

Onoto Watanna's Japanese Collaborators and Commentators

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In the last twenty years, scholars with an investment in Asian American writers from the turn of the century have paid increasing attention to the literary works of Edith and Winnifred Eaton, children of an English father and a Chinese mother, who adopted the pen names of Sui Sin Far and Onoto Watanna respectively, and wrote fiction and non-fiction in English about Asian characters. The older, Edith Eaton (1865–1914), has had a warmer reception into Asian American literary canons: by choosing to write essays and short stories about the plight of the Chinese in America, she helped transform the American literary landscape of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, that present scholarship now shows to be vitally multicultural.¹

Embracing Winnifred Eaton (1875–1954) is a more complicated task. Unlike her sister Edith's writing persona and subject matter, Winnifred's writerly identity and novels are not as easily categorized under more conventional Asian American rubrics. Winnifred Eaton chose to write under a Japanese (or Japanese-sounding) pseudonym and proceeded to produce over a dozen best-selling novels, most of which were set in Japan, or featured Japanese characters. Winnifred not only continued to use this pseudonym but reinforced it with a fabricated biography. According to early newspaper and magazine profiles and reviews featuring Onoto

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Watanna as well as her sister Edith's *New York Times* obituary (whose authorship is attributed to her,)² she was the daughter of an Englishman and a Japanese noblewoman from Nagasaki. The publicity photographs that accompany these profiles usually depicted her in outfits that are or approximate Japanese dress, accentuating her unusual background and marking her as exotically Other.

Because of this unconventional authorial persona, only in the last decade has Winnifred Eaton/Onoto Watanna been resurrected as an Asian American (or Asian Canadian) writer. More often, scholars choose to focus on Edith Eaton/Sui Sin Far, whose life and writings followed more conventional narratives of Asian American literature. It would take a shift in the climate of literary studies and a recognition of the heterogeneity of Asian American experiences and literary expression for scholars to start to pay attention to the subversive strategies of Onoto Watanna. The past few years have proven bountiful in Onoto Watanna studies. Four of her novels were reprinted by different university presses: *Me: A Book of Remembrance* (1997), *Miss Numé of Japan* (1999), *The Heart of Hyacinth* (2000) and *A Japanese Nightingale* (2002). Some of her shorter works, both fiction and non-fiction were collected in a volume entitled "*A Half Caste*" and *Other Writings* (2003).³ A lively and informative full-length biography written by her granddaughter Diana Birchall entitled *Onoto Watanna: The Story of Winnifred Eaton* was published in 2001.⁴ Longer scholarly pieces, including two excellent 2002 studies have also informed how we reconstruct and interpret Onoto Watanna: Dominika Ferens' *Edith and Winnifred Eaton: Chinatown Missions and Japanese Romances* which argues successfully for reading the sisters' work through an ethnographic lens in order to understand their contexts, methodologies and audiences,⁵ and Jean Lee Cole's *The Literary Voices of Winnifred Eaton: Redefining Ethnicity and Authenticity* brings to her analysis of Onoto Watanna historical and cultural themes to map for us productive ways to understand Eaton's life and work in context.⁶

Ferens explains that when Eaton decided to adopt this persona and perform orientalism through Onoto Watanna, "a thirty-year-old tradition already existed into which she could step" and by "becoming Onoto Watanna, Winnifred enacted mainstream orientalist fantasies, exploiting the discourse that feminized and aestheticized Japan. Her gender became a major selling point in the publishing marketplace."⁷ As Oscar Wilde reminds his readers, "the whole of Japan is a pure invention. There

is no such country, there are no such people. [. . .] the Japanese people are, as I have said, simply a mode of style, an exquisite fancy of art.”⁸ That many Westerners saw Japan as pure invention gave Onoto Watanna the creative space in which to write her novels; by seeming to enact orientalist fantasies, she also created covert double narratives that resisted and rewrote the very stereotypes that tried to define her and what she wrote.

In reality, Japan was neither pure nor solely an invention. In the decades after Japan ended its long isolation, much information about the country, its customs and its people became available to the public. A cursory look at *Poole's Index to Periodical Literature* and its supplements which indexes articles, editorials and reviews from American periodicals from 1802 to 1906, shows that the number of articles about Japan increased steadily over the nineteenth century. The third supplement (for the years 1892–1896) lists over 170 entries about Japan and things Japanese. By the time we get to the twentieth century, the fifth supplement (for the years 1902–1906) includes over 500 entries.⁹ We may assume Eaton took advantage of this proliferation of information in order to construct her Onoto Watanna and inform her stories, especially now that we know from Birchall's biography that Eaton never traveled to or lived in Japan or had any biological ties to the country.

Writing narratives set in a country of which she had no first-hand knowledge must have been hard enough for Eaton; constructing and maintaining the exotic persona of the half-Japanese Onoto Watanna was probably daunting as well. Indeed, a closer look at Eaton's self-representation reveals the effort that went into this transformation. It is too facile to assume that this elaborate performance was divorced from direct assistance, comment or criticism by Japanese artists living in the United States at the turn of the century. In this essay, I wish to explore Eaton's personal and professional connections to Japanese in the United States who served as collaborators and commentators of her work as I examine outward markers of her Japaneseness, such as her name and a facsimile of her autograph as well as her publicity photographs.

