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REVIEWS

Cathy Park Hong's Minor Feelings: Major Reckonings on the Asian-American Identitarian Writer

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Review of

Cathy Park Hong. *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning.* One World, 2020. 206 pages.

In the opening chapter of her memoir, *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning*, Korean-American poet-writer Cathy Park Hong reflects on her years as a graduate student at the Iowa Writers' Workshop in the early 2000s: "By the time I was at Iowa, I had already decided that writing about my Asian identity was juvenile." Adhering to the then prevailing milieu at Iowa and other American MFA programs, Hong notes how her and other students of Asian descent often "scrubbed" their writings of racial and ethnic markers. During that time, "ethnicky" writing about Asian-American identity was not only faux pas, but a "sign of weakness." The message was clear: you can be Asian, just don't write about it.

Employing an episodic mode of exploration, *Minor Feelings* chronicles the "slow drip of racism" nestled within MFA programs and the larger literary world—harkening back to a time when the term "identitarian" was a derogatory moniker. The inner self absorbs and amplifies the outward: Hong painstakingly admits to her past internalization of shame and resentment toward identity-based writing: "I internalized their condescension, mocked other ethnic poetry as too ethnicky." It was the price of the ticket: as Hong's MFA testimonies bring into sharp focus, to be an Asian-American writer was to discount the worth of one's identity.

In today's MFA workshops, overt forms of racism (offensive and derogatory comments about the racial components of the piece or the author) would likely be subject to censure—and rightly so. But as we look at the state of the MFA today, can we truly declare Hong's portraiture of the self-censoring Asian-American writer a relic of the past?

True, MFA programs have dramatically diversified over the past two decades since Hong's years at Iowa. Today, many graduate and undergraduate creative writing programs employ Asian and Asian-American writers, some even in a leadership role as director—e.g., Jhumpha Lahiri and Yiyun Li at Princeton, Ken Chen at Barnard, and Lan Samantha Chang at Hong's own Iowa. And course reading lists are more diverse, featuring identity-based writing on race, ethnicity, queerness, among other topics. Since Hong's time, it is probably fair to say that workshops participants, both instructors and students, have become more sensitive to workshop etiquette, the spoken and unspoken rules governing engagement among participants.

But as workshop rules of engagement have developed, have our rules of censure also become more sophisticated? On the one hand, workshops nowadays encourage, and even celebrate, identity-based writing. In workshops, "bring your identity to the page" is the new motto. On the other hand, one wonders if traces of anti-identitarian sentiments still linger, but now morphed into potentially more subtle though no-less-harmful forms and strains. In other words: Instead of *scrubbing* identity out the page, is the new modus operandi to *varnish* it? Based on my own survey of workshop experiences, it's not common to hear coded calls for race and ethnicity to be downplayed: "It's too heavy-handed." "Tone it down." "Make it subtle." The message (outwardly expressed, internally absorbed) is now: you can be Asian, just don't foreground it.

However, as Hong notes, the Asian-American consciousness is inseparable from her and her writing: "[W]hen I became a published poet, I couldn't suspend my Asian female identity no matter what I wrote." For Hong and other writers of color, writing about one's identities is often not a choice; it's a calling. Many Asian-Americans, like African-Americans and those from other marginalized communities, see the world through the lens of what W.E.B. Du Bois called, a "double consciousness"; for those who traverse between different cultural and ethnic worlds, identity is always embodied and felt, and thus, never inseparable from the self.

How then can the Asian-American self be given permission to appear on the page? Hong's book reveals a way forward. For Hong, permission was granted through a supportive community and formative mentorships. Hong calls her writing a "family trade," tracing her "ancestry" back to other Korean-American writers—specifically, how her writing professor at Oberlin, Myung Mi Kim, introduced her to the works of another Korean-American writer, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha. Here, Hong recalls the first reading Cha's *Dictee* and how she discovered through Cha's work new ways to structure narrative and form to challenge colonialism and deconstruct language hierarchies. Out of this "literary link" of Cha-Kim-Hong, a passing of literary batons.

Nowadays, MFA programs are embracing diversity to an unprecedented degree, recruiting aspiring writers from all backgrounds and walks of life, and investing in creating an inclusive atmosphere on campus and in workshops. Yet, undoubtedly, the state of the MFA remains far from fully representative and inclusive. What’s needed are more opportunities for baton-passing and linkage-forging: greater diversity in the MFA faculty ranks, staff, and student body. Hong’s self-portraiture of the Asian-American identitarian writer is not only a stunning artifact and a riveting testimony, but a cautionary tale—a rallying cry to keep fighting for representation and inclusion in workshops and creative writing spaces.