

**Asian American and Asian Resource and Cultural Center (AAARCC)  
Purdue University**

**West Lafayette, IN**

**September 14, 2020**

**Cathy Park Hong, *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning* (One World, 2020)**

### **Notes and Questions for Discussion**

My sincere thanks to AAARCC, Director Dr. Pam Sari, and Program Administrator Manabu Taketani, for your leadership in involving Purdue in this series. I am very grateful to you for the opportunity to respond to Cathy Park Hong's book.

We will focus today on the first two chapters. Chapters One is titled "United" (pp. 3-35); and Chapter Two is titled "Stand Up" (pp. 36-65)

The notes below are organized into four units and I am not sure we will get through all of them, or even many of them today. It depends on how the discussion goes. But I am sharing them in case people in the audience want to follow up.

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#### **1. Reviews and Initial Responses to *Minor Feelings***

*Minor Feelings* has garnered moving, beautiful, and powerful reviews, with especially memorable ones coming from African American and other Asian American writers. Quite a few of them emphasize how deeply and personally *transformative* it is to read the book. Here are three examples from just the blurbs on our editions:

- to read this book is to become more human.  
Claudia Rankine, poet, author of *Citizen*
- it takes all the parts of us that we can barely account for and gives them back fully recognized. It felt like having someone sit me down in a chair and say, "Your feelings are real!" and "This is how we got here' and "Here is the way out" all at once. It broke my heart with relief.  
Mira Jacob, author of *Good Talk*
- We are so not ready for what Cathy Park Hong does in *Minor Feelings*. And thankfully, she does not care whether we are ready or not [... .] Few books change how we talk to each other and whisper to ourselves. Cathy Park Hong sees us. Her vision and execution are so breathtaking. And so genius. And so absolutely scary. Read it Reread it. It will read you.  
Kiese Laymon, author of *Heavy*

I wonder if those in the audience who've read or started reading the book would like to share their own responses.

If not, and if there's time, perhaps we can move on to an episode from the first chapter, "United," in which Hong describes some responses from her readers. It focuses on a reading she gave at Western Michigan university a week after the last Presidential election. We'll read from the bottom of page 29 through page 30.

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## 2. Central Paradigms: Minor Feelings and Reckonings

Let's move on to the central concepts and key paradigm of the book, "minor feelings." Hong adapts the term from feminist and pioneering cultural and literary theorist Sianne Ngai, who constructed the paradigm of "ugly feelings" as a particular manifestation of late capitalism- feelings such as irritation, envy, and disgust. Ngai describes such feelings as "non-cathartic." Catharsis is the Greek literary term for the purging and purification of emotion: it's the moment and process whereby when the audience of tragedy is able to release powerful, overwhelming, or unbearable feelings in "pity or terror": in comedy, the release comes in "laughter." No such release is possible with ugly feelings- they don't rise to the level of tragedy or comedy. Instead they linger and accumulate and overwhelm. Ngai emphasizes that ugly feelings are part of the dynamic of race and gender.

Building her own paradigm, Cathy Park Hong emphasizes that minor feelings in the US have everything to do with the history of racism and imperialism; minor feelings emerge, fester and turn toxic especially in the experience of model minorities. Minor feelings are "the racialized range of emotions that are negative, dysphoric, and therefore untelegenic, built from the sediments of everyday racial experience and the irritant of having one's perception of reality constantly questioned or dismissed" (Hong 55).

In the history of American racism, Asian Americans are the quintessential model minorities: well-behaved, compliant, quiet, unthreatening and discreet. Minor feelings emerge from the struggle to keep up this façade. The myth of model minority ultimately undermines other minorities, such as the African American, Native American or Latinx who are deemed to be more unruly, dangerous, unmanageable- more undeserving. So ultimately it benefits the majority.

But does the paradigm of model minority also benefit the so-called model minority? I think Hong would unequivocally say that if it does, it's at a cost that she finds unbearable. The cost to be paid is the burden of minor feelings. The benefit- "to be next in line for whiteness" -requires disappearing, hiding in "America's amnesiac fog." Moreover, this benefit can be snatched away in an instance when it suits the majority. Hong offers several instances of this, including the fate of South Asian Americans who passed from near model minority after 9/11 to the status of "terrorists." Particularly harrowing instances she offers of admission into and expulsion from the model minority come on pages 31-34, where she juxtaposes her grandfather's family being unexpectedly gathered into the rank of the good Korean during the Korean war to the situation of Mr. Dao, who in April 2017 was pulled off an overbooked flight-without his consent and in the most humiliating, violent and searing way. That may seem like a minor incident- but it isn't, since it exposes the precarity of the entire edifice of model minority. Hong writes about it searingly but also in the most nuanced way. just talking about those pages could take up the whole hour we have today.

In an interview, Hong names the film *Parasite* as being about minor feelings. I'd be curious if others in the audience also made that link.

