White Selves “Trampling” Chinese Selves: Reification and the Crisis of White Professional Masculinity in Sui Sin Far’s Short Fiction

Like Georg Lukacs, Sui Sin Far shared a similar critical understanding of the consequences of fragmenting human capacities. This essay re-reads a set of Sui Sin Far’s thematically and nominally corresponding stories from *Mrs. Spring Fragrance* (1913) demonstrates their extension of the Lukacsian theory of reification to account for the crisis of white masculinity which was being culturally managed by a reifying racial logic. Reading the overlooked yet self-conscious allusions to Robert Louis Stevenson and his famous novella *The Curious Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) in Sui Sin Far’s much-studied “Its Wavering Image,” I demonstrate the Trans-Atlantic influence of Stevenson’s novella’s endorsement of evolutionary science and degeneration theory on early twentieth century imaginings of “the Chinaman” as a sexual threat to white womanhood. Sui Sin Far recasts the Jekyll/Hyde figure as the archetype of the white American professional masculinity whose normative identity tenuously rests on a chain of binary axes (white/black, civilized/wild, masculine/feminine, heterosexual/homosexual) invented and undermined by its own professional epistemologies. The dramatization of white male professional characters’ failed romantic pursuits of masculinized professional women in the office and racially-ambiguous women in Chinatown suggests Sui Sin Far’s acute diagnosis of how changes in US domestic and transnational relations of labor provoked white professional masculinity’s epistemological instability. Sui Sin Far’s narratives are critical interventions in the crisis of white masculinity that disclose the circulation of biracial, oppositional, and hybrid categories as reifications working to contain the threats of miscegenation and the increasing
importance of culture and performance to racial identity. Her racially-ambiguous characters reject reified identity categories depicted as creating unnatural divisions and truncating human possibility. Sui Sin Far strategically represents “Chinatown” as utopian space in which interracial families, racially-ambiguous subjects, and interracial parenting can exist and thrive as “normal.” This hermetically-sealed “Chinatown” is a radical experiment in the politics of de-reifying racial identity, which defies the cultural expectations by positing the “biracial” subject as “whole” yet ambiguous, white masculinity as a “wavering image,” and “Chineseness” as an egalitarian epistemology. Through the employment of the temporality of the child, these narratives acknowledge “Chinatown’s” utopian impossibility, as the child of Chinatown must “mature” via interpellation into white American’s racial ideology. Characteristic of Sui Sin Far’s work, the white regulatory figure invades the utopian space and forecloses the transgressive possibilities of “Chinatown’s” alternative epistemologies of race and human difference.