

Counterstories in Cathy Park Hong's *Minor Feelings*

Jack Vaught

ABSTRACT

Although the “model minority myth” seems promising in benefiting Asian Americans, its greatest hoax is that it has never guaranteed safety from anti-Asian hate. The Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 uncovered the long-existing, historical tensions of anti-Asian hate in America, as hate crime rates had spiked to unprecedented levels. They have historically been shaped by discrimination, forced assimilation, and the struggle to belong in a society that has continuously treated them as diseased or alien enemies. Asian Americans have been subjected to the simplification of what Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie defines as the “single story.” To break from this continued discrimination of autonomy and identity, it is crucial to look at stories that push back against dominant narratives imposed by mainstream society.

In recent years, a surge of marginalized narratives has countered pre-existing barriers formed by single stories, including Cathy Park Hong's *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning*. Her semi-autobiography includes various essays that work toward describing the Asian American consciousness through Hong's lived experiences and research. Authentic stories that counter the single stories imposed by mainstream society re-story the canon of what it means to be Asian

© Vaught, *The Digital Literature Review*, 12 (1), 10-29.

doi: 10.33043/5559r34a. Shared with CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 License.

American. In this paper, I will explore how Asian Americans reclaim identity through “counterstories,” turning what Hong calls “minor feelings” into visualized struggles. By analyzing the critique of single stories, narrative voice, and the experience of purgatorial spaces, I will demonstrate how *Minor Feelings* works as a counterstory to reclaim Asian American identity.

Since their initial wave of immigration to the United States, the Asian American identity has been historically shaped by discrimination, forced assimilation, and the persistent struggle to belong in a society that continuously treats them as perpetual foreigners. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s concept of the “single story”—noted as the reductive, inaccurate representation of a group of people—provides a powerful lens to comprehend this struggle of identity: Asian Americans frequently have stereotypical images and singular narratives forced onto them that erase their complex and diverse lived experiences, rendering them invisible. Korean American poet Cathy Park Hong hopes for a change in American literature to counter the single story imposed on Asian Americans: “Overhaul the tired ethnic narratives that have automated our identities; that have made our lives palatable to a white audience but removed them from our own lived realities—and stop spelling ourselves out in the alphabet given to us” (47-48). Authors’ counterstories—an act of what Chinua Achebe refers to as “re-storying”—are crucial when deconstructing single stories. In this essay, I will explore how Asian Americans reclaim identity through counterstories, turning minor feelings into visualized struggles. Using Adichie’s definition of the single story and elements of Espiritu et al.’s critical refugee studies (CRS) in *Departures*, I will explore the enduring impact of racism and displacement within the home. Through analyzing the critique of single stories, lived experiences of purgatorial space, and narrative voice, I will demonstrate how Cathy Park Hong’s *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning* works as a counterstory with Hong’s acknowledgment of the power to heal, reconstruct, and reclaim Asian American

narratives.

Cathy Park Hong was born and raised by Korean parents in Los Angeles, California. Hong is a poet by trade, her work primarily focusing on the fusion of language and unique expressions of human honesty. Her semi-autobiography *Minor Feelings* is divided into seven critical essays that attempt to locate Asian American experiences within the racial discourse of the United States, each struggling with questions of internalized and societal racism. Hong begins her novel with the essay “United,” in which she asks, “Who is us? What is us?” (28). Her essays detail the complexities of the Asian American identity from defining the single story and cross-racial relationships in “Stand Up,” political shame in “The End of White Innocence,” and concluding with the burdens of silence and gratitude in “The Indebted.” Each chapter deals with spaces of discomfort with the “intersections of racism and capitalism, specifically but not solely as they relate to Asian Americans, to more deeply understand where we are and how we might move forward” (Beyer). The title of the novel *Minor Feelings* is positioned as a framework to identify why Asian Americans are dismissed as racialized minorities. Using Sianne Ngai’s “ugly feelings,” Hong contends that minor feelings arise from a spectrum of racialized experiences that have been internalized to avoid giving them significant value. This can result in emotional suppression, self-doubt, and a complicated relationship with one’s cultural background or “home.” *Minor Feelings* breaks from the mainstream to make the lived experiences of Asian Americans visible. As an Asian American herself, Hong acknowledges her access to this knowledge and practices Trinh T. Minh-ha’s “speaking nearby” when discussing the Asian American condition, maintaining proximity to the subject while refraining from speaking on their behalf (Hong 102-103). Like CRS, which Espiritu et al. define as the contextualization of refugee narratives, Hong recenters the story of Asian American experiences to enable transformation from simplified objects of study to complex narratives, emphasizing they are fellow humans deserving of justice. In this essence,

Hong's *Minor Feelings* evokes elements of Richard Delgado's "counter-storytelling" or "counterstories": critical stories used to challenge dominant narratives, such as single stories (Delgado 2414). Hong retells the story on her own terms, bringing an intimate, raw honesty that allows readers to bear witness to the impacts of systemic racism.

