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White Women Writing Women of Color in the Late Nineteenth Century U.S.:
The Catholic as the Sympathetic Other

White women began to emerge as professional authors in the U.S. during the nineteenth century through their use of the combination of literary and political intentions to advocate abolitionism and Reconstructionism in their short stories and novels. As more Easterners began to settle the Native American and Mexican lands appropriated by the U.S. in the second half of the century, these settlers came into contact with Native Americans, Mexicans, and Chinese in increasing numbers. The task of the White woman author in her efforts to try to influence her reading public to abandon their race prejudices became more complex than the question of Black or White. Much of their fiction published in the last decades of the nineteenth century displays an attempt to create a hierarchy among these races that would both preserve True Womanhood and legitimate U.S. control of these territories. A certain inability to imagine the Other infuses these texts, leading the White authors to Orientalize the women of color they portray through their depiction of these women's spiritual beliefs. Not only are Catholic traits and rituals exaggerated or assigned to unlikely Catholics in these works, but Native Americans' true spiritual beliefs are also often eclipsed in the need to create identifications for the White, Eastern Protestant female reader. This problematic portrayal of religion is a type of unconscious racism that hints at the nascent feminist movement's problems in its efforts to gain support in the South, even as it attempts to foster racial tolerance and "sisterhood." I will use Helen Hunt Jackson's 1884 *Ramona* as an example of how white women writing in this era emphasized the Catholicism of both Californio (Latina) women and Native American women in order to portray them as sympathetic, yet inferior characters in the minds of their White Protestant readers. By contrast, Zitkala-Sa's *American Indian Stories*, originally published in 1900 and 1901, is one example of how 19th century U.S. women of color who wrote fiction portrayed their own spirituality and how they contrasted their ideas of womanhood with those of white Protestant women.