

Chapter Four

PASSING: CROSSING COLOR LINES IN THE SHORT FICTION OF ALICE DUNBAR-NELSON AND SUI SIN FAR

THIS CHAPTER CONSIDERS how two early multiracial authors in North America, Alice Dunbar-Nelson (1875–1935) and Sui Sin Far (1865–1914), transform the archetype (or stereotype) of the “tragic mulatta.” First formulated in 1933 by African American poet and literary critic Sterling A. Brown,¹ the term “tragic mulatta” refers to a limiting set of representations for mixed-race characters that was pervasive throughout nineteenth-century American literature and sentimental romance, typically taking the form of a multiracial woman who lives as white (deliberately or ambiguously) and garners sympathy from the audience before her story comes to a tragic end. The issue of racial passing was a fraught and complex one in real life for multiracial individuals in the late nineteenth century through the turn of the twentieth, as Allyson Hobbs reveals in African American communities and Emma Jinhua Teng in a transnational “Eurasian” Asia-Pacific diaspora context,² and literary scholars have developed richly nuanced approaches for understanding stories of passing in sentimental romance traditions.³

In a contemporary Asian American literary context, Jennifer Ann Ho observes how “mixed race bodies ... create mobile subjectivities for their narrators” as a story passes “through genre, through identities, through countries—crossing multiple borders of form and content to create a passing story.”⁴ Ho’s idea of the “theme of passing as a continually evolving strategy for dislocating one’s racial and ethnic identity”⁵ is evident in early passing stories as well. My discussion of “local color” sketches composed in the early careers of Dunbar-Nelson and Sui Sin Far traces how imagery of the Virgin Mary and Joan of Arc are associated with racial and gendered ambiguity and complex acts of passing and transformation. These feminine figures, deeply ingrained in the medievalism of the era, foreground nuanced traversals of language, race, gender, and sexuality.

1 Brown, “Negro Character by White Authors,” 192–96.

2 Hobbs, *A Chosen Exile*; Teng, *Eurasian*.

3 Palumbo-DeSimone, “Race, Womanhood, and Tragic Mulatta”; Raimon, “*Tragic Mulatta*” *Revisited*.

4 Ho, *Racial Ambiguity*, 97. See also Skyhorse and Page, eds., *We Wear the Mask*.

5 *Ibid.*

Alice Dunbar-Nelson: Creolization and Francophone Medievalisms

Alice Dunbar-Nelson (1875–1935), author, journalist, and political activist, was the first woman of color to publish short stories, first in her collection of poems and short stories, *Violets and Other Tales* (1895), and then in *The Goodness of Saint Rocque, and Other Stories* (1899). Dunbar-Nelson's "local color" sketches (this term "local color" also devised by Sterling A. Brown)⁶ explore nuances of life in and around New Orleans, and her narratives that ambiguously mark characters' racial identities and use careful representations of speech (including varieties of English and French) offer subtle indications of a person's class, race, and ethnicity. Understanding these "local color" sketches requires an appreciation for the complexities of black Creole identity in late nineteenth-century Louisiana, including local understandings of creolization and francophone Catholic traditions.

Louisiana, and New Orleans in particular, is often described as the northernmost point in the Caribbean, and it is in the context of French colonialism in the Caribbean that creolization and the local historical meanings of "Creole" and "people of color" are situated. In a much-cited food metaphor in her two-part essay "People of Color in Louisiana" (1916), Dunbar-Nelson states that a "person of color" in Louisiana would feel that "a Creole is a native of Louisiana," and the "mixed strains" of Creole identity include an "African strain slightly apparent" with the "true Creole" being much "like the famous gumbo of the state, a little bit of everything, making a whole, delightfully flavored, quite distinctive, and wholly unique."⁷ Complicating and challenging a black/white racial binary predominant throughout the rest of the United States, free Creoles of color in Louisiana formed a vital third social grouping (in conjunction with black and white racial categories) with its own prestigious literary and cultural traditions and prominence in society.

The first poetic anthology of works by Americans of color was *Les Cenelles* [The Holly Berries] (1845), printed in New Orleans and composed in French by free black Creole men who dedicated the poems collectively "au beau sexe louisianais" (i.e., to the women of color of Louisiana).⁸ Although these poems by men addressed to women might appear to be conventional love poems in form and style, there were unmistakably political dimensions to their use of discourses of love and devotion that were associated with French romanticism.⁹ Most noticeably, Creoles of color in Louisiana aligned their sociopolitical interests with those of formerly enslaved black people in Haiti who had won the nation's independence from France in 1804, and Creoles of color in Louisiana proudly exhibited a mixed cultural and racial heritage. As Floyd D. Cheung has shown, the authors of *Les Cenelles* and Creoles of color aligned their values with Catholicism,¹⁰ and Shirley Elizabeth Thompson observes that "the francophone black Atlantic" with its

6 Brown, "Negro Character by White Authors," 196–97.

7 Dunbar-Nelson, "People of Color in Louisiana: Part 1," 367.

8 Lanusse, *Les Cenelles*, reprinted by Coleman, ed., *Creole Voices*, xli.

9 Barnard, "Les Cenelles."

10 Cheung, "Les Cenelles and Quadroon Balls," 11.

“meeting of Catholicism and African religious practices” created an “elastic ritual space” of spiritual practices that could “incorporate political and social critique and vice versa.”¹¹

Attending to the francophone and Caribbean contexts for Catholic identity reveals how profoundly race, religion, and language intertwine. Throughout other parts of the United States, the anglophone category of WASP (“White Anglo-Saxon Protestant”), which Matthew X. Vernon observes “most insidiously” relies on a racialized understanding of the term “Anglo-Saxon” to mark “wealth, privilege, and whiteness,”¹² intertwines the social phenomena of language, religion, and race to construct a classed term strongly aligned with white supremacy and a Christian, i.e., Protestant, identity. Catholic identities and Catholic medievalisms throughout North America were not homogeneous. As discussed in this book’s previous chapters, anti-Chinese violence incited by predominantly Irish American and Catholic brotherhoods mobilized medievalizing imagery and discourse to reinforce white supremacy and racism, including Denis Kearney’s “The Chinese Must Go!” rhetoric in San Francisco and Catholic “rat libel” propaganda in New York’s Chinatown.

