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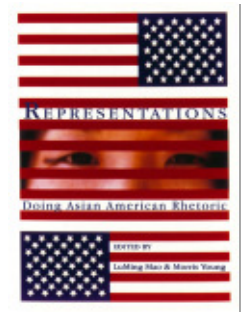
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## REREADING SUI SIN FAR

*A Rhetoric of Defiance*

Bo Wang

Sui Sin Far, or Edith Eaton (1865–1914) has been recognized as the first Chinese American writer to depict truly the Chinese in America with empathy.<sup>1</sup> Certainly in her own day she was a well-known author and her works were carried by major literary journals and newspapers in both Canada and the United States, including the *Montreal Daily Star*, *Los Angeles Express*, *Independent*, *New England Magazine*, and *Boston Globe*. Yet, like many other women who wrote and published in earlier times, she was almost forgotten after her death. Little was written about her until the 1970s, when first the editors of *AIIEEEEE! An Anthology of Asian American Writers* (1991), and then later literary critics S. E. Solberg (1981) and Amy Ling (1983) brought her to the attention of Asian American literary scholars.

In recent years, and especially since the publication of Annette White-Parks's biography of her (1995b), the importance of Sui Sin Far to the development of Asian American literature has been increasingly recognized. Literary scholars have examined Sui Sin Far's work using different approaches, such as multiculturalism, feminism, and postmodernism (Solberg 1981; Ling 1990; Yin 2000; Ammons and White-Parks 1994; White-Parks 1995a; Diana 2001; Beauregard 2002; Li 2004). But from a rhetorician's point of view, the most significant aspect of her work is the innovative rhetorical strategies she utilized to inform and persuade her dual audiences so that changes could be made to transform a racist society. Although literary scholars have done important critical work recovering Sui Sin Far's works from oblivion, few have provided in-depth analyses of the rhetorical strategies she employed in her fiction and

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1. In this essay, I refer to Sui Sin Far as a Chinese American writer for the purpose of situating her rhetorical practices within the context of Asian American rhetoric study, though she had a multifaceted identity and lived and published in both Canada and the United States.

nonfiction pieces. It is necessary that we reread her work from a rhetorical perspective to include her contribution to Asian/Chinese American rhetoric. In a letter Sui Sin Far wrote to the editor of the *westerner* in November 1909, she mentioned: “[M]y stories and articles in ‘The westerner,’ ‘Out West’ and ‘Post-Intelligencer’ accomplish more the object of my life, which is not so much to put a Chinese name into American literature, as to break down prejudice, and to cause the American heart to soften and the American mind to broaden towards the Chinese people now living in America—the humble, kindly moral, unassuming Chinese people of America” (quoted in White-Parks 1995b, 154).

Saliently, she had a clear political and antiracism agenda when writing stories and articles about Chinese immigrants in America. Whether she was challenging the cultural norms in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century or protesting against institutionalized racial discrimination against the Chinese in North America or intentionally revealing to the public her identity as a Chinese Eurasian, Sui Sin Far consistently used writing rhetorically to speak for the silenced and the downtrodden and to fight for racial equality.

Some literary critics have faulted Sui Sin Far for portraying the Chinese with a certain “orientalism” in the author’s tone and displaying Asian immigrants to the critical white gaze (Dong and Hom 1987).<sup>2</sup> Yet we must read her work in its own social, historical, and cultural context. She wrote in an era when racism was rampant in North America. Not only Chinese immigrants, but also African Americans and other people of color were cruelly persecuted. The 1880s saw the aftermath of the American Supreme Court’s crashing down of the Civil Rights Act and the staggering heights of lynching and murder of African Americans. While African American women rhetors such as Frances E. W. Harper, Ida Wells, and Fannie Barrier Williams were speaking against racism and the practice of lynching, Sui Sin Far fought against racial discrimination in her own way, using literary and journalistic writing as a means to the practical ends of changing social conditions and

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2. In his book *Orientalism*, Edward Said defines Orientalism as “a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between ‘the Orient’ and ‘the Occident’” (1979, 2). According to Said, this kind of distinction derives from a western projection of political dominance and academic authority in relation to the Orient. In addition, oriental methodology used in the study of the Orient produces problems of essentialism and ethnocentrism, which tend to create distorted and inaccurate views of non-western ideas and traditions.

unjust laws.<sup>3</sup> By initiating a dialogue between Chinese and European Americans, Sui Sin Far became a rhetor for the Chinese immigrants of her time, who were segregated and silenced. She deserves our respect for her courage to speak out against racial discrimination in an era when racism shaped not only the thinking of her time but national policies as well.

My analysis of Sui Sin Far is based on an assumption that as contemporary readers we are in dialogue with her work as we try to understand her positions, her strategies, and the consequences of her work. As I see it, such an analysis necessarily generates an argument for considering her short fiction not merely as aesthetic undertakings, but as rhetorical texts in themselves. These imaginative writings, together with her autobiography and journalistic articles, reveal her personal struggles as a biracial writer, her particular rhetorical strategies, her breaking of the stereotypes of silences and invisibility, and her commitment to the change of that racist society. Through a rhetorical analysis, I will show how Sui Sin Far used stereotyped characters, irony, personal experiences, and other rhetorical strategies to raise readers' consciousness of the irrationality of racism. Specifically, I will use narrative criticism to analyze the rhetorical dimension of Sui Sin Far's short fiction. I will examine the specific rhetorical strategies she employed in both her fiction and nonfiction to change the attitudes of her audience. I will also contend that Sui Sin Far's texts could be read along with the theoretical work of Kenneth Burke to complicate our understanding of the canonical notion of identification.

