Minor Feelings

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF CATHY PARK HONG

Cathy Park Hong was born and raised in Los Angeles. Her parents were Korean immigrants to the U.S., and her father worked as a life insurance salesman and ran an industrial warehouse. In *Minor Feelings*, Hong depicts her childhood as largely tumultuous and unhappy but cites summer trips to visit her grandparents in Seoul as a rare bright spot. She was a self-described "socially awkward recluse" through high school, but she credits Oberlin College with opening her mind and giving her the confidence and freedom that she needed to dedicate her life to art. Although she started out planning to become a visual artist, she eventually switched to poetry, thanks largely to positive experiences studying with Myung Mi Kim. Hong then earned her MFA in Poetry at the prestigious Iowa Writers' Workshop, where she first confronted the complexity of writing about race as a poet in the U.S. She lived in New York for many years, where she worked a series of odd jobs, ranging from barista and aromatherapeutic cleanser salesperson to fact checker and reporter for the *Village Voice*. Her first book, *Translating Mo'um* (2002), won the Pushcart Prize for work published by small presses, and her second, *Dance Dance Revolution* (2007), won the Barnard Women Poets Prize. She has also received fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts, the $165,000 Windham Campbell Prize, and a Fulbright scholarship, which allowed her to work as a journalist and translator in South Korea. The 2020 publication of *Minor Feelings*, which won the National Book Critics Circle Award and was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, launched Hong to national fame. In 2021, she was named one of the 100 most influential people in the world by *Time* magazine. As of 2022, she lives in Brooklyn and teaches poetry writing at Rutgers University in Newark, New Jersey.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In *Minor Feelings*, Cathy Park Hong places special emphasis on the connections between colonialism, U.S. policy, international migration patterns, and the challenges that Asian Americans face today. For instance, she emphasizes how the Korean War transformed life in Korea forever and put many Koreans (including her own parents) in contact with the U.S. for the first time. The Japanese Empire occupied Korea from 1910 to 1945, but after World War II, the U.S. and Soviet Union took it over, split it in two, and established authoritarian regimes in their respective halves. The North invaded the South, until a U.S.-led coalition pushed back and invaded the North, and then China did the same in the opposite direction. Eventually, the two sides reached a ceasefire in 1953, but not until more than three million people were killed, most of them civilians. At the time, Koreans were still banned from immigrating to the U.S., as the nation's immigration policy was based on a racist quota system that prioritized Northern and Western Europeans while severely restricting everyone else. People of Asian descent have lived in the present-day U.S. since long before the American Revolution and played a key role in much of its history, including in the construction of the transcontinental railroad and the growth of California's agriculture industry. But, starting with the famous Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the government put in place a series of policies designed to completely prohibit Asians from immigrating in the late 1800s and early 1900s. This meant that when the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act eliminated the racist quota system, people from Asia—and particularly highly-qualified professionals like doctors, engineers, and mechanics—were able to immigrate to the U.S. in substantial numbers for the first time in almost a century. In addition to contributing to the "model minority" narrative that Hong analyzes at length in *Minor Feelings*, this wave of immigration also sowed the seeds of a collective Asian American political consciousness—in fact, radical student activists at UC Berkeley coined the term "Asian American" in 1968. As of 2022, Asian Americans make up around six percent of the U.S. population, but this share is rapidly growing.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Before *Minor Feelings*, Cathy Park Hong published three books of poetry: *Translating Mo'um* (2002), *Dance Dance Revolution* (2007), and *Engine Empire* (2012). The second-to-last essay in *Minor Feelings* focuses on the life, death, and work of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, whose *Dictee* (1982) Hong cites as a major inspiration for her own poetry. Cha's brother, the biographer and translator John H. Cha, has written a memoir about her death entitled *The Rite of Truth: telling/retelling* (forthcoming in English). Hong also writes about how she has been influenced by her relationships with other poets, like her friend Prageeta Sharma and her mentor Myung Mi Kim. Sharma's poetry books include *Bliss to Fill* (2000) and *Grief Sequence* (2019), while Kim's include *Commons* (2002) and *Dura* (1999). Of the many other works of poetry that Hong praises for innovative takes on race in the U.S., two that stand out are Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014) and Bhanu Kapil's *The Vertical Interrogation of Strangers* (2000). Meanwhile, Hong argues that Jhumpa Lahiri's writing—most famously *The Interpreter of Maladies* (1999)—has come to serve as a template for much Asian American literature. In contrast, Hong celebrates writers like Ocean Vuong (*On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*) for breaking

the mold. Finally, Hong also cites a wide range of media throughout *Minor Feelings*. Richard Pryor's comedy specials, such as *Live in Concert* (1979), inspire Hong to talk differently about race, while Hollywood movies like *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) and *Moonrise Kingdom* (2012) reflect major trends in American culture. Hong also explores Asian American identity through documentaries like Wu Tsang's *Wildness* (2012), Ken Burns's *The Vietnam War* (2017), and Jeff Blitz's *Spellbound* (2002).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning
- **When Written:** 2015–2020
- **Where Written:** Primarily New York City
- **When Published:** February 2020
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Creative Nonfiction, Cultural Criticism, Essay Collection, Autobiography, Asian American Studies
- **Setting:** Los Angeles; New York City; Iowa City; and Oberlin, Ohio
- **Climax:** Hong concludes that she must repay her debt to her country and parents through her activism and art, rather than by chasing the "privatized dream" of success under capitalism.
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Between Two Worlds. In an ironic twist of fate, Cathy Park Hong met her husband, a white man from Brooklyn, while they were both living in Seoul.

PLOT SUMMARY

In her essay collection *Minor Feelings*, Korean American poet Cathy Park Hong connects her personal experiences of race and ethnicity to a broader analysis of Asian American identity, art, and politics in the U.S. today. She argues that Asian Americans are too often *spoken for* and too infrequently given the chance to actually *speak for themselves*. And she contends that they can learn to do the latter by listening to the "minor feelings" of the book's title: the negative emotions associated with being a racial minority in a country that simply doesn't acknowledge one's existence or perspective.

The book's first essay is called "United." One day, suddenly convinced that her old facial **tic** has returned, Hong falls into a deep depression. She visits a Korean American therapist (Eunice Cho), who refuses to treat her and won't say why. Outwardly, Hong's life seems perfect, but on the inside, she feels invisible and stuck. She realizes that she has always "struggled to prove [herself] into existence," which is troubling her poetry. In fact, Asian Americans are largely invisible in American culture, even though there are millions of them and they have been in the U.S. for centuries. When they *are* visible, it's usually through the model minority myth—which depicts them as intelligent, compliant, emotionless foreigners who will eventually become like white people if they keep working hard for long enough. Like many Asian Americans, Hong has internalized this myth and learned to compare herself to an impossible standard. She will need to shed it if she wants to overcome her depression and find her authentic voice as a writer.

In the next essay, "Stand Up," Hong explores how Richard Pryor's comedy helped her heal by enabling her to answer the question: "Who am I writing for?" The American education system and poetry community taught her to write for white people. This meant either ignoring her identity entirely or focusing on topics like trauma, resilience, and success, which would fit white readers' simplistic expectations for Asian American poetry. But by telling stories rooted in his own minor feelings, Richard Pryor showed her that it's possible to name and subvert stereotypes through art, too. Hong asks how she could incorporate the same strategy into her own writing. For instance, she imagines telling the story of the 1992 riots between Los Angeles's Black and Korean communities through the lens of the minor feelings of people who actually lived through it. Doing so would hopefully allow her to capture the situation's context and complexity, without simply turning one racial group into the hero and the other into the villain.

In "The End of White Innocence," Hong contrasts her own unhappy, chaotic, shame-filled childhood with the traditional American ideal of childhood as a time of innocence, purity, and exploration. Yet this concept has always been reserved for white children. Indeed, when movies like *Moonrise Kingdom* celebrate white childhood in the mid-20th century, their nostalgia is really about something else entirely: they're really yearning for the days when white people could profit from a systematically racist society without having to feel guilty about it. Today, white people often pursue the same "sheltered unknowingness" by avoiding situations that reminds them about racism—or even by calling people who point it out *anti-white racists*. Today, a story is considered "universal" if it is told from the perspectives of the world's small white minority. Hong asks what it would mean to instead tell stories from the perspective of the *true* global majority, the formerly colonized people who cannot just forget their families' and countries' history so easily.

Hong tries to answer this question in her fourth essay, "Bad English," which celebrates the accented, nonstandard, mixed dialects of English that immigrants actually speak. These dialects are often mocked on the schoolyard and in popular media, but Hong finds that they capture her experience and

worldview far better than standard English. Thus, unlike the countless Asian American writers who try to distance themselves from their families' and communities' speech, Hong declares that "Bad English is my heritage."

But whose bad English can Hong write? Since it's common for white artists to copy and profit off of non-white artists' work, many Americans now support the informal "stay in your lane" rule—that artists should only cover their own cultures and identities. But this idea is misguided: identities don't exist in homogeneous bubbles, and by removing all the diversity from their work, artists of color would be doing exactly what white writers do. Instead, Hong suggests the strategy that filmmaker Trinh T. Min-ha calls "speaking nearby" other cultures: telling stories about other people without trying to speak for them or declare what they mean.

Hong's next essay, "An Education," explores how her college friendship with two other ambitious Asian American students shaped her racial consciousness and creative work. Erin, her roommate, is a brilliant professional artist and one of her closest friends to this day. But Helen was unstable, domineering, and frequently violent. She developed serious drug addictions and plagiarized Hong's poetry, but she was also a visionary artist who astonished her teachers and classmates. (Hong doesn't regret falling out of touch with Helen after college.) Still, Hong, Erin, and Helen all played crucial roles in one another's development as artists: by taking one another seriously as artists, they built the kind of confidence that artists of color often struggle to cultivate.

The essay "Portrait of an Artist" focuses on the story of Korean American poet Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, who was raped and murdered in 1982. Just a few days earlier, Cha had published her book Dictee, a groundbreaking multilingual work of poetry, memoir, and history that interlaces stories about Cha's own mother with those of martyrs like Yu Guan Soon and Joan of Arc. To Hong, Cha was one of the first writers who captured the simultaneous insight and invisibility that comes with being Asian American. Cha truly developed her own voice, beyond the confines of stereotype. So, Hong explores the lack of scholarly and media attention to Cha's death, which is usually passed over quickly (and occasionally treated as a secret "answer key" for interpreting her work). Does detailing the evidence about Cha's violent death do her justice, Hong asks, or merely dehumanize her? Justice, Hong decides, at least up to a certain point. She interviews Cha's friends and family members and explains how Cha's brother John helped lead the search for her body.

Hong's final essay, "The Indebted," returns to Asian Americans in general. Today, many Asian Americans try to define their place in mainstream U.S. society through the strategy from the movie *Crazy Rich Asians*: they try to make a ton of money and buy their way in. This solution is convenient because many young Asian Americans feel indebted to their immigrant parents and see building wealth as a natural way to pay them back. But Hong views it as untenable, most of all because the only way for Asian Americans to build wealth is by joining the same racist, capitalist, and imperialist system that has long excluded them and inflicted violence on their families overseas. She proposes another option instead: solidarity. Asian Americans should bond with other Americans of color and present a united front against racism in all of its manifestations. Artists should particularly focus on fighting "racial containment" norms, which insist that white artists and writers can make universal claims, while artists and writers of color can only write about their own groups' particular experiences. Of course, this has been Hong's goal in this book, and only time will tell if she succeeds in spurring a broader social change.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Cathy Park Hong – Hong is the author of *Minor Feelings* and a prominent Korean American poet and writing professor. She was born and raised in Los Angeles, then educated at Oberlin College and the Iowa Writers' Workshop in the Midwest. As of the early 2020s, she lives in New York City. In this book, she explores different elements of the Asian American experience, ranging from her personal experiences with racism and the "minor feelings" they have provoked to the specific challenges Asian American women face and the question of what "Asian American" truly means in the diverse contemporary U.S.

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha – Theresa Hak Kyung Cha was a Korean American poet and photographer who published the influential book Dictee in 1982, just a few days before a security guard, Joseph Sanza, raped and murdered her. Her book, which is now considered foundational to Asian American literature, explores the intersection of political violence, womanhood, imperialism, and historical trauma by juxtaposing the stories of women like the Korean martyr Yu Guan Soon, Cha's own mother, and Joan of Arc. Cathy Park Hong cites Cha's work as a key inspiration for her own and explores the significance of her life, death, and critical reception in the essay "Portrait of an Artist." In particular, Hong argues that *Dictee*'s careful use of language captures the psychological reality of immigration and colonization, and that its content captures how many Korean women and immigrants carry traumatic histories with them. Hong also uses Cha's story as a case study to investigate what Asian American art really is and what it means to study it—including how to describe identity's influence on art without entirely reducing art to identity, as well as how to "pay proper tribute" to the legacy of earlier Asian American literature.

Erin – "Erin" is Hong's pseudonym for her college roommate, a successful Taiwanese American visual artist who remains a

close friend to this day. The essay "An Education" focuses on Hong's relationship with Erin and their mutual friend Helen in college. In this essay, Hong portrays Erin as a brilliant, ambitious student who works hard to overcome the prejudices that Asian women face in the arts—but also struggles to cope with Helen's anger, jealousy, and instability. Hong praises Erin's loyalty and support as a friend, which she credits with nourishing her "creative imagination" and encouraging her to take herself seriously as an artist. However, Erin also expresses concern that Hong may violate her and Helen's privacy by writing about them.

Helen – "Helen" is Hong's pseudonym for a close college friend who, along with their mutual friend Erin, fed her creative imagination and inspired her to become a poet. However, Helen was also violent and highly emotionally unstable (much like Hong's own mother), which led her and Hong to fall out of touch after college. A Korean international student who grew up in several different countries, Helen arrived at Oberlin as a talented violinist but decided to quit and become a visual artist instead. Although she was an outstanding, highly driven artist, she was also very difficult to love: she almost never slept, struggled with addiction, frequently assaulted other students, disappeared for days at a time, and even attempted suicide on campus. Hong's essay "An Education" largely focuses on the complexity of her love-hate friendship with Helen. Their relationship nourished her creatively but also forced her to relive much of the trauma associated with American racism, the Korean War, and family violence—as well as the experience of Korean women and Asian Americans more generally.

Cathy Park Hong's Father – Cathy Park Hong's father grew up relatively poor in a village near Seoul, and as a child, he watched a U.S. soldier nearly murder his own father (Hong's paternal grandfather) in cold blood during the Korean War. After the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act enabled skilled Asian immigrants to get visas, Hong's father pretended to be a mechanic and migrated to the U.S. with Hong's mother. However, he spent most of his career working as a life insurance salesman in Los Angeles. Eventually he managed to buy an industrial warehouse, which funded Hong's education. Yet Hong warns her readers against interpreting her father's story as a classic "model immigrant" story: he was also a belligerent heavy drinker, and he was always distinctly aware of (and highly frustrated with) the racism he faced from white Americans.

Cathy Park Hong's Mother – Cathy Park Hong's mother migrated with her husband (Hong's father) from South Korea to the U.S., where they raised their two daughters (Hong and her sister). Hong emphasizes that her relationship with her mother was tumultuous, combative, and often violent, and she admits that she's not yet ready to address it directly in her writing. However, Hong also highlights how she was shaped by observing white Americans' racism toward her mother—for instance, adults often spoke to her mother like a child, in part because of stereotypes about Asian women and in part because she struggled to express herself in English. Hong found this humiliating, particularly because her mother was an intelligent, dignified woman who was highly articulate when speaking Korean.

Cathy Park Hong's Paternal Grandfather – Cathy Park Hong's paternal grandfather was nearly murdered by American soldiers during the Korean War, when they mistook him for someone else. Hong's father, who was a young child, never forgets the incident. Hong cites this story to point out how immigration and Asian American identity are inherently linked to the U.S. government's imperialism and atrocities overseas.

Cathy Park Hong's Maternal Grandmother – Cathy Park Hong's grandmother was born in North Korea but carried Hong's mother across the border to South Korea on foot during the Korean War. Later, she frequently visited the U.S., where she suffered racist abuse from white people—including from a group of children, who mocked her accent and kicked her over. Hong emphasizes the contrast between these two stories because they show how racism dehumanizes Asian Americans, making their perspectives and stories invisible. To Hong's dismay, her grandmother died in a wretched nursing home in Seoul in 2008.

Richard Pryor – Richard Pryor was a Black comedian who became a household name across the U.S. in the 1970s and 1980s. Today, many consider him one of the greatest stand-up performers of all time. Cathy Park Hong argues that Pryor mastered the art of challenging his audience's expectations about race by telling stories grounded in personal experience. She presents his comedy as a key example of how artists can use minor feelings as a jumping-off point for finding their own voices and thinking deeply about American racism.

Eunice Cho – "Eunice Cho" is Cathy Park Hong's euphemism for a Korean American therapist whom she briefly sees in New York. After one appointment, Cho refuses to continue treating Hong, for mysterious reasons that she prefers not to state. Hong connects this situation to her reflections on the role of doubt, invisibility, and "minor feelings" in Asian Americans' experiences.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Bernadette Cha – Bernadette Cha is Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's sister who appears in Cha's video Permutations.

John Cha – John Cha, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's brother, is a professional translator and biographer who wrote a book about his sister's death (and his personal involvement in investigating it).

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's mother – Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's mother is the central figure in Cha's book, Dictee.

Sandy Flitterman-Lewis – Sandy Flitterman-Lewis is a film scholar who was a close friend of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha. In fact, Cha was supposed to meet with Flitterman-Lewis on the night of her murder, and Hong interviews Flitterman-Lewis about the case.

Myung Mi Kim – Myung Mi Kim is a prominent Korean American poet. Cathy Park Hong took a class with her in college and has been significantly influenced by her work ever since.

Joseph Sanza – Joseph ("Joey") Sanza is the serial rapist and security guard who raped and murdered Theresa Hak Kyung Cha in 1982.

Yuri Kochiyama – Yuri Kochiyama was a Japanese American civil rights activist who played a prominent role in the civil rights movement.

TERMS

Dictee – *Dictee* is **Theresa Hak Kyung Cha**'s only book, which was published just a few days before her death in 1982. The book mixes genres, languages, and storylines to explore women's place in revolutions and social upheavals. It focuses on figures like Cha's mother, Joan of Arc, goddesses from Greek mythology, and the Korean martyr Yu Guan Soon.

Minor Feelings – "Minor feelings" is **Cathy Park Hong**'s term for the negative emotions that people of color feel when the white perspective that dominates U.S. cultural life clashes with and discredits their own reality.

Model Minority Myth – The model minority myth is the pervasive, racist idea that Asians have achieved disproportionate levels of wealth, professional success, and social integration in the U.S. because they have unique qualities (like being unusually intelligent, hardworking, grateful, compliant, family-minded, and law-abiding).

Permutations – *Permutations* is a short film that **Theresa Hak Kyung Cha** made early in her career. The film features a series of headshots of Cha's sister **Bernadette** from different angles, with one frame of Cha herself subtly spliced in.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

ASIAN AMERICAN POLITICS

The seven essays in Cathy Park Hong's *Minor Feelings* ask what it means to be Asian American in the 21st century. Hong contrasts the "minor feelings" of invisibility, shame, and resentment that have defined her racial consciousness with the "model minority" story often told about Asian Americans—which suggests that they are hardworking, enterprising, and intelligent but also uninspiring, emotionless, and interchangeable. For Hong, this story is actually dehumanization disguised as praise: by presenting Asian Americans as heirs to the U.S.'s immigrant legacy, the model minority story argues that the U.S. is a fair society where success depends solely on individual effort. In turn, if the U.S. is a meritocracy, then Americans of color—including Asian Americans—cannot blame their problems on racism, but only on themselves. Yet this story doesn't line up with most Asian Americans' real-life experiences. While diverse, these experiences share a few common traits: many Asian Americans feel either unwanted or fetishized, completely invisible or reduced to absurd stereotypes. White Americans often view Asian Americans as irrelevant outliers living on the fringes of society, so they almost never consider what Asian Americans' lives and communities are actually like. Thus, Asian Americans like Hong are forced to live with the knowledge that society has oversimplified and reduced what it means to be Asian in the United States, ultimately discounting Asian Americans' reality, perspective, and voice.

In response, the model minority story offers Asian Americans a devil's bargain: it promises them equality in the future, so long as they agree to remain invisible in the present. Taking this deal and seeking respectable, professional jobs in the capitalist economy is the "default way of life" for many Asian Americans, Hong argues—movies like *Crazy Rich Asians* even celebrate this choice. After all, immigrants' children often feel indebted to their parents and see building wealth as a way to repay that debt. But Hong argues that capitalism's promise of racial equality is an illusion: while the model minority myth suggests that Asian Americans can only ever find belonging in the U.S. by changing *themselves* and assimilating into white American culture, Hong believes that Asian Americans should seek this belonging by changing *American culture* instead. She proposes that Asian Americans band together with other groups and fight to replace the current U.S. system of racial hierarchy with a more tolerant, egalitarian one—one in which the nation values the perspectives, norms, and interests of people of color just as much as it values those of white people.

