

"BRILLIANT . . . TO READ THIS BOOK IS TO BECOME MORE HUMAN." —CLAUDIA RANKINE, author of *CITIZEN*

MINOR FEELINGS

AN ASIAN AMERICAN RECKONING

CATHY PARK
HONG

ADVANCE PRAISE FOR
MINOR FEELINGS

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“Cathy Park Hong’s brilliant, penetrating, and unforgettable *Minor Feelings* is what was missing from our shelf of classics. She brings acute intelligence, scholarly knowledge, and recognizable vulnerability to the formation of a new school of thought she names minor feelings. In conversation with Sianne Ngai’s *Ugly Feelings*, Hong charts her emotional life as a Korean American immigrant woman, thereby shattering the concept of a single story of the Asian experience. *Minor Feelings* builds through what Hong names a ‘racialized range of emotions,’ which are routinely dismissed by others. To read this book is to become more human.”

—CLAUDIA RANKINE, author of *Citizen*

“Cathy Park Hong’s *Minor Feelings* truly delivers news we can use. It will educate some and inspire hallelujahs from others; people will productively argue with it, be inspired by it, think and feel with and around it. Hong says the book was ‘a dare to myself,’ and she makes good on it: by writing into the heart of her own discomfort, she emerges with a reckoning destined to become a classic.”

—MAGGIE NELSON, author of *The Argonauts* and *Bluets*

“*Minor Feelings* is an essayistic investigation of those feelings so hard to name, a mix of the elusive, denied, unexpected, and unexplored—a fierce catalogue of that which has not been named and yet won’t be ignored; an electric intervention, a provocation, and a renewal.”

—ALEXANDER CHEE, author of *How to Write an Autobiographical Novel*

“I seldom finish a book and say we are not ready for what I just read. But we are *so* not ready for what Cathy Park Hong does in *Minor Feelings*. And thankfully, she does not care whether we are ready or not. *Minor Feelings* seals intellectual cracks while patiently revealing emotional and national secrets I was afraid and unwilling to name. Few books change how we talk to each other and whisper to ourselves. *Minor Feeling* is one of those books that changes the language we use to reckon, to talk, to write, and to hide. Cathy Park Hong sees us. Her vision and execution are so breathtaking. And so genius. And so absolutely scary. Read it. Reread it. It will read you.”

—KIESE LAYMON, author of *Heavy*

“Cathy Park Hong’s book is tremendous. The entire time I read, I was hissing yes and yes and YESSSSS and letting my minor feelings become major feelings, which I think is the glory of a book like this—it takes all the parts of us that we can barely account for and gives them back fully recognized. It felt like having someone sit me down in a chair and say ‘Your feelings are real’ and ‘This is how we got here’ and ‘Here is a way out’ all at once. It broke my heart with relief.”

—MIRA JACOB, author of *Good Talk* and *The Sleepwalker’s Guide to Dancing*

M I N O R

F E E L I N G S

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An Asian American Reckoning

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C A T H Y P A R K

H O N G



O N E W O R L D

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Minor Feelings is a work of nonfiction. Some names and identifying details have been changed.

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By Cathy Park Hong

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UNITED

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MY DEPRESSION BEGAN WITH AN imaginary tic.

For an hour, I stared at the mirror, waiting for my eyelid to flutter or the corner of my mouth to tingle.

“Do you see my tic?” I asked my husband.

“No.”

“Do you see my tic now?” I asked my husband.

“No.”

“Do you see my tic *now*?” I asked my husband.

“No!”

In my early twenties, I used to have an actual tic in my right eyelid that spread so that my right facial muscles contracted my eye into an occasional Popeye squint. I found out I had a rare neuromuscular condition called hemifacial spasm, triggered by two cranial nerves behind my ear that became twisted. In 2004, when I was twenty-six years old, a doctor in Pittsburgh corrected my spasms by inserting a tiny sponge to separate the two entwined nerves.

Now, seven years later, I was convinced my spasms had returned—that somehow the sponge had slipped and my nerves had knotted themselves up again. 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.

My self-conscious habits returned. I found elaborate ruses to hide my face in public, cradling my cheek against my hand as if I were in constant dismay, or looking away to quietly ponder a question about the weather

when all I could think of was my ticklish nerves that could, any second, seize my face into a tic.

