

Desire and Asian Diasporic Fiction: Democracy and the Representative Status of Onoto Watanna's *Miss Numè of Japan* (1899)

Xine Yao*

New York, 1950: a mixed-race child is introduced to her paternal grandmother of Chinese descent. Raised by her white Jewish maternal grandmother, the young girl balks at this familial affiliation to a stranger:

There was much laughter, and the lady whom everybody now agreed was the Bad Grandma, laughed the loudest of all, but I could tell she was profoundly hurt and embarrassed. The other grown-ups apologized profusely.

The Bad Grandma smiled on. “No, no, it’s perfectly all right. I understand. She doesn’t remember ever seeing me before. She doesn’t know me.” (Birchall 1)

Diana Birchall opens her biography of Winnifred Eaton Reeve—aka her “Bad Grandma”—with the only time she met the mixed-race Chinese North American writer who used the vaguely Japanese pseudonym “Onoto Watanna” during the era when the Chinese were perceived as the “bad Asians” and the Japanese as the “good Asians.” Once acclaimed by popular audiences and New York literati alike, Winnifred Eaton wrote at least 15 novels, alongside plays, short stories, and screenplays during her career in the US and Canada. Jean Lee Cole’s (2002) observation that “Onoto Watanna”

*Xine Yao is Lecturer in American Literature to 1900 at University College London. Yao’s first book is the award-winning *Disaffected: The Cultural Politics of Unfeeling in Nineteenth-Century America* (Duke UP, 2021). She is a BBC New Generation Thinker and co-host of *PhDivas* podcast.

American Literary History, vol. 35, no. 1, pp. 97–112

<https://doi.org/10.1093/alh/ajac154>

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remains the most prolific writer of Asian descent in North America likely still holds (155). Among scholars of the Eaton sisters, the moralizing, reductive delineation between elder sister Edith Maude Eaton aka “Sui Sin Far,” the “good sister”—who publicly identified as Chinese and wrote about Chinese diasporic communities—versus “Onoto Watanna,” the “bad sister”—whose commercial successes and recognition retroactively contribute to her dubious position—has long been questioned. Viet Thanh Nguyen submits that the Eaton “‘bad’ sister” (34) is the wrong kind of “bad,” given the Asian Americanist disciplinary idealization of “bad subjects” who frustrate hegemony like her legibly activist sister (33–36). Birchall’s painfully awkward anecdote expresses a sense of familial misrecognition and moral categorization that befits the fraught legacy of a writer passed over in favor of her sister for the distinction of being revered as the ancestral fount of Asian North American literature.¹

Whereas Sui Sin Far’s only book, the short story collection *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*, was published in 1912, Onoto Watanna’s first novel *Miss Numè of Japan* appeared in 1899, the first known novel published by a writer of Asian descent in the US. The plot follows two interracial heterosexual romances: encounters in Japan between a betrothed Japanese couple and an engaged white American couple lead to the cleaving of the original relationships wherein one ends in tragedy, the other in marriage. Contemporary scholars are rightly skeptical of claims to origin, of recovery efforts, canon formation, and the attention allotted to traditional literary genres, yet such legitimate critiques may be marshaled in an academic sleight-of-hand to avoid reckoning with this novel. I wish to unpack the insights that can arise from recognizing, rather than disavowing, the representative status of the “Bad Grandma” of Asian North American literature.

Why? “Because representation matters!” is the persistent refrain of mainstream Asian American politics, soldering together the domain of cultural and artistic production to the structural problem of minority recognition in a liberal democracy. Driven by the urgency of rising rates of anti-Asian racism resulting from the coronavirus pandemic, this refrain continued its crescendo throughout the 2022 Asian/Pacific American Heritage Month (May) from which I draw out two illustrative examples from the spectrum of tactics with regard to cultural and political representation in US democracy. The state of coalitional politics signified by the month is indicatively precarious in both instances: as Indigenous scholars have scrutinized, “Asian/Pacific American” suffocates “Pacific Islander” into the overrepresentation of Asians, usually Chinese and Japanese.² That May, the second annual STAATUS (Social Tracking of Asian Americans in the US) Index assessed the dire national landscape of

perceptions of Asian Americans and Asian American experiences. The press release ends: “[W]e need to increase visibility of Asian Americans by considering how we are portraying Asian characters, writing multi-dimensional narratives, and casting Asian Americans into mainstream, leading roles” (Leading Asian Americans).