ART, VOICE, AND AUDIENCE

Cathy Park Hong may be best known for *Minor Feelings*, but she is first and foremost a poet. This is why her struggle to understand racism and identity

is so closely tied to her quest to find an authentic authorial voice. She admits that, since she went through the U.S. school system, she was "raised and educated to please white people." She grew up expecting her audiences to be white, and she learned that those audiences also have specific expectations about what she, as a Korean American woman writing poetry in English, should be producing for them. She acknowledges that these expectations have influenced her work, so her own voice isn't even entirely hers: rather, it's conditioned by her audience, and that audience is conditioned by American racism.

As Hong tries to counteract racism's influence on her voice and work, she asks herself two crucial questions: who is she writing to, and whose behalf is she writing on? Put differently, who is the right audience for Asian American literature, and what does it mean to represent a group as diverse as "Asian Americans" in the first place? There are no easy or universal answers to these questions, but they are still extremely important—to the point that the questions themselves speak to a key element that Hong believes is at play in Asian American art. In fact, Hong believes that *all* artists of color must deliberately unlearn the industry convention of adapting their work to an imagined white audience and then choose their voice and audience for themselves. Hong, for her own part, argues that it's important to embrace alternative approaches to language (including the nonnative dialects she calls "bad English") and try to "speak nearby" other groups, or include their voices and perspectives without "speaking for" them. Yet there is no single right answer to her questions about voice and audience. Rather, she hopes that these questions will become topics of active debate in the world of Asian American art and literature, and she hopes that critics will learn to view the way each artist approaches such questions as a defining characteristic of their work—just like a poet's choice of form or a visual artist's choice of medium.

HISTORY, IGNORANCE, AND RACISM

Cathy Park Hong argues that white and nonwhite Americans tend to think differently about the past. Families of color are likely to have come to the U.S. more recently, under more pressing circumstances, and this informs their perspectives on American life. This is especially true of Asian Americans, Hong notes, and she uses her own Korean American community as an example. Hong's parents lived through the Japanese occupation, the Korean War, and the Rhee dictatorship. Then, they moved to start life anew in a foreign but rather unwelcoming country. Together, Hong argues, this traumatic history gives Korean Americans a feeling of *han*—or a characteristic mix of "bitterness, wistfulness, shame, melancholy, and vengefulness." But other immigrants have their own versions of *han*, too; their migration stories are tied to other kinds of conflict, violence, and hardship, which are often the result of U.S. foreign policy.

In contrast, Hong notes, many white Americans have very little understanding of history, especially when it comes to race relations. Their information about the past tends to come from popular culture, which often erases nonwhite people from history. For instance, Hong notes that Wes Anderson's *Moonrise Kingdom* offers a nostalgic fantasy of the 1960s, but without people of color and the civil rights movement involved. Such fantasies appeal primarily to white viewers and shape the way they think about the past—for instance, they are more likely to think of the U.S. as a traditionally white country and see diversity as a new phenomenon. Similarly, Hong argues that innocence and ignorance play a similar role in white childhood: while nonwhite children learn about racism through experience, white children have the privilege of remaining ignorant of it. Thanks to this "sheltered unknowingness," white children don't have to recognize how they benefit from racism, nor do they think about how to stop it.

In short, Hong argues that one reason racism remains an unspoken cultural norm in the U.S. is because many white Americans don't understand their own racist beliefs and behaviors. They don't understand why Asian families like Hong's immigrate to the U.S., which they believe (contrary to historical evidence) to have historically been an all-white country. And they often don't understand the links between Asian American migration and U.S. foreign policy. Thus, Hong argues that teaching accurate information about U.S. history—particularly the history of immigration and U.S. involvement in other countries—would help white Americans develop the same sense of history that many Asian American immigrants already have. For Hong, providing this basic education is one of the most tangible, effective ways that Americans can fight racism today.

FRIENDSHIP AND SOLIDARITY

In *Minor Feelings*, beyond her complex arguments about the nature of identity, racism, history, and art, Cathy Park Hong also makes a more straightforward case for the importance of human connection. The childhood memories and adulthood depression that she describes in the first half of the book contrast strongly with the intense—if often tumultuous—relationships that she emphasizes in the second half. Her college friendship with Erin and Helen helps her build confidence and develop as an artist, her marriage helps her overcome her depression, and when she becomes a mother, her relationship with her daughter drives her to contemplate the future of Asian American life in the U.S. (Arguably, this logic could even extend to Hong's intense interest in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, even though they've never met, since Cha's book Dictee showed Hong what it would truly look like to write in her own voice.) Hong links U.S. culture's prevailing individualism with the minor feelings (like loneliness, alienation, and shame) that she has long felt as a Korean American. But she also shows that she overcame those feelings

through loving relationships with people who share or support her identity. At the end of book, she extends this observation to the political arena: where American culture tends to prefer individualistic solutions to political problems (like trying to overcome discrimination through individual hard work), Hong proposes fighting for collective change based on love and solidarity. She uses Japanese American activist Yuri Kochiyama's work with diverse causes during the civil rights movement as an example of how the "model of mutual aid and alliance" can lift up everyone, if only everyone is willing to accept help and solidarity.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

HONG'S TIC

Cathy Park Hong uses her tics—both a real one in her twenties and an imagined one in her thirties—to represent how racism insidiously affects Asian Americans, afflicting them with minor feelings and leading them to undermine themselves. Hong's original tic starts in graduate school: part of her face involuntarily spasms from time to time, until a surgeon solves the problem by separating the nerves that have twisted together near her ear. This happens during a period when she is struggling with the role that her identity should play in her writing—her graduate school classmates believe that poetry should be race-neutral, meaning that it should read as though it were written by a white person, and they consider poets who deviate from this norm to be "unintellectual identitarian[s]." Yet if Hong accepted this norm, it would mean deviating from her true self. Hong's tic represents how these competing demands complicate her quest to find and write in her own voice. Literally, they twist up her nerves, depriving her of control over her own face (or identity).

Seven years later, Hong suddenly convinces herself that her tic has come back, even though it actually hasn't. She opens the book with the tale of this experience, which served as a prelude to a serious bout of depression. Hong connects this depression to the sense of shame, invisibility, and inadequacy that she associates with being an Asian American—and, above all, an Asian American poet expected to write for a white audience. In turn, her imaginary tic is subtle but unmistakable trace of the fact at the center of her book: American racism gets under Asian Americans' skin and affects their sense of self at a deep, enduring level.

THERESA HAK KYUNG CHA'S HANDS AND GLOVES

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's hands and gloves represent the complex relationship between art and life. Hong begins her chapter on Cha by describing how Cha delivered a series of photographs to a gallery right before Joseph Sanza raped and murdered her. Cha would be showing the photographs, which depicted different people's hands, in an upcoming exhibit. Later, at the end of the essay, Hong notes that the first thing Cha's brother John encountered when he stumbled on her crime scene was her bloodied glove, which appeared to be full of air but quickly deflated. John calls it his sister's "final art piece." Remarkably, her photography exhibit was planned for later the same day.

This coincidence points to the broader, disturbing parallel between Cha's work and her death. Life appears to have imitated art in this situation, not only because Dictee's focus on violence against women can be seen as predicting Cha's murder, but also because her physical hands were found to be absent in her glove at the same time as they were present in her art. One way to interpret this coincidence would be to say that the image of the deflating, bloodied glove suggests that Cha's spirit somehow departed it—presumably to relocate itself in her exhibit (her artwork). Of course, it's also significant that hands are the central tools in virtually all of the labor that human beings perform—including the literary and creative work done by artists like Hong and Cha. However, Hong also consistently warns her readers against trying to treat Cha's death as an "answer key" to the meaning of her work. Thus, readers should view these coincidences as a starting point for further analysis about Cha's life and work but not as a definitive statement about their meaning.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Random House edition of *Minor Feelings* published in 2021.

United Quotes

❝ My face was no longer my face but a mask of trembling nerves threatening to mutiny. There was a glitch in the machine. Any second, a nerve could misfire and spasm like a snaking hose hissing water. I thought about my face so much I could *feel* my nerves, and my nerves felt ticklish. The face is the most naked part of ourselves, but we don't realize it until the face is somehow injured, and then all we think of is its naked condition.

Related Characters: Cathy Park Hong (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

Cathy Park Hong opens *Minor Feelings* by describing how, one day, she suddenly felt that her old facial tic had returned. Even though a surgeon had fixed it years ago by untwisting her nerves, she became convinced that it was going to come back at any moment. This may seem like an unusual starting point for a book about Asian American politics and literature, but Hong uses this tic—and the depression that follows it—as a metaphor for her experience with race in the U.S. With her "imaginary tic," Hong felt that her body was escaping her control. She could no longer trust it, and she became hyper-aware of her appearance, which seemed to no longer faithfully reflect her inner self.

Hong argues that life for many Asian Americans is defined by a similar sense of tension and powerlessness as the feeling that arose because of her tic. For one, white Americans tend to view her in terms of stereotypes that she can't control. Not only is the self that everyone else sees not her true self, but it actually *betrays* her true self. Asian Americans like her are either viewed as unassimilable foreigners or "next in line to be white," assimilated and grateful for the chance to live in the U.S. But neither of these assumptions captures their true experience, which is often defined by what Hong later calls "minor feelings"—frustration, anxiety, and desperation at the pervasiveness of racism and exclusion. It's little surprise that Hong feels many of these same emotions in reaction to her "imaginary tic."

> I was finally living the New York life I wanted. I was recently married and had just finished writing a book. There was no reason for me to be depressed. But anytime I was happy, the fear of an awful catastrophe would follow, so I made myself feel awful to preempt the catastrophe's hitting. Overtaxed by this anxiety, I sank into deep depression. A friend said that when she was depressed, she felt like a "sloth that fell from its tree." An apt description. I was dull, depleted, until I had to go out and interface with the public, and then I felt flayed.

Related Characters: Cathy Park Hong (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

Oddly enough, Hong's depression sets in precisely when she achieves her dream "New York life." This may seem like a bizarre paradox, but upon closer analysis, it makes perfect sense. In her first essay, Hong argues that this is a common situation among Asian Americans: even when they are succeeding by all the ordinary social and financial metrics, they feel lost and invisible. She argues that this often happens because they occupy a "vague purgatorial status" in U.S. society and learn to view themselves from the perspective of white people, which leads them to feel inadequate, no matter how much money they make. In other words, even when Asian Americans achieve the so-called "American Dream" of wealth, it's still common for them to feel that they haven't achieved acceptance. They are still invisible, stereotyped, or simply excluded from mainstream society, and they still spend their everyday lives largely surrounded by people who do not fully respect their humanity. At the end of her book, Hong compares this situation to a feeling of constant *indebtedness*. The children of immigrants, in particular, feel obligated to repay an unrepayable debt to their parents and country, and it's often not until they succeed in their careers that they realize that they will never be able to fully repay it.

> For as long as I could remember, I have struggled to prove myself into existence. I, the modern-day scrivener, working five times as hard as others and still I saw my hand dissolve, then my arm.
>
> [...]
>
> In the popular imagination, Asian Americans inhabit a vague purgatorial status: not white enough nor black enough; distrusted by African Americans, ignored by whites, unless we're being used by whites to keep the black man down. We are the carpenter ants of the service industry, the apparatchiks of the corporate world. We are math-crunching middle managers who keep the corporate wheels greased but who never get promoted since we don't have the right "face" for leadership. We have a content problem. They think we have no inner resources. But while I may look impassive, I am frantically paddling my feet underwater, always overcompensating to hide my devouring feelings of inadequacy.

Related Characters: Cathy Park Hong (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

Hong introduces what she views as the general predicament of Asian American life. Of course, she emphasizes that not all Asian Americans share this experience—on the contrary, the majority of them probably do not, but it *is* the way that "the popular imagination" views them. And analyzing this situation is crucial to understanding the norms, policies, and prejudices that prevent Asian Americans from achieving wider cultural acceptance in the U.S.

Hong describes this condition by portraying her own professional life through a powerful metaphor: the harder she works, she suggests, the more she starts to disappear. Like other minority groups, Asian Americans are welcomed in the U.S. today primarily as laborers—the only difference is that they generally work in professional and corporate jobs, not manual labor. Their population is relatively small and extremely diverse, so they often lack a coherent political and cultural identity, and they are frequently viewed as impersonable and interchangeable. This is why Hong imagines herself fading into invisibility as she writes: the harder Asian Americans work within contemporary corporate capitalism, the less visible they become in society as a whole. Hong's purpose in this book is to propose an alternative model, through which Asian Americans can achieve the acceptance, recognition, and cultural influence that they deserve.

When the 1965 immigration ban was lifted by the United States, my father saw an opportunity. Back then, only select professionals from Asia were granted visas to the United States: doctors, engineers, and mechanics. This screening process, by the way, is how the whole model minority quackery began: the U.S. government only allowed the most educated and highly trained Asians in and then took all the credit for their success. *See! Anyone can live the American Dream!* they'd say about a doctor who came into the country already a doctor.

Related Characters: Cathy Park Hong (speaker), Cathy Park Hong's Father

Related Themes:

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

Many Americans stereotypically associate Asian Americans with prestigious professional fields—especially science, medicine, and engineering—but most do not know this is the result of a specific, fateful policy decision by the U.S. government. Until 1965, the U.S. strictly limited immigration from outside Northern and Western Europe, regions whose people the government deemed racially and culturally superior. In 1965, Congress finally overturned this racist policy but restricted visas to highly qualified professionals instead. As a result, the largest wave of immigrants from Asia to the U.S. were "doctors, engineers, and mechanics" in the late 20th century. This is why, in the public imagination, Asian Americans are often assumed to be educated professional immigrants (and their children) who work in these fields. It's also the root of the "model minority" myth—and the notion that Asian Americans' success proves that the U.S. is a meritocracy.

Of course, Hong emphasizes that this is by no means the only Asian American story: Asian Americans have been present in the U.S. for many centuries, and many of the most recent Asian immigrants to the U.S. are working-class or refugees. Nevertheless, she also argues that understanding the way that the government deliberately shaped the Asian American population through immigration policy is crucial to making sense of Asian Americans' political and social status today. To take one example, without understanding this history, many Americans believe in absurd stereotypes, like the idea that Asian American students are simply more intelligent and hardworking. These stereotypes disadvantage Asian American students who don't fit the mold and, even more worrisomely, bolster even more dangerous stereotypes about Black, Latinx, and Native American students.

My classmate's repellent post was almost easier to handle than my graduate school experience, because the slow drip of racism at Iowa was underhanded. I always second-guessed myself, questioning why I was being paranoid. I remember the wall of condescension whenever I brought up racial politics in workshop. Eventually, I internalized their condescension, mocked other ethnic poetry as too ethnicky. It was made clear to me that the subject of Asian identity itself was insufficient and inadequate unless it was paired with a meatier subject, like capitalism. I knew other writers of color at Iowa who scrubbed ethnic markers from their poetry and fiction because they didn't want to be branded as identitarians. Looking back, I realized all of them were, curiously, Asian American.

Related Characters: Cathy Park Hong (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 16-7

Explanation and Analysis

Hong explains how she began to confront the perils of writing as an Asian American when she attended graduate school at the prestigious Iowa Writers' Workshop. One of her classmates wrote a racist post criticizing her work and joking about murdering her, but she didn't find this outright prejudice nearly as troubling as "the slow drip of racism" that taught her to view her own voice as unserious and untrustworthy. Crucially, Hong notes that this dimension of the racism was "underhanded"—it operated through implicit messages, which taught people like her to internalize a sense of inferiority.

Because white writers and critics dominate the American literary world, Hong argues, writers of color often have to imitate a white voice and erase all traces of their own ethnicity—which also means their own family history and much of their everyday experience—unless they want to be pigeonholed as "ethnicky" and unserious. For Hong, this reflects a broader trend in U.S. culture: white people are viewed as neutral, universal, and objective, while people of any other ethnicity are seen as exotic aberrations, who should only be thought about in exceptional situations. For instance, museums, bookstores, and universities do not usually categorize the work of nonwhite writers as "American," because in the public imagination, "American" still means "white." One of Hong's primary goals in this book is to determine how Asian Americans can find a middle ground between these two pitfalls—erasing their voices to sound white or being categorized as ethnic exceptions.

Patiently educating a clueless white person about race is draining. It takes all your powers of persuasion. Because it's more than a chat about race. It's ontological. It's like explaining to a person why you exist, or why you feel pain, or why your reality is distinct from their reality. Except it's even trickier than that. Because the person has all of Western history, politics, literature, and mass culture on their side, proving that you don't exist.
In other words, I didn't know whether to tell this guy to fuck off or give him a history lesson. "We were here since 1587!" I could have said. "So what's the hold up? Where's our white Groupon?" Most Americans know nothing about Asian Americans. They think *Chinese* is synecdoche for *Asians* the way *Kleenex* is for *tissues*.

Related Characters: Cathy Park Hong (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 18-9

Explanation and Analysis

Because Asian Americans are so often invisible and forgotten in the U.S. mainstream, many white Americans don't know the first thing about their lives, cultural backgrounds, or history. For example, they assume that all Asian Americans are Chinese or recently immigrated to the U.S.—even though they actually come from dozens of different countries and many of them have been in the U.S. for generations.

As a result of these common misconceptions, Asian Americans like Hong often find themselves explaining the same basic facts over and over to the people who surround them. For instance, Hong recalls how the white owner of a gallery where she gave a reading approached her to proudly exclaim that "Asians are next in line to be white." In this passage, she points out how absurd this assumption is: Asian Americans have been in the U.S. since the 1500s and still face widespread discrimination and exclusion. This conversation speaks to the way that white ignorance is one of the main driving forces behind minor feelings: Asian Americans constantly have to deal with white people who proclaim to know everything there is to know about Asian Americans, even though they actually know nothing. Of course, this episode also illustrates why Hong thinks it's so important for *all* Americans to learn about Asian American history.

The writer Jeff Chang writes that "I want to love us" but he says that he can't bring himself to do that because he doesn't know who "us" is. I share that uncertainty. 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. Since the late sixties, when Asian American activists protested with the Black Panthers, there hasn't been a mass movement we can call our own. Will "we," a pronoun I use cautiously, solidify into a common collective, or will we remain splintered, so that some of us remain "foreign" or "brown" while others, through wealth or intermarriage, "pass" into whiteness?

Related Characters: Cathy Park Hong (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 28-9

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of her first essay, Hong addresses the key question that lurks in the background of her whole book: who is "us?" What does "Asian American" even mean? After all, almost nobody ethnically identifies as "Asian American"—rather, people tend to identify with their national origins as "Korean Americans," "Indian Americans," and so on. So why should we lump together millions of different people under the term "Asian American," and what is Hong talking about when she writes about "the" Asian American experience or consciousness?

These questions are too complex to justify simple answers, but Hong does try to offer some general guidelines. She points out that the category "Asian American" is intended to emphasize what people share—without downplaying the diversity among them. She highlights the term's origins in political activism, but also admits that such activism has all but disappeared. And she notes that different ethnic Asian Americans get racialized—or incorporated into the U.S.'s racial hierarchy—in different ways.

In fact, Hong's deeper purpose in posing these questions is to suggest that her book can serve as an answer to them. While it is unclear whether Asian Americans will "solidify into a common collective" so far, Hong hopes that her work can help make this a reality. In particular, she hopes to show people how much they stand to gain by banding together around the concept of an "Asian American" collective.

> It's like being ghosted, I suppose, where, deprived of all social cues, I have no relational gauge for my own behavior. I ransack my mind for what I could have done, could have said. I stop trusting what I see, what I hear. My ego is in free fall while my superego is boundless, railing that my existence is not enough, never enough, so I become compulsive in my efforts to do better, *be* better, blindly following this country's gospel of self-interest, proving my individual worth by expanding my net worth, until I vanish.

Related Characters: Cathy Park Hong (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

Hong compares her experience with American racism to "being ghosted" (which is when someone abruptly cuts off contact with another person without warning or explanation). She is talking about the way that white people and institutions ignore her, and Asian Americans are totally left out of conversations about the U.S.'s present and future. They're frequently even left out of official statistics. At best, they are an afterthought; but usually, they are not even part of white people's frame of reference, and so they don't have a way to gauge their status. In particular, they often don't have enough information to know whether personal slights—like "being bullied, or passed over for promotion, or cut off every time [they] talk"—are really about race. Hong argues that this is like being ghosted because it is impossible to know if she is invisible because she is doing everything right, or because she isn't even being counted. Of course, this sense of invisibility also feeds into the "model minority" myth by falsely promising that Asians can become visible if only they work harder, become wealthier, and buy status for themselves.