Given that Sui Sin Far was writing to dual audiences of both Protestant white readers and later some middle-class members of Chinese American communities in North America, she was facing tremendous rhetorical obstacles—she had to negotiate the difficult process of achieving her purposes without compromising her principles—which often forced her to be resourceful in delivering her message. As a consequence, her writing reflects, however subtly, the social tensions surrounding racial relations. It is only natural that some readers would resist or have doubts about Sui Sin Far's message due to the constraining function of cultural norms on people of color. Thus, this study draws attention to how a rhetor from a marginalized group and in a border position uses creative strategies to circumvent various social forces to inject her voice in the

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3. For detailed analyses of 19th-century African American women rhetors, see Logan 1999.

dominant discourse. My goal is to be mindful of the distinctive rhetorical obstacles she encountered and to describe the particular rhetorical strategies she used to reach her audience.

Though Sui Sin Far's work touches various aspects of the social life of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—including racial relationships, interracial marriage, acculturation, and women's status—in this essay, I will focus on her ideas about racial issues. And I will examine some representative pieces of her work as they fall in categories of genre: short stories, autobiography, and journalistic essays, discussing them in terms of the ideology they imply and the rhetorical strategies they employ as a way to achieve their goals of making changes in belief and attitudes.

### BREAKING STEREOTYPES

In the late nineteenth century, after the United States completed its transcontinental railroad, racist laws and policies were implemented to drive the Chinese people out of the country. The 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act stopped legal immigration of all Chinese; Chinese immigrants already in the United States became the target of racism, being driven into segregated urban areas—the Chinatowns in large cities like San Francisco, Seattle, and New York. Accompanying this anti-Chinese wave, magazine stories and news articles against the Chinese pervaded the media with the purpose of rationalizing the ill treatment of Chinese immigrants. During this period, Chinese Americans were frequently depicted as the “yellow peril” in American fiction, which fostered stereotyped images of the Chinese as alien, even nonhuman, others.<sup>4</sup> In such a hostile racist atmosphere, Sui Sin Far began writing about Chinese immigrants and Chinatown life.

Sui Sin Far's task is one of writing against essentialist racism and breaking the unjust but socially accepted stereotyped images of Chinese immigrants in North America. Alongside her message that racial discrimination is unjust and irrational is the often recurring argument that it is a person's humanity and the environment in which he or she is brought up that form character rather than the accidents of race or nationality. Individuality, she insists, is more important than nationality. The depiction underlying this argument can be found in many of her short stories collected in her book *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*. Here, I will use narrative criticism to examine two short stories in this collection.

4. Wu 1982 provides an in-depth analysis of how Chinese Americans were represented in American fiction between 1850 and 1940.

Narrative criticism provides an analytical approach that can illuminate the persuasive power hidden in Sui Sin Far's fiction. Based on rhetoric theorist Walter Fisher's narrative paradigm, critics such as Robert C. Rowland and Robert Strain have developed a method that emphasizes the way that narrative functions persuasively (as opposed to analyzing a narrative by transforming it into an argument that can then be tested by the standards appropriate for rational argumentation). The three-step approach proposed by Rowland, which "moves from the *form* of the narrative, to the *functions* fulfilled by the particular story, and to an *evaluation* of how persuasive the narrative is with a given audience," offers a systematic and flexible way to examine the rhetorical function of both fictional and nonfictional narratives (2005, 143). Such an approach helps me to bring out the rhetorical dimension of Su Sin Far's short stories.

In "The Story of One White Woman Who Married a Chinese" and its sequel, "Her Chinese Husband," Sui Sin Far tells of a white woman who divorces her abusive white husband and marries a kindhearted Chinese man. The narrator, a working-class white woman named Minnie, has been deserted by her Caucasian husband James Carson, who dislikes her because she is too unsophisticated and ignorant of politics. When she attempts to commit suicide, she is rescued by Liu Kanghi, a Chinese merchant who shelters her later and marries her. Liu comforts her and supports her so that she finally recovers from her trauma and starts a new life with regained confidence. After they are married, Liu treats Minnie with reverence and respect and cares for her with tenderness and love, forming a sharp contrast to the cold and cruel behavior of her ex-husband James Carson. However, their marriage transgresses a forbidden area and breaks the taboo of miscegenation; the story ends tragically with Liu Kanghi being murdered.

Though the story is fictional, it can be considered as a narrative that has a rhetorical dimension. Minnie and Liu Kanghi, the protagonists of the narrative, play a heroic role, for they defy the forbidden ground in American society: interracial marriage between Chinese and European Americans was viewed as a threat to the survival of the American nation. Liu Kanghi as a protagonist is endowed with another layer of symbolic meaning, which turns over the stereotypical expectations: "There was nothing feigned about my Chinese husband. Simple and sincere as he was before marriage, so was he afterwards. As my union with James Carson had meant misery, bitterness, and narrowness, so my union with

Liu Kanghi meant, on the whole, happiness, health, and development. Yet the former, according to American ideas, had been an educated broad-minded man; the other, just an ordinary Chinaman” (Sui 1995, 79). Contrary to the stereotypical depictions of the Chinese at that time, Liu Kanghi presents a new image, an image of a man who has deep feelings toward his wife and children, and does everything he can do to support his family.

