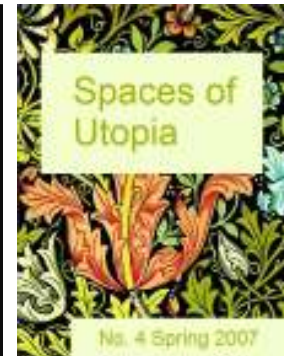


New World Literature? Crossing Borders with Isabella Bird and Winnifred Eaton

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Utopia, as journey in time and space, could only be a splendid metaphor for this adventure in a territory not yet completely explored by the female conscience.

Vita Fortunati, "Utopia Re-Interpreted:
An Interview with Vita Fortunati" (2006)

... the utopian element is ultimately a component of identity. What we call ourselves is also what we expect and yet what we are not.

Paul Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*
(1975/1986)

Stopping for the night at one of the first towns that lay on her route to the northern Japanese island of Hokkaido in 1878, Scottish traveller Isabella Bird soon became aware of close scrutiny. A large crowd had arrived at the village inn before her, and so, she had to accept whatever accommodation remained, a room barely large enough for her camp bed and collapsible rubber bath, and enclosed only by sliding windows with translucent paper for window panes. These "shoji were full of holes", she laments in her travel narrative, "and often at each hole", she continues, "I saw a human eye. Privacy was a luxury not even to be recalled" (Bird 2000: 50). Accessible spaces seem to present a particular problem for the nineteenth-century narrator who must account for a female

character's presence within them. American writer John Luther Long draws a distinction similar to Bird's between open Eastern dwelling and a Western desire for privacy in his 1898 novel *Madame Butterfly*. For Long's central male character Mr. B. F. Pinkerton, "clever Japanese artists (...) made the paper walls of [a] pretty house eye-proof". Then, "with their own adaptations of American hardware, the openings cunningly lockable. The rest was Japanese" (Long 2002: 30). This innovative adaptation performed by Japanese artists in service to an American owner defines a secure, private place where the American Lieutenant Pinkerton's marriage to the Japanese Madame Butterfly can be constructed. Pinkerton gives his wife the authority of keys, but he then refuses to allow her relatives into the house, thereby constituting what he calls a "modern" relationship and isolating a woman within it.

When Winnifred Eaton – writing from the United States under the Japanese-sounding pseudonym Onoto Watanna – revises the popular tragic story of the Japanese geisha in her 1901 novel *A Japanese Nightingale*, she constructs a house for her main characters Jack Bigelow and Yuki that is "a bit of art in itself". She describes the surrounding "green highlands", "the jagged background of mountain peaks," and "a lazy, babbling little stream (...) mirroring on its surface the beauty of the neighboring hills" (Eaton 2002: 106). Eaton indulges in lyrical descriptions of "pink, white, and blushy-red twigs of cherry and plum blossoms, idly swaying" (*ibidem*). I quote from various places in this scene to show how Eaton crowds conventional representations of Japanese landscape and Japan into this chapter that she appropriately titles "In Which the East and the West Are United". Eaton's attention to setting initially distinguishes her writing from Long's, but the pull of the tragic Asian female character is

strong. Japan's harmonious Spring masks only briefly what the narrator calls the "jealous snarls of winter" that threaten this cross-cultural union. One day, when Jack Bigelow is "poking among [his wife's] pretty belongings, as he so much liked to do", he discovers that she has secrets. She has been hoarding money and hiding it in her jewel-box (*idem*, 114). She has been lying to him, and he is shocked when confronted with this vision of his marriage as a financial transaction. He remains ignorant of his violation of his wife's privacy, assuming that objects within his home belong to him. As the narrative unfolds, his assumption is increasingly challenged yet never completely overturned.

Each of these three narratives imagines a relationship between gender identity and domestic space. The development of female agency turns space into place. In calling this space "domestic", I intend to recall a double meaning: these writers draw attention to the relationship between the *home* and the *nation* by focusing on the construction of female characters. Thus I also present these initial scenes to illustrate the domestication of Orientalism. The willingness to imagine and construct a foreign place in fiction can suggest a willingness to erase local culture and to disregard national boundaries. Read in this way, these fictional Japans reveal the colonizing impulse of modern Western travellers and novelists. Yet the modern nation also has been defined optimistically as an imagined community, a community of people not bound by ethnicity but by secular rituals and vernacular literature, among other things. Winnifred Eaton, writing as Onoto Watanna, imagines a modern Japan in which national differences can be reconciled by romance. Japan is a vehicle rather than a source or a reference, however. Eaton refers ultimately to the United States. She describes a place in which love triumphs over ethnic identity. In this

article, I am suggesting that Eaton borrows Bird's perspective on the Far East and challenges Long's subsequent tragic view. She extends the vision of both of these writers when she imagines beyond an initially uncomfortable contact between cultures to a new shared home, a utopian American home.