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For more of Hong's insights into the concepts of Model Minorities and Minor Feelings, see 28-29: "The writer Jeff Chang...to "pass into whiteness" (from the bottom of page 28 just before the break on page 29)

Hong says of Asian Americans and model minorities: "we put our minor feelings aside to protect white feelings" (57).

If there is time, I would also like to hear from the audience what they associate with the term "reckoning."

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### **3. How does one counter Minor Feelings? The Iconoclasm of Richard Pryor, Hiding and Exposure**

Minor feelings oblige model minorities to hide the true complex self even from oneself. The first two chapters are infused with the theme of hiding and exposure. In fact the book opens with Hong describing a facial tic (which we learned later began when she was in a famous writing graduate program) and her realization that the face is the most naked part of the body. She plunged into a deep depression for a year, coming out of it only when she had her own transformative cultural awakening. This happened when she watched the iconoclastic comedian, Richard Pryor, who walked away from the role he was expected to play as a black comic and into an incendiary comedy of exposure and naming the hidden. It is directly his influence that enabled her to move from hiding, even in her own writing, to risky exposure of all that hides in the myth of the model minority and in minor feelings themselves.

Hong names a "shock of recognition" when she first saw a televised performance by Pryor; she was reminded of the Korean concept of *han*: "a complicated combination of bitterness, wistfulness, shame, melancholy, and vengefulness, accumulated from years of brutal colonialism, war, and US-supported dictatorship. *Han* is so ongoing that it can even be passed down: to be Korean is to feel *han*" (Hong 54).

Pryor seemed to Hong to channel this and other minor feelings, perform them, and in so doing counter them through exposure. The book pays a powerful tribute to Richard Pryor's stunning and iconoclastic work.

We often hear that Asians come from "shame" culture- which of course seems linked with hiding. But it's important to note that Hong conclusively rejects any notion that shame is inevitable in Asian cultures. She rejects the language of essentialism and explicitly tells us that shame is not cultural; shame is political. Shame in the model minority context exists so as to entrench the majority's political distribution of punishments and rewards (such as they are) to different minorities. Drawing on Pryor's cultural breakthroughs, her refusal of shame and of hiding is what makes her book such a reckoning: as in presenting an account, acknowledging, settling of unsettled charges, a refusal to hide.

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### **4. The form of the book: What genres can do justice to minor feelings?**

Hong makes it clear that "too often" stories of Asian American racial trauma have been molded to be unthreatening and "shaped by the white imagination. Publishers expect authors to privatize their trauma: an exceptional family or historical tragedy tests the character before they arrive at a revelation of self-affirmation. In many Asian American novels, writers set trauma in a distant mother country or

within an insular Asian family to ensure that their pain is not a reproof against American geopolitics or domestic racism” (49).

The genres in which many Asian Americans are expected to write are those of the progress from darkness to light, from failure to triumph. This requires heroic trajectories with beginnings, middles, ends, climaxes and denouements. But as we see, minor feelings inevitably resist such a schema. As Hong puts it, “there is no immediate emotional release in the literature of minor feelings. [...] Because minor feelings are ongoing, they lend themselves more readily to forms and genres that are themselves serial” (57). She uses the examples of the graphic novel, the serial poem, and the episodic poetic essay. I think the form she has chosen for her book is also perfect and for those who’ve read it or started reading it, I’d be curious to know how you responded to it.

*Minor Feelings* comprises 7 essays that bring together very disparate materials: official histories, family memories, responses to other writers, literary critiques, theoretical musings, reportage, a kind of blogging, even investigative reporting (for instance when later in the book Hong tries to figure out the silences around an iconic feminist Korean American writer, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, namely her rape and murder in 1982 when she was 31). The chapters are broken up into brief sections separated by blank space and vary in length from a paragraph to 2-3 pages. Each chapter as a whole is not organized around beginnings, middles, and endings (even though it might contain several individual narratives that are organized that way). The writing unfolds episodically and serially- modes that Hong indicates are particularly well suited to minor feelings.

The form of the book is not daunting or convoluted, but it is still unusual and hard to classify. Speaking for myself, I found the writing, the pace and the form breathtaking- I feel as if I have to pause to inhale even while I am rapt taking everything in. There were two warring impulses for me: my eyes keep scanning the page wanting to move forward, forward, and forward across the pauses and passages, because the writing is so riveting, and so much of it feels like the revelation I might not have known I was waiting for. At the same time, Hong exposes things, often very painful, difficult things and hidden things, with such precision and laser sharp insight that I might flinch, while also wanting to go back, reread, and linger just to make sure I read what I thought I’d read. Sometimes the pauses and brief blank space between passages give us the just the right break for recovery, reflection, and regathering of energy, focus and thought.

I’m curious to learn how those present here today who’ve listened to us reading from the book- or have had a chance to read it themselves- responded just to the form.

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