I. THE COMMENTATORS

Onoto Watanna had attracted the attention and interest of at least two Japanese writers during her lifetime and many Japanese scholars posthumously. In fact, articles written by two Japanese scholars, Katsuhiko

Takeda and Yoshiro Ando, predate by over a decade what most Asian American literature scholars consider the first influential scholarly essays on Watanna by S. E. Solberg and Amy Ling.¹⁰ Takeda published “Onoto Watanna; A Forgotten Writer” in the English-language journal *Orient/West Magazine* in 1964.¹¹ Understandably, having read the available published profiles of her, he is under the impression that Onoto Watanna was born in Nagasaki and lived there as a child. Interestingly enough, he introduces her as a Canadian writer and does not allude to her biracial background; he attributes her ease with writing about Japan to her childhood experiences. After a brief biography, he introduces readers to what he considers Watanna’s best novel, *A Japanese Nightingale*. In his evaluation of the novel, Takeda waxes enthusiastic: “The origin of Onoto Watanna’s romantic dimension is traceable, in spirit, to the French romantic school. Some readers will complain about the novel’s excessive sentimentality but this should not prevent us from estimating it highly on its esthetic merits.”¹² He also suggests that the reason why Watanna’s works have been neglected is because she “lived in a period which marked the decline of romanticism and the rise of realism.”¹³ He ends his essay by noting that “[a]s an early introducer of Japan, Onoto Watanna belongs in the same ranks with Lafcadio Hearn and Pierre Loti, even if she is inferior to them in the field of imaginative literature.”¹⁴

Ando’s two-page article entitled “Onoto Watanna to iu Sakka” [“A Writer called Onoto Watanna”] written in Japanese in 1970¹⁵ augments and corrects Takeda’s essay in terms of biographical details which he gleaned from a correspondence with Winnifred Eaton’s daughter, Doris Rooney, who met with Ando and Takeda during her travels in Japan and Southeast Asia earlier that year. His essay, in addition to providing a more detailed overview of Eaton’s life (for instance, Ando explains that Winnifred’s mother Grace was Chinese but educated in England) and career, also presents Rooney’s explanation of her mother’s pen name and how it came into being, a point I will discuss in detail later in this essay. Ando’s essay ends with the following thought: “[. . .] even though, as [Kafu] Nagai says, she may not be a first-rate writer, I do think that these works, filled with a beautiful style of writing, entertaining plots and dramatic effects, ought to be read more, especially in Japan.”¹⁶

Both Takeda and Ando delight in Onoto Watanna not only because she wrote of Japan but also because they, like later scholars, were elated to rediscover a writer who had been popular during her lifetime but then fell into oblivion. Their assessments of Onoto Watanna’s prose, unlike current readings of her made through the lens of ethnic studies, focus on

her style and possible connections to other traditions such as romanticism and Japanese literature. As both Takeda and Ando note in their essays, Onoto Watanna was known at least to one Japanese writer of her generation, Kafu Nagai (1879–1959). Nagai, who later established himself as one of the most important Japanese writers of the first half of the twentieth century, traveled through the United States and France as a young man. It was during his stay in Seattle that he read a Watanna novel and was charmed. On February 26, 1904, he wrote in his diary:¹⁷

Read a novel recently published in America entitled *The Heart of Hyacinth*. Written by accomplished authoress Onoto Watanna, it is a sweet love story set in Japan's Matsushima and portrays an English orphan girl. It is not particularly a masterpiece but the chaste prose and artistic sentiment is worth savoring. The greater part of my curiosity centered on the Japanese setting and the depiction of Japanese manners so I finished reading the 200-odd pages with pleasure in a single day.¹⁸

Takeda suggests that Nagai, who “had a taste for the exotic which is one of the elements of romanticism” and “belonged to the school of art-for-art's-sake [which is] a literary school [. . .] he founded in Japan” was influenced by Watanna and claims that some pieces in Nagai's *American Stories* “make this fact unmistakable.”¹⁹

Another name of a Japanese writer that comes to mind is Yone Noguchi (1875–1947), the Japanese poet who was known for his numerous collections of poetry in English. Noguchi dropped out of Keio University and traveled to California where he eventually started writing and publishing poems in English, winning acclaim both in the United States and Great Britain. After Noguchi left California, he made his way to New York where he continued to write poems, essays and novels. On his way there, he spent some time in Chicago where he met and became friends with Onoto Watanna.

In *Yone Noguchi: Collected English Letters*,²⁰ Watanna is mentioned several times, twice by Frank Putnam, a friend with whom Noguchi stayed during part of his visit to Chicago, once by himself and another time by a woman named Ann Water. Putnam, a journalist and sometime poet, published a slim volume of poems in 1898 dedicated to Winnifred Eaton with an introduction by Onoto Watanna,²¹ so we may surmise that he was in on her masquerade though in his letters to Noguchi, he refers to her as Onoto. In a June 19, 1900 letter to Charles W. Stoddard, Noguchi gives her address as the one where letters to him should be sent because it is

where my dearest friend lives and I visit nearly every evening. She is a half caste woman with the name Onoto Watanna; her mother was Japanese, father being an English [sic]; she herself being very bright writes now and then very clever short stories for magazines. Did you ever hear her name? Onoto Watanna, you never heard before? She published one book from Rand McNally & Co., last year, I believe. She is awfully clever, but she has no sound mind and sweet philosophy. She is woman after all!²²

It is clear here that he at least in this context subscribes to the public version of Eaton's persona; though he later becomes disenchanted with her, here his artless enthusiasm for his new friend is full of youthful eagerness and he seems impressed by her being a published writer. Her success as a writer of Asian descent in the United States must have been heartening to Noguchi. One wonders if he knew or suspected that she was not of Japanese descent. One also wonders what they did during those evening visits. Was Noguchi telling her about Japan? Was Onoto Watanna able to gather information about Japan from him?

II. INVENTING A NAME

Though it is a marker of her supposed Japanese heritage, the pseudonym "Onoto Watanna" has puzzled scholars for years. Is it Japanese or simply Japanese sounding? Does it mean anything? Does it have to? According to Ando, her first name, "Onoto," is found in a Lafcadio Hearn story and is Japanese. But while "Onoto" is a Japanese name, "Watanna," though written in Japanese, merely sounds Japanese and is an invented name. As Ando relates, Doris Rooney explained that "Watanna" was abbreviated from "Watanabe," a common Japanese surname.²³ This sounds plausible, since "Watanabe" is more likely to be mispronounced than not (since English speakers may consider the last "e" silent though it is not);

Fig. 1. A facsimile of Onoto Watanna's autograph from the frontispiece to *The Wooing of Wistaria* (New York: Harper, 1902).

