

Teaching Edith Eaton/Sui Sin Far: Multiple Approaches

By Wei Ming Dariotis

This essay compares pedagogical approaches to teaching the literature of Edith Eaton in two distinct contexts: a course on Asian American Literature and a course on Asian Americans of Mixed Heritage. Eaton's stories are often taught in Asian American literature courses and they might also be taught in courses on mixed heritage Asian Americans. A comparison of the variant pedagogical approaches in these two different contexts suggests a useful synthesis that could enrich either type of class. In a literature course there is a focus on the literary qualities, themes and issues her work expresses and raises, while a mixed heritage course might instead explore the social, legal, and historical circumstances surrounding her life as they are expressed in her work. Though Asian American literary studies has a strong interdisciplinary component that allows for the introduction of social, critical legal, and historical analyses into the discussion of literature, and mixed heritage Asian American studies is developing room for cultural and literary studies, these can be tentative forays. In the spirit of Maria Root's *Bill of Rights for People of Mixed Heritage*, which asserts that mixed heritage people should have the right "to have loyalties and identification with more than one group of people," I would like to propose a course or an approach that would not force us to choose between one interpretation or another, but would rather allow both to be addressed in a way that might allow for a synthesized view—a critical mixed race literary studies analysis of Eaton's work. I suggest developing a blended pedagogical approach to teaching the literature of Edith Eaton.

Edith Maude Eaton (1865-1914), who took the pen name Sui Sin Far, is recognized as the first Asian American published fiction writer—despite the fact that the term "Asian American" did not come into existence until over fifty years after her death. Her achievement is usually reported along with key pieces of explanatory biographical information, the most significant being her parentage—she was the daughter of a Chinese mother raised in England and an English father. She was born and raised in England until age seven, whereupon her family moved to Montreal. For the last fourteen years of her life she lived on both the West and East Coasts of the United States, supporting herself as a journalist and documenting in both journalism and fiction the Chinese American communities in both New York and San Francisco's Chinatowns.

Sui Sin Far/Edith Eaton and the Asian American Literature Course

Sui Sin Far¹/Edith Eaton's position within the history of Asian American literature is intriguing precisely because she was both of "mixed race" *and* not born in the United States, yet, despite these aspects which might have made her anathema to

¹ In this context I privilege Sui Sin Far in the dyad of her names to highlight her nom de plume and thus her identity as a "literary ancestor" of Asian American writers.

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those who called for authentic representations of Asian American identity, early Asian American literary critics like Frank Chin consider Eaton's work to express a "real" Chinese America (Chin, 12). In addition to her historical placement, Eaton's work also invites the discussion of the literary trope of the "tragic Eurasian," as well as the ethnic enclave fiction known as Chinatown literature, which some scholars recognize as Eaton's invention (White-Parks, 1). In fact, Annette White-Parks also credits Edith Eaton with perhaps coining the term Chinese American, saying she "might have been the first to use it in literature" (xvi). Positioning Edith Eaton within an Asian American literature course thus may be somewhat problematic—yet it has been accepted because she is an Asian American "literary ancestor" based on the themes and content of her stories, as well as because of her extra-literary contributions. Edith Eaton *chose* the pen name Sui Sin Far and *chose* to write sympathetic and insightful stories about Chinese life in America. Thus, her identity politics and her professional choices can be seen as ideal from an Asian American cultural nationalist perspective, which has been until recently the master narrative of Asian American literature.

This narrative of Asian American literature begins with the story of the construction of Asian American literature as a creative writing category and as a subject of literary criticism through the work of the *Aiiieeeee!* editors (Jeffrey Paul Chan, Frank Chin, Lawson Inada, and Shawn Wong), and such founding scholars as S.E. Solberg and Amy Ling. The masculinist heroic narrative of Asian American literature² features the editors of *Aiiieeeee!* combing used bookstores in search of anything published by Asian American writers before them, turning up mostly racist fantasies like Hilton's *Lost Horizon*, but occasionally stumbling upon some long neglected work like John Okada's *No-No Boy*. It is not clear exactly who among the emerging Asian American literary critical establishment³ first re-discovered Edith Eaton. When I posed the question to *Aiiieeeee!* co-editor Jeffrey Paul Chan, who, at San Francisco State College, taught the very first course in Asian American literature, he told me, "Him Mark Lai gave us *Mrs. Spring Fragrance* with his customary diffident shrug and said, 'Here, perhaps you guys can do something with this.' It may well be that Sam [Solberg] and Amy [Ling] came up with her independently" (Jeff Chan, personal e-mail, 8/28/07). I also posed this question to Shawn Wong, who, at Mills College, taught the second course ever offered in Asian American literature; Wong responded:

