

IDENTITY POLITICS IN SUI SIN FAR'S
MRS. SPRING FRAGRANCE: RACE AND GENDER
DYNAMICS IN "THE SING SONG WOMAN"
AND "ITS WAVERING IMAGE"

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Sui Sin Far (Edith Maude Eaton) published her collection of short stories, *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*, in 1912. This collection is remarkable, in part due to its insight into the traumatizing wounds inflicted by acculturation and the resistance to acculturation experienced by Asians and Asian Americans in the United States.¹ Working within the short story genre allowed Sui Sin Far many options in terms of treatment and presentation of her material.² The short story, because of its brevity, makes use of and trades upon cultural knowledge and stereotypes in establishing characterization and plot, but Sui Sin Far subverts and overturns cultural and literary assumptions and leaves ambiguity in their place as her literary hallmark. Indeed, in the texts that continue to resonate today, stereotypes are dismantled through the deployment and reimagining of gendered and racial performative scripts. What I see as important short fiction, "The Sing Song Woman" and "Its Wavering Image," the first not yet the subject of criticism and the latter increasingly written about in the last decade, will be highlighted here. Specifically, I will offer new interpretations of these two short stories and demonstrate how reading

¹ Sui Sin Far's nationalities are still under debate because critics harbor a need to place her within a tradition. At this point, she is most often referred to as Asian American rather than Asian Canadian. Interestingly, although her she was warmly received in Canada and her legacy enjoys longevity there (a monument was erected to commemorate her), Canadian literary scholars have not claimed her in the way that American researchers have. However, while Montreal became Sui Sin Far's permanent home and was the place to which she most often returned, most of her fiction is set in the United States. This discussion of nationality tends to lend itself to irony because Far observes, "After all I have no nationality and am not anxious to claim any. Individuality is more than nationality" in "Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian" in *Mrs. Spring Fragrance and Other Writings*, ed. Amy Ling and Annette White-Parks (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995): 230.

² Sui Sin Far refers to herself as Miss Far in "Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian." Amy Ling points out, though, that the Chinese language was foreign to Sui Sin Far, and she mistakenly refers to herself as Miss Far instead of Miss Sui, which would follow the Chinese tradition of putting the family name first. See Amy Ling, "Writers with a Cause: Sui Sin Far and Han Suyin," *Women's Studies International Forum* 9, no. 4 (1986): 414. However, most critics refer to Sui Sin Far's name in its entirety in recent scholarship, and I will follow suit.

them within our own contemporary concerns with identity politics, as inflected by race and gender, open up these pieces in especially relevant ways to a discussion of diversity for twenty-first-century readers, students, and scholars.

Before I offer close readings that build upon the most recent scholarship on Sui Sin Far and identity politics, I would like to briefly address the subject of the latter because these power dynamics are at play in *Mrs. Spring Fragrance* as a whole. Dominick LaCapra defines “identity politics” inductively when he examines the challenges of studying political attitudes and positions that exhibit the concerns of different social groups. He understands identity politics as involving “a grid of subject positions,” and the problem is that one “remains within that grid” through “processes of identification or excessive objectification.”³ According to LaCapra, the challenge of such study “is somehow to try to test critically, perhaps in certain ways validate, or perhaps transform one’s subject position, so that one doesn’t end up where one began.”⁴ In refining this position for ethnic studies, David Palumbo-Liu distinguishes between “identity” and “type”: he argues that we “type” people when we place preset narratives that are socially prescribed and determined and project them onto minorities. In typing people, we thereby ascribe traits to an individual through socio-historical and politically entrenched notions about a purported group identity, which result in rigid notions about types of people and their social roles.⁵ Unfortunately, in many cases, the social stories or cultural narratives are more powerful and persuasive in their appeal or purported truth than the behavior (and identity/self-identity) of the actual person considered.⁶ The aim of studying identity politics, then, is to acknowledge and grapple with the markers or behaviors (brought about by discursive formations) that construct and limit one’s agency or perspective in order to better understand a subject and the subject’s (or one’s own) place in the world in relation to others.