An analysis of the narrative forms of the story can reveal its rhetorical dimension. In the story, there are two different, but related, antagonists. At one level, the role of antagonist is played by James Carson, who first abandons his wife Minnie and later threatens and insults her when he knows that she is with Liu Kanghi. In *Sui Sin Far*'s narrative, James Carson, the white man, is described as brutal and cruel, which flips over the stereotypical depiction. At a second level, the antagonist is the social bias against interracial marriage, and this is represented through both James Carson's remarks about Minnie's relationship with Liu Kanghi and Liu's tragic death toward the end of the story.

The primary setting of *Sui Sin Far*'s narrative is in a Chinatown in the United States. The Chinese family with which Minnie stays are “kind, simple folk” (1995, 72). Minnie's experience living with the family teaches her that “the virtues do not all belong to the whites” (74). The major plot devices in the story involve betrayal and commitment. Minnie is betrayed by her ex-husband James Carson. In sharp contrast to Carson, Liu first kindly supports Minnie and later marries her and treats her with love and respect until the end of his life. The author's feeling about him is clearly expressed by Minnie, the narrator of the story: “[H]e is always a man. . . . I can lean upon and trust in him. I feel him behind me, protecting and caring for me, and that, to an ordinary woman like myself, means more than anything else” (77). There is a clear relationship between the two plot devices. *Sui Sin Far*'s narrative challenges the racist stereotypes of Chinese Americans and showcases the preposterous nature of racial prejudices through the narrator's experience. The major theme of the narrative concerns racial discrimination and interracial marriage. The author argues that just like the white people, the Chinese are human beings and are capable of experiencing love. The author also tries to persuade the audience that an interracial marriage can be a happy and healthy union, though the end of the story casts a pessimistic shadow over such a union.

Viewed from a narrative perspective, *Sui Sin Far*'s story fulfills the basic rhetorical functions of narrative. The story is well designed to attract the

reader's attention with its vivid depiction of a Chinese-Caucasian marriage. The story creates identification between the audience and the major characters Liu Kanghi and Minnie. Implicitly, the author tells her readers that Chinese characters are people just like them, having their faults but also loving and caring about their families and friends. This type of identification persuades at an unconscious level, subtly leading the audience to associate with the characters through their shared humanness. Sui Sin Far utilizes the power of narrative to transport the reader to a different place and time. This function can be seen clearly in her detailed descriptions of Minnie and Liu Kanghi's daily lives in a Chinatown in the late nineteenth century, which reinforces her message that the Chinese are normal human beings just like the whites, and a mixed marriage can be a happy one if it is based on love. The story also taps into the values and beliefs of the audience in its theme of the basic human need for family and children, and therefore creates an emotional reaction by appealing to the reader's sense of empathy. Sui Sin Far's story has, in Robert Rowland's words, "narrative credibility" (2005, 145).<sup>5</sup> Her story is coherent to a certain degree. The action of the characters is consistent, which is reflected through the interactions between Minnie and Liu Kanghi and the attitudes of the whites toward the Chinese in the story. However, it is difficult to estimate whether the story is consistent with the reader's experience because not all readers had experience interacting with Chinese immigrants in the late nineteenth century. To the readers of her time, her story must have sounded quite different from the stories perpetuating stereotyped images of the Chinese told in the dominant discourses.

The difficulty in evaluating the story's narrative credibility, nevertheless, points to the rhetorical obstacles Sui Sin Far encountered in the late nineteenth-century in North America. The literary journals she wrote for were targeting an audience that expected to have its preconceived stereotypes about Asians confirmed rather than challenged in the stories it read, because such stories, as Elaine Kim notes, "provide literary rituals through which myths of racial supremacy are continually reaffirmed, to the everlasting detriment of the Asian" (1982, 20). Considering the rhetorical situation in which she wrote, it is small wonder that Sui Sin Far

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5. Rowland uses "narrative credibility" to refer to whether a narrative is coherent in itself and consistent with the personal experience of an intended audience, which improves the narrative paradigm first developed by Walter Fisher. See Rowland and Strain 1994 and Fisher 1987.



would have to use character types and conventions from the mainstream discourse in order to disarm hostility and resistance. Take, for example, Minnie's account of James Carson as a "more ardent lover" than Liu Kanghi (1995, 78). To some scholars, this seems to be an orientalist description that conceives the Chinese man as inferior to the white man in terms of masculinity. The death of Liu Kanghi at the end of the story also seems to fall into a set pattern of the then-popular American fiction in which Chinese-Caucasian marriages often ended tragically. However, this kind of reading misses the intricacies of various social and political forces that constrained Sui Sin Far's writing. The brief description of James Carson's physique and the ending of the story may be deliberately designed by the author to appease the reader's appetite for stereotyped images and his/her concern about miscegenation. As Annette White-Parks observes, "these were mainly camouflage, under which the writer could slip in her message" (1995b, 116). I would further propose that in Sui Sin Far's text orientalism is a masquerade—a rhetorical strategy she employs to "support the fulcrum by which [s]he would move other opinions" (Burke 1962, 56). In other words, stereotyped images are used as a means of identification to change the audiences' attitudes, though this strategy involves yielding to the audience's opinions in some respects. In a culture characterized by a rigidly stratified racial hierarchy, to directly argue for egalitarianism would be fruitless, verging on disregarding the white supremacy that has been well constructed in the dominant discourse. Sui Sin Far was aware of these limits and took advantage of literary conventions and formulas, turning them into a rhetorical strategy to fulfill her own purpose. At a deeper level, her story is different from those in the mainstream discourses in that she puts Liu Kanghi at the center of her narrative and portrays him as a man with "great" soul, which is an unusually positive image of the Chinese at that time. Though the story ends with Liu's death caused by his own countrymen, her narration shows how racial prejudices devour innocent individuals in interracial marriages, thus appealing to the readers' sympathy to change their attitudes toward miscegenation. In this sense, Sui Sin Far's work challenged the stereotyped representations of Chinese Americans and went beyond, in Jeffrey Partridge's words, a literary Chinatown—"a community imagined by [European Americans]—for their own purposes and their own pleasures" (2007, ix).

