

Chinese or White?: Racial Formation, Hybridity, and Chinatown in Sui
Sin Far's "Its Wavering Image"

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Submitted to the graduate degree program in English and the Graduate
Faculty of the University of Kansas in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts.

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Date Defended: April 6, 2015

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Abstract

Drawing upon Judith Butler's theory of performativity, this thesis offers an interpretation of "Its Wavering Image" that explains the biracial main character, Pan's, process of racialization. The argument is two fold: first, the paper contends that in this story, Sui Sin Far theorizes that race is performative rather than biological. Race does not come *from* characters' bodies, but is rather an *incorporated* performance of codes. Pan's race, then, depends not on her parentage or her biology, but on the "codes" she internalizes and embodies, codes that are fleshed out throughout the thesis through historical contextualization of San Francisco and Chinatown. Sui Sin Far roots "Its Wavering Image" firmly in space and place to emphasize the connections between Chinatown – a space that was zoned "Chinese" by the city – and racial identity formation. The second part of the argument deals with racial hybridity; the characters of "Its Wavering Image" cannot understand racial hybridity because their home spaces – and the boundaries between the spaces themselves – condition them to think of and recognize race in dualistic terms, in this case, Chinese or white. Ultimately, "Its Wavering Image" allows Sui Sin Far to undermine the notion that race is either stable or essential and to critique a system in which people *must* fit at one end of the binary or the other.

Acknowledgements

I am indebted to the following people for their support of me during this project: Dr. Philip Barnard, for his help during my revision stages, his encouragement, and his willingness to help a when my plans to defend early went awry; Dr. Kathryn Conrad, for her helpful advice, suggestions, and for helping me with Judith Butler! I am also indebted to my fellow graduate students and the graduate faculty of the Department of English at the University of Kansas for their collegiality and support.

Most of all, I am indebted Dr. Susan Harris, with whom I had been hoping to work since undergrad. I thank her for serving as the initial chair of my committee and for introducing me to the fascinating world of Sui Sin Far in the first place; she was honest, tactful, and kind throughout the process. Her genuine interest in and excitement for the project was contagious and her patient help through the process enabled me to develop my initial, small idea into a complete thesis.

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In 1865, Sui Sin Far (Edith Maude Eaton), was born in England to a white father and a Chinese mother, but moved to North America as a child, where she continued to live and write until her death in 1914. During her writing career, Sui Sin Far focused much of her attention on underserved Chinese populations, and published multiple works of fiction, memoir, journalism, and ethnography detailing their plights (Hsu 10-11). Since she was rediscovered in 1974, scholars have explored the myriad ways Sui Sin Far acted as a powerful advocate for Chinese populations in North America. In her 1983 article, “Edith Eaton: Pioneer Chinamerican Writer and Feminist,” Amy Ling asserts that Sui Sin Far, as both a writer and activist, was “foremost... a champion of the hated Chinese” (289). This advocacy, critics have found, permeates Sui Sin Far’s corpus of work, but perhaps most notably, her collection of short stories, *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*, published in 1912. *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*, the most famous of Sui Sin Far’s writings, stands as the first book of fiction published in the United States by an author of mixed Chinese and white ancestry (Hsu 9).

While the stories of *Mrs. Spring Fragrance* highlight the contentious position of the Chinese in the United States, the work also reflects Sui Sin Far’s patent interest in racial hybridity. This attention to hybridity has garnered a degree of critical attention, but less, still, than Chineseness has. Jane Hwang Degenhardt’s article, “Situating the Essential Alien: Sui Sin Far’s Depiction of the Chinese-White Marriage and the Exclusionary Logic of Citizenship” (2008), focuses on four stories of *Mrs. Spring Fragrance* and asserts that Sui Sin Far’s “mixed race subject[s] provides a crucial site for exploring the contradictions inherent to a logic that privileges national identity” (686). In “The Making of a Eurasian: Writing, Miscegenation, and Redemption in Sui Sin Far” (2012), Juanita C. But adds to this conversation, highlighting the

“anguish and confusion” (25) evident in Sui Sin Far’s descriptions of biraciality. Vanessa Holford Diana’s article, “Biracial/Bicultural Identity in the Writings of Sui Sin Far,” also notes the marginalization of biracial characters and argues that these depictions “render impossible the delineation between subject and ‘abject,’ between dominant self and Other” (86). This paper builds upon this conversation, focusing on one key story from *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*, “Its Wavering Image,” which makes visible issues about biracial identity that had not yet been fully recognized, and which provides a strong counternarrative to the “rags-to-riches” tales we so often hear about first- and second-generation immigrant families.