There was no tic.

It was my mind threatening mutiny. I was turning paranoid, obsessive. I wanted someone to unscrew my head and screw on a less neurotic head.

“Stinking thinking,” my husband called my thinking.

To try to fall asleep, I ingested whiskey, then whiskey with Ambien, then whiskey with Ambien, Xanax, and weed, but nothing could make me sleep. When I could not sleep, I could not think. When I could not think, I could not write nor could I socialize and carry on a conversation. I was the child again. The child who could not speak English.

I lived in a beautiful rent-stabilized loft on an unremarkable corridor of Lower Broadway known for its retail jeans stores that pumped out a wallpaper of Hot 97 hits. 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.

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I decided to see a therapist to treat my depression. I wanted a Korean American therapist because I wouldn’t have to explain myself as much. She’d look at me and just *know* where I was coming from. Out of the hundreds of New York therapists available on the Aetna database of mental health care providers, I found exactly one therapist with a Korean surname. I left a message for her and she called me back. We set up a consultation.

Her small, dimly lit waiting room had a framed Diego Rivera poster of a kneeling woman holding a giant basket of calla lilies. The whole room was furnished in Rivera’s tranquilizing palette: the brown vase of cattails, the caramel leather armchair, a rug the color of dying coral.

The therapist opened her door. The first thing I noticed was the size of her face. The therapist had an enormous face. I wondered if this was a problem for her, since Korean women are so self-conscious about the size

of their faces that they will go under the knife to shave their jawlines down (a common Korean compliment: “Your face is so small it’s the size of a fist!”).

I went into her office and sat down on her couch. She told me she was going to begin with some standard consultation questions. The questions she asked were indeed standard: Was I hearing voices in my head? Having suicidal thoughts? I was soothed by how standard these questions were since it assured me that my depression was not in fact *me* but a condition that was typical. I answered her consultation questions despondently; I might have even hammed up my despondency, to prove to her, and myself, that I needed to be there. But when she asked, “Was there ever a time in childhood where you felt comfort?” I searched for a memory, and when I couldn’t recall a time, I collapsed into sobs. I told her the beginning of everything—my depression, my family history—and when our consultation was over, I felt remarkably cleansed. I told her I’d like to see her again.

“I’m not sure I’m taking any more patients with Aetna,” the therapist said neutrally. “I’ll contact you soon.”

The day after, I went ahead and called her office phone to set up another appointment. When I didn’t hear from her after twenty-four hours, I left two more messages. The following day, she left a voicemail, telling me she couldn’t take me as a patient since she’d decided to stop taking Aetna insurance. I immediately called back and left my own voicemail explaining that Aetna would reimburse me 80 percent for all out-of-pocket costs. She didn’t return my call. Throughout the week, I left four more voicemails, each one more desperate than the last, begging for her cell number so we could text about this. Then I began to randomly call her and hang up when I got her machine, hoping to catch her between appointments. I did this half a dozen times per day, until it dawned on me that she might very well have caller ID, which shamed me so badly I slunk into bed and didn’t come out for the rest of the day. Finally, she left another terse message: “It’s a lot of paperwork for you to be reimbursed.” I speed-dialed her number and shouted into her machine: “I can handle the paperwork!”

While I was waiting for her to call back, I had to attend a reading at the University of Wyoming in Laramie. At this point, I was severely depressed. It was a miracle that I managed to board a plane when all I wanted to do was cut my face off. As expected, the reading went badly. To recite my poems to an audience is to be slapped awake by my limitations. I confront

the infinite chasm between the audience's conception of Poet and the underwhelming evidence of me as that poet. I just don't *look* the part. Asians lack presence. Asians take up apologetic space. We don't even have enough presence to be considered real minorities. We're not racial enough to be token. We're so post-racial we're silicon. I recited my poems in the kazoo that is my voice. After my reading, everyone rushed for the exit.

At a layover in the Denver airport on my way back to New York, I saw the therapist's number on my phone. "Eunice!" I shouted into the phone. "Eunice!" Was it rude to call her by her first name? Should I have called her Dr. Cho? I asked her when I could make my next appointment. Her voice was cold. "Cathy, I appreciate your enthusiasm," she said, "but it's best you find another therapist."