Even more important, Sui Sin Far's employment of Standard Written English and the fact that her characters' development coincides in part

with stereotyped images complicate Kenneth Burke's notion of identification. For Burke, identification is essential to persuasion. Creating identification entails the rhetor leading the audience to identify or be "consubstantial" with her. The rhetor can succeed in changing an audience's opinion only in one respect, and only insofar as she "yields to the audience's opinions in other respects" (1962, 55–56). In other words, the rhetor persuades members of her audience by building common ground with them, which may include origin, background, interests, shared experiences or attitudes. Although Burke's conception of identification provides a general guideline for analyzing rhetorical actions, it doesn't attend to the particularities of rhetoric's function or to what a rhetor from a marginalized social group has to do to achieve her purpose through identification. Sui Sin Far's mastery of Standard Written English and fluent prose did show her audiences that like them, she had a decent education, which might have won over some readers, though this gesture alone could hardly lead her audience, particularly Protestant white readers, to her side on such a sensitive issue in an extremely racist society.

Restricted by the larger social context and literary conventions, she had to resort to other strategies, particularly forms and character types within the genre of sentimental fiction or "Chinatown tales," to achieve her purpose.<sup>6</sup> In her texts, we can see how she uses the humanity of the major character Lui Kanghi to create identification between readers and character who, as humans, have similar needs for family and children. We can also see how she uses stereotyped images, the very form she intended to break through, to appease readers' appetite for exotica. The latter points to the delicate and complicated process through which a rhetor builds identification with her audience. Her employment of a literary form to identify with her audience so as to challenge the very idea embodied by the form can be viewed as an important way in which a rhetor uses identification to persuade her audience when caught in asymmetrical power relations. This innovative strategy, or what I call "forced identification," may lead to a persuasion subversively. In this sense, Sui Sin Far's work represents a special case of persuasion and sheds new light on the basic ways identification functions.<sup>7</sup>

6. Solberg 1981 categorizes Sui Sin Far's short stories as "Chinatown tales." Other literary scholars, such as Vanessa Holford Diana (2001) and Min Hyoung Song (2003), identify Sui Sin Far's stories as sentimental fiction, a genre employed by many American women writers in the nineteenth century.

7. For Kenneth Burke's discussion of identification, see Burke 1962, 21–24, 46, 55–56; 1966, 301; 1972, 28; and 1951, 203.

Another narrative feature—irony—is also a rhetorical strategy Sui Sin Far used to reach her audience in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In many of her stories, she adopts a strong ironic tone to speak against racism through her characters. In a short story titled “In the Land of the Free,” Sui Sin Far writes against racist policies, particularly the Chinese Exclusion Act, through a strong ironic tone. The protagonists of the story are a little Chinese boy and his parents, who are separated by immigration officials just because the boy was born in China. Although the parents believe that “there cannot be any law that would keep a child from its mother,” it takes almost a year for the “great Government” to clear the case (1995, 96–97). In the process, a white lawyer unscrupulously charges the parents over \$500, an enormous figure at that time, to “hurry the Government” to bring the child back (99). When the boy is finally released, he has forgotten his Chinese name and cannot recognize his mother. The author casts immigration officials and the white lawyer as the antagonists who victimize Chinese immigrants, which again breaks the stereotypical expectations. In addition to detailed descriptions of the agonizing pain the separation causes the mother, Sui Sin Far uses irony as a rhetorical strategy to criticize racist policies.

An irony is built up through both the title and the plot of the story. The author’s play with the word “free”—what the U.S. government professed and what a Chinese immigrant family discovered—incisively points to the fact that the government’s practice was contradictory to its promise. Or in other words, this land is free only to certain people, depending on their racial identity. The parents’ assumption that “there cannot be any law that would keep a child from its mother” and the ten-month separation from their child enhance the irony and reveal the dehumanizing nature of the racist policies, which appeals strongly to the rational side of the reader. The irony is further developed through the use of “the great Government” to refer to the U.S. government and a description of the legal document as “the precious paper which gave Hom Hing and his wife the right to the possession of their own son” (1995, 101). Through these descriptions, most readers of her time would have been able to detect the incongruity between the words and the author’s intended meaning, or at least sympathize with the pain of the family. Thus, this seemingly casual and informative short story of a Chinese immigrant family is embedded with the author’s political agenda, a rhetorical move not unfamiliar in Sui Sin Far’s work. Sui Sin

Far's story illuminates the rhetorical function of irony. In other words, irony can be used as a logical proof to connect to the audience because it often exposes the illogical and contradictory aspects of human action. Further, her use of irony showcases the kind of rhetorical choices a writer has to make to deliver her message when writing within the constraints of unfavorable social and political conditions. During the time period in which she wrote, the irony Sui Sin Far used in her story would have been more effective in debunking racist policies than direct criticism.