Melissa Phruksachart critiques this pervasive ideology of representation as a neoliberal fantasy particular to Asian American politics, terming it “‘messianic visibility’: an overinvestment in the idea that insistently normative cinematic identification possesses transformative, even curative, political and personal potential” (61). The dilemma of representative politics becomes flattened out into the politics of representation alone, translating identity into capital. Eaton herself skillfully navigated such a strategy: her novels were advertised with Orientalist imagery amidst burgeoning market taste for *Japonisme*.³ She was unabashed about her reasons for writing her “Japanese stories”: “I do not need to ask your pardon for my being honest in this, but I am so sorry that I could not give you a nice reason for writing the book *Miss Numè of Japan*. You may, if you wish, use the real reason—that I wrote it because I was hard up,” writes Onoto Watanna in a letter to *Book News* (“Miss Numè of Japan” 487).

Insofar as the STAATUS Index presents the “good” representation argument, there is another approach weaponizing that insistence on representation by putting pressure on the “bad.” “Because representation matters!” is the ironic subtitle of a viral Twitter thread by the podcast *Politically Asian!* entitled “8 Asian American Trailblazers Who Made Things Worse.” Embellished with jaunty emojis and the Asian/Pacific American Heritage Month hashtag (with no mention of Pacific Islanders), the thread features a litany of current public figures who contributed to anti-Asian, anti-immigrant sentiments, and anti-Black police brutality among other issues (*Politically Asian!*). Rather than messianic visibility, the subversion of the logic of representation enables the excoriation of false messiahs, to force the comfortable quiescence of bourgeois Asian American representation back into the realm of politics. Thus, for Asian Americanist scholars, reckoning with “Onoto Watanna” is no naïve recovery: according to Nguyen, she demands our acknowledgment of the flexible “plurality” of political tactics, including accommodation (24). Her unprecedented financial success as a mixed-race Asian woman must be understood in relation to her tactical writerly negotiations of Orientalism, Japanese imperialism, and her own anti-Blackness and antisemitism.⁴ Onoto Watanna, for Tomo Hattori, exemplifies the underacknowledged hegemonic complicity of the Asian American as model minority (230).

“First,” “Asian American,” and “novel” each bear great cultural weight: combined, they threaten to naturalize a complicated literary history as brief, self-evident milestone. Here I examine *Miss Numè of Japan* as the first Asian American novel by analyzing how each element functions in relation to mainstream Asian American political and aesthetic representation in US liberal democracy. The term “Asian American novel,” Susan Koshy asserts, is a disciplinary conceit insofar as the coalitional framing “Asian American” did not exist until the 1970s; previously such literatures would be categorized by authorial national origin or topic (1046–47). Eaton’s writings could now be called “Asian American literature,” but back then her Orientalist masquerade cuts across those earlier taxonomic assumptions. Much as “Asian American” and “Asian American novel” depend upon a deliberate but fragile amalgamation of differences for the construction of their coherence, the “first Asian American novel” anticipates the aggregate and disaggregate tensions and possibilities of that political formation. To that end, I read *Miss Numè* in relation to classic early- and nineteenth-century Americanist scholarship alongside Asian Americanist theorizing to frame how the novel, a tale of domestic fiction writ overseas in Asia, tracks the uncomfortable tensions and convergences of desire and Asian diasporic fiction.

