

AMERICAN WOMEN'S TRAVEL WRITING AS LITERATURE: MARGARET FULLER,  
EDITH WHARTON, AND WILLA CATHER

By

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To my mom and dad, and my sister Danielle

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Abstract of Thesis Presented to the Graduate School  
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American Women's Travel Writing as Literature: Margaret Fuller, Edith Wharton, and Willa  
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In the years between 1820 and 1920 the United States experienced radical technological innovation that contributed to the restructuring of society and to the breakdown of some gender ideologies. One of the most significant areas of technological innovation was transportation, and the popularization of steamboats and steam palaces, locomotives, and automobiles made mobility cheaper and more accessible than ever before. As travel became more viable for women of all social classes and backgrounds, they embarked on travel domestic and international travel in unprecedented numbers. No Longer "accidental tourists," women were eager to broadcast their authoritative new role as travelers, and to record and in some cases publish their narratives of travel.

This paper looks at the travel writing of Margaret Fuller, Edith Wharton, and Willa Cather, three critically acclaimed and commercially successful authors who achieved "agency" as women and as feminists through their narratives of travel. My analysis will emphasize the inconsistency between the positive early reception of travel narratives written by Fuller, Cather, and Wharton, and their ensuing neglect, illuminating the entrenched gender ideologies that delegitimize women's travel writing. Through close readings of Fuller's *Summer on the Lakes*, Wharton's *In Morocco*, and Cather's *Willa Cather in Europe*, this paper deconstructs the way in

which gender complicated the popularization, dissemination, and legacy of female travel narratives in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

CHAPTER 1  
INNOVATIONS IN TRANSPORTATION, THE MOBILE FEMALE BODY, AND LUST FOR  
TRAVEL WRITING

Between the early nineteenth century and the early twentieth century the United States experienced radical technological innovations and accompanying social change. One of the most significant areas of technological innovation was transportation, and the popularization of steamboats, trains, and automobiles made mobility cheaper and more accessible than ever before. In her anthology of nineteenth century American women travel writers, Mary Suzanne Schriber describes the way in which “technology conspired with challenges to ideology” in the early nineteenth century “to set a record number of American women afloat on the high seas and ashore on other continents in diligences, railway cars, and jinrickshas.”<sup>1</sup> As it became easier for individuals from all social classes to travel, women began to travel for a variety of reasons and in greater numbers than ever before: “the proportions of this female exodus were without historical precedent.”<sup>2</sup>

American society was consequently forced to reconsider the meaning of female mobility and to re-think strict social norms that sought to confine women to the domestic sphere. American women were confronted with conflicting ideologies. Capitalist entrepreneurs were eager to take advantage of a new population of travelers, employing every opportunity to “reap profits from the ranks of the ladies,” which for those included “investing in shipboard appointments that catered to women in particular.”<sup>3</sup> But society was still hesitant to embrace the mobile woman and women were challenged and “hobbled” in their travels “by ideological

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<sup>1</sup> Mary S. Schriber, *Telling Travels: Selected Writings by Nineteenth-Century American Women Abroad* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1995), xiv.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, xiii.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, xiv.

constrictions pertaining to gender,”<sup>4</sup> indicating that their place was in the home and their role comprised bearing children and caring for their families. Ideologies emphasizing female fragility, weakness, and vulnerability, and promoting motherhood as women’s ultimate duty, were nonetheless at odds with the reality of female mobility and the lives of many independent and professional women, particularly successful female writers.

The increase in travel sparked an unparalleled interest in travel writing, and men and women from all social backgrounds recorded their travels in diaries, memoirs, and travel narratives. Travel writing was a uniquely eclectic genre that has served as a “meeting place for various narrative voices, literary styles, levels of speech, and kinds of subjects, combining disparate modes of discourse without necessarily generating any tension among them or forging them into a ‘higher unity.’”<sup>5</sup> Critically acclaimed authors were not immune to the appeal of travel writing: “a quick glance at the biographies and collected works of the canonical figures in nineteenth-century American literature will show that all but Whitman, Thoreau, and Dickinson went to Europe, and most wrote about it.”<sup>6</sup> Professional writers as well as novice writers wrote and published travel writing en masse, but not all travel writing garnered attention and very little travel writing left a lasting mark on the canon of American literature. It is no coincidence that independent white men authored the majority of the “seminal” works of travel writing, still popular today.

In *Moving Lives*, Sidonie Smith argues that “travel functions as a defining area of agency”—a decidedly masculine agency: “ever in the process of becoming ‘men,’ travelers

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., xv.

<sup>5</sup> William W. Stowe, “Conventions and Voices in Margaret Fuller’s Travel Writing,” *American Literature* 63.2 (Jun. 1991), 243.

<sup>6</sup> William W. Stowe, *Going Abroad: European Travel in Nineteenth-Century American Culture* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994), 4.

affirm their masculinity through purposes, activities, behaviors, dispositions, perspectives, and bodily movements displayed on the road, and through the narratives of travel that they return home to the sending culture.”<sup>7</sup> However, Smith qualifies her argument, explaining that “even though travel has generally been associated with men and masculine prerogatives, even though it has functioned as a domain of constitutive masculinity, women have always been and continue to be on the move.”<sup>8</sup> Women have achieved significant agency through their mobile bodies, but their narratives have historically been marginalized and devalued. So what does it mean for a woman to achieve agency as a traveler and in what circumstances is her narrative valuable and worthy in the eyes of her culture?

This study looks at the travel writing of Margaret Fuller, Edith Wharton, and Willa Cather, three critically acclaimed, women writers of the nineteenth- and early twentieth century, who are regarded today as part of the American literary canon. Despite their impressive careers and the foremost role that gender plays in their respective narratives of travel, popular and critical audiences have responded to their travel writing in specific ways. Furthermore, their travel writing has been categorized very differently from the works of their male contemporaries.

This paper attempts to illustrate the ways in which Fuller, Cather, and Wharton achieved “agency” through their feminist travel narratives, but it also deconstructs the way in which gender complicated the popularization, dissemination, and legacy of female travel narratives in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. My analysis will emphasize the inconsistency between the positive early reception of travel narratives written by Fuller, Cather, and Wharton, and their ensuing neglect. In comparing the travel writing of Fuller, Cather, and Wharton, I will

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<sup>7</sup> Sidonie Smith, *Moving Lives: Twentieth-century Women's Travel Writing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), ix.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, x.

analyze the ways in which female travel writers were forced to “negotiate shifting social expectations, changing statuses of privilege and discrimination.”<sup>9</sup> I will also emphasize the significance of privilege and the intersection between class and gender and nation and gender in women’s travel writing. For example, as a wealthy, famous, and well-connected American, Wharton possesses more power than the women in the harem that she observes, which raises questions both of class and Orientalism. Cather, still unknown as a writer and traveling on a budget, writes under different circumstances. She is perhaps less threatening to those that she encounters than Wharton, and because her travel companion is a female and she is free from male supervision, she might feel less constrained by gender norms. Gender is one of several factors in determining power and influence.

In *Traveling Economies*, Steadman writes: “Thinking about traveling women invites us to modify our understandings of women’s experience in the last century to consider the constant and complex negotiations individual women entered into between gendered expectations and the lived reality of their participation in private and public life.”<sup>10</sup> Steadman’s point is particularly resonant in thinking about professional female writers who traveled and wrote. Women like Willa Cather and Edith Wharton transgressed gender norms in a literal sense as mobile females who constantly ventured outside the domestic sphere, but they also challenged more subtle gender constraints by making their voices heard in the public sphere as professional writers.

Chapter two illuminates the historical context in which American women began to travel and to write and publish a variety of travel narratives. It describes the technological innovations, particularly those related to transportation, which increased female mobility. The chapter also

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<sup>9</sup> Jennifer B. Steadman, *Traveling Economies: American Women's Travel Writing* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2007), 7.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

analyzes the economic and social repercussions of the boon in female travelers, including the idea among entrepreneurs that “in a capitalist economy, women must circulate to be profitable,”<sup>11</sup> and illustrates the growing popularity of travel narratives of all types. I will distinguish between the types of women who were able to travel and write, the different types and purposes of travel writing, and the popularity and posterity of particular works. Ultimately, chapter two paints a holistic picture of the relationship between technological innovation, increased mobility among women, and the social and cultural implications of the traveling female writer. It also illuminates the ways in which historians, literary theorists, and scholars of gender studies have worked together to theorize the myriad ways in which travel facilitates the transgression of gender norms.

Chapter three examines the life of Margaret Fuller and includes a close reading of *Summer on the Lakes*, a travel narrative based on Fuller’s Western travels in the summer of 1843. Chapter four is devoted to Edith Wharton, tracking her swift rise to literary fame and her lifelong relationship with travel and focusing specifically on the last travel narrative that she published in 1918, *In Morocco*. Chapter five posits Willa Cather as a ground-breaking novelist during the 1920’s with a largely unrecognized early career in journalism and a striking collection of travel articles, published posthumously in 1956 as *Willa Cather in Europe*. The “gendering of the world” that we see in the travel narratives of women writing in the nineteenth century reveals the “previously unrecognized gendering of the world in men’s accounts of travel.”<sup>12</sup> Fuller, Wharton, and Cather were writing on the edge of culture and the edge of gender, pushing the limits of ideology with their mobile bodies and their brave voices.

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<sup>11</sup> Mary S. Schriber, *Writing Home: American Women Abroad, 1830-1920* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1997), 23.

