Queering/Querying the Text in Patricia Powell's *The Pagoda* and Sui Sin Far's "Jamaica Works"

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Although African/Jamaican novelist Patricia Powell and Chinese/Canadian writer Sui Sin Far were born almost exactly a century apart, their artistic works are strongly linked by setting—both time and place—and the authors' forceful critiques of the British Empire and its productions of colonial knowledge.[1] For Far, the empire entangled transnational links from Shanghai, where Far's English father met her Chinese mother; to England and the British dominion of Canada, where she spent her childhood; to her work as a journalist in the United States—founded as a British colony—to Jamaica, another British colony, which Canada provided with "an ongoing force of women office workers" (White-Parks, *Sui Sin Far/Edith Maude Eaton: A Literary Biography*, 32). Her writings, particularly "Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of a Eurasian" (1909) and "The Sugar-Cane Baby" (1910), provide sharp expositions on the racialized, gendering plantation labor system and white supremacist colonial violence routed through the circuits of empire. Patricia Powell's novel *The Pagoda* (1999), which features a gender-queer Chinese/Jamaican protagonist seeking firm footing in post-emancipation colonial Jamaica, holds significance in the historiography of the Chinese Americas and multiple global souths—including the U.S. South—which invites exploration beyond the book's conventional categorization as queer fiction of the Anglophone Caribbean. Thinking through the Chinese/Jamaican community as represented in Powell's novel in conjunction with Sui Sin Far's stories set in Jamaica, we explore the ways

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both authors challenge xenophobic and imperialist regimes, particularly those predicated on knowledge production and literacy. Far's decision to "fight… battles" on behalf of Chinese people in North America by writing articles in local papers ("Leaves" 223) and Powell's artistic choice to open and close her narrative with the act of letter-writing foreground the ways that composing and deciphering all kinds of texts contribute to empire building and whether, as Audre Lorde so provocatively questioned, these "master's" tools can indeed "destroy the master's house."

Like Ella Shohat, we argue for the Caribbean's significance in understanding Orientalism: the myth of Columbus's "discovery" of the so-called "New World" in 1492 can be tied to the expulsion of Muslims and Jews in Spain in the same year—commonly known as the Reconquista. The events are linked in terms of both discourses of travel and conquest and expurgatory practices. As Shohat claims,

> Perhaps the first modern orientalist was none other than Columbus. After his arrival in the Caribbean island of Hispaniola, he wrote to the Spanish throne praising the war against both Muslims and Jews, and thanking the queen for having sent him to the regions of India to convert its people to the holy faith. Here, discourses about Muslims, Jews, and (Asian) Indians crossed the Atlantic… arming the conquistadors with a ready-made us-versus-them ideology aimed at the regions of India, but applied instead towards the indigenous peoples of the accidentally discovered continent. (47)

Significantly, Shohat's argument hinges on acts of writing: Columbus's missive to the queen; his travel journals, diaries, and maps; Bibles for converting "heathens"; and later, historical accounts of empire and colonization are essential to constructions of race, geographies of the "backward" cultures of the Global South, idealized notions of the "progress" of the Global North. In U.S. history, denied or restricted access to literacy was essential—even after the abolition of slavery—to preventing Black, Indigenous, and other people of color from participating in the political sphere. Twentieth-century literacy tests, for example, served as obstacles to citizenship: barriers to African American enfranchisement and, in the form of entrance applications, impediments to Chinese immigrants' physical entry to the nation. Despite its centrality to the liberation narratives of prominent figures, such as Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and others, literacy has been utilized for "regulation, imposition, surveillance," and other means of control that regularly "do damage or inflict harm on individuals" (Pritchard 9, Prologue).

These considerations of reading, writing, and power are further

elaborated upon by Lisa Lowe and Kris Manjapra, whose critique of state and historical archives inspires a queer reading practice that brushes against linear nationalist histories: "the 'archive' is… a way to refer to the parameters for knowledge, or how we read, find evidence, and make legible the complex conditions of the past" (38). Such a reading practice motivates the registers of knowledge beyond that of the written archive, which "may often be a means of stabilizing colonial power," and instead directs attention to "embodied affective practices implied by material things [that] may evoke other notions of agency and resistance, particularly with respect to subjects and communities without access to written means of representation" (42). Following Shohat as well as Pritchard, Lowe, and Manjapra, and in recognizing the undertheorized relationalities of "Asian Americas" across the U.S. South and the circum-Caribbean, we explore the queer conjunctions of race, gender, and literacies in Powell's and Far's work: both literal, commonly recognized practices of reading and writing and the acts of interpreting physical bodies as racialized, gendered, queer and queered texts. In pursuing this idea of corporeal literacy, we apply the lens provided by Gayatri Gopinath, who asserts that the skill of being able to decipher what is "written" on the body is not readily available to all members of a community; rather, it "demands a certain way of seeing"—and here, we insert the word "reading"—which Gopinath identifies as "queer": "This alternative optic renders apparent the unruly embodiments and desires that are usually obscured by dominant historical narratives" (328). This reading practice requires the viewer's investment in recognizing "abjected, forgotten, and disavowed other[s]" (330), whether in real time or trans-temporally, as Powell's historical fiction sets out to do, and enables her readers to accomplish.

Sui Sin Far's Autobiographical Writings

Sui Sin Far's perspectives on race were sharply informed by responses to her Chinese heritage as she encountered not just individual acts of racism but legislative ones, such as the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act in the United States, anti-miscegenation laws, and the Canadian parliament's head tax on Chinese immigrants in 1904. In her 1909 autobiographical sketch, "Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian," Sui Sin Far exercises a politics of comparison informed by her encounters with racism in order to provide critical commentaries on racial power dynamics throughout various U.S. regions, Jamaica, and by extension other parts of the Caribbean. The title of this work focuses attention on Far's position as one who records her experiences on paper: the vignettes are to be found on "leaves," or pages, and the word "portfolio" also conjures images of sheafs of paper.[2] Notably, however, the collection of pages is a *mental* one, not a physical record; despite the

fact that Far published extensively and worked as a stenographer, there is an ambivalence conveyed about the capturing of her experiences in writing, via what Xine Yao states is "the crafting of artifice to both disclose and withhold" (204).[3]

Significantly, although during her lifetime much of her work was published anonymously, it "often found print in such outlets as railway brochures or local newspapers" (White-Parks xiv). The newspaper publications correlate to her occupation as journalist while the work in railway brochures reveals her proximity to the material histories surrounding railroads and the discursive production circulating through railways. She was employed as a stenographer by the Canadian Pacific Railway Company, which was built exploiting Chinese labor, and the trace of this population's work in "Leaves" interrupts a dominant history that would forget the racialized exclusion and mistreatment of these workers in Canada and the United States.

In recording racist discussions about Chinese people in the "Middle West," Far describes her invisibility as a woman of Asian descent: "Some one [*sic*] makes a remark about the cars full of Chinamen that past [*sic*] that morning. A transcontinental railway runs thru the town" (224). The disparaging comments that ensue are underscored by irony: the transcontinental railway, invaluable to the U.S. economy and mythography of the nation's technological advancement, was built by Chinese laborers; additionally, Far's colleagues assume the composition of their gathering is exclusively white. This short passage also provides glimpses of understanding of ethnic prejudices encapsulated within broader racializations: "'Now, the Japanese are different altogether. There is something bright and likable about those men,' continues Mr. K" (224)— although this paternalistic moment of paradoxical racial tolerance would change dramatically during World War II.