When discussing the Asian American body, it is important to recognize the complexities of the diaspora. The label Asian American is a recent term coined by historical civil rights activist Yuji Ichioka in the late 1960s to unify Asian ethnic groups in solidarity to increase their power, rejecting terms such as "Oriental" imposed by the Western world and demanding much-needed resources (Shih et al. 412). Despite the rich diversity of Asian Americans, the label has been used as an umbrella term to homogenize the diversity of Asian subgroups' myriad differences; they are generally understood to be those of the East Asian diaspora (i.e., Korean, Japanese, and Chinese). Yang et al. acknowledge in the introduction of their article that "Grouping such diversity into one category blurs the uniqueness and humanity of different heritages, making it all too easy to marginalize and stereotype," describing one of the main dangers of the Asian American monolith in its erasure of individual groups' realities.

In discussing the Asian American condition, Hong questions how to use the collective statement "we," mentioning in *Minor Feelings* her conflicted feelings in its usage. She uses it cautiously throughout her novel, describing the struggle of defining what the label Asian American is: "The paint of the Asian American label has not dried. The term is unwieldy, cumbersome, perched awkwardly upon my being" (29). Her cautious use of the word reflects the challenges Asian Americans face when uniting a vast community under a single label while simultaneously honoring the diversity of individual experiences. By acknowledging the fluidity of Asian American identities, more inclusive narratives that counter the homogeneity of the label itself are brought to attention. This recognition of the richness of Asian American experiences is essential to dismantle the reductive frameworks

that erase them.

According to Bell and Delgado, counterstories refer to the narratives of those marginalized by white-dominated spaces. Counterstories humanize marginalized groups' realities by articulating their lived experiences while simultaneously challenging dominant frameworks (qtd. in Rodríguez 160). Delgado emphasizes their power, noting that counterstories engage the conscience and stir imagination in ways conventional discourse cannot (2415). Hong draws audiences' attention using her tools as a poet to illustrate lived realities, describing how poetry is used to authentically describe immigrant experiences: "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" (196-197). Turning to prose gives Hong more agency to examine and analyze her internalized feelings on racial identity. Her narrative in *Minor Feelings* presents her lived experiences not to elicit empathy, but to reclaim and resist the commodification of her pain. Hong critiques the expectations that writers of color must present their trauma in ways white audiences can maintain innocence:

Of course, writers of color must tell their stories of racial trauma, but for too long our stories have been shaped by the white imagination. Publishers expect authors to privatize their trauma: an exceptional family or historic tragedy tests the character before they arrive at a revelation of self-affirmation... the outlying forces that cause their pain... are remote enough to allow everyone, including the reader, off the hook (49).

Hong's critique highlights how migrant and racialized literature has historically been framed to maintain the existing framework "shaped by the white imagination" that demands writers of color's voices be modified into preapproved, nonconfrontational templates to avoid addressing systemic racism. This simplification aligns with Carpio's critique in *Migrant Aesthetics* of how racialized literature—such as slave narratives

and contemporary immigrant fiction—relies on expressions of suffering and pain to gain empathy and allyship (12). Similarly, Hong observes the pressures on marginalized writers to always express gratitude, stating “Writers of color had to behave better in their poetry and in person; they had to always act gracious and grateful so that white people would be comfortable enough to sympathize with their racialized experiences (46). Asian American writers, Hong argues, are often pressured to adapt their stories to be consumable to a white audience. This process obscures their complexities and lived realities, forcing them to adhere to preapproved molds of the single story.