Dunbar-Nelson’s “local color” sketches reveal how place informs the lives of free people of color, and her early stories often rely on subtly encoded local cues to signal the sociocultural milieu of a setting. I concentrate on three prose narratives whose female protagonists are ambiguously racialized, usually by references to dark hair or eyes but also through vague references to color. As Thompson states, Dunbar-Nelson “only subtly hints at the African blood of her characters”¹³ in her portrayals of “the hopes and dreams of the mixed-race Creole woman.”¹⁴ The indeterminacy of the term “Creole,” which from the perspective of black Louisianans could include white Creoles as well as Creoles of color, allows Dunbar-Nelson’s characters to be ambiguously “read” by an audience as white, black, or mixed. These stories, thick with Marian allusions and coded references to distant and unattainable whiteness, carry a particular significance once their central female characters are recognized as Creoles of color.

“Little Miss Sophie” tells a story drawing upon the “tragic mulatta” archetype, and Thompson has observed that “Creole of color women characters” of this kind serve to “delimit hard and fast racial and moral categories,” becoming “tragic because they are trapped between them.”¹⁵ Sophie, “poor little Creole old maid,”¹⁶ is a seamstress in Third District of New Orleans, and what seems to be a “slice of life” narrative changes course once Sophie overhears two men talking about the wealthy white man Neale who had abandoned his “little Creole love-affair” with a “dusky-eyed fiancée”¹⁷ to marry a white woman. The text reveals that Neale had promised to marry Sophie (an arrange-

11 Thompson, *Exiles at Home*, 96.

12 Vernon, *Black Middle Ages*, 55.

13 Thompson, *Exiles at Home*, 177.

14 Ibid., 178.

15 Ibid., 173.

16 Dunbar-Nelson, *Goodness of St. Rocque*, 140.

17 Ibid., 145.

ment which would have been to her socioeconomic advantage), but he now needs back the ring he had previously given her in order to support his claim to a new inheritance. The subtext underlying Sophie's predicament is the local *plaçage* system, where a free woman of color could find romance and economic support with a wealthy white man (until he should choose to marry a white woman), and Cheung has explored the moral misgivings that Creoles of color expressed in response to this practice.¹⁸ Throughout this story, Marian imagery not only associates the poor Sophie with tragic innocence and feminine beauty but also sets her against a vision of idealized whiteness; Sophie's worship of the Virgin introduces themes of suffering and sacrifice that set up a bittersweet irony when the story ends on Christmas day.

Medieval imagery pervades Sophie's story. When it opens, music is "dying away in distant echoes through the great arches of the silent church" as Sophie walks alone, "crouching in a little, forsaken black heap at the altar of the Virgin," and the "beneficent smile of the white-robed Madonna" elsewhere represented as a "calm white Virgin," initially "seemed to whisper comfort."¹⁹ When Sophie enters a church and witnesses a wedding, the space is expressly described in medievalizing terms: "There it was, right in the busiest, most bustling part of the town, its fresco and bronze and iron quaintly suggestive of mediaeval times," and everything was "cool and dim and restful" inside "with the faintest whiff of lingering incense rising," with "the sweet, white-robed Virgin at the pretty flower-decked altar," as well as another statue of the Virgin "away up in the niche, far above the golden dome where the Host was."²⁰ This discourse of love and devotion to the Virgin shifts after the critical revelation of the story, when Sophie resolves to return the ring to her former fiancé:

[O]nce you were his, and you shall be his again. You shall be on his finger, and perhaps touch his heart. Dear ring, ma chère petite de ma coeur, chérie de ma coeur. Je t'aime, je t'aime, oui, oui. You are his; you were mine once too. Tonight, just one night, I'll keep you—then—tomorrow, you shall go where you can save him.²¹

In this attentive display of code-switching (moving between English and French), the language of love addresses the ring as proxy for the former lover, and the language mixing reflects the other forms of cultural and racial mixing that shape Creole identities in Louisiana. This story ends with the ring described by the omniscient narrator in English as "clasped between her fingers on her bosom,—a bosom white and cold, under a cold happy face."²² Throughout this story, the Virgin is repeatedly portrayed as distant, "white-robed," "white," and "calm"—and Sophie's pitiful death against the backdrop of Marian imagery implicates the church and legal institutions as "cold" and "silent," complicit in upholding idealizations of white supremacy and demanding sacrifices from

¹⁸ Cheung, "Les Cenelles and Quadroon Balls," 8.

¹⁹ Dunbar-Nelson, *Goodness of St. Rocque*, 137.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 147.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 150–51.

²² *Ibid.*, 152.

women of color. Sophie in the story's conclusion is "white and cold," ironically becoming white only in the pallor of death.²³

"Sister Josepha" is divergently rich in its medieval imagery and a nuanced play of linguistic registers through spoken dialogue. In this story, the woman known as Sister Josepha had started out an orphaned Creole infant named Camille, who has "big black eyes"²⁴ and "small brown hands."²⁵ After being taken into the convent she grows into a beautiful woman, but she flees the white man who would be her prospective adoptive father: "she could not divine the meaning of the pronounced leers and admiration of her physical charms which gleamed in the man's face," but "she knew it made her feel creepy" and she "refused to go" back to the household.²⁶ She takes refuge in the convent, but even Father Ray objectifies her, "linger[ing] longer in his blessing when his hands pressed her silky black hair."²⁷ With no family and "no nationality"²⁸ and no future prospects, she has no option but to shut herself into the convent.

The narrator uses Marian imagery to eroticize architectural and environmental space when she is in church. Although Sister Josepha looks at "her worn rosary" and "glanced no more at the worldly glitter of femininity," the "golden magnificence of the domed altar with its weighting mass of lilies and wide-eyed roses" infuses the space.²⁹ "Her heart beat quickly" and "rebellious thoughts ... surged in her small heavy gowned bosom"³⁰ when she exchanges glances in church with a boy with "waves of brown hair" and "pitying brown eyes" and she "briefly" falls in love.³¹ Erotically-charged Marian imagery renders all the more vivid the tragedy of her foreclosed life path, and in a "flash" she experiences "the cruel self-torture of wonder at her own identity ... asking herself, 'Who am I? What am I?'"³² The language of martyrdom and suffering or "cruel self-torture" forms the crux of her fraught identity.