The ambiguity surrounding who starts the conversation ("some one") suggests that everyone present is culpable of racist participation—the author included, since a "miserable, cowardly feeling keeps [her] silent" (224). As the discussion continues, the town clerk states, "A Chinaman is, in my eyes, more repulsive than a [n-word]" (224), revealing an operative hierarchy of differential racialization and "indexing the uneasy positioning of Asian subjects subject to geopolitical developments and situated, as needed, as disciplinary mediator complicit in the ongoing subordination of Black and Indigenous populations" (Yao 173). In another ironic gesture, Far captures both a sense of her erasure from the scene and the racial illiteracy of the townspeople when she records, "'I wouldn't have one in my house,' declares my landlady" (224). After informing her company that she is Chinese, the author "do[es] not remain much longer in the little town" (225). The breadth of this short conversation registers transnational labor histories, riding through on a transcontinental railway,

and coalescing racial hierarchies. Immediately following this "Middle West" section, Far writes, "I am under a tropic sky, meeting frequently and conversing with persons who are almost as high up in the world as birth, education and money can set them. The environment is peculiar, for I am also surrounded by a race of people, the reputed descendants of Ham" (225). The author now resides in Jamaica, addressing new sets of ambiguities. Her choice to use the word "peculiarity" may refer to the "peculiar institution"—a profoundly violent euphemism for U.S. slavery—in a compelling weaving together of the racial dynamics found in two societies in the Americas that envision themselves as quite distinct. Another reading exposes the contrast between those "high up," the unidirectional beneficiaries of colonialism, and "the reputed descendants of Ham," the African-descended producers of the wealth. In "The Intimacies of Four Continents," Lisa Lowe broadens the definition of "intimacy" to encompass "spatial proximity or adjacent connection… the political economic logics through which men and women from Africa and Asia were forcibly transported to the Americas, who with native, mixed, and creole peoples constituted slave societies, the profits of which gave rise to bourgeois republican states in Europe and North America" (193). Sui Sin Far's writing insists that race must be considered in relation to transnational labor migration, and through her immediate juxtaposition of the U.S. Midwest and Jamaica, she shows the close relation between these specific histories. In this way, the "leaves" of the title, besides suggesting the literal pages readers are asked to turn as they proceed along her "mental portfolio," refer to Far's counter-memories to dominant narratives while simultaneously calling sharp attention to the continuity of the historical pages of movement within empires.

Far remarks on "[t]he novelty of life in the West Indian island," where "[m]ixing with people of fashion, and yet not of them, [she] is not of sufficient importance to create comment or curiosity" (225). The author's purposeful use of "mixing" and "comment or curiosity" refers to her own racial ambiguity in a place where multiracialism is not uncommon, especially after Britain's importation of indentured servants from South and East Asia to replace enslaved laborers following the Emancipation Act of 1833. Far reports the same racist assumptions she encountered in the "Middle West" as "[o]ccasionally an Englishman will warn me against the 'brown boys' of the island, little dreaming that I too am of the 'brown people' of the earth" (225). The Englishmen's admonitions against her possible intimate contacts with "brown boys" undergird the racialized and gendered formula for the lynching of people of color in the United States. In response, her self-inclusive use of "brown people" frames a global critique of imperial whiteness.

Correspondingly, an early memory that Far documents in "Leaves" takes place in England, at "a children's party, given by the wife of an Indian

officer whose children were schoolfellows of mine. I am only six years of age, but have attended a private school for over a year, and have already learned that China is a heathen country, being civilized by England" (218). This passage reveals intimate childhood memories sedimented with xenophobic and imperialist knowledge regimes, resonating with Stoler's argument that "colonial institutions, designed to shape young bodies and minds, were central to imperial policies and their self-fashioned rationalities… [with] an abiding interest in a sentimental education, in the rearing of the young, and in affective politics" (43).

Even as she narrates her early encounter with colonial racial logics, "The dissonant moments in Far's sentimentalism allow space for her explorations of transgression that cannot easily be included in projects of political utility: such recalcitrance speaks to how the requirements for sympathetic literary representation intertwine with the evolving apparatus of immigration as a modern manifestation of sentimental biopolitics" (Yao, 205). The presence of the Indian officer recalls British colonialism in South Asia. Far directs attention to the fact that she is only six years old, yet in the single year that she has attended school in Great Britain, she has "*already* learned that China is a heathen country, being civilized by England" (italics added). The "already" carries multiple resonances. As a small child, the author has fully absorbed the colonialist rhetoric of benevolently civilizing the Other. Within this atmosphere, she is also "already" Othered when her Chinese heritage is revealed. Finally, the "already" read in the tone of a child's boast or lament also reflects the sensitive internalization of this racist rhetoric, exposing the school's imperial bestowing and regulation of knowledge. The author's careful observations and comparisons enable her later, in Canada, the United States, and Jamaica, not only to grasp and redirect knowledge production, but also to create a counter-knowledge against, and uncontained by, colonial and racist rhetoric. "Leaves," thus, traces intimate memories, indicating the critical value of transnational encounters for shaping Far's politics and amplifying her investment in producing counter-narratives to the dominant ideologies of imperial racism.

Reading, Writing, and Knowledge Production in *The Pagoda*

Born a girl child into a poor family in nineteenth-century China, Powell's protagonist is not supposed to learn to read or write. Lowe[4] (or A-yin, as Lowe's given name is revealed to be on the last page of the book[5]), notes that their father—a coffin maker and sign painter (24) who "smell[s] of ink" (189)—sends Lowe's brothers out into the world for formal schooling while introducing Lowe to literacy in private. Lowe is raised as a boy by this parent and taught calligraphy while "sitting in the unfinished coffins under the yellow glare of oil lamps" behind the shop's

deadbolt (25). The scene is highly suggestive: the child must be taught in secret, in darkness. Literacy is linked to danger for both, but specifically to death for Lowe, literally seated in a casket in "the *dead* of night" (25, emphasis added).[6]

The other man who teaches Lowe to read and write is Cecil—this time in English. Cecil, the owner of a small ship he uses to bring indentured laborers from China to Jamaica, fills his cabin with various types of texts: "*barricades* of books, the sheets of paper and old maps dotted with ink spread out on the floor, tacked on the walls, and piled high on the great wide desk that dwarfed the room" (69, emphasis added). Strikingly, that cabin space becomes a site of trauma for Lowe in the forms of physical imprisonment, rape, and the forced erasure of their female identity. Literacy thus takes on valences of the traumatic as well. Once they arrive in Jamaica and Cecil establishes Lowe as a shopkeeper, the link between violence and writing occurs again when Lowe recalls,

> Every time Cecil came [to the shop], he [Lowe][7] was *assaulted* with the memories of the ship.… sketches and watercolors, the loose, rough-cut sheets of brown paper scattered across the carpeted floor with illustrations, the scrawl of letters and words Cecil was teaching him.
> … rope wrenching into his narrow wrists, … Cecil's teeth tight on the tip of his earlobe; … and Lowe lying there, no image behind the expressionless eyes, … no movements save for a soft and precise *singing* from *paper*-thin lips. (96, emphasis added)

The brutality of the voyage—initially cast in this scene as violence inflicted upon Lowe's mind (as opposed to their body) in the form of traumatic memories—is wrapped up in images of paper and writing: sketches, letters, and literacy lessons are scattered around the scene of the physical rape. In contrast, Lowe's presence in the ship's cabin is rendered in terms of their voice: their "soft and precise singing" ties Lowe to orality. This sound and the movements of the mouth necessary to create this artistic expression are the only signs of the protagonist being alive.

