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Minor Feelings: A Reckoning on Race and the Asian Condition. By Cathy Park Hong. 2020. Paperback edition. 2021. xvii + 206p. £9.99. Penguin Random House. ISBN 978 1 78816 559 4

Cathy Park Hong's *Minor Feelings* (2020) is immediately intimate. There is a raw edge to the essays; the pervasive pressure of the white gaze is intense, pushing a 'shiv of light' into Hong's prospective peace.¹ Despite its characterisation as a collection of self-reflexive essays, there is a compelling narrative flow which guides the reader through the often-autobiographical elements of the book. The first-person perspective of the writing exposes the author, allowing the reader into painful moments in Hong's life and career as well as providing insights into Asian American heritages and histories. Hong picks apart the careful web of shame, assimilation, racialisation and suppression that intersect to constitute a system of emotional undercurrents, the minor feelings of the book's title. The 'I' of the writing has a lyric quality, and Hong's poetic voice colours the vivid and visceral tangents of the work.

These essay-chapters, each concerning a different aspect of the Asian American condition, are initially erratically paced, suggestive of the complex self-hatred that the book as a whole attributes to it. In its preface, Hong argues that the Asian American identity is one both often ignored and difficult to delimit, given the great expanse of heritage that it encompasses. She distils a version of it

¹ Cathy Park Hong, *Minor Feelings: A Reckoning on Race and the Asian Condition*, (NY: Penguin Random House, 2020) p. 11. Hereafter all references to the text will be cited parenthetically.

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through her own specific experience as a Korean American woman. Hong identifies the white gaze as a defining factor in Asian American identity formation, as it is this white supremacist pressure which amalgamates immigrants of different national heritages into one minority group. Hong depicts the inherent loneliness of both desperately needing the support of an 'us' while conversely resisting the erasure that can come from such a positioning. She is disconcerted throughout each essay by the power of the 'us' to act as an admission of the horrifying homogeneity that has long been propagated about peoples of colour. This is most strongly apparent in the first essay-chapter, 'United':

Who is us? What is us? Is there even such a concept as an Asian American consciousness? Is it anything like the double consciousness that W.E.B. Du Bois established over a century ago? The paint on the Asian American label has not dried. The term is unwieldy, cumbersome, perched awkwardly upon my being.

(9)

In this way, Hong unfolds the generational layers of trauma which embed themselves in racialised minority communities and families. The violence absorbed during colonial histories bubbles up as it passes through parents piloted by a post-traumatic survival instinct. In 'United' Hong manifests a dinner table cut through with mistrust. Each family member refracting another through the

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absorbed facets of a media-touted white viewpoint. Through this carefully placed succession of mirrorings, those with apparent cultural similarities come to see nothing in that sameness but further alienation. Nothing proves so familiar as another white face, beaming out from a screen. This misrecognition is absorbed, then regurgitated as otherness, as an intense misdirection of a racially subjugated rage. For Hong, '[r]acial self-hatred is seeing yourself the way the whites see you,' and she details the way this self-hatred has hung in the Asian American community in the form of a suffusing shame (9).

Hong captures this dehumanising automation of the Asian individual, curating a clinical cyborgian logic and holding a mechanical affinity that emerges when least expected:

I lay on the motorized gurney that slid into the machine. The interior was smooth, white, and cylindrical. I felt like I was inside a gigantic hollowed-out dildo. I am the body electric, I thought, and my brain is going haywire.

(17)

Hong links this commodification of Asian immigrant bodies to America's engineering an apparent proof of the model minority myth; boosting the mirage that a white capitalist utopia is open to all races. This capitalist carrot of being able to buy one's way out of a white supremacist hegemony then allows for the continuous cannibalisation of non-white bodies on a never-ending production line; the conveyor belt wheels of which are constantly spinning towards white wealth. This confrontation of the mythologisation of the Asian American as a model minority helps to deconstruct the lack of interiority that is subsequently granted to Asian Americans. Hong depicts Asian Americans through the 'white

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imagination' as a cyborg hoard, all alike, all devoid of autonomy (49). This is furthered by her discussion of the assertion that paler Asian skin tones allow for a proximal whiteness, a theme that recurs in her later essay on 'White Innocence'. This idea dangerously diminishes Asian American voices speaking out about their experiences of racism, leading to the suppression of feelings that Hong unveils in these essays.

Hong's perspective throughout *Minor Feelings* pivots around her lived experiences, integrating her own journey as an academic into the essays. She deftly critiques the high-brow gatekeepers of academic acumen and the racist power structures within western, Eurocentric universities. She identifies the erasing aspect of modernity's separation of author and text, and the contradictory, racialising lens through which authors of colour's work is often regarded. Hong depicts her younger self as 'committed to the New' and assured in the belief that she would be applauded for formal innovation 'despite' her identity (17). In doing so, she spotlights the disparaging tone taken against racially embodied, or personally engaged work, by the white dominated upper echelons of literary academia. Hong thus articulates from her own experience a destructive paradigm between self-erasure and fetishistic pigeonholing that plagues authors of colour. These assessments pose the question, why then, as a person of colour, work in academia? The answer becomes gently apparent. Academic institutions provide a scaffold for the poet, providing pockets of monetary sustenance along with a steady train of spectators. Furthermore, to not take up space at all is to be erased entirely, which these essays are staunchly against. Despite the difficulties, Hong roots her academic life in artistic camaraderie: women surround Hong throughout her creative journey. 'An Education', situates Hong as one of three Asian American

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women striving to succeed in the New York art scene. Later in 'A Portrait of an Artist' Hong exhibits a lineage of Korean women writing embodied poetics: Myung Mi Kim, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha and Hong herself. She acknowledges the symbiosis of these relationships by drawing from Kim and Cha and then returning to them within her work. In this way Hong makes evident the way that Korea's history has in-folded the lives of its people, creating weightily linked narratives which run between families, drawing otherwise strangers to one another, and heightening bonds.