Stand Up Quotes

> The poet's audience is the institution. We rely on the higher jurisdiction of academia, prize jury panels, and fellowships to gain social capital. A poet's precious avenue for mainstream success is through an award system dependent on the painstaking compromise of a jury panel, which can often guarantee that the anointed book will be free of aesthetic or political risk.
> Watching Pryor, I realized that I was still writing to that institution. It's a hard habit to kick. I've been raised and educated to please white people and this desire to please has become ingrained into my consciousness. Even to declare that I'm writing for myself would still mean I'm writing to a part of me that wants to please white people.
>
> I didn't know how to escape it.

Related Characters: Cathy Park Hong (speaker), Richard Pryor

Related Themes:

Page Number: 40-1

Explanation and Analysis

In her second essay, Hong explains how her yearlong episode of depression led her to question the purpose and effects of her poetry. She admits that, like all thinkers and artists, her creative development has depended largely on

the institutions that trained her. Specifically, she has learned to write in and for university creative writing departments, and poets linked to academia control virtually all of the levers of power in the U.S. poetry world. Unsurprisingly, the vast majority of these poets are white, and this influences their social norms, aesthetic preferences, and official decisions. Too often, poetry written from nonwhite perspectives simply falls on deaf ears.

This is why Hong concludes that she has "been raised and educated to please white people"—and that she needs to reevaluate her work's audience if she wants to truly discover her voice. Indeed, she emphasizes that voice isn't just the natural product of a writer's inner being—instead, it always depends on the way that a specific writer wants to communicate to their specific audience. Thus, if Hong wants to find a voice that feels true to her inner self and can communicate what she truly wants to say, she also has to define her audience. This is, in part, why she worries so much about the meaning of "Asian American." She knows that she cannot continue to write for white audiences, but she also cannot write only for other Korean American women like herself. Yet writing for Asian Americans is a feasible middle ground that will let her explore the connections between her personal experience and U.S. politics as a whole, without forcing her to justify her existence at every turn.

> How naïve to think that my invisibility meant I could play God! If Whitman's *I* contained multitudes, my *I* contained 5.6 percent of this country. Readers, teachers, and editors told me in so many words that I should write whatever felt true to my heart but that since I was Asian, I might as well stick to the subject of Asians, even though no one cared about Asians, but what choice did I have since if I wrote about, say, nature, no one would care because I was an Asian person writing about nature?
>
> I suspected that if a reader read my poem and *then* saw my name, the fuse of the poem would blow out, leading the reader to think, I thought I liked the poem but on second thought, I can't relate to it.

Related Characters: Cathy Park Hong (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 42

Explanation and Analysis

Hong describes how, when she first began writing poetry, she felt a sensation of dizzying freedom: in a poem, she could be anyone and explore anything. She could transcend her dull, miserable daily life as a high school student—where her peers defined her, above all, by her race.

But when Hong tried to show her poetry to other people, she faced a kind of creative whiplash: suddenly, her identity mattered far *too* much. She could no longer escape it; anything that she wrote suddenly became an *Asian* poem. If she wrote about Asians, then her work would be seen as little more than a curious novelty, an exotic report on what an exotic group of people think. If she wrote about anything else, then readers would question her authority to speak about it and wonder why she *wasn't* writing about being Asian. In other words, her identity put her poetry in a lose-lose situation, because it meant that readers simply would not try to relate to it. Indeed, Hong thinks, most American readers view writers of color as though they're speaking from the other side of a great divide. They humanize white writers but objectify nonwhite ones, and until readers start to humanize everyone, writers of color will not be on equal footing.

> The ethnic literary project has always been a humanist project in which nonwhite writers must prove they are human beings who feel pain. Will there be a future where I, on the page, am simply I, on the page, and not I, proxy for a whole ethnicity, imploring you to believe we are human beings who feel pain? I don't think, therefore I am—I *hurt*, therefore I am. Therefore, my books are graded on a pain scale. If it's 2, maybe it's not worth telling my story. If it's 10, maybe my book will be a bestseller.

Related Characters: Cathy Park Hong (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 49

Explanation and Analysis

White people's historical dominance in U.S. (and global) literature has dire consequences for writers of color because it determines the reception of their work. Whereas white writers are viewed as merely describing the (race-neutral) human condition, nonwhite writers are viewed as visitors from another world, coming to report what their people have lived, felt, and thought. Indeed, books are often white readers' primary source of exposure to people of color's thoughts, or even their sole indication that nonwhite

people are fully human (in the sense that their sensibilities, experiences, and abilities are just as sophisticated as white people's).

This trend has created a pernicious norm: writers of color are expected to tell sob stories on behalf of their whole race, as part of a plea to white people to take their humanity seriously. And often, their work is "graded on a pain scale"—the more suffering it exhibits, the better white readers like it. Needless to say, grading literature on a single criterion fails to do it justice. It would be like judging *all* paintings by how accurately they depict shadows. And its true purpose is largely to feed white readers' sense of superiority. In order for readers to finally take her work seriously, Hong argues, she must seek to break free from this norm. This doesn't mean being able to write about race without mentioning suffering, but rather being able to mention suffering (or not) without having one's work defined solely by it in the public eye.

❝ In Pryor, I saw someone channel what I call minor feelings: 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. Minor feelings arise, for instance, upon hearing a slight, knowing it's racial, and being told, *Oh, that's all in your head.* A now-classic book that explores minor feelings is Claudia Rankine's *Citizen.* After hearing a racist remark, the speaker asks herself, What did you say? She saw what she saw, she heard what she heard, but after her reality has been belittled so many times, she begins to doubt her very own senses. Such disfiguring of senses engenders the minor feelings of paranoia, shame, irritation, and melancholy.

Related Characters: Cathy Park Hong (speaker), Richard Pryor

Related Themes:

Page Number: 55

Explanation and Analysis

Hong summarizes why she finds the subject matter of Richard Pryor's comedy so compelling: he marries an incisive analysis of American racism with an honest exploration of his own emotions in response to it. In other words, he finds the right balance between the personal and the political by emphasizing what it *feels* like to suffer discrimination and racism. As Hong points out here, Claudia Rankine's *Citizen* is another, more recent example of a work of art that takes the same approach.

Hong calls the emotions that Pryor and Rankine explore "minor feelings." They usually feel too insignificant to act on, but they're also frustratingly common, or even a constant state of being, for people of color in the U.S. They're often reactions to what are sometimes called "microaggressions"—situations in which people of color have white perspectives imposed on them and are expected to accept those perspectives as a form of objective truth. Thus, minor feelings are more than just the pain caused by racism: they're closer to the slow-burn agony of suffering racism and then being forced to pretend that racism doesn't exist, day in and day out.

❝ Writing about race is a polemic, in that we must confront the white capitalist infrastructure that has erased us, but also a lyric, in that our inner consciousness is knotted with contradictions. As much as I protest against the easy narrative of overcoming, I have to believe we will overcome racial inequities; as much as I'm exasperated by sentimental immigrant stories of suffering, I think Koreans are some of the most traumatized people I know. As I try to move beyond the stereotypes to express my inner consciousness, it's clear that *how* I am perceived inheres to *who* I am. To truthfully write about race, I almost have to write *against* narrative because the racialized mind is, as Frantz Fanon wrote, an "infernal circle."

Related Characters: Cathy Park Hong (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 64

Explanation and Analysis

Hong elaborates on how effective writing about race must accommodate contradictory needs. For instance, it must simultaneously address political realities (through polemics) and personal emotions (through lyricism), which requires finding the right balance of certainty and ambivalence. Such writing should also strive to fight stereotypes without rejecting the grain of truth that they sometimes contain. But this can be incredibly difficult: as Hong emphasizes here, racist ideas affect how people of color think about themselves, and so there is no easy way to separate anti-racist truth from racist fiction.

Through this comment, Hong also explains the goals and structure of her book. She suggests that, because her mind is "knotted with contradictions," she cannot simply reach

and present a fully formed conclusion about race. Instead, writing is also the process through which she separates truth from myth in her own thought (and helps her readers do the same). This helps explain why she has organized this book as a series of essays, all of which try to connect personal experience to the broader political questions of identity—or combine polemic and lyric—without presuming that there are easy correct answers to our fundamental questions about race.

The End of White Innocence Quotes

❝ Rather than look back on childhood, I always looked sideways at childhood. If to look back is tinted with the honeyed cinematography of nostalgia, to look sideways at childhood is tainted with the sicklier haze of envy, an envy that ate at me when I stayed for dinner with my white friend's family or watched the parade of commercials and TV shows that made it clear what a child should look like and what kind of family they should grow up in.

Related Characters: Cathy Park Hong (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 68

Explanation and Analysis

Hong differentiates the kind of nostalgia that many white Americans have for childhood from her own more ambivalent—or even outright negative—outlook on it. She cannot fondly "look back on" her own childhood, because she had few happy experiences; instead, the most she can hope is to "look sideways at" it, seeing white children's happy childhoods in one direction and her own miserable one, out of the corner of her eye, in the other.

Through these comments about childhood, Hong points out that people of color internalize harmful racial norms, stereotypes, and hierarchies very early in life. In this chapter, she shows that many of her earliest memories are defined by a sense that her family was inherently different from—and inferior to—the white families who surrounded her. Her family might have been troubled and dysfunctional, but her shame about them was primarily a question of race: adults, schoolmates, advertisements, and the whole community projected an image of ideal, white childhood that Hong always knew she could never achieve.

❝ On its own, *Moonrise Kingdom* is a relatively harmless film. But for those of us who have been currently shocked by the "unadulterated white racism … splattered all over the media," we might ask ourselves what has helped fuel our country's wistfully manufactured "screen memory." Anderson's *Moonrise Kingdom* is just one of countless contemporary films, works of literature, pieces of music, and lifestyle choices where wishing for innocent times means fetishizing an era when the nation was violently hostile to anyone different. Hollywood, an industry that shapes not only our national but global memories, has been the most reactionary cultural perpetrator of white nostalgia, stuck in a time loop and refusing to acknowledge that America's racial demographic has radically changed since 1965. Movies are cast as if the country were still "protected" by a white supremacist law that guarantees that the only Americans seen are carefully curated European descendants.

Related Characters: Cathy Park Hong (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 73

Explanation and Analysis

Hong cites the scholar Lauren Berlant, who presents the popular Wes Anderson movie *Moonrise Kingdom* as a case study in how racist concepts of childhood, innocence, and nostalgia are deeply rooted in U.S. popular culture. The film depicts two children who fall in love and run away to live in the wilderness together in the year 1965. On the surface, the film is race-neutral—and yet it's also obvious that it could never be about nonwhite children. In 1965, the civil rights movement and the violence surrounding it were major issues, and the U.S. finally repealed its age-old whites-only immigration policy. Nonwhite children either wouldn't have been around or wouldn't have been able to escape their brutal reality to take shelter on a magical island.

But Hong's complaint isn't just that all the characters in *Moonrise Kingdom* are white—rather, her issue lies in *why* the film chooses to reminisce about 1965, *which version* of that era it celebrates, and what this teaches contemporary audiences about U.S. history. By setting his fantasy of "innocent times" in a time when the U.S. was "violently hostile to anyone different," Wes Anderson repeats the all-too-common Hollywood tropes that *American* truly means *white*, and that the U.S.'s best times were those when there were as few people of color in the nation as possible. This is why Hong uses *Moonrise Kingdom* as a metaphor for Hollywood's dangerous tendency to present American history as the history of white people by default.

> Innocence is, as Bernstein writes, not just an "absence of knowledge" but "an active state of repelling knowledge," embroiled in the statement, "Well, *I* don't see race" where *I* eclipses the *seeing*. Innocence is both a privilege and a cognitive handicap, a sheltered unknowingness that, once protracted into adulthood, hardens into entitlement. Innocence is not just sexual deflection but a deflection of one's position in the socioeconomic hierarchy, based on the confidence that one is "unmarked" and "free to be you and me." The ironic result of this innocence, writes the scholar Charles Mills, is that whites are "unable to understand the world that they themselves have made." Children are then disqualified from innocence when they are persistently reminded of, and even criminalized for, their place in the racial pecking order. As Richard Pryor jokes: "I was a kid until I was eight. Then I became a Negro."

Related Characters: Cathy Park Hong (speaker), Richard Pryor

Related Themes:

Page Number: 74-5

Explanation and Analysis

Hong offers a detailed analysis of the "sheltered unknowingness" that enables white people to simultaneously perpetuate racism and deny its existence. In a nutshell, white ignorance is so widespread because it's far easier to oppress others if one doesn't have to recognize or admit what they're doing. Needless to say, nonwhite people generally don't claim that they "don't see race" because they learn very early in life that race constantly structures their everyday interactions in the U.S. Richard Pryor's joke shows that, as children, nonwhite people don't have the luxury of remaining innocent and ignorant: they quickly learn that their race will mark them forever.

In contrast, white children can get away with never learning about racism because it doesn't disadvantage them, and they generally don't see it firsthand. Perhaps most importantly, they never learn about the history of race and racism in the U.S., which allows them to continue imagining that the U.S. is a perfectly meritocratic society. Hong sees a direct link between this childhood innocence and the ignorance that white people embrace in adulthood: both enable them to benefit from the racial hierarchy without understanding it. In turn, this is why Hong describes claims to ignorance about race as "a deflection of one's position in the socioeconomic hierarchy"—they're a way for white people to pretend that everyone's equal, when in reality, they stand at the top of a steep and exploitative racial hierarchy.

> One characteristic of racism is that children are treated like adults and adults are treated like children. Watching a parent being debased like a child is the deepest shame. I cannot count the number of times I have seen my parents condescended to or mocked by white adults.
>
> [...]
>
> By not speaking up, we perpetuate the myth that our shame is caused by our repressive culture and the country we fled, whereas America has given us nothing but opportunity. The lie that Asians have it good is so insidious that even now as I write, I'm shadowed by doubt that I didn't have it bad compared to others. But racial trauma is not a competitive sport. The problem is not that my childhood was exceptionally traumatic but that it was in fact rather typical.

Related Characters: Cathy Park Hong (speaker), Cathy Park Hong's Mother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 77-8

Explanation and Analysis

In this essay, Hong contrasts the way that people of color encounter race and racism very early on in life in the U.S., while white Americans often remain completely ignorant about race and racism throughout their entire lives. She argues that one of the most distinctive—and most traumatic—ways that Asian American children cope with racism in childhood is by watching white people humiliate and degrade their (the Asian American children's) parents. White people frequently talk down to immigrant adults, using the same voices that they would use to talk to children, or mock their accents. Meanwhile, they treat those immigrants' children, who often have higher levels of fluency in English, as the responsible adults in the situation. This behavior confuses language proficiency—or, in many cases, simply having a foreign accent—with maturity, intelligence, and humanity. Put differently, white people assume that an immigrant's child is more competent than their parent just because they have been raised in a "superior" country like the U.S.

Hong emphasizes that this experience is central to Asian American's widespread sense of trauma and shame—which, frustratingly enough, white Americans tend to assume is the product of repressive Asian cultures. In this sense, anti-Asian racism becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy: it ensures that Asian Americans are ashamed and invisible, then provides a convenient explanation for that shame and invisibility.

Whether our families come from Guatemala, Afghanistan, or South Korea, the immigrants since 1965 have shared histories that extend beyond this nation, to our countries of origin, where our lineage has been decimated by Western imperialism, war, and dictatorships orchestrated or supported by the United States. In our efforts to belong in America, we act grateful, as if we've been given a second chance at life. But our shared root is not the opportunity this nation has given us but how the capitalist accumulation of white supremacy has enriched itself off the blood of our countries. We cannot forget this.
As a writer, I am determined to help overturn the solipsism of white innocence so that our national consciousness will closer resemble the minds of children like that Iranian American boy.

Related Characters: Cathy Park Hong (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 89-90

Explanation and Analysis

Today, Western culture dominates the U.S. For the most part, white people living in the U.S. are viewed as truly American, even if they have only been in the country for a generation, while people of Asian descent are viewed as perpetual foreigners, no matter how long their families have lived in the U.S. In turn, the U.S.'s "national consciousness" is virtually always seen as based on white people's perspectives—which frequently involve a near total ignorance about the history of U.S. racism and foreign policy.

Here, at the end of her third essay, Hong lays out her vision for an alternative kind of "national consciousness," one that also accounts for immigrants' experiences and complex, often ambivalent relationships to the U.S. She does not mean to completely exclude white people from the equation, but rather to develop a collective immigrant consciousness that can inform a more inclusive version of "national consciousness." Specifically, she argues that many recent immigrants, regardless of their specific origin, have come to the U.S. to escape conditions specifically created by the U.S. government. Many are fleeing U.S.-led wars, and many simply want to leave countries that have struggled to develop economically because of "the capitalist accumulation of white supremacy"—or the highly unequal global financial and trade systems that have been set up by and for wealthy capitalist countries like the U.S., the E.U. member states, and Australia.

Bad English Quotes

It was once a source of shame, but now I say it proudly: bad English is my heritage. I share a literary lineage with writers who make the unmastering of English their rallying cry—who queer it, twerk it, hack it, Calibanize it, *other* it by hijacking English and warping it to a fugitive tongue. To *other* English is to make audible the imperial power sewn into the language, to slit English open so its dark histories slide out.

Related Characters: Cathy Park Hong (speaker), Theresa Hak Kyung Cha

Related Themes:

Page Number: 97

Explanation and Analysis

Hong asks how Asian American writers can use language truthfully, in a way that faithfully represents their experience. Her conclusion is that they should embrace "bad English"—or use the language unconventionally, like the famous Shakespeare character Caliban, ultimately managing to take the language apart in order to do new things with it.

First, this strategy gives immigrant and bilingual writers the chance to reclaim English. They can use English's broad, international linguistic repertoire in diverse ways and, in doing so, leave their own mark on the language's future. But secondly, and perhaps more importantly, bad English can enable immigrant writers to capture the true emotional tone of their lives. Hong notes that many immigrants encounter English first and foremost as the language of racist authority: they are forced to speak it in public and at school, but they speak other languages at home. Even adults who grew up entirely in the U.S., like Hong, might find that English is the language they use most in their day-to-day lives, but not the language with the most emotional significance and literary power for them. "Bad English" enables writers to simultaneously depict their sense of cultural alienation, like Theresa Hak Kyung Cha did in her work, and to capture the hidden meanings and untranslatable feelings that conventional English simply cannot.

> A side effect of this justified rage has been a "stay in your lane" politics in which artists and writers are asked to speak only from their personal ethnic experiences. Such a politics not only assumes racial identity is pure—while ignoring the messy lived realities in which racial groups overlap—but reduces racial identity to intellectual property.

We must make right this unequal distribution but we must do so without forgetting the immeasurable value of cultural exchange in what Hyde calls the gift economy. In reacting against the market economy, we have internalized market logic where culture is hoarded as if it's a product that will depreciate in value if shared with others; where instead of decolonizing English, we are carving up English into hostile nation-states. The soul of innovation thrives on cross-cultural inspiration. If we are restricted to our lanes, culture will die.

Related Characters: Cathy Park Hong (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 101-2

Explanation and Analysis

Hong strongly opposes the trend that she calls "'stay in your lane' politics"—or the ever-stronger norm that artists and writers only depict people of their own ethnic group. Many view this as a way to ensure that minority groups' stories aren't distorted or appropriated, and Hong understands this intention. However, she argues that "'stay in your lane' politics" is ultimately a kind of creative segregation, which takes the American obsession with private property to an extreme and ultimately prevents different ethnic groups from working together. After all, the whole point of Asian American identity has always been to build a broad, multiethnic coalition to fight for change on a broad range of political issues—including many whose primary beneficiaries are not necessarily Asian American. If Americans of color ever want their art and ideas to be taken as seriously as white Americans', they must start to integrate their different perspectives, not segregate them. Of course, this process of integration must be based on a free, consensual, respectful exchange of ideas—the kind of dialogue that Hong later calls "speaking nearby" instead of "speaking for." One of Asian American activism's central goals should be to make such an exchange possible.

> I turned to the modular essay because I am only capable of "speaking nearby" the Asian American condition, which is so involuted that I can't stretch myself across it. […] I sometimes still find the subject, Asian America, to be so shamefully tepid that I am eager to change it—which is why I have chosen this episodic form, with its exit routes that permit me to stray. But I always return, from a different angle, which is my own way of inching closer to it.

Related Characters: Cathy Park Hong (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 103-4

Explanation and Analysis

Hong distinguishes between "speaking for" people and what the filmmaker Trinh T. Min-ha calls "speaking nearby" them. "Speaking for" people means assuming a position of authority and declaring what their experiences and ideas mean. But "speaking nearby" people means inviting them into a conversation and listening to their voices, rather than trying to make a conclusive argument about what they are saying. For Hong, "speaking nearby" is the solution to the problem of how to write about Asian Americans. Yes, "Asian American" is an impossibly broad category, and nobody can ever *speak for* all Asian Americans. But by *speaking nearby* other Asian Americans, Hong can help create the kind of creative and political coalitions that she views as crucial to overcoming racism and discrimination.