<sup>12</sup> Schriber, *Writing Home*, 7.

## CHAPTER 2 HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Traveling served to raise the stakes, as each town along the stagecoach route was confronted with the reality of a mobile independent woman and with the prospect of the town's own mothers, sisters, and wives climbing on board to join her.

-Jennifer Bernhardt Steadman, *Traveling Economies*<sup>1</sup>

In the period between 1820 and 1920, a series of factors contributed to the increased mobility of women and to the accompanying rise in women's travel writing: "technology, economics, and the marketplace, together with conceptions of the history and mission of the United States, joined the discourses of femininity circulating in nineteenth-century America to make travel possible, important, marketable, and profitable."<sup>2</sup> This short chapter is divided into several sections intended to illustrate the historical context in which American women took to the road in unprecedented numbers, no longer as followers but as travelers. The sections will examine the following topics: technological innovations and economic prosperity; ideologies and social change; the market for female travel narratives; the role of gender in the travel narratives of men and women; and the progressive potential and shortcomings of women's travel writing.

Each of these topics functions in relationship with the others and must be understood as a piece of a larger puzzle. New technologies might have made it economically viable and physically possible for women to travel, but shifts in social ideology made it culturally acceptable, at least in many circumstances. These analyses are intended to be brief and each demands further scholarship. For example, there is much more to be said about the intersections between modes of transport, gender, and class, as well as the idea that female travelers writing about their experiences abroad effectively re-gendered the traditionally masculine European tour. As a body of writing, American women's narratives of travel "play themselves off against the

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<sup>1</sup> *Epigraph*. Steadman, *Traveling Economies*, 4.

<sup>2</sup> Mary S. Schriber., *Telling Travels*, xiv.

culture's reigning ideas of and conversations about women, some to revise the concept of Woman, some to confirm the status quo ante, and all of them to shape, influence, and complicate the culture's talk about the woman 'question.'"<sup>3</sup>

### **Technological Innovation**

Despite the somewhat different time periods in which they lived, Margaret Fuller (1810-1850), Edith Wharton (1862-1937), and Willa Cather (1873-1946), all experienced the “exponential change”<sup>4</sup> that accompanied the industrial revolution and the new modalities of time and travel, both in America and abroad. Margaret Fuller is able to take a train out West, which greatly reduces her travel time. Willa Cather travels by steamship across the Atlantic to embark on her European adventure, and one of her most significant articles from abroad addresses the differences between American steamboats and their English counterparts. Edith Wharton's travels are contingent on the automobile, as she “motors” in and out of the harems of Morocco. We must not underestimate the role of the steam engine and the allure of “faster, safer, cleaner, and more comfortable machines of motion”<sup>5</sup> in propelling women's travels.

In her study of women's travel writing in terms of specific technologies of travel, Sidonie Smith reminds us that “the mechanics of motion before the nineteenth century—foot, horse, coach, sailing ship—were relatively slow, elemental, and often undependable means of travel,”<sup>6</sup> making travel impractical, dangerous, and expensive. The “transportation revolution,” which historians divide into four stages, occurred in the years between 1790 and 1840. The first two stages were marked by the popularity of the stagecoach and canal boats. The third stage saw the

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<sup>3</sup> Schriber, *Writing Home*, 8.

<sup>4</sup> Nancy Bentley, “Wharton, Travel, and Modernity.” in *A Historical Guide to Edith Wharton*, ed. Carol J. Singley (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2003),149.

<sup>5</sup> Smith, *Moving Lives*, xi.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

introduction of the steam engine and the commercial growth of the steamboat. The transportation revolution culminated with the development of the railroad.<sup>7</sup>

The introduction of the steam engine changed the course of history. The first steamboat, developed by Robert Fulton, was launched against the current on the Hudson River in 1808. By the 1830s, commercial steamboats were traversing all the major and minor rivers in the United States.<sup>8</sup> With the introduction of steam-powered ships in the 1820s, foreign travel became cheaper, quicker, and safer, and consequently more accessible to the middle and lower class. Nonetheless, industrialists catered to the wealthy, developing and popularizing the “steam palace” or “naval mansion”<sup>9</sup> between the 1840s and 1860s.

As mentioned in the introduction, industrialists were eager to “reap profits” from the new population of traveling women, particularly women with disposable income, and often did so by appealing to ideological constructions of feminine delicacy. Steam palaces were luxuriously designed with “public dining halls boasting fresh flowers and ceilings of stained glass in turquoise, amethyst, and topaz . . .furnished with silk upholstered chairs of richly carved solid mahogany.”<sup>10</sup> Women could stay in private boudoirs, and the “innumerable bath and toilet rooms” ensured that they could “travel across oceans comfortably and in ladylike fashion.”<sup>11</sup> Such accommodations were increasingly available at “relatively moderate cost,”<sup>12</sup> enabling women in a range of economic positions to travel.

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<sup>7</sup> Patricia Cline Cohen, “Women at Large: Travel in Antebellum America.” *History Today* 44.12 (1994), 46.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>9</sup> Schriber, *Telling Travels*, xiv.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, xiv.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, xv.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, xv.

The invention of the “iron horse” in the early nineteenth century had an equally major impact, driving the “expansion of commercial and communications networks”<sup>13</sup> and greatly increasing the mobility of individuals hailing from all social classes. The railroads were praised for their convenience, reliability, and relative cheapness, and viewed as a symbol of American “progress.” Indeed, railroads played a major role in increasing the mobility of middle and lower class Americans, especially women who took advantage of railway travel to become “less ignorant, less dependent, and more autonomous.”<sup>14</sup> As we see in the case of Willa Cather, “it delivered them cheaply to jobs in major cities,”<sup>15</sup> where they could work to provide for themselves and in many cases their families.

Nonetheless, the spread of railways across the United States did not come without significant human and cultural costs. Smith reminds us that, among other things, “the expansion of the railroad facilitated the exploitation of subject peoples and the radical disruptions of communities and cultures.”<sup>16</sup> In *Summer on the Lakes*, Fuller perceives the complex impact that technology has on the lives of the settlers and natives in the West. On one hand, she regrets the incursion of technology and its destructive repercussions, but she is also attuned to the role of the railroad in facilitating her own travels and allowing her to gain proximity to the Indian tribes that she learns so much from.

Finally, we must note the invention of the automobile at the close of the nineteenth century. Americans were disillusioned with railroad monopolies and eager for “flexible transportation, hard road surfaces, and individualized routes,”<sup>17</sup> all things that the automobile

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<sup>13</sup> Smith, *Moving Lives*, 121.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

offered. As the final touches were put on the internal combustion engine, inventors, manufacturers, and consumers expressed a great deal of interest in this new individualized form of mobility.<sup>18</sup> The desire to own personal automobiles spread quickly and by the early 1900's even women were taking the wheel. As an interesting side note, Wharton "celebrated automobiles" as an alternative to the "rampant modernization" that characterized so much of the American landscape at the turn of the century. Of course, few women were as independently wealthy as Wharton and consequently few experienced automobile travel.

It is easy to overlook the implications of these innovative technologies of transport. The steamboat, the railroad, and the automobile served as means to mobility, but they also defined the terms and meaning of that mobility. These omnipresent symbols of modernity demanded a "reorientation to time and space"<sup>19</sup> and resulted in dramatic and resounding shifts in cultural expectations and gender norms.

### **Ideologies and Social Change**

The ideology of separate spheres, which confined women to the domestic sphere while men occupied the public sphere of business, politics, etc., was still very much intact during the nineteenth century. However, several social and political developments revealed the "gaps in the ideology of gender"<sup>20</sup> and threatened to break down the gender divide. Women were becoming increasingly active in the suffrage movement and the abolition movement, as well as a variety of philanthropic and voluntary associations. Acting as "crusaders" for political and social reform, middle-class women were already testing the waters of public participation, frequently traveling

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<sup>18</sup> See Smith, *Moving Lives*, 167-202 for a riveting discussion of the automobile, including the social implications of its popularization.

<sup>19</sup> Smith, *Moving Lives*, 21.

<sup>20</sup> Schriber, *Telling Tales*, xv.

both domestically and internationally to pursue their charitable projects.<sup>21</sup> The varied travels of women from all backgrounds in the nineteenth century, “as well as the crucial fact of their travel publications, suggests the range of models of mobility and autonomy available to women to counteract the ideological mandates of separate spheres.”<sup>22</sup>

The “New Woman,” characterized by her rejection of conventional female roles and interest in asserting her voice, became a popular feminine ideal between the 1850s and 1890s. New Women, such as Willa Cather, effectively “issued themselves passports to freedoms that threatened to change the borders of the mind even as those thrown up around the body were breached.”<sup>23</sup> Such women challenged feminine norms of appearance by wearing trousers, riding bicycles, smoking cigarettes, and of course, traveling by automobile, train, and steamship.

Women were also gaining entry into colleges and entering the workforce in professional roles, “including the profession that made room for an outpouring of travel writing, journalism.”<sup>24</sup> Journalism functioned as a “two-way street” for women both inside and outside of the profession who were interested in traveling and writing. Many women outside of the industry hoped that their travel narratives would land them a job in journalism and newspaper writing, while those women inside the industry working as journalists, such as Willa Cather, took advantage of travel writing to experiment with more creative forms and possibly expand their reputation and careers.

All of these factors contributed to and worked in conjunction with the physical act of travelling to explicitly challenge the notion of separate spheres. As soon as women stepped out of their homes and boarded trains, steamships, and automobiles, they were transformed from

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<sup>21</sup> Smith, *Moving Lives*, 17.