"I'll handle the paperwork! I love paperwork!"

"I can't be your therapist."

"Why not?"

"We're not right for each other."

I was shocked. Every pore in my skin sang with hurt. I had no idea that therapists could reject patients like this.

"Can you tell me why?" I asked feebly.

"I'm sorry, I cannot."

"You're not going to give me a reason?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I'm not allowed to reveal that information."

"Are you serious?"

"Yes."

"Is it because I left too many voicemails?"

"No," she said.

"Are you seeing someone I know?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"Then it's because I'm too fucked up for you, isn't it?"

"Of course not," she said.

"Well, that's how I'm going to feel if you don't tell me why. You're making me feel like I should never open up and never share my feelings because I'm going to scare everyone away with my problems! Isn't this the

opposite of what a therapist is supposed to do?”

“I understand how you feel,” she said blandly.

“If I do anything drastic after this phone call, it will be all your fault.”

“This is your depression talking.”

“It’s *me* talking,” I said.

“I have another patient waiting,” she said.

“Don’t fuck her up too,” I said.

“Good-bye.”

—

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. Often at night, I flinched awake and berated myself until dawn’s shiv of light pierced my eyes. My confidence was impoverished from a lifelong diet of conditional love and a society who thinks I’m as interchangeable as lint.

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.

There’s a ton of literature on the self-hating Jew and the self-hating African American, but not enough has been said about the self-hating Asian. Racial self-hatred is seeing yourself the way the whites see you, which turns you into your own worst enemy. Your only defense is to be hard on yourself, which becomes compulsive, and therefore a comfort, to peck yourself to death. You don’t like how you look, how you sound. You think your Asian features are undefined, like God started pinching out your features and then abandoned you. You hate that there are so many Asians in the room. *Who let in all the Asians?* you rant in your head. Instead of solidarity, you feel that you are *less than* around other Asians, the

boundaries of yourself no longer distinct but congealed into a horde.

I like to think that the self-hating Asian is on its way out with my generation, but this also depends on where I am. At Sarah Lawrence, where I taught, I had students who were fierce—empowered and politically engaged and brilliant—and I thought, Thank God, this is the Asian 2.0 we need, Asian women ready to holler. And then I visited a classroom at some other university, and it was the Asian women who didn't talk, who sat there meekly like mice with nice hair, making me want to urge: You need to talk! Or they'll walk all over you!

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In 2002, I was a graduate student in poetry at the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop. My friend and I were at the Coral Ridge Mall for a pedicure and found a family-owned place where the Vietnamese owner put on his immigrant patter by repeating everything twice: "Pedicure pedicure? Sit sit." I waited for that man's wife or daughter to serve me but they had customers. The only pedicurist left was his son, who looked about fourteen and wore an oversized black hoodie and cargo shorts. Behind the counter, he scowled, hands shoved into his pockets. He didn't look like a trained nail technician. He looked like he should be playing *Halo* on Xbox. When the boy didn't respond the first time, his father snapped at him to hurry up and fill the basin with water.

The boy walked over to where I was sitting. He squatted down until his scabbed knees reached his ears. I told him I wanted my toenails cut round, not square. He began filling the basin with water. "It's too hot!" I said when I dipped my foot in. He slowly adjusted the temperature. I noticed he cut my toenails square, not round. I noticed he refused to look me in the eye. When he did, I detected a flicker of hostility. Did he feel aggrieved at spending all his after-school hours massaging the calves of Iowan soccer moms? Or did it just annoy him to serve someone who looked too much like him, someone who was young and Asian? Although I was twenty-four, I could pass for seventeen, and I looked boyish with my short choppy haircut. Still, I thought at the time, I am much older than you and you should respect me like you're forced to respect those Iowan blond moms who come in here. Then he used the toenail nippers and pinched hard into the flesh of my big toe, hard enough to make me flinch.

"Can you please be softer?" I asked tartly. He mumbled an apology but

pinched his nipper even harder into my skin.

“Can you be softer?”

He tore a cuticle off.

“Hey!”

He dug his nipper in harder.

“I *said*—”

He tore a cuticle off.

“*softer*—”

He dug his nipper in harder.

