was important, it was also because it was important in relationship to other so-called minority populations in the United States. In fact, the first ethnic studies course I took was Intro to Chicano Studies, which was actually very important for me because I grew up in San Jose, California, a city with a very large number of Latinos, including friends of mine. Identity in relation to solidarity has always been one of the most crucial dialectics of my life. I think that dialectic is still important because you still see, I still see people with very explicit identity commitments who don’t have a sense of solidarity and who are themselves therefore vulnerable to reactionary sentiments, like racism against other populations that they should have a greater sense of solidarity with. So I think our ongoing task always has been, in the era of colonization and hopefully decolonization, that we both have to develop politicized identities but always in relationship to solidarity with other politicized identities.

The relationship to questions of cancellation and censorship and power is, I think, also clear because when we look at the current political climate and cultural climate of the United States and Florida, where you all are at, or at least two of you, the rhetoric around cancellation is itself deeply ahistorical because you could argue the whole history of colonization has been one of extremely violent cancellation by those in power, including now the cancellation of the histories of colonized cultures, and all that enforced with physical and symbolic violence. The cultural efforts, the civil society efforts of colonized peoples to bring to light and to hearing what has been done to them and what is still being done to them is a fairly soft response to the hard history of violent cancellation that’s already been practiced. The anti-wokeism efforts, the anti-cancellation efforts on the part of conservatives and some liberals is a deeply strategic or a highly naïve response that doesn’t acknowledge this longer history of colonization. I think deeply strategic or highly naïve because it depends on who’s carrying out these programs. I think your governor, Ron DeSantis, is deeply strategic. I think he knows what he’s doing, but I think there’s a lot of people who are just naïve and are just accepting the rhetoric of wokeism and

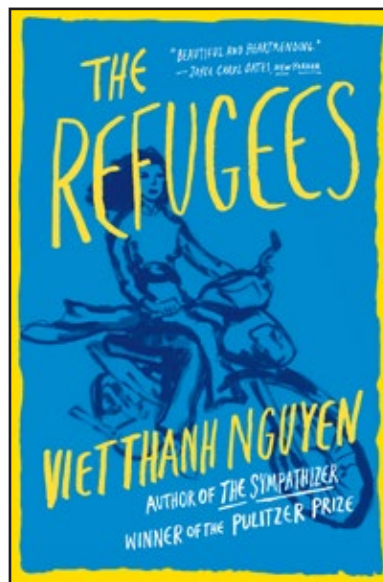


Figure 4. Cover illustration. Designed by Christopher Moisan. *The Refugees*, by Viet Thanh Nguyen, Grove Press, 2017. Front cover.



cancellation without understanding this longer history of colonization.

If we have this dialectical relationship between identity and solidarity, we can bring out this history and say that affirming our identities today is not simply an effort at cancellation. It's, in fact, a deeply political and programmatic effort at decolonization. I think that someone like DeSantis isn't exactly wrong when he says that this political movement for what he calls cancellation and wokeism is a threat to his vision of the United States. It is a threat to his vision of the United States. It is a fairly significant and mortal battle that we're engaged in. So long as we understand that it's not simply a superficial political struggle but, in fact, is a political struggle and cultural struggle over the very meaning of this nation.

**Yarran:** I want to phrase this more as an invitation. I'd like to invite you to say or to talk about what you think is most exciting about Asian and Asian American studies at the moment, particularly thinking about identity and solidarity. Instead of asking, "What directions do you think Asian and Asian American studies should take in the future?" I'd like to ask you to note some directions that are occurring at the moment that you want to emphasize as speaking to those issues of identity and solidarity that you've just mentioned, especially with our current political climate.