The single story is a concept that devalues and homogenizes marginalizes narratives. As Adichie defines in her TEDTalk, “The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story” (00:13:03-00:13:15). Single stories place labels onto groups of people, creating a distinct line between those with power and those without to otherize them. It is here that those in power standardize what they consider to be authentic stories. As Adichie further explains, “Like our economic and political worlds, stories too are defined by the principle of *nklai*: How they are told, who tells them, when they’re told, how many stories are told, are really dependent on power” (00:09:48-00:10:03). The perpetuation of the single story devalues lived experiences that do not conform to dominant standards, using certain available facts to obscure reality and justify the reinforcement of stereotypes (Delgado 2421-2412). As Hong identifies, this can be found in exceptional stories of struggle and triumph that let readers “off the hook” (49). Stories narrated by minorities lose their authenticity when forced to conform to molds prescribed by the dominating white framework. As Hong describes, these “respectability politics” adhere to the sterilization of grief in subaltern narratives. Rather than empowering marginalized voices, the single story ultimately serves the dominant group, reaffirming white innocence and complacent distance from systemic injustice.

Hong advocates for acknowledging the emergence of counterstories that reclaim the fullness of Asian American identity. These stories refuse to create remoteness that isolates pain from the collective histories and systems that shape it. In countering these stories through *Minor Feelings*, Hong applies what Chinua Achebe defines as re-storying: “the process of ‘tak[ing] back the narrative’ of ‘peoples who had been knocked silent by all kinds of dispossession,’ in the hope that re-storying will result in ‘balance of stories among the world’s people’” (qtd. in Espiritu et al. 22). Asian Americans are grossly underrepresented with the dominating presence of the single story. Throughout *Minor Feelings*, Hong works to contextualize Asian Americans’ stories, examining figures such as Ocean Vuong and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha to emphasize the importance of authentic representation by countering the singular narratives imposed onto them as tragic diasporic subjects. Contextualizing such marginalized stories outside of the exceptional tale acknowledges the individual human stories that enrich a collective narrative.

Hong highlights the dynamic of commodified, exceptionalist stories in her essays, particularly in “Stand Up,” where she describes how white audiences impose their frameworks onto stories of trauma. This framework is highlighted in Hong’s short analysis of Ocean Vuong whose work is often simplified by audiences who fixate on his background as a Vietnamese refugee, ignoring the broader complexities of his layered identity; to audiences, his queer identity does not fit into the mold of tragic victimhood. In her critique of Vuong’s single story, Hong underscores the limitations of the refugee narrative. She argues it objectifies pained experiences to evoke emotional responses driven by a sense of injustice such as empathy, pity, shame, and outrage: “He reassures the public that he has not only sung but lived through his libretto of hurt so that his poetry and biography have become welded into a single American myth of individual triumph” (Espiritu et al. 19; Hong 51). The importance of counterstories, Delgado notes, is that they shatter complacency to deepen and humanize the Othered subject: “It is through

this process that we can overcome ethnocentrism and the unthinking conviction that our way of seeing the world is the only one—that the way things are is inevitable, natural, just, and best—when it is, for some, full of pain, exclusion, and both petty and major tyranny” (2439). Diverse stories are a gateway to conversations that construct reality. Welding stories such as Vuong’s to a solely tragic subject fosters audience complacency, dehumanizing the individual by erasing complex identities and flattening his lived experiences into a consumable narrative that elicits empathy, as Carpio describes.

The concept of empathy plays a significant role in the perpetuation of the single story. Carpio notes that empathy has been historically commodified in literature. By 1955, Susan Lanzoni notes, “*Reader’s Digest* defined the term... as the ‘ability to appreciate the other person’s feelings without yourself becoming so emotionally involved that your judgment is affected’” (qtd. in Carpio 10). This detached empathy model of art, as Serpell calls “a gateway to white saviorism” with its implied occupation of marginalized stories, allows audiences to feel without thinking critically about systemic issues” (qtd. in Carpio 12). Instead of working toward genuine understanding, this approach enables readers to consume marginalized experiences while maintaining distance.

Another key aspect of the single story is the racial binary that excludes Asian Americans. Hong notes the difficulty of situating herself within the context of the dominant “black/white” racial framework. She understands the oppression of Black and African Americans but also finds herself allying with white people (53-54). These binaries create an exclusionary dynamic where, in the context of Asian American single stories, Asian Americans are neither fully accepted nor entirely rejected, reinforcing their status as perpetual foreigners. Despite being positioned as “honorary whites” under the model minority myth, Asian Americans remain racialized Others, expected to be diligent and compliant while remaining politically silent (Saiot, Tuan, Zhou & Tuan qtd. in Sabharwal et al. 543). Such limitations lead to a form of erasure where Asian Americans are

absorbed into a white supremacist framework where whiteness equates to acceptance and success, therefore denying their individuality and history. The positivity of American optimism coupled with seemingly positive stereotypes establishes a double bind of existence where Asian Americans occupy what Hong describes as a “vague purgatorial status:”

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 to keep the black man down... But while I may look impassive, I am frantically paddling my feet underwater, always overcompensating to hide my devouring feelings of inadequacy (9).