Utopia is metaphor, a comparison that renders the source word or source location unfamiliar. In Vita Fortunati's words, the utopian journey can open a territory "not yet completely explored by the female conscience" (Fortunati/Ramos 2006: 4). Fortunati's emphasis on the internal journey in itself utopian, allowing for the possibility that the imaginary is not always already colonised. Mary Baine Campbell recalls the historical link between so-called voyages of discovery and literary utopia. She reminds us that early utopias very often refer to an actual place. They are set in "geographical reality almost but not totally inaccessible to the European reader at home" (Campbell 2006: 118). Fundamentally, a literary or political utopia outlines a society that may be realised in the future. On a large scale, utopia confronts the nation as a construction, or confronts with what Fortunati calls "the culture tradition and the national history of the country towards which the author expresses his/her sense of belonging" (Fortunati/Ramos 2006: 8). In the scenes described above, inhabiting a foreign place disrupts a familiar sense of belonging. Isabella Bird's female traveller sets out to observe Japan and finds herself relentlessly observed, robbed of solitariness even in sleeping and, we can assume, in bathing. Privacy cannot be recalled or resumed in this setting. Bird's traveller must abandon this expectation. So too must the reader, and Bird thus excuses the spectacle she presents as lady traveller. Bird naturally must assume a new

character while abroad and, through the circulation of the narrative, this new character also makes a place for herself at home.

Perhaps the critical function of utopia must operate on the same small scale that Bird describes. Paul Ricoeur's attempt to reconcile ideology and utopia, passions and politics ultimately challenges us to shift scales in our analysis of the utopian. Like the political utopias that most interest Ricoeur, an individual or group identity is always a projection into the future. "The ruling symbols of our identity derive not only from our present and our past but also from our expectations for the future", Ricoeur argues in the final lecture of *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia* (1975/1986). He goes on to explain: "It is part of our identity that is open to surprises, to new encounters. What I call the identity of a community or of an individual is also a prospective identity. The identity is in suspense" (Ricoeur 1986: 311). If, as Ricoeur concludes, "the utopian element is ultimately a component of identity", then does an examination of the ambiguously gendered, multi-national characters imagined by the Scottish writer Bird and Canadian American writer Eaton uncover a utopian impulse? I aim to explore this question and the critical limitations of utopian characters within a broader tradition of representing intimate contact – of turning foreign spaces into familiar places. In so doing, I focus on three key concepts: the domestic observation practiced by Isabella Bird, the alternative temporal logic that structures Bird's adventure narrative, and the technologies of identity that Winnifred Eaton exploits in order to patriate the Asian in America.

I. Bird's Eyes

The exemplary Western woman traveller Isabella Bird embeds herself within the domestic, as observer and observed. She does not place herself above the scene she describes and therefore does not assume the kind of authoritative position that Mary Louise Pratt calls “the monarch-of-all-I-survey”. Bird’s descriptions of people and places do not depend upon the “vivid imperial rhetoric” that Pratt identifies in the Orientalist writing of other British explorers, particularly those predominantly male adventurers searching for the source of the Nile in the Near East only a decade or so before (Pratt 1998: 201). Instead, Bird bases her authority and her writing persona on her ability to adapt to new locations. Lodged repeatedly in rooms without locks or doors, she describes her initial discomfort and optimistically predicts: “I shall acquire the habit of feeling secure” (Bird 2000: 46). Her narrative gradually transforms foreign domestic spaces into more familiar places and in the process gradually transforms her female narrator into a self-assured figure.

As the narrative proceeds, Isabella Bird seems to enjoy her developing authority over non-Western land and people; she seems to enjoy the spectacle of herself as traveller and author even more. Bird bases her narrative authority on her ability to prove that she has been somewhere specific, the same self positioning that supports the authority of the field anthropologist, what James Clifford terms “ethnographic authority”. Both the travel writer and the anthropologist follow the cues established by utopia. In apparent but not actual contrast to the empirical observation of travel narrative and ethnography, the perspective of a utopian writer “is always the glance from nowhere”, as Paul Ricoeur reminds us (1986: 266). This leads to a problem. “In creating itself as

the absolute 'elsewhere' of its historical moment, utopia thus detaches itself from the process of social transformation and effaces its relation to the process of history", Jennifer Burwell points out in the introduction to her book *Notes on Nowhere* (Burwell 1997: 2). Burwell writes about "the relationship between figures of subjectivity and conceptions of the social space" (*idem*, 3). She asserts that all social theory has some relation to the utopian impulse, predominantly because theories of social transformation (including Marxism and feminism) construct an "outside" figure who cannot be reconciled to society. The glance of this outside observer becomes crucial to effecting social transformation. Burwell accepts a general definition of the utopian as the impulse that "funds our attempt to imagine the 'other' of what is", a definition that echoes Ricoeur (*ibidem*).

