

Reflections on the Model Minority as the American Dream/Nightmare¹

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In this essay, I want to take us on a journey of critical fabulation, a method coined by Saidiya Hartman as a way of imagining one's route through voids, through the gaps of archives and memory, and attempts to say what resists being said.² This reflection moves in four parts: a brief introduction to "model minority" as conceptualized in the field, minor feelings, poet Franny Choi's response, and finally, I will conclude with possibilities for a different world.

The story of the "model minority" is a nightmare. It is borne out of a dream imposed on bodies, a narrative that strips agency and turns living, breathing humans into automatons and objects for productivity's sake. As Courtney Sato recounts of historian Gary Sato's work, the term "model minority," often associated with the education, financial mobility, and relative success of Asian Americans in the United States, is ideated on how it benefits the demographic, rarely asking what it costs to be a part of the so-called "model minority," while the same population is seen as a threat—the so-called "yellow peril."³

This story of the "model minority" is embedded in the racial hierarchies that govern "belonging," where the term of inclusion of Asian Americans (particularly those understood as being part of the model minority) are premised on their

use-value, profitability, and disposability: the moment they are calculated or even speculated to become liabilities, their "model minority" status is converted into their hibernating alter-ego: the inassimilable alien, yellow peril, an objectionable race. The existence of this pattern of inclusion and exclusion, of owning and disposing, has recently been retested in the face of the COVID pandemic. Its historically cyclical nature, meanwhile, is reaffirmed; Asian exclusion in the face of COVID is not so dissimilar in kind to the Chinese Exclusion Act, the Japanese Internment, and the relatively recent War on Terrorism (against Middle Easterners and South Asians)—only different in degree. The fragility of Asian American inclusion and the precarity of Asians in the racial polity of the United States⁴

go hand in hand.

It is also a story that continues to emphasize that Asian American are neither white enough, nor black enough, as Asian American poet Cathy Park Hong writes: "in the popular imagination, Asian Americans inhabit a vague purgatorial status . . . distrusted by African Americans, ignored

¹ This essay was originally a talk delivered to the Critical Conversation Series organized by the Black Student Union and the Asian Student Organization at Augustana University, Sioux Falls.

² Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 1–14.

³ Gary Y. Okihiro, "When and Where I Enter," in *Margins and Mainstreams: Asians in American History and Culture* (University of Washington Press, 1994), 12.

⁴ Cristian Carlo Loveranes Suller, "'Model Minority' Writing: Asian America and the Literary Canon," (Ph.D. diss, University of Texas at Dallas, 2024), 46–7.

by whites, unless we're being used by whites to keep the black man down."⁵ Asian American inhabitancy in the "model minority," in other words, keeps racial hierarchies solid, and racial capitalism entrenched—as Asian Americans try to, on one hand, succeed, and on the other, prove that they are not liabilities in a system liable at any point to turn on them, consume them, and devour them whole, even as they were first used to replace slaves in plantation fields, then weaponized to keep black kin in check, and variously "upgraded" and "downgraded" in the racial hierarchy in the last three centuries. Racialization in the United States is interesting: "whatever power struggle your nation had with other Asian nations—most of it the fallout of Western imperialism and the Cold War—it is steamrolled flat by Americans who don't know the difference."⁶

I wrote earlier that the "model minority" is a nightmare. Most of my work deals in affect—the ways in which empire imposes itself on the embodied experience of the Other, and how those trapped in coloniality process the violence of the system both in feeling and in enactment. Drawing on the work of Hartman and Sianne Ngai, Cathy Park Hong fleshes out what she calls *minor feelings*.⁷ Hong writes, "Minor feelings occur when American optimism is enforced upon you, which contradicts your own racialized reality, thereby creating a static of cognitive dissonance. You are told, 'Things are so much better,' while you think, Things are the same."⁸ Minor feelings occur when you are being gaslit by being told that a racial slight *is not*—when you begin to doubt your very senses, and so the disfiguration of the senses becomes an engendering of "the minor feelings of paranoia, shame, irritation, and melancholy."⁹

She also goes on to write,

Minor feelings are also the emotions we are accused of having when we decide to *be* difficult—in other words, when we decide to be honest. When minor feelings are finally externalized, they are interpreted as hostile, ungrateful, jealous, depressing, and belligerent, affects ascribed to racialized behavior that whites consider *out of line*. Our feelings are overreactions because our lived experiences of structural inequity are not commensurate with their deluded reality.¹⁰

These feelings are not "generated from major change, but from lack of change, in particular, structural racial and economic change. Rather than using racial trauma as a dramatic stage for individual *growth*, the literature of minor feelings explores the trauma of a racist capitalist system that keeps the individual *in place*."¹¹ Asian American poet Franny Choi reflects on this at length in their poem, "For Peter Liang."¹² This reflection is borne out of the killing of Akai Gurley, an unarmed Black man in a Brooklyn housing project by Chinese American NYPD officer Peter Liang, and the subsequent marches on Liang's behalf by hundreds of Chinese Americans. Choi notes that many protesters carried signs that read "One Tragedy, Two Victims," and from there,

⁵ Cathy Park Hong, *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning* (One World, 2020), 9.

⁶ Hong, *Minor Feelings*, 23.

⁷ See Hartman, *Venus in Two Acts*; Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Harvard University Press, 2007).

⁸ Hong, *Minor Feelings*, 56.

⁹ Hong, *Minor Feelings*, 55.