Pan, the half-white, half-Chinese main character, resides in San Francisco’s Chinatown¹, a place that, throughout the story, exerts a large degree of power over the ways characters understand race. Despite Pan’s racial hybridity she cannot seem to exist as biracial, as white and Chinese simultaneously. To understand why, we must trace, first, the story’s depiction of Pan’s process of racialization as imbricated in the historical construction of San Francisco and Chinatown as distinct (white and Chinese) spaces. The story presents race as socially constituted and performative; Pan’s race is naturalized, neither essential nor biological, but instead an

¹ Sui Sin Far was particularly interested in these Chinese settlements, and made studies of Chinatowns throughout Canada, the United States, and even of Chinatowns in Jamaica. Most of Sui Sin Far’s non-fiction work on Chinatowns focuses on those in Los Angeles, New York, and Montreal. For *The Montreal Star*, Sui Sin Far wrote several scathing articles and letters to the editor concerning the treatment and living conditions of Chinese residents (Sui Sin Far, “A Plea for the Chinaman” 192-8). A few years later, she wrote several pieces for *The Los Angeles Express*, describing LA’s Chinatown, which she refers to in one article as “unattractive and unsavory but interesting” (“In Los Angeles’ Chinatown” 198). In these articles, Sui Sin Far provides restaurant reviews, and descriptions of celebrations, but she also informs her audience of the dire need for schools and better education for boys and girls in Chinatown (“Chinatown Needs a School” 202-3). It is partly these articles that have communicated to critics the degree of passion with which Sui Sin Far advocated for the Chinese.

embodied performance of codes *specific to Chinatown*. This provides a platform for the second section of the argument, which asserts that Sui Sin Far highlights the connections between race and place to expose the impossibility of racial hybridity in this particular context. The characters of “‘Its Wavering Image’” cannot understand racial hybridity because their home spaces – and the boundaries between the spaces themselves – condition them to think of and recognize race only in binary terms, in this case, Chinese or white. Pan cannot exist meaningfully as a biracial character in early-twentieth-century Chinatown because, as such, she is illegible. No hybrid category exists in her place and time; there are no available codes that tell her how to *be* biracial or that communicate to others how to understand her hybridity.

Pan’s Story

From the beginning of the story, Sui Sin Far emphasizes Pan’s context, insistent that she does not exist within a vacuum. In fact, she deliberately highlights the ways that Pan’s racial identity is constructed within a specific place and time. When we first meet Pan she is living with her Chinese father, who runs an “Oriental bazaar” in San Francisco’s Chinatown. We learn that her mother, a white woman, died when Pan was a child, leaving her in Chinatown, an area that becomes a character in itself. Initially, Pan does not recognize her hybridity because her context, Chinatown, has shaped her into a Chinese subject.

Pan’s race becomes more complicated when Mark Carson, a white reporter who comes in search of a story, crosses the boundaries between white and Chinese spaces and enters Chinatown. Throughout the story, Sui Sin Far makes clear that Carson senses the multitude of differences between Chinatown and San Francisco. The place itself seems distinctly Chinese to

Carson, and this leaves him confused and unable to interpret Pan's race; he clearly expects to find, in Chinatown, Chinese people. Thus, Pan's ambiguous race renders her illegible to Carson. When Mark Carson returns to his office in San Francisco, he openly wonders: "What was she? Chinese or White?" (81). Carson's editor informs him of Pan's biraciality, and also that she will be a good source for the article because of her intelligence and knowledge about Chinatown. Carson returns to Chinatown and eventually Pan becomes comfortable with him, "leading him about Chinatown, initiating him into the simple mystery and history of many things, for which she, being of her father's race, had tender regard and pride" (81). During their time together, Carson manages to woo Pan, and the two begin a romance. Pan's legibility, however, emerges as a point of contention between the two. While Pan understands herself as Chinese, Mark Carson eventually labels Pan "white" and insists that she does not belong in Chinatown. This occurs multiple times across the story; Carson argues for Pan's whiteness, while she emphasizes her Chineseness.

Although racial ambiguity remains the main source of discord in "Its Wavering Image," another conflict stems from Carson's betrayal: He uses the knowledge he gleaned from Pan – knowledge about the Chinese and Chinatown – to write a special feature article about Chinatown and its inhabitants for a readership of white San Franciscans.² Though in the midst of a romance with Pan, Carson collects her confidences and uses them to make a spectacle of "her people." Pan, stung by Carson's deception, states that she "would rather have her own naked body and soul been exposed, than that things, sacred and secret to those who loved her, should be cruelly

² Historically, this would have been an audience that was interested in reading Chinatown ethnography, a genre that was in vogue during this time (Ferens 2).

unveiled and ruthlessly spread before the ridiculing and uncomprehending foreigner” (84). “‘Its Wavering Image’” closes after Pan discovers this betrayal, as Mark Carson, after a two-month absence, ventures to see her again. He finds Pan angry and “feels strangely chilled” (85) by her demeanor, and by the fact that she has outfitted herself in Chinese clothing. Pan’s intent seems to be to communicate to Carson that his disloyalty is personal and has reinforced her Chinese identity. But once again, Carson misunderstands, insisting: “You are a white woman -- white” (85), and Pan, again, argues for her Chineseness. She further emphasizes this point, stating that she “would not be a white woman for all the world” (85). Paradoxically, Carson’s maltreatment of Pan, and his recurring insistence that she is white rather than Chinese, only serves to reaffirm her Chineseness.