In *Miss Numè*, Harvard-educated Orito Sachi dies for the love of the coquette Cleo Ballard; their betrothed Numè Omi and Vice-Consul Arthur Sinclair marry each other. The entangled romances revive the anxieties of seduction and the marriage plot for national and international arenas of the US and Japan as imperial powers. As Cathy Davidson explains, in the early American novel, seduction was “a metonymic reduction of the whole world in which women operated and were operated upon” (180) indicative of inequalities of power despite the birth of an alleged egalitarian nation. A century later, *Miss Numè* racially recodes the genre’s preoccupations with coercion, love, tradition, and freedom. That recoding, in turn, reconfigures the gendering of these processes of meaning-making on a wider, comparative, even global stage. In doing so, the novel reflects the consolidations of new variations of nationalism and imperialism—and incipient critiques. Eaton’s romance of Japan and the US may itself be a fantasy of a more lateral relations for Asian diasporic people hoping not to be metonymic collateral for the vicissitudes of geopolitical relations with the US at its center. Through its dual romances, *Miss Numè* negotiates fantasies of individualist desire inextricable from the book’s status as a compromised origin for the Asian American novel and Asian Americanist coalitional politics.

1. The Asiatic Novelty Novel: The Cultural Work of the “Asian American Novel”

F. O. Matthiessen’s *American Renaissance* (1941) contended that “Emerson, Hawthorne, Thoreau, Melville, and Whitman all wrote literature for democracy” (xv), and, despite his considerable interest in multiple genres, it is the novel that emerges at the heart of that shared endeavor. Other magisterial studies of US literature overwhelmingly prize the cultural work of the nineteenth-century novel, connecting its rise to that of US democracy itself. And as Davidson later propounds, “The novel is the paradigmatic democratic form. Conflict (of desire, motive, agency, principles) is the basis of fictional plot” (6). While the emergence of the English novel, per Ian Watt, values “individualist and innovating reorientation” (13), individual conflict scales to the status of the nation for the early American novel (Davidson 6). The vernacular, popular genre reflects even as it molds “provincial and parochial identities and communities” (4) into the emergent conglomeration that would be called the US.

According to Koshy, the rise of the Asian American novel is distinctive because it is not taxonomized by the usual principles of nationality, shared history, common culture, or racial identity. The salience of the term comes from its analytic rather than descriptive usage, a political frame whose flexible limits are necessary to sustain tensions and contradictions arising from the term’s coinage. This hermeneutical force operates retrospectively to organize “critical readings of histories of racism and imperialism and alternative political visions of the future” (1046). Earlier in the twentieth century the Asian American novel overtook autobiography as characteristic genre of the literary tradition, a shift from the outsider preoccupation with ethnographic knowledge to greater capacity for formal experimentation (1062). Lisa Lowe’s account, however, pits the “Asian American novel” against the “novel” itself: the novel, she explains, is “a cultural institution that regulates formations of citizenship and the nation” (98) a technology that governs the narration of history because of its status as the privileged aesthetic site for disciplining forms of difference. Inspired by Frantz Fanon, she proposes that the Asian American novel must be seen as rupture from the “nineteenth-century European genre” (45) lest it be subordinated as merely imitative of an unexamined, universalized colonial norm. The signature quality of the Asian American novels that Lowe discusses is their disruption of aesthetic and thematic unification in order to reimagine relationships to subjectivity, history, and nation. These novels have an “antidevelopmental” (50) quality that challenges conventional US narratives of democratic belonging. Nevertheless, Lowe’s

account of the Asian American novel still echoes Davidson's emphasis on the significance of conflict in the novel as US democratic form par excellence (Davidson 45).