The narrative ends with a return to prayer, rendered in three languages: "'Confiteor Deo omnipotenti,' [i.e., I confess to almighty God] murmured the priest" in Latin, and "tremblingly one little sister followed the words" in French saying: "Je confesse à Dieu, tout puissant—que j'ai beaucoup péché par pensées—c'est ma faute—c'est ma faute—c'est ma très grande faute" [I confess to God almighty that I have sinned greatly—it's

23 In an analysis of race and modern American visual culture, Ruby C. Tapia examines the "framing of whiteness as it is produced and reproduced in racialized images of the maternal," including in some cases Marian imagery, and she describes how maternal visual motifs that can be used in forms of "white self-making" that rely upon the "negation of the full humanity" of people of color and contribute to the production of their "social death." Tapia, *American Pietàs*, 21.

24 Dunbar-Nelson, *Goodness of St. Rocque*, 164.

25 *Ibid.*, 156.

26 *Ibid.*, 159.

27 *Ibid.*, 160.

28 *Ibid.*, 170.

29 *Ibid.*, 165.

30 *Ibid.*, 164.

31 *Ibid.*, 167.

32 *Ibid.*, 171.



Figure 9: Brown-eyed and brown-haired Joan of Arc in the Cathédrale Saint-Louis, Roi-de-France or St. Louis Cathedral (largely in its current form since 1850) in the French Quarter of New Orleans, Louisiana. Standing figure donated by the Sodalité de Sainte Jeanne d'Arc in 1920. October 2018. Photo by the author.

my fault, it's my fault, it's my most grievous fault].³³ The author's triglossia stratifies language within the space of the church: an omniscient English narration framing the action, a ritual utterance of the priest in Latin, and an internal expression of emotional "self-torture" or self-blame in French. This literary layering of three languages shows how social scripts and power structures constrain the life paths available to Josepha within a patriarchal and racially stratified society.

In these "tragic mulatta" stories, imagery associated with the Virgin Mary implicates institutionalized religion as a social and legal mechanism of control that is complicit in victimizing mixed-race women, but some of these texts invert Marian tropes by means of happy outcomes. "La Juanita" opens with the exotic beauty of a woman of mixed ancestry who revises the tragic archetype: "La Juanita, you must know, was the pride of Mandeville, the adored, the admired of all, with her petite, half-Spanish, half-French beauty" and "black curls."³⁴ The family patriarch Grandpère Colomés wants to preserve this family's mixed Creole identity and keep it "aloof" from white anglophone Americans, but Captain Mercer Grangeman, "this pale-eyed youth"³⁵ who is "big and blond and brawny,"³⁶ gains La Juanita's affections. Mercer names his boat "La Juanita," and during a boat race Grandpère Colomés "prayed a devout prayer to the Virgin that 'La Juanita' should be capsized."³⁷

This prayer to the Virgin Mary goes unheeded, as Mercer proves himself valiant by braving the ensuing tempest on Lake Pontchartrain: "La Juanita was proud," and when her elders lead her "away in the storm, though her face was white, and the rose mouth pressed close," she stays silent "and her eyes were as bright as ever before."³⁸ Mercer lands safely "surrounded by a voluble, chattering, anxious throng that loaded him with questions in patois, in broken English, and in French" and Mercer was "no longer 'un Américain' now, he was a hero."³⁹ Grandpère Colomés admits "some time dose Americain can mos' be lak one Frenchman."⁴⁰ Fusing Marian imagery with Petrarchan conceits of love as a tempest, the family patriarch's "devout prayer to the Virgin" to *sink* a ship at sea (rather than a maiden's prayer to *save* a mariner from danger) inverts gendered conventions of medieval romance traditions, and forbidden love results in a happy mixed marriage.

Although Dunbar-Nelson uses medieval imagery as the atmospheric backdrop for tragic stories or objectified maidens, some of her medievalism recuperates the potential for an empowered womanhood through imagery associated with Joan of Arc. The young martyr-saint "Maid of Orleans" Jeanne d'Arc who adopted masculine arms and armor

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid., 197.

35 Ibid., 200.

36 Ibid., 198.

37 Ibid., 200.

38 Ibid., 205.

39 Ibid., 207.

40 Ibid., 208.

to lead French troops to victory against the English during the fifteenth century now enjoys prominence throughout Nouvelle-Orléans (New Orleans) in public sculpture and its divergently medievalizing church architecture,⁴¹ and her role as a crusader fighting a just struggle was not lost on Creoles of color in the late nineteenth century. A poem by Creole of color poet Victor-Ernest Rillieux entitled “Amour et Dévouement” [Love and Devotion] is overtly politicized and dedicated to “Miss Ida B. Wells,” African American anti-lynching crusader who is addressed as “vierge au teint brun, au pays du Sauvage” [brown-skinned virgin in the land of the savage]⁴² and compared to both “Judith et Jeanne d’Arc,” i.e., the biblical Judith who beheaded a tyrant and sexual predator, and the medieval maiden and martyr Joan of Arc.⁴³ The phrase “pays du Sauvage” names the brutality of antiblack racism and white supremacy in the United States, redirecting the “savage” and “heathen” epithets to the white Americans who have used such derogatory terms to describe Africa or Asia, and the English phrase “le White Cap” (referring to the notorious white hoods of the Klu Klux Klan) disruptively code-switches from the French.⁴⁴

One of the works in Dunbar-Nelson’s *Violets* is “The Maiden’s Dream,” an enigmatic reverie on romance and desire, interspersed with verses, with medieval intertexts that thematize tragic love. “The maid had been reading love-poetry, where the world lay bathed in moon-light, fragrant with dew-wet roses and jasmine,” with her thoughts “more caressing than the overshadowing wing of a mother-dove.”⁴⁵ The text refers to Dante Alighieri, the “stern, dark, exiled Florentine poet, with that one silver ray in his clouded life—Beatrice,”⁴⁶ and an allusion to the doomed lovers Antony and Cleopatra locates heroism in an explicitly racialized African woman: “Egypt herself, her splendid barbaric beauty acting like an inspiration upon the craven followers, leads on, foremost in this fierce struggle” before “the tide turns” and they are defeated.⁴⁷ Marian devotion (“mother-dove”) and erotic love coexist with religious iconography that casts an African woman as a figure of strength in a “fierce struggle,” even if this imagery is not given a clearly politicized meaning.