Throughout the story, Pan’s “image,” the way Carson recognizes her body and race, wavers. Carson cannot understand Pan as biracial, so at certain times, to him, she seems Chinese, and at others, she seems white; but Carson is unable to perceive Pan as Chinese and white simultaneously. An exploration of Chinatown and its context begins to explain Carson’s perspective. Sui Sin Far roots “‘Its Wavering Image’” firmly in space and place to emphasize the connections between Chinatown – a space that was zoned “Chinese” by the city – and racial construction. Carson, as an outsider, senses Chinatown’s differences – the factors that contribute to racialization – and this awareness works to denaturalize Pan’s race.

San Francisco’s Chinatown

Discussions of racial constructionism appear in a subset of Sui Sin Far scholarship. Critics such as Jane Hwang Degenhardt employ critical race theory to trace legislation’s role in

racializing Chinese-American populations; however, the spatial results of this legislation have not yet been properly explored. An attention to materiality, to the literal fabric of a site, has the potential to reveal as much about inhabitants' cultural values, the ways residents understand themselves and others, as their literature or art (Cresswell 30; Malpas 35-6; Sack 2). Further, scholars assert that place itself plays a vital role in constructing racial identities (Bettinger and Deskins 57). *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*, and ““Its Wavering Image”” in particular, suggests that Sui Sin Far sensed the racializing power of place, and Chinatown's looming presence in ““Its Wavering Image”” ensures that the story stays grounded in its specific historical and material contexts. Thus, before we can understand Pan's race, we must examine Chinatown and its history.

Around the time of the California Gold Rush, San Francisco grew into a large, prosperous city. Chinese immigrants began traveling to the US around this point as a result of labor shortages, and Chinese immigration hit its peak between 1871-1880 (Fong-Torres 264).³ By the end of 1882, anti-Chinese sentiments solidified into the Chinese Exclusion Act, which attempted to address what had become known as “the Chinese question,” and so began the period during

³ These laborers took on arduous and often dangerous menial jobs that white Americans tended to avoid (Fong-Torres 2), but despite this, anxiety surfaced about the Chinese taking potential white jobs. In order to combat this imagined threat, California applied its first prejudicial law, the “Foreign Miner's License Act,” which charged a total of four dollars per month for each single miner's license (11). Perhaps, at least partly, in response to this tax, the Chinese began to present themselves as equal to white Americans in both business and industry, making “white” jobs even more competitive than they were previously (2). The state of California responded to this diversification of employment by instituting other taxes. In 1882, for instance, Chinese fishermen had to pay four dollars in taxes per month (12). In 1862, in another effort to push the Chinese back into mining, the government imposed the “Chinese Police Tax,” on any Chinese man over the age of eighteen who did not work, in one way or another, for the mining industry (12).

which the US discriminated against this group on a nation-wide scale (Jung 5).⁴ Ultimately, this xenophobia, racism, and racist legislature contributed to the crystallization of a space into a place, Chinatown. Cultural geographers Carter, Donald, and Squires argue that a space becomes a place “as the flows of power and negotiations of social relations are rendered into the concrete form of architecture” (xiii). Bearing this in mind, we can begin to think of the bricks and mortar of Chinatown as haunted by the forces that settled or “sedentarized”⁵ Chinese immigrants. Sui Sin Far highlights the salience of these forces by amplifying Chinatown’s importance in the story, as if place exists as the most powerful character.

Because of its power, Chinatown, this place that emerged from xenophobia and racism, is an ideal setting for Sui Sin Far’s theorization of place and its role in racial construction. North American Chinatowns do not reflect essential Chineseness, but are places constructed around and loaded with *ideologies* of difference (Anderson 219). San Francisco’s Chinatown grew out of racist beliefs about Chinese immigrants; in other words, Chinatown emerged to contain “difference.” The sedentarized population within Chinatown, then, was undoubtedly affected by

⁴ Initially, the Chinese Exclusion Act was intended to last for ten years, but this race-based law actually persisted, legally sanctioning prejudice and discrimination against the Chinese until 1943. From 1882 to 1893, Congress passed in excess of ten pieces of legislation designed to further exclusion efforts, ranging from laws that denied reentry certificates for Chinese laborers who had left the country temporarily, to laws that attempted to disallow Chinese females, who were typically assumed to be prostitutes, from (re)entering the country (Chen 46-7).