¹⁰ Hong, *Minor Feelings*, 57.

¹¹ Hong, *Minor Feelings*, 56.

¹² Franny Choi, "For Peter Liang," April 20, 2016, Button Poetry, YouTube, 3:29, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I-A4GNn2Pe4>.

unpacks that Liang is not a victim, but rather a “a disposable knife, a tyrant tool.”¹³ This journey is typical, Choi points out, borne out of “one enemy” who

wears many faces, and this same god who put Akai in those projects is the same god who hammered at our accents until our mouths were clean and biblical as stale bread. Until we fit into the cog of this pyramid scheme, long enough to climb onto the backs of Other others. And so reach our scraps, our good jobs and our decent houses.¹⁴

Likewise, Choi observes that at the same time, “it’s true that no one wants to see us alive, either. They would rather see us hunched over and suicidal in an iPhone factory, or begging for pleasure at a white man’s feet, or not see us at all.”¹⁵

In traversing the affect of minor feelings, the “model minority” myth, though, begins to unravel—we can indeed resist the hegemony of *the* single narrative as imposed by empire. The reality is that not all Asian Americans “succeed” by the metric of the American Nightmare, the 1992 LA Riots (*Sa I Gu*) were not simply Korean Americans versus African Americans, and depending on the times, people are variously “upgraded” or “downgraded” in the racial hierarchies, to name a few examples.¹⁶ Moreover, we do not have to submit to the imposition of American optimism that demands that Asian Americans get over their “inconvenient” feelings. To paraphrase poet Prageeta Sharma (as told to Hong), we *can* refuse the expiration date on race and grief, and we do not have to just *get over it*.¹⁷

Let me nuance the script one more time. If we are serious about the possibilities of a different world, then there is one more reality that we cannot ignore. If Asian American presence is narrativized by the railway, exclusion act, farm workers, laundries, restaurants, and the corner store, then we cannot get away from the reality that all of this happens and has happened on stolen land. Asian Americans have never been white enough to settle land. Instead, as Asian Canadian writer Larissa Lai notes, their “labour was supplementary. . . in that it is both a replacement and an excessive addition. It was used to help open the land up for Western agriculture and resource exploitation . . . in addition to the various kinds of menial support labour that facilitated the colonization of Turtle Island.”¹⁸ She further goes on to write,

In the systemic racialized logic of settlement, we might think of the [initial Chinese] as prosthetic to the white bodies that were given land to turn into property. They functioned, in a sense, as disembodied ‘arms’ of the . . . state—labouring flesh meant to extend the whole and complete property-making bodies of white men, but not to own that property, rather—through the logic of the . . . Exclusion Act—to return to China when the act of property-making was complete.¹⁹

That is to say, as much as they have been exploited, for Asian Americans to regain agency (*Asiancy*, to quote Roy Miki) is to recognize their part in the colonial project and their relationship with the

¹³ Choi, “For Peter Liang.”

¹⁴ Choi, “For Peter Liang.”

¹⁵ Choi, “For Peter Liang.”

¹⁶ Larissa Lai, “Bone to Bone, Spirit to Spirit—Sovereign Matriarchy, Asian/Indigenous Relations, and the Work of Directed Re-Membering,” in *Ideology in Postcolonial Texts and Contexts* (Brill, 2020), 241.

¹⁷ Hong, *Minor Feelings*, 47.

¹⁸ Lai, “Bone to Bone,” 241.

¹⁹ Lai, “Bone to Bone,” 241.

state. It is also to recognize that one of the most radical things that can be done is to seek alliance with caveats, acts of care, a recognition of history, and a willingness to take risk in disrupting the colonial discourse.

One of these ways is what journalist E. Tammy Kim calls being *transnationally Asian*.²⁰ She defines this as the ability to find avenues of solidarity, rejecting narrow assimilationist understandings and neo-Cold War logics, with commitments to the common good. She writes:

If a supposed lesson of covid-19 was that every country, every individual, must become an island to survive, the early days of summer offered proof in the opposite direction. An uprising of the Black Lives Matter movement, at once mournful and ecstatic, reverberated worldwide, despite the threat of the pandemic. [Magazine] *Lausan* drew a line from Hong Kong to Minneapolis and Manila; [the magazine] *New Bloom* covered solidarity protests in Taipei, staged in support of Hong Kongers and Black Lives Matter; and [the magazine] *New Naratif* published an illustrated piece on the discourse of human rights and a feature on discrimination against Sikhs in Myanmar. In these magazines' far-reaching pages, the overlapping crises of our moment—in health and wealth; race, nation, and class—felt undeniably shared.

This ongoing work of solidarity has always only been made possible when we remember that we are not islands, and that we must do the deep work of choosing acts of care across communities and choosing together to heal and resist. I'll close with a final comment from Choi:

When one of your own acts up, it's your job to call him in. So call in your people, Peter, call in the crowds, tell them to come home, to take down their signs, tell them that we have work to do. Tell them, if there is a second victim here, it is not you: it is what was lost between two communities in pain. But unlike the first victim, this one can be brought back.

As we consider the future before us and all that is happening in the world, we do not have to be sucked into the narrative of the American Nightmare. Rather, as Choi beautifully says, it is time to call our people in; we have work to do.

²⁰ E. Tammy Kim, "Transnationally Asian: New Media Neighborhood for an Emerging World," *CJR* (2020), https://www.cjr.org/special_report/transnationally_asian.php.