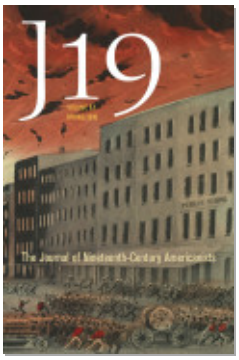
Black-Asian Counterintimacies: Reading Sui Sin Far in Jamaica



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14. "America for the Americans," *Putnam's Monthly* (January to July 1855), 533.
15. Ibid., 536.
16. Ibid., 536, 538.
17. For example, in the mid-1930s a San Diego based group called, The National Club of America for Americans, "petitioned the Los Angeles City Council to pass an ordinance barring non-naturalized aliens from working in the Los Angeles area," a move specifically targeted at California's growing immigrant population from Mexico. See, Natalia Molina, *Fit to Be Citizens?: Public Health and Race in Los Angeles, 1879–1939.* (University of California Press, 2006), 176.
18. See Hiram Bingham, "The Latin American Attitude toward the Monroe Doctrine," *Proceedings of the American Society of International Law at Its Annual Meeting* 8 (April 22–25, 1914), 186.
19. Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972), 77.
20. In an editorial for *Crisis!* magazine, Du Bois said of the US occupation that there was "absolutely no adequate excuse" for the United States to have "made a White Admiral sole and irresponsible dictator of Hayti. The anarchy in Hayti is no worse than the anarchy in the United States," Du Bois continued, "The lynching and murder in Port-au-Prince is no worse than, if as bad as, the lynching in Georgia." *Crisis!* 10, no. 6 (October 1915): 290–92.
21. For Delorme on the US border, see Marlene Daut, "Caribbean 'Race Men': Louis Joseph Janvier, Demesvar Delorme, and the Haitian Atlantic," *L'Esprit Créateur* 56, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 9–23.
22. For both Janvier's engagement with the term and Betances's connection to Delorme, see Daut, "Caribbean 'Race Men,'" 9–23.
23. Ibid.
24. Jossianna Arroyo, *Writing Secrecy in Caribbean Freemasonry* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 82.

Black-Asian Counterintimacies: Reading Sui Sin Far in Jamaica

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In "Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of a Eurasian," Edith Maude Eaton, writing as Sui Sin Far, reflects on her time in Jamaica as a white-passing mixed-race woman.[1] Rumor of her Chinese ancestry provokes a white English naval officer to seek her out for sexual favors, a scenario still all too familiar to women, particularly women of color, today: a predatory conversation sheathed in friendly euphemisms. At first Far believes his visit has to do with her work as a journalist, but his repeated "silly and offensive laugh" suggests otherwise.[2] When she attempts to dismiss him, he laughs again, "There's always plenty of time for good times. That's what I am here for."[3] After commenting on her "nice little body," he invites her to sail with him where "I will tell you all about the sweet little Chinese girls I met when we were at Hong Kong. They're not so shy!"[4] The officer's framing of her presumed affective and sexual availability, and the foregrounding of his own sexual

and social prerogative, are an everyday life manifestation of what Lisa Lowe names a "'political economy' of intimacy . . . a particular calculus governing the production, distribution, and possession of intimacy" predicated on empire and settler colonialism.[5] The man's proposition to Far is a demand for her friendliness because those other Chinese girls in Hong Kong are "not so shy." In her rejection of his desire for intimacy, she risks the dangerous backlash that attends injured white masculinity along with broader social consequences that could impact the relative privilege of her personal and professional life in the Caribbean. Still, instead of a "friendly" relationship to whiteness, Sui Sin Far seeks alternative intimacies. In the same section of her memoir she juxtaposes this incident with musings about her position as a white-passing mixed-race Chinese woman in relation to her observations about anti-blackness in the West Indies. Despite the warnings of the English who tell her to fear the "'brown boys' of the island," the writer considered the mother of Asian North American literature affirms a sense of transnational solidarity between peoples of color in her affective racial identifications. "I too am of the 'brown people' of the earth," she confides to her readers, prefiguring, in this assertion, the anti-colonial alliance between African and Asian nations that would be formalized in 1955 at the Bandung Conference in Indonesia.[6]