**Viet:** I think that we're in what might be called a third wave of Asian American studies. I think the first wave would be obviously inaugurated by 1969, 1968, and the beginning of an Asian American movement that would lead to Asian American studies. The second wave would be the theorization of Asian American studies that was inaugurated in the 1990s. The third wave has been relatively recent, probably in the last decade to two decades, because the first two waves were defined by a commitment to the nation and to citizenship, not an unproblematic commitment or an untheorized commitment but a commitment nevertheless to those frameworks. I think the third wave has been much more cognizant of the limitations of nationalism and citizenship, including, especially in the United States, monolingualism with a focus on English, a claiming of the country, a claiming of the language, and so on. All of which are important. But the third wave of Asian American studies has been much more open and committed to international Asian American studies or a recognition of how Asian American studies is carried out in Asian countries but also a recognition that Asian American studies is itself US-centered and therefore vulnerable to American nationalism, exceptionalism, and imperialism in its very methodologies. Therefore, a third wave of Asian American studies has to be multilingual, comparative, international, multinational, and so on. I think that is where a lot of the exciting work has been done and is being done.

For example, at my university, Asian American studies is now mostly transpacific Asian American studies. All of my graduate students end up doing Asian language study, and a lot of them go do fieldwork in Asia as a part of their Asian American studies work so that the transpacific turn in Asian American studies is indicative of all these concerns from the third wave. Another element of a third wave in

Asian American studies is the awareness and focus on settler colonialism and indigeneity. If you think about the fact that Asian American studies is at least partly born from the work of *Orientalism* and Edward W. Said, and that work is completely based in a critique of colonization that includes Palestine and settler colonization there, then Asian American studies if it's to be true to that intellectual genealogy has to engage with a very broad definition of the Orient and its relationship to places like Palestine and to settler colonization. The other dimension of settler colonization that's also really crucial is that Asian Americans become citizens and settlers. What does that mean for us to claim equality, liberation, justice, and so on as citizens when all that is built on settler colonial projects either within the United States or in the Pacific Islands?

What does it mean for those of us who are refugees to engage in that same kind of narrative, that we reject, for example, the kind of warfare that the United States carried out overseas and then come here and become citizens, and continue to participate in settler colonial violence domestically and the ongoing work of the military-industrial complex? The third wave of Asian American studies has very productively complicated originary notions of how important the United States is as a frame for an Asian American studies project.

**Minh:** My next question has to do with pain. Your works of fiction, whether one thinks of your novels or short stories, often speak to experiences of pain: the pain of war, the pain of loss, the pain of adjusting to a foreign land, the pain caused by racism and xenophobia, the pain of leaving loved ones behind, etc. As a writer, how do you prepare yourself, psychologically and emotionally, to embody, to speak to, to represent such myriad experiences?

**Viet:** I think that, for me, all those questions about confronting pain and trauma, both of the personal kind but also the collective and historical kind, are inseparable from the pain of writing. To become a writer, in my case, was fairly painful. It did involve about thirty years of living with the challenges and the hardships of being a writer. I'm not complaining about that, but I think for me it's true that learning the art and all of the various technical aspects of writing was a very difficult experience. So was the experience of living with rejection and obscurity and disappointment and all that. Enduring all of that was inseparable from confronting the pain and the trauma of the content of my writing. These two things were inseparable. I had to go through all of that pain of learning to become a writer in order to confront the pain and the trauma of the histories that I wanted to deal with. The discipline of becoming a writer, I think, is related to the discipline of being able to confront the pain and the trauma. It's only by doing both things at the same time that I could write a book like *The Sympathizer* and then eventually write a book like the memoir I just finished. *The Sympathizer* and *The Refugees* are about confronting the pain and trauma of the collective historical experience of being Vietnamese either in Vietnam or in the diaspora. But the memoir I just finished is about confronting the individual pain and trauma within my own family, which was really hard to do. I couldn't have done it thirty years ago, and it took the thirty years of

writerly discipline to be able to confront the internal issues within my family and myself.