Although Sui Sin Far's short stories are often categorized as sentimental fiction or "Chinatown tales," I view them as important articulations of her ideology, showcasing the way she dissipates the fear and misunderstanding that contribute to racial prejudice. If her characters bear traces of a certain orientalism, they are always used as a rhetorical strategy to circumvent social constraints against refuting racial stereotypes, thus reflecting the larger political ends of Sui Sin Far. Examining her stories in light of their antiracism aims, we can see that the rhetorical obstacles she encountered demanded that she use creative strategies to connect the reader to her characters, who are often designed to subvert stereotypical expectations.

#### LIVING AND WRITING "BETWEEN WORLDS"

During her rather short life, Sui Sin Far published two autobiographical essays, in 1909 and 1912. The essay that has brought the most attention from literary scholars is "Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian," in which she presents herself as a Chinese Eurasian and writes from an insider's viewpoint. The other essay, titled "Sui Sin Far, the Half Chinese Writer, Tells of Her Career," was published as a promotional piece for her book *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*. These essays offer an invaluable glimpse into Sui Sin Far's life as a writer and artist; written in a genre that blends truth and fiction, they enable her to express, in a more explicit way, her personal struggles in a racist society and her constant search for her identity. As the literary critic Janet Varner Gunn points out, autobiography is "a cultural act of self reading" done both by the autobiographer, who is "reading his or her life," and by the reader, who interacts with the text and finds his or her own meaning in the story of the author's life. Gunn also states that two-dimensional reading acts happen in the "autobiographical situation," which includes the author's impulse to write and respond to a problem, his/her perspective, and the reader's interpretation of the work (1982, 12–13). Thus, Gunn's

conception of autobiography, though formed through the lens of literature, views the narrator in an autobiography as a rhetorical construction that conveys the author's intention and purpose. To appropriate Gunn's concept for a rhetorical perspective, I would say that autobiography as a genre enables the author to respond to both internal and external exigencies by telling a life story.<sup>8</sup> In other words, the author selects details and scenes from his/her life experiences to tell a story not only to express him/herself but also to influence the reader within a larger social and historical context. In this sense, *Sui Sin Far's* autobiographic writing can be seen as part of her rhetorical practices, showing the irrationality of the color line through a life story.

Though both autobiographic essays deserve an in-depth analysis, here I will focus on "Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of a Eurasian," a rather short but intense first-person narrative, structured as a series of vignettes out of memory in a more or less chronological order. In "Leaves," the narrator describes some selected life experiences with both white and Chinese communities, expressing her inner struggle as a child and later as an adult of Chinese and English heritage in the late nineteenth century. Dialogues and descriptions of the major incidents in her life provide a relentless account of an unbending, strong female whose external circumstances help shape her character, changing her from a naïve, vulnerable young girl to a woman who fought openly against racism. Faced with insulting, sometimes torturing treatment because of her identity as a biracial child—often being gazed upon, hooted at, beaten—the narrator does not so much overcome the events as internalize them to become more attuned to the pain and plight of Chinese people living in North America. Through reading, writing, and traveling, she works to immerse herself with the Chinese, and finally commits to defending the Chinese—her mother's people. In fact, to show her struggle and her determination, the narrator depicts a typical incident she experienced as a Chinese Eurasian. During a dinner the narrator

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8. Janet Varner Gunn's conceptualization of "autobiographical situation" focuses more on the autobiographer's need to respond to an inner crisis that affects her own life and her desire to invite the reader to find a meaning in her life story. In terms of analyzing the rhetorical dimension of autobiography, Gunn's theory complements Lloyd Bitzer's (1968) concept of "rhetorical situation," which pays more attention to a crisis or an exigency in the outside world that prompts a rhetorical response. Here, I use Bitzer's term "exigency" to refer to crises the autobiographer faces in both her own life and the outside world, emphasizing her agency in reacting to a rhetorical situation.

attends in a “Middle West” town where she works as a stenographer, her employer casually mentions: “Somehow or other, . . . I cannot reconcile myself to the thought that the Chinese are humans like ourselves. They may have immortal souls, but their faces seem to be so utterly devoid of expression that I cannot help but doubt.” A guest, the town clerk, echoes: “Souls, . . . Their bodies are enough for me. A Chinaman is, in my eyes, more repulsive than a nigger.” Then her landlady declares: “I wouldn’t have one in my house.” The narrator records her inner struggle at this moment: “A miserable, cowardly feeling keeps me silent. . . . If I declare what I am, every person in the place will hear about it the next day. The population is in the main made up of working folks with strong prejudices against my mother’s countrymen. The prospect before me is not an enviable one—if I speak. I have no longer an ambition to die at the stake of demonstrating the greatness and nobleness of the Chinese people” (1995, 224).

But instead of remaining silent, the narrator speaks out. When her employer asks, “What makes Miss Far so quiet?” she raises her eyes “with a great effort” and tells him: “Mr. K., . . . the Chinese people may have no souls, no expression on their faces, be altogether beyond the pale of civilization, but whatever they are, I want you to understand that I am—I am a Chinese” (1995, 225). The movement from being silent through fighting her fear to breaking silence and speaking out, in fact, becomes the narrator’s primary mode of action. By speaking out, the narrator refuses to accept the humiliating remarks made by racist whites. Moreover, the narrator’s action of speaking out allows her to articulate her thoughts and gives her power to persuade people that racism should be eliminated because it is wrong, unjust, and irrational. In other words, the narrator, given the cultural norms and racial prejudice she faces, feels that she has no choice but to break silence because speaking out is the only way to possibly change people’s attitudes.