Reanimating the question "Is it any good?" (186) from Jane Tompkins's classic feminist analysis of nineteenth-century white women's writing for Asian American literary studies encourages attention to a rather different version of cultural work than the oppositional resistance prized by some Asian Americanists. My reading is sensitive, that is, to developmental continuity as much as anti-developmental rupture. In *Book News*, Onoto Watanna refuses pretenses to having written "a great book," admitting that with *Miss Numè of Japan* she did not wish "to ruminate or moralize" or "introduce harrowing or realistic plots and situations" (487). Indeed, for Opie Read, it as an Asiatic novelty novel: "Onoto Watanna plays an instrument new to our ears, quaintly Japanese" (3). Lowe's important 1996 study of Asian American literature as immigrant acts prioritizes works written in the mid-twentieth century onward, parameters that leave out Onoto Watanna along with other earlier writers whose work might be considered derivative of Anglo-American forms.⁵ In some ways, this emphasis parallels the classic concerns that the early American nation did not produce "good" literature until the nineteenth century, with convergent concerns including anxieties about a colonial cultural dependence and lack of cohesive identity capable of worthy literary expression (Homestead 529).

This question of the coherence of identities prefigures how Onoto Watanna's first novel precipitates a retrospective crisis for the various ethnicities subsumed under "Asian American" and its politics of representation. Eaton's opportunistic self-portrayal as Japanese prefigures and, perversely, anticipates, the panethnic collectivity of "Asian American," inaugurating a role that Nguyen calls a "panethnic entrepreneur" (4). There was no sense of broad "Asianness" as such in the nineteenth century. Before the 1960s, as Y en L e Espiritu documents, Asians typically disaffiliated from other ethnic groups to avoid how different Asian nationalities were variously demonized for geopolitical developments and the vagaries of capitalism (19–20). Eaton, by contrast, took advantage of what Espiritu calls the "pervasiveness of racial lumping" (20) to pass along the axes of ethnicity and class (since the Chinese were seen as lower class) and engendered the appearance of Japanese American authorship and narrative possibility. Whereas Sui Sin Far debuts an early use of "Chinese American" (Far 56) in a 1913 essay to discuss the condition of migrant workers, Onoto Watanna's subtitle, "A Japanese-American Romance," is among the prominent early usages of "Japanese American." The romance of "Japaneseness" for Eaton

may be less a desire for Japan than an aspirational marker for “Chineseness” to be granted the same class privilege and relative racial valorization. As Eve Oishi writes, “the racialized narratives of her Japanese fiction are actually the coded negotiations of her uncertain class status and struggle to establish an independent and successful career” (xxvi), noting that Onoto Watanna’s descriptions of her Japanese heroines resemble her own self-descriptions.

Although this ruse is self-serving, her imagined kinship with Japanese people begot real collaborations: her book illustrators included notable Japanese artists, even if one-time friend Yone Noguchi decried her publicly as a fraud (Matsukawa 49). At least one contemporary Japanese writer read Eaton’s work, and Japanese literary scholars treated it seriously at least a decade prior to the revival led by Amy Ling and other scholars in the West (34). In imagining a sensibility that Chinese and Japanese peoples might share, Watanna’s writing, as Iping Liang claims, “made Asian Americans socially visible and important by her impersonation of multiple ethnicities” (183). However, compromised, *Miss Numè of Japan* inaugurates the possibility of an Asian American imaginary.

2. Desire and Asian Diasporic Fiction: Sentimental Educations

Aboard their trans-Pacific steamer “Japanese and Chinese lanterns” create a “fairyland” (20) scene for Orito’s and Cleo’s flirtations: this lone appearance of Chineseness, the only non-Japanese Asiatic signifier, dissolves into the novel’s preoccupation with Japan as representative Asian nation. In the novel’s immediate context, this conflation reproduces the ascendancy of Japanese imperialism in the Pacific: after the humiliation of US Commodore Perry’s “opening,” Meiji-period Japan saw itself as the rightful leader among Asian and Pacific nations because of the success of its modernization projects and its strategic efforts at Westernization. Winnifred Eaton’s dual romance plots refract this contested modernization in Asia and simultaneously holds a mirror up to Asian American politics to come.