In this passage, Hong uses the concept of "speaking nearby" to explain why she chose to write *Minor Feelings* as a series of modular essays (meaning essays composed of many shorter sections). She felt that it would be both impossible and counterproductive to try and address "the Asian American condition" head-on—but by repeatedly "speaking nearby" that condition in a variety of different ways, she can sketch a general picture of its outlines, without pretending to be some kind of all-knowing genius or prophet.

In thinking about my own Asian identity, I don't think I can seal off my imagined world so it's only people of my likeness, because it would follow rather than break from this segregated imagination.

But having said that, how can I write about us living together when there isn't too much precedent for it? Can I write about it without resorting to some facile vision of multicultural oneness or the sterilizing language of virtue signaling? Can I write honestly? Not only about how much I've been hurt but how I have hurt others? And can I do it without steeping myself in guilt, since guilt demands absolution and is therefore self-serving? In other words, can I apologize without demanding your forgiveness? Where do I begin?

Related Characters: Cathy Park Hong (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 109

Explanation and Analysis

Like all of Hong's essays, "Bad English" concludes not with a definitive thesis statement, but rather with a meditation on the stakes of the questions she has chosen to confront. Of course, this doesn't mean that she hasn't made progress. Rather, like a scientist, she answers certain compelling research questions and then raises new questions for future research at the end. In this chapter, she has asked about how to write on behalf of Asian Americans in general, and she has decided that "speaking nearby" them—instead of "speaking for" them—is the best way to balance their need for an integrated political identity with their right to be the authorities on their own particular stories.

In this conclusion, Hong gestures at some of the complex authorial decisions that would be involved in *speaking nearby* Asian American culture—the decisions she has no doubt had to confront in writing this book. Specifically, she asks how she can avoid platitudes, do justice to the people she writes about, and above all, highlight her own moral shortcomings without becoming self-indulgent. These final questions lead the reader into Hong's next essay, in which she explores her relationship with her college friends Erin and Helen while admitting that she feels guilty for telling their stories in such a public forum.

An Education Quotes

The avant-garde genealogy could be tracked through stories of bad-boy white artists who "got away with it," beginning with Duchamp signing a urinal and calling it art. It's about defying standards and initiating a precedent that ultimately liberates art from itself. […] The problem is that history has to recognize the artist's transgressions as "art," which is then dependent on the artist's access to power. A female artist rarely "gets away with it." A black artist rarely "gets away with it." Like the rich boarding school kid who gets away with a hit-and-run, getting away with it doesn't mean that you're lawless but that you are above the law. The bad-boy artist can do whatever he wants because of who he is. Transgressive bad-boy art is, in fact, the most risk-averse, an endless loop of warmed-over stunts for an audience of one: the banker collector.

Related Characters: Cathy Park Hong (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 114-5

Explanation and Analysis

While the essay "An Education" is primarily about Hong's college friendship with Helen and Erin, at a deeper level, it's largely about how artists' identities affect their paths through the art world. As she argued in her well-known essay "Delusions of Whiteness in the Avant-Garde," Hong insists that "the artist's access to power" affects their chances at every step of the process. It shapes the support young artists receive, other people's expectations for them, how much collectors will pay for their art, and even whether they are seen as innovative or outdated when they do unconventional work.

Unlike the "bad-boy white artists" that Hong describes here, she, Helen, and Erin didn't have access to the traditional levers of power in the art world. But their friendship gives them the inspiration and support that they need to pursue art anyway. Even as the art world set frustratingly low expectations for them, they set high expectations for one another. In fact, even though their friendship was full of conflict, it still demonstrates why solidarity is such a powerful tool in the fight for racial equality. Hong, Helen, and Erin gave each other many of the same advantages that well-connected white artists obtained through institutions. In short, white Americans may have many advantages due to their entrenched institutional power, but Americans of color can find strength in numbers.

I would have had a happier four years in college had I never met Helen. But I wouldn't have been the writer I am today. Helen validated us, solidified us, and made us feel inevitable. We were going to define American culture. […] We had the confidence of white men, which was swiftly cut down after graduation, upon our separation, when each of us had to prove ourselves again and again, because we were, at every stage of our careers, underestimated. But I wouldn't have had it any other way. That struggle kept me faithful to the creative imagination cultivated by our friendship, which was an imagination chiseled by rigor and depth to reflect the integrity of our discontented consciousness.

Related Characters: Cathy Park Hong (speaker), Helen

Related Themes:

Page Number: 149-50

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of "An Education," Hong reflects on her conflicted feelings about her friendship with Helen. While Helen made Hong's college years a living nightmare, she also may have been Hong's greatest creative influence. In particular, she helped Hong develop a kind of confidence that, while probably disproportionate to their station in life at the time, ultimately played a major role in Hong's success later on. Hong's final sentence is dense, but its conclusion is poignant: her friendship with Erin and Helen served as the gold standard for all her future artistic endeavors. When others wouldn't take her seriously as a poet—which was most of the time, chiefly on account of her race and gender—she could always remember how Erin and Helen *did* take her art seriously. In fact, in her subsequent work, she strove to live up to the artistic "rigor and depth" that she reached in college. She wouldn't have known that she was capable of this if it weren't for Helen.

Portrait of an Artist Quotes

Cha doesn't ever direct your reading of *Dictee*. She refuses to translate the French or contextualize a letter by former South Korean leader Syngman Rhee to Franklin D. Roosevelt or caption the photo of French actress Renée Jeanne Falconetti in Carl Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc*. The reader is a detective, puzzling out her own connections.

[…]

Cha spoke my language by indicating that English was *not* her language, that English could never be a true reflection of her consciousness, that it was as much an imposition on her consciousness as it was a form of expression. And because of that, *Dictee* felt true.

Related Characters: Cathy Park Hong (speaker), Theresa Hak Kyung Cha

Related Themes:

Page Number: 154-5

Explanation and Analysis

Hong explains why she found Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictee* so inspiring and relatable—even though it's a famously obscure and complex book. Namely, Cha's use of language, history, and genre synergizes with her own experiences of race and immigration. By including text in various languages without translation, Cha replicates the immigrant condition of having to piece together the meaning of an illogical-seeming whole from disparate sources. She describes what it's like to inhabit and use languages like English and French, which have been imposed on her and her people through violence, and none of which are adequate to fully capture her experience of the world. She does the same thing with her sources, piecing together various documents, memories, and photographs in order to demonstrate how the culturally disparate pieces of her life fit together—without reducing her experience to any single declarative statement. For Hong, the opacity of Cha's work is the point: it rings true because the world has long felt just as opaque to her.

The length to which scholars will argue how Cha is recovering the lives of Korean women silenced by historical atrocities while remaining silent about the atrocity that took Cha's own life has been baffling. […] The more I read about her, the less I knew. And the less I knew, the more I couldn't help but regard Cha as a woman who also disappeared without explanation.

Related Characters: Cathy Park Hong (speaker), Theresa Hak Kyung Cha

Related Themes:

Page Number: 157-8

Explanation and Analysis

Hong points out the disturbing irony in the critical reception of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's work: *Dictee* was about recovering the stories of women who were silenced by atrocities, and the exact thing happened to her, but critics generally haven't investigated this connection except in passing.

What can explain this puzzling omission? A charitable interpretation is that these critics view focusing on Cha's work instead of her death as a way to respect her legacy—to let the words she chose to speak define her legacy, rather than the violent death that she did not choose. Hong agrees that this is an important goal, but now that Cha's work has received ample critical attention for nearly four decades, she thinks that critics have already accomplished it. But another interpretation of the critics' silence is more troubling: perhaps they simply didn't know what to say. Maybe they found Cha's fate too disturbing, the connection to her writings too strong.

Regardless of why critics have overlooked Cha's death, Hong views the fact that they have done so as a serious problem. This omission leads Cha's book to overtake Cha's identity: critics' sense of who she is starts to fade, and they start to forget the story behind her work. This is troubling most of all because *Dictee* is essentially an autobiographical book. Cha didn't write about her death, of course, but it's clearly relevant. Ultimately, while silence might start out as a form of respect, eventually it becomes a form of forgetting.

> By introducing me to Cha, my professor Kim established a direct, if modest, literary link: Cha, Kim, myself. Not only did they share my history, they provided for me an aesthetic from which I could grow. For a while, however, I thought I had outgrown Cha. I'd cite modernist heavyweights like James Joyce and Wallace Stevens as influences instead of her. I took her for granted. Now, in writing about her death, I am, in my own way, trying to pay proper tribute. But once, when I read an excerpt of this essay in public, someone asked if Cha would have written about her rape homicide in the fairly straightforward narrative account that I'm writing in. "Not at all," I said. "But I'm just trying to write what happened. I found that formal experimentation was getting in the way of documenting facts."

Related Characters: Cathy Park Hong (speaker), Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Myung Mi Kim

Related Themes:

Page Number: 171

Explanation and Analysis

Hong contemplates Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's influence on her work, which she understated for a long time. In fact, she practically admits that she long took Cha for granted: Cha's work was so central to Hong's sense of who she could be—and what Asian American literature could be—that she could easily forget to mention her. She "thought [she] had outgrown Cha," but really, she was just building on the foundation that Cha set for her.

This essay is Hong's way of trying to "pay proper tribute" to Cha—but arguably, so is this whole book, since Cha's work has so profoundly influenced Hong's perspective and basic concepts. Of course, Hong also emphasizes that she is not trying to imitate Cha in this essay—there are times for formal innovation, and times that call for a clear story. This is one of the latter. Ultimately, like Hong's friendships with Erin and Helen, her emphasis on her debt to Cha shows that artists do not form in a vacuum, as solitary geniuses—instead, their creative development depends on the people who surround them, both in physical and literary terms. In turn, this explains why Hong is so interested in building up a tradition of Asian American literature, from which future writers can take inspiration.

The Indebted Quotes

The takeaway from the crowd-pleasing opening scene in the novel and film *Crazy Rich Asians* is the following: if you discriminate against us, we'll make more money than you and *buy* your fancy hotel that wouldn't let us in. Capitalism as retribution for racism. But isn't that how whiteness recruits us? Whether it's through retribution or indebtedness, who are we when we become better than them in a system that destroyed us?

Related Characters: Cathy Park Hong (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 183

Explanation and Analysis

In her final essay, Hong synthesizes the book's major concepts into a call to action. She explains that Asian Americans have mostly dealt with challenges like prejudice, erasure, and the model minority myth by leaning into American capitalism. They have, in short, tried to buy their way into whiteness. And it's telling that the novel and movie *Crazy Rich Asians*, easily the most influential depiction of Asian people in recent global popular culture, treats wealth and success as synonymous. (However, it's set in Singapore, not the U.S.)

Hong's goal in her final essay is to offer an alternative to the *Crazy Rich Asians* model of "capitalism as retribution for racism." For Hong, this model is worrisome because it leaves behind the vast majority of people of color (including Asian people) who aren't fabulously wealthy, and because it encourages Asian Americans to dedicate their lives to the same political and economic system that oppressed them in the first place (and continues to do so). Instead of working tirelessly in the hopes of eventually meeting white society's criteria for acceptance, Hong will propose, Asian Americans should strive to change those criteria through activism.

I began this book as a dare to myself. I still clung to a prejudice that writing about my racial identity was minor and non-urgent, a defense that I had to pry open to see what throbbed beneath it. This was harder than I thought, like butterflying my brain out onto a dissection table to tweeze out the nerves that are my inhibitions. Moreover, I had to contend with this *we*. I wished I had the confidence to bludgeon the public with *we* like a thousand trumpets against *them*. But I feared the weight of my experiences—as East Asian, professional class, cis female, atheist, contrarian—tipped the scales of a racial group that remains so nonspecific that I wondered if there was any shared language between us. And so, like a snail's antenna that's been touched, I retracted the first person plural.

Related Characters: Cathy Park Hong (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 183

Explanation and Analysis

In her final chapter, Hong returns to one of the questions that has plagued her throughout her whole literary career: who is "Asian American?" When she makes claims on behalf of Asian Americans, who is the "we" she writes for? As she explains here, this question long stopped her from asking the other questions that she takes up in *Minor Feelings*. She long worried that her own life experience was too narrow and biased to justify her speaking on behalf of *all* Asian Americans. After all, she is the exact kind of person—privileged, East Asian, and born in the U.S.—whom American popular culture usually treats as a stand-in for the term "Asian American," to the exclusion of everyone else.

But now, after exploring ideas like minor feelings and bad English, speaking nearby and racial containment, Hong feels that she can offer a clearer answer to the question of who "we" is, without erasing the millions of Asian Americans whose life experiences are nothing like hers. She has begun clarifying which experiences are central to Asian Americans' shared experience of race. Namely, "Asian American" represents a distinct political identity that has emerged from diverse ethnic groups' parallel experiences of immigration, invisibility, and racism. Most of all, the term "Asian American" refers to a shared commitment to making the U.S. more racially equitable and its national consciousness more culturally, historically, and globally aware. Thus, Asian American literature does not have to speak for all Asian Americans—rather, it merely has to start from these general principles and goals.

Sow the cratered lands with candy and from its wrappers will rise Capitalism and Christianity. About her homeland [South Korea], the poet Emily Jungmin Yoon writes, "Our cities today glow with crosses like graveyards."

Related Characters: Cathy Park Hong (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 184-5

Explanation and Analysis

During the Korean War, American soldiers nearly murdered Hong's grandfather—until they realized they had the wrong man, let him go, and gave his son (Hong's father) candy in a feeble attempt at consolation. In fact, the U.S. military has consistently given out candy to children during its wars around the world. While the U.S. public might associate this candy with freedom and democracy, Hong associates it with U.S. imperialism's greed, hypocrisy, and senseless violence—which has been directed, above all, at the formerly colonized populations of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Notably, the U.S. imposed capitalism on South Korea by establishing not a democracy, but a brutal dictatorship. (It has done the same in numerous other countries, particularly in Latin America.)

Hong's line about candy is her way of mocking the U.S.'s naïve assumption that destroying a nation is the way to free it. Meanwhile, Emily Jungmin Yoon uses crosses to represent both the millions of Koreans who died during the Korean War, many of them thanks to U.S. war crimes, and South Korea's largely Christian population today, which is the product of Western (chiefly American) influence. Both of these metaphors represent a version of minor feelings, on a global scale: what Americans view as liberation (because they know very little about the war), Korean Americans know to have been a horrific, earth-shattering atrocity.

To be indebted is to fixate on the future. I tense up after good fortune has landed on my lap like a bag of tiny excitable lapdogs. But whose are these? Not mine, surely! I treat good fortune not as a gift but a loan that I will have to pay back in weekly installments of bad luck. I bet I'm like this because I was raised wrong—browbeaten to perform compulsory gratitude. Thank you for sacrificing your life for me! In return, I will sacrifice my life for you!
I have rebelled against all that. As a result, I have developed the worst human trait: I am ungrateful. This book too is ungrateful. In my defense, a writer who feels indebted often writes ingratiating stories. Indebted, that is, to this country—to whom I, on the other hand, will always be ungrateful.

Related Characters: Cathy Park Hong (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 186

Explanation and Analysis

Hong argues that many Asian Americans—and especially the children of immigrants—live with a constant sense of *indebtedness*. They are often grateful to their parents for their fearless decision to migrate and years of hard work, and to the U.S. for offering them economic opportunities that they may not have had at home. People like Hong figure that they must pay back this debt by making as much money as possible, so their whole lives become complicated financial calculations. In the process, they lose their autonomy. In fact, this dynamic helps drive the model minority myth: countless Asian Americans grow up thinking that their only viable financial options are taking a faceless corporate job or studying for a profession they don't truly like.

This is why Hong has "rebelled against all that"—she realized that designing her life around profit would not even lead her to truly repay her parents' love, but rather merely to waste her life doing a meaningless and destructive desk job. Instead, in this final chapter, she proposes another option: ingratitude. This doesn't mean denigrating or forgetting about one's parents, but rather refusing to let a sense of indebtedness control one's relationship with them.

> In 1968, students at UC Berkeley invented the term *Asian American* to inaugurate a new political identity. Radicalized by the black power movement and anti-colonial movement, the students invented that name as a refusal to apologize for being who they were. It's hard to imagine that the origin of *Asian America* came from a radical place, because the moniker is now flattened and emptied of any blazing political rhetoric. But there was nothing before it. Asians either identified by their nationality or were called Oriental.

Related Characters: Cathy Park Hong (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 190

Explanation and Analysis

Hong returns to one of the motivating questions behind her writing: what does "Asian American" even mean? Why refer to such a diverse group with a single moniker? Over the course of her book, Hong has explored possible answers to this question by citing the experiences that bind most Asian Americans together—like immigration, erasure, minor feelings, and an awareness of history. But now, she asks who , exactly, came up with the term "Asian American."

This passage is Hong's answer. From the start, "Asian American" has been a strategic *political* identity—not an ethnic one. This difference is crucial: the Berkeley students defined "Asian American" based on different groups' shared political interests, and *not* on the assumption that they all have the same culture, traditions, or identity. In other words, "Asian American" is about outcomes, not origins—the future, not the past. But in mainstream U.S. culture today, "Asian American" is treated like a homogeneous ethnic identity. Often, white Americans assume that all Asian Americans are Chinese (or similar enough to Chinese people that they might as well be Chinese). Of course, they wouldn't say the same about English people and Italians—even though, in reality, Asian cultures are far more diverse than European ones. Hong's goal is to help the U.S. move past this stale concept of "Asian American" and bring the term back to its original usage: a diverse coalition of people with origins in Asia who work together to make the U.S. a more just, equal, and hospitable country.

> I bring up Korea to collapse the proximity between *here* and *there*. Or as activists used to say, "I am here because you were there."
>
> […]
>
> My ancestral country is just one small example of the millions of lives and resources you have sucked from the Philippines, Cambodia, Honduras, Mexico, Iraq, Afghanistan, Nigeria, El Salvador, and many, many other nations through your forever wars and transnational capitalism that have mostly enriched shareholders in the States. Don't talk to me about gratitude.

Related Characters: Cathy Park Hong (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 195

Explanation and Analysis

In debates about immigration and nationalism, immigrants are usually depicted as outsiders arriving on U.S. soils from foreign lands. Immigration stories are told from the perspective of non-immigrant Americans watching immigrants arrive, but not from the perspective of immigrants choosing to leave home for the U.S. As a result, immigrants' home countries are seldom actually part of the conversation. But Hong thinks they should be. The U.S.'s imperialist policies around the world explain much of its wealth and influx of immigrants.

In a way, then, immigrants aren't coming to the U.S. to take Americans' wealth, as anti-immigration advocates fear—rather, they're coming to take back their own countries' wealth, which the U.S. has already stolen. White Americans aren't disproportionately wealthy because of their own virtues or hard work, Hong suggests, but rather because their government has spent more than 200 years systematically plundering nonwhite people—from Native Americans and African slaves to the people of the countries Hong lists here—and transferring the stolen wealth to white people. In historical perspective, then, telling immigrants to be grateful for the chance to live in the U.S. is in many ways analogous to demanding gratitude from people one has enslaved or a country one has invaded.

> Poetry is a forgiving medium for anyone who's had a strained relationship with English. Like the stutterer who pronounces their words flawlessly through song, the immigrant writes their English beautifully through poetry. The poet Louise Glück called the lyric a ruin. The lyric as ruin is an optimal form to explore the racial condition, because our unspeakable losses can be captured through the silences built into the lyric fragment. I have relied on those silences, maybe too much, leaving a blank space for the sorrows that would otherwise be reduced by words. [...] By turning to prose, I am cluttering that silence to try to anatomize my feelings about a racial identity that I still can't examine as a writer without fretting that I have caved to my containment.

Related Characters: Cathy Park Hong (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 196-7

Explanation and Analysis

Hong quotes the distinguished poet Louise Glück, who won the Nobel Prize in Literature just a few months after this book was published, to explain the stakes of writing about race in poetry and justify her decision to write this book in prose. Glück compares poetry about emotions, or *lyric* poetry, to a ruin. Such poetry is never perfect or complete—it always falls short of fully capturing the emotion that it expresses, and its beauty often depends most of all on what it leaves unsaid. As Hong points out here, the lyric is particularly fitting for immigrants, because like them, it knows that it cannot express its true self in English. And since everyday experiences of racism are so often defined by silence—for instance, by the minor feelings associated with being erased, or the difficult decision to say nothing and avoid causing a conflict—lyric poetry's power to speak through silence makes it a fitting genre for the topic of race.