Yes, *Aiiieeeee!* is probably the earliest published mention of Edith Eaton. It was Sam Solberg who mentioned her to us, so he was on to her back as early as 1972 since the *Aiiieeeee!* introduction was finished in 1972. Jeff is probably right about Him Mark Lai who like Sam was always very generous with his discoveries. Him Mark probably found the book and Sam did a lot of the primary research on her and her sisters. (Wong)

Regardless of who found her, she was eagerly claimed—probably because of her sympathetic view of Chinese Americans AND because she clearly thought of them as Chinese Americans—i.e. as whole people with complex inner lives, rather than as the base stereotypes most writers of her time made them out to be. This view of Eaton is

² I learned this narrative first as an undergraduate from Shawn Wong and later from my SFSU Asian American Studies Department faculty mentor, Jeffrey Paul Chan, and through several lectures/presentations by and conversations with Lawson Inada and Frank Chin. I learned a more feminist perspective of this narrative while studying with Shirley Geok-lin Lim at UC Santa Barbara for my PhD.

³ White-Parks remarks that two earlier dissertations, one published in 1932 and another in 1952, mention Eaton (1).

what I see as a likely situation of her work in a typical lower division, introductory course on Asian American literature, although it is outside the scope of this essay to conduct a thorough survey of such courses.

My students read Frank Chin's manifesto, "Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake," which excoriates those Asian American writers he deems to be "fake" and valorizes Edith Eaton as well as two other Eurasian writers, Diana Chang and Dr. Han Suyin, as writers of authentic, or "real," Asian American stories. Chin claims these three as Chinese American writers who write "knowledgeably and authentically of Chinese fairy tales, heroic tradition and history" (12). Chin claims that "Sui Sin Far" was "[a] lone champion of the Chinese American real" (12). What does it mean for Eaton to be seen as an Asian American literary ancestor? Although she is frequently mentioned by these early critics to be Eurasian, many Asian American literary critics also seek to emphasize her "Chinese-ness," both by using her pen name, Sui Sin Far, as the first term in the dyad Sui Sin Far/Edith Maude Eaton⁴ and by claiming her as the first Chinese American published fiction writer. The slipperiness of the categories which the author inhabits (Chinese, Chinese American, Chinese Canadian, British-born, Eurasian) would seem to contradict Chin's attempt to make her stand for the "real" in Asian American literature, yet he does precisely this. Does this mean that the "real" Chinese American is not necessarily male, "pure" Chinese, and born in America? Does this mean that the "real" Chinese American can "look white" or, more accurately in Eaton's case, Latina, and still be "authentic" because of her commitment to the community rather than because of her appearance or her lineage? These are useful routes of inquiry for any Asian American Studies course.

Mixed Heritage Asian American Studies Course

Eurasian, Mixed Race, Mixed Heritage, or Hapa?: Naming Edith Eaton/Sui Sin Far

The Asian American Studies Department at San Francisco State University has offered several courses focusing on Mixed Heritage Asian Americans⁵. These courses show a forward-thinking interest in developing mixed race Asian American studies beyond a mere inclusion as part of another course. In her essay, "Asian American Studies Through (Somewhat) Asian Eyes: Integrating "Mixed Race" into the Asian American Discourse," Cynthia Nakashima invites Asian American studies to "come and see what the mixed race discourse has to offer" (113). She argues for centering mixed race Asian Americans, rather than "tacking the subject of mixed race...onto the end of the discussion." In critiquing this "additive" approach (113), she offers suggestions for developing a more critical analysis that uses mixed heritage Asian American perspectives as a new lens with which to review Asian American Studies. She argues, "integrating a mixed race world view...can and...should alter the entire Asian

⁴ As in the title of Annette White-Parks' *Sui Sin Far/Edith Maude Eaton: A Literary Biography*.