Throughout “Leaves,” the narrator is in a constant search for an identity—one that resists any simplified or reduced representation. As a child, she feels bewildered and confused: “I do not confide in my father and mother. They would not understand. How could they? He is English, she is Chinese. I am different to both of them—a stranger, tho their own child” (1995, 222). As an adult, she straddles and struggles, pondering who she is. She writes: “When I am East, my heart is West, When I am West, my heart is East. Before long I hope to be in China. As my life began in my father’s country it may end in my mother’s. After

all I have no nationality and am not anxious to claim any” (230). On the one hand, this expresses the narrator’s feelings of being an exile, a rootless wanderer, and a lonely searcher caught “between worlds” (Ling 1990, 20). On the other hand, in refusing to claim any nationality, the narrator makes a symbolic move toward breaking down the color line—the racial and cultural hegemony that divided and discriminated people according to their skin color. What she searches for seems to be a multi-faceted identity that is both Chinese and western, and that is ambivalent, contradictory, and ever-changing. She expresses such a tendency at the end of “Leaves”: “I give my right hand to the Occidentals and my left to the Orientals, hoping that between them they will not utterly destroy the insignificant ‘connecting link’” (230).

Sui Sin Far’s narration of her life story suggests that she uses her life both as evidence of the ubiquity of racism in North America and as a demonstration of how an individual could react constructively to that racism. By describing the painful incidents she experienced both as a child and as an adult, she appeals to the emotional side of her dual audiences of both white readers and Chinese communities. Her background as a well-educated professional writer of fluent and eloquent prose would help her create identification in certain areas with her white middle-class audience, and consequently exert some influence upon it. Specifically, her courage and integrity as a human being and her literary talent would help her persuade her white readers, identifying her ways with theirs by using their language, gestures, and some shared cultural values. Actually, she mentions in “Leaves” that her employer apologized for making prejudiced remarks after she declared her Chinese heritage to the people at the dinner table in that small “Middle West” town. Yet, considering the extremely hostile racist backdrop against which Sui Sin Far wrote, it would be presumptuous to conclude that she could reach all her white audience. Her depiction of how she broke silence and confronted racism is rhetorically significant, for she models how a person from a marginalized group can resist social norms. Though faced with no small barrier in reaching out to the Chinese people, her painful life experiences and her rather explicit political stance would enable her to build common ground with the Chinese communities through a two-way identification in terms of fighting against essentialist racism. In other words, Sui Sin Far as an author uses her life experiences to identify with Chinese Americans, who in turn identify with her for both her personal struggle as a Chinese Eurasian and her courage to speak

out.<sup>9</sup> This kind of identification would create a close union between her and Chinese communities. We can see this clearly in “Leaves” as Sui Sin Far records her sense of accomplishment: “My heart leaps for joy when I read one day an article by a New York Chinese in which he declares, ‘The Chinese in America owe an everlasting debt of gratitude to Sui Sin Far for the bold stand she has taken in their defense’” (1995, 223).

As mentioned earlier, blending truth and fiction, the form of autobiography entails the author’s selection and rearrangement of his/her life experiences to convey a particular message that is important to him/her. The narrator, as a rhetorical construction, enables the author to establish a public persona, which is often hidden in fiction, poetry, and other literary genres. In the case of “Leaves,” Sui Sin Far effectively uses the form to achieve her purpose in this respect. Through her descriptions, we can see her struggle as well as her courage to defy racism. Despite her frequent confrontations with racial prejudice and discrimination, she retained her personal dignity and integrity. By showing how she struggled, and how she conquered her temptation to remain silent, Sui Sin Far builds up her public persona as a dignified speaker and writer who consistently seeks to break down the color line.

#### **SPEAKING FOR THE SILENCED**

Finally, I want to consider as part of her antiracism purposes and rhetorical practices Sui Sin Far’s journalist articles, though these articles have been read largely as background material in analyses of her fiction. During her career as a writer, Sui Sin Far penned a large number of articles either to introduce Chinese communities to the wider public or to defend them at some difficult moments. I intend to look at her journalistic articles not as a background for her fiction or as a fully separate category, but as another equally important genre in which she speaks openly for Chinese people living in North America. In that light, they are rhetorically important and ideologically sound. Just as she believes she should use literature to break down racial prejudice, Sui Sin Far argues for the rights of the Chinese in her journalistic articles.

In the late nineteenth century, accompanying the anti-Chinese movement were news reports of the vices that Chinese immigrants brought to North America, which were used by the media to legitimize racial

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9. Sui Sin Far’s use of two-way identification further illuminates the ways in which identification functions; in this case, her writing is empowering, not only to herself but also to Chinese American communities.



discrimination against the Chinese. In response to the aggravated social abuse of Chinese immigrants in both Canada and the United States at that historical juncture, Sui Sin Far published a series of short sketches and reports about the life of Chinese immigrants, in which she often uses personal experiences, irony, comparisons, and other rhetorical strategies to achieve her political purposes.