In both Bird and Eaton, we find alien characters who glance from outside, outsiders who are inside a culture. Bird's travel can be read as springing from a utopian impulse, in other words. Bird undertakes her journey open to surprises and new encounters, and willing to test her sense of self and relationship to others, at least to some degree. "Having been recommended to leave home, in April 1878, in order to recruit my health by means which had proved serviceable before, I decided to visit Japan", Bird writes in the preface and goes on to say she was "attracted less by the reputed excellence of its climate than by the certainty that it possessed, in especial degree, those sources of novel and sustained interest which conduce so essentially to the enjoyment and restoration of a solitary health-seeker" (Bird 2000: xxiv). Like many travel writers and contemporary anthropologists, Bird emphasises the novelty and the solitariness of her journey abroad. When Bird published *Unbeaten Tracks in*

Japan in 1879, she could lay claim to being the first Western woman to write about rural Northern Japan. The well-known guidebook publisher, John Murray, published a guide to Japan in the nineteenth century as part of his popular series for English travellers, but “until Thomas Cook’s first organized parties set out for Egypt in 1869 it was not easy to go much beyond the beaten tracks of Western Europe” (Sillitoe 1995: 152). Those who did needed “a great deal of money as well as enterprise and energy”, as Alan Sillitoe points out in his popular account of “a century of guidebook travel”, and most of them in the Far East were men (*ibidem*).

“As a lady travelling alone, and the first European lady who had been seen in several districts (...) my experiences differed more or less widely from those of preceding travellers”, Bird points out by way of justifying her decision to offer to the public this volume of letters written “on the spot” to her sister and a circle of personal friends (Bird 2000: xxv). She admittedly sacrifices “artistic arrangement” – by which she seems to mean a coherent and pleasing narrative – because she preserves the immediacy of this account. Arguing in the next breath that this method of publication “places the reader in the position of the traveller”, she further circumvents any criticisms of rough form or content (*ibidem*). The lack of artistry proves the authenticity. The scenes described are strictly representative, she argues, and the illustrations, with a few exceptions, engraved from her own sketches or Japanese photographs.

The authorial claim made in this prefatory sketch is supported by several now classic elements: Bird’s identity as solitary European traveller, the novelty of her observations, the immediacy of the account and corollary authenticity, the narrative perspective, and the visual record of actual events. In reading Bird, I

focus on the question of identity in relation to the visual, a particular imagining of a character moving through space and observed in place, a character looking out from those *shoji* full of holes and human eyes. Each time Bird enters a new place, she observes and is openly observed. Her identity is constituted again and again through these scenes that register recognition of how she is seen by those she has come to see and how she is transformed in others' eyes. "When I arrived" at Takahara, she records, "a whole bevy of nice-looking girls took to flight, but were soon recalled by a word from Ito to their elders" (*idem*, 97). By the time she writes this letter, on June 24th, she has been travelling alone for two weeks, and seems now to enjoy these confusions. "I wear a hat", she admits, "which is a thing only worn by women in the fields as protection from sun and rain, my eyebrows are unshaven, and my teeth are unblackened, so these girls supposed me to be a foreign man" (*idem*, 98). Bird's guide and translator Ito explains to her that these girls have never even seen a foreign man, "but everybody brings them tales how rude foreigners are to girls, and they are awful scared" (*ibidem*). In the sentence following Ito's abbreviated narrative, Bird moves on to the mundane details of subsistence at the inn: "There was nothing eatable but rice and eggs, and I ate them under the concentrated stare of eighteen pairs of eyes", she says (*ibidem*). With an ethnographic feint – the addition of a specific domestic detail – Bird manages to assert her novelty and simultaneously establish her familiarity. By familiarity, I mean both her expert knowledge and her conventionality, an illusion perpetuated in all ethnographic writing.

An English woman alone in the East in the nineteenth century was as novel a figure for readers as for the locals who encountered her on the road.