“Watanna” is less likely to be mangled. A facsimile of her autograph appears in the frontispiece of her novel, *The Wooing of Wistaria* (1902).²⁴ The signature is written in Japanese, the two characters reading “Watanna” using kanji or Chinese characters coming first followed by the three reading “Onoto” in hiragana phonetic characters (figure 1). The first kanji used in her autograph to write her last name reflects that etymology: the character for “Wata” (“to cross”) here is the same that those with the last name “Watanabe” would use. It is the combination with the second character, “Na” meaning “name,” that makes her last name significant. As I noted in a previous essay, this cross-naming “foreshadows Winnifred Eaton’s career as a tricksterlike figure who assumes multiple identities in order to straddle different spheres and disrupt the sense of reality and complacency in those worlds.” As a trickster, she crosses boundaries to challenge public assumptions about race, gender and literary production.²⁵ Her pen name, therefore, playfully implies she is a trickster and discloses the presence of a bilingual collaborator.

The penmanship of the last name is such that we can see that the pen makes the requisite strokes in more or less the right order. However, the extra lines and awkward balance which are, even within the more generous boundaries of cursive writing, indicators that though perhaps the person who wrote this had samples in clear Japanese handwriting to copy, s/he was doing just that: copying without comprehending. The calligraphers I consulted separately agreed on this point since the distortions in the writing seem as if they are the result of the hesitant starting and stopping of copying rather idiosyncratic messy handwriting.

This is confirmed in how the first name is written. The hiragana characters correspond to those used for names in the late nineteenth century (here, the “to” is a cursive version of a kanji character which differs from the one in current use). However, there are glaring errors: the first “O” character is strangely twisted around, giving it a look akin to the reversed “r” in the name of that ubiquitous American toy store. The “no” is fine but the “to” is missing a cursive curve. All in all, it is the mangled “O” that is the give-away and strongly suggests that these characters were written by, if not Eaton herself, someone who was not literate in Japanese.²⁶

It would be a serendipitous discovery if one could prove that it was Noguchi who had christened Winnifred Eaton as Onoto Watanna and also bestowed upon her the clever cross-naming Chinese characters for her name as well as examples of how to write her name in Japanese, not

only because it would link these two writers more firmly but also because it would give a local habitation and a name to one of the invisible Japanese collaborators who helped to maintain her persona, for surely she could not have done all of this on her own. Unfortunately, her use of the pseudonym predates their first meeting, and so we must conclude he was not responsible for naming her. However, Noguchi was already a friend by the time her novel *The Wooing of Wistaria* (1902) was published with a frontispiece featuring a facsimile of what purports to be her autograph so it may be possible that he was the one to put characters to the sounds of her name. If so, perhaps he was the one who taught her to write her pen name in Japanese during their evenings together, though whether or not it was his handwriting she copied is impossible to determine.²⁷ In any case, the presence of this autograph indicates that Eaton did take her half-Japanese persona seriously enough to want to make Onoto Watanna a tangible reality through the writing of her name.

III. THE COLLABORATORS

Eaton was not known for her literacy in Japanese so if this is indeed Onoto Watanna's handwriting, who showed her how to write in Japanese? Other than Noguchi, some professional connections immediately come to mind: Kiyokichi Sano, Genjiro Kataoka (also known as Genjiro Yeto) and Gazo Foudji, three illustrators for her books who were Japanese. I have yet to find references to Kiyokichi Sano who illustrated *The Heart of Hyacinth* (1903) and *Daughters of Nijo* (1904) but Gazo Foudji who illustrated *The Love of Azalea* (1904) and Genjiro Kataoka who not only illustrated *Tama* (1910) but also *A Japanese Nightingale* (1901) under the name Genjiro Yeto, were known both in Japan and abroad as practitioners of western-style painting.

Gazo Foudji, or Fuji Gazo (also known as Masazo) as he is sometimes listed,²⁸ was born in what is now Oita prefecture, Japan in 1853. He enrolled in the Ministry of Industry and Commerce's Fine Arts School (Kobu Bijutsu Gakko) in Tokyo in 1876 where he studied painting under Antonio Fontanesi and Acchile San Giovanni, two Italian painters who were responsible for putting together the first western-style painting curriculum in Japan. In 1880, he was awarded a government scholarship to study abroad in Paris. His mentor there was Raphael Collin. Foudji is perhaps best known not for his own work (though he did win awards both in Japan and France for his paintings) but for convincing a young

Seiki Kuroda, who later became one of the leading Japanese artists of the turn of the century, to quit his law studies and become a painter. Foudji later worked for the porcelain factories at Sevres, married a Frenchwoman and moved to the United States to continue composing designs for porcelain companies. Most reference sources list this much and add that he died in Yonkers, New York in 1916. That he worked as an illustrator is clear from Onoto Watanna's books. He also designed the cover for the June 1904 issue of *The Ladies' Home Journal* so that it looked like a traditional Japanese ukiyoe woodblock print of a young woman standing in a garden. That a leading women's magazine which influenced the taste of its readership would choose such cover art suggests how pervasive and popular Japonisme was at the time in the United States.

Genjiro Kataoka²⁹ was born in the porcelain-manufacturing town of Arita, Saga prefecture, Japan in 1867. Records show that he was adopted by the Ezoe family but for some reason, he chose to be known by the surname "Yeto" in the United States. Since he went back to using "Kataoka" after the adoption was dissolved, one book he illustrated for Onoto Watanna uses the surname "Yeto" and the other, "Kataoka." Yeto obtained a government scholarship to study abroad in the United States in 1889. Living at the Bush-Holley House in Greenwich, Connecticut and associating with artists such as Childe Hassam who frequented this part of Connecticut, Yeto studied with the American Impressionist painter, J. H. Twachtman who was also under contract with Scribners as an illustrator from 1888 to 1893; perhaps it was through Twachtman's connections that Kataoka later worked as an illustrator. In 1895, he enrolled in the Art Students League in New York City. He had his first solo art exhibition in New York in 1901. A member of the New York Watercolor Club, he also exhibited at the Salmagundi Club in New York where he was a prize winner in 1905. He married in 1904 and returned to Japan for good in 1911 to work at the Telecommunications Museum in Tokyo. He does not seem to have been very visible as an artist during the last part of his life. He died in 1924 of tuberculosis.