But if lyric poetry is so powerful, why did Hong write this book in prose? As she notes here, her goal was "to anatomize [her] feelings" about race, and *not* to faithfully capture "the sorrows" of facing racism. The difference between these styles of writing is like the difference between making a shopping list (anatomizing, or listing out, the relevant information) and writing a story about what it's like to go to the store (capturing one's personal experience). Even though Hong spends much of *Minor Feelings* asking what it means to write about racism from her own authentic perspective—and even though she certainly does this in certain places—she ultimately considers the book more of an artist's statement, or even a how-to manual, than a work of art in itself.

> Our respective racial containment isolates us from each other, enforcing our thoughts that our struggles are too specialized, unrelatable to anyone else except others in our group, which is why making myself, and by proxy other Asian Americans, more human is not enough for me. I want to destroy the universal. I want to rip it down. It is not whiteness but our contained condition that is universal, because *we* are the global majority. By *we* I mean nonwhites, the formerly colonized; survivors, such as Native Americans, whose ancestors have already lived through end times; migrants and refugees living through end times currently, fleeing the droughts and floods and gang violence reaped by climate change that's been brought on by Western empire.

Related Characters: Cathy Park Hong (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 197

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of her book, Hong takes one last stand against the "racial containment" that plagues contemporary American literature and art. "Containment" is the idea that people should only write about and for their own racial and ethnic groups, which leads each group's work to be "contained" in a separate bubble that cannot dialogue or connect with any of the rest. As long as the art world works this way, Hong argues, whiteness will remain the dominant, seemingly *neutral*, *universal*, and *objective* perspective.

But Hong also offers an alternative proposal for a universal perspective that *isn't* based in whiteness. She is not merely suggesting that people of color should view themselves as a diverse, multicultural majority with many different perspectives, in the way that politicians like Barack Obama have famously proposed. Rather, she's arguing that virtually all people of color in the world share certain key experiences that can serve as the basis for a coherent, shared perspective. (These experiences include colonial plunder, dehumanization, and even racial containment itself.) This is what it truly means to think in terms of "Asian American" identity: to look beyond the United States and base one's perspective on a broader, global understanding of what it's like to be a victim of Western capitalism and empire.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

UNITED

"**An imaginary tic**" sparks Cathy Park Hong's depression. Her husband doesn't see anything, but she's convinced that her face is spasming—like it used to, until a surgeon fixed it seven years ago. Over the following days, she grows anxious and self-conscious. She tries to hide her face and struggles to sleep, which affects her work. Despite living her dream—writing full-time, happily married, and living in New York—she's too depressed to function.

Hong begins with her tic because it serves as a powerful metaphor for the concept at the heart of her book: many Asian Americans develop "minor feelings" in reaction to American racism. For Hong, these feelings are rooted in the contradiction between the narratives told about Asian Americans, which highlight their wealth and assimilation, as well as their actual experiences of living in the U.S.—experiences defined by invisibility. Indeed, Hong presents her own situation as representative of this common (but not universal) experience among Asian Americans. Namely, despite their outward appearance of success, many Asian Americans' actual experiences are defined by anxiety and doubt. Just as Hong's spasm seizes control of her own face, racism seizes control of her identity and image.

Hong decides to find a therapist. She finds the only Korean American name in her insurance company's database—Eunice Cho—and sets up an appointment. When Cho asks if Hong ever felt comfort as a child, Hong bursts into tears and tells her whole life story. She feels relieved, but Cho calls her two days later to say she isn't accepting Hong's insurance anymore. Hong keeps calling to get another appointment. Cho calls her back a few days later, when she's at the airport on her way home from a lackluster poetry reading. Cho says that she can't treat Hong—she has a good reason but can't mention it. Hong yells at her over the phone.

Hong's saga with Eunice Cho speaks to the tenuous solidarity that Asian Americans feel with one another: they know that they share certain experiences, but they can never be sure to what extent. In this case, Hong doesn't know if Cho rejected her because their experiences were too similar, because Cho thought she was leaning too heavily on their shared Korean culture, or for some other reason. This also foreshadows a key comparison that Hong makes at the end of this chapter: being Asian American is like being ghosted, facing rejection and invisibility without knowing exactly why.

Hong has always "struggled to prove [herself] into existence." She has always felt inadequate, no matter how hard she has worked. She notes that Asian Americans have a "vague purgatorial status" in the U.S.—they are neither white nor Black, assumed to be competent as workers but also uncharismatic and incapable of leadership. Many become self-hating because they think of themselves from a white perspective. In her classes, Hong sees many young Asian women break the stereotype, but many others continue to fulfill it.

Hong summarizes what her experiences have taught her about the connection between Asian Americans' cultural, economic, and political status (on the one hand) and their individual psychology (on the other). Since they're a numerically small group, Asian Americans are often forgotten or reduced to highly simplistic stereotypes—but because they're also an extremely diverse group, these stereotypes are often totally disconnected from their actual reality. Put differently, the mainstream white perspective assumes that all Asian Americans are the same, while Asian Americans recognize that they actually share even less than most other minority groups. Thus, they must choose between being visible through an inaccurate stereotype and not being visible at all.

Once, in graduate school, Hong got a pedicure at a shop owned by a Vietnamese family. The only available pedicurist was the owner's surly teenage son, who ignored Hong's instructions and painfully tore off her cuticles. Hong stood up and left without paying. Today, Hong thinks that she and the boy clashed because they were both self-hating, but also recognizes that she has no idea what he was actually thinking or feeling.

Hong's pedicure, like her appointment with Eunice Cho, highlights her ambivalence about Asian American identity. On the one hand, she identifies with the boy because she imagines that he is also self-hating on some level: she thinks that he resents having to do traditionally feminine work to help support his immigrant family. But on the other hand, she has no idea what he's actually thinking, and they don't share the same cultural background, so she feels a vast chasm between them. According to Hong, this frustrating combination of identification and disconnection is central to the Asian American experience.

In Korea, Hong's father grew up poor but succeeded in school. In 1965, the U.S. began allowing a few highly qualified Asian professionals to immigrate—the origin of the model minority myth today. Hong's father pretended to be a mechanic and obtained visas for himself and Hong's mother. At his first job in Pennsylvania, when a workplace accident left him with a broken leg, the company fired him. So Hong's parents moved to Los Angeles, where her father became an insurance salesman. He worked long hours and constantly fought with Hong's mother, but he managed to succeed financially.

Hong carefully juxtaposes her parents' immigration story with the model minority myth. In many ways, it fits: her parents suffered and worked hard in order to achieve financial success. But Hong also emphasizes the myth's limits: her father's suffering was unnecessary and unjust, not noble, and he was by no means a perfectly ethical man. Indeed, by holding her father's story up against the myth, Hong encourages her readers to question the myth's true origins and meaning. To her, the answer is simple: the U.S. gave visas almost exclusively to highly educated doctors, engineers, scientists, and mechanics, so of course those people were more successful in the U.S. But this says nothing about Asian people's inherent traits or the millions whose stories are completely different.

Hong's father may sound like the kind of "model immigrant" who wouldn't care about race, but actually, he is highly aware of it, often to the point of blaming every slight on racism. When Hong started at graduate school in Iowa, her father pointed out the lack of Black people and warned her not to feed into stereotypes about bad Asian drivers.

The "model immigrant" stereotype assumes that people like Hong's father are so grateful to be in the U.S. that they are willing to withstand racism (or simply do not notice it). But Hong challenges this stereotype by pointing out that it doesn't describe her father at all—he clearly recognized that people discriminated against him, just as any reasonable person in his situation would have.

In graduate school, Hong learned that one of her classmates wrote an anonymous blog post criticizing her work and joking about murdering minority writers like her. She felt not anger but shame: she blamed herself for being an "unintellectual identitarian." In her classes, she learned to avoid discussing racial identity, and she came to see writing about race as "a sign of weakness." **Her original tic** developed around the same time.

Hong now addresses the connection between her Asian American identity and her vocation as a poet. Her instinctual shame and her reluctance to mention race both show how, in literature as in everyday life, Asian Americans are expected to be invisible. Again, she associates this invisibility—which requires hiding her identity and silencing her own voice—with the tic that seizes control of her face.

When Hong reads a selection from this book at a New York gallery, the gallery owner, a white man, proudly tells her about his racial awareness classes, which have taught him that "minorities can't be racist" and "Asians are next in line to be white." Hong disagrees, but he insists she is wrong. Educating white people about race is exhausting, Hong explains, because it's fundamentally about getting them to recognize her existence. U.S. culture generally ignores Asians and fails to appreciate that they are a diverse group who come from many different countries and face vastly different economic circumstances.

The gallery owner's overconfident belief in simplistic clichés about race reflects the broader trend that Hong sees in U.S. society: white Americans insist that their perspective is the objective truth, even when they're talking about other people's lives and experiences. This leads to a gap between the public image of Asian Americans and Asian Americans' actual experiences—and, in turn, this gap leads to the sense of alienation and frustration that Hong calls "minor feelings."

After the Civil War, the first Chinese laborers came to the U.S. to work in plantations and build the transcontinental railroad. Their stories have almost never been told. The first Chinese women in the U.S. were trafficked there and forced to work as sex workers. They had no rights. In the 1800s, anti-Chinese sentiment led to constant murders, bombings, and the Chinese Exclusion Act. In 1917, the U.S. banned all immigration from Asia, a policy it only reversed in 1965 due to the Cold War. The U.S. needed skilled workers, and paradoxically, it wanted to look more racially tolerant while also using "compliant and hardworking" Asian professionals as an example to undermine Communism and the civil rights movement.

Even though Hong emphasizes how frustrating and exhausting it is to teach ignorant people about Asian American history, she has to do it anyway in this passage. By doing so, she again shows that she has no choice but to write at least partially to a white audience, whether she likes it or not. She simply cannot assume that her readers have basic knowledge about the long history of Asian immigration to the U.S., at least not in the same way writers could assume that readers have basic knowledge about Ellis Island. Many Chinese American families have been in the U.S. for generations longer than many white American families, Hong emphasizes, and holding Asian immigrants up as a model minority was always part of the official plan when the U.S. began granting visas to them.

The model minority myth promises Asian immigrants inclusion and equality, but it's never unconditional. For instance, since 9/11, Indian Americans have been "downgraded" to the same racial category as Muslims from the Middle East. Indeed, most white Americans just don't know or care about the stories of different Asian immigrant groups.

Unlike with most racist stereotypes, many Asian Americans actively buy into the model minority myth because they stand to get something out of it: a status equal to that of white people. But Hong argues that this promise is really a convenient lie that stops Asian Americans from challenging racism and ultimately pushes them to continue working for the social and economic system that exploits them.

The University of Montana hired Hong's friend, the poet Prageeta Sharma, to direct its creative writing program. During a party at Sharma's house, another professor and two graduate students broke into her room, stole her clothing, and took pictures of themselves wearing it. When Sharma reported the incident, the university blamed *her*, claiming that she wasn't "Montana enough," wasn't well-known enough as a poet, and wasn't versed in "women's leadership." It even revoked her directorship. To Sharma, this response was clearly about race and gender. Something similar happened to her father: when he became a college president, white colleagues spread racist rumors about his management style and forced him out of his job.

Hong highlights how Sharma's colleagues use thinly veiled racism, disguised as objective judgment, to push her out of her position. Clearly, when Sharma's colleagues challenged her "Montana" credentials, they were accusing her of not fitting into white cultural norms. When they suggested she wasn't well-known, they merely assumed that their reading habits, as white professors, reflected those of the whole nation's. And when they questioned her leadership skills, *they really meant that they disagreed with her leadership* style*—which was to diversify the program. Sharma's father's experience shows how racist ideas like the model minority myth systematically limit Asian Americans' access to leadership roles.*

Hong admits that readers might instinctively question whether racism is really at play in this story. Asian Americans are used to hiding their stories, thinking that white people won't believe them. As a child, Hong even distrusted fellow Asians, including her family members. For instance, she convinced herself that the balls of black gum in her dad's closet were heroin, not herbal medicine. When her college roommate's father introduced himself as a Korean War veteran, her father refused to respond—and she scolded him in the car afterwards. He angrily asked if he was supposed to *thank* the man for the war. Now, Hong understands how he felt.

Sharma's experience is a powerful example of how Asian Americans' place in the U.S. leads to "minor feelings" of frustration and alienation. Sharma clearly recognizes that her treatment was rooted in racism, but her colleagues maintain plausible deniability by phrasing their complaints in terms of culture *and* professional standards *rather than race. Similarly, in the episode that Hong describes, U.S. cultural norms suggest that Hong's father, as an immigrant, must simply accept her white roommate's father's perspective—which is that the U.S.'s involvement in Korea was benevolent. Needless to say, the roommate's father never questions this assumption or wonders what Hong's father feels about the war. In fact, Hong will later reveal that her father watched U.S. soldiers nearly murder his own father during the war.*

Jeong is a Korean word for a special kind of "instantaneous deep connection." This is what Hong imagined feeling with Eunice Cho. In fact, she really hoped that working with a Korean therapist would let her skip "the long, slow work of psychotherapy" and just chalk everything up to culture. When Hong's new therapist agrees that Cho handled the situation badly, Hong starts wondering if perhaps her own story struck too close to home for Cho. Hong writes Cho an angry review on a therapist rating site—in it, she complains that Koreans are repressed and unfit to be therapists. Hong asks what "us" means for Asian Americans, and whether they will ever form a shared political consciousness.

Hong's analysis of jeong *shows how she refuses to let English limit her imagination or reach—on the contrary, she tries to bring the breadth and richness of Korean into it.* Jeong *is a powerful antidote to the sense of invisibility and disconnection that, as Hong points out here, characterizes many Asian Americans' lives in the U.S. Indeed, throughout* Minor Feelings, *Hong chronicles her ill-fated attempts to make deep connections with other Asian Americans (and especially Korean Americans like Eunice Cho) around their shared identity. Put differently,* jeong *is a way for Korean Americans to establish solidarity, and her book is in part about her struggle to find it.*

After Donald Trump's election, Hong gives a reading in Michigan. In response to Trump's planned Muslim registry, she discusses Japanese internment and then reads an essay. Several students tell her how her reading helped them. One white woman praises her for mentioning the internment, but asks why she didn't just read her poems, which would help everyone heal. Hong anxiously says that she's "not ready to heal." Fortunately, the woman understands.

Hong's conversation with the white woman shows how white Americans frequently assume that they *decide the true meaning of people of color's stories and experiences—and how this creates "minor feelings" (like low-level fear and anxiety) for Asian Americans like Hong. Yet the woman's respectful reply to Hong also shows how Americans can overcome this dynamic. The assumption that Asian Americans should be trying to "heal" suggests that their suffering is all in the past—presumably because of the poor conditions they faced in Asia—and that the U.S. has offered them nothing but safety, comfort, and affluence. But this myth is based on racist assumptions about the differences between the U.S. and Asia—according to Hong, Asian Americans' problems are often rooted specifically in the way* the U.S. *has treated them.*

Three million people, including countless innocent civilians, died in the Korean War. American soldiers broke into Hong's family's home, destroyed all of their possessions, and dragged Hong's grandfather outside to execute him. He only survived because the village translator walked by and told the soldiers that they had the wrong people.

This vignette explains why Hong's father said nothing when her roommate's father bragged about serving in the Korean War. The model minority myth suggests that Asian immigrants faced poverty and violence at home (in supposedly inferior Asian countries) and then found wealth and security in the (supposedly superior) U.S. But Hong reveals that, actually, the U.S. is specifically responsible for her family's trauma. The U.S. didn't save her family from poverty and violence in Korea: it created those conditions in the first place.

Hong remembers this story when she sees a video of airport security violently dragging Vietnamese doctor David Dao off an overbooked plane to open up more space. Like Hong's father, Dao dresses conservatively "to project a benign and anonymous professionalism." While the media avoids the topic of Dao's race, Hong knows that the security guards would not have dared to brutalize a white man in the same way. They gave him such a severe concussion that he ran back onto the plane, confused and hallucinating, whispering that he needed to go home. Dao fled Vietnam as a refugee in 1975, and years later, he lost his medical license for allegedly trading drugs for sex. This complex story humanizes Dao: like most refugees—and like Hong's father—he carried trauma into his new life.

Hong juxtaposes her family's story with David Dao's because they both experienced trauma that was caused by *the U.S. in Asia, and then they were made to relive this trauma (in different ways) after immigrating to the U.S. By doing so, of course, she also directly connects the U.S.'s imperialism overseas with its pattern of anti-Asian violence at home. Both trends stretch back centuries, at least to gunboat diplomacy in Japan and the lynching of Chinese Americans in the 1800s. David Dao's dress and the guards' treatment of him both attest to the way that U.S. culture dehumanizes people of Asian descent. Indeed, Hong suggests that many Asian immigrants seek to prove their worth by looking "benign and anonymous," but this makes him seem invisible in the process.*

When people say, "Asians are next in line to be white," Hong thinks, "Asians are next in line to disappear." The U.S. wants them to stay invisible—except when their success can be held up as proof that racism doesn't matter. Hong compares being erased like this to being ghosted—getting rejected, without having any social cues to explain why. This leads her to lose trust in her own perceptions. To compensate for her doubt and self-hatred, she works harder, endlessly, until she's invisible.

Mainstream U.S. culture proposes that Asian Americans will only ever achieve equality if they become invisible*—or if they make a conscious effort to shed their traditions, languages, and cultural norms. Not only is this a form of cultural imperialism, which suggests that "true" American culture is Western European culture, but it's also a false promise: no matter how hard they work to be invisible, they are still treated as different and inferior. Hong's metaphor of working herself out of existence shows that the model minority myth creates a self-fulfilling prophecy. By insisting that race doesn't matter, U.S. culture teaches Asian Americans to expect equality, but when it fails to treat them as equals, it generates the "minor feelings" (like doubt and self-hatred) at the heart of this book.*

STAND UP

During her year of depression, Hong spends most of her time lying down in her apartment and struggling to eat, sleep, or write. She and her husband watch a special by the comedian Richard Pryor, who boldly sweats through his silk shirt and makes fun of his audience members using separate white and Black voices. Pryor captures the truth about race in the U.S. through what Freud called "tendentious humor" and through what Black comedians in the 1940s called "lies"—stories that use aggression and obscenity to point out repressed truths. Pryor's sets inspire Hong, who starts transcribing them. She realizes that they're funny and moving because of his delivery, not his language.

Hong contrasts her own uncertainty and artistic paralysis when confronting questions of race with Richard Pryor's bold, incisive comedy. Of course, this is precisely the kind of art that Hong wants to create. Pryor tells the truth directly, speaking from a clear and authentic point of view. Through humor, he gets his message through to audiences of all races, without compromising its content. He also connects with a longer Black comedy tradition. Hong struggles to find (but hopes to build) a comparable tradition in Asian American literature. (This is why, for instance, she dedicates her penultimate chapter to the work of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha.)

Pryor started out imitating "clean, wholesome" comedians like Bill Cosby—until he realized that this didn't at all represent who he was. Hong feels the same: she asks, "Who am I writing for?" Poets often pretend that they don't care about audience, but in reality, they tend to write for the academic institutions that give them employment, awards, and status. By watching Pryor, Hong realizes that she has also "been raised and educated to please white people."

Pryor models the process of artistic self-discovery for Hong. She chronicles her own process over the course of her book. Here, she emphasizes how this process is inseparable from determining one's audience. After all, a defining feature of Asian American literature is that writers have to explain and justify their existence to white readers. This is similar to how Bill Cosby's "clean, wholesome" comedy for the Black community still indirectly caters to white people: rather than rejecting racist stereotypes about Black people, it accepts those stereotypes and then tries to change the way that Black people behave.

Hong first started writing poetry in high school after reading classmates' work and deciding that she could do better. In her day-to-day life, she felt lost and isolated, but when she wrote poetry, she felt incredibly free. However, upon publishing her work, she started feeling the limits of her identity. Everyone began asking her to write about being Asian, and she worried that nobody would read her work if she wrote about anything else. This is why comedy intrigues her: unlike poets, comedians can't hide their identities and have to speak directly to their audience.

Hong points out a contrast between the way poetry makes her feel privately *when writing it (free) and* publicly *when publishing it (constrained by her racial identity). The white-dominated U.S. reading public treats white writers as neutral and objective, so it celebrates them for publishing on practically any topic. This affirms their artistic freedom. But the reading public treats writers of color as exotic oddities who are only qualified to report on issues corresponding to their own particular identities. Of course, the same holds true for many other industries, from restaurants to fashion—and Hong's search for solutions can apply to them, too.*

When Hong was young, the crowds at her poetry readings were always mostly white. It took her a long time to realize this, but once she did, she started feeling humiliated every time. She couldn't stand the thought that her work's true audience was "a roomful of bored white people." So, instead of reading her work, she started doing stand-up comedy about her life. Writing about racism was too uncomfortable but joking about it was much easier.