Joan of Arc would become more significant to Dunbar-Nelson after World War I, when she adopts the figure in line with contemporaneous imagery of the “new woman” associated with modernity, and the queerness of Joan of Arc evident at the turn of the twentieth century (which I discuss elsewhere in this book) would become prominent in the author’s later works. The erotic networks that would emerge among Dunbar-Nelson and contemporaneous African American women associated with the Harlem Renaissance are richly archived and documented in the research of Black feminist poet and

41 Vishnuvajjala and Barrington, “New Orleans’s Medievalisms.”

42 Coleman, ed., *Creole Voices*, 115–16.

43 Ibid., 117.

44 Ibid.

45 Dunbar-Nelson, *Violets*, 85.

46 Ibid., 90.

47 Ibid., 89.

literary historian Akasha Gloria Hull.⁴⁸ As far as francophone and activist contexts are concerned, Dunbar-Nelson writes a chapter “Negro Women in War Work” for a history on African Americans in the Great War, which elsewhere includes a story of Drum Major Sissle, a “man of color,” movingly singing a song about Joan of Arc “in English and then in excellent French,” honoring the “Maid of Orleans” who “liberate[d] the French at a time when their national existence hung in the balance.”⁴⁹ In a reading journal on April 29, 1923, Dunbar-Nelson records reading a book about Joan of Arc “with text subservient to beautiful illustrations” by French artist Bernard Boutet de Monvel,⁵⁰ and her conclusion to an essay “The Negro Woman and the Ballot” on socioeconomic freedom of African American women in 1927 states: “Perhaps some Joan of Arc will lead the way.”⁵¹

In Dunbar-Nelson’s earliest “local color” works set in Louisiana, it is not yet Joan of Arc but the imagery of Marian devotion and more conventional models of maidenhood that invite her most focused attention, in conjunction with her subversions of the “tragic mulatta” trope. The author’s early interests in linguistic creolization create vivid portrayals of local space and social environments, and the ambiguous racialization of characters in her “local color” sketches allows them to pass among perceived racial categories and enact subtly transformative deployments of medieval feminine imagery.

Yellow Medievalism: Sui Sin Far in Jamaica

Alice Dunbar-Nelson’s “local color” sketches and “tragic mulatta” stories bear fruitful comparison with the works by a contemporaneous biracial woman author, journalist, and poet: Sui Sin Far (1865–1914). Sui Sin Far was the most commonly known pen name of Edith Maude Eaton, who was born in England to a white English father and a Chinese mother (who had been adopted by white English missionaries); the author spent her childhood in Montreal before her family relocated to Jamaica. In 1898 between the publication of Dunbar-Nelson’s first two story collections, Sui Sin Far published a story “Away Down in Jamaica” featuring a tragic brown Clarissa on the Caribbean island. The white woman who frames the story is told the character’s backstory: “Clarissa is a brown girl, Missus. She was adopted when a little child by some rich white people. They brought her up like a lady, but some years ago she ran away from them.”⁵² The interlocu-

⁴⁸ Hull, *Color, Sex, and Poetry*; Hull, *Diary of Alice Dunbar-Nelson*. On medievalism and the Harlem Renaissance, see also Whitaker, “(B)lack in the Middle Ages”; Whitaker, *Harlem Middle Ages*; Chang, “Pastoral.”

⁴⁹ Scott, *American Negro in World War*, 309; this text includes Dunbar-Nelson’s Chapter XXVII, “Negro Women in War Work,” 374–97.

⁵⁰ Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Journal II, Record Book No. 3, MSS 113, University of Delaware Library, Newark, DE. Jesse Ryan Erickson, *Alice Dunbar-Nelson Reads*. <https://sites.udel.edu/alicerreads/journal-ii/1923-2/>.

⁵¹ Dunbar-Nelson, “Negro Woman and the Ballot.”

⁵² Sui Sin Far [Edith Eaton], “Away Down in Jamaica.” Chapman, ed., *Becoming Sui Sin Far*, 171–180, at 174.

tor responds: "Indeed! Quite a romantic history!" and the story ends with a quotation of verses from Harriet Beecher Stowe's abolitionist novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.⁵³

Sui Sin Far's sympathy for the "tragic mulatta" figure is most evident in a column published in Jamaica about the opening of a new theater in Kingston, and she remarks that the stage is "next to literature ... the most potent influence that is working in the modern world" and it "links us to the past" while it also "keeps us in close touch with all the great hopes, enthusiasms, and interests of the nineteenth century."⁵⁴ She is moved by a show about a "Vaudeville girl" that features a song about a mixed-race Caribbean woman, a "yellow girl [at] whom we decent people hurl / Anathemas, and jokes."⁵⁵ This song names the mixed-race woman as a spectacular figure targeted by both misogyny and racism, and the lyrics name the figure herself as a trope: "You are a poem, or a song— / A wicked one, they say— / A bit of colour thrown along / A drab old world and gray."⁵⁶ The term "yellow" in this context has its own ambiguity; it can refer to the pseudo-scientific racism of the day which uses "yellow" as a third term for mixed-race black people (Dunbar-Nelson herself uses "white and black and yellow" in a story about male racial passing that she published posthumously),⁵⁷ and Christine "Xine" Yao notes that "yellow" is simultaneously the "shade of Asian racialization triangulated between black and white."⁵⁸

In a later essay entitled "Leaves of the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian" (1909), Sui Sin Far would recount her refusal of the advances of a white English naval officer and her own act of identifying with the "brown people" of the world.⁵⁹ In her earlier account of a theatrical performance in Jamaica in 1897, Sui Sin Far's implicit sympathy for and identification with the "yellow girl" in the song signals the multivalent associations of "yellow" within a shared mixed-race diasporic Black and Asian context. The author's empathy for the "yellow" mixed-race woman enacts a form of what José Esteban Muñoz calls "disidentification," a politicized strategy by which queer people of color transform social perceptions of their own marginalized positionings through performances or cultural productions that are not typically "coded" as properly belonging to them.⁶⁰ In this earlier context in Jamaica, Sui Sin Far, a "yellow" biracial (white and Asian) author, finds a subtle way to signal disidentification with a "yellow" (or "brown," depending on context) mixed-race woman—even if such a woman does not precisely share her own racial or ethnic background. In this process, the author creates literary and theatrical space for new kinds of interracial "yellow" solidarity between women.