Eaton’s blurring between Chinese and Japanese strangely anticipates the formative violent equivalence that provoked the modern Asian American political movement: the 1982 murder of Vincent Chin. A Chinese American man mistaken for Japanese, Chin was beaten to death outside a strip club before his wedding by white men blaming Japanese automakers for job crises during a time of anti-Japanese anxieties. Eaton’s deception inverts the terms of Chin’s tragedy by relying on white credulity to pass from Chinese to

Japanese in order to sell a bestselling genteel tale of heterosexual interracial romances in Japan during a time of anti-Chinese anxieties. Eaton wishes to be mistaken for Japanese and flourishes; Chin is inadvertently mistaken for Japanese and dies a brutal death. These contrasting historical flashpoints of Asian ethnic slippage further orient us toward ongoing anxieties about the racialization of normative gender and sexuality for narrative and political coherence made visible by the marriage plot. Chin's tragedy is the betrayal of the marriage plot of the Asian American citizen. As Takeo Rivera theorizes, the official activist presentation of Chin's death insists that, at the deepest level, his murder violently disrupts the fulfillment of normative sexuality and thereby interrupts his being enfolded into the phenomenon of model minoritarianism (1–29).

Much of Onoto Watanna's oeuvre as a literary "Bad Grandma" is predicated on the aspirational desires that could coalesce into that model minoritarianism: she writes different permutations of Asian, white, and mixed-race heterosexual romances often either upwardly mobile or already set within the purview of the upper classes—fantasies of Asian romances with white America. By tapping into the existing seduction and marriage plot traditions of (white) women's domestic fiction, *Miss Numè* evokes their generic concerns about individuation, freedom, coercion, transgression, and material stability as the narrative's central romances allegorize the negotiations of geopolitical relations between two rising global imperialist powers, asymmetries of power coded as Asiatic racialized gender.

Since the novel—and the seduction novel in particular—are established genre metonyms for the troubled workings of US democracy, I ask of this representative nineteenth-century Asian American text, who might be considered a victim, a seducer, and a coquette, and how are these roles reworked in the narrative? Whereas Numè and Arthur's successful relationship consummates the marriage plot of domestic fiction, here between representatives of the US and Japanese political elites, the fates of Orito and Cleo cast their shadows over the novel. As the narrative unfolds, the lurking influence of the sentimental novel invokes and questions the genre's gendered schematics of disobedience, risk, and empowerment on an unequal social terrain writ global. Insofar as the idea of cultural citizenship depends on consent rather than descent, as Werner Sollors argued in 1986, so too did romantic marriage—as opposed to arranged marriage—become a literary trope associated with America (112).

Despite this potential framing of East-West interracial love, the novel does not simplistically present authoritarian Japanese tradition either victimized or enlightened by democratic US modernity. A paranoid view might read the novel's romances as overdetermined by what Leslie Bow calls white supremacist "racist love," an

“affective structure enmeshing Asian Americans” (40). Bow reappropriates this phrase from Frank Chin and Jeffrey Paul Chan, who helped edit an influential Asian American literary anthology that erased Onoto Watanna from the masculinist cultural nationalist canon they crafted. White racist love alone, however, obscures how scholars have read the trickster undermining of stereotypes in *Miss Numè*. For instance, as Pat Shea argues, the novel resists contemporary anti-miscegenation sentiments, although it hesitates to defy white anxieties about the Japanese openly (19).

Reading the trajectories of the love plots in relation to early and nineteenth-century scholarship further brings into view its formal and structural dimensions in the context of literary tradition and the dilemmas of Asian American representation on the horizon. In highlighting the relevance of seduction narratives to Eaton’s novel, however, I follow critics wary of reproducing the didactic, socially conservative moral education thesis which often attends the genre. As Katherine Binhammer and Winfried Flück argue of the British and American seduction narratives, respectively, seduction did not simply emplot the naturalized, punitive foreclosure of women’s nascent sexual freedoms and their indoctrination into a desexualized, domesticated ideology. Rather, they explored the struggles over women’s drive to know the world and their own hearts amidst contested, circumstantial understandings of consent and material outcomes (Binhammer 2). The seducer is worldly, and being chosen by him tantalizes the promise of recognition and self-empowerment for the coquette who possesses “a sympathetic hunger for life” despite that “risky gamble” as Flück explains (99).

