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### Acknowledging Privilege in Relation to Ethical Memory

On discussing Viet Thanh Nguyen's writing *The Committed*, the "Between the Covers" podcast hosted by David Naimon explores Nguyen's engagement with the idea of ethical memory, and its relevance not only in modern America, but also its relevance throughout history and among many marginalized communities. Nguyen brings up that to understand ethical memory is to be able to acknowledge a double model of what it means to be 'ethical'. Naimon summarizes Nguyen's ethical memory model as, "for memory to be ethical, it necessitated not just the remembering of one's own people's tragedies but also the remembering of that of the other, and an awareness around what your own people are forgetting in their own story to avoid contending with a competing story of another" (Nguyen).

Both Naimon and Nguyen emphasize throughout the podcast that 'ethical' can not simply play into the favor of one person or party. Ultimately, ethicality relates to empathy, and further expands to the acknowledgement of one's own privileges. Privilege, as discussed in the podcast, is not only connected to white supremacy and the privilege of one's skin color. The concept of privilege can be anything that relates to the so-called norm of American society, such as identifying as a heterosexual, conforming to the gender binary, or being an American-born citizen rather than an immigrant or refugee. Considering sexual politics in Asian American literature, particularly within Carlos Bulosan's *America is in the Heart*, Rachel Lee examines in her own work *The Americas of Asian American Literature: Gendered Fictions of Nation and Transnation* that Bulosan's writings were made possible through the interactions of other men who, because of American social standards, had more power than women. Lee writes based on her impression of Carlos's heteronormativity and gender conformity that, "Thus Filipino men, black men, Mexican men, Indian men, white men are all part of Carlos's "America in the heart," in that they are allowed to hold America as property and are all permitted to hold American women "properly" (Lee, 20).

This does not absolve the prejudice continually faced by non-white people but rather opens up discourse as to why facing issues such as racism can not be fought on different levels. In other words, why ethical memory is necessary to combat a one-track mindset about how to dismantle racist ideologies among minority groups, as Nguyen acknowledges, "It's super interesting how many people are offended by the thought of doing two things at the same time—being against anti-Asian violence and anti-Black racism" (Nguyen).

Although it is important to recognize that colonization was not just done by European countries and racial tensions among minority groups results from many centuries of war and dispute, these instances distance minority groups from each other, resulting in an inward competition about 'who had it worse' or 'who did more work to get here'. Naimon and Nguyen bring up many instances in which racial tensions among minorities, particularly within the Asian American community, resulted in racism towards other communities such as African Americans. Nguyen agrees that although the struggles of many Asian Americans are valid and their successes should be proudly acknowledged, he does not find favorable the turn of Asian Americans using their privileged success to resort to historically white American imperialism and racism to gain a sense of belonging within American high society: "one of the ways by which in the United States you learn how to be an American is that you learn how to be an American racist. An immigrant becomes more American or closer to white people by learning anti-Black narratives, for example" (Nguyen). This is where ethical memory is needed. To make this a course motif would heighten the awareness of double standards and stereotypes towards marginalized groups. Additionally, with recent insurrections, it is crucial to understand that to absolve these aforementioned issues one must not give in to that 'one track mind' where, for example, stopping Asian hate crimes means harming and discrediting the work black people have done for Black Lives Matter.

#### Works Cited:

Lee, Rachel C., and Rachel C. C. Lee. *The Americas of Asian American Literature : Gendered Fictions of Nation and Transnation*, Princeton University Press, 1999. ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/csumb/detail.action?docID=617314>.

"Viet Thanh Nguyen: The Committed." *Between the Covers* from Tin House, 2 March 2021, <https://tinhouse.com/podcast/viet-thanh-nguyen-the-committed/>