Intimacy operates, here, as a heuristic for understanding how the racialized and gendered pressures of domesticity, sentimentality, and sexuality are imbricated with the projects of empire. These exploitative relations undergird the transnational violences of settler colonialism, slavery, and indentured servitude—systems which, as Lowe argues, enable the liberal fictions of white Western individuals, who are able to claim intimacy as one of the privileges associated with the private sphere, as a property of their citizenship in modern civil society. In the shift from the late nineteenth-century threatening "Yellow Peril" to modern-day deserving "model minority," Asian Americans, particularly those of East Asian descent, are lured by false promises of inclusion into this liberal fiction on the basis of intimate affiliation with whiteness. Among the processes of comparative racialization that emerge from transnational intimacies, Ellen Wu traces how Asian Americans were complicit in the anti-black creation of the "model minority" category in the American cultural imaginary.[7] Nonetheless, the solidarity work of activists like Grace Lee Boggs and Yuri Kochiyama, along with studies of earlier black-Asian cultural and political engagements by scholars like Edlie Wong and Julia H. Lee, indicates an alternative genealogy of coun-

terintimacies that disrupts those aligned with the afterlife of imperial exploitation.[8] In defiance of the coercive pressures made manifest through sexual violence and emotional labor, the mixed-race Asian and black women of Sui Sin Far's fiction and nonfiction writings reorient these indices of transnational power relations away from their focus on whiteness and toward the possibility of resistance through affective connections that center peoples of color.

In Far's rediscovered Jamaican stories and journalism we can see how residual, institutional, and emergent forms of intimacy are bound up with both the emotional and the sexual senses of the word for women of color. These coercive intimacies are predicated on, as Lowe puts it, the "proximity of the geographically, and conceptually, distant sites of the Caribbean and China" connected through colonial modes of biopolitical violence that drew together African enslavement and Asian indentured servitude. Lowe identifies the figure of the Chinese woman in the West Indies as "handmaiden to this colonial fantasy of assimilating the colonized to forms of bourgeois family and freedom"—an anticipatory manifestation of the twentieth-century anti-black myth of the model minority, pitting the supposed "civility" of the Chinese woman against denigrating representations of black women's sexuality.[9] Meanwhile in Hong Kong, the British colonial government demonized the orientalized Chinese woman's sexuality as "Yellow Peril-ous" by pathologizing and policing sex work.[10] Hong Kong and the Caribbean collide in Far's memoir: her self-identification as one of the "'brown people' of the earth" collapses the antipodal opposition between black and Asian women by refusing the anti-black construction of Asians as the colonial handmaidens of whiteness.

For Asian Americans, the development of counterintimacies with African Americans has meant accessing affective possibilities concealed by the nineteenth-century "Yellow Peril" stereotype. Accusations of inhuman unfeeling have long attended the racialization of peoples of color in the United States. As captured by Rei Terada's concept of the expressive hypothesis, the recognition of one's affective interiority acts as proof of subjecthood.[11] Pathologizing people as incapable of "proper" feelings, therefore, abjects them from the category of the human. Thomas Jefferson claimed that African Americans' feelings were both excessive and diminished: "Their griefs are transient. Those numberless afflictions, which render it doubtful whether heaven has given life to us in mercy or in wrath, are less felt."[12] Relatedly, the "Yellow Peril" portrayed Asians as inscrutable Orientals—what Senator John F. Miller,