Literacy is not solely connected to the male oppression of women in the novel; Cecil's identity as a white man parallels Miss Sylvie's position as a white-skinned woman. Cecil brings Sylvie, a woman of undisclosed mixed ancestry, into Lowe's household to serve as a mother to young Elizabeth, the child born of the sexual violence between Cecil and Lowe on the ship. Although Ann-Marie Lee Loy is correct when she interprets Sylvie and Lowe as two people struggling against "the powerlessness and limitations of the gendered female body as it had been defined

in China and Jamaica around the turn of the century" (12), the critic underplays the advantages and social capital that Sylvie's complexion allows her—quite different from those to which Lowe has access in the rigid British colonial hierarchy. Indeed, Sylvie's access to educational privileges and leisure time makes possible her pursuits of reading and writing for pleasure "at the great desk in her study" (222).

In their analysis of a mid-eighteenth-century desk from Puebla de Los Angeles, Mexico, as a colonial object with proximities to sugar plantation histories, Lisa Lowe and Kris Manjapra ask, "what sociality and behaviors are held within the materiality of the desk? … Who had the leisure to sit at the desk, and what did they write as they gazed at the painted maps? Were they curious if the Black workers depicted were enslaved or free?" (42). Where Cecil owns walls—"barricades"—of books, Powell indicates that Sylvie possesses "columns of texts fitted into ceiling-high shelves" (28), alluding to the architecture of the spaces that literate subjects inhabit. Lowe is largely excluded from these spaces. After their shop burns with Cecil inside, Lowe knows that the police—upholders of white colonial authority—will only want to talk to Sylvie, who is female, but white. The officers abide by colonial markers of authority, protecting the narrow passageways of access as they maintain their own forms of masculinist control over the written word: they keep records "with their black notebooks and bristling mustaches" (19).

It therefore seems highly significant when, each evening in the weeks after Sylvie first arrives and "sen[ds] a note by way of either Dulcie, the housekeeper, … or Dulcie's son, Omar, imploring Lowe to join them for dinner," that Lowe decides not to respond to the missives. We interpret this act as a metaphor for the protagonist's refusal to comply with the colonial order. "[E]ach day he crumpled the note and burned it in the fire that cooked his meals, cursing the audacity of these porcelain alabaster people to want to control his life so thoroughly and completely" (107). His resistance appears, on the surface, to be about his jealousy: he is competing with Sylvie for Elizabeth's affection and for the place as "true" mother. The fact that this rivalry takes place in the form of written correspondence, however, is infinitely compelling.

Despite Lowe's obsession with building a pagoda that will function as a site for teaching future Chinese/Jamaican generations to acquire literacy skills and pursue white collar professions associated with book-learning—"law and medicine, public speaking and drama"—as well as Cantonese and Mandarin literature (41), the character has a troubled relationship to texts: in both his lack of access to them and his challenge to their absolute authority. He has been thoroughly conditioned by what literacy studies scholar Eric Darnell Pritchard identifies as "literacy normativity": "value systems that say what is not literacy, who is and is

not literate, what is an acceptable… way to acquire [it] and how suitable is the space in which to do it, and what are the appropriate materials for literacy practices" (22 of ProQuest Ebook).

Sylvie's position as a part of the colonial order, marked by her ties to literacy and the written word, is conveyed once again after Elizabeth elopes, has children, and establishes a home of her own. Sylvie sends her

> a travel journal Uncle Cecil had left there with accounts of some of his travels, a book with soft moldy boards, a flimsy binding, and humid pages that were loose, coming apart, sticking to her fingers and to each other, with pages that had been ripped out, reorganized, rewritten, still wet with ink that ran, smudged, leaked into sentences, that set the room awash with the humming, murmuring sea, the shrieking gulls, the clanging masts from the forests of boats. (65-66)

The "moldy boards" of the book suggest rot; its "soft[ness]" and "flimsy" binding imply that this text is not sturdy or, by extension, reliable. The loose pages, "coming apart," reinforce the notion of the flimsiness of construction both of the physical document and the narrative within. Powell associates Cecil's written ledger with a lack of substance that counters notions of history and truth. The torn-out pages, the smeared and illegible words, the rewritten and reorganized accounts—all indicate facts that have been omitted, changed, and reordered: stories that have been revised by a writer hoping to preserve his reputation, remember the past in a nostalgic way, or fit into the established record.

The Pagoda allows readers to extend these ideas, considering other ways that written documents can manipulate not just individuals, but entire populations. Cecil's journal triggers trauma in Lowe, "set[ting] the room awash… with the sea," causing Lowe to physically relive the distress of the passage from China as Cecil's captive. This power over Chinese bodies echoes certain details of indentureship preserved in historical records. The first Chinese men brought to the British Caribbean arrived in Trinidad in 1806 as part of an experimental colony of about 200 sugarcane laborers from Macao, Malaya, and Calcutta. From 1838, which marked the abolition of slavery in the British empire, until the end of World War I, over 500,000 new workers had entered the plantation system in the British West Indies: 80% from India, approximately 8% from Madeira, and a little under 4% from China. Written contracts drawn up in Asia were indecipherable to the laborers who could not read or write. And, when they reached the Caribbean, they were also subject to an "elaborate system of regulations… in immigration ordinances passed by

local legislatures (and sanctioned by the Colonial Office" (Look Lai 11)—legal texts that controlled their mobility. These mandates frequently involved severe penalties, such as jail time or extensions of the indenture period, for major crimes as well as minor offenses, such as failing to work up to a given standard. Other statutes bound indentured servants to specific plantations; yet others restricted their mobility rights outside of the plantation milieu. Official written documents were also required for contracted laborers to travel beyond an area of two miles outside of a plantation's boundaries. Historian Walton Look Lai notes that this strict pass system "could be utilized either for the paternalistic protection of the immigrant in a new and strange environment, or for the abuse of his labour power by unscrupulous plantation officials" (11), a statement directly applicable to Cecil's manipulation of Lowe's body on both the ship and Jamaican soil. In these ways, written texts served as a trap—a cage and a prison—to the indentured laborers brought from South and East Asia to serve on sugarcane plantations after the abolition of slavery in the British West Indies.

Powell refers to bills "now sitting in legislature" that stymie Chinese businesses so they cannot challenge the operations of white merchants (57). The Chinese men in the novel, "faces haggard and gray," have "fingers still glistening from the India ink that bound them to contracts—two pounds a month for five years at seventeen, twenty hours a day, six days a week" (Powell 43). These contracts "promised one thing when they signed in Whampoa but presented another once they arrived on the estates" (44). All of these papers lie in sharp contrast to the blueprints for the pagoda—imagined by a multiply marginalized subject for a marginalized community. And significantly, Lowe never completes the pagoda; it stands unrealized by the novel's conclusion, whereas papers exist, get preserved, and continue to produce racialized subjects.

