

---

# Representations of fin-de-siècle Chinese American prostitutes in the stories of Miriam Michelson and Edith Eaton/Sui Sin Far

Karen E. H. Skinazi\*<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>University of Birmingham – United Kingdom

## Abstract

Miriam Michelson, "a California Jewess who has succeeded with her pen," as The Washington Post described her in 1905, wrote journalism, short stories in mass-circulation magazines, and book after book about adventure-seeking, bold, slang-slinging women. She wrote little about Jewishness or Jewish people. Whereas her religious compatriots—the playwrights of Second Avenue, the sweatshop poets, the socialist and Forward editor, Abraham Cahan—turned their critical eyes on their own cultural peculiarities, using the New York ghetto as their literal and discursive creative space, Michelson preferred to cross cultural borders and was adept at exploring the worlds of other ethnic groups populating the varied landscape of the Western United States. But Michelson's examinations of different groups reveal, ultimately, less about specific rituals or practices of the Hawaiian natives who feature in her 1901 story, "Understudy for a Princess," or an Irish family, at the heart of her 1904 novel, *The Madigans, or "Piutes"* (sic) in her 1934 book, *The Wonderlode of Silver and Gold*—and more about exploring the meanings of such categories as culture, gender, race, and nationality. In this paper, I will put Michelson's explorations of these categories of identity in conversation with the work of Edith Eaton, who wrote as Sui Sin Far, and similarly used the multiethnic panorama of turn-of-the-twentieth-century American womanhood as her literary canvas. Focusing on Michelson's "In Chy Fong's Restaurant" and Eaton's "Lin John," I will show how both stories employ and subvert (mis)conceptions of the Chinese prostitute in turn-of-the-20th-century United States. I will argue, however, that Michelson goes one step further than Eaton by positioning her white American heroine, Rhoda Massey, in yellowface, in a Chinese brothel, and having her emerge as the most "authentic" Chinese prostitute of the group for the (benighted) white Christian missionary out to save the (benighted) souls of the heathen, thus forcing us to question the authenticity of an(y) identity and the danger that lies in believing in it.

---

\*Speaker