Finally, I think that it helps to have a sense of humor. I don't know if I could have done these things without developing a sense of humor. No one who knew me as a college student, for example, would have said, "Viet has a sense of humor," certainly not in the next decade. Part of learning the narrative art has been also learning the comic art of satire and self-satire, and that's obviously manifested in *The Sympathizer*, which then became the preparatory ground for me to be able to write a memoir, where I'm dealing with the very painful subjects within my own family, and which I obviously treat very seriously but I also treat with a lot of humor. People sometimes read *The Sympathizer*, and they're surprised that I could write a novel about war and violence and torture and war crimes and so on and still make it kind of funny. They'll read the memoir, and perhaps they'll think, "Wow, writing about mental illness and domestic disturbances and things like that, and you're still cracking jokes?" Well, one of the ways by which I could try to absorb all the pain and trauma is to also laugh at it, laugh at them, or laugh at myself at the same time.

**Minh:** A follow-up, please. You talked about the pain of writing. On average, how many hours a day do you devote to writing? What's your writing routine if any?

**Viet:** One thing I tell writers is that you do have to put in the hours to be a writer. I say 10,000 hours because I think that's not an inaccurate figure. But it doesn't matter whether you do these hours every day or whether you simply do them over twenty years or thirty years, whenever you can. That was my solution to it. I don't write every day because I can't, because I'm a teacher and a professor. That affects the writing, but I did put in all those hours eventually. That's the writing routine, and again, that's part of the discipline. For *The Sympathizer*, I did write every day. That was a very ecstatic and unique moment in my life, but every other book I've written has been written in the fragments and the margins of a life that's also committed to the profession of professing and also the life of parenting and the personal obligations as well.

**Arnab:** Your works of fiction highlight many different stories of immigration. For some of your characters, the process of immigrating to the United States is relatively smooth (though not easy by any means). For others, such as the protagonist of *The Sympathizer* or the short story "Black-Eyed Women" (from *The Refugees*), it is a process filled with the horrors of violence, loss, and unthinkable hardships. As a writer, what do you want readers to take away from reading about such diverse experiences?

**Viet:** I would want the readers to be moved in some way. I think about my own readerly responses to short stories or novels or poems that I've loved, and my reactions have always been threefold. First, I've been transported in some way by the narrative or the image. Second, I've been emotionally moved in some way. Third, I've been provoked to think in some way about what I've just read. I hope that those three things are all elements of what readers take away from the stories or from the books. Now, not every reader is going to take those elements away. Some readers will not like what it is that they encounter, and I think that's fine, too, because I'm also fine with this idea that if I'm committed to a certain notion of my art at the aesthetic and political levels, I'm also committed to this idea that art provokes. It doesn't just move. It doesn't just make us feel better. It doesn't just offer us a reflection. Art can really also annoy or anger us and unsettle us, and not everybody is going to react positively to such an experience. I think that, as a writer, I'm perfectly comfortable with this idea that some readers, I think some minority of readers is going to have a negative reaction to the work.

**Yarran:** Your stories are a poignant reflection on the complexities of coming to terms with one's identity and culture. Your characters often clash, struggle, grapple, compromise over what it means to be an American in a society that largely sees you as different, foreign, or othered. Your characters often struggle over the question of how to belong, whether to assimilate fully or hold on to distant cultural values and practices. As a refugee, did you yourself ever experience some of these struggles or conflicts and did these experiences play a role in shaping the complex themes of identity and culture in your works of fiction?

**Viet:** I think about one of my teachers, Maxine Hong Kingston, whose work I encountered when I was a teenage college student, and how my encounter with her work was initially one of befuddlement. I didn't understand what I was reading, but I spent thirty years periodically returning to her work because I teach it and because I think of her work as being important to me

precisely because it did befuddle me. It led me to come back continually to deal with the complexities of what she was doing. In relationship to my own work and its impact on readers, I hope for some of that same impact. Now, if readers are immediately compelled and entertained, that's great. But if readers are also sort of put off initially, that's also fine because maybe the coming-to-consciousness that you're talking about is sometimes a very delayed process. Sometimes a work can increase our level of consciousness precisely because it already speaks to us. I get a lot of responses from readers who don't have to be persuaded, but the work does mean something to them because it gives them a heightened understanding or heightened