introducing the Chinese Exclusion Act to the US Senate in 1882, called "automatic engines of flesh and blood . . . patient, stolid, unemotional, and persistent."[13] Here we see another possibility for why dehumanization depends, in part, on the dismissal of racialized capacities for feeling: it is a recognition of the threat posed by those disaffected African Americans and Asian Americans who refuse to respond on an affective level to oppressive institutions naturalized by intimacy. This disaffection is expressed in an alternative history of Asian American solidarity with African Americans that refuses the dominant narrative of assimilation that demands intimate identification with whiteness—a history recently visible, for instance, in the reclaiming, by contemporary Asian American activists, of the pejorative "Yellow Peril" by adopting the slogan "Yellow Peril Supports Black Power."[14] Sui Sin Far's refusal of intimacy with the white English officer and her preferred cross-racial kinship with the " 'brown people' of the earth" is an earlier moment in these efforts at solidarity: defying expectations of colonized docility, she embraces fears about Asian subversions that would ally her with other vilified peoples of color toward the counterintimacies of an anti-colonial, anti-racist coalition that exceeds national boundaries.

In Far's writings the "yellow girl," the figure of the mixed-race woman, acts as the embodied meeting of colonial intimacies that can transform into subversive counterintimacies. "Yellow girl" carries overlapping racial connotations: in race science, "yellow" is the confluence between the color that is associated with black mixed-race people labeled "mulattoes," sometimes derisively called "high yaller," and the shade of Asian racialization triangulated between black and white.[15] Writing and passing under the pseudonym Fire Fly for Jamaica's *Gall's Daily News Letter*, in her column for January 28, 1897, Far shares a vaudeville song about the mixed-race black woman as a Caribbean figure of both desire and contempt: "Are you, my dear, the yellow girl, / of all our author folks / at whom we decent people hurl / anathemas, and jokes? You are a poem, or a song— / a wicked one, they say— / a bit of colour thrown along / a drab old world and gray. / And every well-turned ankle, dear / is a joy to all the earth, / except to us good folks who fear / the smile or dance of mirth."[16] She surmises that a white "old lady" would not approve of the song, imagining a critique that parallels the threat of the "yellow girl": Fire Fly, herself a different sort of "yellow girl," may be guilty of "irreverence" because "[the old lady] is sure I am fast and ought to be kept down."[17] Yet, she continues, she has "a certain callousness in

regard to the feelings of witless respectables." Far's unfeeling "callousness" is her disregard of the respectable niceties that obscure the violent intimacies undergirding the Kingston social scene.[18] Accordingly, she jokes, such a critic "would put me into prison had she the power." She segues from the jest to her critique of the women's quarters of the Government Institute, where state violence overwhelmingly impacts black and mixed-race women: "It seems to me that when a woman gets into a prison uniform she loses all that is human."[19] Sui Sin Far shares the song in a self-aware sense of kinship with these other "yellow girls" who are both exoticized and criminalized.[20] By strategically juxtaposing popular-culture colonial intimacies against institutional injustice, Far draws attention to how "yellow girls" of black and Asian descent are differently punished for being both desirable and threatening to whiteness.[21]

The sexual perils associated with the "yellow girl" are reclaimed in her 1898 *Metropolitan* short story "Away Down in Jamaica." It begins as a conventional bourgeois white love triangle: the well-bred Kathleen Howard engaged to the arrogant Wickliff Walker, while the impoverished Canadian journalist Phil Everett pines for her.[22] The situation becomes complicated when Walker's former lover Clarissa, a Jamaican mixed-race girl adopted by white parents, emerges. Despite parallels to Samuel Richardson's famous ill-fated heroine of the same name, Clarissa defies the stereotype of the tragic mulatta: calling Walker a "coward," she confronts him about his hypocritical pursuit of married respectability.[23] Clarissa enacts revenge by disrupting Walker's plans to marry the rich heiress, poisoning Kathleen through the Caribbean magical and spiritual practice of *obeah*, while the Jamaican climate acts as her accomplice, striking down Phil with a tropical malady. And, significantly, Clarissa escapes punishment after destroying the white sentimental love plot, leaving her former seducer in ruins. The suffocating embrace of colonial intimacy creates the conditions for weaponizing that proximity against the colonizer. Martha Cutter, who rediscovered the short story, identifies parallels between Phil and Far as Canadian journalists in ill health.[24] The deaths of the white characters, however, imply that Far rejects inclusion into the white liberal fictions enabled by oppressive intimacies: she chooses to kill off her identification with Phil's white Canadian privilege and her desire for white womanhood represented by Kathleen, instead affirming her sisterhood with fellow "yellow girl" Clarissa. The story closes with the black servants singing about the deaths: "Oh, there'll be mourning, mourning, / oh, there'll be mourning, mourning, / oh, there'll be mourning, mourning, / at the Judgement seat of Christ."[25] This song does