Although Asian Americans are given the faux privilege of being adjacent to white Americans, their status is easily reversed by their perceived foreignness in this country’s long-existing anti-Asian hate rhetoric. The importance of counterstories becomes especially clear in such times of crisis. More recently in 2020, the United States was forced into lockdown with the Covid-19 pandemic. Many politicians—including Present Donald Trump—labeled Covid-19 as the “kung flu” or “Chinese virus,” associating Asians with the disease. Those racist sentiments reinvoked hate and discrimination targeting Asian Americans, mirroring America’s history of making Asians a racial scapegoat through disease. According to the Anti-Asian Hate Crime Report in 2021, reports of discrimination and violence against Asian Americans increased by 145%—unprecedented levels—in 2020 (qtd. in Han et al. 2516-1517). Racism in America has always been under the surface by systemic barriers. As Sabharwal et al. point out, “The rise in reporting hate crimes against Asian Americans is indicative of the xenophobia and the deep-seated stereotype of ‘forever foreigner’ that persist in the historical, political, and cultural underpinnings of the US” (543). Conditional citizenship, where Asians are caught in a double bind between praise and hate, highlight the limitations of the single story. Hong delves into the internal toll of this purgatorial status, describing the strenuous performance of

competency in terms of citizenship and economics. The purgatorial status in which Asian Americans are positioned exiles them with the inability to fully belong in the American framework, where they are viewed as perpetual foreigners.

The perpetual foreigner stereotype alienates Asian Americans, compelling them to feel as if they are not recognized as part of a larger community. As Asian Americans are not acknowledged as “real minorities,” they overcompensate and contort their identities to fit into singular narratives constructed by the white imagination, as seen in Hong’s critique on whiteness and success. This is not to say that all Asian Americans are to be perceived as generally conforming, but that the effects of the single story manipulate how the general public views them in terms of their conditional citizenship. As Asian Americans are positioned outside of society’s barriers through the perpetual foreigner myth, their experiences arguably align with those of refugees under Espiritu et al.’s CRS, which critiques the commodification of stories of exceptionalism.

While it is recognized Hong is privileged compared to refugees as an American-born citizen, there are ways her depiction of systemic marginalization in the States aligns with CRS. Similar to previous movements in other emergent fields, CRS confronts conditions such as purgatorial spaces and systemic forces of erasure, challenging the status quo to amplify the voices of the “overlooked and underestimated” (Espiritu et al. 11-12). It focuses on elements of Achebe’s re-storying, using Um’s definition of it “as the process conceptualizing survivor-refugees as ‘experiencing subjects,’” rewriting to humanize and legitimate these lived experiences (qtd. in Espiritu et al. 22-23). CRS emphasizes the importance of lived experiences being retold canonically by those who bear witness, resisting systemic marginalization and dominant narratives of the single story as counterstories do—themes that resonate with Hong’s analysis of Asian American identity in *Minor Feelings*. CRS highlights how refugees are seen as outsiders who are shaped by tragic experiences of imperialism and war, which extends to how Hong contends

the multifacetedness of Asian Americans who are regarded as perpetual foreigners in a society that refuses to acknowledge their existence outside a liminal space.

The marginalization of Asian Americans through their purgatorial status mirrors CRS's examination of how refugees are denied agency and visibility. Hong's critique that Asian Americans "don't have enough presence" to be considered "real minorities" parallels the marginalization of refugee experiences in broader narratives (7). They are objectified into a framework of commodity under the guidelines of the single story, reducing them to figures who must constantly justify their existence and citizenship outside of portrayed victimhood. For Asian Americans, it is their dismissal as a model minority "used by whites to keep the black man down" (9). During the Cold War in 1965, Hong describes how Asian Americans went from "the degraded race" to the model minority:

During this period the model minority myth was popularized to keep Communists—and black people—in check. Asian American success was circulated to promote capitalism and to undermine the credibility of black civil rights: we were the "good" ones since we were undemanding, diligent, and never asked for handouts from the government (22).