Cecil, as a white-skinned European man, avoids official documentation but has the luxury of employing these texts for his benefit whenever he desires—the "laws that had been passed to deter [Black and brown] people from working away from the estates, the high taxes that had been instituted to prevent them from starting their own landholding business, from opening up shops" (135). With just a small ship and some capital, "[he] could disregard the contract system, where they'd have to dole out money per head at immigration for each Chinese" (17). On his last voyage, his boat—which he has received, significantly, as a part of his uncle's involvement in the slave trade,[8] "collect[ing] the African people and sell[ing] them" (67)—contains 800 Chinese laborers: 500 kidnapped ("illegals" without contracts), only 300 with documentation to pass through official channels. Cecil's racial, national, and gender privilege allows him to operate both within the legal system and outside of it.

Cecil's ability to navigate by the stars is described in terms of

literacy—access to a variety of coded narratives—underscoring his connections to reading and writing. Upon inheriting his ship, "in two-twos he could *read the sky* like the belly of his hand, *like a newspaper*" (67, emphasis added). He is able to advance his career and increase his profits enough to have "hired captains to run things and he *looked after the accounts*" (67, emphasis added). His facility with inscribed signs stands in striking contrast to Lowe's lack of access to written documents. On several occasions, the protagonist is described as sitting in "*Miss Sylvie's* study" (130, 144, emphasis added); this space of reading, writing, and learning is not identified as belonging to both Lowe *and* Sylvie, despite decades of co-residence. Lowe "started innumerable novels and biographies of great men, none of which he had the patience to finish" (130). Here, anxiety over the possible exposure of childhood gender identity prevents Lowe from completing the texts, but their unreadability is also significant in that these works "of great men" can never include Lowe, as transgender, as Asian, as non-white Jamaican.

It seems significant, then, that while Lowe's father is initially depicted as an avid reader so deeply invested in literacy that he insists, despite tradition, on teaching his daughter to read, he seems grounded in oral traditions. "[Lowe's] father *recited by heart* and with his eyes closed soliloquies from plays and entire books of love poetry" (25, emphasis added). The coffin maker has "ideas for a book," but the production is endless, never finding its way onto the page: "he'd been making for twenty-three years… a collection of nine short stories, all of which had already been titled, all the pages numbered, some with illustrations; only the stories were *left to be written*" (25, emphasis added). Also unfinished, marking the novel's ambivalence toward written documents, is Lowe's letter to Elizabeth. Before trying to write this confessional to their daughter—the act of literacy that opens the novel—Lowe "had never written a letter before and had had to rifle through Miss Sylvie's *moldy and decaying correspondence* in order to find the correct form" (5, emphasis added). Powell's protagonist is distanced from literacy from the very start of the narrative, distanced from the formality of written correspondence and formal education. When "he pick[s] up the pen. It quivered in his hand, jumped out, and clattered on the desk" (6). Although readers might intuit that Sylvie's letters are "moldy and decaying" from age, one gleans from the start that literacy—reading, writing, and physical texts—occupies a complex role throughout *The Pagoda.* Therefore, when Lowe hears a voice that startles them while writing the letter and the paper falls, "his feet were frantic, searching for the letter, the letter that would reveal him, point him out, disgrace him in front of everybody" (10). The document is dangerous, and he eventually burns it (28). Lowe returns again and again to try to capture their ideas on the page: "Ask anybody, I been writing you this letter for years.… maybe I had to lose every damn thing first and fall

down so low and so deep that I almost hit bottom before I could finish writing it finally.… And exactly with the words put just so" (245). Lowe signs the letter, which ends the novel, but Western notions of completed missives, linear narratives, and "logical" texts are still undermined: *The Pagoda* begins and ends with the letter, creating a circular rather than linear form, and the action ends with the letter written but not actually sent. The phrase "words put just so" suggests the finality of a singular narrative, and exempts other versions and possibilities; however, Lowe's own inhabitation of genders demands more complexity—a refusal of imposed, static taxonomies. In other words, the (symbolic) perpetual deferral of this letter perfectly echoes the nature of flux of Lowe's gender identity and position in the community.

So why create this link between writing, documents, and trauma? Especially when what Lowe ostensibly desires most through the course of the novel is to construct a pagoda—a building, or set of buildings, that he envisions as a "school for the Chinese children born on the island. A school and meetinghouse where they could hold weddings and celebrate festivals" (40). Lowe's friend Kywing, also an immigrant from China, sees no use for the pagoda. Thinking primarily of profits from his physical labor and his eventual return to China, he remarks, "we not learners here, man. We didn't come to turn learners.… [M]y big boy there, talking this *nonsense about law, bout sacred and universal history*!" (40, emphasis added). While Lowe perceives literacy and book-learning as "nonsense," they imagine a space for children to learn "law and medicine, public speaking and drama, and… literature" (41), a space to "liberate themselves"—notably not *ourselves*—"from shopkeeping." And, even further into the future, they fantasize about "this club, this benevolent society writing its own newspaper, reporting on events affecting Chinese both here and abroad. There would even be an obituary section and another announcing weddings and births, and still another reporting on those murdered in cold blood… on those opening up new businesses" (41). The newspaper suggests the power of self-representation: capturing the life stories (obituaries), culture (weddings), accurate census data (births), successes (new businesses), and injustices against (murders) one's community instead of being captured and distorted by the writing of others.

The pagoda stands as a potent symbol of resistance against the "multitude of schools [that] had sprung up [all over the country]. Mico Teachers Training, Munro, Mannings. Down by his way alone, five more missionary schools, two trade centers, and a teacher training college. Why not one for the Chinese so they could learn Commerce and Geography, Elements of Astrology?" (40). The mission schools in particular point toward oppressive colonial history. Powell notes that "Spaniards came [to Jamaica], raping and pillaging with guns *and Bibles*

and the words of God" (71, emphasis added). Among the gifts Lowe brings to Kywing's children when they are young are books, texts "from one of Miss Sylvie's husband's old trunks, wet with *mildew and rotting* in the buttery: three bloated copies of *Pilgrim's Progress,* with passages underlined in ink… [and] an atlas with the pictures faded and the names of countries inked in Latin" (36, emphasis added). Again, these texts not only rot with age, and from the damp tropical climate, but symbolically as well. These books belonged to the oppressor, the white European ruler of these colonized lands. They are colonizing texts, with the power to warp the minds of Kywing's and Sharmilla's Indo-Chinese Jamaican children. The very currents that allowed colonization via European migration and expansion also create the atmospheric conditions for colonial decay—the natural elements themselves conspire against colonizing texts.