Recent critics of *Mrs. Spring Fragrance* investigate to what extent Sui Sin Far replicates stereotypes and/or reimagines Asian, American, and Asian American identities. Jane Hwang Degenhardt demonstrates in her work on Sui Sin Far’s short story collection that the desire to “renegotiate the position of the Chinese immigrant in relation to the exclusionary logic of national citizenship” is activated through the display of the constructions of masculinity and femininity, by highlighting “specific

³ Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 175.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ David Palumbo-Liu, “Assumed Identities,” in *Background Readings for Teachers of American Literature*, ed. Venetria K. Patton (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2006), 150, 154-155.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 151, 153.

[American] anxieties about racial and gender equality.”⁷ As a result, Sui Sin Far will position the Chinese immigrant “as a recuperative agent and protector of the debilitated white family.”⁸ Marjorie Pryse argues that Sui Sin Far produced “a book about American attitudes even though most of the characters in the fiction are Chinese,” and she shows that Sui Sin Far “reconstructs the English language as a site of cultural encounter” to “struggle against mainstream American representations of the Chinese” so that American readers may “come to view themselves differently.”⁹ While focusing on transnationalism in *Mrs. Spring Fragrance* in the figure of the merchant, Arnold Pan notes that Sui Sin Far can be “championed” for “presenting an empathetic and realistic view of Chinese immigrants starkly different from stereotypes circulating in an era of virulent racism.”¹⁰ And June Howard remarks on “the instability and constructedness of race and nation in Sui Sin Far’s writings, enabling her to appear even more prescient” in our own contemporary world.¹¹ Of the three stories Howard examines, “Its Wavering Image” is the only one by which she and I will overlap in our critical positioning of Sui Sin Far’s treatment of identity construction. I will begin with “The Sing Song Woman,” a story strangely neglected by critics and yet one that complicates, critiques, confuses, and dismantles traditional expectations concerning race and gender in early twentieth-century Asian American fiction.

In “The Sing Song Woman,” Ah Oi is a Chinese actress, an occupation traditionally considered unrespectable for a woman, who is living in an American Chinatown. Bold in her language and behavior, Ah Oi appears unaffected by racist displays, perhaps because she is the antithesis of the idea of a proper, prototypical Chinese woman. For instance, when her Asian American friend Mag-gee vehemently confides (“To think of having to marry a Chinaman! How I hate the Chinese!”) to her, Ah Oi simply laughs, neither taking offense nor seeing any merit in following conventional behavior (there is no “having to” for her).¹² Her reply to Mag-gee is to marry her white suitor, and she schemes to make it happen

⁷ Jane Hwang Degenhardt, “Situating the Essential Alien: Sui Sin Far’s Depiction of Chinese-White Marriage and the Exclusionary Logic of Citizenship,” *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies* 54, no. 4 (2008): 655.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 656.

⁹ Marjorie Pryse, “Linguistic Regionalism and the Emergence of Chinese American Literature in Sui Sin Far’s *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*,” *Legacy: A Journal of American Women Writers* 27, no. 1 (2010): 92, 85.

¹⁰ Arnold Pan, “Transnationalism at the Impasse of Race: Sui Sin Far and U.S. Imperialism,” *The Arizona Quarterly* 66, no. 1 (2010): 87.

¹¹ June Howard, “Sui Sin Far’s American Words,” *Comparative American Studies* 6, no. 2 (2008): 145.