⁵ “Sedentarize” is a term used by James C. Scott and other political scientists to denote the forced settlement of a group of people so that they become identifiable or “legible” to the state. In this case, white San Franciscans of the time feared their Chinese neighbors and desired to drive them out of the city *and* the country (Chen 49). This drive was especially powerful because of another piece of legislation, one that ensured that violence by whites against the Chinese could not be prosecuted in court (Tsui 22).

the ideologies cemented into its foundation. As a member of Chinatown, Pan would be subject to certain ideas about Chineseness, simply by virtue of her location. As a theoretical framework, Judith Butler's work with performativity elucidates the role Chinatown plays in racializing Pan, and though unseen, the role white San Francisco would have played in racializing Carson. According to Butler, gender is performative, a "pre-conscious" performance of cultural codes. Neither biological nor agential, we internalize and embody gender, and it becomes "naturalized" through our repeated performances. Quite a few critics have noticed how well Butler's theory translates to race. For instance, Susan Bordo argues that "race" could stand in for "gender" in Butler's early piece "Postmodern Bodies, Postmodern Subjects." Sarah Salih follows Bordo's lead, expanding upon Butler's argument and proposing that race, like gender, is a performance; race is not something that simply "is," but rather something that is "assumed" (63). More recently, Nadine Ehlers published *Racial Imperatives* (2012), in which she contends that race, like Butler's conceptualization of gender, functions as an unstable "marker of identity" (150) that must be continuously controlled and perpetuated in order to retain its meaning.

As these scholars have noted, a preconscious internalization of codes, which are continuously (re)performed and thus naturalized, constitutes gender *and* race. Race seems stable and natural, but it is an illusion behind which there is nothing essential. We become racialized by a largely covert, neither completely conscious nor completely unconscious, process. During this process, we interpret cultural ideologies, embody them, and wear our bodies accordingly. As a part of the Chinese community, Pan's identity is steeped in exclusion from whiteness and white spaces, her "cultural reality" (Butler 26). The Chinatown functions as a locus of racist ideologies, of what Butler would refer to as "received interpretations," that Pan is compelled to (re)interpret

and embody (28). But, if Pan's process of racialization is not a conscious, agential one, how are we as readers to gain insight into the process? Carson, as a resident of white San Francisco, provides the ideal means through which Sui Sin Far can dramatize Chinatown's racializing power.

Denaturalizing Pan's Race

Chinatown begins exerting its control early in "Its Wavering Image," as Sui Sin Far's language highlights the firmness of boundaries between Chinatown and the white city. For example, on Mark Carson's first visit to meet Pan's father, he steps "across the threshold" (80), from one space to another. Pan "open[s]...doors...to [Carson] when he knocks" (81) and allows him to cross into Chinese spaces. Moreover, later in the story, Sui Sin Far suggests that boundaries between Chinatown and white San Francisco have a physical effect on Carson, causing "his steps to falter on his way to meet Pan" (84). Sui Sin Far's delineation of boundaries – her contention that Mark Carson recognizes, and even feels, the strength of the boundaries between the two spaces – allows her to highlight the dominant mode of thinking about these two spaces. The characters of "Its Wavering Image" conceive of Chinatown and San Francisco as a binary.

Carson's conception of these two places as a binary reflects San Francisco's history, geography, and architecture, which made it a noticeably segmented and segregated city. In the late nineteenth century, the city suffered from its poor planning; its streets were too narrow and steep and its neighborhoods and districts were isolated from one another (Kahn 1). In the late 1890s, San Francisco's Board of Supervisors limited Chinatown to eight-square-blocks around

the space where white pioneers had settled around Portsmouth Square (Hsu 284). Before the earthquake of 1906, it was one of San Francisco's two true ghettos, the other being the Barbary Coast⁶ (Dreyfus 71). But while the Barbary Coast's borders were inexact, allowing it to sprawl into the spaces of genteel San Franciscans, Chinatown was virtually autonomous and its borders were clear (71). On the southern boundary of Chinatown, St. Mary's Church, the city's first Roman Catholic Cathedral, guarded the Western city of San Francisco from Chinatown's Eastern influences (Hsu 284). If Chinatown threatened to cross this line of demarcation, the newspapers spread the word and the city made concerted efforts to contain the Chinese⁷ (284).

Through Carson's perspective, Sui Sin Far highlights the forced and fixed positionality of the Chinese within San Francisco; Chinatown was, for all intents and purposes, a ghetto. In the story, these distinct boundaries cause Mark Carson to feel unpleasantly contained by Chinatown. Several times he finds himself looking up at the sky. First, he spends time in the "high room open to the stars" (82). On another visit, he notes the "motley thronged street beneath him," gazes up at the moon and exclaims "How beautiful above! How unbeautiful below!" (82). Later that night, Carson, once again, finds his gaze drawn upward toward the "crescent moon" (83). Carson's constant upward glances toward the open, unbound sky are a reaction to the restrictions

⁶ The Barbary Coast was San Francisco's red-light district. During the daytime, the Barbary Coast was a maritime district, but at night it lured sailors and tourists into grog shops, brothels, opium dens, and gambling houses (Bacon).