Here, I will examine a journalistic article Sui Sin Far published in Canada. In 1882, the U.S. government passed the Chinese Exclusion Act to prevent Chinese from entering the country. Meanwhile, the Canadian government gradually increased head taxes on the Chinese. In 1896, there was a petition to impose a tax of \$500 upon each Chinese entering Canada. To counter the charges against Chinese immigrants, Sui Sin Far published an article titled "A Plea for the Chinaman: A Correspondent's Argument in His Favor" in the *Montreal Daily Star* on September 21, 1896. In her article, which was composed as a letter to the editor of the newspaper, she argued against a Mr. Maxwell, the representative of a commission from British Columbia that was organizing the petition at the time.

She starts her letter by relating to the reader's basic values about how to treat other human beings: "Every just person must feel his or her sense of justice outraged by the attacks which are being made by public men upon the Chinese who come to this country. It is a shame because the persecutors have every weapon in their hands and the persecuted are defenseless." Obviously, she builds her argument on the assumption that it is unfair and unjust to abuse and attack human beings who are defenseless. Then she defines the major issue under discussion: "It is proposed to impose a tax of five hundred dollars upon every Chinaman coming into the Dominion of Canada" (1995, 192). She looks at the major charges the commission made against the Chinese and refutes them one by one. Disregarding the letter form, one may recognize an organization that is logical rather than chronological. She examines the grounds on which those charges against the Chinese were based and points out their illogical and immoral nature.

Sui Sin Far establishes her credibility as an author by bringing in her personal experience as a journalist who lived and worked with Chinese immigrants in their own communities in Montreal. She uses personal experiences and irony as her primary means of support; in fact, most of her claims are backed up by personal experiences combined with interpretative explanations. For example, countering the charge that the

Chinese are “immoral,” she responds in the tone of a professional who knew the Chinese community very well: “They are mostly steady, healthy country boys from the Canto district. . . . They come here furnished with a modest sum of money and with the hope of adding thereto by honest labor” (1995, 195). Drawing on her personal experience to illustrate her point, she describes her visit to the Chinatown in New York, where she was received “by the Chinese . . . with the greatest kindness and courtesy,” which disproves the warnings that “Chinatown was a dangerously wicked place” and if she went there she “would never come out alive or sound in mind or body” (196). This indicates that she was conscious of the importance of credibility, especially in addressing a sensitive topic under such adverse conditions.

In addition to personal experiences, Sui Sin Far uses irony and comparisons to appeal to both the sentiments and the rational side of the reader. She mentions satirically that “Mr. Maxwell ought to be ashamed of himself” for sneering at the Chinese “for being docile and easily managed” because “a Chinaman . . . will stand for reason, but unless forced, though by no means a coward, he will not fight.” Then, she further explains her point: “In China a man who unreasonably insults another has public opinion against him, whilst he who bears and despises the insult is respected. There are signs that in the future we in this country may attain to the high degree of civilization which the Chinese have reached, but for the present we are far away behind them in that respect” (1995, 195).

She develops an irony through juxtaposition of “civilization” and “barbarism”—the very terms Mr. Maxwell used to describe himself and his colleagues in relation to Chinese immigrants. By pointing out that this Mr. Maxwell actually knew nothing about China and its culture and that he and those of the same mentality who abused the Chinese shamelessly put the blame on their victims, she exposes the immorality and irrationality of their behavior. In addition, she uses her knowledge of the Chinese culture to challenge the accusers’ assumption that only westerners contributed to the world civilization, which is a rather audacious action for her time.

She also employs comparisons to refute the charges against the Chinese. In debunking the hypocrisy of accusers’ claim that the Chinaman “comes here to make money and with the intention of returning sooner or later,” she writes: “In that he follows the example set him by the westerners; . . . The ports of China are full of foreign private adventurers.

After they have made their 'pile' they will return to their homes—which are not in China” (1995, 197). The comparison between what Chinese immigrants encountered in Canada and what westerners were doing in China further reveals the racist nature of those charges. These strategies are especially effective in the context of her letter because it is clear where she stands in relation to the issues under discussion. Unlike many of her early journalistic pieces carrying no byline, this letter is signed with the initials of her English name—Edith Eaton. This signature, together with her claim in the letter that “[i]t needs a Chinaman to stand up for a Chinese cause,” shows her identity as both an insider and an outsider of the Chinese community, and therefore can be viewed as a rhetorical strategy Sui Sin Far used to enhance her credibility.

In her other journalistic articles that were published later, she committed herself to introducing Chinese communities as she perceived them to continue breaking down stereotypes. Her enthusiasm as a journalist and rhetor can be seen from titles such as “Chinatown Needs a School,” “Chinese Workmen in America,” and “The Chinese in America.” Certainly, Sui Sin Far addressed the issue of racism repeatedly in her fiction and autobiography; the attitudes she conveys in her journalistic articles do not differ substantially from those she expressed in her literary writing. But the venue of journalism provided her with additional possibilities to communicate her ideas. While we can speculate about the rhetorical effects of her articles, we should bear in mind the obstacles she was facing in that dark era. Some readers might question or disregard her message simply because hers was different from those based on racist assumptions usually found in the media. However, Sui Sin Far’s tone and persona are crucial to her effectiveness in responding to racism in her journalistic articles. As I have shown in the above analysis, sometimes she openly argues against racial discrimination with specific evidence and personal experiences, appealing to the rational side of the reader. Sometimes she reports events with an ironic tone, which often covertly touches and tests the foundations of the reader’s values and beliefs. Though her journalism presented a lonely voice at the time, her rhetorical prowess would enable her to plant new ideas in people’s minds.