Unlike Foudji, who apparently had a career designing porcelain, Yeto-Kataoka, though also a watercolor artist, seems to have been primarily an illustrator, drawing not only for Watanna's books but also for those of Noguchi, Lafcadio Hearn and others that had "oriental" themes. He was also in charge of designing the costumes for David Belasco's *The Darling of the Gods* (1902) after serving as an advisor for costumes and

props for *Madame Butterfly* (1902), both Broadway hits with Japanese settings and characters. However, both artists seem well-versed in the American idiom of turn-of-the-century book illustration so their work is not extraordinarily different in composition and subject matter from those done by Watanna's non-Asian artists, such as L. W. Zeigler, who was responsible for the illustrations in *A Japanese Blossom* (1906). In fact, these two Japanese artists, because they were trained in France and the United States respectively, could not have been blind to the western fascination for things oriental. However, a closer look reveals that their illustrations differ from those of their non-Asian counterparts because they integrate techniques characteristic of Japanese illustrations and woodblock prints of the late nineteenth century; given that the rise of *Japonisme* depended on the careful study and imitation of such woodblock prints, no wonder their artwork deftly catered to the orientalist desires of the American public without disrupting conventional ideas of book illustration.

That Sano, Foudji and Kataoka-Yeto were Japanese and had Japanese names was an asset for both the publishers and Eaton herself: their names, coupled with hers, reinforced not only Eaton's fictive persona but also helped to exoticize the contents of her books. Conversely, from the point of view of the Japanese illustrators, having their work published by major American publishing houses was probably a plus. That through her works, she provided work opportunities for Japanese artists suggests her redefining the parameters of publishing practices while making sure she also profited.

IV. INVENTING A LOOK

From early on in her writing career, Onoto Watanna received a great amount of attention though there was much confusion about her name as well as her ethnic and racial background. An early mention of her in *Current Literature* from 1897 tells us of a Japanese woman writer named Kitishima Kata Hasche, "a clever Japanese girl who is living in Chicago at present and winning fame by writing for the magazines and newspapers of Chicago and the East under the pen name of Otano [sic] Watanna [. . .] the two names meaning the same thing but belonging to different Japanese dialects."³⁰ Later, when her first novel, *Miss Numé of Japan*, is published, her biracial identity is more firmly established. In 1899, the journal *Book News* notes:

Among those who have recently appeared none has sprung more rapidly into notice as a successful short-story writer than Onoto Watanna, the young half-Japanese, half-English girl, who makes her home in Chicago. [. . .] In appearance, Miss Watanna is decidedly Japanesque with the black hair and eyes of her countrywomen, but in stature she is taller than they. In her simplicity of speech and belief that all mankind is as honest as herself, she resembles the fascinating characters of her own stories.³¹

Though this passage and other passages in book reviews and profiles make mention of the fact that she is half Japanese and half English, Onoto Watanna is more often than not described as if she were simply Japanese. On a practical level, this ignores mixed race identity, something Eaton insists upon highlighting, both in the persona of Onoto Watanna and as a running theme in many of her works. Nevertheless, Eaton perseveres and in fact, her choice to make Onoto Watanna a half-Japanese and half-English writer was a bold political move that reveals canny insight into how Americans understood foreigners.

As Robert G. Lee argues in his book *Orientalism: Asian Americans in Popular Culture*, there is a political difference between the terms foreign and alien, though they are often used interchangeably: “‘Foreign’ refers to that which is outside or distant, while ‘alien’ describes things that are immediate and present yet have a foreign nature or allegiance. [. . .] foreigners, whose presence is defined as temporary, are seen as innocuous and even desirable.” However, Lee explains, “[a]liens, outsiders who are inside, disrupt the internal structure of a cultural formation as it defines itself vis-à-vis the Other; their presence constitutes a boundary crisis.”³² Onoto Watanna’s half-Japanese, half-English background makes her doubly “foreign”; this combined with her ethnic cross-dressing triggers references to Japanese countrywomen, compounding her foreignness in print. That she is in reality an “alien” and at the same time a trickster, is masked effectively in a double narrative of racial representation.

The photograph that accompanies this review shows the author wearing a loose kimono and holding an enormous fan behind her head (figure 2). The staged artificial pose and props as well as her youth and uncertain expression highlight the incongruity between this portrait of an author and those more conventional and staid portraits of other authors, who mostly were white. However, this staged pose starts to make sense if we read this photograph as one that mimics or is informed by photographs such as those of actors performing in Gilbert and Sullivan’s *The*



Fig. 2. Portrait of Onoto Watanna from *Book News* 17 (1899): 451.



Fig. 3. Geraldine Ulmar as Yum-Yum. Portrait no. 2 of a set of seven cabinet portraits of D'Oyley Carte's English "Mikado" Company. (From the author's collection.)

Mikado that were widely available at the turn of the century. For instance, this photograph of Geraldine Ulmar as Yum-Yum (figure 3) is part of a set of seven cabinet portraits of D'Oyley Carte's English "Mikado" company that consumers could obtain if they sent in to the manufacturer fifteen wrappers of Dobbins' Electric Soap. What is interesting here is that the image of a white woman then stands in for the Japanese one and 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. The following advertisements, called trade cards, copied the Mikado photograph and gave birth to other similar trade cards that disseminated and naturalized the idea that the loose kimono, the oversized fan and Caucasian features were the hallmarks of Japanese womanhood (figures 4 and 5).



Fig. 4. Trade card for Chin Lee & Co., San Francisco. (From the author’s collection.) Fig. 5. Trade card for Gilt Edge Shoe Gloss, Whittemore Bros. & Co., Boston. (From the author’s collection.)