Hong's white audiences underline why she feels so alienated and devalued as an Asian American poet: they suggest that, whether she likes it or not, her work's true purpose is simply to give white people a report about how Asian people behave, think, and feel. She switches to comedy because the irony of the situation is too painful: the racial dynamics of her readings replicate the same racial dynamics she's writing about in society.

Writers of color have long been expected to tell their stories in a way that fits white people's expectations rather than their real experience. And the publishing industry has long deemed their work too risky to buy unless it fits established templates. The template for immigrant stories has been Jhumpa Lahiri's work, which consistently focuses on characters' actions at the expense of their interior lives. And when they do depict interior life, ethnic writers have long been expected to represent their entire group, confess their pain, and assure the white public that the causes of that pain are foreign (like Asian parenting) or squarely in the past. For instance, the media consistently paints the poet Ocean Vuong as "the tragic Vietnamese refugee," while overlooking his analysis of the Vietnam War and his queer identity.

Hong argues that white readers want to read stories that fit and affirm their stereotypes about Asian Americans rather than stories that actually showcase what Asian American artists and writers have to say. Put differently, they are interested in meeting Asian Americans as exoticized objects—immobilized characters on the page—but not as subjects with their own perspectives and agency. To achieve popularity, then, Asian American writers often have to portray themselves the way white people see them—they have to develop what Black American sociologist W. E. B. DuBois famously called a "double consciousness." Hong absolutely respects Jhumpa Lahiri and Ocean Vuong's work—she just suggests that one reason for their wild popularity is the way that their work happened to (at least partially) fit with the white reading public's expectations.

Richard Pryor's comedy is so powerful in part because of how it responds to templates. He recognizes that white audiences expect Black performers to tell sob stories about oppression, so instead, he turns his stories about trauma into hilarious, self-deprecating comedy. He brought the Black American tradition of coping with violence through humor to a national audience. He caricatures and takes apart stereotypes by, for instance, talking about having sex with both white and Black women but declaring that he can't satisfy either.

Hong specifies precisely why Pryor's comedy is so inspiring. It would be easy for him to simply satisfy white audiences by replicating racist stereotypes. But instead, Pryor carefully engages and then undermines these stereotypes, which allows him to point out their falsity and their limits. Hong hopes to adapt the same strategy to her own purposes in this book: rather than pandering to stereotypes about Asian Americans or simply pretending they don't exist, she will try to actively deconstruct them.

Hong identifies with Pryor because his work reminds her of the Korean concept of *han*—the sense of "bitterness, wistfulness, shame, melancholy, and vengefulness" that Koreans associate with the weight of their history. Pryor gives voice to minor feelings: the everyday shame, sadness, and anger that people feel when everyone around them dismisses their reality. Most ethnic literature overlooks these feelings because they're incompatible with stereotypical stories of resilience, survival, and growth. And yet minor feelings are rooted in reality's failure to live up to the rosy template.

Hong introduces the concept at the heart of her book: the "minor feelings" that plague people of color because of the contradiction between their real experiences and other people's firmly held but mistaken ideas about them. Pryor's comedy draws attention to these minor feelings by pointing out how exhausting, absurd, and frustrating it is to live in a country where the majority of people only view him through the lens of racist stereotypes. Of course, Hong also uses the concept of han *to draw connections between Korean history and Black American history—both of which illustrate how U.S. imperialism and violence created long-term downstream consequences for the people who suffered it.*

When Hong was young, Koreatown was the center of her family's universe. But white people never went—to them, there was nothing there. Contrary to the stereotype that Asian Americans are all successful and have strong family values, Hong saw her neighbors' families and professional lives constantly falling apart. Her father's best friend (and her dentist) drank himself to death; another was murdered by his tenant.

The turmoil in Hong's community again refutes the "model minority" myth, which suggests that the U.S. is a fair meritocracy and Asian immigrants succeed economically because they are morally virtuous (peaceful, family-oriented, and so on). In reality, Hong suggests, the emotional lives of the immigrants she knows are largely defined by the "minor feelings" associated with adapting to the U.S.

In 1992, riots broke out between Los Angeles's Black and Korean residents, and Hong saw firsthand how racist her community could be. In fact, many Korean immigrants ran successful businesses in Black neighborhoods precisely because banks would lend to them and not to Black people. By blaming the riots primarily on communal tensions, the media avoided confronting the structural causes of Black unrest. Hong once tried to write a novel about the riots, which represented the U.S.'s racial failures, but she gave up. She preferred stand-up comedy, which allowed her to pass on her feelings—including embarrassment and shame—to a captive audience.

Hong revisits her old project on the Los Angeles riots because she thinks that, with her analysis of Richard Pryor and minor feelings, she finally has the tools necessary to do justice to the riots' complexity. She notes that the media has explained the riots by depending on the tired, racist cliché that nonwhite people are irrational, violent, and full of hate. But she believes that, by focusing on the riots' structural roots and the minor feelings associated with it, she can faithfully depict all sides of the violence without simply portraying one side as the perpetrator and the other as the victim.

During the riots, a mother told her teenaged son to be careful. The next morning, she saw a photo of his dead body in the newspaper. He was the only Korean who died in the violence. But when Hong saw his mother describe her experience in a documentary, she remembered women in her own family. The violent weight of Korean history had left them enraged and despondent, and they saw that same "dark force of power" at work in the U.S., too. After the riots, the U.S. refused to support the Korean immigrants who lost their businesses, and the neighborhood never recovered. The riots' Latinx victims are also forgotten when the story is reduced to "the 'good' Korean merchants versus the 'bad' black community."

Hong sees a direct connection between violence in the distant and recent past. In this sense, for Koreans, immigrating to the U.S. represents a continuation of their history, and not a break from it—as the model minority myth would suggest. Hong uses the phrase "dark force of power" to describe how powerful people and governments (especially the U.S.) have consistently treated ordinary Koreans as collateral damage, as if they're meaningless pawns in the government's merciless quest for wealth and control. Ultimately, by emphasizing the minor feelings that Korean immigrants feel in response to this "dark force," Hong does what she hoped: she tells a story about the individual experience of racial violence without losing sight of the structural factors that make it possible.

Hong's writing requires her to confront the political and personal dimensions of racism at the same time. There is some truth in clichés about immigrant suffering and racial progress, but they also seriously limit writers like Hong because, as she puts it, "*how* I am perceived inheres to *who* I am." She must resist stereotypes to tell the truth. When it comes to events like the L.A. riots, minor feelings offer a compelling alternative close-up perspective, an alternative to the media's tired platitudes. Whereas most Americans learned about the L.A. riots from the perspective of a news helicopter flying over the city, Hong imagines zooming in and listening to a Korean shopkeeper, who cries out about the police's indifference.

Hong summarizes her argument about how investigating minor feelings can yield a new kind of Asian American literature—one that engages and moves beyond stereotypes, rather than being constrained by them or simply pretending they don't exist. Writing about minor feelings is a way to bridge the personal and the sociological, which Hong argues is sorely needed. Simply examining the dynamics of racial groups from a detached sociological perspective often leads us to unfairly blame and dehumanize the people in question, Hong argues, while focusing exclusively on personal experiences of racism can lead us to overlook its broader root causes. But minor feelings are personal experiences that point to broader sociological phenomena, so they can help bridge this gap.

THE END OF WHITE INNOCENCE

As a child, Hong admired her white friends' calm, orderly home lives. In contrast, her family was chaotic and full of conflict; her only fond childhood memories are from visiting her grandparents in Seoul. Now, she has a daughter of her own, so her childhood memories often unexpectedly come back to her—but none are good. Hong's parents simply wanted their children to have food, education, and medical care, which were never guaranteed in Korea. When she remembers childhood, Hong feels like she's looking sideways—not backward. She envied white children, who got to be the norm.

Hong uses her own experience as a basis for explaining the vast divide between the way the children of Asian immigrants growing up in the United States view childhood and the way that the children of white Americans do. (However, she doesn't claim to speak for everyone in each of these two groups.) As immigrant children face racism, feel out of place at school, and witness their parents juggling the stresses of adapting to life in the U.S., their childhoods are often defined by the "minor feelings" that Hong described in the last chapter.

Hong's teachers expected her to identify with stories like *Catcher in the Rye*—but she didn't. Unlike the novel's protagonist, Holden Caulfield, who cherished childhood, Hong couldn't wait for hers to end. In fact, humans haven't always viewed childhood as a time of purity and innocence—this idea is an American invention that started with 19th-century poets like William Wordsworth. It continues today with movies like Wes Anderson's *Moonrise Kingdom*, which chronicles two white children falling in love and running away to live in the wilderness in 1965. That year, between the civil rights movement and new immigration policies, the U.S. was consumed by racial conflict. But this history is invisible in Anderson's movie, which—like so much of U.S. popular culture—portrays an era of violent racial hostility as a nostalgic past when white people were safe and protected.

In short, Hong's argument is that the traditional American association between childhood, innocence, and nostalgia is a racist idea. Specifically, it's part of the longstanding racist effort to define the history and identity of white *Americans as those of the* entire country. *The innocence of childhood is a privilege often denied to immigrant and nonwhite Americans, whose experience is written out of the nation's self-image.* The Catcher in the Rye *involves a fantasy of rebellion that would have only been available to white people, while* Moonrise Kingdom *involves a fantasy of white children seceding from society and living in a protective bubble.*

In U.S. popular culture, white children have long been portrayed as innocent, while Black children have been defined as wicked, inhuman, and unfeeling. Innocence also fosters the "sheltered unknowingness" of white privilege: it enables white people to grow up completely ignorant about the social hierarchies that they have created and benefited from. In contrast, Americans of color grow up with shame—the opposite of innocence—because they recognize how the power dynamics of race affect all social interactions.

Childhood can be a time of innocence and belonging for white American children only because they live in a society that systematically places them at the top of every social hierarchy. But nonwhite American children do not have the same luxury, because they face these hierarchies—and therefore learn about them—from a very early age. For Hong, many white adults' *ignorance about racism is an extension of the same process: because they have never experienced it firsthand, they can easily pretend that it simply doesn't exist.*

Hong remembers how her mother once unknowingly sent her to school in a shirt with the Playboy bunny on it—her classmates mocked her, but never told her what it meant. She felt the same way learning English in school. Shame taught her to see herself in the same way as her white peers saw her. Meanwhile, white adults would condescendingly treat her parents like children, which was humiliating. These experiences are the source of Hong's shame—and yet the U.S. still blames Asian Americans' shame on their supposedly repressed, defective cultures. White Americans may see extreme cases of racial violence in the media, but they never see the stress, terror, and shame that people of color feel living in a thoroughly racist society.

Hong catalogues the experiences that prevented her from having the kind of carefree, innocent upbringing that is viewed as a norm for white children. At every turn, the people surrounding Hong taught her that she and her family did not fit in, and this message sunk in—just like most of the lessons to which people are repeatedly exposed in childhood. Through this example, Hong encourages her white readers to shift the way they conceptualize racism. Rather than thinking of it as an evil force that pops up unpredictably once in a while to attack people of color, they should view it as a kind of force field that is constantly present and influences all decisions, relationships, and social interactions in the U.S. Because it's everywhere, all the time, it fundamentally conditions the way people of color react to the world. This is why Hong argues that minor feelings like shame are a cultural norm for Asian Americans.

When Hong was little, her grandmother—a tough former refugee who crossed from North Korea to South Korea on foot, carrying Hong's mother on her back—came to the U.S. One day, while she was walking through the neighborhood with Hong, a group of white kids mocked her accent, and one girl kicked her to the ground. Hong's father yelled at the girl, but Hong was terrified that the neighbors would retaliate. Five years later, a man yelled a racial slur at the family at the mall; Hong felt enraged, but helpless. Something similar happened in Hong's 20s: a white man yelled "*ching chong ding dong*" at her in the New York subway. She confronted himonHHH, and he threatened her with violence. Afterward, Hong's white roommate broke out in tears. Hong had to fight off the impulse to comfort her.

Hong's anecdote about her grandmother reveals how American racism is both deeply humiliating and profoundly ignorant. Specifically, the U.S. racial hierarchy elevates white American children above virtuous Korean refugee grandmothers. Indeed, Hong's family is afraid of the white girl—who probably knows next to nothing about Korea or their lives—because they know that they will lose out in any conflict with her. Hong's confrontation in the subway points to another troubling fact: the U.S. values protecting white people's innocence about race above actually stopping racism. By breaking out into tears when the conflict didn't even involve her, Hong's roommate made the situation about herself and completely overlooked Hong's needs. Hong implies that her roommate's astonishment is the logical result of a system in which white people learn to view their own perspective as the authoritative, unquestionable truth without ever having to consider anyone else's perspective.

In 2016, "White Tears" became a nationwide meme: it refers to white people's defensiveness and sensitivity in the face of racial issues that nonwhite Americans face every day. Social scientists have found that white people see other groups' progress as their own loss; in aggregate, they even see anti-white prejudice as a worse problem than anti-Black prejudice, even though white people dominate every dimension of U.S. society and the racial wealth gap between Black and white Americans is actually getting *worse*.

"White tears" reflect how, in mainstream U.S. culture, prejudice holds more sway than reality. In other words, white perspectives enjoy unquestioned dominance. White people have virtually no knowledge about how people of color experience race, even as people of color are forced to internalize white people's prejudices about them in order to get by in day-to-day life. Indeed, the research that Hong cites here suggests that white Americans are so used to having power over other racial groups that they literally cannot see the difference between racial equality and what they think is some sort of anti-white oppression. This is why many contemporary writers argue that mainstream U.S. culture has white supremacist undercurrents: even if they do not realize it, many white Americans are deeply invested in a political system that places them at the top of a strict racial hierarchy, and they strongly resist any attempts to make this system more equal.

In 2018, Hong visited an art exhibit by Carmen Winant, who covered the walls of the Museum of Modern Art with every photo she could find of women giving birth—2,000 in all, almost all white. White reviewers celebrated Winant's work as "universal," but Hong clearly saw that this didn't include her. Hong admits that she sees whiteness everywhere, but she argues that she *has* to because Asian Americans still haven't collectively understood their place in the U.S. racial hierarchy. Because "[immigrant] survivor instincts align with [the U.S.'s] neoliberal ethos," too many Asian Americans simply worry about working hard, retreat into their family bubbles, and pretend that race doesn't matter.

Hong's discordant experience at Winant's exhibit again reminds her that she lives in American culture's blind spot. Being "universal" doesn't mean including all sorts of different people equally, but rather depicting the world from a white perspective. Put differently, "universal" is a code word for "white"—art by white people is "universal" all on its own, while art by Asian people is either forgotten or treated as a curious, exotic exception to the norm. Of course, this speaks to art and literature's power in informing the public consciousness. After all, Hong's goal as a writer is to help make the default American perspective a pluralistic, diverse one by challenging white artists' claim to "universality."

Since 2016, thanks to demographic, economic, and media changes, white Americans have started feeling "marked" and ashamed for being white. Some have processed this shame by examining their privilege and learning about U.S. racial history, but others have done so by lashing out, so they can remain innocent and ignorant. Most white Americans live in all-white environments, so they often feel threatened whenever they encounter nonwhite people. This explains how, for instance, airport security could detain a five-year old Iranian boy—and U.S. citizen—in 2017.

When white people feel "marked" by their race, they experience a slight *taste of what Americans of color have endured for centuries (though not nearly to the same extent). They then feel shame, confusion, and resentment about being born into a specific racial hierarchy at a particular point in time, through no fault of their own. In other words, they feel their own version of minor feelings. And they can cope with these minor feelings by either critically examining the racial hierarchy or simply accepting and internalizing it. Hong suggests that Asian Americans have the same options: they can either look critically at the racism they face, or they can internalize ideas like the model minority myth and dedicate their lives to achieving the narrow capitalist definition of success.*

Western imperialist countries like the U.S. have plundered much of the world, including most immigrants' homelands. This history is what fundamentally unites Americans of color, and it should be part of the core American story. Hong wants to help the U.S. put such perspectives at the center of its national consciousness.

Throughout this book, Hong highlights how Asian Americans' diversity often prevents them from forming any truly shared cultural, artistic, or political identity. But here, she offers a vision of such an identity—and shows how it could expand to include other Americans of color, too. Indeed, she proposes an alternative to the default assumption that only white-centric perspectives count as "universal" or classically American.

BAD ENGLISH

Most kids collect toys or dolls; Hong collected pencils, erasers, and notebooks. Her Korean peers frequently ostracized her. They spoke the local L.A. mix of "FOB, Gangsta, and Valley," which made it harder for her to learn formal English. In fact, she didn't speak English until age six or seven. Her family and neighbors seldom used it, besides curse words, and they put their own spin on American customs. For instance, Hong's father has a habit of telling *everyone* "I love you." She held off on using her cute mechanical pencils for as long as she could, but she felt "exquisite pleasure" when she finally did. She used them to draw anime-style cartoon girls with the wide eyes and tiny nose she wished she could have.

It's telling that, as a child, Hong expressed herself through drawings and not words. After all, she underlines how her relationship to English is fundamentally different from that of Americans who grew up with it as their first and only language. This raises the question of whose literature counts, and what kind of English writers should use if their native dialect isn't the standard American English of the white upper and middle classes. Hong emphasizes that this doesn't just apply to Asian immigrants (to whom she refers with the moniker "FOB," or "fresh off the boat"), but also many other Americans of color and even some white people (like those who speak California "Valley" English).

Hong enjoys "collecting bad English," browsing sites that post incorrect translations from signs and t-shirts in Asia. She finds poetic beauty in the marks Asian languages leave on English, since from living in Seoul, she has seen how English is changing Korean, too. "Bad English is my heritage," Hong proclaims—she identifies with the long tradition of writers making English theirs by changing it, or *othering* it. She wants "to eat English before it eats [her]."

Mainstream American culture may view "bad English" as distorting and enfeebling the language, but for Hong, it actually enriches it. Every immigrant's linguistic background is different, but Hong emphasizes that they all make their own contributions to English, which always is and always has been in flux. When she defines her goal as "to eat English before it eats [her]," Hong means that either she will change standard English, or else standard English will distort her authentic voice—which actually depends on multiple languages, dialects, and registers at the same time.

Hong's mother is strong and brilliant in Korean, but she struggles to express herself in English. White people talk to her like a toddler. As a girl, Hong always stepped in to help her mother communicate. Asian accents are "the last accents acceptable to mock." Hong admits that even she hates calling Chinese restaurants and Indian customer service centers. But she also hates the "gentle, sitcom-friendly, easy listening" Asian accent that many actors use nowadays in TV shows—this accent doesn't represent the way most Asian families actually communicate.

Hong summarizes how language contributes to the discrimination that Asian Americans face. Unused to speaking foreign languages themselves, many Americans assume that people with accents or limited English competence are unintelligent or immature. It's such a widespread phenomenon that even Hong plays into it. Of course, the fact that Asian speech patterns are "the last accents acceptable to mock" reflects how little public attention Asian American issues receive in the U.S.

Hong has always tried to break English apart by mixing words, registers, and genres in her writing. But she has always struggled to express love in English—she's afraid of letting it into her family life. She also wonders how much she can change English before she offends others. For instance, the dialect that her Koreatown neighbors spoke growing up is now often considered a form of blackface. The U.S. increasingly has a "stay in your lane" policy: artists are expected to only produce work about their own personal experiences and ethnic groups. This is an understandable response to the history of white artists profiting by copying nonwhite artists' work. But it also treats art as private property. It gets in the way of artistic experimentation and exchange, the processes that enable art to inspire people and transform culture.

Hong's struggle with English is a key part of her quest to find her own authentic voice as a writer. To what extent, she asks, can she truly express herself in a language that has been imposed on her? And to what extent does her search for artistic freedom mean unfairly imposing on others? In her past work, like Dance Dance Revolution, *she has mixed different languages and cultural traditions. But did this mean forcing a narrative onto other people, in the same way that white America has forced a narrative onto her? If writing about minor feelings represents a literary middle ground between disconnected personal narrative and dry sociological analysis, then she's now looking for a middle ground between being dominated by language and dominating other people's language. Strict "stay in your lane" artistic norms may be motivated by good intentions, but they're incompatible with the kind of dynamic, interconnected literature that Hong seeks to create.*

Hong quotes the filmmaker Trinh T. Min-ha, who argues that artists should "speak nearby" other cultures, not "speak about" them. In other words, rather than taking a position of authority and declaring what other people's experiences mean, artists should give that authority to those people. Hong cannot hope to speak *for* Asian America—only to speak *nearby* it. This is why she has written this book as a collection of lyric essays, without a straightforward thesis. Yet *writing nearby* Asian Americans' experiences also requires *writing nearby* other groups' experiences.