not mourn for the losses to upper-class white Jamaican society; rather, its lyrics express grim triumph. Mary Chapman, editor of a collection of Far's rediscovered and recollected writings, footnotes that this is the same hymn sung by mixed-race Cassy in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to make her enslaver Simon Legree believe he is haunted.[26] Sui Sin Far imagines a revenge fantasy for violences inflicted on women of color by white men as well as the erasures of white sentimental narratives by presenting "yellow girls" Clarissa and Cassy as heroines who personify a precedent of black resistance that benefits all women of color.

In his well-known figuration of structures of feeling, Raymond Williams proposes that "thought as felt and feeling as thought" generate our lived experiences of ideology.[27] Inasmuch as racism itself operates, in part, as a structure of feeling, as Gordon Fraser argues in his essay, one step toward the flourishing of anti-racist counterstructures might be deliberate alienation from the pressures of affective affiliation with whiteness, an afterlife of the "intimacies of four continents." Despite the demand to prove herself as worthy of inclusion during the era of Chinese Exclusion, Sui Sin Far distances herself from this affiliation; instead, claiming affective kinship with black people, she draws attention to the interlocking gendered and racialized intimate abuses endured by both black and Asian "yellow girls as her way of thinking through what Colleen Lye calls the Afro-Asian analogy. To emphasize Jamaica when reading Sui Sin Far, a writer claimed by both Asian American and Asian Canadian literary traditions, provides a historical and transnational frame for two recent trends in social justice activism that seek to extend such anti-racist counterintimacies. First, in online anti-racist discourse, there has been a proliferation of the phrases "#whitetears" and "#whitefragility," along with gendered variations, which highlights the cultural and political value granted to white feelings that impede social justice work by peoples of color.[28] The mockery accompanying the grassroots use of these phrases decenters both white feelings and the enduring demand that people of color defer to them. Second, the Movement for Black Lives has inspired progressive Asian American activists to revitalize efforts at black-Asian solidarity, as signified by hashtags like #Asians4BlackLives and initiatives like Letters for Black Lives, a crowdsourced project for supporting the movement that began by focusing on anti-blackness in Asian American communities.[29] Central to this activism is the rejection of the aspirational whiteness, anti-blackness, and settler colonialism entwined in the model minority myth. Reclaiming the nineteenth-century insult "Yellow Peril" through the slogan "Yellow Peril Supports

Black Power," a rallying cry that emerged in the 1960s and has, more recently, been updated to express Asian American solidarity with the Movement for Black Lives,[30] contributes to the explicit recognition of how historical and present-day Asian American liberation is tied to solidarity with black people, echoing Far's identification as one of the "'brown people' of the earth." Sui Sin Far's Jamaican writings offer us a way of understanding how marginalized peoples in the United States, led by women of color, challenge false promises of inclusion into white liberal fictions. By forging counterintimacies out of the transnational entanglements of empire, racism, and labor that draw them together, they build solidarity toward a radical politics of collective liberation.

Notes

1. My research was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. Thanks to Dana Luciano, Mary Chapman, Jesse Goldberg, Mee-Ju Ro, and Omar Khurshid as well as the MLA panel "The Intimacies of Four Continents" organized by the Race and Ethnicity Studies Forum.

2. Sui Sin Far, "Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of a Eurasian," *The Independent* 66, no. 3138 (1909): 226.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 18.

6. Far, "Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of a Eurasian," 225, 29. Asian and African countries met at the 1955 Bandung Conference under the aegis of cooperation and anti-colonialism. Richard Wright's first-hand account, *The Color Curtain: A Report on the Bandung Conference*, is considered a foundational text of black-Asian studies.