#### CONCLUSION: CUTTING A PATH AT BORDERLANDS

In “Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian,” Sui Sin Far wrote these words: “I believe that some day a great part of the world will be

Eurasian. I cheer myself with the thought that I am but a pioneer. A pioneer should glory in suffering" (1995, 224). Indeed, Sui Sin Far was a pioneer, personally and rhetorically. She was the daughter of a Chinese mother and an English father, who lived in England, Canada, and the United States. She did not marry. She worked and supported herself as a journalist, a stenographer, and a fiction writer. Though she could pass as a white, she chose to reveal her identity as a Chinese Eurasian, a splendidly dauntless move in her time. Above all, she had great talent and courage to break silence and speak out for justice. As Elizabeth Ammons states, "That Sui Sin Far invented herself—created her own voice—out of such deep silencing and systematic racist repression was one of the triumphs of American literature at the turn of the century" (1982, 105). I would say that her achievement was also one of the triumphs in Asian American rhetoric.

Sui Sin Far contributed tremendously to the Asian/Chinese American rhetorical tradition. She was the earliest Chinese American writer who consciously used writing to fight against essentialist racism. Most significant among her contributions was the leading role she played in exposing the social abuses inflicted on Chinese people living in North America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This is demonstrated by the short stories, autobiographical essays, journalistic articles, and other texts she has left behind. Writing, obviously, was a powerful weapon she used to battle against racial prejudice and discrimination.

Sui Sin Far was one of the earliest proponents of the cause of racial equality. In an era when racism was well constructed in the dominant social discourses and supported by a race theory that was based on pseudoscience, her idea that individuality is more important than nationality was far ahead of her time and incredibly contemporary. And her courage to openly express her idea regardless of danger and risk set up a model for people in Asian/Chinese communities. According to Annette White-Parks, in the fall of 1992, about three hundred Chinese Canadians fought to be reimbursed for the head tax that was imposed upon Chinese immigrants who entered Canada between 1885 and 1923. Many of the protesters carried with them a copy of Sui Sin Far's 1896 letter to the *Montreal Daily Star* (1995, 239). Saliently, Sui Sin Far's legacy still inspires and empowers her mother's people eighty years after her death.

Sui Sin Far's work illustrates the rhetorical choices Asian/Chinese Americans made (and make) in the Asian American rhetorical tradition under adverse social and political conditions. As a Chinese American

writer, she was obliged to be particularly innovative because she faced obstacles unknown to white middle-class men. She was a rhetorical figure unique in rhetorical history because the central element of racial oppression was the silencing of her voice. Just like white and African American women rhetors who had to invoke a certain feminine style or appeal to biblical scriptures to speak for gender and racial equality during the nineteenth century (see Campbell 1989, 12–15), Sui Sin Far had to resort to various strategies including stereotyped images, irony, sarcasm, and personal experiences to reach her audiences. Her writing indicates that Asian/Chinese American writers can use literary genres and conventions rhetorically to resist and defy cultural norms when they have little access to political arenas. Sui Sin Far's rhetorical practices also reveal that the reshaping of literary genres, conventions, and character types can create rhetorical spaces where Asian/Chinese Americans are able to disseminate their ideology and have their voices heard.<sup>10</sup> In such a space, stereotyped characters, irony, sarcasm, personal experiences, accented language, incongruities, and tricksterism, to name a few, are all rhetorical strategies they can use to overcome social restrictions and break silence. Sui Sin Far's writing has directly or indirectly influenced Chinese American writers and rhetors of later generations. Some of her rhetorical moves can be found in the work of contemporary writers such as Maxine Hong Kingston, Gish Jen, and Shawn Wong. The connection between Sui Sin Far and contemporary Chinese American writers could serve as an important site for further rhetorical inquiry. Such inquiry would offer new insight into the rhetorical strategies Asian/Chinese American writers and rhetors used (and use) in their writing to resist and challenge the dominant discourse.

Her work also suggests that the ways identification functions inside the Asian/Chinese American rhetorical tradition complicate our understanding of the canonical conception of identification. While Kenneth Burke's notion of identification applies to the rhetorical actions of many rhetors, Sui Sin Far's use of stereotyped images, along with other narrative features to build identification with her dual audiences, certainly presents a particular way a writer from a marginalized social group induces identification. Her work shows that the canonical conceptions

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10. Here I use the term "rhetorical space" to refer to the effect created through reshaping genres and textual features such as character type and format in a communicative event. For a detailed discussion of the concept of rhetorical space, see Mountford 2001, 41-71.

of certain rhetorical modes can be revisited and revised. Sui Sin Far's rhetorical practices exemplify the liberatory potentials of identification as a means to subvert cultural norms and interrogate power.

Though Sui Sin Far penned a large number of short stories and essays to fight against essentialist racism and speak for the Chinese Americans of her time, her name is almost forgotten. Not only she, but also many other accomplished Asian/Chinese American writers and rhetors, can hardly be found in anthologies of rhetoric. As we rebuild the canon and "remap rhetorical territory," in Cheryl Glenn's words, it is important that we include Asian American writers' work in dialogue with their historical, cultural, and social contexts and with writers and rhetors of other ethnicities (1997, 17). To do otherwise is to participate in the perpetuation of the values and beliefs that are silencing.

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