⁵ In April 1991, a new course, AAS 391: Cross Cultural Relationships and Families was proposed to the Asian American Studies Department at San Francisco State University. The description of the course suggested it would examine "realities and images of cross cultural/interracial relationships between different Asian American groups as well as with non-Asians." The key objectives of the course included the "redefinition of racial/ethnic images and labels" and an analysis of the "new implications for Asian American communities in light of this phenomena." Course texts included *Mixed Blood* by Paul Spickard and *Chinese American Intermarriage* by Betty Lee Sung. It was eventually decided to re-conceptualize the course to focus on Asian Americans of Mixed Heritage (AAS 550, on the books as of Fall 1996); this course focuses on "Issues concerning Asian Americans of mixed ethnic background and heritages, with focus on the groups' interracial profile in relation to their ethnic and cultural sensibilities" (SFSU Bulletin description).

American studies discourse by disrupting the very concept of “Asian American” itself. Who and what is Asian American” she questions” and who gets to decide?” (114). Nakashima’s call is rooted in an earlier article, “Being Different Together in the University Classroom: Multiracial Identity as Transgressive Education,” co-authored by Nakashima, Teresa Kay Williams, George Kitahara Kich, and G. Reginald Daniel and published in 1996 in Maria Root’s anthology, *The Multiracial Experience*. “Being Different Together” begins with a description of the first course ever offered specifically focusing on Asian Americans of mixed heritage, which took place in the spring of 1992 at UC Santa Barbara⁶. This class focused on histories of racial hierarchies, anti-miscegenation laws, European and American war and imperialism and the resulting mixed race Asian populations transnationally, as well as contemporary social and political issues around mixed heritage Asian American identities.

Situating Edith Eaton/Sui Sin Far within a course on Asian Americans of mixed heritage is not nearly as problematic as locating her within Asian American literary studies. She is one of the first prominent Asian (North) Americans of mixed heritage, she wrote sympathetically and even realistically about interracial relationships, and about mixed heritage Asian American identities and experiences (for example in her journalistic essays, “Half-Chinese Children” and “Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian,” as well as in her fiction, “It’s Wavering Image,” “Her Chinese Husband,” etc.). Also, the timing of her life coincides with the development of anti-Asian miscegenation laws in California, the anti-Chinese immigration movement, the eugenics movement, and the development of the contemporary racial hierarchy. Furthermore, she used the term “Eurasian” to describe herself, which invites a discussion about self-identification terminology for mixed heritage Asian American people. Thus, there are many reasons for including Eaton as an anchor in such a course.

⁶ As a young graduate student, I was a member of that class, taught by Teresa Kay Williams. In the article, Williams et al discuss pedagogies related to teaching courses “about such a complex group of peoples who neither had a social script to follow nor a legitimate space of academic inquiry in which to write and construct one” (361).

My version of the course on Asian Americans of Mixed Heritage begins with an overview of the history of the development of theories of racial hierarchy and of anti-miscegenation laws. Against this backdrop Eaton's stories are particularly striking; placed so directly in their historical context they reveal her resistance to forces that were extremely powerful during this time, while also providing a focal point for a discussion of these large historical movements. Eaton's stories resist the logic of anti-Asian immigration and anti-miscegenation laws, which dehumanized Asians and emphasized their difference and distance from whites, and contribute to the "tragic Eurasian" stereotype. Eaton's use of the common-at-the-time term "Eurasian" to describe herself allows us to question the history of the term "Eurasian"—why did it have derogatory connotations—especially for women? Are there contemporary Eurasian identities and how do these differ from historical ones? This question about her use of the term "Eurasian" is also an entry point for issues of authenticity, identity and self-determination as expressed in the contemporary debate over the use of the term "Hapa" as an identifying label by Asian Americans of mixed heritage⁷.

These two very different points of departure -- the tragic Eurasian trope vs. the self-determination of the contested term "Hapa" -- serve as touchstones for comparing the two different approaches for teaching Eaton's work. The discussion of the very contemporary debate over the use of the term "Hapa" may not seem to be directly related to an understanding of Eaton's work at all. It is anachronistic, to say the least, to apply the Native Hawaiian term, which has gained general usage among West Coast Asian Americans only since 1992, to an author who died in 1914; however, Eaton's own self-identification with the dissatisfactory term "Eurasian"⁸ and her coining of the term Chinese American, invites a comparative inquiry around the idea of self-determination. It invites us to pose the question, "What does it mean to claim Edith Eaton as a "Hapa" author?" Or, "What does it mean to call her a mixed heritage "Asian American" author given the term "Asian American" is a self-determined label of a clearly political identity developed in 1968?" Raising these questions we explore issues of naming, self-identification, community building, and the politics of identity.