Queering Heteronormative Narratives

Numerous scholars have written about the queered family structures present in Powell's novel. Yumi Pak argues that Miss Sylvie offers Lowe "an alternative model of conceptualizing the world: a Black queer maternal that considers a horizontal passing *on*, rather than a vertical passing *down*" (49). Tao Leigh Goffe theorizes that what is at stake in the novel "is not the task of rewriting the past or inserting queer narratives into history but rather to meditate on the production of history and the role of power" (59). Jarrod Hayes' *Queer Roots for the Diaspora: Ghosts in the Family Tree* (2016) provides an especially productive framework for pursuing the literacy line of inquiry in the book. Comparing "roots narratives" from African, Jewish, and Armenian diasporas, Hayes explores how the writers explored—the majority of whom were/are *not* LGBTQIA-identified—create stories of returns to homeland and origins that "queer" the connection "between diasporic identity and its roots by acknowledging their own fictionality" (20). Hayes argues that "the *telling* of the story is actually what creates the origins and indeed, the identity rooted in them" (3, italics added); we intend to pay even closer attention to the distinction between *telling* a story and *writing* one down. Hayes notes,

> *Queer Roots* is… about a certain obsession with beginnings and origins and the impossibility of returning to those origins with any certainty, or of knowing that the beginnings one has returned to are the true beginnings and not just the product of the fiction making that is the telling of the story of that return. It is a book about the writtenness of roots, the impossibility of roots, and the importance of recognizing both. (1)

The scholar's interrogations of rhizomatic theories of origin, "alternative

forms of affiliation and descent" (10), mythography, and the ways that writing works lend us productive pathways to wrestle with the complex meanings of the writing depicted in Powell's novel.

Powell forcefully wrenches apart the heteronormative imperative of the colonial enterprise, conventional celebrations of diaspora identity, and romantic searches for origins: Lowe is almost violated in a legal marriage in China, raped during the diasporic passage to the Caribbean, and Lowe's Jamaican-born daughter-of-the-diaspora is raised by a gender-queer couple. Stefan Helmreich's etymological discussion of the word "diaspora" is useful for considering the implications of Powell's choices. The Greek word for diaspora (διασπορα), meaning "dispersion," stems from the words for "through" (δια) and a verb meaning "to sow or scatter" (σπειρειν). Because the sowing of seeds has strong sexual connotations—seeds are metaphorical for sperm—"[d]iaspora, in its traditional sense, thus refers us to a system of kinship reckoned through men and suggests the questions of legitimacy in paternity that patriarchy generates" (245, quoted in Hayes 16). Hayes also points to the work of Patton and Sánchez-Eppler, who bring together myths of origins and heterosexual diasporas in their interpretation of the story of Adam and Eve: "[T]he simultaneity of the expulsion from Eden and the installation of heterosexuality suggest that Western sexual and diasporal discourses are fundamentally, if anxiously related" (2, quoted in Hayes 18). It should be noted that this narrative from the Book of Genesis simultaneously connects diaspora to sinfulness, disobedience, and *forbidden knowledge*—ideas crucial to colonial regimes seeking to maintain control over their colonized subjects. The colonizer's control of knowledge, typically tied to literacy, makes Powell's complex renderings of reading and writing in the hands of various characters an intriguing anti-colonial commentary.

And here, again, weaving together our analysis of *The Pagoda* with Far's Jamaica writings proves fruitful. Far undermines the primacy of the Christian creation story in "The Sugar-Cane Baby," first published in *Good Housekeeping* in May 1910, presenting a counter-narrative to an ostensibly benevolent colonizing mechanism. The short story opens with vivid, colorful imagery of nature's abundance: "Humming birds glistening like jewels… darted from flower to flower; insects of all colors and shapes droned over the grass and vines; lizards, green, yellow, speckled, black-and-gold, glided… Coiled around a flat, smooth stone was a green spotted snake. In the midst of all sat the sugar-cane baby sucking a piece of green sugar cane" (258). The scene is idyllic and Edenic, with Christian overtones of both snake and child. However, readers soon learn that the site is a sugar plantation, not the Garden of Eden: "The mother of the sugar-cane baby was working in the cane field. All morning she had carried him on her back; but in the afternoon

he had become restless, so she had laid him under a clump of bamboo outside the plantation, and without misgiving had returned to her labor" (258-9). Although slavery was abolished in Jamaica in 1838, plantation owners continued to exploit indentured laborers, most from India and China. Far undermines the conventional Judeo-Christian text by suggesting that *inside* the plantation ["Eden"] is a dangerous space—*outside* is safest place to leave her baby. The passage simultaneously insists on reckoning with the reality of forced labor amid such a beautiful landscape, embedding a critique of the colonial plantation system that might otherwise selectively portray the luxuries of those "high up in the world" ("Leaves" 225, emphasis added).[9]

Far continues to set up the colonial logic that seeks to depict colonial subjects as uncivilized, and poor, immigrant, Black, and brown women as negligent mothers (which justified the tearing apart of families during slavery, and the relocation of Indigenous children to missionary boarding schools)—ideas with which the primary readership of *Good Housekeeping* would likely have concurred. When she introduces two Sisters of Mercy into the narrative, the ostensibly benevolent Christianity of the story becomes much more explicit; the nuns, coming across the child and the snake, become alarmed:

> "Dear little thing!" murmured the younger Sister, as the elder raised him in her arms. "See, how pretty he is; his little features are almost perfect; his eyes as black as night; and his skin—his silky skin is the color of a dead leaf."
> "A Hindu child!" observed the elder. Then almost passionately, "Oh, these mothers, these mothers! What love have they for their children when they can leave them like this?" (259)

The narrative suggests that the Sisters' mission in Jamaica is to convert "heathen" laborers, intimately linked to the colonial system: when they first see the infant, they refer to him as a "Hindu child," revealing their attention to religion, conversion, and race. Far, however, constructs a parallel version of the Christian creation story offered in Genesis. Notably, the Indian woman emerges after the fall, as she labors, in the dual meanings of working the land and giving birth. The Sisters encounter the infant in the "wilderness," not a domesticated garden, and the snake is not Satan, but instead a protector "trained by the baby's father to guard the little one" (261). By reframing the biblical story, the text unsettles religious epistemologies that justify racial hierarchies that cast racialized "others" as inferior and directs the critique instead to the injustices of colonialism.

Far's attention to the transnational dynamics of religion, labor, colonialism, race, and gender in this story does critical work in unsettling

normalized imperial ideologies. She indirectly challenges racializing rhetoric, partly through her refusal to engage in racializing language, and partly through embedding a critique of racializing rhetoric into her diction. The Sisters, for example, take the baby to the convent orphanage where it lies in one of many white cribs in a long white room—the baby becomes symbolically immersed in whiteness. The narrator identifies most of the other babies as "pure pickaninnies, but not a few bore the mark of the white man in complexion and feature. The sugar-cane baby was distinguished as being the only little native of Asia" (260). These two sentences point readers in several complex directions. The latter, referring to the sugar-cane baby as "the only little native of Asia," pulls together the transnational framework of the story, reminding readers of the forced labor of Africans controlled by the British empire and the presence of South Asian laborers who were imported when slavery ended in the British empire in 1838. The term "pickaninnies" is striking for Far, who rarely uses the term "Black" in "Leaves" and "Sugar-Cane"; she relies instead upon more indirect language such as "the reputed descendents of Ham" and "brown people" ("Leaves," 225) and critiques directly racist language such as the n-word ("Leaves," 224). "Pickaninny" generally functions as a pejorative in the English language—"A black child. (Now considered offensive when used by a white person of a black child.) *Caribbean* and *U.S.* A black child of African origin or descent" (*OED*). The word choice stresses the significance of the rest of the line: that "not a few bore the mark of the white man in complexion and feature." The phrase gestures to the ways that colonial contact and profiteering produced and also "rescued" orphans.[10] The sentence also gestures toward sexual violence against laborers of African descent, perpetrated by the white plantation-owning class and, while structurally incommensurate, akin to the brutality endured by Lowe during the passage from China to Jamaica. As Cutter notes, Sui Sin Far is not always forward about sex in her works, much less in the context of coerced imperial violence. The narrative setting, away from the United States and Canada, and its more obvious plantation activity may have encouraged her to write more explicitly about colonial sexual violence (Cutter 87).