⁷ This has interesting implications for "Its Wavering Image"; because of newspapers' role in ghettoizing the Chinese, the residents of Chinatown would have been suspicious of Carson, a white reporter for a San Francisco newspaper.

of the ghetto.⁸ “Ghetto” has come to describe an economically depressed area in a city with a high population density⁹ whose inhabitants are segregated from the rest of the city for reasons of racial, religious, or cultural difference (Davis and Ravid x). Historically, a ghetto was often an enclosed space with high walls that separated it from outside spaces. In the case of Chinatown in “Its Wavering Image,” the walls are metaphorical, but so salient that in 1970, an architect named Clayton Lee designed a gateway, “The Dragon Gate,” to mark the entrance of San Francisco’s Chinatown at Grant Avenue, formerly Dupont Street, the location of Pan’s father’s bazaar (Dunn and Mingasson 72). These boundaries also reflect the material reality of San Francisco city planning after the 1906 earthquake. At this time, city planners and architects set out to reimagine the formerly poorly-planned San Francisco.¹⁰ City leaders hoped to unite the disparate districts of

⁸ Scholars debate the etymology of the word “ghetto”; some contend that it derived from the Venetian word *geto*, which describes the space in which Jews in Venice in the 16th century were compelled to live (Davis and Ravid x). Other scholars speculate that it was originally a Yiddish word, and some claim it came directly from Latin (x).

⁹ Today, Chinatown has approximately 64, 272 people per square mile, whereas the rest of San Francisco has only 17,407 people per square mile (“San Francisco General Plan: Chinatown”). City planners estimate that during the turn of the century, Chinatown had an even larger population density (“San Francisco General Plan: Chinatown”).

¹⁰ The earthquake was not the only catalyst for revitalizing the city. In 1846, San Francisco was nothing more than a hamlet, but the discovery of gold in 1848 and the subsequent gold rush (1848-1880), spurred population growth (5). However, in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, San Francisco’s growth rate slowed dramatically, and it had to compete with the likes of Los Angeles, Portland, and Seattle. Around 1900, partly because of anxieties about San Francisco’s status, the city started to pay particular attention to city planning. James Duval Phelan, the city’s mayor from 1897 to 1901, envisioned a “new San Francisco,” a well-planned city whose beauty would ensure social harmony (57). Drawing from the “City Beautiful Movement,” Phelan started a movement that produced much of the architecture for which San Francisco is famous, but the movement also reimaged the city as one of united spaces rather than one of disparate districts (58). It was thought that if the spaces of the city were united, the

San Francisco, but despite the Chinese's considerable contribution to the growth of the city during the gold rush, Chinatown remained a separate space with clear boundaries.

In addition to the restrictions of this ghetto, Carson also notices the *sensory* differences between Chinatown and the white city. To Carson, Chinatown seems hot, dusty, and unsavory (80) and when he first enters a room in Pan's house, he finds it "fragrant with the odor of dried lilies and sandalwood" (80). Chinatown appears exciting, with its "big colored lanterns, shedding a mellow light," and "sometimes there [is] music... a Chinese band [that] play[s] three evenings a week in the gilded restaurant beneath them" (82). In contrast, when Mark Carson returns to the white city, he merely returns to the "office" or "the city," and Sui Sin Far includes no descriptors. Ultimately, Carson's reaction to the smells, sounds, sights, et cetera, of Chinatown, juxtaposed with his lack of description about the outside white city, emphasizes the strength of place, the control Chinatown seems to wield over him.

While Carson's observations highlight the "difference" of Chinatown, they simultaneously intensify his status as white outsider and highlight his "white gaze" This gaze signifies a historical gaze that forced an interpretation – certain understandings about Chineseness and about the differences between Chineseness and whiteness – onto the residents of Chinatown. When Carson first enters Chinatown, he comes as a spectator, a "reporter who had been sent to find a story" (80) about exotic Chinatown for a *white* audience. Carson's business is with Pan's father, "the spectacled merchant" who "kept an Oriental Bazaar on Dupont Street"

people of the city would come together in a kind of local patriotism, which would then help the city compete with other large Western cities (59). However, Chinatown remained isolated.

(80). The scene's setting, the well-known Dupont Street,¹¹ was in itself a spectacle constructed by external powers. After the 1906 earthquake, in an effort to draw in tourists and sanitize Chinatown's "unsavoriness" (Sui Sin Far 80), white architects altered Dupont Street considerably, and this alteration was not an isolated incident, but part of a larger trend. A common historical belief about Chinatowns is that they reflected "authentic" Chineseness, that they were "pure" manifestations of Chinese culture within the American city. But, in actuality, Dupont Street, renamed Grant Street after the 1906 earthquake, serves as the main tourist attraction of all of Chinatown. This street in particular was designed with white tourists in mind, a kind of spectacular American reimagining of China forced onto Chinatown's residents (Tsui 22).

The practice of reconstructing spaces for tourists was no secret to early twentieth-century Americans. A 1908 New York Times article, "San Francisco's New Chinatown," finds the post-quake Chinatown picturesque and sanitary, its "oriental aspects" carefully preserved for business (tourism) reasons ("San Francisco's New Chinatown" 6). Buildings of this supposed "Orient in the Occident" (7), particularly those on Dupont St, were constructed in an architectural style¹² characterized by a combination of Edwardian architecture and elements that mimicked Chinese

¹¹ The city of San Francisco renamed Dupont Street "Grant Street," but the Chinese continued to refer to it by its former name.