Bird emphasises the uniqueness of her journey and her own uniqueness throughout her narrative, repeatedly documenting those scenes of arrival that underscore the experience of first contact. In these scenes, Bird effectively demonstrates how unfamiliar the figure she presents is to the rural inhabitants, and each time, she justifies her novelty and authorship again. She also reveals how heavily she depends upon her local guide Ito to translate not only her language but also her body.

II. Queer Crowds/Queer Time

When Bird records another scene of arrival late in her narrative and further north on her journey into uncharted territory, for example, she seems to have fully embraced her role as a curiosity and has developed strategies for controlling the stories told about her. She has travelled to the village of Yusowa which she calls “a specially objectionable looking place”, where “the people crowded in hundreds at the gate (...) got ladders and climbed on the adjacent roof” and “remained til one of the roofs gave way” (Bird 2000: 159). Although a government Transport Agent attempts to disperse this mass, they refuse to leave. “They said they might never see such a sight again”. Finally, “[o]ne old peasant said he would go away if he were told whether the ‘sight’ were a man or a woman” (*idem*, 159-60). Here the reader may well ask the same question. Is Bird acting as a man or a woman in her adventurous narrative?

As soon as Bird acknowledges that her sex and gender role is in question, she dodges the question. She demurs, in a true womanly fashion saying that the old peasant’s curiosity “awoke [her] *sympathy* at once”, (emphasis mine) and this sympathy necessitates a new narrative. She tells her

local guide Ito to tell the crowd “that a Japanese horse galloping night and day without ceasing would take 5 ½ weeks to reach my country – a statement which he is using lavishly as I go along” (*idem*, 160). Bird’s use of the personal pronoun “I” is not surprising since this is a personal narrative. It is notable in this instance, however, in that it emphasises the solitariness of her journey at the very moment in which she reveals how much she depends upon Ito. Bird’s story situates *her* in the modern world, and from this position, she negotiates her relationship to Ito and to her audience, both Japanese and European. Through her command of translation and translator, Bird can ground her identity in a difference of location rather than gender. She asks her dual audience to imagine a distant national space and redefines space by travelling time.

Bird clearly assumes that her audience can neither imagine the distance she has travelled nor imagine Japan and Europe as simultaneous spaces.¹ She thus foregrounds her superior ability to translate across cultures, portraying Ito as her willing accomplice. In fact, she gives Ito a narrative but not a voice. Remember he tells *her* story as *she* goes along. She masters her narrative in this moment and then directs her reader’s attention to the observing crowd, describing the assembled men and women as “queer (...) so silent and gaping, and they remain motionless for hours”. For Bird, queerness signals evasiveness, a quality that discomfits her, even as she acknowledges the necessary novelty it affords her narrative and its character. She admits, “I should be glad to hear a hearty aggregate laugh, even if I were its object. The great melancholy stare is depressing” (*ibidem*). Instead of making her the object of the hearty laugh that she desires, this crowd acts collectively to subject her to observation and speculation about her own queerness.

“The term transgender can be used as a marker for all kinds of people who challenge, deliberately or accidentally, gender normativity”, Judith Halberstam contends in her recent analysis of the Brandon Teena murder and of transgender biography more generally (Halberstam 2005: 55). In recording her “imaginative life schedule”, to borrow another phrase from Halberstam, Bird in some ways creates a queer narrative. The character development of a single woman abroad does not follow the temporal logic of family life organised around marriage and children. Bird writes about her adventures in letters to an actual circle of female friends and family – a temporarily-constituted reading community whom she addresses directly in the text. Publishing her letters allows her to travel again. Or as Dominika Ferens puts it: “For both missionaries and travellers, writing was a way to ensure the continuity of their respective enterprises (...) Travel was textualized, circulated among readers, and reenacted” (Ferens 2002: 23). Bird says herself that she puts the reader in the position of traveller, seeing and being seen by others: the position of traveller is the position of spectacle. In places so far from home, Bird safely ignores some of the dictates of true womanhood in the nineteenth century. The autonomy she gains remains dependent upon the “elsewhere” of Japan, however.