"Speaking nearby" offers a solution to Hong's dilemma because it allows artists to bring other people's experiences into their work without taking away those people's right to define the meaning of their own lives. In other words, it's an attempt at inclusion without domination—and this inclusion is necessary to achieve broad political change. Here, Hong also briefly discusses her overall strategy in this book. Namely, her essays address different challenges involved in living and making art as an Asian American, but they do not try to declare what Asian American identity or literature should be.

When writers of color are told to tell their story, it too often means packaging their stories in a form that white audiences and publishers will want to read. For Hong, bad English is an alternate way for different groups to connect their experiences, without putting the white perspective at the center of their art. At its best, bad English is an oral form—writing it is difficult, especially in the internet age, but Hong is doing her best.

Just like minor feelings, bad English gives Asian American writers a powerful tool for projecting their own true voices and resisting the pull of racist artistic norms. Of course, bad English doesn't just mean using the same nonstandard dialect as immigrants from one's same cultural background. Instead, it really means playing freely with English in an effort to invent the dialect or mixed language that best resembles one's actual speech, thought processes, or worldview.

Trans Chinese American artist Wu Tsang's documentary *Wildness* opens with a shot of the sunset over Los Angeles, a scene familiar to Hong. It goes on to profile the Silver Platter, a mostly Latinx bar where Tsang found a trans community and throws a party every week. The party attendees are very different from the bar's regular clientele, but Tsang's parties bring them together in a kind of "secret utopia"—until hipsters show up and gentrify the bar. At the end of the movie, Tsang feels guilty and stops hosting her parties. But Hong wonders how Tsang's relationship to the community changed after the documentary launched her to international fame.

Wu Tsang's documentary speaks to the fraught politics of trying to form social and political bonds among different groups through "speaking nearby." While Tsang successfully brought two embattled minority groups together and enabled them to collaborate, due to the situation's class dynamics, one of these groups ended up inadvertently harming the other. Tsang's decision to cancel the parties shows how artists must put the communities they work with and for before their own egos. But Tsang's ironic rise to fame also shows that "speaking nearby" goes against the art world's norms: usually, artists *are celebrated, not the people whom their art is about. For artists, keeping their subjects in focus requires consistent focus and discipline—it's all too easy to just let oneself become the center of attention.*

When Hong was growing up, Black, Latinx, and Asian kids were casually racist to each other all the time. While it didn't hurt as much as racism from white people, it still divided them and set up a racial hierarchy. Hong asks how writers of color can genuinely portray a multiethnic America without repeating the same error or getting too caught up in their guilt. It would be easy to do what white writers have always done: scrub all ethnic difference out of their work.

Hong does not have an easy formula for creating a racially convivial society. Instead, she affirms the importance of all the considerations at play. "Stay in your lane" is just a new version of exoticism, which prevents Americans of color from forming collective identities and makes whiteness seem like a neutral default. But veering too much into other lanes risks bringing about conflict and destruction, not collaboration. The only solution is to seek out a reasonable middle ground. After all, Wu Tsing's story shows that even the best of plans can backfire—and that building a coalition of multiple groups usually involves carefully balancing power among them.

AN EDUCATION

Hong went to high school art camp hoping to become a cool kid instead of a geek. But she found herself upstaged by an intimidating goth Taiwanese girl named Erin. They struck up a friendship in class and then decided to paint together one night. Working in front of someone else, Hong felt like a real artist for the first time. Erin turned out to be friendly; she and Hong bonded over their similar upbringings and painted all night together. Decades later, Hong and Erin go to a New York gallery opening together. The artist, Jim Shaw, has filled the gallery with amateur paintings from thrift shops—including, astonishingly, one of Erin's paintings from art camp. Erin, now a professional artist, is too embarrassed to say anything.

Hong explores the roots of her vocation as an artist. American culture often portrays artists as solitary geniuses who develop their interests and style in a vacuum, but Hong rejects this narrative by putting the story of her lifelong friendship with Erin in the foreground. By doing so, she shows that artists truly become artists because of their everyday lives and relationships. Indeed, as this chapter will show, Hong's friendships with other Asian American women enabled her to believe in her potential as an artist. Erin's painting in Jim Shaw's show represents how their friendship and vocation have come full circle—but also the way that white artists often profit from reproducing the work of artists of color.

In her twenties, Hong had an artist friend named Joe. At one of his shows, he just hung raw canvases with faint, childish drawings on them. He became a sensation. "Bad-boy white artists" have long been able to sell this kind of low-effort transgression. Indeed, critics, patrons, and other artists often befriend them early in their careers and invest in their apparent potential. Women and people of color generally aren't so lucky. Yet Hong's relationships with Erin and a woman named Helen ended up giving her a version of this same supportive artistic friendship. She and Erin unexpectedly both ended up at Oberlin College, where they met Helen, a talented but troubled violinist who quit to study art and religion instead.

Hong's emphasis on how people become artists through particular relationships and life events—and not solitary genius—enables her to highlight how social dynamics create systematic inequalities in the art world. In short, wealthy white men dominate the art market, and they generally invest in artists with whom they identify—who tend to also be white men. Hong argues that women and artists of color simply would not be taken seriously if they tried to do "bad-boy" avant-garde work like Joe's or Jim Shaw's. (Hong made a more in-depth version of this argument in her popular article "Delusions of Whiteness in the Avant-Garde.")

Most of Hong's peers in Koreatown spent their careers working hard to satisfy their parents—either to pay off debts or fulfill unrealistic expectations. But fortunately, Hong's father ran a successful business and supported her interest in poetry. In contrast, her mother was deeply troubled, to the point of often threatening her life. Hong's mother is one of the keys to her story, but she isn't ready to write about her yet.

Hong notes how family expectations and pressure also influenced her trajectory as an artist. While a sense of indebtedness is central to the experience of most Asian American immigrant families—a point that she will emphasize in the book's final essay—she also recognizes that she was unusually lucky to have her father's support. Her reluctance to write about her mother also foreshadows the other moments of deliberate silence throughout this chapter—especially when it comes to Helen and Erin's life stories.

In college, Hong, Helen, and Erin would sit for hours at an Ohio diner and discuss art. Their friendship was the foundation for Hong's development as a poet. Helen was peculiar: she spent every night in friends' rooms but didn't sleep, and she easily surpassed them at anything they did, from writing poetry to running on the treadmill. Erin and Helen became the art department's best students, but their classmates resented them and started calling them "the Twins" because they were both Asian. Often, white people feel "*overrun*" when multiple nonwhite people of the same ethnicity enter a white space. At Oberlin, Erin and Helen's ambition scared the underachieving white boys who dominated the art department.

Hong's friendship with Helen and Erin shielded them all from the pervasive racism that surrounded them in Ohio. If they didn't have one another's support, Hong suggests, they may have internalized this racism and never developed the confidence to pursue art as a career. Instead, they served as both a source of motivation and an audience for one another's work. Meanwhile, Helen may sound like a classic "mad genius" artist, but readers should also ask which kinds of "mad geniuses" are celebrated and which are dismissed—and whether this has something to do with race and gender.

Erin did minimalist landscape art, which was in part a way to reinterpret her family trauma. Years later, Erin asks Hong not to include the details of her trauma in this book. Hong complains that Asians too often keep their trauma private, but Erin insists that, as a female artist of color, she constantly runs the risk that her audiences will view her work as nothing more than an extension of her autobiography. Hong no longer knows Helen, but Erin encourages her to think about how much of Helen's story it's right to tell. Hong replies that writers *always* tell other people's stories, which makes them inherently "a bit cruel."

Hong considers the ethical implications of storytelling. She and Erin both prefer to keep some details to themselves. They're both motivated by a combination of privacy and professional self-interest: they're uncomfortable sharing the worst details of their lives publicly, and they recognize how these details will strongly shape the public response to their work. Meanwhile, just as Hong wondered if and how she can write about groups to which she doesn't belong, she now asks if and how she can tell Helen's story. After all, while Helen's story is first and foremost Helen's, it's also a central part of Hong's own story, so leaving it out would mean limiting herself. Put differently, Hong asks how she can "speak nearby" Helen—or write about *Helen without imposing her own meaning on Helen's life.*

As a college first-year, Hong convinced the art department to put her straight into an intermediate class. The professor complimented her technique but questioned her aesthetic sophistication. Hong thought her work was far better than her peers' uninspired drawings; instead, she had to accept how utterly subjective art can be. She hoped that art would be meritocratic, like the spelling bee in the documentary *Spellbound*—the more she worked, the better she would be. But instead, she learned to meet her teacher and classmates' expectations by putting in *less* effort.

Once again, the art world's dynamics are like society's in miniature: Hong's class shows her that art is no meritocracy, just as her life experiences have shown her that society in general is not a meritocracy, either. Elsewhere in this book, she highlights how the concept of meritocracy has long been central to American life and politics, because it suggests that people's social and economic status depends solely on how hard they have worked. Indeed, it's a central part of the model minority myth: mainstream culture praises Asian professionals for their success and then argues that, if members of other racial groups haven't become successful professionals, too, it's their own fault. But the empirical evidence shows that that race, gender, and class deeply influence people's outcomes, and truly understanding and improving society requires first understanding these dimensions of it. This story about art class reflects the same truth: Hong advances not by working harder, but by carefully analyzing white people's expectations and then learning to meet them.

Unlike Hong, Helen never gave up on beauty. For one final project, she created a vast web of pipes and filament in homage to the famously obsessive installation artist Ann Hamilton. As soon as she finished, Helen attempted suicide. Soon, Hong and Erin became her caretakers; frightened of setting Helen off, Hong retreated into herself. But Helen's rages continued: she once pushed her roommate down the stairs. In fact, Helen reminded Hong of her own family. The next summer, Hong met Helen in Seoul. While Hong dressed like a typical, conservative Korean woman, Helen wore her usual revealing clothes and masculine haircut. Helen had moved back home and was seeing a psychoanalyst—her mother thanked Hong for being her friend.

In one sense, Helen embodies Hong's dream of artistic authenticity: she entirely throws herself into her art, insisting on pursuing her own vision and refusing to cave to other people's expectations. In another sense, though, Helen is also Hong's artistic nightmare because she loses sense of the world around her and retreats entirely into her own mind. Hong's challenge in Minor Feelings *is to find a middle ground between these two perilous extremes—or, in other words, to do justice to both her own artistic vision and other people's needs. Of course, Hong is careful to avoid imposing such rigid and broad interpretations on her friendship with Helen: she believes that it would be unethical to seize the authority to decide what Helen's story means, and she recognizes that her own memories are less than perfect.*

A year later, Hong and Erin moved into a dilapidated, old, ant-infested house at Oberlin. Their roommate, another art major, turned the living room into a studio. Hong had spent the previous semester studying abroad in London, where she had a boyfriend and lived with a group of sexual libertines. She wasn't excited to be back in Ohio. Helen started doing heroin and lashing out at Erin's new boyfriend. Erin did deserve better—her boyfriend was a mediocre white slacker who spent all day in bed, complaining and making Erin do everything for him. He and his artsy white friends were frightened of Helen.

Hong's friends in London show her a different version of freedom and creative ambition—one far less tumultuous and destructive than Helen's. Indeed, their sexual liberation contrasts with Erin's stale relationship with her boyfriend, which takes traditional gender roles to an extreme. Hong points out how the combination of race and gender dynamics makes this possible, elevating mediocre white men while sexualizing and objectifying Asian women. But Helen breaks with these dynamics by refusing to give Erin's boyfriend and his friends the respect they think they deserve for being white.

One day, Helen went to Hong and Erin's house after a "heroin bender" and sprawled out on their armchair. Hong remembered her London roommates and decided that she, Erin, and Helen should take off their shirts. They did, but then Helen started mumbling about hearing voices and accusing Hong of laughing at her for being fat. Hong told Helen she was beautiful and deserved love, but Helen physically attacked her and Erin.

This incident bolsters the contrast between Hong's two visions of art and freedom: Helen's, which is rooted in self-hatred, and that of her libertine roommates, which is born out of self-affirmation. Hong also uses this juxtaposition to question American culture's romantic fixation on the stereotype of the tortured artist—which, she suggests, is both destructive and unnecessary.

Hong grew tired of her art class and realized that Erin and Helen were far better than she was, so she switched to poetry. Years later, she admits to Erin that she was jealous of Erin and Helen's work. She also asks if Erin has any less extreme memories of Helen. They reminisce about the study group they formed to read Martin Heidegger's notoriously difficult *Being and Time*. Erin and Helen seemed to get it, but Hong didn't understand a thing. Erin argues that *Helen* was actually jealous of *them* because, unlike her, they had a clear sense of who they were, where they came from, and what they wanted.

Hong isn't criticizing Erin and Helen for leading her to give up on visual art—on the contrary, she's recognizing their pivotal, irreplaceable role in her journey to becoming a poet. Hong's memories about the Heidegger study group show how Erin and Helen pushed her to grow—even if she often felt that they left her behind. Of course, Erin's comment about Helen shows that the same thing was also true about Erin and Hong's influence on her. Finally, Erin's comment also underlines Hong's insistence that her own perspective on Helen is limited and incomplete—again, she does not wish to "speak for" Helen (or define the meaning of Helen's struggles), but only to "speak nearby" Helen (or bring Helen into her own story).

Hong also switched to poetry because she was "too neurotic for art": she wanted to reproduce her ideas perfectly, something possible in poetry but not in visual art. So she took a class with Myung Mi Kim, who taught her about the role of silence in poetry and showed her that she didn't have to change her voice just to satisfy white audiences.

Hong's "neurotic" desire to bring her vision to life as faithfully as possible helps explain her central goal in Minor Feelings*: to find the right authorial voice through which to explore herself, Asian Americans, and race in the U.S. Specifically, she wonders how she can balance personal experience with broader political considerations, as well as write about other groups without speaking for them. Myung Mi Kim's class served as the foundation for her lifelong exploration of these issues.*

Hong is lucky to have studied in the 1990s, when multiculturalism was the norm in college curriculums. She, Erin, and Helen fed off one another's creativity. Hong once staged a poetry reading in a flooded, abandoned basketball court—which the university cleaned up and she re-flooded. While Hong, Erin, and Helen related their art to their identities, their art wasn't *entirely* about identity. At exhibits like the 1993 Whitney Biennial, artists of color presented bold, provocative, political work that challenged the art world's white-centric norms. Hong sees a similar energy in the early 2020s, and she hopes that it spreads rather than disappears, as in the 1990s.

Hong points out that the cultural norms in schools and universities strongly influence how students of color learn—and what kind of creative voices they develop. Fortunately, Hong's college environment pushed her to explore her identity and develop her creativity. But on white-dominated campuses where multiculturalism isn't welcome, students of color do not have the same opportunity. This is why Hong wants to make sure that future students have the same opportunity. However, this doesn't mean she thinks that everything *in colleges should be about identity, or that white and nonwhite artists can't coexist. Rather, she focuses on changing the* norms *and* dominant perspective *in academia and art.*

In college, Hong didn't want to share her poetry with Helen: she was afraid of Helen's judgment, and Helen already dominated everything else in her life. After Hong finally gave Helen some poems to read, Helen disappeared for a week. Feeling abandoned, Hong grew anxious and bitter. She spent days searching the campus for Helen. Eventually, they randomly ran into each other on the lawn, and Helen told Hong that she loved the poems.

Helen may have been crucial to Hong's development as a poet, but this doesn't mean that she was a uniformly positive influence. Not only did she wreak havoc on the people around her, but she also completely failed to understand what she was doing. In fact, Hong's feelings when Helen reads her poetry are similar to the "minor feelings" that arise in her when she has to write for white audiences who simply don't understand her perspective.

A few months later, the college accidentally reported that Helen had graduated, and the administration emptied her studio, destroying all of the art she had made in college. Hong worried that Helen would commit suicide—but she also resented Helen for the emotional chaos of their friendship. To Hong's surprise, Helen spent a month painting around the clock instead. Her show dazzled the whole art department. She put together a separate installation in her studio—and covered the walls with poems plagiarized from Hong's collection. When Hong confronted her, Helen angrily accused her of sabotage, and Hong left.

Helen's final project demonstrates her ambition and vision—the same traits that inspired Hong to take herself seriously as an artist. Yet the plagiarism incident shows that their friendship could only go so far because Helen simply had no empathy or respect for Hong's autonomy. Of course, this incident can help readers understand Hong's emphasis on doing justice to other artists (including Erin, Helen, and the subject of her next essay, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha). But Hong's concern for other artists' autonomy doesn't mean that she feels like she has adequately respected them—on the contrary, she feels guilty for violating Helen's privacy in this essay.

Hong wasn't planning to write about Helen—just Erin, who stayed her best friend for many years after college. In contrast, Hong and Helen fell out of touch after college, and Hong "didn't miss her at all." Yet Hong feels that she has betrayed Helen by writing about her—even more than Helen betrayed her by plagiarizing her work. Helen made her miserable, but she also convinced her that her art could make a difference. Helen gave Erin and Hong faith in their work and "the confidence of white men," at least for a time. This experience helped them keep their "creative imagination" alive when others underestimated them throughout their careers.

Hong concludes by emphasizing her ambivalence about writing about Helen. She regrets exposing unsavory personal details about Helen's life, but she has striven to paint Helen in as fair a light as possible, without distorting the facts. Most of all, she feels that she could not tell her own story without mentioning Helen's. This is a testament to how deeply Helen influenced Hong's development as an artist. After all, while Hong admits that she was happy to end her friendship with Helen, she never says that she regrets starting it. She emphasizes that Erin and Helen gave her the support and confidence that conventionally successful white male artists tend to get from people with formal authority, like teachers and art collectors often do for white male artists.

PORTRAIT OF AN ARTIST

In 1982, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha took the subway from the Metropolitan Museum (where she worked) to a downtown gallery. She delivered **photographs of hands** for her upcoming show and then continued past the company that published her poetry book Dictee and the building where Hong would live more than two decades later. Cha was already sick of the corrupt New York art world, even though she was finally succeeding in it. She went to the Puck Building, where her husband Richard, a photographer, was working on a shoot.

This essay begins with what appears to be an ordinary day in the life of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha. Of course, this introduction takes on an entirely different meaning for readers familiar with Cha's story. Hong emphasizes the varied connections between her own life and Cha's: they were both Korean American women writers and artists living in New York, fed up with the art world, married to other artists, and so on. If they hadn't been separated by a generation, they likely would have met.

Hong read Dictee for the first time in Myung Mi Kim's class at Oberlin. In the book, Cha juxtaposes her mother's life story with those of several other women, including Yu Guan Soon (whom Japanese soldiers tortured to death for protesting their occupation of Korea) and Joan of Arc. The book is a series of poems, essays, memories, stage directions, images, and found documents, and Cha does not tell the reader how to connect them. Indeed, unlike many Asian American writers, Cha does not insist on translating everything into English. To Hong, this makes the book far more authentic and relatable.

Hong suggests that Cha's experiments with language, content, and genre capture the loss and alienation (or the minor feelings) that are so central to many Korean Americans' experiences. Just like Hong hopes to do in her own writing, Cha rejects the linguistic conventions imposed on her by U.S. literary culture. Similarly, she also explores the connections between history and the present, personal feelings and political life, ancestors and descendants, and Korea and the West.

On Cha's way into the Puck Building, a security guard (Joseph Sanza) raped and murdered her. This fact became inseparable from her work—especially since it was about "young women who died violent deaths." But few critics discuss her death in much detail. There are no reliable statistics on violence against Asian American women, and within many Asian cultures, silence and denial about such violence is the norm. Unlike Sylvia Plath, whose readers have debated her life and death for generations, Cha's readers have seldom investigated hers.

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's horrific fate will surprise some readers and be familiar to others. But Hong's goal in this essay is to give it due consideration by reinterpreting it. She knows that this risks disrespect and sensationalism, but she also thinks that it can illuminate how violence leaves a lasting mark on Asian American women's consciousness. In other words, Hong brings Cha's life story to the foreground not because she enjoys prying into strangers' trauma, but because she thinks that U.S. culture has wrongly ignored that trauma.

In one of Cha's early videos, she translates from French in her "ethereal and serene" voice; another, entitled Permutations, shows different images of her sister Bernadette's face, wearing a neutral expression that could mean anything.

Hong mentions Permutations *for several reasons. It offers readers another window into Cha's life and work, and it sets up this essay's powerful concluding passage. It also highlights how repetition deprives things of their meaning, which speaks to the racist stereotype that Asian Americans are identical and interchangeable.*

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha grew up in a village near Busan, where her parents had fled from Seoul during the Korean War, and then in San Francisco, where she started winning poetry contests in middle school—after just two years of learning English. Her mother supported her art, but her father did not. She then studied art and literature at Berkeley, focusing on the French avant-garde.