"Reading" the Body

As Gabrielle Owen argues, "Queer epistemologies… allow for a profound recognition of *what is real* about the body and desire even when the cultural norms of gender and sexuality or the limits of language make such recognition seem unthinkable or impossible" (194). Notably, Owen's analysis includes norms of age as well—particularly the constructions of limited categories that operate to ensure the management and control of particular bodies. This concept lends itself well to analysis of Sui Sin Far's "Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian" in that

Far frequently resists and rejects attempts by others to lock her into constrictive frameworks of identity. For instance, when Far writes about the childhood experience of being singled out for her Chinese heritage at a party, one perceives the ways her body and physical features are "read"—they are looked at, interpreted, and symbolically integrated into the body of colonial knowledge. During this recollection, Far identifies a "white haired old man" as imposing an authoritarian imperial gaze on her body:

> "He adjusts his eyeglasses and surveys me critically. 'Ah, indeed!' he exclaims. 'Who would have thought it at first glance? Yet now I see the difference between her and other children. What a peculiar coloring! Her mother's eyes and hair and her father's features, I presume. Very interesting little creature!'" (218)

The author's use of "eyeglasses" as the medium through which the man "surveys" her points to the intense racializing reliance on the ocular, the colonizing language of surveying land for territorial expansion, and the objectification of the girl's body, with its "peculiar coloring" as a text to be interpreted. Far's response works to distance herself from this colonizing gaze: emphasizing her sense of violation, she writes, "I had been called from my play for the purpose of inspection. I do not return to it. For the rest of the evening I hide myself behind a hall door and refuse to show myself until it is time to go home" (218-9). Although hiding might appear to be a gesture of defeat, Far effectively resists the racializing gaze by "refus[ing] to show [her]self," embodying and critically interrupting the injury and the reading of her phenotypical features in a way that allows her to disrupt an authoritative, empirical, patriarchal, and putatively scientific British colonial gaze.

Elsewhere in the memoir, she comments on other ways she chooses to subvert colonial attempts to interpret and interpolate her body. Upon moving to the United States, she realizes that generating misreadings is a relatively easy task, though sustaining them becomes psychologically damaging: "It is not difficult, in a land like California, for a half Chinese, half white girl to pass as one of Spanish or Mexican origin. This poor child does, tho she lives in nervous dread of being 'discovered'" (227). One need only think of Powell's Miss Sylvie, who hides her racial identity as a person of African descent from her white husband, eventually killing him to maintain the charade, before moving in with Lowe.[11] She does not reveal her parentage immediately, allowing everyone in the Jamaican community to read her white skin as the sole marker of her identity. When Sui Sin Far rejects the suggestions of acquaintances "who advise me to 'trade' upon my nationality… [by] dress[ing] in Chinese costume, carry[ing] a fan in my hand, wear[ing] a pair of scarlet beaded slippers,

liv[ing] in New York," and "discours[ing] on my spirit acquaintance with Chinese ancestors" (230), readers might question whether she is acting in alignment with Miss Sylvie and others who chose to "pass" for white. Far refuses to render herself as a hypervisible, readable emblem of Chinese-ness, and indicates her polite dismissal of these advisors by calling them "some funny people" (230). She expresses a desire, rather, to bond with the Chinese American community, "making myself familiar" with everyday folks instead of catering to white patrons and other members of society who can insure her literary success.

Miss Sylvie's choice to let white elites and working-class people of color in Jamaica believe she belongs to the planter class should not be interpreted simply as a rejection of her African heritage in pursuit of a sense of belonging with an allegedly superior European community. "Passing" for white in a setting where the one-drop rule dictated racial authenticity would have been one of the few possible ways for a Black woman of the time to climb the socioeconomic ladder. Powell situates the complexity of Sylvie's identity in a type of intertextual framework. Her body is not the only document analyzed by others to determine her status; rather, she is also interpreted through the phenotypic aspects of her children's bodies. She feels compelled to give away three newborns because "[t]hey were too brown" (143): their African ancestry is legible in the color of their skin, making her own bloodline the subject of intensive scrutiny.

The Pagoda also presents the body of Lowe's daughter Elizabeth as a text that requires careful reading. The protagonist describes their daughter's face as a mask with a smile that gets "pasted onto her face" (64), like an item in a scrapbook. Without clearly defined eyebrows, she "ha[s] penciled in a narrow brown arch above her eyes that put her face in perpetual question" (63). The references to pencils further aligns her visage with a written page: it becomes a surface marked with inscriptions. Interestingly, her husband, who is African Jamaican, is perceived by Lowe as "the dead stamp of Cecil" (78). A stamp suggests an imprint to be read, or an adhesive attached to correspondence, again allowing *The Pagoda*'s author to gesture toward notions of literacy. The flurry of references to the act of reading bodies and evidence of writing on bodies again highlights Powell's attention to literacy and the fraught access to this set of skills—as well as to the power that literacy is supposed to bestow—for members of the community outside of the European planter class.

Ann-Marie Lee Loy describes Chinese workers transported to the British Caribbean colonies in the nineteenth century as multifaceted instruments of "colonial power and control": they were brought in as a cheap labor force as well as for the establishment of a "neutralizing buffer zone" between enslaved Black people and European planters (2).

Ostensibly apolitical, and culturally distinct from the enslaved population *and* Europeans, they were viewed as "no real economic competition or social threat to the planter class" and recruited to keep colonial hierarchies firmly intact (3). Lee Loy's article asserts that "Powell's novel reveals a special interest in the construction and mediation of social identities, particularly gender," with the protagonist's "Chineseness" stereotyped as a result: *The Pagoda* "re-inscribes a number of colonial ideas about Chinese alienation" (11). In other words, Lee Loy critiques the way the novel, while negotiating conflicts between an individual's "desires" and "the social roles and positions afforded to their gender," aligns Chinese Caribbean subjects with being unassimilable—not only socially and culturally but in the alienation between Lowe's physical body "and the inner being or soul that it houses" (11). She astutely connects constructions of the self and constructions of the other to the power of colonial discourse: "Simply put, power produces knowledge. It is those who are in positions of authority and have the power to control the dissemination of ideas who shape what we know, or think we know, about ourselves and others, despite the fact that this knowledge reflects the desires, biases, needs and anxieties of those who construct it and are as such, limited sites of knowledge" (13). In other words, Lee Loy asserts that the source of tension does not lie in the disconnect between Lowe's body and the spirit; the true conflict lies between identity as a discursive construction. We believe it crucial to parse the novel even more specifically through notions of literacy, and not only discourse: the ways bodies get "read" or interpreted by others.