Presenting herself fleetingly as a transgender character within the narrative, Bird actually replicates some of what she has discovered in this “new Japan” which she insists is “not a fairyland”. Observations of clothing and gender markers constitute her primary evidence for this anti-romantic statement. “The men may be said to wear nothing. Few of the women wear anything but a short petticoat wound tightly round them (...) From the dress no notion of the sex of the wearer could be gained, nor from the faces, if it were not

for the shaven eyebrows and blackened teeth” (Bird 2000: 91). This description occurs in the same letter and only a few pages before Bird’s account of Ito’s determination to learn “good English as distinguished from “common” English” and her determination to “manage him”, chiefly because “I saw that he meant to manage me (...). He is intensely Japanese (...) and he thinks everything inferior that is foreign. Our manners, eyes, and modes of eating appear simply odious to him” (*idem*, 95, 96). At this point, Bird displaces the narrative commentary onto Ito, her cultural interlocutor. We see Bird’s eyes through Ito’s eyes, seemingly multiplying the narrative perspective. Yet, it is Bird who continues to direct her readers’ attention with the imperative: “You will observe”. She says that she wants readers to note how she is “entirely dependent upon Ito not only for making travelling arrangements but for making inquiries, gaining information, and even for companionship such as it is” (*idem*, 96). In spite of this attempt to soften her commanding narrative presence, Bird has already contained Ito: she has taken him under her tutelage and has learned to “manage” him herself.

“Besides providing the license to possess and command men, the scientific nature of [Bird’s] expedition also allows her to gaze freely at male bodies”, Dominika Ferens contends, adding that Bird’s virtue remains “above suspicion so long as the men around her are depicted as her social inferiors (...). Women interested her little” (Ferens 2002: 39). As narrator, Bird enjoys a position of authority over her subject, Japan, and as traveller, Bird lives in close physical contact with her guide and her carriers. As the examples here demonstrate, her travel between cultures develops into occasional travels between genders, an ambiguity that underscores the novelty of her authorial identity as well as her authority while on the road. As a Japanese newspaper of

the time so aptly reported, Bird is a lady who spends her time in travelling. While travelling, Bird also assumes more freedom than she might otherwise enjoy as a Victorian lady at home. She experiences alternative places and alternative ways of inhabiting them.

III. Modern Spectacles

Bird, Long, and Eaton all publish during a period of general fascination with foreign countries, principally Japan. While Japanese immigration remained low in the late-nineteenth century, Japanese characters remained safely far away and *foreign* rather than threateningly present in the West or *alien*.² By the end of the nineteenth century, Japan had proven military power by winning wars with China and Russia and had demonstrated cultural refinement with contributions to the international exhibitions popular in Europe and the United States. This exhibition craze provides a context for understanding narratives of the foreign. The Japanese goods exhibited at the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia, for instance, were “second in volume only to those exhibited by the British”, as historian Peter Duus points out and they “attracted much public interest by their novelty” (Duus 1997: 37). Ultimately, Duus is interested in what he calls *The Japanese Discovery of America*. He emphasises a process of mutual contact and cultural adaptation and talks about “the opening of the [Japanese] ports in 1859” when “a piece of the outside world” was “transplanted to Japan, providing the Japanese with a small-scale model of what the West was like (...)” (*idem*, 21). Duus mentions scale briefly in the context of firsthand observation of the foreign. He argues that information about the large-scale

reached Japan through a small-scale reproduction. An American micro-culture of the Yokohama port helped to define modernity for a rapidly-changing Japan.

The modern nation was by no means a stable entity through the nineteenth century. Anne Maxwell analyses the struggle to construct and maintain European national identities, for example, when she analyses the growth of a spectacle in the mid- to late-nineteenth century. She asks a question related to Duus's preoccupation with a modern "discovery of America": "What were the sources of American's knowledge of their nation's origins, and their amnesia toward imperialism?" (Maxwell 2000: 94). Display of non-European people in photography and international exhibitions reinforced a sense of European identity, she argues, and she folds the construction of American national identity neatly into the same argument. She does not refer directly to David Harvey's similar attempt to understand more recent *Conditions of Postmodernity* in his 1990 book of that name, but she closely echoes his description of a crisis of representation that defines modernity and modernism. The familiar crisis of representation in the arts results, in Harvey's estimation, from the challenge that violent suppression of political revolution presented to ideas of progress, specifically the Enlightenment belief in an ideal society. Harvey briefly considers how nineteenth-century American realist and naturalist writers revise a utopian national rhetoric amid a broader struggle to construct coherent national identity. He begins, as does Maxwell, with the European model.