53 Ibid. See also 180.

54 Sui Sin Far [Fire Fly], "The Girl of the Period: The Theatre." Chapman, ed., *Becoming Sui Sin Far*, 119–21, at 119.

55 Ibid.

56 Ibid.

57 Dunbar-Nelson, "Stones of the Village," 5.

58 Yao, "Reading Sui Sin Far in Jamaica," 200.

59 Ibid., 199–200.

60 Muñoz, *Disidentifications*; also see this book's introduction.

By inviting audiences to consider the rich sociopolitical implications of the term “yellow,” Sui Sin Far’s medievalism (discussed in the previous chapter and below) could be considered a recuperative form of “yellow medievalism,” a social corrective to the era’s stigmatizing anti-Asian discourses of “Yellow Peril” and the sensationalist fearmongering “yellow journalism” associated with newspaper publisher William Randolph Hearst before and after the Spanish-American War of 1898.⁶¹ The ambiguously racialized “yellow girl” in the Jamaican theater names and subtly reworks the “tragic mulatta” archetype, allowing for what Yao has called “counterintimacies” between Black and Asian women. Sui Sin Far’s queer act of disidentification in the theater opens up a seemingly constraining trope of cultural representation.

Tricksters and Fictive Voicing

I end this chapter by addressing Sui Sin Far’s own “local color” sketches, including her early narratives and essays, and I attend to the author’s own flexible vernacularity and mobile acts of fictive voicing across genres (journalism, short fiction, and memoir). Sui Sin Far’s earlier works have been described as having the hints of the “trickster” hero not only associated with later Asian American traditions but also with medieval European beast-fables and African folklore.⁶² Sui Sin Far’s “local color” sketches located in Montreal, Jamaica, and across the US construct varied acts of racial passing while in transit. She implicitly passes as a white Englishwoman in Canada writing as “E. E.” (Edith Eaton) in order to speak against white anti-Chinese racism in “A Plea for the Chinaman” (1896),⁶³ but elsewhere she adopts a persona and literary voice of a Chinese man whose racial positioning shifts across North American locations and navigates varied spaces of solidarity among Jews, Japanese, and Chinese in New York’s Chinatown (as discussed in the previous chapter). In addition to her “white” and “Chinese” racial personas, the author also writes *in propria persona* as an “Eurasian” hybridizing complex positionings.

Sui Sin Far’s acts of racial and gender passing are most evident through her multiple pseudonyms. In some of her early pieces published as if they were journalistic travel sketches, she writes as a “Chinaman” named “Wing Sing” using a stylized and affected “accent” or pidgin English. In a description of travels from Los Angeles through Canada, “Wing Sing” includes an episode entitled “He Hears Habitant French” where the narrator reports hearing “very strange talk” in the railway car and the “Irishman he say ‘That is the French talk. We have plenty French people in Canada.’”⁶⁴ Another “Wing Sing” report from Montreal during Chinese New Year opens: “Gung Hee Sun Neen, Happy New Year,” and it describes a meeting with “Lee Chu, he Chinaman, but he all same Canadian man” who “wear fur coat and fur hat and he drink plenty beer” and is “interpreter in Montreal

61 On the long history of such “Yellow Peril” discourses, see Tchen and Yeats, *Yellow Peril!*

62 White-Parks, “Sui Sin Far as Trickster Authorship.”

63 Sui Sin Far [E. E.], “Plea for the Chinaman.”

64 Sui Sin Far [Wing Sing], “Wing Sing of Los Angeles on His Travels.” Chapman, ed., *Becoming Sui Sin Far*, 209–11, at 211.

court.”⁶⁵ Chu “[s]ometime he talk English, sometime he talk Chinese and sometime he talk the French talk,” and “[w]hen I go to bid him good-bye, he say ‘Au Revoir’” and he asks his cousin what that means and “my cousin he say, ‘I think he mean to tell you he know something you not know.’”⁶⁶ This play on what the “native informant” does and does not know sets up a clear winking pun on the author’s own pen name: “The Chinese lily, the Chinaman call the Sui Sin Far, it bloom in all the house of the Chinese at this time and its fragrance greet me like a friend.”⁶⁷

In her earlier work before the turn of the century published as “Fire Fly,” Sui Sin Far seemingly adopts the social positioning of the white English colonizer. Fire Fly’s “The Departure of the Royal Mail” (January 1897) describes “English voices mingled with the soft southern accents of the West Indians,” reminding her that “Jamaica is English” and the piece ends with a quotation from William Watson’s imperialist and colonial verse.⁶⁸ Fire Fly’s “Alpha Cottage” sketch (February 1897) describing the Convent of Mercy finds the “sunny institution” an appealing shelter.⁶⁹ She notes that “they welcomed me most courteously and kindly,”⁷⁰ and the “ideal school, located healthily and beautifully supplied” and “taught by gentle, refined ladies,” features paintings of former mothers and a “lady whose fresh youthful face beamed so happily upon me that for a moment I almost wished I myself were a member of her sisterhood.”⁷¹ The medieval atmosphere of the Convent of Mercy Chapel is so idyllic and charming that the narrator “almost” wishes herself “a member of [the] sisterhood,” and Sui Sin Far signals her fascination with, yet marked distance from, this community whose grounds she visits.