¹² This architectural style grew out of the larger *Chinoiserie* revival. *Chinoiserie* refers to European art, décor, and architecture that are characterized by imagery of an imagined version of China. This style experienced a revival in early twentieth-century America (Impey 10).

architecture, namely lattice work, curved balconies, and curved eaves (155).¹³ While this new creation was neither Chinese nor American, neither Eastern nor Western, sites like the Sing Fat Co. building and the Sing Chong Co. Chinese bazaar effectively molded what was a ghetto into a space that *seemed* authentically Chinese to white Americans (Tsui 22). Moreover, individual buildings, like the larger place, were constructed to communicate and contain Chineseness. This is further evidence of the way that “Chineseness” was ascribed to Chinatown as a whole, but was also built into the structures that housed businesses and residences, more intimate spaces people would negotiate daily.

As we have seen, Chinatown’s distinct architecture, as well as elements like its colored lanterns, makes it look different, to Carson, from the rest of San Francisco. In Butlerian terms, he recognizes Chinatown’s codes, its cultural mores, as strong and as distinct from those of the white city. It was, thanks to white architects’ and tourists’ thirst for “an Orient in the Occident,” easily recognizable as “Chinese.” Fittingly, the diverse residents of this Chinese place became, by virtue of their location, “Chinese.” In other words, the material and cultural forces discussed above corralled Chinatown’s residents into a specific, easily recognizable identity. They become racially legible, which made controlling this population more convenient for administrators and law enforcement, and made labeling and thus recognizing this population easier for white San Franciscans like Mark Carson (Scott 3).

Butler’s discussion of legibility is pertinent here, insofar as ambiguity leads to illegibility. In other words, one who is racially ambiguous is indecipherable to those around her. In *Seeing*

¹³ Marina McDougall and Hope Mitnick think of this hybrid architecture style as a “prop,” that comes out of city planners’ “theme-park thinking,” a practice that thematizes the landscape to attract tourists (154).

Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed, James C. Scott examines the state's role in arranging populations to encourage racial legibility. He contends that groups like Chinese immigrants, who do not settle in one distinct area, have always been an annoyance to states (1). Ultimately, the process of making a society legible calls for social engineering on a large scale (5), social engineering we can see at work in San Francisco during the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries. Chinatown, as it appears in in "Its Wavering Image" is a result of this process. Chinatown sedentarized this population and made them legible to the state. Moreover, the restricted position of the Chinese within this space meant that they were compelled into a single, homogenous racial category.

Chinatown's Pan and Hybridity

Through Carson's outsider perspective, readers experience the racializing forces of Chinatown, but Pan's character allows Sui Sin Far to theorize racial hybridity as it functions within this constrained, racialized space. Her position and fixedness in place traps her into a single, fixed racial identity, and Sui Sin Far emphasizes Chinatown's salience further through descriptions of Pan. Pan's identity seems reliant on her location; in the text, she conceives of her identity in spatial terms. She identifies as Chinese because "those *around* [italics added] her" (85) are Chinese. Sui Sin Far describes Pan's racial identity in spatial terms an additional two times. Pan "always turn[s] away from whites" (81) when she meets them. And, furthermore, when Pan comes across white people, she feels "strange and constrained, shrinking from their curious scrutiny as she would from the sharp edge of a sword" (81). Here, Pan shrinks away

from white people; she separates herself from them, and, although she feels “constrained,” aligns herself with Chineseness.

This response to race appears later in the story, too, when Pan reacts physically to the racialized boundaries of Chinatown. As noted earlier, Mark Carson, as an outsider, perceives the metaphorical walls that surround Chinatown and Chineseness. After Carson’s betrayal, Pan also begins to perceive and react to the walls of Chinatown. First, Pan “stumble[s] up the stairs which led to the high room open to the stars” (84). The language here suggests that Chinatown’s built landscape contains Pan. Again, this line evokes the idea of a ghetto with walls so high that Pan must climb upwards to see the stars. Furthermore, as with Carson, the landscape appears to control Pan’s body; she must maneuver around it, but it still manages to trip her, to immobilize her. Butler emphasizes the existence of “rigid codes of hierarchical binarisms” (Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 185), and the literal walls of Chinatown represent these metaphorical codes, codes that uphold spatial and racial binaries; they separate white and Chinese spaces and differently racialized bodies.

Although Sui Sin Far’s conceptualization of race includes the physical body, it is important to note that it does not rely on biological determinism. “‘Its Wavering Image’” reorients understandings about inherent race, positioning Chinatown as the cultural force that molds Pan. When Pan’s biological mother dies, Chinatown replaces her, acting as a metaphorical mother with whom she begins to identify: she “had lived in Chinatown [all her life], and if she were different in any sense from those around her [including her father], she gave little thought to it” (Sui Sin Far 85). In other words, Pan does not unknowingly inherit racial traits from her biological mother; rather, Chinatown (covertly) constructs Pan’s identity. From Chinatown, Pan

unconsciously absorbs certain cultural traits associated with her supposed biological race; she deciphers, embodies, and performs the codes – what Butler would refer to as the “sanctions, taboos, and prescriptions” (28) – she “inherits” from Chinatown. Ultimately, Pan’s racial hybridity, the fact that her mother was a white woman and her father a Chinese man, has little to do with the race she embodies.