¹² Sui Sin Far, “The Sing Song Woman,” in *Mrs. Spring Fragrance and Other Writings*, ed. Amy Ling and Annette White-Parks (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995): 126.

for her friend. No one in the story is surprised that the untraditional Ah Oi is “up to some trick.”¹³ It is difficult to associate a stable identity with a trickster figure because that figure is unpredictable in behavior, and Ah Oi’s behavior is very much that of a trickster. Determined to help her friend, Ah Oi goes so far as to switch places with Mag-gee and ends up becoming wed to Ke Leang as a result. In the aftermath of the wedding, Ah Oi is denounced as a worthless “thing” after she is identified “as an imposter, an actress, a Sing Song Woman.”¹⁴ Ah Oi’s characterization needs to be based on the unrespectable profession of an actress so that certain assumptions about her are in place before Sui Sin Far thwarts readers’ expectations. Indeed, Ah Oi undergoes such a transformation that she becomes an entirely different character. As set up in the beginning of the story, a sing song woman is offensive to the modest traditional values of the Chinese because the body is put on display, thus making it a spectacle. Moreover, the sing song woman can also be read as a euphemism for a prostitute.¹⁵ By ascribing such a name to Ah Oi, Sui Sin Far leaves room for speculation. Already working as an actress, is Ah Oi primed and in danger of selling her body in a more vulgar way? At the end of the story, Ah Oi is ready to resign herself to the role of docile wife in China, giving up her profession and the United States for her husband. Her demeanor has completely changed; her “bright, defiant eyes” give way to “an upward, pleading glance.”¹⁶ Her body becomes disciplined and her behavior becomes circumscribed—but these changes are brought about by her own choices.

“The Sing Song Woman” provides a clear example of Sui Sin Far playing with readers’ expectations because Ah Oi does run a gamut of representations. She embodies both the Americanized and sexualized Chinese liberated bad-girl and the Chinese docile wife. While these may not seem to be sufficient choices for the feminist reader, it is important to realize that Far depicts a both/and situation. Ah Oi is neither simply American nor Chinese: she is both in the story. Her change of professions, from actress/prostitute to wife, subsequently changes how she behaves. Her identity shifts, allowing her to embody a different role.

The stories collected within *Mrs. Spring Fragrance* maximize the possibilities of subjectivity because they destabilize the notion of origin and essence. Even when Sui Sin Far assumes the reader is familiar with a character type she represents, no one term—or body—is privileged. In

¹³ Ibid., 127.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ In “The Wisdom of the New,” also included in *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*, the term sing song woman is used in this way. See Ellen Dupree, “Sui Sin Far’s Argument for Biculturalism in *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*,” in *Asian American Studies: Identity, Images, Issues Past and Present*, ed. Esther Mikyung Ghynn (New York: Peter Lang, 2000), 96.

¹⁶ Ibid., 127, 128.

"Lin John," the Chinese man is duped and dubbed a fool. In contrast, "The Story of One White Woman Who Married a Chinese" depicts Liu Kanghi as a better man and husband than James the white American who belittles his wife, abuses her verbally, and attempts an extramarital affair. We cannot pin down Sui Sin Far's representations of women to one category or one ideological position because her representations of Asian American women are fraught with complications and complexity. In "The Wisdom of the New," Pau Lin murders her son to prevent him from becoming assimilated to American culture, and yet our sympathy lies, at times, with Pau Lin's trials and tribulations in the new country, with its different gender roles and family expectations.

In "Its Wavering Image," the ambiguity of a racial identity is foregrounded in order to parse the purported meaning of it. The main female character, Pan, represents an Asian American girl living in Chinatown. She is viewed as both Chinese and white, but her claim as both Asian and American is challenged by Mark Carson, a white journalist.¹⁷ When Mark inquires as to whether Pan is Chinese or white, Sui Sin Far bypasses and thus withholds the response, stating only that Mark is answered—not telling us how he is answered. However, once Pan is confronted with Mark's binary mindset (i.e., she must be white or Asian, not both), the narrator relates that "the mystery of her nature began to trouble [Pan]."¹⁸ Nonetheless, Pan's shyness wears off, and Mark finds that Pan is "bewilderingly frank and free."¹⁹ Surely accustomed to a white cultural mythos regarding Asian women, Mark is surprised to discover that Pan is not shy whatsoever. In fact, Pan is quite used to having her own way and acting with authority; her father believes that "everything she did or said was right."²⁰ However, Mark tries to force Pan to choose between her identities, refusing her entitlement to both.