“That *hurts!*”

To be competent at this line of service, you have to be so good you are invisible, and this boy was incapable of making himself invisible! Maybe I was hallucinating this pain to justify my own rising irritation that his physical *boy* presence was distracting me from relaxing. He was so ungainly in that supplicant’s crouch, making me feel ungainly in my vibrating massage chair. It wasn’t fair.

The boy dug his nipper into my toe so hard I yelped out again. His father shouted at him in Vietnamese and the boy’s sharp ministrations finally softened by a smidge. I had had enough. I stood up, my two feet still in the basin’s soapy scum, and I refused to pay. My friend watched me, troubled by my behavior. I hoped the father would later punish him by withholding his paycheck. But the boy probably didn’t even get a paycheck.

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We were like two negative ions repelling each other. He treated me badly because he hated himself. I treated him badly because I hated myself. But what evidence do I have that he hated himself? Why did I think his shame skunked the salon? I am an unreliable narrator, hypervigilant to the point of being paranoid, imposing all my own insecurities onto him. I can’t even recall if I actually felt that pain or imagined it, since I have rewritten this memory so many times I have mauled it down to nothing, erasing him down until he was a smudge of resentment while I was a smudge of entitlement until we both smudged into me. But he was nothing like me. I was so privileged I was acquiring the most useless graduate degree imaginable. What did I know about being a Vietnamese teenage boy who spent all his free hours working at a nail salon? I knew nothing.

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When my father was growing up in the rural outskirts of Seoul, he was dirt poor. Everyone was poor after the war. My grandfather was a bootlegger of rice wine who couldn't afford to feed his ten children, so my father supplemented his meager diet with sparrows he caught himself and smoked in a sand pit. My father was smart, enterprising. He won a nationwide essay contest at the age of ten and studied hard enough to be admitted into the second-best university in Korea. It took him nine years to graduate college because of mandatory military service and because he kept running out of money.

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.

My father lied. He wrote down he had training as a mechanic. He, along with my young mother, was sent to the hinterlands of Erie, Pennsylvania, where he worked as an assistant mechanic for Ryder trucks. Despite lack of training, he got by, until a cracked stone in an air grinder came loose and shattered his leg so badly he was in a cast for six months. Ryder fired him instead of giving him workman's comp because they knew he couldn't do anything about it.

Then they moved to L.A., where my father found a job selling life insurance in Koreatown. He worked more than ten hours a day and was eventually promoted to manager. But years of selling life insurance were taking their toll. No matter how much he worked, he could never save enough. He drank heavily during those years and fought with my mother, who beat my sister and me with a fury intended for my father. Later, with bank loans, my father bought a warehouse that distributed dry-cleaning supplies in a desolate industrial section of L.A. With this business, my father became successful enough to fund my private high school and college educations.

—

On paper, my father is the so-called model immigrant. Upon meeting him, strangers have called my father a gentleman for his quiet charisma and kindness, a personality he cultivated from years of selling life insurance and dry-cleaning supplies to Americans of all manner of race and class. But like many model immigrants, he can be angry.

The question of racial identity can bedevil the children of Asian immigrants. But it's assumed that immigrant parents themselves are unfazed by the race question because they are either working too hard to care or they identify with the country they hail from and there's nothing more to say on the subject. But the experiences my father acquired as a mechanic in blue-collar white Pennsylvania and as a life insurance salesman trawling through neighborhoods ranging from Brentwood to South Central had made him highly sensitive about his own racial identity to the point where everything came down to race. If we were waiting for a table, and someone was seated before us, he pointed out that it was because we were Asian. If he was seated way in the back of the plane, he said it was because he was Asian. When my parents moved me into my dorm room during the first week at Oberlin in Ohio, my father shook my roommate's father's hand, who then asked him where he was from. When my father said South Korea, my roommate's father eagerly replied that he fought in the Korean War.

My father smiled tightly and said nothing.

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"There are many Caucasians here," my father said quietly when he visited me in graduate school in Iowa.

"Where are all the black people?" he asked, as we drove into a Walmart parking lot and found a parking spot.

"Always smile and say hello," my father said. "You have to be very polite here."

"My daughter," my father told the Walmart cashier, "is a poet at the Iowa Writers' Workshop!"

"Really," the Walmart cashier said.

"Don't ever make an illegal U-turn here," my father advised after I