The term Eaton used to describe herself is "Eurasian," as in the title of her collection, *Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of a Eurasian*. Yet the term "Eurasian" can be difficult to embrace in the contemporary context because of its negative associations with the "tragic Eurasian" stereotype, which is similar to the "tragic Mulatto" stereotype. In "'Metisse Blanche': Kim Lefevre and Transnational Space" Isabelle Thuy Pelaud provides a critique of a reading of Lefevre's memoir that emphasizes the similarities of these mixed race tropes:

By emphasizing the split nature of the Eurasian in conjunction with the mixed nature of the text itself, Yeager accepts that sociocultural reasoning projected onto people of mixed descent whereby they are seen as doomed to suffer because

⁷ For an analysis of this debate, please see my essays, "To Be "Hapa" or Not to Be "Hapa": What to Name Mixed Asian Americans?" in *At 40 Asian American Studies @ San Francisco State*, 2009, or "On Unbecoming Hapa" in *Interracial Relationships in the 21st Century*, 2009.

⁸ In terms similar to discussions of other populations of mixed heritage, Eurasians were referred to as a "problem" or "question" by British and French colonizers. For more on this, please see "Raising Eurasia: Race, Class, and Age in French and British Colonies" by David M. Pomfret, in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, v. 51 no. 2 (April 2009) p. 314-43.

of the their duality, a strategy traditionally used to critique intermarriages and multiraciality. (Pelaud, 125)

The common denominator is not just “duality,” but the tension between “whiteness” and the non-white—the struggle between different levels of the racial hierarchy. But the Eurasian need not always be tragic, and indeed it is Eurasian writers themselves who often resisted this construction of their identity, despite dominant projections of their images as confused, burdened, and ultimately, desiring “true” white purity. In “Ambivalent Passages: Racial and Cultural Crossings in Onoto Watanna’s *The Heart of Hyacinth*,” Huining Ouyang argues that in *The Heart of Hyacinth*, Edith Eaton’s sister, Winifred Eaton, who wrote under the pen-name Onoto “Watanna[,] envisions a hybrid, fluid Eurasian subjectivity that counters the dominant stereotype of the tragic Eurasian and that of the Eurasian as either the unassimilable racial and cultural other or legitimate white colonial property” (Ouyang, 211). Eurasian writers such as Diana Chang and Han Suyin⁹ wrote complex stories about Eurasian identity development.

But well before either Diana Chang or Han Suyin, Edith Eaton resisted the easy image of the tragic Eurasian, evincing a complex understanding that never relies on expected definitions of “East” vs. “West.” For example, the short story, “Its Wavering Image” describes a girl born of a Chinese father and a European American mother.¹⁰ This girl, Pan, rejects the “obvious” choice offered in the “tragic Eurasian” scenario. Pan lives in Chinatown with her father, since her mother is deceased. She meets a European American reporter named Mark Carson, who uses her to gain access to the Chinese community, only to betray them and her by writing an article exposing their religious and social rituals as quaint and bizarre. Later, he insists to Pan, “you have got to decide what you will be—Chinese or white? You cannot be both” (63). But Eaton’s character, Pan, seems to recognize that the act of choosing one by alienating the other itself is an act of betrayal of self. Those positive qualities in her that Carson perceives as owing to her whiteness she claims for her Asian heritage and she rejects both him, and his assertion of her identity as white. According to the logic Eaton provides, moving beyond the “tragic Eurasian” paradigm thus requires two actions: one, a rejection of the assumption that being white is the best option, and two, a letting go of this dichotomous structure altogether.

Despite Steve Ropp’s doubt about whether “Multiracial Subjects Really Challenge Race?” I argue that teaching the work of Edith Eaton through the lens of mixed heritage Asian American cultural studies can create a space in which to critique and problematize accepted racial categories. Has, for example, the category “Asian American” always already been inclusive of people of mixed race because of Edith Eaton and others like her who helped lay the groundwork for the creation of this

⁹ Diana Chang’s 1956 novel *The Frontiers of Love* provides three Eurasian characters, each one of which traces a different trajectory of identity in war-torn Shanghai. Mimi is the typical tragic Eurasian character; striving for whiteness, she is in love with a white man who ultimately cannot choose to marry her because of her Asian heritage. Feng is Mimi’s mirror opposite in that he wishes he could be fully Chinese, and dedicates himself to the Chinese nationalist cause. Sylvia is the balanced Eurasian, the one who can effortlessly transition from Western clothing to Chinese, who strives to be nothing but what she already is. Han Suyin’s 1952 novel, *A Many Splendored Thing*, also resists this image, with her protagonist, a thinly veiled version of herself, satisfied with her own identity.