<sup>22</sup> Steadman, *Traveling Economies*, 9.

<sup>23</sup> Schriber, *Telling Travels*, xvi.

<sup>24</sup> Schriber, *Writing Home*, 6.

“private into public actors on the world stage.”<sup>25</sup> But women’s newfound mobility did not always undermine notions of women as weaker, more delicate, and more vulnerable sex, requiring male supervision. For example, conduct books encouraged female mobility, but provided a strict set of guidelines for behavior, dress, and interaction.

Schriber reminds us that public response to women travelers was deeply conflicted, marked by a “desire simultaneously to encourage and constrain women’s global ambitions.”<sup>26</sup> She goes on to describe the “complexities, apprehensions, and ambiguities in the culture’s attitude toward the phenomenon of traveling women.”<sup>27</sup> Travel was more or less accepted as long as it was purposeful and “decorously pursued.”<sup>28</sup> Unlike their male counterparts, women had to constantly justify their travel. One of the most common arguments against women traveling invoked the trope of female sexual vulnerability, suggesting that the traveling women would likely encounter sexual risk and/or sexual temptation. Female travel writers heeded such concerns, negotiating the “propriety of topics”<sup>29</sup> that they included and being careful to address the reader in a ladylike fashion. Many also went to great lengths to “make it clear that they were not at sexual risk” or “subject to stranger’s overtures.”<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, women travelers, including Fuller and Wharton, spent a significant portion of their travels under the “guidance” of a protective male friend or spouse. The nineteenth century was marked by an oscillation between ideological enlightenment and reversion to strict gender stereotypes, but one might argue that each step forward was accompanied by only half a step back.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>29</sup> Smith, *Moving Lives*, 18.

<sup>30</sup> Susan L. Roberson, “American Women and Travel Writing,” in *The Cambridge Companion to American Travel Writing*, ed. Alfred Bendixen et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 223.

## The Market Value of Traveling Women and the Market for Female Travel Narratives

Women in the nineteenth century finally gained access to the “raw material for travel writing: travel itself.”<sup>31</sup> Travel provided women, traditionally confined to the private, domestic sphere, with an “important, and therefore legitimate occasion to write.”<sup>32</sup> Women, of course, had been writing in the privacy of their homes for centuries. Travel writing, in its similarities to the journal, the memoir, the letter, and the diary,<sup>33</sup> functioned as an ideal form of writing for women just beginning to voice their opinions in the public sphere.

As we have seen, the transportation revolution made both domestic and international travel possible for women as well as men. New technologies of mobility broke down the class, race, age, and gender boundaries that had previously barred independent travel for women and other marginalized groups. With the increase of traveling women came an inevitable increase in the number of women writing about their travels. Schriber aptly captures the relationship between the onslaught of women travelers and the development of female travel writing thus: “having invaded the historically male territory of travel in significant numbers,” women effectively “transformed travel into a passport to the historically masculine domain of the travel book.”<sup>34</sup> Between the years 1800 and 1850, 325 books of travel were published, but between 1850 and 1900 that number jumped dramatically to 1440.<sup>35</sup> According to Schriber, women published, in addition to articles in the periodical press, 27 books about foreign travel prior to the Civil War and 168 after the Civil War.<sup>36</sup> Women represented a significant portion of travel writers but certainly not the majority (190 out of over 1700).

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<sup>31</sup> Schriber, *Telling Travels*, xxii.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, xxiii.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, xxiii.

<sup>34</sup> Schriber, *Writing Home*, 47.

<sup>35</sup> Schriber, *Telling Travels* xxiv.

<sup>36</sup> Schriber, *Writing Home*, 52.

Women from all social backgrounds recorded their travels and many successfully published and marketed their narratives. But we must bear in mind what kinds of tracts publishing houses purchased, what types of women were writing them, and how these narratives were labeled. Much female travel writing, in the form of letters, diaries, and journals, was never published, although it was often circulated among friends and family members. Women who wrote travel narratives for newspapers and magazines rarely published full-length books. Those women who were able to publish their travel narratives, and especially those who wrote books based on their travels, were mostly white middle and upper class women from the Northeast with time and money.<sup>37</sup>

Encouraged by new opportunities to travel and excited by the market for travel writing, women “became increasingly comprehensive in their declared reasons for publishing travel books as the century progressed.”<sup>38</sup> Professional authors, such as Margaret Fuller and Edith Wharton, wrote to broaden their careers and vocalize their political views. Others envisioned themselves as virtuous women with a moral mission to act as agents of reform and enlightenment, an approach often grounded in “Victorian didacticism, self-righteousness, and ethnocentrism.”<sup>39</sup> Others saw travel writing as an opportunity to gain entry into the profession of journalism. Particularly audacious women took up travel writing for “overtly political reasons,”<sup>40</sup> eager to assert their opinions regarding pressing political issues, such as the Spanish American War.

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<sup>37</sup> See Schriber, *Writing Home*, 2. Schriber confines her study to middle and upper class white women from the Northeast, mainly because these were the women who most often had the resources to publish their writing.

<sup>38</sup> Schriber, *Telling Travels*, xxiv-xxv

<sup>39</sup> Schriber, *Writing Home*, 52.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, 55.

Women's narratives of travel were profitable for publishers in the late nineteenth-century and early-twentieth century literary marketplace, but women's entry into the marketplace should not be read as an indication of their unbridled success. Deborah Williams reminds us that "even as women writers created huge profits for editors, publishers, literary agents—and themselves—the literary marketplace, dominated by men, was at best ambivalent, if not hostile about the presence of women."<sup>41</sup> Deborah Williams argues that the male novelist Joseph Hergesheimer was "speaking for many male writers"<sup>42</sup> when he voiced his concerns that women writers would silence men. Well-known male authors, including Nathaniel Hawthorne, expressed their concern that women were taking over the industry. Such concerns were largely unfounded, especially considering the denigration of female writing as "commercial" and inferior to male writing.

The publishing industry, like the nation as a whole, was undergoing dramatic changes during the nineteenth century. It was slowly evolving from "a genteel occupation in which agreements were sealed with handshakes to a consumer-driven professional industry in which both the book and the author's own image became products."<sup>43</sup> Female travel writers, as well as female writers in general, fared relatively well in this commercialized literary market, but their writing was never treated as separate from their gender. In fact, women's success in the literary marketplace was often treated as suspect, as proof that their work appealed to the masses and was thus inferior and non-literary. Of course, there existed a double standard in that popular male works, such as Mark Twain's *The Innocents Abroad* (1884) and Henry James's *Americans Abroad* (1878), were commercially successful and popular but also regarded as "literature."

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<sup>41</sup> Deborah L. Williams, *Not in Sisterhood: Edith Wharton, Willa Cather, Zona Gale, and the Politics of Female Authorship* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 3.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>43</sup> Williams, *Not In Sisterhood*, 3.

Thus, women participated in the literary industry but their work was “taken less seriously than men’s writing.”<sup>44</sup>

### **Traveling Women Writing and the Gender Divide**

The Differing Relationship of men and women to the institutions of writing and to the culture’s concept of “writer” . . . affected the purposes for which women wrote travels, the cultural work of their writing, and the angle from which women were attached to the genre and its conventions.

–Mary Suzanne Schriber, *Writing Home*<sup>45</sup>

There is no doubt that women transformed the publishing industry in the nineteenth century, but this does not mean that publishing houses embraced all women with equal fervor or that female writers achieved parity with their male counterparts in the literary marketplace. Female writers hailed from a variety of class and educational backgrounds and wrote for an array of reasons. Many of the women writing travel narratives were literary amateurs who “understood writing as an arm of religious, civic, and domestic discourse,” while others, such as Fuller, Cather, and Wharton, “valued writing as ‘high art’ . . . divorced from popular writing.”<sup>46</sup>

While it is important to recognize the diversity of female travel writers in America during the nineteenth century, this paper focuses specifically on successful, professional female writers. Fuller, Wharton, and Cather were best known for their work as novelists outside of the travel genre, and were hailed as important literary artists. The travel genre provides a useful lens for assessing the careers of these three literary figures because women’s narratives of travel have historically been devalued in comparison to those written by men. In many cases, women’s narratives were initially well-received but quickly lost popularity, often disappearing completely after the death of the author. This trend holds even for extremely successful female writers.

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>45</sup> Schriber, *Writing Home*, 6.

<sup>46</sup> Schriber, *Telling Travels*, 3.

Fuller's *Summer on the Lakes* was published to great critical acclaim from the likes of Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Edgar Allen Poe, and others. Few are familiar with this work today, while Thoreau's *Walden*, also a Transcendentalist travel narrative published at around the same time, is regarded as an American classic. Likewise, just as *Willa Cather in Europe* was first published as a series of Cather's compelling and witty articles in the *Nebraska State Journal*, so too Mark Twain's *the Innocents Abroad* began as a series of letters commissioned by the San Francisco *Alta California*.<sup>47</sup> Both authors were unknown as novelists during their first attempt at travel writing, and yet *The Innocents Abroad* has been assumed as part of Twain's literary oeuvre, and hailed as a canonical work, while *Willa Cather in Europe* has been brushed under the carpet.

In examining the disparate treatment of male and female travel writers, it is relevant to invoke the tradition of the European tour or Grand tour. I frequently allude to this tradition, most often taken up by wealthy white men from western nations, in my close reading of *Willa Cather in Europe*. Cather explicitly challenges the Grand tour by shifting her priorities as a traveler and writer off the beaten path. She acknowledges major monuments, buildings, places, etc., and then turns her attention to some other aspect of the environment, often the local inhabitants and the natural world.