The notion of the Convent of Mercy as an “institution” providing safety for marginalized women invites fruitful comparisons with Dunbar-Nelson’s contemporaneous stories. According to the community’s own lore, the Convent of Mercy was first founded as Alpha Cottage School by Justina “Jesse” Ripoll, a Jamaican-born Creole of “mixed” black, Portuguese, and French ancestry, and one account of the Convent’s origins in May 1880 begins with her “holding the hand of a little orphan girl, walk[ing] up the path” to Alpha Cottage.⁷² As much as “Fire Fly” aligns herself with the white English colonizer class in Jamaica, she nonetheless comes close to identifying with the perspectival protagonists of Dunbar-Nelson’s contemporaneous fiction.

Sui Sin Far’s first and only collection of short stories, *Mrs. Spring Fragrance* (1912), engages both with medievalizing romance traditions as well as new configurations of

⁶⁵ Sui Sin Far [Wing Sing], “Wing Sing of Los Angeles on His Travels,” Chapman, ed., *Becoming Sui Sin Far*, 211–13, at 211–12.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 212.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 213.

⁶⁸ Sui Sin Far [Fire Fly], “Departure of Royal Mail,” Chapman, ed., *Becoming Sui Sin Far*, 116–18, at 118.

⁶⁹ Sui Sin Far [Fire Fly], “Girl of the Period,” Chapman, ed., *Becoming Sui Sin Far*, 121–25, at 122.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 123.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² Little, *You Did It Unto Me*, 2–3.

the “tragic mulatta” figure within a new set of “yellow” biracial (white and Chinese) contexts. The short story “Sweet Sin,” written in Montreal and published in 1898, is the author’s first narrative featuring a “Eurasian” (Chinese and white American) protagonist, and the narrative describes a woman similar to Dunbar-Nelson’s Sister Josepha whose identity crisis is a form of “self-torture.”⁷³ In Sui Sin Far’s story, the biracial protagonist named Sweet Sin kills herself because she cannot marry the Chinese man whom her father favors due to her love for a white American, but she cannot marry the white American either—and in Arthurian fashion her story ends with the image of her enclosed remains floating on the water while a posthumous letter reveals the tragic circumstances of her death.⁷⁴

The biracial woman’s identity conflict is expressed in terms of dueling selves: “My Chinese half is good and patient, like all the Chinese people we know,” but “my American half ... feels insulted for the Chinese half and wants to fight,” and “you don’t know what it is to be half one thing and half another,” and “I feel all torn to pieces,” and “I don’t know what I am, and I don’t seem to have any place in the world.”⁷⁵ What Dunbar-Nelson calls “the cruel self-torture of wonder at her own identity” in Sister Josepha, and here expressed by Sui Sin Far through Sweet Sin, is a medievalized form of the internal suffering and “double-consciousness” famously formulated in 1903 by African American sociologist and historian W. E. B. Du Bois: the “peculiar sensation ... of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others,” a “two-ness” of “two souls, two thoughts ... two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”⁷⁶ It is a theme that Sui Sin Far develops at length in her essay “Leaves of the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian” (1909) relating episodes in her life spanning childhood and young adulthood across England, Montreal, New York, and San Francisco’s Chinatown.⁷⁷

Although Sui Sin Far often aligned herself explicitly with her Chinese background (in her texts and in real life), her first-person “Eurasian” narrative—related in a perpetual present tense—reveals the shifting ways she was perceived across time and space, and her autoethnographic turn conjoins white heroism and Chinese victimhood in one body. The first encounter with racist violence transpires after the family enters the US. In New York, white children on the street find out she and her brother are Chinese and hurl insults: “Chinky, Chinky, Chinaman, yellow-face, pig-tail, rat-eater.”⁷⁸ The narrator proclaims that she (and by extension her brother) “would rather be Chinese than anything in the world,” and in an ensuing skirmish “the white blood in our veins fights valiantly

73 Sui Sin Far [Sui Seen Far], “Sweet Sin.” Chapman, ed., *Becoming Sui Sin Far*, 166–71.

74 On the medieval trope of the deathbed letter, see the story of “the lily maid” Elaine of Astolat (or Ascolat) in Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, bk. 18, chap. 20, 435; Tennyson, *Idylls of the King*, “Elaine,” 147–22, esp. 212–17.

75 Sui Sin Far [Sui Seen Far], “Sweet Sin.” Chapman, ed., *Becoming Sui Sin Far*, 168.

76 Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 3. On Du Bois and the Middle Ages, see Achi and Chaganti, “Medieval African Art”; Vernon, *Black Middle Ages*, 19–22 and 108–11; Whitaker, *Black Metaphors*, 125–29 and 144–52.

77 Sui Sin Far, “Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian,” in *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*, ed. Hsu, 221–33.

78 *Ibid.*, 222.



Figure 10: Sculpture of Joan of Arc standing next to the altar at the Basilique Notre-Dame de Montréal in Old Montreal, Québec, a masterpiece of Gothic Revival architecture. May 2018. Photo by the author.

for the Chinese half of us.”⁷⁹ Informing her proud mother afterwards that the siblings “won the battle,” the narrator awakes in the morning shouting lyrics to “Sound the battle cry” —a hymn laden with chivalric imagery.⁸⁰ Alluding to anti-Chinese violence through this tale of childhood harassment, Sui Sin Far uses medieval imagery to express a racialized dual identity. Internalizing “white savior” tropes of progressive missionary uplift, she imagines a chivalric white self who fights on behalf of another self that is vulnerable and Chinese.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 222–23. Sui Sin Far records the opening two lines of the hymn by William Sherman, “Sound the Battle Cry” (1869).

This episode with its imagery of Christ-like martyrdom and the cross evokes the “crossings” and burdens of mixed-race identity. Hsuan L. Hsu has argued that the “cross of the Eurasian” invokes both the “crucifix and the biological crossing of blood that marginalizes the author from both Chinese and white communities”⁸¹ in line with the themes of martyrdom that Min Hyoung Song finds pervading Sui Sin Far’s sentimental romances.⁸² Expanding the Du Bois style “conflict” in “Sweet Sin” from a decade earlier, the author claims and reframes the “tragic mulatta” or “yellow girl” motif in her own voice. Sui Sin Far’s biracial positioning allows her to mobilize the “tragic mulatta” motif and also embody a “white savior” archetype. In the form of a prophetic dream, the narrative reaches a hagiographical apotheosis in third-person voice. The author reads an article from a Chinese writer in New York stating: “The Chinese in America owe an everlasting debt of gratitude to Sui Sin Far for the bold stand she has taken in their defense.”⁸³ In her later work as a journalist and advocate, she would write movingly on behalf of immigrants in Chinatowns (Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle, Montreal).⁸⁴ Sui Sin Far would reroute what might otherwise become tropes of toxic chivalry, expressing through medieval intertexts a commitment to racial justice.