If Chinatown functions as a metaphor for Pan’s mother, “those around her” are her metaphorical relatives. As one is wont to feel when around family, when Pan spends time with the residents of Chinatown, she feels “natural and at home” (Sui Sin Far 81). Upon first glance, “natural” once again signifies notions of the “essential” or “biological,” but within the context of the entire story and its emphasis on place and culture, it becomes clear that Pan’s identity relies on her context and not her racial hybridity. For instance, Pan calls Carson’s audience, white San Franciscans, the “uncomprehending foreigner” (84); technically Pan is half-white, like these supposed “foreigners,” but because they live in a separate space with different cultural norms, Pan cannot identify with them. These metaphors of the family further allow Sui Sin Far to revise understandings of racialization as a cultural process rather than a biological one.

Within this cultural process, Carson functions as a kind of enforcer, subtly policing and reifying Pan’s Chineseness. Encouraged by the separate spaces of San Francisco, Carson only understands race in binary terms, and thus he does not know what to make of Pan’s hybridity. Because, physically, Pan appears to be something other than Chinese, Carson wonders “what [is] she? Chinese or white?” (81). Even after he learns from his editor that Pan is biracial, he cannot accept it. Although Carson continues to insist that she choose one race, Pan rarely wavers in her racial identity. Vanessa Holford Diana argues that Sui Sin Far’s treatment of biracial characters

leads “to the deconstruction of the binary system upon which Orientalism is based” (86), but here Sui Sin Far’s depiction of racial hybridity becomes more complex. She simultaneously condemns and recognizes the white/Chinese binary system, emphasizing the import of an unambiguous racial affinity. Judith Butler remarks on this type of ambiguity in her gender theory, arguing: “it is not possible to exist in a socially meaningful sense outside of established gender norms. To fall from established gender boundaries...is in some sense to put one’s very existence into question” (27).

This existential dilemma, Butler argues, further stresses the “necessity that there be an interpretation” (27), a mode of reading another’s identity. Ultimately, Pan gains a stable race in Mark Carson’s eyes because he forces an interpretation onto her. He classifies her “white,” insisting that she does not belong in Chinatown or among her family, who “do not understand [her]” (82). But his questioning of her race, his insistence that she is “white... [and] has no right to be [in Chinatown]” (82) has only strengthened Pan’s Chinese racial identity. She replies to his accusations with affirmations of her Chineseness. First, she defends her home space: “perhaps it isn’t very beautiful... but it is here I live. It is my home” (82). She speaks of her father, emphasizing that she “would rather have a Chinese for a father than a white man” (82). And in response to Carson’s beliefs about her race, she tells him, repeatedly, to stop, first commanding “No! no!” and later “do not speak in that way anymore,” and finally, “Hush! Hush!... I do not love you when you talk to me like that” (82-3).

Not only does Pan defend her Chineseness in reaction to Mark Carson’s confusion, his inability to read her pushes her to overcompensate and *consciously* perform the kind of Chineseness he has come to expect. This is to say, she goes beyond racial performativity and into

an agential performance of race. As if working to prove the Chineseness of the space and herself, Pan leads Carson around Chinatown, taking him to Chinese-only spaces like the Water Lily Club. She becomes proud of her Chineseness, her Chinese father and the residents of the Chinatown, who “look upon [her] as their own” (82). Further into Chinatown Pan and Carson venture, and she “initiat[es] him into the simple mystery and history of many things, for which she, being of her father’s race, had a tender regard and pride” (Sui Sin Far 81). This line signifies Orientalist discourses – those that cast the East as mysterious and Easterners as essentially different from Westerners at the core – and indicates that Pan has internalized these Orientalist notions. Pan’s conscious over-performance of Chineseness allows her to innovate her racial performance; she rearranges received racial norms in a way that makes her performance distinct and idiosyncratic¹⁴ (38). Pan remains trapped in her Chinese racial identity, and her only choice, her only small amount of agency in the story lies with the small ways she alters her already existing racial identity.

Carson, though, serves to reify Pan’s Chineseness in another way, too: through repetition. In addition to Carson’s confusion, his continuous insistence that Pan is “white” pushes her further into conscious Chineseness. She reacts to his gaze and the label he attempts to force on her, and she, again and again, chooses Chineseness. This repetitive back and forth between Pan and Carson starts early on. First, Carson wonders whether Pan is Chinese or white. Pan insists that she would prefer a Chinese father to a white one. Carson retaliates by insisting that Pan is

¹⁴ According to Butler, “the choice to assume a certain kind of body, to live or wear one’s body a certain way, implies a world of already established corporeal styles” (26). Within this already established world, the only choice one has is to “interpret received gender norms (‘sanctions, taboos, and prescriptions’) in a way that reproduces and organizes them anew” (26).

white rather than Chinese, and again, Pan insists that she is Chinese, not white. Later, Carson insists that Pan choose a racial identity: “Chinese or white?” (83). In the final scene, Carson asks Pan why she wears a Chinese dress, and she replies “Because I am a Chinese woman” (85). Carson replies, repetitively insisting that she is “a white woman--white” (85). And, once again, Pan denies her whiteness and affirms her Chineseness.