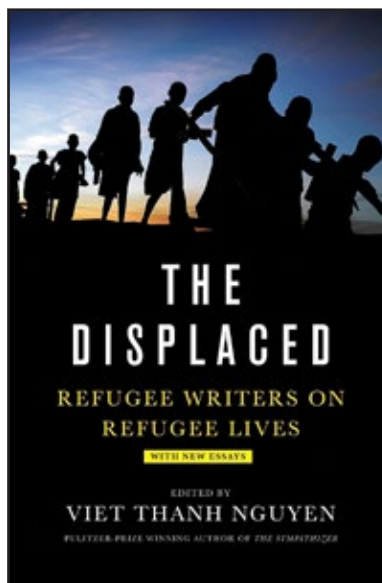


Figure 5. Cover illustration. Designed by John Gall. *The Displaced: Refugee Writers on Refugee Lives*, edited by Viet Thanh Nguyen, Abrams Press, 2018. Front cover.

insight into some kind of problem that's meaningful for them, like the problem of being Asian American or being a Vietnamese refugee and so on.

But I also hope that the coming-to-consciousness issue might be there even for readers who initially reject or hate the work because maybe they are unsettled by being confronted with an idea or form that they didn't expect, either in general or from someone like me. That's also my hope for when I go give public lectures or write public essays and so on. The idea of coming to consciousness and the role that my work plays in that is a complex one because I think there's multiple audiences, multiple kinds of readers for this work. That's why I think that I'm willing to allow my work to be a negative influence on some people because sometimes the negative influence is more powerful and more provocative than the positive influence.

I think, for example, about Samuel Beckett, whose plays I've seen. Honestly, I don't understand them. I don't get it. But talking about writing as philosophy, his work is deeply philosophical, and the impact of the work has been such that I've never forgotten it. There've been many novels that I've been deeply entertained by and liked, but I've totally forgotten about them. Beckett's work, however, as confounding as it is, including moments where I've fallen asleep watching his plays, still affects me, and I continue to come back and grapple with it. That's sort of the high standard that I have in mind for my own work. I would like novels like *The Sympathizer* and *The Committed* to entertain people, but I am perfectly okay with them provoking people in a negative way, too, in the hopes that the negativity will stay with them and force them to confront that negativity at some point later on.

**Yarran:** Funny that you described it in that way because my initial response to *The Sympathizer*, at least the first half of it, was I was annoyed by the character's voice. I couldn't get inside the narrator's head. It was only with the really overtly satirical scenes in the second half of the novel with the scenes of the filming of the movie that I started to be able to approach the novel in a slightly different way. By the time I got to *The Committed*, my mindset towards the characters had changed with the kind of dialectic through the acting of the narrative. In my own experience of those two novels, there was that kind of initial alienation, I guess one could say, about particularly various things about the voice of the narrator but then coming back to it through that kind of unreliability and recognizing that unreliability. So, yeah, thank you.

**Viet:** Going back to the cancellation issue, we do live in an age in which, I'm not saying this about you in particular, but we do live in an age in which a lot of readers want to feel comfortable in their reading. They want to have

difficulties explained to them, aesthetic difficulties or political difficulties and so on, because they don't want to be unsettled. But one function of art is not to explain itself, and I think that, in some ways, *The Sympathizer* and *The Committed*, for example, have didactic elements in them, very deliberately so. In other instances, I refuse to be didactic and explain why certain things are being said or done. Some readers are coming into the work, again not talking about you in particular, and they want to have their worldview affirmed in some way, and it isn't. It's dislodged, and they want the comfort of an explanation. Novels don't always offer that. I think that is, to me, symptomatic of some of the debates around cancellation because sometimes people want to cancel something because they're unhappy. They're unsettled. They want an explanation, and it's not forthcoming in a way that's pleasing to them. Instead of trying to grapple with the work as art or philosophy and so on, they just refuse to countenance its continuing existence in their world.

That is carried out by people of different ideological backgrounds. I can safely say that that is also carried out by people within my general ideological universe. I disagree when that's being done because there is an irreconcilability between political orthodoxies and what it is that art and philosophy sometimes need to do, which is to reject orthodoxies of all kinds. Unfortunately, cancellation is oftentimes a manifestation of orthodox impulses from people of all kinds of different backgrounds.

