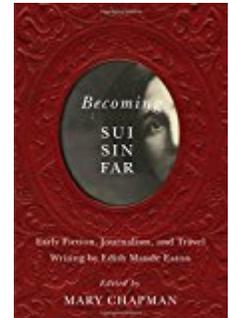


Mary Megan Chapman. *Becoming Sui Sin Far: Early Fiction, Journalism, and Travel Writing by Edith Maude Eaton.* Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016. 352 pp. \$110.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7735-4721-6.



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Commissioned by Jay W. Driskell

Becoming Sui Sin Far began with a Google search. When editor Mary Chapman typed “Edith Eaton” into the Google Books search box, she found “The Alaska Widow” (1909), a previously unknown, and strikingly atypical, Edith Eaton story. The chance find led Chapman to wonder how many other Eaton stories had not been included in her 1912 collection *Mrs. Spring Fragrance* and were as yet unrecovered and how an expansion of the Eaton canon might lead to a reappraisal of an author thought of primarily as a sympathetic voice for the Chinese experience in America. *Becoming Sui Sin Far* answers those questions.

Edith Maude Eaton (1865-1914) was born in England to a white British-born father and Chinese-born mother. The family moved several times between North America and England, settling in Montreal. Eaton lived and worked in “England, French Canada, Northern Ontario, the Caribbean, and several port cities in the US and had experienced the ethnic, racial, and cultural settings of the contact-zones in these diverse locales” (p. xviii). In 1912, Eaton, using the pen name Sui Sin

Far, published *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*, a collection of stories of the experiences of the Chinese in North America. Her work regained attention at the end of the twentieth century but scholars were working with a limited set of her works; in 1981 a checklist of Eaton’s works listed just twenty-two pieces of fiction and ethnographic journalism. Annette White-Parks added some forty-two works to Eaton’s corpus, many of which were included in White-Parks and Amy Ling’s landmark anthology *Mrs. Spring Fragrance and Other Writings* (1995). This growing body of work, focused largely on the Chinese and Chinatowns, established Eaton as an ethnic writer of the Chinese experience in North America. Subsequently, scholars located additional Eaton works bringing into the early twenty-first century a corpus of over 100 works. Chapman’s diligent work of recovery has added 150 uncollected texts by Eaton—more than doubling Eaton’s known oeuvre to over 260 texts and quadrupling the number of works known when in 1995 White-Parks and Ling introduced Eaton to a contemporary audience.

The increased diversity and breadth of Eaton's writing suggests a much more complicated biography than previously understood. Earlier biographers believed Eaton to have been poor, working as a stenographer to support her literary efforts. Chapman demonstrates that Eaton was a very popular and prolific author, earning a living through writing in several genres and publishing in a diversity of venues. Eaton, Chapman argues, "was not simply a sympathetic chronicler of North American Chinatowns; she was also an early middlebrow author, a pioneering North American woman journalist, and an important transnational, or even-post-national, author who questioned the coherence of ideas about ethnic and national identity, on which, ironically, her critical reputation had been based" (pp. xviii-xix). Eaton's expanded oeuvre suggests that she made a concerted "effort to write popular works for a mainstream audience and from the more dominant white perspective" (p. xxiii). In addition, Chapman's work suggests a new recognition of the significance on Eaton's career as an early woman journalist. Chapman's study and Eaton's expanded corpus makes visible Eaton's attempts "to examine racial identities beyond the Chinese" and "invites us to read her in terms of transnationalism—that is, in terms of border-crossing, border-straddling, and border-challenging" (pp. xxiii, xxiv).

Becoming Sui Sin Far includes seventy texts written by Eaton, largely drawn from what Chapman identifies as Eaton's first phase as a writer (1888-98). Chapman organizes Eaton's works in this volume by genre, geography, and chronology. Sections include "Early Montreal Fiction, Poetry, and Literary Sketches (1888-1891)," "Selected Early Journalism: Montreal 1890-1896," "Selected Early Journalism: Jamaica 1896-1897," "Selected Later Fiction (1896-1906)," and "Cross-continental Travel Writing (1904)." Appendices include a biographical timeline, a chronological bibliography of Eaton's works, and an 1896 essay in the *New York Recorder*, "A Visit to Chinatown," which includes the first-known reference to Eaton's Chi-

nese nom de plume Sui Sin Far. The introduction relays Eaton's biography, place in literary history, an overview and assessment of each organizational section, and Chapman's cogent reassessment of Eaton.

Chapman has performed an exceptional work of recovery. She details her research method, offering a primer on this painstaking work. First, she built on the bibliographic and biographical work of previous scholars. Using each geographic or biographical detail as a hint, Chapman developed a list of Canadian, American, and Jamaican periodicals and newspapers in which Eaton may have published. Letters to and from Eaton, acknowledgments in publications, Eaton's autobiography, and reviews, among other period material, provided sources for discovering additional publications. Making use of digital newspaper archives (such as newspapers.com) and of hardcopies, Chapman diligently searched as many issues of each publication as possible, seeking Eaton's writing, a complex search for an author who used multiple pseudonyms. Chapman was able to identify unsigned work as Eaton's by comparing phrases and motifs (sometimes entire paragraphs) from later, identified, work in which Eaton had recycled earlier unsigned pieces. For Eaton, "self-plagiarism is one of her defining traits as a self-supporting writer who used journalism as raw material for later fiction or reprinted earlier writing in different publications to fill word-counts and meet deadlines" (p. lvii).

The work of recovery was painstakingly slow and not without challenges. Chapman found that some periodicals lacked complete runs of issues; some Eaton works known only by the title did not survive. There are pseudonyms and publication venues that remain unknown, and despite the corpus of work now recovered, there are chronological gaps in Eaton's bibliography, leaving periods of time without any known Eaton publication. The challenges thus become opportunities for identifying future additions to Eaton's oeuvre.

Chapman argues that with this larger corpus of work, we expand and deepen our understanding of Eaton's place in literary history. As Chapman demonstrates in her introductory essay, Eaton's works complicate the idea of North American citizenship as the sole goal for diasporic Chinese—"suggesting that [Eaton] thinks that at this period in history Chinese desire mobility—in terms not only of space, but also of class and identity—much more than they desire formal Canadian or US citizenship." For Eaton, the most desirable aspect of citizenship is not belonging to one particular collective "and much more in terms of having the freedom to determine one's own narrative—to chart one's own course and to write one's own story." Here, Chapman argues, Eaton anticipates Aihwa Ong's concept of "flexible citizenship" (*Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* [1999]) in which diasporic Asians seek to "move between national spaces and to benefit from the opportunities these multiple national spaces" offer (p. lix).

Given the current political climate, both in the United States and beyond, *Becoming Sui Sin Far* raises pertinent questions about the meaning of citizenship, the crossing of borders, and the fluidity of the physical body and the construction of identity. Questions of race and gender pervade Eaton's work as well. "All these texts," Chapman writes, "use the permeability of national borders as a metaphor for the permeability of other borders, such as race, gender, and sexuality, even as they reflect on the artifice of national belonging or citizenship" (p. xlix). Those historians who teach the US survey, the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, or courses on race and ethnicity may well find a story or two within this significant collection that will prompt discussion on events past and current.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-shgape>

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