¹⁷ As this article might indicate, Sui Sin Far combats the popular rhetoric of her time concerning identities. According to Sean McCann, "In this manner, 'Its Wavering Image' offers an indictment of the journalistic invention of the era's 'yellow peril' phenomenon. In a larger sense, though, the story is a bitter satire on the whole logic of the contemporary drive for Americanization—the exemplary Progressive Era movement championed by reformers like Riis." See Sean McCann, "Connecting Links: The Anti-Progressivism of Sui Sin Far," *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 12, no. 1 (1999): 74-75. McCann reads Mark as the fictional counterpart to Jacob Riis, whose book *How the Other Half Lives* (1890) demonizes Chinese Americans and advocates progressivism. Like Mark, Riis "provided sensational evidence of the secretive and authoritarian nature of a Chinese culture they presumed to be fundamentally at odds with the democratic principles of American society." *Ibid.*, 74. Both Carson and Riis suffer from sinophobia.

¹⁸ Sui Sin Far, "Its Wavering Image," in *Mrs. Spring Fragrance and Other Writings*, ed. Amy Ling and Annette White-Parks (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995): 61.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 62.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

'Pan,' he cried, 'you do not belong here. You are white—white.'

'No! no!' protested Pan.

'You are,' he asserted. 'You have no right to be here.'

'I was born here,' she answered, 'and the Chinese people look upon me as their own.'

'But they do not understand you,' he went on. 'Your real self is alien to them. What interest have they in the books you read—the thoughts you think?'

'They have an interest in me,' answered faithful Pan. 'Oh, do not speak in that way any more.'

'But I must,' the young man persisted. 'Pan, don't you see that you have got to decide what you will be—Chinese or white? You cannot be both.'

'Hush! Hush!' bade Pan. 'I do not love you when you talk to me like that.'²¹

Mark's binary structuralist politics prevent him from understanding Pan's subject positions. Claiming love and affinity for her father and her Chinese community, Pan attempts to silence Mark after her protests that she is not exclusively white go unheeded by him. She rejects an identity solely embedded in whiteness, in spite of the fact that Mark tries to persuade her that her "real self" is bound up in white thoughts and pursuits. Mark cannot fathom her choice to embrace both her Chinese and American identities simultaneously because he believes in essentialist notions of identity. Eventually, Mark forces her to choose between the two as a result of his betrayal. He breaks Pan's trust by publishing a newspaper account of Chinatown, divulging its sacred rites and secrets. Feeling that he has betrayed not only her but her Chinese community, Pan renounces her white identity by affirming only her Chinese one. Distancing herself from Mark the white betrayer, Pan dons traditional Chinese costume, symbolizing her alignment with her Chinese identity. But identity for Pan is performative. Sui Sin Far demonstrates in "Its Wavering Image" that identities are not essentialist because Pan has the ability to choose which identity to assume and perform. Through her characterization of Pan, Sui Sin Far plays upon and with conceptions of identities. Indeed, Pan is construed as both Chinese and American in the beginning of the story by the city editor, from whom Mark inquires about Pan's ethnicity. And she is considered white by Mark ("You are a white woman—white") and Chinese by the people of Chinatown ("the Chinese people

²¹ *Ibid.*, 63.

look upon me as their own").²² "Its Wavering Image" endorses poststructuralist play through the performance of identity constructions, and it underscores the performative nature of identity at large. Pan can articulate through language that she is Chinese ("I am a Chinese woman")²³ and assume the identity accordingly, even while Mark defines her as white.²⁴

The structure of *Mrs. Spring Fragrance* as a collection prepares us for the unsettling experience of the repositioned characters with refashioned identities.²⁵ The stories present various arguments, while, at the same time, presenting a plurality of voices and viewpoints. No single voice, character, plot, or theme is privileged. A collection of short stories can never present the continuity that is inherent in the structure of a novel, regardless of how experimental the novel might be, because the novel is structured to be read as a whole. In a novel, even abruptly shifting scenes and passages are tied to the work as a whole. Chapters tend to presume upon knowledge of what comes before in previous chapters (and sometimes of what comes after). In *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*, there are various concerns and focuses, and "occupying its center is not, as in standard western long narratives, the all-important individual, but rather the configuration of figures who make up a group."²⁶ Instead, the center is decentralized to give space for many types of voices and situations.