7. Ellen Wu, *The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origin of the Model Minority Myth* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).

8. For more on black-Asian relations in this era, see Edlie Wong, *Racial Reconstruction: Black Inclusion, Chinese Exclusion, and the Fictions of Citizenship* (New York: New York University Press, 2015); Julia H. Lee, *Interracial Encounters: Reciprocal Representations in African and Asian American Literatures, 1896–1937* (New York: New York University Press, 2011).

9. Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, 31, 33.

10. Ibid.

11. Rei Terada, *Feeling in Theory: Emotion after the "Death of the Subject"* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

12. Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, ed. Frank C. Shuffelton (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 146. For how these stereotypes contribute to the criminalization of black America, see Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016).

13. *Chinese Exclusion Act, 1882*, 47th Cong., 1st Sess, 1484.

14. Dan Truong, "Yellow Peril Supports Black Power," *Huffington Post*, July 15, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/dan-truong/yellow-peril-supports-bla_b_7781586.html.

15. For uses of "yellow" or "high yaller" to describe black mixed-race people, see Jack D. Forbes, *Africans and Native Americans: The Language of Race and the Evolution of Red-Black Peoples* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), and James F. Davis, *Who Is Black? One Nation's Definition* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991). For Asians as "yellow," see Michael Keevak, *Becoming Yellow: A Short History of Racial Thinking* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011).

16. Sui Sin Far, *Becoming Sui Sin Far: Early Fiction, Journalism, and Travel Writing by Edith Maude Eaton*, ed. Mary Chapman (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016), 119–20.

17. Ibid., 120.

18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. Far's humor and critique reflect her understanding of her different audiences; Chapman describes *Gall's Daily News Letter*'s audience as "fairly liberal white elites and successful mixed-race planters and manufacturers" (xlii).
21. As both Dominika Ferens and Chapman observe, Sui Sin Far began her column with light coverage of Jamaican society but then shifted to harder analyses of injustice. Here we can see how Far played between the two in a single entry.
22. Martha Cutter, "Sex, Love, Revenge, and Murder in 'Away Down in Jamaica': A Long Lost Short Story by Sui Sin Far (Edith Eaton)," *Legacy* 21, no. 1 (2004): 85.
23. Ibid., 78.
24. Ibid., 88.
25. Far, *Becoming Sui Sin Far*, 180.
26. Ibid.
27. Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 132.
28. See Mamta Motwani Accapadi, "When White Women Cry: How White Women's Tears Oppress Women of Color," *College Student Affairs Journal* 26, no. 2 (2007): 208–15; Robin DiAngelo, "White Fragility," *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy* 3, no. 3 (2011): 54–70.
29. For more on hashtags and solidarity in Asian American and Pacific Islander activism, see Rachel Kuo, "Reflections on #Solidarity: Intersectional Movements in AAPI Communities," in *The Routledge Companion to Asian American Media*, ed. Lori Kido Lopez and Vincent N. Pham (New York: Routledge, 2017).
30. The earlier use of the phrase is documented in the iconic 1969 photo by Roz Payne that depicts the Asian American Political Alliance standing alongside the Black Panther Party with a sign that announces "Yellow Peril Supports Black Power." "Roz Payne: Yellow Peril Supports Black Power, Oakland, California," *International Center of Photography*, accessed May 3, 2017, https://www.icp.org/browse/archive/objects/yellow-peril-supports-black-power-oakland-california-0.

Lynching's Afterlife

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> We need the truth of how the bodies died to interrupt the course of normal life. But if keeping the dead at the forefront of our consciousness is crucial for our body politic, what of the families of the dead?
> —Claudia Rankine, "The Condition of Black Life Is One of Mourning," 2015

> Attempting to account for atrocity can never be complete, but must be ongoing.
> —Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains*, 2011

Sometime in August 1899, Lavinia Baker and her five children walked into J. E. Purdy's photography studio in Boston, Massachusetts and posed for a series of family portraits. The photographs, which were printed as 3×5 cabinet cards and standard 8×10