One of the most revealing medieval motifs in the “Eurasian” essay is Sui Sin Far’s invocation—and transformation—of Joan of Arc. The author declares that she loves “poetry, particularly heroic pieces [and] fairy tales” and “dream[s] of being great and noble.”⁸⁵ She takes “glory in the idea of dying at the stake and a great genie arising from the flames and declaring to those who have scorned us: ‘Behold, how great and glorious and noble are Chinese people!’”⁸⁶ By invoking progressive prophesy and potent martyrdom imagery associated with Joan of Arc, Sui Sin Far anticipates the more famous women warriors that would emerge throughout later Chinese American writing.⁸⁷ Within its own time, the Joan of Arc imagery is complexly racialized. Sui Sin Far’s hagiographic prophesy as a Chinese Joan of Arc revises the “tragic mulatta” tropes by envisioning progressive potentials. This prophetic moment anticipates one of Sui Sin Far’s fictional narratives of a white woman who witnesses a prophesy about her “half-breed” child “of Chinese blood,” proclaimed by “the old mulatto Jewess who nursed me.”⁸⁸

⁸¹ Hsu, ed., *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*, “Introduction,” 19.

⁸² Song, “Sentimentalism and Sui Sin Far.”

⁸³ Sui Sin Far, “Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian,” in *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*, ed. Hsu, 226.

⁸⁴ Sui Sin Far [E. E.], “Plea for the Chinaman.”

⁸⁵ Sui Sin Far, “Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian,” in *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*, ed. Hsu, 225. See also “In Fairyland,” *Dominion Illustrated* 5, no. 120 (October 18, 1890): 270; Chapman, ed., *Becoming Sui Sin Far*, xxxii–xxxiii and 33–39.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ Born in 1905 in Los Angeles, Louise Leung Larson was given the name “Lau Lan, after the most famous woman in France, Joan of Arc” (*Sweet Bamboo: A Memoir of a Chinese American Family* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 225); see also Kingston, *Woman Warrior*; Hwang, *FOB*; and Yang, *Boxers & Saints* (listed in the “Creative Works by People of Color” bibliography at the end of this book). Note also Chin, “Ye Asian American Writers,” 2–7.

⁸⁸ Sui Sin Far, “My Chinese Husband,” in *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*, ed. Hsu, 104–10, at 109. The child

Through such ambiguously racialized figures, Sui Sin Far offers possibilities for a revised heroic or transformative “mulatto” identity, and her vision of European Christian martyrdom or “glory in ... dying at the stake” uses a distinctly orientalist discourse: “a great genie arising from the flames.” In a contemporaneous white-authored Chinatown narrative, Willa Cather’s omniscient narrator adopts a white missionary gaze through a character visiting a Chinatown shop run by a “Chinaman, so smooth and calm and yellow,” and he finds the store full of “glowing primitive colors” and infused with “odors [that] flashed before his eyes whole Orient landscapes, as though the ghosts of the Old World cities had been sealed up in boxes, like the djinn in the Arabian bottle.”⁸⁹ Sui Sin Far’s own orientalizing transformation of Joan of Arc into a “great genie rising from the flames” crafts a conspicuous hybridity conjoining old and new worlds.

Sui Sin Far’s short stories, contemporaneous with Dunbar-Nelson’s “local color” narratives laden with intense Marian imagery, deploy the figure of the Virgin not only for emotional impact but also for ethnographic ends. Dunbar-Nelson associates Mary with patriarchal and institutional forms of complicity in white supremacy and the devaluation of women of color in Caribbean cultural frameworks, but Sui Sin Far uses her journalistic and fictional “local color” sketches to make the Virgin Mary represent the cultural syncretism evident throughout Chinese diaspora contexts, and the author subtly subverts normative scripts of the racialized maiden as a tragic love object.

In her story “The Chinese Lily” (1908), originally published within a year of her “Eurasian” essay, Sui Sin Far features a beautiful Chinese maiden who shares the author’s pen name (as discussed in the previous chapter). In the 1912 reprinting of the story, the character’s name diverges from the author’s full moniker of “Sui Sin Far,”⁹⁰ or the English transcription of the Cantonese 水仙花 (literally “water fairy/immortal flower”), which is often translated as “water lily” in reference to the fragrant white narcissus which can grow in water alone and is associated with Chinese Lunar New Year traditions.⁹¹ The name of the maiden as specified in *Mrs. Spring Fragrance* (1912) is instead “Sin Far” and the name’s English meaning is glossed within this version of the text as “Pure Flower, or Chinese Lily.”⁹² The author’s naming of the flower through two possible designations multiplies the range of interpretations that readers can bring to the blossom in question, as the phrase “pure flower” could potentially evoke the idea of the sacred lotus— an entirely different plant which also emerges from water and which carries deep religious significance in Chinese Buddhist and Daoist iconography.⁹³

The range of meanings that the author attributes to the name “Chinese lily” increases the symbolic resonance of flowers and their myriad religious associations. The imagery

is born with a “veil over his face,” which Hsu suggests evokes W. E. B. Du Bois’s observation that “the Negro is ... born with a veil, and a gifted second-sight in this American world.” Hsu, *Ibid.*

89 Cather, “Conversion of Sum Loo,” 263.

90 Sui Sin Far (Edith Eaton), “The Chinese Lily,” *Out West*: 508–10. In the first iteration of the text, the protagonist’s name is “Tin-a” and the other woman is named “Sui Sin Far.”

91 Li, “Chinese Flower Arrangement,” 35 and 49; Yin, *Chinese American Literature*, 54 and 112.

92 Sui Sin Far, “The Chinese Lily” (1912), in *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*, ed. Hsu, 129–32, at 130.