In such a cultural environment, no wonder Eaton’s cross-dressing was accepted more or less seamlessly. Birchall notes that even the Eaton family was not exempt from the craze for *The Mikado* and dressing in costumes reminiscent of the light opera. She notes that Eaton’s older sisters were

mad about Gilbert and Sullivan, and a passion for Japanese styles hit Montreal hard, culminating with an elaborate production of *The Mikado* in 1886. [. . .] A family photograph shows three of the Eaton sisters—Sara, Rose, and May—waving fans and wearing kimonos about this time. The most enthusiastically Japanese of them all, Winnifred, is not among them, but perhaps she took the picture.³³

Eaton was a quick study. With the exception of the first Mikado-influenced photo, the other photos show a clear progression from that first image of Onoto Watanna as a Mikado chorus girl to wanting to present a credible image of a Japanese woman who is not a geisha. In figure 6, from a 1901 “Notes of a Bookman” column of *Harper’s Weekly*, all showiness from the 1899 photograph is erased and we see a poised and refined young woman wearing a kimono and looking into the camera.³⁴

There is none of the silliness and caricature that accompanies Mikado-influenced poses. We can only guess that this transformation is the result of advice from those who were acquainted with Japanese women and their dress but in any case, here Eaton and her publicists have mastered how to manipulate the photographic image to create a credible subject that does not need to stoop to obvious forms of yellowface to achieve their goal. The third photograph, the frontispiece to *The Wooing of Wistaria* (1902) continues in this vein and adds an air of studiousness: this is Onoto Watanna, the authoress, holding a book and wearing an outfit that is evocative of the hakama overskirts women scholars wore in Japan over a century ago (figure 7).



Fig. 6. Portrait of Onoto Watanna from "Notes of a Bookman" *Harper's Weekly* 45 (Dec. 21, 1901): 1300.

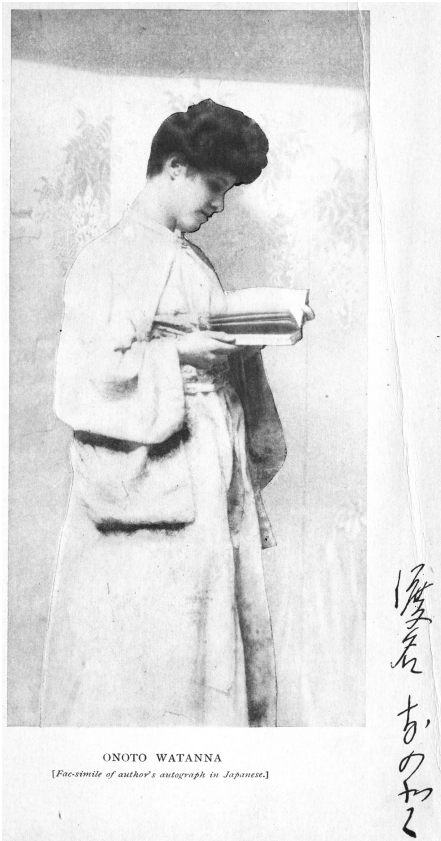


Fig. 7. Portrait of Onoto Watanna from the frontispiece to *The Wooing of Wistaria* (New York: Harper, 1902).

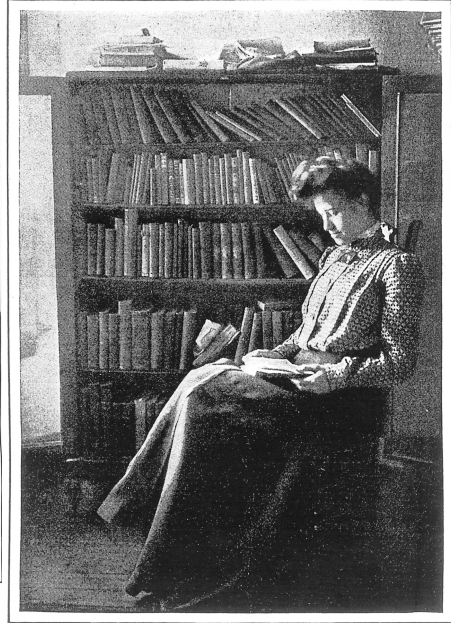
Compared to the middle- and upper-class white women in the early twentieth century whose performance of Asian-ness was, according to Mari Yoshihara, “very much congruent with their identity as American women,”³⁵ Onoto Watanna’s cross-dressing had different concerns at stake. For Yoshihara’s performing white women, the thrill is in the progression from looking at things that are Asian, owning things that are Asian and then becoming Asian, if only for however long the costume event was to last.³⁶ This kind of performing Asian-ness denotes privilege and leisure as it reinforces whiteness; it also assures the performer that she may return to that normative whiteness whenever she wants. For Eaton, performing as Onoto Watanna was inextricably tied to the economics of earning a living. This performance was not necessarily leisurely nor was it only for a specific duration of time. And whiteness was not necessarily promised to her at the end of the day.

This is not to say that Onoto Watanna always dressed in kimonos for her publicity shots. In fact, Onoto Watanna practices another kind of cross-dressing in the December 1903 issue of *Harper’s Weekly*, which published three photographs of her in western-style clothes.³⁷ In these photographs, Onoto Watanna presents us with another kind of performance: she is now transformed into a Gibson Girl, albeit one who is more ethnic looking than the ones we usually see. In figure 8, Onoto Watanna wears an elaborate lace blouse and has her hair piled atop her head like the women Charles Dana Gibson often drew. In this pose, we see a vibrancy in her expression that we do not see elsewhere. The advent of the Gibson Girl coincided with the emergence of the New Woman, who not only had the choice to be freed from the economic shackles of domesticity by being gainfully employed but also had more control over how she led her life. The second photograph of her reading in her library suggests the material comfort and psychological repose her successes in writing have given her (figure 9). And in the photograph with her and her car, we see enjoying the fruits of her literary labor in the form of the latest that automotive technology has to offer (figure 10). This is not to say that these last three photographs capture the “real” Onoto Watanna; I would argue that this is Onoto Watanna as a trickster again, challenging our preconceptions of gender and race. She is and can be all of these incarnations at once because these portraits chronicle the processes of invention and adjustment that make Onoto Watanna possible.



The latest Portrait of Onoto Watanna, Author of "A Japanese Nightingale" and "The Heart of Hyacinth."

Fig. 8. "The latest Portrait of Onoto Watanna, Author of 'A Japanese Nightingale' and 'The Heart of Hyacinth.'" "Onoto Watanna" *Harper's Weekly* 47 (Dec. 5, 1903): 1959.



Onoto Watanna in her Library

Fig. 9. "Onoto Watanna in her Library." "Onoto Watanna" *Harper's Weekly* 47 (Dec. 5, 1903): 1960.



