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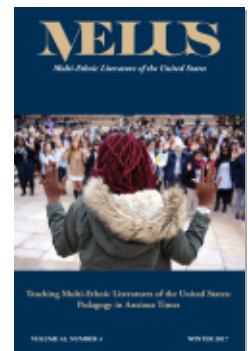
Becoming Sui Sin Far: Early Fiction, Journalism, and Travel

Writing by Edith Maude Eaton (review)

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Becoming Sui Sin Far: Early Fiction, Journalism, and Travel Writing
by Edith Maude Eaton. Edited by Mary Chapman. McGill-Queen's UP,
2016. lxxvi + 274 pages. \$110.00 cloth; \$34.95 paper.

Mary Chapman's edited collection recovers early writing from Edith Maude Eaton, the Chinese North American author often known by her pen name, Sui Sin Far. *Becoming Sui Sin Far: Early Fiction, Journalism, and Travel Writing by Edith Maude Eaton* is a valuable collection for scholars working in a range of fields, including Chinese American and Canadian literatures, print culture, gender studies, travel writing, and transnational and hemispheric studies. Whereas Edith Eaton's 1912 book, *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*, has become increasingly well-known since its recovery in the 1980s, this collection focuses on her early writings, which heretofore have not been available in print. Carefully edited and introduced, Chapman's volume brings to light a wealth of Eaton's early periodical fiction and essays, allowing a fuller understanding of Eaton's boundary-defying life and work.

The introduction to the collection offers a persuasive reassessment of its subject's complex authorial position, an argument signaled by the fact that Chapman refers to the writer by the name Edith Eaton and titles the collection *Becoming Sui Sin Far*. Whereas previous scholarship tended to focus on the author's ethnic heritage and Chinatown writings, Chapman argues that Eaton was a "transnational, or even post-national, author who questioned the coherence of ideas about ethnic and national identity" (xix). Eaton's work featured in the collection serves as evidence for this claim. Her early writing falls in a wider range of genre categories than the sentimental Chinatown fiction of *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*. These categories include literary sketches, middlebrow fiction, sensational fiction, journalism, and travel writing. Perhaps most striking is the fact that Eaton employs a variety of bylines in her early work. Eaton wrote anonymously and under her given name before using the pseudonyms Fire Fly, Sui Seen Far, and Wing Sing. Thus, Chapman reveals that the pen name Sui Sin Far was only one among many. Moreover, while assuming these names, Eaton traveled internationally, living in Montreal, Jamaica, Boston, San Francisco, and Seattle. The collection illuminates an author who persistently crossed borders and resisted any single ethnic or national identity.

Chapman's introduction also models a rigorous process of recovery. Recognizing scholars who have helped to expand our knowledge of Eaton's

oeuvre (S. E. Solberg, Amy Ling, Annette White-Parks, Dominika Ferens, Martha J. Cutter, June Howard, and Hsuan L. Hsu, among others), Chapman describes her own research in detail. This description of the periodicals Chapman searched and how she searched them provides an important note on the text and a useful point of reference for future scholarship. The book's appendices supplement its recovery work with a bibliography and a timeline of Eaton's life. The bibliography is the most comprehensive inventory of Eaton's work to date, and it points to additional texts not included in the collection. Likewise, the biographical timeline offers new details of Eaton's life. For instance, Chapman uncovers the history of Eaton's Chinese-born mother, Achuen "Grace" Amoy, who was enslaved in childhood as a member of an acrobatic troupe that toured the United States and Europe before being rescued by missionaries and returning to China where she would marry Edward Eaton and once again migrate to England and North America (xvi).

The body of the book is divided into five sections. The first consists of literary sketches and poetry published under Eaton's given name in Montreal's *Dominion Illustrated* from 1888-1891. Experimental in nature, these pieces fluctuate between realistic depictions of city life and romantic fantasies. The texts are particularly fascinating as Eaton adapts established genres and canonical sources for her own purposes. The second and third sections of the book consist of journalism that Eaton composed in Montreal and Jamaica. From 1890-1896, Eaton's work was published anonymously or with her initials (E. E.) in the *Montreal Daily Witness* and the *Montreal Daily Star*. These reports and letters to the editor focus almost exclusively on the social concerns and activities of Chinese communities in Montreal and North America. Of particular interest are stories of Chinese immigration and border-crossing, such as "Thrilling Experience of a Band of Smugglers in the Lachine Rapids" (1895). In this report, Eaton describes the strategies of Chinese migrants as they avoid the surveillance of customs officials at the Canada-US border. Leaving the *Montreal Daily Witness* in the winter of 1896, Eaton traveled to Kingston, Jamaica, for six months where she published journalism under the name Fire Fly. These pieces report on local events and culture while incorporating the perspective of the writer. As Ferens has argued in *Edith and Winnifred Eaton: Chinatown Missions and Japanese Romances* (2002), Eaton's Jamaican writing marks a shift in the author's career, as she travels into the global south and reflects more deeply on colonial divisions of race, class, and labor.

The remaining two sections of the book include mid-career fiction, written from 1896-1906, and a series of cross-continental travel writing published in 1904. The reprinted short stories offer rich material for consideration. They were published in a range of periodicals under different pen names over the course of a decade. Chapman reprinted one such story, "The Alaska Widow," in *MELUS* in spring 2013, along with insightful commentary on its cross-cultural themes. While that story is not included in *Becoming Sui Sin Far*, the

more mature fiction in the fourth section of the book is similarly rewarding, and it is easy to imagine new scholarship responding to the fiction recovered here. The final section of the book reprints an ambitious project in which Eaton traversed the North American continent by train—from the West coast to the East and back, crossing the Canada-US border along the way—written from the perspective of a Chinese man. As Chapman points out, “at over 15,000 words, ‘Wing Sing of Los Angeles on His Travels’ is Eaton’s longest sustained authorial project” (1). The series is an absorbing travelogue, describing the social interactions of early twentieth-century rail travel in the dialect of its good-humored businessman narrator.

Becoming Sui Sin Far is an impressive achievement in research, recovery, argument, and editing. It will allow scholars of Edith Eaton to reexamine the author’s life and work through an expanded oeuvre that repeatedly crosses boundaries of gender, geography, and genre. The collection will be of interest to scholars working on American women writers, border studies, and the interplay of literary and journalistic writing at the turn of the twentieth century. Chapman advances a strong argument regarding Eaton’s transnational individualism, and the book raises new questions about the various identities Edith Eaton claimed as her own.

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