Citing the European political and economic crises of 1847 and 1848 as a turning point, Harvey explains how increasing globalism after 1850 both "rekindles capitalist growth" and leads to a loss of identity with place. The global

threatens to bury “locality” (Harvey 1990: 264). For this reason, the French novelist Zola predicts the end of the realist novel: it simply cannot represent the simultaneity of a globalised world. What primarily interests Harvey are various attempts to create place when space becomes abstract. Thus, he points out that the late-nineteenth century is characterized by the “labour of inventing tradition”, within which he includes historical preservation, museum culture, and international expositions (*idem*, 272). These increasingly popular visual cultures “celebrated a world of international commodities”, Harvey concedes, but they also, and equally importantly, “exhibited the geography of the world as a set of artifacts for all to see” (*ibidem*). Here again, Maxwell and Harvey agree.

Presenting Duus’s argument in connection with Maxwell and Harvey, I intend to indicate the relevance of small-scale models of cultural geography within fictions of Japan, models also consistent with the scale of popular representations of foreign cultures in the West. After the 1876 exhibition and extensive positive media coverage of the Japanese contributions, as Duus reminds us, “middle-class American parlors and living rooms, especially on the East Coast, actually began to fill with curios, carpets, carvings, and cabinets imported from Japan or designed ‘in the Japanese style’” (Duus 1997: 38). The unfamiliar could be incorporated into the American home. A serene Japanese Pavilion floating by itself on an island at the Chicago World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893 only increased public desire for “things Japanese”. So, Winnifred Eaton is writing from within the United States in a period characterised by displays of national *and* foreign culture (often with the exposure to the foreign reinforcing a sense of modern nationality). Increasing industrialisation, urbanisation, struggles for women’s rights and worker’s rights

lead to an often-nostalgic regionalist reaction and a search for solutions to troubling elements of modernisation. Eaton thus plays to an audience eager for a glimpse of the exotic and an escape into a romance that still somehow reminds them of home.

Eaton's *A Japanese Nightingale* actually begins with a spectacle. At a banquet in honour of the full moon on a tiny island in Tokyo Bay, someone suddenly extinguishes the candles and throws a large mat in the centre of the garden.

Out of the shadows sprang onto the mat a wild, vivid little figure, clad in scintillating robes that reflected every ray of light thrown on them; and, with her coming, the air was filled with the weird, wholly fascinating music of the koto and the samisen. (Eaton 2002: 86)

This first description of the novel's heroine reveals a wild creature. Captivated by the unusual performance, an American theatrical manager pursues this girl through the dark streets, dragging along with him his new acquaintance, our soon-to-be hero Jack Bigelow. The same character whom the American sees as beautiful and, by extension, profitable signifies something different to the Japanese proprietor of this magical island tea garden. He tells the Americans that they have been fooled into seeing an illusion, an image beyond the reality of this

cheap girl of Tokyo, with the blue-glass eyes of the barbarian, the yellow skin of the lower Japanese, the hair of mixed color, black and red, the form of a Japanese courtesan, and the heart and nature of those honorably unreliable creatures, alien at this country, alien at your honourable country, augustly despicable – a half-caste. (*idem*, 89)

This remarkable catalogue of character traits borrows from popular receptions of scientific theories about race in the nineteenth century and popular images of the Caucasian woman in Asian dress.³

It has been argued that Eaton simply draws from the same popular sources of information about Japan and popular stereotypes of Asian women that shape John Luther Long's popular *Madame Butterfly*, but Eaton refuses this explanation. In a 1903 interview quoted in the introduction to the most recent edition of Eaton's novel, she points out that "to say (...) a Japanese woman copied the style of a man who probably did not see her country (...) is (...) absurd".⁴ She suggests in this statement that *A Japanese Nightingale* is not complete fiction. Seeking a field of literature not already overcrowded, Eaton says that she "naturally turned to her native country" for "interesting copy" (*apud* Honey/Cole 2002: 11). Indeed, her style can be distinguished from Long's for its greater attention to landscape and setting, as the brief examples above demonstrate, but does Eaton's description seem real? Within late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century American literature, Eaton's work raises the question of what role romance plays in an age of realism. I am interested in how her female character, typically sentimental in many ways, comments on the instability of national identity more generally.

Eaton seems very much aware of the popular culture of spectacle that surrounds her and that allows her to play with the visual construction of character, linking the visibility of sex or gender to the stability of national identity. When we meet our heroine for the second time in Eaton's novel, she is bowing low at Jack Bigelow's feet, offering herself to him in marriage, and apparently making him very uncomfortable. In this moment of encounter, the reader follows Jack's lengthy examination of the girl, his dissection of her primary characteristics and behaviour. Her carefully smoothed hair has come loose from its pins, revealing a "tawny rebellious mass", and this hair, combined

with her blue eyes, renders her “an eerie little creature that made [Jack] marvel”. Her appearance immediately presents a problem of classification that Jack struggles to resolve through observation.