**Minh:** Let's talk about history and representation. History plays a prominent role in your works of fiction, whether one thinks of representations of the Vietnam War (the American War) or the Fall of Saigon. Do you see your writings as doing important work in educating readers about such historical events? In other words, do you see your writings as trying to undo the damage caused by misrepresentations and omissions on the part of mainstream American media that often amount to jingoistic, propagandistic, and Orientalizing portrayals of such histories?

**Viet:** Oh, absolutely. I think that the collective work that I've done from Asian American literature with my first book through the Vietnam War and refugee experience and colonization is all meant to counter dominant misrepresentations. That being said, I think that fictional work that only does that is kind of boring.

I just think that the language around "representation matters," misrepresentation, corrective representation has a dimension of treating art as if it's performing a function of affirmation, which is important but is also far from enough for what art should be doing. That's why I think that I keep returning to the issue of my hope that my writing not only does that work of counter-representation against dominant misrepresentation but also counters the counter-impulse,

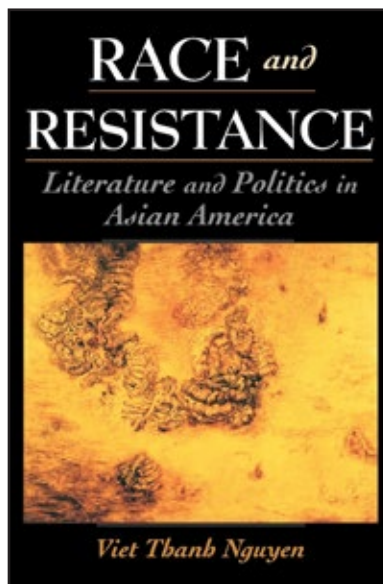


Figure 6. Cover illustration. Designed by Joy Taylor. *Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America*, by Viet Thanh Nguyen, Oxford University Press, 2002. Front cover.



the corrective impulse, the impulse for therapy, the impulse for amelioration that people who have been traumatized by misrepresentation often feel.

Art that only does that, that only offers a positive reflection back to the people who have been negatively misrepresented, is quite insufficient and, again, boring. If we use the metaphor of the mirror to say that we've been misrepresented, we've been distorted, and therefore we have to offer a positive mirror, that's a dangerous metaphor because when we hold up a mirror, even to people who have been negatively misrepresented, we shouldn't be just trying to give them a positive self-reflection. This is why I think that, for example, some Vietnamese readers don't want to read my work, whether they're communist or anti-communist, because the mirror that the fiction holds up to them is not a mirror of positive reflection. It's a mirror that shows all the dimensions of our human faces, from all the beauty to all the ugliness at the same time, and, again, there are a lot of readers out there who don't want to see the ugliness. They just want to see the beauty.

**Minh:** So art can play a corrective critical function, and it can be entertaining, nonboring, in your sense?

**Viet:** Absolutely. But again, I'm just trying to emphasize that the corrective and representational parts, as important as they may be, are themselves insufficient to an artistic project because what's the impulse behind correcting the representation? It's to offer a truer representation. But is a truer representation only the positive? No, I think a truer representation is, in fact, something that reveals that we are neither victims nor villains. We're neither angels nor demons. We're all these things in one subject, one subject as an individual, one subject as a collective or a community. Again, a lot of people who have been damaged by misrepresentation don't want to confront that more complex level of representation.

**Arnab:** On March 1, 2023, you delivered the 18th Annual Anne and Loren Kieve Distinguished Lecture at Stanford University. Sponsored by the Center for Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity (CCSRE), it is titled "Speaking for an Other." Would you give us a sense of what that lecture is about, especially in relation to future directions of your work? Does the theme of "Speaking for an Other" tie in any way to issues of identity and solidarity?