### **The Grand Tour**

The tradition of the European tour for Americans served as more than the culmination of a privileged male education. It was meant to serve as a transformative journey, a rite of passage for the white male about to embark on his life of prosperity and dominance. It is in keeping with ancient tradition of constitutive masculinity, which treats travel as an "opportunity to achieve

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<sup>47</sup> William W. Stowe, *Going Abroad*, 3.

notable distinction through self-defining experience far from home.”<sup>48</sup> William W. Stowe captures the essence of the European tour in *Going Abroad* in his chapter on travel as ritual. The European tour might be conceptualized as “an initiatory act, a necessary step in a well planned career.”<sup>49</sup>

So what happens when women accumulate the resources to travel abroad without men and to employ the written word as proof of their agency? Susan Roberson suggests in her essay in the *Cambridge Companion to American Travel Writing* that the transportation revolution enabled women to participate in their own version of the Grand Tour.<sup>50</sup> Women such as Edith Wharton and Willa Cather used travel abroad to “broaden and deepen their knowledge of European history and art, turning their knowledge into real capital as they published their narratives.”<sup>51</sup> And yet, one must question how much authority female writers acquired writing in such a gendered space and publishing in a male dominated market.

### **Travel Writing and Literature**

Let’s begin by looking back at the history of male travel writing, a pastime that men have enjoyed since the “time of Gilgamesh.”<sup>52</sup> Unlike men, who “both wrote and traveled by an ancient birthright, thoroughly assumed and assimilated,”<sup>53</sup> women had to rationalize their travel and justify their right to write. Women’s newfound mobility in the nineteenth century and increased opportunities to write did not dissolve the entrenched gender inequalities that separated men and women’s voices as writers. The “differing relationship of men and women to the institutions of writing and to the culture’s concept of ‘writer’ . . . affected the purposes for which

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<sup>48</sup> Smith, *Moving Lives*, ix.

<sup>49</sup> Stowe, *Going Abroad*, 25.

<sup>50</sup> Roberson, “*American Women and Travel Writing*,” 221.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

<sup>52</sup> Smith, *Moving Lives*, ix.

<sup>53</sup> Schriber, *Writing Home*, 70.

women wrote travels, the cultural work of writing, and the angle from which women were attached to the genre and its conventions.”<sup>54</sup> Historically, women’s travel writing could not stand on its own as men’s travel writing could; it was categorized by gender first and then by content and value.

The traditional masculine travel narrative written by American literary figures follows the template of the Grand tour, with writers structuring their narratives around visits to important people and places. In his recent study of Mark Twain and tourism, Jeffrey Melton reminds us that “at one point or another in their careers, almost all of the era’s prominent literary figures availed themselves of the freedoms and benefits of travel writing.”<sup>55</sup> Stowe might add that most of these “canonical figures”<sup>56</sup> were male. Some women, including Fuller, Wharton, and Cather, participated in the European tour, but their writing reflects the occasional discomfort they felt in negotiating the masculinized template of travel writing. We also witness the ways in which they challenge the gendered ideology of the genre.

### **Progressive Possibilities and Constraints of Women’s Travel Writing**

My intent is not to posit nineteenth century American women’s travel writing as inevitably more progressive than male travel writing or to suggest that the writing of Fuller, Wharton, and Cather is unassailable in terms of its treatment of race, class, nation, culture, and gender. However, nineteenth century women writers were positioned in the margins of literary production, although class and racial differences among women influenced the way in which they “occupied these margins.”<sup>57</sup> Writing from the margins impacted the “authorial identity”<sup>58</sup> of

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>55</sup> Jeffrey A. Melton, *Mark Twain, Travel Books, and Tourism: The Tide of a Great Popular Movement* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002), 16.

<sup>56</sup> Stowe, *Going Abroad*, 4.

<sup>57</sup> Cheryl McEwan, *Gender, Geography, and Empire: Victorian Women Travellers in West Africa* (Aldershot, Hampshire, England: Ashgate, 2000), 9.

women and resulted in gendered knowledges that in many cases provide insight into multiple oppressions.

American women travel writers of the nineteenth century were not immune to the racist and imperialist structures and hierarchies that influenced the travel writing of their male counterparts, as we see in the work of Wharton and arguably in the work of Cather. Just as Fuller, Wharton, and Cather challenge important gender, race, and class stereotypes, they also reify hierarchies, albeit in different ways and to different extents. For example, Fuller disrupts racial stereotypes in her interaction with Indian women in ways that Wharton is unable to replicate as a French-sponsored writer in Morocco. In the three chapters devoted to specific authors, I will attempt to place each writer in historical and social context, offering critiques where they are necessary but also emphasizing the rich gendered and literary content.

The fourth chapter, concerned with Edith Wharton, inevitably raises questions of colonialism and colonial discourse, which I will explore in more depth. Historically, women have not participated in colonial discourse to the same extent and in the same ways as men because of their marginalized gender status: “they cannot be said to speak from outside colonial discourse, but their relation to the dominant discourse is problematic because of its conflict with the discourses of femininity, which were operating on them in equal, and sometimes stronger, measure.”<sup>59</sup> Cheryl McEwan encourages us to read women’s travel narratives “both as products of colonial cultures and the discursive field of imperialism, and as instrumental to changing discourses on colonial spaces.”<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> McEwan, *Gender, Geography, and Empire*, 9.

<sup>59</sup> Sara Mills, *Discourses of Difference: An Analysis of Women's Travel Writing and Colonialism* (London: Routledge, 1991), 63.

<sup>60</sup> McEwan, *Gender, Geography, and Empire*, 12.

CHAPTER 3  
MARGARET FULLER: THE GREAT AMERICAN TRAVEL CLASSIC

**Introduction**

Margaret Fuller, born in 1810 in Cambridgeport, Massachusetts, was a prominent social figure and a widely read critic and author during her lifetime, but her rich body of writing is virtually unknown in the critical world of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> Her best-known work, *Women in the Nineteenth Century*, was a highly controversial and influential social and political tract at the time of its publication. It was perhaps the most progressive feminist text since Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). Her travel writing was also critically acclaimed and read nationally. Fuller was considered one of the foremost thinkers and innovators among a group of prominent intellectuals during the mid nineteenth-century that included Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Walter Whitman. Yet today Fuller is "perhaps one of the best-known, least-read critics and authors of the nineteenth century."<sup>2</sup>

During Fuller's lifetime, women were barred from institutions of higher education, but her father, a distinguished Harvard College graduate, a four-term U.S. Congressman, and chairman of the House Committee on Naval Affairs, made sure that his daughter received an exemplary education.<sup>3</sup> He was determined to educate her at home from a very early age and he held Fuller to "an unusually high standard of intellectual and personal discipline,"<sup>4</sup> likely contributing to her remarkable work ethic and analytical capabilities. Fuller was not only a precocious young child; she was also a critical thinker, "unhampered by convention and prepared to question the frame

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<sup>1</sup> Zwarg, Christina, *Feminist Conversations: Fuller, Emerson, and the Play of Reading* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Zwarg, *Feminist Conversations*, 9.

<sup>3</sup> Steele, introduction, xii.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, xii.

through which historical issues are formulated.”<sup>5</sup> Edith Wharton and Willa Cather were also highly educated and exposed to scholarly pursuits at an extremely young age, as I will explore in the subsequent chapters.

The introduction to this chapter provides biographical a account of Fuller’s life and literary career, emphasizing her experience as an well-educated, well-traveled, and for the most part financially comfortable American female author. Travel played an important role in Fuller’s life as a writer and mobility is importantly linked to her feminist ideals and goals. Travel writing provided Fuller with a less controversial venue than fiction writing or journalism for asserting her controversial ideas. In *Summer on the Lakes*, Fuller positions herself as an observer of other cultures, not as a critic of her own, effectively camouflaging her critique of gender roles in Western society and her approval of alternative cultural values. Fuller’s insights regarding the role and significance of gender in her culture and other cultures make her “valuable both to our understanding of American literary history and to the complex history of feminist criticism of which she is part.”<sup>6</sup> In addition to looking at Fuller’s personal life and political and social agenda, the early part of this chapter illuminates the popular and critical reception of Fuller’s work, particularly her travel writing, both during her lifetime and among current literary critics.

The majority of this chapter comprises a close reading of *Summer on the Lakes*, a narrative of Fuller’s travel in the West in the spring of 1843. Fuller’s travel came at a pivotal point in her career and marked a turning point that prefigured much of her later writing. In the introduction to *the Essential Margaret Fuller*, Jeffrey Steele argues that by 1843 Fuller had “reached the point where Emerson, Thoreau, and Hawthorne—three of America’s leading writers—treated her as a

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<sup>5</sup> Zwarg, *Feminist Conversations*, 7.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

literary equal if not an intimidating antagonist.”<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the stimulating “Conversations” that she held for Boston women had “placed her at the center of an influential and important circle of female intellectuals,”<sup>8</sup> making her writing of interest to a diverse and influential set of individuals.

I frequently allude to the relationship between Fuller and the other female travel writers addressed in this study. While Fuller was not a contemporary of Wharton or Cather, as they were to each other, she faced similar obstacles as a independent and mobile woman eager to make her voice heard. I also discuss Fuller’s close friends and intellectual peers, including Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Horace Greeley, as Fuller’s claim to fame is as a conversationalist, a scholar who believed in the infinite value of exchange and dialogue. Many of Fuller’s close friends and peers also took up travel writing at some point in their careers. For example, Thoreau wrote *Walden Pond*, a piece of travel writing that is secure in the canon of both American travel writing and American literature.