And yet the more he looked at her, the more he saw that her clothes became her; that she was Japanese despite the hair and eyes. He did not try to explain the anomaly to himself, but he could not doubt her nationality. There was no other country she could belong to. (Eaton 2002: 93)

She cannot be American, in other words, at least not yet, and she apparently does not wish to be. When Jack finally turns to her to confirm his suspicions, he simply asks, “You are Japanese?”. She nods, and his lingering confusion provokes a smile and a demur glance that somehow reinforce her nationality in his eyes. The narrator concludes: “She was all Japanese in a moment, and prettier than ever” (*ibidem*). This image of Yuki, presented entirely through Jack’s eyes, documents her excessively feminine behaviour as proof of national identity. Yuki’s ambiguous nationality is stabilised by evidence of a traditional gender identity.

IV. New World Literature

The specific emphasis *A Japanese Nightingale* places on an indisputable, observable identity is contradicted by Eaton’s deliberate construction of a false authorial identity. Born in Canada to an English father and a Chinese mother, Eaton begins writing fiction as Onoto Watanna after migrating to the United States from a brief stint as a stenographer in Jamaica. She settles in Chicago in 1896 and, in 1899, publishes her first novel and “the first known novel by an Asian American author”, as Eve Oishi points out in the introduction to *Miss Nume of Japan* (Oishi 1999: xi). As these brief biographical details reveal, Winnifred Eaton violates at least one illusion of realism by assuming a half-

Japanese, half-English identity and later shedding it. She fabricates a biography, proclaiming Japan as her native country in promotional material and in interviews. She claims racial memory and personal experience as critical tools for successful writing. In some ways, Eaton's long and varied career makes hers a classic American immigrant success story. Yet, her work has been troubling for literary criticism. In tracing the reception of Eaton and her work, we also trace to some degree the development of ethnic literature in America across the twentieth century. Eaton inserts her fiction into the American literary market by producing and reproducing a national identity that is in many ways an imitation. Repeating the visual markers of a stereotypical⁵ Asian female becomes a way for Eaton to negotiate and negate the messiness of national and ethnic identity.

In part because Eaton does not depict characters who share her exact family background, her work received little attention in the first wave of Asian American literary scholarship in the late-twentieth century. It is interesting to note that her older sister Edith, who wrote journalism and fiction under the Chinese pen-name Sui Sin Far, was less popular at the time but gained later recognition for her realistic portrayals of an urban Chinese immigrant community in California. Her contemporary reception as a woman regionalist and the first Asian American fiction writer precedes Winnifred Eaton's, in other words. Winnifred Eaton – more so than Edith – exhibits the kind of nostalgia for a place of origin that characterises women regionalists; it just happens to be a place Eaton has never visited. Ultimately, the foreign landscapes and the resolutions to Winnifred Eaton's narratives distinguish her from many of the

“New Women” writers who were her contemporaries, however. Eaton’s characters find happiness only when they accept the inevitability of marriage.

Within this sentimental resolution, Eaton imagines a new kind of domestic union. Of course, the lovers in *A Japanese Nightingale* are miraculously reunited after a long, agonising separation, and they renew their pledges to each other, this time with additional emphasis on the convergence of travel and dwelling and the related convergence of domestic identities: “I will take you to my home”, Jack assures Yuki. “I will follow you to the end of the world and beyond”, she replies (Eaton 2002: 171). Their story concludes with promises to be wedded for ever and ever. “Yes, forever”, Jack repeats after Yuki, and has the last word of the novel. In Eaton’s imagined Japan, the romantic union between European American and English Japanese transcends time and national boundaries and overcomes the nasty characterisation of Yuki as a cheap, Tokyo girl. Thus, a Western romance incorporates the undoubtedly Japanese character, opening the possibility of a new shared American home in a way that a realist novel of the time perhaps could not.

On initial examination, Eaton’s fictions seem to do little to further what Thomas Peyser considers characteristic of late nineteenth-century America and late-nineteenth century American realism: “Americans’ highly self-conscious attempts to wrest a coherent sense of their national identity from the cosmopolitan realities that surround them” (Peyser 1998: 104). Then again, Winnifred Eaton might be the apparent anomaly that instead proves a rule – at least for American literature – that representations of national identities are fictions but not unsubstantiated ones after all. According to the Japanese literary scholar Yuko Matsukawa, Eaton actually researched her subject

thoroughly and initially enjoyed a favourable reception among late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Japanese writers and artists. Matsukawa reminds us that “in the decades after Japan ended its long isolation, much information about the country, its customs and its people became available to the public (...) We may assume Eaton took advantage of this proliferation of information in order to construct her Onoto Watanna and inform her stories” (Matsukawa 2005: 33). Eaton writes what her readers want to hear and see. She assimilates American popular culture, and she assimilates the EurAsian character into a broadly Western, expressly American domesticity. How then does her writing fit within the history of American literature?