**Viet:** The lecture at Stanford was a foreshadowing of the memoir that's coming out. There are two dimensions here that I'll highlight. One is that it's titled "Speaking for an Other" because the talk highlights the ethical and artistic problems of speaking for an other, whether that is because we assume the role of a spokesperson through the act of representation, whether it's the act of giving a

talk, writing an essay, or writing a novel. It's ethically and politically problematic and complicated to speak for others, even if that action is necessary to engage in this work of counter-representation that we just talked about. A lot of decolonizing literature and so-called minority literature is caught in this problem of speaking for an other. We need our writers to speak for us, for others, ourselves as others, but what happens when that action of speaking for an other is potentially negative or a betrayal of the people that we're speaking about?

I think that's always been the case. It's especially the case when we are dealing with fiction or memoir, both of which I've now engaged in. I used that talk to shift the terrain for me from just the broadly political terrain of speaking for an other, whether the other's Vietnamese or Asian American, for example, to the very personal dimension of speaking for an other who is my mother. That is also speaking for an other as well. What happens when our work is not just in a potentially fraught relationship with the larger community but with intimates, people who are very, very close to us? One of the conclusions that I reach in the memoir is that sometimes the other is someone who is too close to us. We could imagine that other as someone who is, for example, part of a community that is right next to ours or a nation that's right next to ours, but the other is someone

who, too close to us, is oftentimes the people we love. What happens when we speak about them? How fraught is that action? I think, for me, the talk and the memoir grapple with the relationship between the need to speak a truth, which is hopefully what we do as writers and philosophers, and what happens if that truth is also taken as a betrayal by the others we are speaking about or speaking for.

Finally, the talk was also about this question of identity, which is, what if the other is within us? How do we know that we even understand ourselves? I think a lot of my work is concerned with that question. Sounds pretty obvious in relation to *The Sympathizer* and *The Committed*. In fact, to write this memoir, I had to write the memoir in the voice of the *Sympathizer*. In other words, in writing *The Sympathizer*, I had to create a whole persona to approach this complicated history of the war and its aftermath, and then to write my memoir, which I didn't want to do, I had to use another persona that I had created in order to talk about myself. The novels and the memoir are deeply related in a formal and philosophical sense because they're all about self and otherness when the self and the other are within us. Treating myself and the other not as simply these vastly huge political and cultural positions but also as positions of internal difference. The novels and the memoir are about individuals confronting the otherness within themselves, and so part of the memoir is about how much I know and don't know who I am. For example, the memoir talks about the unreliability of my own memory when it comes to

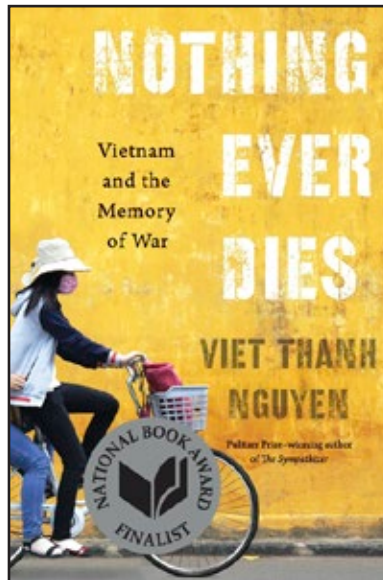


Figure 7. Cover illustration. Designed by Graciela Galup. *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and The Memory of War*, by Viet Thanh Nguyen, Harvard University Press, 2016. Front cover.



writing about my mother and about how her mental illness was so deeply traumatic for me that I had to contain it and forget huge portions of my own life and my mother's life in order to just cope with her otherness, the fact that she herself was other to herself because of her mental illness, and then the deep impact it had on our family. Writing the memoir was actually really, really difficult because it was precisely about trying to confront this otherness that I had buried within my own self.

**Yarran:** I was struck by part of your final response to Arnab's last question when you brought up writing for your mother in your memoir and the way in which you had to adopt the narrator's voice in *The Sympathizer*. Ocean Vuong does something remarkably similar in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, for similar reasons and perhaps with similar intentions: simultaneously to be able to write of that person that you care about and to hold them at some distance so as not to impose on them. I want to ask you about that connection. If you have any thoughts that you'd care to share, I'd love to hear them.