### **Biographical Account Of Fuller’s Life And Career**

She wore this circle of friends, when I first knew her, as a necklace of diamonds about her neck. They were so much to each other that Margaret seemed to represent them all, and to know her was to acquire a place with them. The confidences given her were their best, and she held them to them. She was an active, inspiring companion and correspondent, and all the art, the thought, the nobleness in New England seemed at that moment related to her and she to it. She was everywhere a welcome guest.

- Emerson, *Memoirs of Margaret Fuller Ossoli*<sup>9</sup>

In 1810, Timothy and Margaret Crane Fuller welcomed their first of seven children, Margaret Fuller, into the world. Neither of Fuller’s parents hailed from wealthy families, but

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<sup>7</sup> Steele, introduction, xxii.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., xxii.

<sup>9</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Visits to Concord” in *Memoirs of Margaret Fuller Ossoli* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1884), 213.

Timothy Fuller acquired an excellent education at Harvard College and distinguished himself as a lawyer and a member of the Massachusetts legislature. As mentioned earlier, the young Margaret Fuller received a rigorous and exacting education, beginning her studies in English and Latin at the age of six.<sup>10</sup> By the age of nine, Fuller was reading Virgil, Cicero, Horace, Livy, and Tacitus, perfecting her Greek grammar, and honing her language skills in French and Italian. In an autobiographical sketch published when she was thirty, Fuller indicated that the classical texts influenced her more than anything else in her formal education.

Fuller's studies were one of her many occupations. As the eldest of seven children, she was frequently expected to act as a surrogate mother, tending to the needs of her siblings and keeping the household in order, a role that she would play for much of her adult life. Despite the emphasis that Fuller's father placed on teaching his eldest daughter himself and the invaluable role that she played in her household, Timothy and Margaret Crane Fuller decided that their daughter should be made into a lady. Like many young women of her age and social status, Fuller was sent away for "finishing" at Miss Susan Precott's Young Ladies' Seminary in Groton, Massachusetts.

The seminary was one of many schools that "increased educational opportunities" for women in the early republic, but it taught music, sewing, dancing, and drawing, as well as manner and morals, alongside history, geography, philosophy, mathematics, and the natural sciences.<sup>11</sup> Fuller was not a "typical student"<sup>12</sup> and she was not impressed by the curriculum at the school, which completely neglected Latin and Greek, two of her favorite areas of study. Fuller tells a story in *Summer in the Lakes* about an extremely intelligent, dramatic, and

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<sup>10</sup> Mary Kelley, introduction to *The Portable Margaret Fuller* (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), xi.

<sup>11</sup> Kelley, introduction, xiii.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, xiii.

unconventional friend that she had during her school days. This young woman, Mariana, bears a suspicious resemblance to the adolescent Fuller herself during her time at the Young Ladies' Seminary. I will return to this perhaps autobiographical scene in my close reading of *Summer on the Lakes*.

Fuller returned from Miss Prescott's in 1825 at the age of fourteen and remained in her childhood home for the next decade, engaging in a rigorous self-education that increasingly reflected her own interests as a scholar.<sup>13</sup> It was during this period that Fuller began to produce original creative work, engaging in criticism and writing poetry and fiction. She published a series of articles, in which she demonstrated her extensive reading, and began to broadcast her ideas. In 1835, just as Fuller was beginning to build her reputation as a critic and journalist, she suffered a significant setback. Timothy Fuller died of cholera, leaving his family in a precarious financial situation and increasing Fuller's financial obligations and household responsibilities. Fuller was forced to cancel her plans to travel and study in Europe, and began to seek out paid positions to take care of her family. Over the next three years, she worked as a teacher at Bronson Alcott's Temple School in Boston, Massachusetts and then at the Greene Street School in Providence, Rhode Island.

Fuller was determined to make her students' learning experience memorable and effective. Her lessons in Latin, French, and Italian were "designed as a pedagogical experiment in which teacher and student participated in a Socratic dialogue."<sup>14</sup> She encouraged conversation as a vital tool for learning, a technique that we see in her travel writing when she engages multiple voices and anticipates objections to her arguments. Boston society was startled not only by Fuller's

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<sup>13</sup> See Kelley, introduction, xiv, for a description of Fuller's extensive classical education. Fuller read widely in Italian literature, including Petrarch, Dante, Berni, and Tasso. She also enjoyed Epictetus, Milton, Racine, and de Stael, and a variety of Enlightenment texts.

<sup>14</sup> Kelley, introduction, xv.

approach to teaching but also by the “radical religiosity of the conversations,”<sup>15</sup> and she resigned in 1837. Fuller moved to Providence soon after and began working at the Green Street School. This period was marked by an increased interest in the status of women in the nineteenth century, an issue that Fuller brought into the classroom and encouraged her young female students to think critically about. Such ideas were at the forefront of Fuller’s thoughts when she ventured out West in 1843.

In 1844, upon returning from her travels out West, Fuller accepted a prestigious position as the *Tribune*’s chief reviewer-critic. She became increasingly involved in social and political issues during her New York years, and her columns “reflected her implicit belief that knowledge of wrongs or evils led to their correction.”<sup>16</sup> Fuller’s concern with domestic problems soon expanded to encompass foreign regions as well. She wrote frequently on Europe, but didn’t neglect Mexico, Argentina, and China, among other nations. Fuller’s passionate writing and advocacy during this period was driven by her humanism, Transcendentalism, and feminism, all of which “informed her writing and philanthropy.”<sup>17</sup>

When Fuller died at age forty she had achieved a great deal: she was hailed as “the best literary critic in America, a successful editor, a teacher who pioneered new forms of educational practice, on the country’s first columnists and war correspondents, and the author of the most influential book on woman’s rights.”<sup>18</sup> As I have emphasized at length, Fuller had also produced a notable body of travel writing that is remarkable for its engaging style and rich content, as well as for the race, gender, and class-conscious lens through which it is written.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid. xv.

<sup>16</sup> Margaret V. Allen, *The Achievement of Margaret Fuller* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1979), 126.

<sup>17</sup> Allen, *Achievement of Margaret Fuller*, 127.

<sup>18</sup> Steele, introduction, xi.

## Summer on the Lakes

In her life, the demands of traditional domesticity coexisted with ‘another world’ in which she was a pioneer.

—Jeffrey Steele, *The Essential Margaret Fuller*<sup>19</sup>

*Summer on the Lakes* represents Fuller’s only completed travel book and it “allowed her to express in a single context the disparate aspects of her consciousness: the appreciative and the analytic, the intellectual and the aesthetic, the conventionally masculine and feminine.”<sup>20</sup> In keeping with the genre, *Summer on the Lakes* is an eclectic mix of prose, poetry, proverbs, and dialogue. Fuller’s writing is “vigorous, witty, and charming,”<sup>21</sup> and her style is literary and often poetic. Her voice is authoritative, but her narrative reads as more of a conversation than a soliloquy. She incorporates myriad voices into the text, which prevents any one voice, including her own, from becoming too powerful.

In his article “Conventions and Voices in Margaret Fuller’s Travel Writing,” William W. Stowe calls attention to the polyvocality inherent in Fuller’s text, the way in which she incorporates a “variety of voices that are sometimes attributed to others, sometimes derived from conventions and models, sometimes clearly Fuller’s own.” By bringing these voices together and facilitating their interaction, Fuller is able to “express a subtle, complicated understanding of politics and culture, and of the American’s—and especially the American woman’s—relation to them.”<sup>22</sup> While I think that Stowe’s reading is valuable, I want to emphasize an important implication of Fuller’s polyvocality. Throughout *Summer on the Lakes*, Fuller gives voice to others. She achieves this by incorporating the voices of those around her through dialogue and

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, xii.

<sup>20</sup> Stowe, “Conventions and Voices,” 250.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 251

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 251.

description, but she also does so more subtly by prompting the reader to join in on the conversation. One is reminded of the Socratic teaching style that Fuller employed while working as a teacher in Boston and Providence as well as the conversational format of her Boston Conversations. Fuller never tells the reader what to think in *Summer on the Lakes*; instead, she prompts the reader to think for herself by posing challenging questions and describing possible solutions.

In *Black and White Women's Travel Narratives*,<sup>23</sup> Cheryl Fish calls *Summer on the Lakes* a “hybrid text,” a “poetic ethnography” that perhaps even transcends the travelogue with its “blend of autobiography, history, critical reading and a gender and race-based analysis of the promise and tragedy of Westward expansion.”<sup>23</sup> While I am positing *Summer on the Lakes* as a piece of travel writing and not as an ethnography, I am still attracted to Fish’s use of the term “hybrid,” in that it captures the multi-dimensional and multi-functional nature of the text.

In my own reading, I will rely upon and extend theories of polyvocality and hybridity, but I will also emphasize their interconnectedness in Fuller’s work. In looking at the intersections between the many voices apparent in Fuller’s travel writing and her diverse choice of subject matter, we can better see the “multiplicity of concerns and determinations through which she consistently had to negotiate” and witness in her strategies “a range and subtlety that anticipate and inform the double strategy of feminist discourse today.”<sup>24</sup> For example, at one point in the text Fuller is eating dinner at a hotel with a table of new faces when she abruptly digresses to tell the aforementioned story of a girlhood friend, Mariana. Fuller’s strategic digression illuminates

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<sup>23</sup> Fish, Cheryl J., *Black and White Women's Travel Narratives: Antebellum Explorations* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004), 96.