Many scholars trace the beginnings of studies in American literature and culture to the 1950s when scholars began to formulate a canon of great American writers, and academics produced sweeping analyses of national culture. This first attention to the role literary imagery might play in shaping rather than simply reflecting a national culture and identity was then extended by Alan Trachtenberg and others who wanted to write “critical cultural history”.⁶ Trachtenberg attended carefully to the growth of industry and metropolis, the building of railroads that linked the country and polarised it along class lines, to all of the varied features of what he calls the “the incorporation of America” during the mid- to late-nineteenth century. At the same time, feminists challenged some of the images central to American studies by pointing out, for example, the violent relationship suggested by the seemingly innocent metaphor of virgin land. More recently, scholars of American literature have turned to theories of transnationality, globalisation, and postcoloniality to query any facile embrace of American exceptionalism. Yet, the concept of an ever-

expanding frontier as a decisive factor in the formation of an American character remains compelling. Indeed the very question of American character seems more urgent in an era reaching for postnationalist understanding. In the preceding argument, I have analysed characters shaped by intimate contact on an imagined frontier, specifically the frontier of advancing modernity carved into the Pacific Ocean from the mid- to the late-nineteenth century.

In conclusion, I will suggest an additional context for understanding the construction of the female character as a new American in Eaton's *A Japanese Nightingale*, namely, the proliferation of utopias in American literature. "Utopia, No place, was almost always – even as late as Margaret Meade's [sic] exoticised *Coming of Age in Samoa* – set in geographical reality almost but not totally inaccessible to the European at home", Mary Baine Campbell argues (Campbell 2006: 118). I repeat Campbell's full quote in concluding in order to emphasise the example she selects as exemplary – an American woman anthropologist who travelled to the Pacific and brought back free love. In fact, as Campbell points out, utopia as a literary form first appears in an era of transAtlantic voyages, a period of contact between Europeans and cultures in the Americas. American literature begins in this moment when information about a New World is communicated back to Europeans at home.

American literature has been defined particularly by the habit of finding *oneself* in the process of finding new worlds. For William Spengemann and other recent revisionist literary historiographers, early American literature thus includes More's *Utopia*, Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, texts that "discover to modern readers the origins of their modernity" (*apud* Bauer 2003: 7). As the U.S. borders reach the

Pacific Ocean and continue to expand in the late-nineteenth century, American literature yet again becomes a literature characterised by the utopian impulse. In this context, Isabella Bird and Winnifred Eaton register the impact of globalisation on a small scale. Both Bird and Eaton explore the uncomfortable reality of cultural contact experienced by the modern character. Eaton extends Bird's exploration by presenting messy nationality as a problem that threatens intimacy and that therefore can be solved through intimate relationships. Her new American character belongs most clearly within a utopian tradition of new world literature.

Notes

¹ See Stephen Kern and David Harvey on space-time and space-time compression as a defining feature of Western modernity (Kern 1993; Harvey 1990).

² A perception more often associated with Chinese immigrants, many of whom built railroads from the mid- to the late-nineteenth century. See, for example, Young's *Mules and Dragons* (1993: 1-15). See also Matsukawa on "how Americans understood foreigner" (Matsukawa: 2005: 41).

³ For more on images from Gilbert and Sullivan's "The Mikado", for example, see Matsukawa, who argues that "Caucasian features in Japanese dress represent the Japanese woman, especially since there were few competing images of Japanese women circulating within popular culture to compensate or correct this" (Matsukawa 2005: 42).

⁴ Long's admitted precursors include Pierre Loti and Lafcadio Hearn, for example. See Honey/Cole 2002: 11.

⁵ In its original definition from the world of printing – a duplicate impression of an original type.

⁶ This is Trachtenberg's term. He says that he intends it to mean: "'history' in the sense of concreteness and temporality, 'cultural' in the sense of a totality of relations, a 'whole way of life' ('whole' not as a unified homogenous field but as elements interrelated even where divergent and conflicted), and 'critical' in the sense of skeptical, demystifying, contextual" (Trachtenberg 2003: 759). His struggle to justify the unwieldy term culture suggests a persistent problem with studies conducted under its auspices.

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