However, this status can easily change, as previously mentioned, when the white men in power use Asian Americans as racial scapegoats. This unstable identity is similar to that of the systemic erasure CRS critiques: refugees are often reduced to sanitized victims of imperialism and war to avoid existing systemic issues that suppress upward mobility. These reductive roles record how both Asian Americans' and refugees' exceptional stories are commodified in single stories. By reviewing Hong's work within the broader framework of CRS, she not only critiques the perpetual foreigner stereotype and racial binaries used to keep minorities in place but also challenges the structural inequities they perpetuate. Like CRS, Hong advocates re-storying to resist the singular narratives imposed by dominant groups to reclaim humanity and the complexities of identity.

By contextualizing herself as an Asian American woman while navigating these restrictive structures, Hong challenges the idea of the “tragic unknowable subaltern subject” (172). She acknowledges the silence embedded in Asian American narratives:

The problem with silence is that it can’t speak up and say why it’s silent. And so silence collects, becomes amplified, takes on a life outside our intentions, in that silence can get misread as indifference, or avoidance, or even shame, and eventually this silence passes over into forgetting (165).

Here, Hong discusses Korean American writer and artist Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, whose notable novel *Dictee* is known for its manipulation of English as an act of resistance. She is also known by police as “an Oriental Jane Doe” (Hong, 164). Years after her death, critics and audiences quite literally made a performance out of it to grapple with the meanings of her many works. In this act of disregard for her humanity, Cha’s own views on silence were hijacked by the dominant discourse that silenced her.

Unlike the previous case study of Ocean Vuong’s narrative, Cha’s was reduced simply to silence. Cha was brutally raped and murdered in 1982—a fact that is often omitted to avoid sensationalizing her story or retraumatizing her family (Hong, 164). Hong argues that this silence ultimately erases Cha, reducing her identity to “mystery and hushed hearsay,” a common trope found in objectifying Asian women (165). Hong centers the chapter “Portrait of an Artist” on Cha to re-story how her life is remembered, appreciating her being in its entirety, including her end. She critiques how Asian American writers often struggle against their work being hijacked by their biographies, particularly when those stories disrupt dominant narratives. These counterstories can elicit discomfort, leading audiences to erase or reframe them in ways that align with the preapproved molds of the single story.

One of the main points echoed throughout *Minor Feelings* is the struggles Asian American writers face when their work is paired with their biographies, especially when

it comes to racial and sexual experiences. The confrontations of these experiences that do not adhere to the single stories of exceptionality and foreignness expose audiences to long-suppressed discomfort, which they then impulsively erase again with narratives that fit their ideals. When Hong recalls her conversation with Flitterman-Lewis—a friend of Cha’s—she describes one of the dominating narratives that fetishized Cha’s life as an object of study. One graduate student at a particular conference “made confusing, pretentious claims about Cha’s passivity as rape victim being a kind of performance art” (170). Cha, as Flitterman-Lewis retorted, was not at all passive. Any form of biographical narrative that counters or re-stories dominant ones must be treated with care. They must appear noncoercive as counterstories to not turn potential allies away, nor should their aesthetics promote sensational viewing. When Hong reflects on her search for who Cha was, she writes, “Maybe I am just tired of Cha’s ghostliness. If she’s known at all, she’s known as this tragic unknowable subaltern subject” (172). Hong is in a privileged position where she can speak near these “unknowable” subjects. The confrontation disrupts the commodified silence that typically follows the narratives of Asian women.

Language has long been used as an act of silence. Throughout history, the English language has served as a tool of assimilation. However, writers such as Achebe and Cha see language as a medium of resistance. Hong notes Cha manipulated English to create an unpleasurable experience, presenting the discomfort Asian Americans feel when their sense of belonging is determined by linguistics: “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” (155). Hong examines how the concept of standardized American English reinforces the perpetual foreigner stereotype while simultaneously offering a means to reclaim identity. In her chapter “Bad English,” Hong reflects on her relationship with English by celebrating the realities of accented, nonstandard, mixed dialects she proudly refers to as her heritage:

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 mastering of English their rallying cry... To *other* English is to make audible the imperial power sewn into the language, to slit English open so its dark histories slide out (97).

Hong describes bad English as a powerful linguistic tool that projects an authentic, unapologetic voice that challenges the authority of standard English. As she recounts her history of “outside” English, Hong explores “what it means to borrow words and stories from other groups. The resulting vernacular pokes holes in the idea of fluency” (Kim 27). Hong embraces her bad English as a form of reclamation of the Asian American identity, defying the dominating white framework of America that expects the people to speak in unaccented, standard American English. For Hong, bad English represents a form of defiant survival in a society that situates a binary based on linguistic performance.