Hong leaves her readers to decide what to make of the clear parallels between her own childhood and Cha's. On the one hand, she has emphasized how personal experience inevitably shapes artists' voices, which shapes their art—particularly when it involves questions of race and belonging. But, on the other, she has also criticized the way that artists of color are tokenized and reduced to their biographies. For instance, many readers might assume that Hong and Cha's beliefs, personalities, poetry, family lives, and so on are naturally similar just because they're both Korean American women who grew up in California. Of course, Hong will grapple with this tension throughout the rest of this essay, as she asks what role Cha's biography should play in the critical analysis of her work.

Dictee was ignored for a decade after Cha's death, but it has since become a staple of Asian American literature courses. Cha's art has also reached a worldwide audience. Hong teaches her students to treat the words in *Dictee* like those of a language they're just learning. Cha uses short, broken sentences to convey "the immigrant's discomfort with English" and mimic the linguistic effects of Japanese, American, and Soviet colonialism in Korea. Critics often declare that *Dictee* breaks the norms of autobiographical writing by rejecting the idea of a single authorial voice. But, upon reading the book, Cha's mother became convinced that Cha was writing specifically to her.

In her previous essays, Hong has discussed her vision of Asian American literature's goals—such as faithfully capturing individual experience without losing sight of Asian Americans' diversity and complex position within the U.S. racial hierarchy. She has also identified many of the strategies that she believes writers can use to achieve these goals—like engaging history, giving voice to minor feelings, embracing "bad English," and "speaking about" different figures and cultures instead of "speaking for" them. Here, she celebrates Cha's work for employing these literary strategies—in fact, as she will explain shortly, she actually learned many of them from Cha. *The contrast between critics' interpretations of* Dictee *and Cha's mother's interpretation suggests that the book is so powerful because of its hybrid form.* Dictee *is simultaneously personal and anonymous, comfortable in language (generally) but not in any (specific) language. Its version of the immigrant experience isn't just being caught between two different cultures, but rather suffering the imposition of a series of different cultures through violence and imperialism.*

Hong contacts curators and scholars with questions about Cha's death, but they reply that they prefer to focus on Cha's work. Of course, Hong agrees that critics shouldn't let Cha's death overshadow her life. But she still finds it disturbing that nobody has ever fully told Cha's story. Cha's writing constantly uses silence to capture the horrors of historical violence, but silence can also easily give way to forgetting.

Hong returns to the relationship between biography and literature. While she fully understands critics' desire to respect Cha's family and not distract from her work, she also suspects that some might be motivated by squeamishness or fear. Perhaps they are afraid of admitting that history is repeating itself—and that Cha identified the cycle of violence that went on to destroy her. Perhaps Cha would want others to chronicle the violence she suffered, just as she chronicled the violence that others did. But Hong would not dare speak for her. Still, Hong believes that carefully saying something *about Cha's death—even if it means speculating, making mistakes, or failing to reach conclusions—is better than remaining silent about it.*

Joseph Sanza, Cha's murderer, had raped many other women before. But he only killed Cha—probably because she had met him several times before at the Puck Building and thus might have been able to identify him after he raped her. He raped her in the sub-basement, beat and strangled her to death, then rolled her body up in a rug and dumped it in a nearby parking lot. (Hong wonders how specific to get—at what point does more detail start to dehumanize Cha?) Sanza stole Cha's wedding ring, took a bus to Florida, and raped two more women. The police searched the Puck Building for weeks but didn't find the crime scene—Cha's own brothers did.

The details of Cha's death are beyond horrifying. They demonstrate how sex, violence, and identity are inextricably linked for many Asian American women, as well as how official institutions (like the police) often ignore their needs. But, in recounting it, Hong remains torn between two competing impulses. First, she wants to tell Cha's story in the public record faithfully and completely. But second, she also wants to ensure that the public remembers Cha's humanity—that they view her as a full person, with agency and a complex life, and not just the tragic victim of a terrible crime.

Hong interviews Cha's brother John, who wrote a book about the murder (*The Rite of Truth*). In Dictee, Cha wrote about how her mother wouldn't let John participate in the protests against U.S.-backed Korean dictator Syngman Rhee in 1960. Hong is relieved that Cha's family is willing to discuss the murder.

John shows Hong that her interest in Cha's death is welcome, and that she's right to view academics' reluctance to discuss it as a serious oversight. Once it's available in English, John's book will provide another valuable resource to readers and scholars who want to situate Cha's work in the context of her life and death.

It took three trials for a jury to convict Joseph Sanza. Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, a friend whom Cha was supposed to meet the night of her murder, tells Hong how the scratch marks on Sanza's face and arms became important evidence in the trial. When a student once tried to connect Cha's work to her "passivity as a rape victim," Flitterman-Lewis brought up the scratch marks, which prove that "she fought back." On the night of the murder, Flitterman-Lewis saw Dictee on display at St. Mark's Bookshop—a store Hong once frequented, and where she once rejoiced in seeing her own book on display.

Flitterman-Lewis's argument with the student illustrates Hong's point about the dangers of focusing on Cha's death. Specifically, doing so risks painting Cha as a passive object who is important because of what was done to her, rather than an active subject who is important because of what she did. Just like writing about Asian Americans risks reinforcing stereotypes, then, writing about Cha risks reinforcing the exact same trends that she tried to write against in Dictee. *But these risks are not a reason to* ignore *Cha's life and work—just to write about them carefully.*

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's work has deeply influenced Hong ever since Myung Mi Kim introduced her to it. And this essay is Hong's way of "trying to pay proper tribute" to Cha. But Hong recognizes that, in the past, she would have disagreed with what she's doing now: narrating Cha's death in a straightforward form that Cha would never use, treating it as an "answer key" for interpreting Dictee, and emphasizing her personal connections to Cha. Hong's father grew up in Busan as a refugee at the same time as Cha; her uncle was in the protest John wanted to join, and her grandfather was so worried that he had a heart attack and died.

Just like the essay about Erin and Helen, this essay raises important ethical questions about how to write about (or "speak nearby") other people's stories when they don't (or can't) give their consent. By pointing out how her feelings about the issue have changed over time, Hong emphasizes that she does not pretend to know for sure that she is doing more good than harm. But she certainly thinks that she is: not only can she "pay proper tribute" to Cha (and enable others to do the same), but she also wants to show how Cha's work can serve as a model for Asian American literature, illuminate her own life experiences, and inspire young people to experiment with writing about their own.

Hong wonders why other critics haven't written about Cha's death—perhaps it's because the word "*rape*" is so powerful that readers either get stuck on it (and overlook Cha's work) or simply stop reading.

Hong asks about the proper relationship between biography and art, particularly when both are so powerful. Is it possible to consider Cha's life and work together, or does the seriousness of one inevitably overwhelm the seriousness of the other?

Most supposed images of Cha online are actually pictures of her sister Bernadette, from Permutations. Of course, Asian women are often mistaken for one another. Cha even wrote a poem about being called "Yoko Ono," a common experience in her era. When Asian women are desired at all, it's often as part of a sexual fetish. Many learn to assume that *all* interest in them is really perversion. Hong recalls the poet Bhanu Kapil's question: "What is the shape of your body?" For Hong, this question evokes shame. What would it mean to Cha, who wrote about women's bodies being hidden and destroyed? The media paid no attention to her death; Sandy Flitterman-Lewis thinks that it would have if she were white. Hong agrees.

The confusion between Cha and her sister only underlines the point of Permutations*: Asian American women are invisible in U.S. culture in part because they are treated as interchangeable versions of each other. Meanwhile, Bhanu Kapil's question is so profound because it hands women of color control over defining their own bodies—which, in popular culture, are too often defined exclusively from white men's perspective, as sexualized objects. Flitterman-Lewis's comment about the media response to Cha's death shows how these two norms work together to erode the public's empathy for Asian American women like Cha and, ultimately, divert interest away from crimes like her murder.*

After Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's death, her mother dreamed about the number 710 and her sister Bernadette about the number seven, three times. Her brothers found the sub-basement where she was killed when they came across a stairway with the numbers 710, 711, and 713 painted on it. They saw **her bloodied gloves**, which seemed inflated—and which John called "her final art piece." This happened on the same day that the gallery was showing Cha's final photography exhibit—her photographs of hands.

Much like the resemblance between Cha's work and her death, the connection between Cha's gloves and her exhibit is too striking not to mention. Yet Hong deliberately refrains from declaring what it means—instead, she prefers to let Cha's family members speak (and her readers decide) for themselves. Still, it's worth exploring some of the options. Perhaps the juxtaposition of Cha's empty glove with her gallery full of images of other people's hands could represent the way that she has left her mark on the world even after her death. Or perhaps it could suggest that her life and work have ceased to be just her own and taken on a broader social meaning.

In his book, John describes a childhood photo of him and his siblings. Cha is frowning and wearing an ugly, boxy haircut. Years later, in Permutations, Cha would add one frame of her own portrait into the video of her sister Bernadette.

The first picture represents an outsider's view of Cha, posed in a way that doesn't represent her true self, while the second represents Cha taking active control of her own image through art. Of course, the first photo also represents the place of family in Cha's life, work, and legacy. Similarly, the easy-to-miss frame of Cha in Permutations *is a comment on both the way that Asian American women are sometimes viewed as interchangeable and the way that artists insert themselves and their lives into their work. Together, they suggest that Cha herself is too often invisible or forgotten, even in discussions about her work.*

THE INDEBTED

After becoming a mother, Hong feels stuck, unable to travel or get much time alone. She goes swimming in the public pool and tries to write about its beauty as a common space—until she remembers how white communities fought to keep Black people out of them throughout the 20th century. When she was thirteen, a man kicked her out of her aunt's building's pool, complaining that Asians were "everywhere."

In this final essay, Hong returns to the broader questions that have motivated her book as a whole: what does it mean to be Asian in America, and how can Asian American writers define their voice and audience? Her comments on the pool represent how difficult it is to define or write about collective identity in the U.S., where racial conflict and oppression have always been a central feature of political life.

Today, "we're everywhere now" is one version of the Asian American story, the one told in movies like *Crazy Rich Asians*: Asians will fight racism with capitalism, by making enough money to buy white people out. But, Hong asks, is this any different from just becoming white? Writing this book about race was far more difficult than Hong expected. She knows she cannot speak on behalf of "we" Asian Americans, as she only represents a small slice of them.

Hong argues that most Asian Americans have to choose between two starkly different approaches to life in the U.S. In aggregate, individuals' choices will shape the overall composition and story of "Asian America." In simple terms, they can try to win at capitalism, or they can try to change capitalism. Winning at capitalism is the default option, and it isn't available to all Asian Americans (such as working-class refugees). Hong argues that choosing this option is similar to becoming white because it involves both accepting the racist hierarchies that dominate corporate life and profiting off of the exploitation of others—mostly nonwhite people in the U.S. and around the world.

Hong returns to the moment when the American soldiers nearly murdered her grandfather during the Korean War. The village interpreter said something in English, and the soldiers let him go and gave candy to his young son (Hong's father). The U.S. military has long handed out candy as a consolation for its brutal violence. Perhaps, Hong suggests, the U.S. thought that, by sowing candy, it would reap Christianity and capitalism. In South Korea, it worked.

It's impossible to understand the ultimatum that Hong gives Asian Americans without first understanding why *she thinks that trying to succeed under American capitalism inevitably means oppressing and exploiting other people. This passage helps explain it: like many scholars, Hong views U.S. military imperialism as the foundation of the capitalist global economic system that makes American professionals so rich. In fact, for Hong, this is the great irony in most Asian American immigration stories: immigrants dedicate themselves to working for the exact same political and economic system that plundered their home countries and sometimes even murdered their loved ones.*

Hong feels indebted to her parents, just as her parents feel indebted to the U.S. This sense of debt makes immigrant children "ideal neoliberal subject[s]"—to pay back their parents, they have to succeed at work. Whereas gratitude allows us to appreciate the present, indebtedness means "fixat[ing] on the future." Good luck starts to look like a loan that needs repayment. But Hong refuses to live like this, even if the only alternative is to be ungrateful.

Hong explains why striving to succeed under capitalism is such an attractive option for the children of Asian immigrants: they become "ideal neoliberal subject[s]" because they learn to conceive of their entire lives in financial terms. But Hong also asks why children's debt to their parents has to be understood—and repaid—in purely economic terms. Her vision is clear: Asian Americans should seek to envision their debt to their country and their immigrant parents in other terms, and they should look to give back in ways that actually benefit society as a whole.

A famous photo of Malcolm X's assassination shows him lying on the ground while Yuri Kochiyama holds up his head. Kochiyama grew up as an optimistic, patriotic Japanese American in Los Angeles. During World War II, her father was imprisoned on false espionage charges for several weeks (and died shortly after getting out). Her brother joined the U.S. army, but the rest of the family ended up in an Arkansas concentration camp. After the war, she moved to New York, where Black coworkers started teaching her about the long history of U.S. racism. She became an activist, met Malcolm X at a rally, and began working with him. She was incredibly selfless, and her "sense of *we* was porous and large." She fought for causes as diverse as prison reform, Puerto Rican independence, and reparations for Japanese American internment.

Kochiyama's life story offers a model for how Asian Americans can work to change the U.S.'s structures of wealth and power, instead of just joining them. Most of all, Kochiyama demonstrates why this can only work if Asian Americans build solidarity with other minority groups—or develop a broad "sense of we*." These different groups' struggles are interrelated, as they all share a common interest in fighting racism, imperialism, and inequality; a victory for one group generally lifts them all up. Practically speaking, Asian Americans are a numerically small and highly diverse group, so they are more likely to achieve their own goals if they build coalitions with other groups. Yet this is often difficult, because the model minority myth encourages Asian Americans to view themselves as exceptional and superior to Black, Latinx, and Native Americans.*

A group of mostly Filipino, Japanese, and Chinese American students at UC Berkeley coined the term "Asian American" in 1968. They were inspired by the Black Power movement and hoped to bring a concern for Vietnamese people into the anti-war movement. Hong didn't appreciate the radical origins of Asian American identity until years after college—in the 1990s, she just took it for granted that ethnic activism was divisive and pointless. But now, Hong believes that Kochiyama's "model of mutual aid and alliance" holds crucial lessons for activists.

Throughout her book, Hong has struggled with the term "Asian American," which feels impossibly vague and broad as an ethnic descriptor. But now, she specifies that it isn't meant to be an ethnic category at all—rather, it has always been a political *term, and it has always specifically referred to a diverse group of people of Asian descent uniting to fight alongside other minority groups for a varied range of political causes. In other words, the "model of mutual aid and alliance" is already built into the concept of Asian American identity—even if most people who claim that identity do not know it. The key to changing U.S. politics is merely to embrace and expand on this model.*

Hong hasn't been to Seoul since 2008, when her grandmother died there in a miserable nursing home. She could never live in Seoul, where women regularly get plastic surgery to look more European, the school system and labor market are hypercompetitive, and the air is severely polluted. She celebrated her 28th birthday with a group of avant-garde musicians at her sister's apartment in Seoul. They started playing "Never Have I Ever," but the game only lasted a few seconds because the musicians all immediately admitted that they had attempted suicide.

Keenly aware of the stereotype that Asian Americans are "perpetual foreigners" in the United States, Hong points out that she feels even more *foreign in Korea. In fact, she sees many of the problems that she associates with American capitalism—like the pressure to conform to racist beauty standards and define one's life through work—replicated in even more severe forms in Korea.*

Hong is in the U.S. because the U.S. was in Korea. The U.S. army mercilessly bombed it, arbitrarily partitioned the peninsula in two, and even invented the double-eyelid surgery that is wildly popular today. The U.S. has done similar damage to dozens of other countries whose people have then migrated to the U.S., including the Philippines, Iraq, El Salvador, and many others.

Hong implicitly connects the issues she sees in Korea today to U.S. imperialism, something that most white Americans know remarkably little about. Like her college roommate's father, who proudly mentioned his time in the Korean War, many Americans simply assume that the U.S.'s military and foreign policies are always positive forces—and never bother to consider how these things affect non-Americans. Instead, Hong suggests that Americans have an obligation to learn about the countless atrocities committed in their name overseas—and recognize how these atrocities are the root cause behind so much immigration to the U.S.

Hong hates the cliché that immigrants feel out of place in the U.S. and need to rediscover themselves in the homeland. But she does find a sense of perspective whenever she's in Seoul. And when she returns to the U.S., she feels flattened out, like she's being "returned to [a] silicon mold." This is why she writes poetry: to communicate her humanity through her words, and her pain through the silences between them. Yet she has written this book in prose in order to address the issue directly.

Hong feels flattened out or "returned to [a] silicon mold" when she goes back to the U.S. because she knows that, unlike Koreans, many Americans do not view her as a full, complex human. They only see the surface of her race and gender, which gives them an inaccurate, artificial sense of who she really is. Hong also implicitly compares the way that writing this book has allowed her to refine her perspective on art with the way that visiting Seoul allows her to reset her perspective on herself.

Hong argues that writers of color must move beyond "racial containment," or the norm of writing only for their own narrowly defined racial groups. White perspectives are still viewed as the universal, neutral default, even though formerly colonized people are a large majority in the world today. It's telling that Hollywood dystopias usually show white people turning into refugees or slaves, living in the kind of conditions that are common in formerly colonized countries today.

Writers who favor "racial containment" may view themselves as anti-racists, but Hong argues that they're actually feeding into the U.S.'s white supremacist norms. Their work suggests that people of color live in a series of isolated, exotic ethnic bubbles, which allows whiteness to remain the default perspective. This applies not just to the U.S., but also to the global cinema industry. As Hong points out, movies with global reach depict dystopia as a world in which white people have to live in conditions that are already a reality for many nonwhite people around the globe. This shows how entrenched racist norms are in Hollywood: many movies are produced primarily for white audiences, under the assumption that they can and will only emotionally identify with other white people. To achieve political change, the U.S. needs art, literature, and film to bridge *different racial groups—rather than only ever covering a single one.*

In Ken Burns's famous documentary about the war in Vietnam, a Japanese American veteran recalls his service in the countryside near Saigon. An elderly Vietnamese woman gave him a bowl of fish and rice, but then he found a tunnel under her house and threw a grenade inside. He killed several people, who may or may not have been soldiers, and his commanding officer praised him. Upon seeing this interview, Hong thinks of the word "traitor." But the soldier was doing exactly what the U.S. asked him to. She wishes the documentary mentioned the trauma Vietnamese people felt, instead of focusing exclusively on the Americans. It also never mentioned the 300,000 Korean soldiers who fought for the U.S. in the war.

Hong presents this anecdote in order to explore the tension between the words Asian *and* American. *She feels like the Japanese American soldier is a "traitor" because he murders innocent Asian people on behalf of the U.S. government, but she also knows that he doesn't truly belong to one side or the other. Still, she suggests that he may have been able to humanize his victims in a way that white soldiers wouldn't have, and she thinks that this fact can help readers grasp the true toll of the U.S.'s overseas wars. Of course, she also recognizes that most of the U.S. public identifies solely with the U.S. military's perspective—and simply assumes that soldiers must have been doing good by killing people.*

No matter what Hong writes, violence always seeps back into her work. She knows that her comfortable life today is deeply tied to Korea's long legacy of violence: occupation by the Japanese, the Korean War, repressive dictatorship, and even the South Korean troops who fought in Vietnam—and brutally murdered at least 8,000 innocent civilians. She feels deeply indebted to activists like Yuri Kochiyama, other writers like Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, and her parents. But she has decided not to repay her parents in the usual way by chasing the "privatized dream" of riches under capitalism.

Hong insists on expanding and complicating the concept of gratitude. She expands it by showing that she doesn't owe her life to her parents alone, but rather to a long political history and a wide range of artistic influences. She complicates it by pointing out how brutal and unconscionable much of that history was. In short, imperialism, authoritarianism, and civil war aren't things to be grateful for. Yet Hong feels that she must incorporate them into her work in order to truly tell her story.

White supremacy conscripts Asian Americans to do much of its dirty work, whether by fighting wars, discriminating against other racial groups, or staffing corporate offices. For affluent Asian Americans, this conscription is a "default way of life." And this makes sense: Asian Americans are made to feel like conditional citizens, but they're promised that they will truly belong once they copy mainstream white culture. This is a lie—in reality, Asian Americans will only free their consciousness once they *change* the mainstream culture. They must defend and collaborate with other Americans of color. For instance, Japanese internment camp survivors are protesting the government plan to reopen the camps as immigration detention centers. "We were always here," Hong concludes.

Hong concludes with a call to action for her fellow Asian Americans. The corporate, capitalist "default" is a pointless way to waste one's life, and the alternative to it is activism. Becoming wealthy will not make Asian Americans white; changing the U.S.'s racial hierarchy will do far more to improve their lives. Put differently, instead of paying off their debts with money, Asian Americans should pay them forward by making the U.S. (and the world) more just and hospitable for everyone. This—and not riches—is the best way for immigrants' children to prove that their parents' sacrifice was not in vain. Hong ends with "We were always here" in order to remind her readers that Asian Americans (and their struggle for freedom) always have been and always will be an integral part of the United States.

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