Onoto Watanna starting from her Home at Fordham Heights, New York, for a Spin in her Automobile

Fig. 10. "Onoto Watanna starting from her Home at Fordham Heights, New York, for a Spin in her Automobile." "Onoto Watanna" *Harper's Weekly* 47 (Dec. 5, 1903): 1960.

V. COLLABORATOR DISILLUSIONED

Despite his eager friendship and professed closeness to her early on, Yone Noguchi gradually grew critical of Onoto Watanna and her writing. Though in his letters, Noguchi and his friends refer to Eaton as Onoto Watanna, one wonders about his complicity in maintaining her fictional identity. As a rising literary star, with friends in literary circles in the West and later in Japan, he as a Japanese writer easily could serve as an authenticator of her persona, whether he was taken in by her or not. Since he published his two novels under the pseudonym, “Miss Morning Glory” (a name, by the way, that reminds us of Eaton’s sister’s pen name, Sui Sin Far, another flowery pseudonym) and by doing so crossed the gender line, he may have delighted in Eaton’s ruse and cooperated in perpetuating her literary self.

However, there are moments in his novels that suggest that he was critical of not necessarily Eaton’s masquerade but rather of the fact that she and others traded realistic representation for orientalist imaginings of how and what Japanese women were. In *The American Letters of a Japanese Parlor-Maid* (1905), the protagonist, Miss Morning Glory, a young Japanese woman from a well-to-do family takes advantage of her longish sojourn in New York during her travels with her uncle to go on an adventure: to work as a maid in an American household. Her letters to her friend Pine Leaf comprise the bulk of this epistolary novel and in one of them, she writes about how her employers would prefer her to be more “oriental”:

“Morning Glory, your speech is too perfect for Japanese. How I wish you could speak broken English like an actress in a Japanese play,” Madam exclaimed.

How disgusted I was, you can imagine!

[. . .]

I am sorry I really can’t succeed in making me a puppet like a Jap heroine in Meriken story who titters “Ahé, hé, hé!” endlessly.³⁸

Edward Marx cites a similar passage in *The American Diary of a Japanese Girl* (1902) where Morning Glory goes to a photographer who encourages her to pose like one of the characters from Sidney Jones’ 1896 light opera, *The Geisha*. Morning Glory is disgusted by the disorderly look that passes for Japanese and declines posing with a fan because it was out of season. Unlike Watanna’s Japanese heroines who

mumble and lisp their way through their speeches, Noguchi's Morning Glory is educated, upper-class and speaks relatively idiomatically correct and clear English; she, and by extension, Noguchi, refuses to give in to the prevailing stereotypes of "Japanese" women. As Marx states, "the novel is witty and full of interesting cross-cultural observations, and it is in many respects an improvement over the pseudo-Japanism of *Madame Butterfly*, which is itself critiqued in the novel."³⁹

Noguchi's critique of Watanna became more pronounced once he was back in Japan. After returning to Tokyo in 1904, Noguchi established himself as an essayist, writer and literary critic in Japanese journals and became a professor of English literature at his alma mater, Keio University in 1905. At the same time, he continued to write for English language journals and newspapers. One such publication was *Taiyo* [The Sun], a Japanese journal, which, as most Japanese journals still do, opens from what English-language journals would consider the back, with reverse pagination. Appended to the end of *Taiyo* was *The Sun Trade Journal*, an English-language journal, whose cover and pagination corresponded to western journal conventions. Noguchi wrote for both *Taiyo* and *The Sun Trade Journal*, confident in his writing abilities in both languages.

In 1906, Noguchi wrote a glowing appreciation in Japanese of Mary Fenollosa and her poetry entitled "Nihon wo Utaeru Beikoku no Onnashijin [An American Female Poet who Sings of Japan]" for *Taiyo*. He praises her "emotional poetic personality [. . .] that allows her to look at nature in Japan as if she were looking at a lover"⁴⁰ and attributes her affinity to things Japanese not only to her sensibility but also to her eight years living in Japan.⁴¹ Through his readings of her poems, Noguchi makes it clear that she is a talented poet, not the least because she introduces to foreign audiences interpretations of Japan of which Noguchi approves. He ends the essay by saying "I think Japan should be grateful not only to have had Mr. Fenollosa among us but also Mrs. Fenollosa too. [. . .] Her artistic life signifies grace and compassion [. . .] I can say that without a doubt, Mrs. Fenollosa is the truest and most exquisite poet to come to Japan from the United States and Great Britain."⁴²

The year after he showered Mary Fenollosa and her poetry with praise, Noguchi castigated Onoto Watanna and her works in a two-part article entitled "Onoto Watanna and her Japanese Work" for *The Sun Trade Journal*.⁴³ Part one starts out with Noguchi expressing his extreme distaste for plays such as Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado* and Sidney

Jones's *The Geisha* (which Noguchi seems to think is part of the Gilbert and Sullivan oeuvre) and before launching into a review of the stage version of Onoto Watanna's *A Japanese Nightingale*, takes a dig at John Luther Long and Onoto Watanna. Noguchi writes:

Later, when I began to read the Japanese stories written by American writers (?) [sic] I felt the same indignation [I did as when I saw *The Mikado*]! I refer to the works of John Luther Long and Onoto Watanna. The saddest part about Miss Watanna is that she is still posing as a Japanese, a half caste at the least.⁴⁴

Noguchi spends the rest of the first part of this article in enumerating all the inaccuracies in the staging of Japanese life in the play, *A Japanese Nightingale*: bad pronunciation of Japanese words, stilted dancing, seasonal errors (wisteria and lotus both in bloom at the same time; seasonally incorrect clothing), religious mistakes, gaudy props and so on. In the second half of the article, Noguchi does essentially the same critique on Watanna's novel, *A Japanese Blossom* which makes him ask, "I wonder why she must write a Japanese story as she does. *A Japanese Blossom* is happily not much of a story."⁴⁵ After again pointing out things that went against Japanese convention, Noguchi ends this article by declaring "The book is one of the saddest literary creations which ever attempted to pass as a Japanese story."⁴⁶