Hong highlights how language choice intersects with identity. She briefly touches on Awkwafina’s backlash for her “blackface” accent in the film *Crazy Rich Asians*, realizing the accent Awkwafina had used was similar to the K-town girls’ accents: “It never occurred to me that those K-town girls were doing blackface. I thought they were just talking the way other teens around them talked” (101). Here, Hong shows linguistic choices emerge from lived experiences and are not necessarily cultural appropriation. However, when individuals such as Awkwafina adopt linguistic markers from other marginalized communities in an attempt to assert belonging, they face scrutiny that reinforces their liminality. Hong critiques this response, noting that like the single story, “stay in your lane” politics simplify the lived realities of racial identities: “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” (102). Once again, Hong illustrates the objectification of Asians as objects of study.

Hong’s commentary on the transformation of English amongst minority groups

reflects other postcolonial theories writers, such as Achebe with “English and the African Writer.” Hong describes English as “our ever-expanding lingua franca, the consumer language of brand recognition and outsourced labor,” highlighting the power dynamics within the language (96). By reshaping English, Hong asserts how marginalized communities reclaim the language as a tool to reflect their own lived experiences rather than conformity. This reflects the sentiments of both Cha and Achebe, the latter stating a writer “should aim at fashioning an English that is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experiences. I have in mind here the writer who has something new, something different, to say” (347). Hong’s reclamation of bad English challenges the authority of existing, standardized norms of the language, which are rooted in maintaining systemic hierarchies. English is typically thought to be the white man’s language, one that involves the colonization of other languages in acts of assimilation. This can be seen today with “stay in your lane” politics imposed onto minorities by white supremacist frameworks, keeping them in low positions of power and Other them in society. As Hong demonstrates, nonstandard forms of English—or as she describes, bad English—serve as a reclamation of voice. Achebe states, “The price a world language must be prepared to pay is submission to many different kinds of use” (347). When the English language is reclaimed, it must adapt to suit the needs of the minority who uses it to their best judgment; it must remain in contact with English and the primary language to avoid erasure, yet altered enough to suit its new usage.

To explore “Bad English” with its linguistic reclamation, I spoke with Dr. Mary Lou Vercelotti, an applied linguistics professor at Ball State University. Although she disagreed with Hong’s use of the term “bad English,” she acknowledged how Hong inverts linguistic discrimination to challenge standardized English. As Hong states, “To *other* English is to make audible the imperial power sewn into the language, to slit English open so its dark histories slide out” (97). Her aggressive language—describing how she must “eat English

before it eats me”—reflects the violent nature of linguistic policing (98). Dr. Vercelotti noted that “cannibalizing” English allows Hong to reclaim the power of language historically used to oppress minorities. This transformation of English to a tool of survival underscores how linguistic hierarchies maintain social inequalities. As Dr. Vercelotti stated, “Who gets to define her English? Is it the white people, or is it her? She’s saying, ‘I get to decide.’” By embracing bad English, Hong asserts her agency and disrupts power structures of exclusion.

Hong’s *Minor Feelings* dismantles the single story in resisting commodification, amplifying uncomfortable truths, and reclaiming Asian Americans’ narrative agency. She critiques the racialized constraints imposed onto marginalized writers by white supremacist frameworks, recognizing that to write truthfully about race she must “write against the narrative” to break free from the “infernal circle” that reduces people of color to their racial identities (64). Through counterstories and their elements of re-storying, Hong challenges these sympathetic approaches that distort migrant experiences into simplified, commodified single stories designed for white audiences. She calls for literature that directly confronts racism, imperialism, and historical erasure while also paying respect to the lived experiences of Asian Americans, ensuring their voices are not flattened into monolithic representations. By embracing linguistic diversity, Hong asserts her right to define her own voice and identity rather than conforming to the limiting framework.