<sup>24</sup> Zwarg, *Feminist Conversations*, 14.

the role of polyvocality and hybridity in the text, and serves as an excellent example of the way in which Fuller fuses the two to make a specific point, which I will examine at length.

While *Summer on the Lakes* keeps with many of the stylistic conventions of travel writing, it is unique as an anti-imperialist, anti-classist, and feminist text. Fuller is deeply concerned with the status of Indians, women, and the diverse body of hard-working frontier settlers, and her concern regarding the marginalization of some groups at the hands of others is linked to her feminist and Transcendentalist ideals. Fuller possessed a “fundamental respect for all forms of life” and she was inevitably opposed to “whatever destroyed or disfigured it, however much that mutilation was rationalized as necessary for some desirable immediate end.”<sup>25</sup> She believed in balance and harmony among human beings and between humans and nature.

Fuller describes the “slovenliness” of the average frontier dwellings and condemns the “rude way in which objects around it were treated, when so little care would have presented a charming whole.”<sup>26</sup> The settlers are thus depicted not only as lacking in taste, but ignorant of the beauty surrounding them—“most of these settlers do not see it at all” (96)—and perhaps even lazy. The Indians are portrayed in a very different light. Fuller notices that they select “the most beautiful sites for their dwellings,” an indication of their good taste, and their “habits do not break in on that aspect of nature under which they were born” (96). She suggests that they are “the rightful lords of a beauty they forbore to deform” (96), an idea that she returns to throughout the narrative. Fuller depicts the Indians as non-aggressive and well-mannered, inclined to embrace and appreciate the natural world.

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<sup>25</sup> Allen, *Achievement of Margaret Fuller*, 123.

<sup>26</sup> Margaret Fuller, *Summer on the Lakes*, in *the Portable Margaret Fuller* (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), 96. Further references will be followed by page numbers in parentheses.

In another scene, Fuller visits an ancient Indian village, which “as usual” the Indians had “chosen with the finest taste” (100). In a surprising observation, Fuller indicates that the scene of the Indian village suggests to her “a Greek splendour, a Greek sweetness” (100). She insists that an “Indian brave . . . might be mistaken for Apollo” (100). Fuller’s interest in observing and validating Indian culture is grounded in her desire to alter negative perceptions of Indians in white culture, to “dispel the stereotypes of the Indians as bloodthirsty, ignorant savages by portraying them as human beings, and by showing that they had their own standards of belief and conduct, to which they were far more faithful than the whites were to theirs.”<sup>27</sup> Fuller understood that the uneven power relationship between whites and Indians, not the superiority of white culture over Indian culture, resulted in the vilification of Indians and the resulting degradation of Indian life and culture by whites.

Cheryl Fish links Fuller’s “use of race as a category of identification” with her intention to develop “theories of gender oppression.”<sup>28</sup> In other words, Fuller frequently uses her discussions of the American Indians and the injustices unleashed on Indian culture as a bridge to unveiling her gendered analyzes. While Fuller recognizes and disparages the gender and race-based inequities present in the American West, her outlook is ultimately optimistic. As we will see in the various close readings in this chapter, Fuller posits the West as a location of potential change and progress: “Fuller believed that American’s destiny was to elucidate a great moral law, and like no other thinker of her time, she envisioned women’s part in the great unfolding.”<sup>29</sup>

If Fuller’s transcendentalist ideals influence her perception of the Indians and Indian culture and guide her feminism, they also play a role in her experience of nature. Nature is

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<sup>27</sup> Allen, *Achievement of Margaret Fuller*, 119.

<sup>28</sup> Fish, *Black and White Women’s Travel Narratives*, 100.

<sup>29</sup> Allen, *Achievement of Margaret Fuller*, 144.

described in quasi-religious terms: “Here swelled the river in its boldest course, interspersed by halcyon isles on which nature had lavished all her prodigality in tree, vine, and flower, banked by noble bluffs . . . mother of beauty, by its sweet and eager flow, had left such lineaments as human genius never dreamt of” (99). Nature is described as infinitely beautiful and as inherently humbling.

Fuller’s underlying political and social agenda, if one might identify it as such, is powerful in its subtlety. Instead of forcing ideas on her audience, Fuller encourages the reader to enter into a dialogue, to temporarily suspend convention for long enough to notice its contradictions and inadequacies. Fuller’s interest in the status of women does not prevent her from analyzing the impact of gender norms on men, women, and children, and from dissecting the intersections between race, class, and gender. She is constantly encouraging the reader to step back and see the bigger picture, and of course to ask questions.

### **Critical and Popular Reception**

*Summer on the Lakes* was for the most part very well received at the time of its publication in 1843, garnering attention from several of the “literary greats” in her close-knit circle of intellectual friends and peers and selling nearly seven hundred copies in the first six months (a typical first edition usually sold less than five hundred).<sup>30</sup> Prior to the publication of her narrative, Fuller worried incessantly about how it would be received by those to whom she was closest, especially since it was her first full-length book of original writing. Fortunately, critics such as Emerson, Thoreau, Greeley, and Poe, hailed *Summer on the Lakes* for its “expressiveness, forcefulness, sometimes eloquence, and often insight.”<sup>31</sup> Greeley, who praised

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<sup>30</sup> See Charles Capper, *Margaret Fuller: An American Romantic Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 155, for a detailed description of the publication history of *Summer on the Lakes*.

<sup>31</sup> Capper, *An American Romantic Life*, 155.

the book as “one of the clearest and most graphic delineations”<sup>32</sup> of the West, was sufficiently impressed by the work to offer Fuller a job at the *New York Tribune*.

Of course, some critics described *Summer on the Lakes* as “elliptical and fragmented,” an “exasperating book.”<sup>33</sup> Indeed, the book has “provoked a good deal of critical puzzlement,” even among contemporary scholars who recognize its value as a feminist, anti-racist text “express impatience with its interlaced musings, dialogues, tales, poems, book critiques, and other seeming digressions.”<sup>34</sup> My own reading aims to illuminate the vital role that Fuller’s unconventional techniques play in her narrative, especially in advancing an anti-racist and feminist agenda.

Charles Capper argues that *Summer on the Lakes* incorporated “several original accents” that makes the book stand apart from the travel writing of her male contemporaries, including Thoreau, Hawthorne, and Whitman.<sup>35</sup> The work was favorably reviewed in the *New York Tribune*, *Christian World*, the *Boston Morning Post*, the anti-Transcendentalist *Boston Courier*, the *Daily Advertiser*, *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, and *Graham’s Magazine*, among other publications.<sup>36</sup> It is remarkable that *Summer on the Lakes* was praised in newspapers and magazines affiliated with a diverse range of political and social viewpoint. Considering its market appeal and favorable reception, it is significant that *Summer on the Lakes* received little sustained attention, and continues to be treated as inferior to the travel writing of major male authors. William Stowe, whose book *Going Abroad* is largely concerned with masculine narratives of travel, is unfortunately correct in his assertion that most people “do not think of

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 155.

Margaret Fuller as a travel writer.”<sup>37</sup> But this doesn’t mean that she wasn’t a travel writer and a prominent and illustrious one at that.

### Travel Writing

Fuller was not a writer of fiction, but she incorporated literary tradition and style into her non-fiction and she is undeniably a great American female author and literary figure. Fuller’s unique literary contributions, including translations, criticism, journalism, and history, “[complicate] our interpretation both of the feminist tradition in America and that tradition in general.”<sup>38</sup> It is not adequate to label Fuller’s work, a critics have been apt to do, as “masculine and self-obsessed” or “feminine, subversive, and polyphonic,”<sup>39</sup> because it at once both and neither. *Summer on the Lakes* is a polyphonic text that engages myriad voices: Fuller’s “travel narratives served as vehicles for multiple voices—males and female, marked and unmarked, real and invented—without establishing a hierarchy among them or a sense of irreversible progress from one to another.”<sup>40</sup>

Fuller found an ideal venue for self-expression in travel writing, but her motives were also pragmatic. Like other writers of the era, Fuller was drawn to the “marketability of travel writing” and recognized that “its loose conventions provided an excellent framework for her own eclectic style and multiple purposes.”<sup>41</sup> Travel also represented one of the few genres in which issues of race and gender could be discussed without marked controversy. I indicated that Fuller’s travel writing is importantly linked to feminist agenda. When Fuller embarked on her travels West in the summer of 1843, she had reached a point in her career in which “the nineteenth-century

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<sup>37</sup> Stowe, “Conventions and Voices in Margaret Fuller’s Travel Writing,” 242.

<sup>38</sup> Zwarg, *Feminist Conversations*, 2.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>40</sup> Stowe, “Conventions and Voices,” 242.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 242.

system of gender relations, and especially its impact on women”<sup>42</sup> dominated her writing, and consequently her agenda as a travel writer. It is this concern with the unequal power dynamic between men and women in the nineteenth century that unites the “seemingly unrelated journal entries, dialogues, tales of disastrous marriages, poems, commentaries on Indians, letters, and historical sketches”<sup>43</sup> that make up *Summer on the Lakes*.