In terms of complexity, Pan’s choice, we know, extends past the simple decision to *be* Chinese; rather, she must perform Chineseness in her own idiosyncratic way. Pan was racialized before she met Carson, and his role has been to denaturalize her Chineseness, to emphasize its constructedness, but also, paradoxically, to fortify it. Rosemarie Garland Thomson’s piece, “Dares to Stares,” is useful in understanding the ways that Carson’s stare and repeated labeling of Pan as “white” concretizes her Chineseness in her own mind. Thomson calls on the ancient story of Medusa, whose gaze turned men to stone, to explain the potency of staring in the Western imaginary. Carson’s labeling of Pan echoes the modes of staring Thomson discusses: The gaze “is a potent social choreography that marks bodies” (32), Thomson explains, and this labeling often makes the object of the gaze and label defensive. In some situations, like the exchanges we see between Pan and Carson, the person being labeled fights back; Pan, in the case of “Its Wavering Image,” “claims empowerment [and] agency” (Thomson 35), and chooses a position contrary to Carson’s, “insist[ing] upon her own self-definition” (Thomson 37). Thus, like Medusa’s, Carson’s stare has solidified Pan’s conscious performance of Chineseness. This solidness appears in the last sentence of the story, when Sui Sin Far refers to Pan as “*being* [italics added] a Chinese woman” (86). The present participle of “to be” implies not only that Pan *is* Chinese, that she embodies Chineseness, but that she is also always “being” Chinese.

“Being” Chinese is not exclusively a passive state, but rather, it is also a state of action and a result of Pan’s (albeit limited) agency.

Sui Sin Far’s Counternarrative

In the 19th and 20th centuries, the dominant narrative about America, sold by media like the newspaper for which Mark Carson works, imagined it as “the land of opportunity,” a place of respite for tired immigrants, a place of acceptance and freedom. For instance, “Immigrants Made Happy,” A *New York Times* article from November 30, 1894, paints a patriotic picture of three hundred and fifty “happy immigrants” consuming their first Thanksgiving dinner at Ellis Island (“Immigrants Made Happy” 10). Similarly, in his *New York Times* published poem, “The Melting Pot,” William Wallace Whitecock describes seeing immigrants flow into New York thusly: “I seemed to stand upon a pinnacle / And at my feet the nations of the earth / Filed on... / To enter here, the longed for promised land” (1-4). The poem continues in a similar vein and ends with this appropriately patriotic sentiment: “Gee whiz! I’m glad that I’m American!” (27). But in “Its Wavering Image,” Sui Sin Far writes a counternarrative to this story. The world of “Its Wavering Image” contrasts starkly with the version of America these examples -- and many other works of popular immigrant fiction -- imagine. Further, the work itself implicitly counters the narrative the newspaper man, Carson, writes about the population in Chinatown. “Its Wavering Image” provides a perspective that contrasts the sensationalist, Othering journalism that pervaded the time (Jirousek 25-26).

Sui Sin Far writes about a country riddled with racism and xenophobia. She takes dominant conceptions of race and expands them, drawing attention to the borders between

worlds and the borders between races. And while she acknowledges that these borders are drawn arbitrarily, she nonetheless parses out the ways they work to control perceptions and understandings of race and identity. Through “Its Wavering Image,” Sui Sin Far questions the very possibility of a multicultural society decades before the term even comes into use. The story reveals a minority population that, instead of mingling with the dominant population, must live apart. The popular image of the United States as a melting pot suggests that disparate cultures come together to meld into a composite, a colorful, stronger culture: American culture. But Sui Sin Far undermines this metaphor, writing of Chinese and white populations whose differences seemed to divide to city, and thus, themselves.

To date, critics have interpreted Sui Sin Far’s portrayal of race in ways that focus on her efforts to bring Chinese populations to the forefront, giving them a voice, and creating a hegemony for Chinese North Americans. However, in “Its Wavering Image” Sui Sin Far advocates for biracial people who found themselves struggling to fit into any group at all. Race, Sui Sin Far shows, could not mingle in one city, San Francisco, at this time, but she also suggests that it could not coexist within one *body*. “Its Wavering Image” allows Sui Sin Far to highlight the ways that a concrete racial identity – even a Chinese racial identity in the early twentieth century – was, in fact, a privilege in itself. Thus, in order to investigate Sui Sin Far’s writing thoroughly, we must read her as a keen and ambitious cultural critic. In *one* quite brief piece of fiction, “Its Wavering Image,” Sui Sin Far manages to undermine the notion that race is either stable or essential and to problematize a system in which people *must* fit at one end of the binary or the other.

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