Hong is direct in her language, demonstrating the importance of not negating her intentions with *Minor Feelings*: To present her story not as one of exceptionalism, but as one of many stories that make up an authentic counterstory. Hong goes against the status quo to establish the authentic counterstory. She recognizes her privileged position as a published and educated American-born writer, using it to amplify other authors’ voices in her critical essays. *Minor Feelings* does not finish with a solidified conclusion of

what is Asian America, instead ending with the declarative statement, “We were always here” (203). The Asian American face has never truly been solidified, constantly being reshaped to fit standards of marketability, rendering multitudes of stories invisible. When it comes to defining what the Asian American story is, there is no answer. Hong’s semi-autobiography proves its power to heal, reconstruct, and reclaim narratives as a counterstory by saying “We were never invisible; it was just a refusal to see us.” Ultimately, *Minor Feelings* is a powerful act of re-storying, reclaiming Asian American narratives from the constraints of the single story.

Works Cited

- Colby, Sandra L., and Jennifer M. Ortman. *Projections of the Size and Composition of the U.S. Population: 2014 to 2060*. U.S. Census Bureau, 2015.
- Hong, Cathy Park. *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning*. One World, 2020.
- Kim, Jisu. "Marginalia." *Women's Review of Books*, vol. 37, no. 2, Mar. 2020, pp. 26-27. *EBSCOhost*, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lkh&AN=142053769&site=ehost-live&scope=site.
- Park, Josephine. "Alien enemies in Julie Otsuka's *When the Emperor Was Divine*." *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 59, no. 1, Mar. 2013, pp. 135-155, <https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.2013.0013>.
- Rodríguez, Noreen Naseem. "'This is why nobody knows who you are:' (counter)stories of Southeast Asian Americans in the Midwest." *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies*, vol. 42, no. 2, 14 Mar. 2020, pp. 157-174, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10714413.2020.1757377>.
- Sun, Michelle. "Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning." *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, vol. 63, no. 3, Mar. 2024, pp. 381-383, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaac.2023.12.006>.
- "About the Topic of Race." *Census.Gov*, 1 Mar. 2022, www.census.gov/topics/population/race/about.html.
- Carpio, Glenda. *Migrant Aesthetics: Contemporary Fiction, Global Migration, and the Limits of Empathy*. Columbia University Press, 2023.

Espiritu, Yen Le, et al. *Departures: An Introduction to Critical Refugee Studies*. University of California Press, 2022.

US Census Bureau, et al. "Projections of the Size and Composition of the U.S. Population: 2014 to 2060. Population Estimates and Projections. Current Population Reports. P25-1143." *US Census Bureau*, Mar. 2015. *EBSCOhost*, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eric&AN=ED578934&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

Yang, Shuling, et al. "Understanding culturally sustaining practices through the lens of Chinese immigrant families in the United States." *Journal of Language, Identity & Education*, 2023, pp. 1-14, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15348458.2023.2282697>.

Shih, Kristy Y., et al. "Impacts of the model minority myth on Asian American individuals and families: Social Justice and critical race feminist perspectives." *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, vol. 11, no. 3, 12 Aug. 2019, pp. 412-428, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jftr.12342>.

"Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: The Danger of a Single Story | TED." *Youtube*, uploaded by TED, 7 Oct. 2009, www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9lhs241zeg.

Vercellotti, Mary Lou. Personal interview. 14 Nov. 2024.

Hong, Cathy Park. Interview by Mina Kim. "Poet Cathy Park Hong on 'Minor Feelings' and Anti-Asian Racism in the Age of COVID," *KQED*, 29 July 2020.

Achebe, Chinua. "English and the African Writer." *Transition*, no. 75/76, 1997, pp. 342-349, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2935429>.

Delgado, Richard. "Storytelling for Oppositionists and Others: A Plea for Narrative."

Michigan Law Review, vol. 87, no. 8, Aug. 1989, pp. 2411-2441, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1289308>.

Fassler, Joe. "What Stories About Racial Trauma Leave Out." *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 26 Feb. 2020, www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2020/02/cathy-park-hong-susan-sontag/607081/.

Goh, Jin X., et al. "Positioning Asian Americans in social cognition." *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, vol. 17, no. 6, 20 Apr. 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1111/spc3.12760>.

Han, Sungil, et al. "Anti-Asian American Hate Crimes Spike During the Early Stages of the COVID-19 Pandemic." *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, vol. 38, no. 3-4, 3 June 2022, pp. 3513-3533, <https://doi.org/10.1177/08862605221107056>.

Sabharwal, Meghna, et al. "From the Chinese Exclusion Act to the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Historical Analysis of 'Otherness' Experienced by Asian Americans in the United States." *Public Integrity*, vol. 24, no. 6, 2 Nov. 2022, pp. 535-549, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10999922.2022.2120292>.