### **Historical, Professional, and Personal Context of Publication**

*Summer on the Lakes* was written at a pivotal time in Fuller’s life and career and at a dynamic period in history. The travel genre was extremely popular during the Antebellum era, second only to fiction in terms of readership and sales. Furthermore, the West was undergoing a mass migration “driven by hard times, cheap land, the previous decades removal of the last of the area’s once numerous Indian tribes.”<sup>44</sup> With the onslaught of settlers headed West and the colorful tales of Indian tribes, “the West was the genre’s most accessible but still exotic subject.”<sup>45</sup> Fuller had also acquired a significant following in the wake of the “Conversations” in Boston. Thus, Fuller chose an ideal time to produce a travel narrative.

Fuller didn’t secure a publisher until her return from travels out West. Several of her male peers, including Emerson, Thoreau, and Greeley, advised her regarding publishing options. Emerson persuaded her to secure a prestigious firm offering high royalties, but Fuller ultimately followed Greeley’s advice and signed a contract with the “up-and-coming Boston house of Charles Little and James Brown,” which offered “10 percent royalties, no risk after production

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<sup>42</sup> Kelley, introduction, xxii.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., xxiii.

<sup>44</sup> Capper, *An American Romantic Life*, 123.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 140.

costs, and the co-print of New York's Charles S. Francis and Company on the title page."<sup>46</sup>

Fuller was told that her travel writing had the potential to become a "national book."<sup>47</sup>

Fuller was excited by the prospect of a new landscape—" a change of air and scene"<sup>48</sup>— and all that it signified in terms of expanding and honing her ideas. She had, of course, just published her essay "The Great Lawsuit: Man versus Woman" in the *Dial*, in which she had argued that there is no "wholly masculine man, no purely feminine woman."<sup>49</sup> Fuller had a distinct sense of what she planned to incorporate into her travel writing and what she aimed to achieve. She was interested in writing a well-researched intellectual travel narrative, which "combined narrative with 'poetic' impressions and self-reflections."<sup>50</sup> In order to achieve this goal, she did a great deal of reading prior to her trip to prepare herself for what she might encounter. She continued her reading and research after her trip because she appreciated travel books "with some research behind them."<sup>51</sup> She was the first woman granted access to the Harvard College Library, and she took advantage of the library's resources, reading every book she could find on American Indians as well as all of the major works of exploratory literature that she could find on the West.<sup>52</sup>

### **Format, Content, and Areas of Focus**

Having just resigned from the *Dial* and temporarily ceased her Boston Conversations, Fuller travelled West in the summer of 1843. Fuller journeyed through Niagara, Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin, lodging in private homes as well as hotels. Her four-month excursion via rail, steamboat, carriage, and wagon, offered her ample opportunity to interact with a vast

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>49</sup> Steele, introduction, xxxiv.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>52</sup> See Capper, *An American Romantic Life*, 141.

range of individuals from all backgrounds and social classes. But Fuller was not entirely independent in that she had male supervision and protection for most of her journey. Fuller began her travels with her friends Sarah Clarke and James Freeman Clarke. James “escorted” the women to Niagara Falls, where they spent a week, and from there he saw them “safely aboard a steamboat”<sup>53</sup> to Chicago. Clarke’s brother William greeted the women in Chicago and chaperoned their tour of the Illinois prairie. The women did make a side trip without male chaperones to Wisconsin, and Fuller stayed alone among the Indians on Mackinaw Island for nine days, indicating that females could travel safely and productively without male supervision.

*Summer on the Lakes* is arranged in seven chapters, each named after the region that it describes. Fuller includes dates, for example the first entry is dated June 10, 1843 at Niagara, but they are inconsistent and rarely align with the chapter headings. The content of the narrative is diverse, including descriptions of the landscape, stories, proverbs, poetry, and prose. My reading and analysis of *Summer on the Lakes* will focus on three specific sections in the text: the first concerns Fuller’s reaction to the frontier women; the second unpacks a story about a young girl that Fuller inserts into the text; and the final involves Fuller’s experiences among the Indian women.

### **I. The Unfitness of the Female Frontier Settlers**

The first scene that I want to look more closely at occurs in chapter three of the narrative, around the Rock River in Illinois, where a kind family of “graceful hospitality” welcomes Fuller and her companions into their home where they are able to get a sense of the lifestyle and customs of the frontier settlers. Fuller depicts the country as idyllic and contrasts urban and rural life, indicating her preference for the latter. As in all of her travel writing, Fuller is captivated by

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<sup>53</sup> Paula Blanchard, *Margaret Fuller: From Transcendentalism to Revolution* (New York: Delacorte Press/S. Lawrence, 1978), 196.

the natural environment and adjusts quickly to the shifting environment around her. But her delight in the natural world is overshadowed by her serious concern with the peculiar and uncomfortable position of many of the female migrants who are accustomed to a more urban environment and lifestyle.

Fuller's host family inhabits a modest double log cabin, which she envisions as "the model of a Western villa" (104). Fuller is delighted by the grounds on which the cabin is built and remarks of the interior that "female taste" has "veiled every rudeness—availed itself of every sylvan grace" (104). The family, too, is extremely congenial and Fuller reminisces on the laughter that she enjoyed in the "charming abode" (104). She is welcomed into the community and encouraged to ponder the prospect of relocating to the West.

Fuller attends a makeshift Fourth of July celebration, which includes traditional drumming and fifeing, a speech delivered by a New England-born orator, and a bountiful dinner provided by the townspeople. She imagines the West, especially early on in her narrative, as a place of great potential in terms of social and political progress. She frequently refers to the children of the settlers as if they might one day represent a new strain of Americans. Fuller describes the children at the Fourth of July celebration, waving their American flags, as drinking the "health of their country and all mankind, with a clear conscience" (105). The day concludes with dance and song, and Fuller admits that she knows of no other location that "affords so fair a chance of happiness as this" (105).

Fuller is attracted to the small town and its friendly inhabitants, as well as the social and economic prospects offered by the frontier as a whole, and enters into a lengthy soliloquy on the merits of the West. The frontier does not discriminate against the poor or unknown or those unable to survive in the fiercely competitive environment of the East coast. With only a small

sum of money a man can purchase a fair lot of land and with moderate labor sustain his family with “raiment, food and shelter” (105). Families might be deprived of the “luxurious and minute comforts of a city life” (105) but surely there are things of greater value. The houses might be “imperfectly built,” but they are sufficient to ward off the cold and ideal settings for “immense fires and plenty of covering” (105). There is plenty of food—fish, game, and wheat—and thus no fear of going hungry or struggling to put dinner on the table each evening.

Furthermore, the houses are too scattered to necessitate fences or impressive facades. Suspicion and ostentation can be dispensed with. There is also no need for the staunch and stressful economy that the city demands. The most appealing aspect of the frontier to Fuller is that “whole families might live together, if they would” (105). She delights in the idea that sons might “settle near the parent hearth” and avoid those “painful separations . . . which desecrate and desolate the Atlantic coast,” but are necessary in order to make ends meet. In the West, the land provides its inhabitants with everything they might need: space to build, fields to work, and food to eat. Accustomed to a “society of struggling men,” Fuller envisions the West as a land of equal opportunity, in which nature seemed to “promise room not only for those favored or cursed with the qualities best adapting for the strifes of competition, but of the delicate, the thoughtful, even the indolent or eccentric” (105). Thus, Fuller’s appreciation of frontier life must be understood in terms of her social egalitarianism.

In this particular town, the families living upon the banks form a “pleasant society” (106). They hail from all over the world, possessing a remarkably “varied experience” but sharing “in common the interests of a new country and a new life (106). Many of the settlers are well-educated, with “cultivated minds and refined manners” (106). Fuller’s optimism regarding

Western settlement is dampened by one factor. She is very concerned with the “unfitness of the women for their new lot” (106):

It has generally been the choice of the men, and the women follow, as women will, doing their best for affection’s sake, but too often in heartsickness and weariness. Beside it frequently not being a choice or conviction of their own minds that it is best to be here, their part is the hardest, and they are least fitted for it. The men can find assistance in field labor, and recreation with the fun and fishing rod. Their bodily strength is greater, and enables them to bear and enjoy both these forms of life. The women can rarely find any aid in domestic labor. All its various and careful tasks must often be performed, sick or well, by the mother and daughters, to whom a city education has imparted neither the strength nor skill now demanded. (106)

She goes to describe the unique ways in which poor female settlers and women who were raised as “ladies” respond to their increased workload and lack of resources. Fuller devotes several pages to outlining the sources and repercussions of the problem, assessing its severity, and suggesting possible solutions. In his analysis of this particular passage, Stowe remarks: “Fuller is here constructing a case rather than describing a piquant contrast.” Fuller appeals to logic and reason, a stereotypically male approach, instead of emotion and sentiment, in developing her argument.

The tenets of her argument are as follows: first, female settlers rarely choose to relocate to the frontier themselves. They go along with the wishes of their husbands. Second, their role in the new territory is more difficult than that of their husbands, and they lack vital skills. Many of the settlers are educated and trained in arts that are largely useless on the frontier. To make matters worse, they can find no assistance in their domestic duties. Third, the onslaught of duties negatively impacts women of all classes. The wives of poor settlers are, accordingly to Fuller, apt to become slatternly, while the ladies, intent on maintaining an orderly household, “struggle under every disadvantage to keep up the necessary routine of small arrangements” (106). Finally, women have scarce resources for pleasure outside of their housework, which might alleviate

their feelings of distress and provide them with necessary pleasure. Fuller writes, “they have not learnt to ride, to drive, to row, alone” (106). Note the insertion of the word “alone”; Fuller not only imagines women engaging in a wide range of physical pursuits associated with bodily movement and freedom, but she envisions them traveling independently, alone.