Eaton’s structure further complicates these dynamics: nineteenth-century women’s novels, according to Karen Tracey, used double proposals as a plot device to complicate the teleology of the marriage plot, inviting comparison between the initial versus accepted proposals to explore the negotiations of intimacy amid historical circumstances (4). In *Miss Numè*, the double proposal between a single romantic dyad becomes bifurcated into the double interlocking love plots with their counterpoised outcomes for the four main characters. While Orito and Numè are engaged from childhood because of their fathers’ friendships, Arthur and Cleo’s betrothal happened under circumstances that lead both to question whether that engagement has become mere obligation. Orito repeatedly proposes to Cleo, finally choosing death when his love is not reciprocated. By contrast, Numè nobly tries to withdraw from her burgeoning romance with Arthur to avoid disrupting the Americans’ marriage, though eventually she and Arthur do wed. Although Cleo who once proclaimed, “I would never marry a man I did not love”

(35), she marries Tom Ballard, a cousin with whom she was raised, oddly mirroring Orito and Numè's original betrothal.

In Onoto Watanna's novel, the drive for self-knowledge about love and the promise of worldly knowledge do not adhere to the literary genre's dominant dichotomy of the white gender binary. Modern all-American Cleo is identified early on as both coquette and seducer. The third chapter's title even poses the question, "Who can analyze a coquette?" And the narrator reports, "Cleo Ballard was a coquette," a "dangerous" one who accrues "victims" (15). Nevertheless, Orito and Numè are not passive victims to her caprices: their vulnerabilities register their own individual struggles for self-knowledge and independence. Each rebels against their father: Orito is returning to Japan after eight years in the US, including the Harvard education his father dictated, but he resists his expected role as the next Takashima patriarch. Meanwhile, Numè inveighs against this educational double standard and pursues her own ad hoc curriculum in which "her knowledge of the outside world was gained entirely through her acquaintance with the Americans" (66). Sentimental education is multidirectional. Both Orito and Arthur learn what love is from Cleo and Numè, respectively. While Cleo tries to thwart Numè's engagement to Orito as a defiance of arranged marriages, Numè correctly assesses Cleo's affective inconsistencies and Arthur's ambivalence about their engagement.

Notably, the chapter when Cleo and her mother arrive in Japan is titled "Those queer Japanese!" (54). Indeed, the lead Japanese characters' genders are presented as not quite normative. Orito is said to be "a youth of extreme beauty" with "features as fine and delicate as a girl's" (6); while "[u]nlike most Japanese maidens," Numè is "impetuous and wayward" (7), prone to "unmaidenly conduct" (9). Although Orito's feminization has been seen as Eaton's internalized racism (Shea 23), it may also register how the adaptation of genre norms about power differences complicate the tradition's dependence upon the standards of the white gender binary.

More broadly, Eaton's interracial romances as fantasies of transnational US democratic tolerance for difference reveals the conditional legibility of model minority representation. Class is the mediating catalyst across the chasm of racialized gender, rendering Orito and Numè exceptional and therefore worthy of desire. Status recognizes status; money recognizes money. In this respect, the unseen but omnipresent money at the heart of Eaton's Japanese-American love stories refracts the actual history of multi-directional exchanges between the nations behind the contemporaneous nationalization of Japanese currency on the level of the bills themselves. Meiji currency was modeled after its US counterpart, even printed in the US by the Continental Bank Note Company (Ravina 215).

According to Mark Ravina, the Meiji government's currency reform promoted Japanese distinctiveness while also using American print technology—and US settler colonial iconography as the bill design blueprint. Scenes of American history like Manifest Destiny violence against Chickasaw and Muscogee peoples printed on US currency were modified for Japanese bills into pivotal moments in Japanese imperialist history like the conquest of Korea (216, 221). Thus, the white American characters' attraction to elite Japanese socioeconomic capital honors the existing mutual recognition of congruencies between national exceptionalist regimes of settler-colonial and imperialist acts of violence commemorated on their respective currencies: a transnational circulation of shared desires and colonial capital.

