Sui Sin Far: True ‘Westerner’?

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Abstract

Sui Sin Far, best known for her short story collection Mrs. Spring Fragrance and Other Stories (1912), crossed numerous racial and geographic boundaries in her lifetime. Born in England in 1865 to a British father and a Chinese mother, Far lived most of her life in Canada and the United States; she is now commonly regarded as the first major “Chinese American” author. To earn enough money to support herself, Sui Sin Far learned to expertly navigate numerous non-geographical boundaries, including various newspaper and magazine editors’ and readers’ expectations of what constituted “Chinese” and “American” character and culture. In the paper I propose presenting at the SSAWW conference in Bordeaux, I will focus on one of those sites of negotiation: the pages of The Westerner magazine, published in the Seattle area during the first years of the twentieth century. Between 1904 and 1909, Westerner editor Edgar Hampton published a total of seven short stories, one travel narrative, one lengthy non-fiction article, and one letter to the editor by Sui Sin Far, a number of which have never been known to – or written about by – scholars (although Mary Chapman’s archival work, paralleling my own, will likely soon change this situation). In the paper I would like to present to SSAWW, I will not only examine how the texts of the works she published in The Westerner negotiated the expectations this periodical’s readers likely had of “Chinese” people’s “difference,” but also how various other materials in the magazine indicate Sui Sin Far’s acceptance as a true “Westerner.” I will argue that unlike the way she and her works were treated as othered “curios” in most other American periodicals, The Westerner’s editor and readers treated Sui Sin Far and the people she represented much more respectfully, as part of a new, more culturally heterogeneous West.