¹⁰ Despite anti-miscegenation laws, this is not an unlikely combination, considering the gender imbalance ratio of the Chinese American community at this time, just before 1912. In fact several of Eaton’s stories reflect this relationship combination.

category? In other words, can Edith Eaton help us explode the idea that there ever was an original authentic Asian American or Chinese American identity? If Eaton, herself a mixed heritage Chinese American, coined the term “Chinese American,” then can we accept that her mixed heritage face is an “authentic” face of Chinese American as much as any other?

Sample Assignments

In the following section I propose three possible assignments based on information in the essay above. The assignments might be presented to students sequentially, or one or more could be assigned in any order. The assignments are geared towards introductory courses in Asian American literature and Asian Americans of mixed heritage, and should be appropriate for either. These assignments are meant to be suggestive; teachers should feel free to adapt these assignments to their own needs.

1. Authenticity and Sui Sin Far/Edith Eaton as an Asian American Author

I ask students to consider what it means for Frank Chin to apply his categories of authenticity and in-authenticity to the writings of a woman who was mostly mistaken for white and made the perhaps “brave” choice of writing under a Chinese pen name. Are Chin’s categories, the “real” and the “fake,” useful criteria for examining Eaton’s work at this point in time? Has the usefulness of his categories changed since the late 1980s/early 1990s when his manifesto, “Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake,” was written? If so, then what categories should we use now to judge Eaton’s work? To begin to address these questions, students are asked to choose one of Eaton’s fictional stories focusing on mixed heritage identity, such as “Its Wavering Image,” “Pat and Pan,” or “Her Chinese Husband.” By using examples from these stories and quotes from Chin’s essay, they are asked to support their arguments.

This assignment, a 3-4 page essay, followed by an in-class discussion, allows us to establish key terminology for the course, such as Asian American, Chinese American, authenticity, ethnic enclave fiction, voice, point of view, etc. This assignment also helps develop a literary critical mode for students who have largely had little exposure to literary criticism prior to taking this course, and who most often associate writing about books with writing plot summaries (typically, out of the 60-70 students over two sections in one academic year, I may have one student who has taken a college-level literature course; there are often mostly first and second year students in this class). Close reading of the text is introduced as a technique in class, and is emphasized as a strategy for developing an argument for the essay, as I encourage students to suspend their often intense reactions to Chin and find the evidence in the texts before defining their argument.

2. The Name Game: Eurasian, Hapa, or Mixed Heritage Asian Americans?

For this assignment, students research the histories and controversies over the terms “Eurasian” and “Hapa.” They are assigned readings such as the two separate introductions to *Intersecting Circles* by Nora Okja Keller and Marie Hara, Paul Spickard’s afterword to *Part Asian, 100% Hapa*, and my essay, “To Be “Hapa” or Not to Be “Hapa”: What to Name Mixed Asian Americans?” as well as the website, realhapas.com. They are also asked to read Edith Eaton’s journalistic essays, “Half Chinese Children” and “Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian.” Students are asked to write an analysis of these issues of naming in relation to their own experience of being “named” or mis-named. As with virtually every writing assignment for this

course, students bring their finished drafts to class for a peer review process, which is followed with a discussion fueled by students being familiar with the thoughts of at least one other classmate.

3. The Name Game Part 2: What Do You Call Yourself By Any Other Name?

For this assignment, students read Eaton's "Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of a Eurasian" and then write a poem about what they call themselves and what others call them related to their heritages and identities. They are invited to invent new names for their identities as part of this process (for example, Tiger Woods' term, Cablinasian, the commonly used "Blacknese," Koruvian for Korean + Peruvian, etc.). Students who are of other than mixed Asian American Heritage would be encouraged to think about how their heritages differ from/relate to their identities and to construct new ways of thinking about who they are based on the communities to which they belong as well as to their heritage lineages. To fully engage this assignment, they perform these poems in what my colleague Allyson Tintiango-Cubales describes as an opportunity of "Critical Performance Pedagogy" (101). This performance would allow them to stage their exploration of identity and confront the ways in which mixed heritage Asian American people's identities are constantly being constructed by the way people interact with their visual appearance. The students exhibit individual and collective self-determination by confronting the audience with their own words of self-identification, called out not through the complex and often daunting experience of being asked, "What Are You?" but rather through their own writing about who they want to be.

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