The connection between written documents and experiences "written" on human bodies is brought into play in *The Pagoda* more literally when Lowe wonders about Dulcie perusing the dailies. "He knew she combed the same newspaper daily, poring over the same article, reading and rereading and grunting the same profound grunt, though, as far as he knew, she couldn't as much as spell her own name. Was it the announcement with word of the bounty?" (128) He imagines that Dulcie is the revolutionary who was almost beaten to death by the British for inspiring uprisings on sugar plantations and then "paraded naked through the streets, her skin gutted by whiplash" (127). Unable to see her naked body, he is unsure of her identity; he is blocked from reading her body just as she is blocked from reading the paper by laws that forbade literacy among enslaved people prior to abolition, and the post-emancipation system of labor that did not allow for any education other than unrelenting work for survival.

Lowe consistently, but unsuccessfully, tries to "read" Dulcie's body for signs of what's in her mind: he attempts "to decode the moods betrayed by her sordid murmuring, the messages hidden in her solid

back, in the hump of her shoulders, in the sturdy neck. He glanced at her *unreadable* brown eye when she handed him his meals" (126, emphasis added). Once again, the protagonist's failure at reading—or perhaps misreading—separates him from the colonial class that selfishly exploits marginalized populations and seeks to reinforce social hierarchies. He does not belong to the caste that engaged in the historical practices of branding enslaved peoples and indentured servants or cutting off the braids of Chinese laborers—all identifying marks inscribed onto bodies to make them more legible as property. Powell notes, "Planters chopped off their glossy imperial queues and emblazoned, in bold red letters on their skins, the initials of plantations" (45). The shearing of Chinese workers' hair also served as the symbolic erasure of a cultural text—an attempt to eliminate emotional ties to the home country.

The concept of reading the body is obviously essential in *The Pagoda* when it comes to gender. Lowe's father rejects his child when he is able to read femininity on Lowe's adolescent body: puberty leads to isolation, and then to being sold to an old man to cover debts. On the ship, the revelation of Lowe's female body beneath male attire results in sexual assault, and the protagonist's life in Jamaica for decades afterward is spent in desperate attempts to be recognized as male. In the protagonist's anxiety about the community's discovery of the gender they were assigned at birth, escaped during childhood, had reinscribed for marriage and then again during the weeks of sexual abuse on the ship, we come to recognize their body as a dangerous text with hidden meanings. Powell refuses to allow readers to pin down a single interpretation. Can Lowe accurately be described as transgender, when their father's refusal to acknowledge them as an adolescent girl and Cecil's insistence on their maintaining male persona in Jamaica preclude choice? Powell's omniscient narrator always refers to Lowe as "he," even when Lowe stops wearing the false moustache, starts wearing women's clothes again, and sits down to write a letter to Elizabeth that they sign "Lau A-yin" (245). This reclaiming of the female given name along with the Chinese spelling of "Lowe" suggests a return to "origins," but this identity is queer— it encompasses his longing for Sylvie, sexual relationships with both Joyce and Omar, and the "suffocat[ing]" and "smother[ing]" embrace of Sharmilla, the wife of good friend Kywing, another Chinese migrant. Lowe does not fight the hug, but "allow[s Sharmilla]… to blot the last breath from his body, to absorb him completely" (238). In this scene, Lowe symbolically dies—and by implication, is reborn—in Jamaica, "absorbed" into an Indian Caribbean woman's body. The embrace stands in striking contrast to their dynamic earlier in the novel, when Lowe "extracted himself neatly… and stood back," externally jovial but "wanting only to forget and to distract her curling eyes from lolling along the arches of his limbs, *from reading him, a smooth-spined*

text" (35, emphasis added). Fearing discovery, Lowe "thought perhaps she desired him, but he found the idea so worrisome, so marked with frustration and distress, that he wiped it completely from *the shelves of his mind*" (36, emphasis added). The shelf metaphor suggests the ledges for displaying wares at the shop—a core part of Lowe's identity is that of merchant—but bookshelves represent another possibility, especially given Lowe's identification of self as a book with a spine. Thus, Powell repeatedly frames identity in terms of literacy, but not in a single form. Written documents are not the only ones that have value: when Lowe arrives to Jamaica, "His English was spare. He couldn't read their furtive glances and secret smiles. He didn't understand their codes, their gestures of kindness" (65). Clearly, one of the most crucial means of survival is gaining the ability to read the people in one's community, even as he does not fit easily into any community to call his own.

Fear, however, makes Lowe falter and dedicate decades of struggle to writing a "false" text of self and maintaining a complicated gender performance. At one point, trying to calm anxieties about being "outed," Lowe thinks, "Nothing at all could betray him unless he removed his clothes, and over the years his instincts had grown keener and he could detect the precise moment at which innocent conversations verged on violence, when a demure innuendo could leap out of hand, when boundaries were crossed, and at that point he knew to remove himself" (118). This constant vigilance comes at a price to their physical and mental health: "All of a sudden Lowe felt exhausted. All of a sudden he felt burdened by his costumes, loaded down by his masquerade, by the labyrinth of lies, the excessiveness of his imagination, that *self that no longer had inherent meaning and instead was just a compilation of fiction*" (124-5, emphasis added). Notably, Powell shifts from the language of performance—"costumes" and "masquerade"—to the language of writing with her choice of the word "fiction." In an era when laws prevented most women from China from emigrating to Jamaica (42), legal documents and other forms of writing represent restrictions and danger rather than freedom and empowerment, indicating yet another way that the possibility of Lowe's existence as a stable subject is deconstructed.

When Lowe begins exploring Miss Sylvie's land with Omar, their quiet walks are redolent with desire. Passing a cigar back and forth, "fingers slightly brushing… Lowe liked the easy silence between them, and the brooding, pouting lips of Omar, and often *he felt the lazy glow of Omar's eyes traveling the contours of his figure,* and at first the panic would rise in him…. *For after forty years he wore his costume like a glove, a second skin*" (117-8, emphasis added). Omar's "reading" of Lowe's body is as male but a masculinity distanced from certain standards of virility. He remarks, "You've small hands for a man, Mr. Lowe. Small feet" (125) and

states, "You look much better without [the mustache]. You don't need it. Look at me. Nothing at all. Definitely more attractive" (124). Lowe's attraction to Omar is partially based on signs typically interpreted as feminine: Omar is a man "who lived with his mother still, who had neither married nor fathered children and who did not sprout hairs on his chin or on his narrow and puffed-out bird chest" (117). His "feminine hands" feature "soft and crisscrossed pink palms" and his muscular limbs move in a way described as "serpentine" (119).

Decolonizing Knowledge, Texts, and Archives

As Lee Loy compellingly states in her analysis of Powell's novel, "constructions of identity, colonial or otherwise, are inherently embedded in the intersection of power and knowledge" (13). She makes the case for this argument by testifying to the authority that gives Lowe's father, Cecil, and Sylvie the power to "impose identities upon Lowe that meet their own needs" (13-4). Cecil embodies the figure of the colonizer; Silvie wields white-skinned privilege; Lowe's father holds the position of family patriarch.