**Viet:** I think Ocean engages in some fictionalization of some autobiographical experiences in that novel, possibly for the reasons you indicate, although I think he's also said it's not an autobiographical novel. For me, the memoir is purely a memoir. Gina Apostol, who read the memoir in draft form, thinks I am theorizing through the Mother as an Other. Sounds about right to me.

**Minh:** Is there a sequel to *The Committed*? Or is this the end?

**Viet:** There has to be. There has to be a season three of *The Sympathizer* TV series if we make it that far, but no more. No more. I fantasize that after the third novel in *The Sympathizer Trilogy*, I can be done with the war in Vietnam. I've written many books about this topic now: war, aftermath, memory, colonization. I would like to be freed from those things. I don't know if it's going to happen. I would like to write about other things, and we'll see what happens after the third novel in *The Sympathizer Trilogy*. But the third novel in *The Sympathizer Trilogy* does continue the excavation into war and colonization.

**Minh:** Do you have a title for it yet? A tentative title?

**Viet:** *The Sacred*.

**Minh:** *The Sacred*?

**Viet:** As in, is nothing sacred? And the answer is, no, nothing is sacred.

**Minh:** Oh, I see. Very good.

**Arnab:** Whether you move on to other topics or you continue writing about these topics, I feel that you've changed a lot of minds. You've definitely changed mine. I first read your short stories. Then I read your novel *The Sympathizer*. It was very transformative for me, and it has been transformative for my students as well. Some of my graduate students last semester were just blown away reading your novel, and it was a difficult time for them because they read your novel around the time Hurricane Ian hit us. Some of my students were without a home, then they were reading this novel, and I feel that kind of added to the impact because we had to switch to online in the middle of the semester. Many of my students told me that novel was the only thing for many of them that kept them not thinking about their own reality, and for that I'm very grateful.

**Viet:** I love that story. Thank you so much. I think that part of why I like going out to give public talks is meeting readers and hearing their stories about their own lives and concerns, but also their stories about their engagement with whatever it is that I've written. I haven't heard that story yet about solace in the face of a hurricane. But that's great.

**Arnab:** Yeah, it was something.

**Minh:** Viet, just in case, Arnab was referring to Hurricane Ian, the deadliest hurricane to strike Florida since 1935. Our school shut down for two weeks, so that's what the experience was about. Well, are you pleased with how the HBO adaptation of *The Sympathizer* has turned out so far?

**Viet:** So far, it's hard to say because I haven't seen any actual episodes. They've moved from LA to Thailand as of this week, and they're starting to shoot in Thailand for the next six weeks. I think the experience has been very positive so far. It's been a very positive set. I heard from many people that this seems like a very unique production in terms of how down-to-earth everybody is, from Park Chan-wook and Sandra Oh and

Robert Downey, Jr. down to all the newer Vietnamese and diasporic actors that we have. The vibe has been great, and the scripts look pretty good.

**Minh:** Do you have a role in shaping the script?

**Viet:** I met with the writer's room, and the majority of the writer's room was actually Asian women (Asian American and Asian Australian). I read the script and gave feedback, but it's such a hugely collaborative enterprise. There's literally hundreds of people making this TV series. Again, it's going to be very hard to say what it's going to be like until we actually see the finished product with all the different collaborative elements in place.

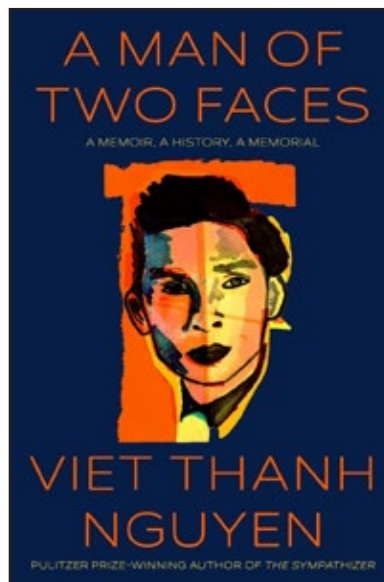


Figure 8. Cover illustration. Designed by Kelly Winton. *A Man of Two Faces: A Memoir, a History, a Memorial*, by Viet Thanh Nguyen, Grove Press, 2023. Front cover.