Sui Sin Far is significant as an Asian American and Asian Canadian author for the simple fact that she is the first published Asian-North American woman writer to treat Asian American themes and experiences in fiction. As Howard observes, "she has become a familiar figure to

²² Ibid., 66, 63.

²³ Martha J. Cutter offers a very convincing argument in "Smuggling Across the Borders of Race, Gender, and Sexuality: Sui Sin Far's 'Mrs. Spring Fragrance,'" in *Mixed Race Literature*, ed. Jonathan Brennan (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002). Asserts Cutter, "[N]ames are important [in *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*] not as absolute descriptors of racial, gendered, or sexual identity, but rather as the space for a certain smuggling across the borders of dominant categories of identity that finally undermines them." Ibid., 137. Pan's act of declaring herself a Chinese woman affirms her identification with two minority groups. Carson's viewpoint as the dominant white man is ultimately undermined; the narrator concludes "Its Wavering Image" with, "And Pan, being a Chinese woman, was comforted." Sui Sin Far, "Its Wavering Image," 66. The reader is left with the narrator's foregrounding of Pan and her identification with minority identities. As Howard argues, "This is a strategic essentialism [on Pan's part]. . . [I]t does not arrest the fluidity of race in Sui Sin Far's work. It declares her independence from Mark Carson's values." See Howard, "Sui Sin Far's American Words," 155.

²⁴ Sui Sin Far, "Its Wavering Image," 66.

²⁵ Annette White-Parks attempted to find previous publication dates or histories for the stories included in the *Mrs. Spring Fragrance* collection, but she concludes that many of the stories were probably written specifically for the collection. See Annette White-Parks, *Sui Sin Far / Edith Maude Eaton: A Literary Biography* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 203-204. Thus, we have some evidence that Sui Sin Far wished to design the collection in particular ways, to emphasize and deemphasize certain themes and characters.

²⁶ Elizabeth Ammons. *Conflicting Stories: American Women Writers at the Turn into the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 118.

scholars of Asian American literature and is increasingly, if not yet securely or prominently, mentioned in general studies of the literature and culture of the United States."²⁷ In what constitutes a remarkable feat, Sui Sin Far assigns a voice to the Asian American community through the act of identifying herself as part Asian and locating her Asian characters in America: "Naming the cruelties, actually repeating the ugly language, and her own resistance to it, defines the opening act—rhetorical, political—of Sui Sin Far's [work]."²⁸ In articulating her own experience and those of her fictional characters, Sui Sin Far resists the passivity assigned to both women and ethnic minorities and concentrated in the ethnic female minority.²⁹ More importantly and more broadly, she defies binary structuralist politics that violently circumscribe identities in her writing, which results in an endorsement of ambiguities in subject positions, a liberation from constrictive and punishing identities, and an acknowledgment of the subsequent historical marginalization of ethnic female writers and their literary texts.

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²⁷ Howard, "Sui Sin Far's American Words," 144.

²⁸ Ammons, *Conflicting Stories*, 106.

²⁹ According to Pryse, not only is "Its Wavering Image" perhaps Sui Sin Far's best story but it may be indebted to Sui Sin Far's own lived experience of the world: "Pan's hybridity in this story brings into Sui Sin Far's construction of this single character, who perhaps comes closest to representing her own experience as a mixed-race woman, the cultural conflicts experienced between American and Chinese cultures." See Pryse, "Linguistic Regionalism," 101. See also "Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian" for an autobiographical account.

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