Orito and Numè are wealthy Kazoku nobility, the modern peerage system that transmuted feudal authority into a more representative form of government under Meiji constitutional monarchy. Proud subjects of US democracy as they are, Arthur and Cleo are both drawn to their love interests' modernized aristocratic status. On the steamer Orito's high birth and education make him desirable to several white women: Cleo becomes jealous of another passenger who angles for Orito. She admits she finds him "really very fine looking," but she stumbles, "for—for a Japanese" (19). Orito attributes his physical attractiveness to being Kazoku; her attention means class affirmation as well as masculine triumph over his white male fellow passengers: "It was pleasant for him to be singled out each day as the one the beautiful American girl preferred to have by her" (17). Similarly, Numè's femininity is exempted from the American understanding of Japanese womanhood as lesser because she is a member of the Kazoku aristocracy, whose "women were supposed to be extremely beautiful" (86). Arthur has developed a classist antipathy to Japanese women, scapegoating them for their own exploitation by his countrymen. He is even introduced to Numè as "a hater of Japanese wom[e]n" (85). Yet he is instantly drawn to her because "[h]er nationality puzzled him," and when Numè gently confronts him about his racialized misogyny, he excuses himself, "You see, I have not met any Japanese *ladies*" (87). His emphasis on "ladies" reveals the limits of an American democratic sensibility even though as Vice-Consul he is a formal representative of US government.

In her assessment of the ending, Huining Ouyang contends that the voluntary deaths of both the Takashima and Omi patriarchs as collateral to Orito's suicide "sever [Numè's] ties with her Japanese family and culture" (103). Yet this conjecture overlooks the novel's closing line: "Perhaps the most frequent visitors at the Sinclairs' are Mr. and Mrs. Shiku" (220), Arthur and Numè's servants, the go-

betweens who facilitate their marriage and who are sanctioned in return. If anything, the conclusion portrays the hybrid modernity characteristic of Meiji-era Japan. The former aristocracy is weakened, but the US recognition, among other Western nations', affirms Japan as modern global entity. The happy Shikus indicate the promise of a representative democracy in the later Taishō era following the Meiji combination of constitutional and absolute monarchy.

There is a curious aside in the novel's conclusion that foreshadows Asian America: Cleo tells Arthur that she will be taking Matsu, a servant, to the US: "I think she is a dear little thing, and I shall educate her" (219). With Matsu, there is the promise of establishing *Issei*, the first Japanese American immigration generation—at least, until the Gentleman's Agreement of 1907 slowly closed the doors of US immigration to the Japanese as they already had to the Chinese. "America is not your home," chides Cleo to Orito when he expresses nostalgia for the US as much as Japan during their flirtations. He replies, "One often, though, becomes homesick . . . for a country which is not our own, but where we have sojourned for a time" (31–2). Orito daydreams to Cleo about a "home wherein both the beauty of Japan and the comfort of America would be combined" (52), but in the end, it is Numè who will have such a household because husband Arthur offers to take any unwanted American furniture once the expatriates leave (215). Bearing the representative weight of the subtitle "Japanese-American Romance," the "first Asian American novel" presents at worst accommodationist, at best ambivalent, and at least multivalent desires: a romance of Japan, a romance of America, a romance of those hyphenate relations. With this "bad" early entry in the Asian American literary tradition, the beginnings of a cross-ethnic Asian sensibility reveals the bourgeois fantasies of diasporic desire at its very emergence, not as a postlapsarian ossification.

