

Asian Americans' uneasy place in the national narrative

April 6, 2020

Sophia Nguyen

THE WASHINGTON POST – When Cathy Park Hong talks about the “minor feelings” that lend her new book its title, she’s talking about the angst of being a non-white person in the United States (US): the dissonance between lived experience and the American promise of boot straps, elbow grease and an ever-more-perfect union. Major feelings are triumphal, she explains, but minor feelings accumulate and persist – sour, contrary and without resolution.

But it’d be natural to assume that “minor” has a different connotation – that it describes states of being that are nagging but trivial, a side plot to a central drama. After all, the essays collected in *Minor Feelings* primarily discuss Asian Americans, a racial group often seen as detached from our central national narrative. Hong never explicitly owns up to this second possible meaning of “minor” when defining her terms. And yet a sense that Asian Americans, with their “vague purgatorial status”, don’t – or somehow can’t – claim relevance to public life haunts her book. As she put it, “Asians lack presence. Asians take up apologetic space. We don’t even have enough presence to be considered real minorities.”

Until recently, Hong, a poet and critic who teaches at Sarah Lawrence College, seemed an unlikely candidate for this project. She is a writer averse to claiming the broad sweep of the word “we”. In graduate school, she wrote, “Any autobiographical reveal, especially if it was racial, was a sign of weakness.” Hong learned to view her identity as a liability. But watching Richard Pryor’s comedy changed everything. His monologues jolted her out of a depressive funk and inspired her to try stand-up – and to finally draw on her life for her material. Now Hong looks to break out of her ingrained habit of writing for a white audience, though she acknowledges, wryly, that “writing for myself would still mean I’m writing to a part of me that wants to please white people”.

Despite that hang-up, *Minor Feelings* could serve as a Cliff Notes to Asian American existence for anyone new to the subject (white or otherwise). Hong briskly brings everyone up to speed. She lays out a historical summary, hitting the usual highlights: the Transcontinental Railroad, the Chinese Exclusion Act, hate crimes. She explained that Asian Americans are not monolithic but a “tenuous alliance” of many nationalities, with the highest income disparity of any racial

group in the country. She narrated “how the whole model minority quackery began”: After the US lifted its 1965 immigration ban, it granted visas to Asians only if they were highly educated professionals.

Alongside this dutiful exposition, Hong provided episodes from her upbringing in Los Angeles – first in working-class Koreatown, then in the affluent, white Westside. Her tone is astringent, stripping the memories of any ennobling tragedy or nostalgic fuzz. The anger can’t be prettily plated. There’s the time a crowd of white kids reacted to her grandmother’s greeting with taunts and a kick to her rear; later on, the many times a white person replied to her mother’s English with “a fright mask of strained tolerance”. Recalling these incidents, Hong identifies a sharply specific minor feeling: the rage that doesn’t quite swell into righteousness but never totally dissipates.

Despite its subtitle, *An Asian American Reckoning*, the book takes up much of its word count discussing others. “I feel compelled to write nearby other racial experiences,” Hong allows: To “seal off my imagined world so it’s only people of my likeness” would be to give in to the limits of a “segregated imagination”. That makes sense; race doesn’t exist in a vacuum. Eventually, though, this tactic seems avoidant. For example, the chapter on American childhood offers a wandering pop-culture analysis, comparing the insistent innocence of Wes Anderson’s films and *The Catcher in the Rye* with the assumed waywardness of Topsy, the enslaved girl in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. After these discussions of white power and anti-blackness, her analysis stalls out. While Hong does add her own youth to the mix – her summers in Seoul and her “tense and petless” home life – she doesn’t extrapolate from that personal experience to theorise more generally, or ambitiously, about the Asian experience.

Hong’s “we” turns out to be expansive. It includes “the formerly colonised; survivors, such as Native Americans, whose ancestors have already lived through end times; migrants and refugees living through end-times currently” – a “global majority” committed to fighting white supremacy and colonialism.

That solidarity might be admirable, but it also provides cover for some limits in her thinking. Can Asian Americans claim a more specific “we”? Can we find meaning in our racial identity? Or can we only draw meaning by subsuming ourselves in non-whiteness, or by turning to our individual family histories and countries of origin? The book stops shy of saying so. Here, its silence feels stifling.

ns561332:v8_1