

*Minor Feelings*: Publishers' Search for the Ethnic Narrative

In a digital age, the publishing industry remains a surprisingly major force in the world's economy. It continues to shape perceptions of society and culture, including race relations. Cathy Park Hong's *Minor Feelings*, published in February 2020, months before the explosion of the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States following the death of George Floyd, addresses the reality of living as a non-white person in America and the ways in which non-white Americans are expected to perform a digestible version of their lives. The lucrative publishing industry should, in theory, provide a space for non-white authors to tell their unfiltered stories, but it has been complicit in this performance by publishing stories that ultimately reinforce society's appetite for tragic "ethnic" narratives. Hong's memoir talks back to the exoticization of non-white voices to cater to a white, middle-class readership more interested in stories that reaffirm *shallow* anti-racist sentiments than truly representing the lives of minority authors. The publishing industry still makes up a shockingly large portion of the world economy. In 2023, publishers generated 29.9 billion dollars in revenue in the US alone.<sup>1</sup> These numbers highlight the industry's economic and cultural relevance despite the growth of digital platforms. Publishers are increasingly publishing works by non-white authors. But they also cater to the market, meaning the expectations of a broad readership. Catering to readers' interests, though, can be a surprisingly difficult task. Choosing who to target often means prioritizing some readers over others. According to many statistics, this readership is almost always the white middle-class; Saha and van Lente write, "[T]he core publishing industry is set up essentially to cater for this one white reader."<sup>2</sup> Agents and editors choose manuscripts based on their potential to attract

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<sup>1</sup> *AAP StatShot Annual Report: Publishing Revenues Totaled \$29.9 Billion for 2023 – Aap.* (AAP – The Voice of American Publishing, 2024), <https://publishers.org/news/aap-statshot-annual-report-publishing-revenues-totaled-29-9-billion-for-2023/>.

<sup>2</sup> Anamik Saha and Sandra van Lente. *Rethinking 'Diversity' in Publishing* (Goldsmiths Press, 2020), 10.

this demographic. In turn, authors are indirectly pressured to write works that appeal to these readers and give their stories the highest chance of commercial success, regardless of how well these works reflect the author's lived experience.

Consequently, the publishing industry caters to readers who only occasionally dip their fingers into the dangerous, swirling vortex of race relations. So and Wezerek argue that publishers support Black writers only when the news cycle periodically covers "acts of brutality against Black people."<sup>3</sup> When these acts become visible and stir public outcry, publishers capitalize and publish stories aligned with the tragedies the white middle class routinely sees in popular media. Mann argues, these stories are "a means of mitigating [white reader's] own feelings of guilt and discomfort with the legacy of slavery."<sup>4</sup> This means that readers can read something about America's sordid history, without truly having to address the continued influence of race on American society.

Besides trafficking in stereotypes, publishers seek narratives that resemble other books on an issue, books that perpetuate stereotypes rather than challenge them. This process, called *comping*, is a technique publishers use to predict marketability. If a narrative resembles that of an already popular book, it is more likely to sell than an unfamiliar story. As one respondent in Saha and van Lente's study says, "publishers 'don't want the next big thing. They want ... the last big thing, only slightly tweaked.'"<sup>5</sup> Despite bringing more attention to non-white authors, *comping* creates a vicious cycle centered around publishing new ethnic narratives that can be "comped" to earlier popular narratives, which sabotages more thorough explorations of race.

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Jean So and Gus Wezerek. *Just How White is the Book Industry?*. (The New York Times, 2020), 7.

<sup>4</sup> Kelsey S. Mann. *Diversity in Publishing: Who Gets to Tell What Stories?: Arts: The Harvard Crimson*. (Harvard University, 2022), 3.

<sup>5</sup> Saha and van Lente, 14.

Hong's *Minor Feelings* largely rejects stereotypical racial portraits and the comping process. Hong was already an accomplished author prior to *Minor Feelings*, a status which likely made Penguin Random house more open to publishing her memoir. She received the Barnard New Women Poets Prize for her 2007 poetry collection *Dance Dance Revolution*, a text which Hong herself points to in *Minor Feelings*.<sup>6</sup> While this may not necessarily be why Penguin published Hong's memoir, Hong's already-established acclaim and, of course, readership, likely made *Minor Feelings* much more attractive to publishers.

In the memoir's first section, ironically titled "United", Hong introduces stereotypes of Asian American women before swiftly dismantling them. While researching therapists in her area, Hong settles on a Korean one believing that this therapist would innately understand her. Initially, Hong refuses to see a non-Korean therapist, suggesting a focus on her racial identity. When she meets the therapist, she writes, "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." Furthermore, she refers to the therapist not as Korean American, but as simply "Korean," reducing her to an "other" to American society.<sup>7</sup> However, as swiftly as she introduces these stereotypes, she shatters them. Instead of bonding over their shared heritage, which is what readers might expect, Hong and Dr. Cho clash after Dr. Cho refuses to work with her. Dr. Cho is never mentioned in *Minor Feelings* again. In opening the memoir this way, Hong mocks her readers' expectations and publishers alike, presenting not a stereotypical ethnic narrative about overcoming her own tragic racial identity, but as a rejection of the publishing industry's and society's voyeuristic interest in the tragic lives of non-white

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<sup>6</sup> Cathy Park Hong. *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning*. (One World, 2020), 111.

<sup>7</sup> Hong, 8.

people in the US. Hong makes it clear that *Minor Feelings* will be a candid representation of her life and her experiences, regardless of their appeal to readers.