Comparing these two reviews, we see that for Noguchi, accuracy in conveying a realistic portrait of Japan is paramount: Mary Fenollosa, with her eight years of living in Japan trumps Onoto Watanna, whose knowledge of Japan is all second hand. Noguchi's sensibilities and national pride are insulted by representations of Japan that are more fictional than anything else. Noguchi is not alone in insisting on historical and cultural accuracy. In a 1904 review entitled "Novels, Japanese and Japanned" an anonymous reviewer for *The Independent* reviews two novels: *Nami-Ko* by Kenjiro Tokutomi and *Daughters of Nijo* by Onoto Watanna.⁴⁷ The former garners this praise: "As a help to the understanding of Japanese character and difficulties there is no book that takes the place that Tokutomi's novel in its English translation is likely to fill" whereas the reason the latter is reviewed is explained as follows: "If it were not that to a great many persons Mrs. Babcock's work seems a true picture of Japanese life, it would be hardly worth while to review it seriously, so many and so glaring are its errors. There is nothing Japanese about it save a few words usually misspelled and wrongly used."⁴⁸ Again,

the standard is whether or not the depictions are historically and culturally accurate or not. Unfortunately Onoto Watanna is severely criticized for the same reasons from both sides of the Pacific.

By fixating on realistic accuracy, Noguchi fails to distinguish between two very different subject positions and the conditions that define each of them: one, that of a privileged well-educated white woman who was a researcher, a writer and also the wife of an art collector and scholar who gained access to many Japanese art collections and artifacts during a period when Japan was more interested in catching up with the West than preserving its art heritage; the other, that of a biracial woman from an impoverished background who took to writing in her teens to eke out a living and gradually carve out a very successful career as a popular novelist and later a screenwriter while dealing with tumultuous marriages (she was married twice) and raising four children.

Furthermore, despite his partiality to Onoto Watanna early on, by this time Noguchi is unable to get past the historical and cultural accuracy to start to consider how Onoto Watanna's seemingly innocuous narratives provide her with frameworks to discuss issues of race, class and gender. Not only does he not seem to have any interest in Asian American identity and literary production, especially by his former friend, he no longer appears to appreciate the difficulties of what he calls a "half caste" woman would have in the United States. This is particularly ironic considering his own son, the sculptor Isamu Noguchi, as a biracial child would face many of the same problems Eaton faced both in Japan and in the United States throughout his life. Indeed, again ironically, his inability to engage with Onoto Watanna's work and self-invention reveals more about Noguchi and his relationship to the establishment as well as the literary standards of the time and illustrates what obstacles Eaton faced as a writer.

In her biography of Eaton, Birchall notes how "Winnifred's 'Japanese deception' was wearing thin" by 1904 and though many journalists and book reviewers continued to take Onoto Watanna at face value, "the New York literary establishment seemed aware that Winnifred was not Japanese."⁴⁹ Birchall points out that at this point of her career, Eaton "may have suspected that she could not continue her imposture indefinitely and that exposure could be embarrassing. [. . .] [T]here was nothing to do but play the Japanese author."⁵⁰ It would take another two decades before Eaton would be able to shed Onoto Watanna and reinvent herself as Winnifred Eaton Reeve, screenwriter and story editor for

Universal, Twentieth Century-Fox and MGM. In the meantime, Eaton sustained the persona of Onoto Watanna through her writings, both fiction and non-fiction, and in interviews. To this end, her Japanese collaborators, those named as well as those whose presence can only be assumed, wittingly or unwittingly helped her define, refine and/or authenticate her self-representation as a woman of Japanese descent. Their participation in the construction of Eaton's persona reveals how those considered Other were, in fact, engaged in the production of American orientalism, thus disrupting popular notions about orientalist fantasies being more or less the product of occidental imaginations. And unsurprisingly, after all, it is Winnifred Eaton as trickster who makes this porosity visible.

NOTES

¹ Sui Sin Far's only published book is *Mrs. Spring Fragrance* (Chicago: McClurg, 1912). Two editions of her works are currently available: a reprint of *Mrs. Spring Fragrance* edited by Catherine E. Falvey (Albany: NCUP, 1994) and Amy Ling and Annette White-Parks eds., *Mrs. Spring Fragrance and Other Writings* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1995). Annette White-Parks has written a full-length biographical study of her: *Sui Sin Far/ Edith Maude Eaton: A Literary Biography* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1995).

² "Edith Eaton Dead: Author of Chinese Stories under the Name of Sui Sin Far" *New York Times*, April 9, 1914.

³ The bibliographical information for Onoto Watanna's works in print are as follows: Linda Trinh Moser and Elizabeth Rooney eds., *"A Half Caste" and Other Writings* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2003); *The Heart of Hyacinth* (New York: Harper, 1903); Rpt. Samina Najmi introd. (Seattle: U of Washington P, 2000); *A Japanese Nightingale* (New York: Harper, 1901); Rpt. in Jean Lee Cole and Maureen Honey eds., *"Madame Butterfly" by John Luther Long and "A Japanese Nightingale" by Onoto Watanna (Winnifred Eaton): Two Orientalist Texts* (New Brunswick: Rutgers U P, 2002); *Me: A Book of Remembrance* (New York: Century, 1915); Rpt. Linda Trinh Moser afterword (Jackson: U P of Mississippi, 1997); *Miss Numé of Japan* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1899); Rpt. Eve Oishi introd. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U P, 1999).

⁴ Diana Birchall, *Onoto Watanna: The Story of Winnifred Eaton* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2001).

⁵ Dominika Ferens, *Edith and Winnifred Eaton: Chinatown Missions and Japanese Romances* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2002).

⁶ Jean Lee Cole, *The Literary Voices of Winnifred Eaton: Redefining Ethnicity and Authenticity* (New Brunswick: Rutgers U P, 2002).

⁷ Ferens, *Edith and Winnifred Eaton*, 118–119.

⁸ Oscar Wilde, "The Decay of Lying," Vyvyan Holland introd. *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (New York: Harper, 1989), 988.

⁹ *Poole's Index to Periodical Literature and Supplements*. Rpt. Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1963. See especially the fifth supplement. 333–339.