The statement can be pushed much farther, however: *The Pagoda* highlights the ways that, for Asian laborers migrating from East and South Asia, as well as enslaved Africans, the physical body was all there was to prove one's existence and experiences: legal statutes and other documents had failed these communities in the Caribbean, literacy was largely inaccessible, and in our contemporary moment the absence of detailed records marks the erasure of these subjects from history and conventional archives. Notably, Omar can be understood as an archive of a different type of information—one that is distinct from the colonial knowledge conveyed through writing and absorbed by reading conventional texts. "He knew the medicinal purposes of each bark and bush, each leaf and stem. And each tree and shrub they passed, he dwelled on their abilities to heal wounds and grow hair and pull down swellings and abort fetuses and beat back depression and cleanse blood and maintain sanity and regulate intestines and dissolve ulcers and ease murmuring hearts" (116). Omar talks to Lowe about "vermin and animals" and "impressed in Lowe's memory ways to recognize roots—the bittersweet smell, the acrid odor, the jagged edge of leaf, the five-leaf cluster that looked like a clenched fist, the burnished Indian-orange color of the stem" (116-7). Lowe's admiration for Omar's teachings suggests a key moment in the novel's push toward decolonizing knowledge. As Omar "reads" the landscape of the nonhuman natural world, Powell describes him as printing the facts—"impress[ing] them"—on his listener's memory rather than on a sheet of paper.

Correspondingly, throughout the process of writing to Elizabeth to explain his identity and history, Lowe suggests the inadequacy of the

written word to capture truth, wondering if he shouldn't tell Elizabeth the story "in person and explain face-to-face, so you can see for yourself. I am not what you think" (8). Written correspondence is deemed insufficient. Lowe's lines in the opening letter remind the reader of Cecil's disregard for the contract system in favor of the biggest profit: "the hope is you will understand. There isn't a record of any of this. Of what I am in truth. No certificates. No registration. Everything had to be quick and hush-hush. Nothing was written down" (8). Without official documentation, Lowe's identity has been their own creation, but one that is fraught with anxiety for much of the narrative.

Conclusions

Both Far's and Powell's writings speak back to popular histories of British and U.S. empires in England, North America, and Jamaica. Although Sui Sin Far's notions of racial prejudice may not specifically account for the power differentials among racialized people in the United States, her refusal to categorize and classify people by race—to read their bodies as texts with one single interpretation—is significant because, in that gesture, she refuses racial hierarchies. Her statements on race and class are attentive to the operations of labor and empire, distinguishing her vision of multiracialism from contemporary neoconservative fantasies of "racelessness" or "colorblindness" that willfully ignore historical and contemporary structural inequalities. Partly because of her own Chinese and white heritage, her focus in "Leaves" centers on "Eurasians," but she was attentive to people of African heritage and other racialized groups in her other works. That attention is evident in "The Sugar-Cane Baby" as well as in "A Chinese Boy-Girl" and "Away Down in Jamaica," a short story about an interracial love triangle published in a Montreal women's newspaper in March 1898.[12] Far's writings serve to reroute embedded circuits of knowledge production in the Global South, enriching complex histories of migration and racialization in a transnational framework.

And while *The Pagoda* is most frequently discussed as a story of alienation—cultural, gender, sexual—we choose to highlight how Patricia Powell engages with the notion of alienation from the written word. At one point, Lowe notes that "[h]e had been so locked up in his self, in his survival, more and more he saw how he did not know [the villagers]. Had not figured out how to read them" (212). The statement is easily interpreted as evidence of the protagonist's inability to achieve intimacy with anyone around them: a striking depiction of alienation from others and self (Lee Loy, 12). While this is true, the language of the passage significantly points toward the ways Lowe is blocked from participating in processes of multiple literacies, ranging from learning how to read and write as a girl child to the coded contractual languages of indenture to reading the people in his proximity.

Both authors' attentions to the intimate contact zones of race and sex address persistant, ongoing social anxieties about the policing of "normative" sexuality—white, intraracial, cis, and heterosexual—and constructions of any other acts as deviant. In nuanced and complicated ways, they problematize discourses centering on racialized, gendered, sexualized "others": discourses that are continually repurposed to construct propertied white males as "universal" national subjects. By asserting their counter-discourses, recalling marginalized histories, and creating another epistemology to critique state-sanctioned and -enforced violence, Sui Sin Far and Patricia Powell unsettle the contradictions and illogic of empire and colonial knowledge production. The policing of literacy is integral to the colonial agenda, including the reading of the proper bodies to engage in intimate acts. Although contributors to the world of textual production, which assumes an audiences' literacy, and centralizing print culture and its associations in their texts by including journalist heroes or protagonists striving toward the building of an educational institution, both Far and Powell illuminate how access to and denial of literacy was—and, by extension, continues to be—critical in both emancipation movements and in the justifications for excluding Black, Indigenous, and other people of color from the political and social sphere.

Notes

1. We have chosen a forward slash (/) between terms to signal the diasporic condition of the categories "African" and "Chinese," simultaneously challenging conceptions of an exclusively white, Euro-American U.S. (and Canadian) citizenry or an exclusively Black Jamaican citizenry.

2. Whether the portfolio belongs to a writer or a visual artist is unclear, but the tangibility of paper and notions of permanent records and physically archived sources remain.

3. Correspondingly, Far's choice of naming her collection a portfolio suggests self-conscious curation, as opposed to the messier, maximalist motivations for archive-keeping.

4. Given that Lisa Lowe is cited on multiple occasions in this article, we use her full name (first and last) from this point on to distinguish more explicitly between Lisa Lowe, the critic, and Lowe, the fictional character.

5. Lowe demands to be called A-yin shortly before the end of the novel (222), but it is unclear at this moment whether it is a name they have chosen for themselves in this new stage of life or a return to the name given by their parents until the very end of the narrative.

6. It also seems significant that Lowe's father's coffins remain empty (except for Lowe's lessons) and unfinished; their lack of use renders the burial-less deaths of Chinese indentured laborers in Jamaica (and on their way there) all the more poignant. Powell describes how "only one third" of the migrants "survived the passage—their bones scattered, sunken in beds in the middle of the Atlantic"; along with suicides—those "who walked off cliffs from overwork, who hung themselves with pigtails looped round tree limbs, who tied stones to their feet and jumped in rivers"; and runaways who "were hunted down and strapped up to rafters and left there swinging, for birds to pluck" (45).

7. We have chosen to use "they/them" pronouns for Powell's protagonist, but preserve the pronouns used by different characters, including Lowe, when quoting from the book.

8. Powell's choice of the name "Rob" instead of "Robert" for Cecil's uncle might seem anachronistic to the twenty-first century reader; however, it illuminates the unethical nature of the man's commercial enterprise: by participating in the slave trade, he plunders, or robs, the African continent of its residents, and steals these peoples' freedom, families, culture, and humanity.

9. For a more thorough discussion of the significance of sugarcane production (and extraction) in the Caribbean, see Mimi Sheller's *Consuming the Caribbean*.

10. Laura Briggs discusses how "raising the 'orphans' of colonized people is a very familiar practice," a practice that lies squarely within imperialist "order" and "civilizing" missions (348).

11. Given that both Far's racial identity, and that of Miss Sylvie, are not stable, the significance of Far being able to pass for Spanish or Mexican (rather than "American" white) suggests a different kind of racializing mechanism at work from Miss Sylvie, particularly since the stratification of racial identities in Jamaica operate differently from the United States. We are indebted to an anonymous reviewer for this insight.

12 For a more detailed discussion of the latter, see Cutter's "Sex, Love, Revenge, and Murder in 'Away Down in Jamaica': A Lost Short Story by Sui Sin Far (Edith Eaton)." *Legacy* Vol. 21. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004.

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