**Minh:** Talking about television and film, did you think the Oscars got it right this time?

**Viet:** Also, *Everything Everywhere All at Once* was produced by A24. A24 is producing this TV series as well. I just had a publicity meeting with HBO and A24, and this is right before the Oscars. The A24 publicity person for this TV series is also the one who did the *Everything Everywhere All at Once* publicity campaign. I think the Oscars did get it right, surprisingly right. I was a little bit cynical in advance that *Everything Everywhere All at Once* would take home some of the trophies, but it took home so many trophies. Hopefully, it does indicate a shift in Asian American representation in front of and behind the camera. We'll just have to wait and see, and we've been hoping for a while. First, we had *Flower Drum Song*, then we had *Joy Luck Club*, and then we had *Crazy Rich Asians*, and the progress seemed to be so incremental and slow. Then this movie just came down and kicked all the doors open, we hope. We hope. I think the real measure is whether Ke Huy Quan gets major leading man roles with this.

**Minh:** What do you think about Ke Huy Quan's acceptance speech in which he shared that his journey to the US started on a boat and that he spent a year in a refugee camp?

**Viet:** Honestly, I was in a bar when his speech came on, so I couldn't hear his speech, but I could see him emote the entire time. He seems like a great guy, and I'm so happy that he won. I did read some of the highlights afterwards, and I'm very proud of him that he foregrounded being a refugee and the boat experience. At the same time, he did conclude that portion of his speech with an invocation of gratitude to the American Dream. Much of my work complicates that narrative. I think that there still remains a lot to be written about the movie and the placement of its actors and the whole issue of the awards and everything because I'm quite aware that awards are partly about art but also partly about a lot of other things, about politics, society, and culture. Not to take away from Ke Huy Quan, but the narrative of the grateful refugee is something that America understands.

**Minh:** Okay, thank you, Viet. Just to let you know, this is Viet's spring break. Thank you very much for taking out ninety minutes of your time—I know you have young children—to share your reflections, your experiences, your thoughts about the past, the present, the future, everything everywhere all at once. Thank you so much, Viet, and good luck with everything. I look forward to the publication of your memoir.

**Viet:** Well, thank you, everybody. Thank you, Yarran and Arnab, for your questions, very detailed, very thoughtful questions. I appreciate all the care that all of you took, including Minh, obviously, for initiating this interview. I look forward to seeing it in *APA Studies on Asian and Asian American Philosophers and Philosophies*. Never thought I'd be in conversation with philosophers, so it's pretty awesome for me to see that happen. Thanks, again!

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This conversation was edited for clarity and length. We would like to thank Viet very much for participating in it. Many thanks to his Chief Author Assistant / Executive Assistant Titi Nguyen for arranging the interview and our Editorial Assistants / Research Assistants Vivian Nguyen and Brent Robbins for recording and transcribing it. In addition to Vivian and Brent, Nhi Huynh provided comments and suggestions on this piece, for which we are grateful.

## NOTES

1. Edward W. Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 173.
2. Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, 173.
3. Approximately seven months and one week after our conversation, 92nd Street Y, a New York-based cultural and community center also known as 92NY, cancelled Viet Thanh Nguyen because of his stance on the Israel-Palestine conflict. For accounts of this episode, see Jennifer Schuessler, "92NY Pulls Event with Acclaimed Writer Who Criticized Israel," *The New York Times*, October 21, 2023, accessed October 30, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/21/arts/92ny-viet-thanh-nguyen-israel.html>; and Jennifer Schuessler, "92NY Halts Literary Series After Pulling Author Critical of Israel," *The New York Times*, October 23, 2023, accessed October 30, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/23/arts/92ny-pauses-season-israel-hamas-war.html>.

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