¹⁰ See S. E. Solberg, "Sui Sin Far/Edith Eaton: First Chinese American Fictionist"

MELUS 8 (1981): 27–39 and Amy Ling, *Between Worlds: Women Writers of Chinese Ancestry* (New York: Pergamon, 1990) as well as Ling's "Winnifred Eaton: Ethnic Chameleon and Popular Success" *MELUS* 11.3 (Fall 1984): 5–15.

¹¹ Katsuhiko Takeda, "Onoto Watanna; A Forgotten Writer" *Orient/West Magazine* 9.1 (Jan.-Feb. 1964): 77–81.

¹² *Ibid.*, 80.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 80.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 81.

¹⁵ Yoshiro Ando. "Onoto Watanna to iu Sakka" ["A Writer called Onoto Watanna"] *Eigo Seinen* [The Rising Generation] 1116.10 (October 1970): 596–7.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 597 (translation mine).

¹⁷ This entry is from *Saiyu Nisshi Sho* [Extracts from a Diary of Western Travels] published in installments in the journal *Bunmei* from May to October of 1917. These installments were subsequently published together repeatedly in volumes of Nagai's collected works and/or diaries. Kafu Nagai's *American Stories*, a collection of vignettes based on his experiences (also chronicled in his diaries) during his travels in the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century is now available in an excellent translation by Mitsuko Iriye (Columbia U P, 2000).

¹⁸ From *Saiyu Nisshi Sho* [Extracts from a Diary of Western Travels], first published in 1918 and included in *Danchotei Nichijo* [Danchotei's Diaries]. Vol. 1. (Tokyo: Iwanami, 1980), 7 (translation mine).

¹⁹ Takeda, "Onoto Watanna," 81.

²⁰ Ikuko Atsumi, ed., *Yone Noguchi: Collected English Letters* (Tokyo: Yone Noguchi Society, 1975).

²¹ Frank Arthur Putnam, *Frank Putnam's Love Lyrics* (Chicago: Blakely P, 1898).

²² Atsumi, *Yone Noguchi*, 44.

²³ Ando, "Onoto Watanna," 596.

²⁴ Onoto Watanna, *The Wooing of Wistaria* (New York: Harper, 1902).

²⁵ Yuko Matsukawa, "Cross-Dressing and Cross-Naming: Decoding Onoto Watanna." *Tricksterism in Turn-of-the-Century American Literature: a Multicultural Perspective* Elizabeth Ammons and Annette White-Parks, eds. (Hanover: U P of New England, 1994), 106–125.

²⁶ Sokaku Takagi and Yujin Nakagawa, both award-winning calligraphers, graciously took the time to provide the assessments that made this part of my analysis possible. Both mentioned that the tempo of the writing seemed hesitant and not that of someone who was literate in Japanese; they both noted also that it would be impossible to know who wrote the sample Eaton copied from looking at this signature alone. When I raised the possibility of someone other than Eaton penning this autograph, Takagi pointed out that if Eaton went to all the effort to cross-dress, she would probably take great pleasure in being able to write her name. I agree.

²⁷ Noguchi's penmanship in Japanese differs depending on what writing instrument he uses. His hand is usually characterized by a roundness which is not present in the Onoto Watanna autograph so most probably, it was not he who actually wrote that autograph. Samples of Noguchi's handwriting in Japanese may be found in *Gendai Nihon Shijin Zenshu* [Contemporary Japanese Poets] Vol. 3. (Tokyo: Sogensha, 1955) and Masao Hosaka and Masami Aoki, *Kindai Shijin Kaji Jikihitsu Genkosho* [A Collection of Modern Poets' Manuscript Pages in Their Own Handwriting] (Tokyo: Tokyodo, 2002).

²⁸ Biographical information on Gazo Foudji is available from several sources. One that I found useful was *Shincho Nihon Jinmei Jiten* (Tokyo: Shincho, 1991).

²⁹ There are fewer sources for Genjiro Kataoka than there are for Foudji. He is listed in Peter Hastings Falk, ed., *Who Was Who in American Art* (Sound View, 1985), 328, but his last name is misspelled as “Katoaka.” I am indebted to Miyako Hada for most of this information which she shared at her presentation to the Japonisme Society, July 31, 2004. Her book which includes a discussion of Yeto, *Japonizumu Shosetu no Sekai* [The World of Japonisme Novels] is forthcoming from Sairyusha in 2005.

³⁰ “Onoto Watanna, the Japanese Woman Writer” *Current Literature* 24 (October 1897): 306.

³¹ “Onoto Watanna.” *Book News* 17 (1899): 451.

³² Robert G. Lee. *Orientalism: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple U P, 1999), 3.

³³ Birchall, *Onoto Watanna*, 18.

³⁴ “Notes of a Bookman” *Harper’s Weekly* 45 (Dec. 21, 1901): 1300.

³⁵ Mari Yoshihara, *Embracing the East: White Women and American Orientalism* (Oxford: Oxford U P, 2003), 98.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 98.

³⁷ “Onoto Watanna” *Harper’s Weekly* 47 (Dec. 5, 1903): 1959–60.

³⁸ Yone Noguchi, *The American Letters of a Japanese Parlor-Maid* (Tokyo: Fuzanbo, 1905), 117.

³⁹ Marx, Edward. “A Different Mode of Speech”: Yone Noguchi In Meiji America.” *Re/collecting Early Asian America: Essays in Cultural History*. Josephine Lee, Imogene L. Lim and Yuko Matsukawa eds. (Philadelphia: Temple U P, 2002), 302–303.

⁴⁰ Yone Noguchi, “Nihon wo Utaeru Beikoku no Onna-shijin [An American Female Poet who Sings of Japan].” *Taiyo* 12.2 (1906): 115 (translation mine).

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 119 (translation mine).

⁴³ Yone Noguchi, “Onoto Watanna and her Japanese Work” *The Sun Trade Journal* 13.8 (1907): 18–21; 13.10 (1907): 19–21.

⁴⁴ Yone Noguchi, “Onoto Watanna” 13.8 (1907): 19.

⁴⁵ Yone Noguchi, “Onoto Watanna” 13.10 (1907): 19.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁴⁷ “Novels, Japanese and Japanned.” *The Independent*. 55 (June 23, 1904): 1445–46.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 1445.

⁴⁹ Birchall, *Onoto Watanna*, 92.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 92.