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3. Conclusion: Filial Obligations to Bad Literary Grandmas

Miss Numè of Japan stages dramas of proto-Asian American political desire for a stake in Westernized modernity and bourgeois possibility. Through its constitutive narrative logics, the novel also produces exclusionary terms in its anticipation of model minoritarianism. Consider that a few years prior to writing the novel, Winnifred Eaton had a short-lived career in Jamaica as a reporter. Over a decade later, she recounted that experience in her thinly veiled memoir *Me: A Book of Remembrance* (1915), where she describes her aversion to the Black and brown people there, even

rejecting the romantic interests of a Black Jewish Jamaican official and casting herself as a plucky, virtuous sentimental heroine. Unlike the topics in *Miss Numè*, the Jamaican story would have been seen as “lacking in literary potential,” according to Dominika Ferens (116). In keeping with its foreshadowing of a privileged bourgeois Asian American paradigm to come, the romances of *Miss Numè* sublimate the intense interracial anxieties experienced on a Caribbean Island nation into the more acceptable miscegenation of white-Asian romance conducted on an island nation in the Pacific. Much like the omission of Pacific Indigenous peoples in the amalgamation of “Asian American Pacific Islander,” the Pacific serves as settler colonial backdrop: Orito and Cleo’s failed romance, following Ouyang, becomes “innocuous” (97) since the Pacific’s natural environment is to blame for inciting their forbidden interracial love. The Japanese American romance uses the Pacific as blank space, a metaphorical placeholding for the transgressive crossings of their desires. At the same time, the Pacific becomes the setting of narrative escalation as well as concluding diminuendo, appropriately representative of this time when Oceania suffered from both American and Japanese imperialist clashing over Hawai’i, the Philippines, and Guam (Chang 25).

Wariness of naming *Miss Numè of Japan* as the first Asian American novel denies the representative implications of its influence in a more explicitly accommodationist, rather than proudly resistant, literary tradition. I have tried to draw from Birchall’s scene of misidentification of her “Bad Grandma” a minoritarian Asian American literary studies standpoint rather than a US literary studies paradigm implicitly centering whiteness and its recognition as normative. This method is one of filial accountability and care that shares commitments akin to efforts like the Letters for Black Lives campaign, a crowd-sourced cluster of multilingual, culturally specific resources that Asian Americans and Asian Canadians started to facilitate intergenerational conversations within families and communities about anti-Blackness, police brutality, and racial justice.

Amy Ling’s field-shaping *Between Worlds: Women Writers of Chinese Ancestry* (1989) makes explicit her deeply personal and political reasons for focusing on women writers of Chinese descent: “Like Alice Walker . . . I too have felt compelled to go ‘in search of our mothers’ gardens” (xi) and “to show off the flowers in my mother’s garden” (xv). Here there is space for a “bad grandma” too: Ling does “show off” Onoto Watanna and *Miss Numè of Japan*, commenting that Eaton’s opportunism is another Chinese tactic of survival that privileges flexibility. Compared to bamboo, compliancy, for Ling, “may be a humiliating position, but it is not a permanent condition” (26). Instead of filial piety, reading *Miss Numè of*

Japan offers an embarrassing but tender filial reckoning with a “Bad Grandma” of the literary tradition.

Notes

1. See David Shih, “The Seduction of Origins: Sui Sin Far and the Race for Tradition,” *Form and Transformation in Asian American Literature*, edited by Zhou Xiaojing and Samina Najmi, U of Washington P, 2005, pp. 48–76.
2. For one influential critique, see Haunani-Kay Trask’s “Settlers of Color and ‘Immigrant’ Hegemony: ‘Locals’ in Hawai’i,” *Amerasia Journal*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2000, pp. 1–24.
3. For analyses of her self-Orientalizing see Nguyen p. 47; Ferens p. 154; Cole p. 25.
4. See Julia H. Lee, *Interracial Encounters: Reciprocal Representations in African and Asian American Literatures, 1896-1937* (2011), pp. 81–113; Chang pp. 38–39; and Hattori pp. 236–37.
5. *Miss Numè of Japan* was long considered imitative of *Miss Cherry-Blossom of Tokyo* by John Luther Long (of “Madame Butterfly” fame), although scholars Dominika Ferens and Huining Ouyang convincingly argue that Watanna revises Long’s novel toward more egalitarian ends.

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