Minor Feelings, moreover, has a diverse intertextual reach, drawing upon a broad range of theorists and creatives. Hong dissects her long standing obsession with comedian Richard Pryor using Sigmund Freud, reflects upon Ralph Ellison's discussion of Black laughter, and cogently applies Giorgio Agamben's depiction of 'Bare Life' to the dehumanisation and persistent destruction of Chinese men and women in nineteenth-century America. This collection embodies an auto theoretical practice, creating a self-reflective, critically informed narrative of necessary, but often ignored information. These pieces are collated, shamelessly, in relation to how Hong came to consider and examine them, and they serve to embody her heritage and creative and scholarly tastes.

Asian American histories provide nuanced distinctions between different nationalities all shunted under the umbrella of one identity, thereby highlighting the erasure of these varied cultural legacies. Moreover, by depicting the blood of the Chinese men cannibalised by the progress of the Manifest Destiny and the barbaric sexual consumption of Chinese teenage girls, Hong ventures out of her own experience and background as a Korean American. This construction and differentiation of Asian identity can also draw from the context of black struggle, art and recognises the tides of black-Asian solidarity. In the chapter endeavouring

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to deconstruct white innocence Hong reveals the ways whiteness plagues her subconscious. Discourse on white fragility is now becoming banal, but Hong refreshingly includes a more innovative discussion. She ponders the way that perpetually having to point out societal racisms can make a person of colour feel themselves to be a perverse, perpetual fun-sponge, peeling open the whiteness in everything as compulsively as they destroy the quicks of their nails.

In her essay 'Bad English' Hong revels in her self-professed heritage of 'bad English', or the destructive use of English, remaking it and exposing its long colonial dominion within so many global mouths. She poetically proclaims that such apparent misuse has the power 'to slit English open so its dark histories slide out' (97). She urges a visceral gutting of a language that carries so many contradictions for the subject of colour articulated within in its pervading usage. This place bad English as an almost anti-internet form; one which does not translate as well through social media, and resultantly implies that it holds greater possibility of inciting and rebuilding community when transmuted textually and in person.

Perhaps the most controversial section of *Minor Feelings* touches on the difficult subject of racism experienced between different groups of people of colour. Hong persuasively states her position that 'the soul of innovation thrives on cross-cultural inspiration' (102). This is a seemingly easy statement to accept. However, positioned after a reference to a blackfishing accusation levelled at an Asian-American actress, an innately miasmatic atmosphere occurs due to the clash of differently racialised perspectives. Moreover, any attempt to discern who owns what, culturally, creates an argument fuelled and heightened by the white capitalist classification of and commodification of culture which Hong holds responsible for "'stay in your lane" politics' (101). As a reader, it is difficult to resist

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retreating behind the familiar neoliberal guise of letting each minority decide for themselves. Hong's discussion stirs the logistical impossibility of this; racial minorities often ideologically oppose one another. Although the principle of Hong's argument is neat, the blackfishing dismissal feels fractious, given that the commercial mining of African American culture is also enacted by non-white peoples. Nevertheless, the uncomfortableness of these pages serves to reflect people of colour's potential culpability in supporting the maintenance of white supremacy and anti-blackness. While Hong's decision to write beside cultural narratives, rather than for or through them, is not a solution to these racial complexities, the perspective is insightful. She positions herself beside captivating elements of Asian American culture and other minority cultures in America, allowing her to knit a careful cultural connectivity between them.

Throughout the collection Hong directs her discussion to people of colour, a reminder that we are not exempt from destroying one another, nor oblivious to our being constantly pushed together under the alienating gaze of whiteness. Minority groups are not differentiated hive minds and she does not treat them as such. Her essays are profoundly informative but do not profess to harbour a harmonious solution. For her white readers, Hong points out the dangerous mirage of white innocence; a condition which breeds generations of white people who—quoting Charles Mills—are “unable to understand the world that they themselves have made” (75). Hong's writing is concerned with necessary history, unearthing underserved perspectives, and peppered with perceptive aphorisms. Perhaps most importantly she speaks to Asian Americans, in an act of anti-erasure, detailing their historical presence in the United States and encouraging them to take up their deserved place. Hong's book is a candid antidote to the rhetoric that racial identity is a 'minor and non-urgent' topic, one

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not necessitating discussion (183). She uses the collection to take all of the time she needs to address the previously suppressed surge of *Minor Feelings*. In doing so she adds another voice to the growing chorus of writing which refutes the crafted narratives of white supremacy and white centring which western media are fast seeding into fact. The book is one which jumps across disparate focuses but speaks to the under-regarded facets of the wide and richly diverse category of Asian American identity.