93 Li, “Chinese Flower Arrangement,” 32.



Figure 11: White-robed statue of Guanyin and other female deities in Honolulu's Chinatown. Honolulu, Hawai'i, November 2017. Photo by the author.

of a “little bird with a white breast” outside the window with Sin Far “extending ... a blossom from a ... lily plant” at the threshold of a feminized domestic space might suggest to Christian readers the white lily flower so often associated with the Virgin Mary in European literary and artistic traditions, especially representations of the Archangel Gabriel’s appearance to Mary in the Annunciation.⁹⁴ Foregrounding fully humanized Chinese characters, this story offers a syncretic and ambiguously racialized annunciation scene. Mermei sits indoors while Sin Far arrives with a “lily” betokening good news. The queer intimacy of this moment also tweaks heteronormative scripts of erotic love, casting Sin Far as the Archangel Gabriel and Mermei as a disabled and deformed Chinese

⁹⁴ Sui Sin Far, “The Chinese Lily” (1912), in *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*, ed. Hsu, 129–32, at 130.

reincarnation of the Virgin Mary.⁹⁵ It's unclear from the text what the Chinese meaning of "Mermei" might be, but the character "mei" (美), often used in Chinese female names, means "beautiful" or can refer to America ("Mei Guo" or 美國, the "Beautiful Country").

Elsewhere in Sui Sin Far's "local color" sketches, the author signals an awareness of the syncretic practice and belief systems of Chinese diaspora communities, where traditional Daoist and Buddhist forms of worship meld with Christian iconography. In Chinese Catholic contexts across Taiwan, Fujian, and the Philippines, Guanyin (觀音, dubbed the "Goddess of Mercy" by Jesuit missionaries in China) or the Daoist or Buddhist figure of Mazu (媽祖), the "Queen of Heaven" (天后) or "Empress of the Sea" who saves mariners and fishermen in danger, is often aligned with the *Stella Maris* (Star of the Sea) or Virgin Mary.⁹⁶ A beautiful compassionate white-robed woman bearing a "Chinese lily" or some other kind of blossom associated with deep religious meaning could be read as Mazu, Guanyin, or Mary, depending on the reader's particular cultural orientation.⁹⁷

In an unsigned piece by Sui Sin Far in the *Montreal Star* (September 1895), an unnamed "Lady" interviewing "Montreal Chinamen" reports that her informant "Mr. Cheeping declared emphatically that the Chinese worship spirits, not images," and he states: "We worship ... in the same way that I have seen people worship in Notre Dame Church here," concluding: "We kneel before 'Mother' (Ahmah) (a Chinese goddess) as the Catholics kneel to the Virgin Mary."⁹⁸ This term of familiarity "Ahmah" is consistent with Chinese practices of affectionately referring to Mazu by names along the lines of "Granny Mazu" (媽祖婆). The analogy between "Ahmah" and the Virgin Mary "in Notre Dame Church here" refutes accusations that the Chinese engage in heathen "idolatry" by worshiping mere objects and not the spiritual entities they represent, and this particular argument is appropriately contextualized for a predominantly francophone Catholic setting.

Sui Sin Far's autoethnographic tropes of conjuring an "other" in order to clarify that non-Christian practices of worship are not mere "idolatry" reforms a discursive strategy as old as the medieval *Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, whose French-speaking English knight makes an analogy between simulacra used in Asia and icons of the Virgin Mary in Western Europe. Near the conclusion of the text the knight discusses "simulacra and idols," observing that people with "diverse laws" and "diverse beliefs" might claim that "there is no people who do not have simulacra," but "they say this because we Christians have images of Our Lady and other saints that we worship" and fail to understand that the powers reside not in "the images of wood or stone" themselves "but the saints in whose name they are made."⁹⁹ As Shirin A. Khanmohamadi has argued, the medieval

95 On the queerness of Sui Sin Far's "The Chinese Lily" and the author's sexuality in general, see Song, "The Unknowable and Sui Sin Far."

96 Dy, "Virgin Mary or Guanyin"; Andaya, "Water Cosmologies in Southeast Asia." On French Jesuits in China and links to the Notre Dame basilica in Montreal, see Madsen and Fan, "Catholic Pilgrimage to Sheshan," 81–82.

97 Song, "Many Faces of Our Lady."

98 Sui Sin Far [Unsigned], "Chinese Religion," in *Becoming Sui Sin Far*, ed. Chapman, 67–69, at 67.

99 Higgins, ed. and trans., *Book of John Mandeville*, 183–84.

traveler Mandeville at times “shows an openness to alternative perspectives and voices” and “highlights the limits of a single-point Latin Christian perspective on a diverse world,”¹⁰⁰ and the narrative’s unfolding reveals how “the traveler is sufficiently othered, ‘worlded’ [by] travels around the globe.”¹⁰¹ Sui Sin Far’s medieval iconography and adaptations of longstanding ethnographic discourses of travel attend to a complex texture of syncretic practices, fuse hagiographical narratives and devotional traditions, and create intricate patterns of linguistic code-switching and cross-cultural resonance. Sui Sin Far’s “local color” sketches skillfully adapt medievalizing rhetoric to the multicultural milieu of her anglophone and francophone environments throughout the Caribbean and North America.

Local Colors Revisited

A comparative reading of Dunbar-Nelson and Sui Sin Far attends to ambiguously racialized characters within multiracial environments (Louisiana, Jamaica, and Montreal). These authors’ shared Caribbean contexts bridge “yellow” racial formations (in Asian and multiracial Black contexts) and offer a complex reworking of Marian imagery from two francophone Catholic regions of North America. In their “local color” sketches, both writers grapple with a multifaceted deployment of Joan of Arc in conjunction with political movements at the turn of the century. The narrators’ strategic passing through medieval genres, imagery, and conventions allow each writer to reinvent the figure of the tragic mixed-race woman and to generate new resistant and complex hybrid possibilities. It is this intricate play of racial positioning and literary voicing that I will examine in the next chapter on contemporary poets of color adapting Old English and Middle English traditions.

100 Khanmohamadi, *Light of Another’s Word*, 114.

101 Ibid., 140.