Investigating this dichotomy between artistic authenticity and the tropes of an ethnic narrative, I engaged in conversations with a range of publishers and authors about their own experience in the industry and the expectations for authors of color within it. Dr. Jake Grefenstette, executive director of the International Poetry Forum and poetry editor at Carnegie Mellon University Press, suggests that the largest barrier to true representation is not the attitudes of publishers, but the larger issues within American society surrounding systemic inequality. “You have to have a high input of diversity,” he says. “Some places make the mistake of implying that you need to lower the bar to diversify ... really the issue is that you just need the higher input.” Here, Grefenstette asserts that perhaps the publishing industry’s general lack of diversity stems not from neglect, but from the racial inequality that has persisted in the United States for centuries. He says, “Socioeconomic diversity is probably the most crucial here—there are a lot of people who are just incapable of submitting.” In a country that systemically privileges white people, the publishing industry is no exception; while certainly not true in every case, many white authors likely have more resources, training, pathways to write and submit to publishers, many of whom also require a submission fee. According to data from the Pew Research Center, white households had 9.2 times as much wealth as the typical Black household, a disparity that, logically speaking, would suggest that members of these households are likely more focused on fiscal survival;<sup>8</sup> Writing and publishing is yet another privilege, one that many non-white authors simply do not have access to.

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<sup>8</sup> Rakesh Kochhar and Mohamad Moslimani. Wealth gaps within racial and ethnic groups. (Pew Research Center, 2023), <https://www.pewresearch.org/2023/12/04/wealth-gaps-within-racial-and-ethnic-groups/>

Diane Goettel of Black Lawrence Press holds similar opinions. She shared that “Becoming a writer is not necessarily a job-secure thing to do. For folks that are coming from a variety of backgrounds, it’s a challenge to think that this is what [they’re] going to study ... There’s some self-selection to it.” Once again, larger systemic barriers complicate the publishing industry’s complex relationship with diversity. However, this wider inequality does not necessarily excuse publishers’ from ensuring they are advocating for real, genuine diversity in their catalogue. Goettel suggests that “Big 5 publishers are very results driven, money driven,” whereas smaller presses, “have a different set of circumstances ... we really don’t push authors to write certain things.” Both Goettel and Grefenstette suggest that change is already occurring; outside of industry-driven, traditional publishing houses the publishing world has taken steps toward celebrating literary excellence in all of its forms, no matter who wrote it or what they wrote about. In positing an avenue for potentially enacting similar changes in traditional publishing, both editors emphasized the power of the consumer; “...larger publishers, they follow trends,” Goettel says. “If people are interested in reading more own voices authors, publishers will follow that.” In line with the summer of 2020 and the uptick in readers’ interest in stories by authors of color, Grefenstette and Goettel suggest that, though publishers themselves should certainly work to ensure diversity within their catalogues, the power for change falls to readers; in an industry controlled by marketability and fiscal success as much as any other, to enact true, lasting change in publishers’ attitudes toward non-white authors and their stories, readers must indicate their interest in these stories beyond the fetishizing nature of the ethnic narrative.

Merely considering how to increase diversity in the publishing industry does not necessarily answer the larger question surrounding the ethnic narrative: how much pressure do

authors of color feel to write about their racial experiences in a way that appeals to white audiences? Though publishers themselves may not necessarily be putting such pressure on authors—at least, not according to Grefenstette and Goettel—authors may feel internal pressure to write about their race as the central aspect of their lives as a means of making their novel more marketable to a white audience. Robert Yune, an author and professor at West Virginia Wesleyan College, recalls being told he should write more “Asian stories.” He says, “For an outside audience, the most interesting thing that I’m offering is ... a cultural identity that is different from other authors.” However, he doesn’t tie this experience to the attitude of the publishing industry at large; considering the post-2020 wave of increased diversity in publishing, Yune says, “I don’t think that the push toward diversity was fake or insincere ... I think it’s difficult to maintain that level of reflection in action, especially when everyone else isn’t ... and especially when it’s part of a trend.” Here, Yune shifts the issue from the publishing industry itself to the larger social issues plaguing American society, just as Grefenstette and Goettel do. In order to enact larger change within the publishing industry, change must first occur within the minds of the American public and, most importantly, within the structures that govern American society.

Pittsburgh-based poet Cameron Barnett is similarly skeptical of the potential for longstanding change within the publishing industry, as well as within American society. He says, “As with a lot of things in our media ... once the initial story fades away, some of that immediate interest fades away [too].” Again, the question of diversity within the publishing industry cannot be contained; change in any industry is indicative of the society that sustains it, not the other way around. To truly recognize literary excellence from every avenue, American readers and writers must first demand that these avenues become visible within society at large. Until systemic

racism is openly and honestly addressed in American society, the publishing industry can only progress so far. Still, Barnett makes no apologies for writing about his race in his poetry. Though he recalls receiving a variety of strong reactions to his poetry and its focus on the oppression of Black Americans, he eschews the suggestion that he writes about race to fascinate others. “I write those things because that’s what our lives are made of,” he says. In doing so, Barnett rejects the idea that his work is intended to educate or enrapture his readers. His work is instead a record of the oppression of, the discrimination against, and, above all, the very existence of Black Americans. For him, writing about race isn’t about increasing diversity in publishing or catering to a white audience. It is about establishing the truth of his life and the racial difference that has altered shaped? it within a society that would prefer to sweep it under the rug. In this, he provides a model for the future of the publishing industry and for American society at large; in order to establish a literary canon that genuinely considers race and its impact on life, publishers, authors, and readers alike must bring, and *keep*, diversity and difference at the forefront of their minds.

## Notes

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