Fuller’s dissatisfaction with the unpreparedness of female settlers lessens when she begins to talk about the little girls of the settlers, imagining that they might “grow up with strength of body, dexterity, simple tastes, and resources that would fit them to enjoy and refine the Western farmer’s life” (107). At the time that Fuller was writing, such characteristics were typically valued in young boys, not young women. Fuller’s emphasis on the importance of bodily strength and independence for both sexes is grounded in her transcendental ideals as well as her feminist ideals. Her goal in illuminating the “joylessness, and inaptitude, both of body and mind” (106) of the female settlers, is to encourage new ways of thinking about appropriate hobbies and activities. Thus, Fuller’s complaints about the situation of women should not be read as pessimistic or as an indictment of the West—“a lot which would be full of blessings for those prepared for it”—but as a criticism of the north, and its failure to provide women with the skills necessary to lead a stimulating and self-sufficient life. Fuller’s critique is ultimately optimistic, as she turns her attention to the prospects for the young women and girls being raised in the West.

Having opened the floor for discussion on the issue of women’s unfitness for frontier life, Fuller thus begins another longer section, meant to drive home the importance of practical education for Western women. Fuller acknowledges the power of entrenched stereotypes and social expectations: young Western women “have a great deal to war with in the habits of thought acquired by their mothers from their own early life” (107). Mothers discourage their

daughters from acting with strength and resolution and from exerting their faculties, as “ladies” do not behave in such a way. Fuller sees no reason why the Western “lady” should be wanting in strong conviction and resolution and skilled in practical crafts. Fuller describes the “fatal spirit of imitation, of reference to European standards” (107), that infects so many of the women settlers. They are determined to send their daughters away to “some eastern city” (107), so that they might receive a proper education—“the measure most likely to make them useless and unhappy at home” (107).

Fuller views such ideas as misguided at best, fatal at worst. She feels that the mothers are setting up their children, particularly their young girls, for failure and extinguishing “whatever original growth might adorn the soil” (107). One might note here Fuller’s own negative experience of being sent away to Miss Prescott’s boarding school—a circumstance which actually interrupted her rigorous classical education. She felt degraded by the curriculum offered to the girls, particularly its emphasis on music, sewing, dancing and drawing, as well as manners and morals. She most resented the cessation of her studies in Latin and Greek.

Fuller yearned for a school that catered to her individual needs, challenged her, and prepared her for life in her neck of the woods, and it is this that she wants for the young daughters of Western settlers. Fuller’s proposed solution in this circumstance is the development of good, local schools, “planned by persons of sufficient thought to meet the wants of the place and time” (107). Instead of being modeled after successful schools in Boston and New York, such schools would cater to the unique needs and circumstances of young people growing up on the frontier. Girls would be tutored on topics related to domesticity, to “make home beautiful and comfortable,” but they would also be encouraged to develop their “bodily strength to enjoy

plenty of exercise” (107, so that they might enjoy good health and the beautiful country around them.

Such an innovative education would provide girls and boys with equal access to the skills essential for navigating their particular environment. It would be much more effective than developing schools modeled after those in Boston and New York, which cater to the needs of students on the east coast. While Wharton’s proposal is relevant to girls and boys, her focus is first and foremost on females. She imagines the infinite potential and happiness of the female unbound and enabled to realize her potential. She encourages the reader to envision such a young woman:

An elegance would diffuse around her, and if her mind were opened to appreciate elegance; it might of a kind new, original, enchanting; it might be as different from that of the city belle as that of the prairie torchflower from the shopworn article that touches the cheek of that lady within her bonnet . . .the woods, the streams, music, and the sincere and familiar intercourse, far more easily to be met here than elsewhere, would afford happiness enough. Her eyes would not grow dim, nor cheeks sunken, in the absence of parties, morning visits, and milliner’s shops. (107)

Fuller is doing something really spectacular in this passage. She is attempting to reinvent traditional notions of femininity, to suggest that female elegance does not need to be defined by particular activities or particular fashions. Just as Fuller compares an Indian village to a beautiful ancient metropolis, so she compares the elegance of the country girl to that of the “city belle” (107)—one is not superior to the other. She rejects the hierarchy between country and city, masculine and feminine, and wealthy and poor, instead arguing for a recognition of but not indictment of difference. Fuller is at once subtle and convincing. A woman might be elegant in her communion with nature; she might be enchanting and original even without a new hat; and she might be happy without lavish parties, rejoicing in solitude. She might delight in family, her able body, and the ground beneath her feet. One of the exciting implications of Fuller’s new conception of womanhood is that it treats women as complex human beings instead of objects.

Fuller doesn't discard or devalue traditionally feminine activities—in contrast, she extols them—but she refuses to draw a line between those activities appropriate for women and those appropriate for men. She further destabilizes the boundary between the genders by employing traditionally masculine adjectives, such as “strong” and “resolute,” to describe females, without implying a negative connotation. In Fuller's mind, a young woman might “exert [her] faculties” without “want of fashionable delicacy,” and she might be “gay, enterprising, ready to fly about” (107) without being subject to reprimand. As we will see in the next close reading, Fuller invokes similar ideas in her portrayal of Mariana.

Fuller constantly questions and frequently rejects conventions and her subtle pet peeves illuminate larger issues. For example, toward the end of this passage pertaining to the education of young women, Fuller indicates her frustration that so many women learn piano when they might play the guitar. She also doesn't understand why instrumental music is always valued over “good vocal” (107). As usual, Fuller justifies her complaint with a series of excellent arguments. The piano is large and cannot be easily carried around. Furthermore, many ladies do not know how to tune their pianos and consequently spoil their ear by playing an instrument that is out of tune. The guitar, in contrast, is a “portable instrument which requires less practice” (108), which can be easily kept in tune by most ladies, and provides an excellent accompaniment to the voice. Fuller suggests that the piano is played not because it is the most well-liked or practical instrument, but because it is seen as “the fashionable instrument in eastern cities” (107). She views this as an absurd reason for its popularity in the West, especially since its popularity in the East can be attributed to its repute in Europe. Fuller has no patience for custom when it is grounded in pretension instead of pragmatism.

As a whole, this passage is significant for a number of reasons. Fuller discerns the unique impact that asymmetrical gender relations have on female settlers. By illuminating the uselessness of some of the social skills and accomplishments so prized in the east, Fuller reveals that such skills are not inherently valuable. They are skills of adornment, not skills of survival, and thus do not foster self-reliance. She uses her observations as a framework for developing suggestions about education in the West, emphasizing its particular relevance to the advancement of young women. Ultimately, she lays a groundwork for re-conceptualizing appropriate male and female roles and activities in the West and empowering young women.

My next reading is linked thematically to the first in its concern with the roles allotted to women. This fifteen-page passage exemplifies Fuller's idiosyncratic mode of travel writing, prone to digression and philosophical reflection. It is also an example of her subtle, but effective method of encouraging the reader to think about gender construction and its ramifications.

## **II. The Tragedy of Mariana**

The story of Mariana begins abruptly in the midst of a dinner party, leaving the reader to ponder the apparently tangential relationship between the story and the text. In fact, the section of the narrative in which Mariana springs to life begins on quite a different subject. Fuller is traveling in the region around Chicago, Illinois, and is fascinated by several aspects of the environment. She admires the forests, which are unlike those in New England because the trees "stand fair and apart from one another" (114), and appreciates the diverse array of wild flowers, "not timid, retiring little plants like ours, but bold flowers of rich colors" (115). She includes a poetic exchange between a solitary man and a passing traveler, and then returns to descriptions of the rolling prairie. While Fuller's days are spent mainly in solitude amidst the fabulous displays of nature, nights around the hotel table are lively with many "new faces, and new stories to be learned" (118), and it is here that the reader is introduced to Mariana.

Even though Fuller assures the reader that anyone with a large acquaintance “may be pretty sure of meeting some of them here in the course of a few days” (118), it still seems like an unlikely coincidence when Fuller encounters the aunt of an old schoolmate. However, this reunion plays an important role in justifying Fuller’s recitation of the tragic story of Mariana. Fuller presents her story as factual account and tells it as if she was once one of Mariana’s school peers. Yet, the narrator of the story seems distinct from Fuller, so I will refer to her as the “narrator” instead of as Fuller herself. In unpacking the story of Mariana, we begin to understand its role in the text and to recognize its remarkable scope in confronting gender inequalities. Under the guise of an engaging story, Fuller effectively calls into question the way in which girls are socialized, offers an alternative model of female behavior, and challenges marital inequalities.

Mariana’s aunt, Mrs. Z., informs the narrator that her childhood friend Mariana is dead. The narrator is startled and upset and begins to sketch out Mariana’s history. The young Mariana was sent from her parental home to live with her aunt so that she might receive an education on the Atlantic coast. Her aunt enrolled Mariana in boarding school for a time so that she could travel abroad. Mariana proved to be a “strange bird” among her boarding school peers—“a lonely swallow” (119). At first, she captivated her peers with her eccentricities, her tendency to break into dance or song, but they soon became agitated with her unpredictability and her unwillingness to follow the lead of others.

Some singular habits she had which, when new, charmed, but after acquaintance, displeased her companions. She had by nature the same habit and power of excitement that is described in the spinning dervishes of the East. Like them, she would spin until all around her were giddy, while her own brain, instead of being disturbed, was excited to action. Pausing, she would declaim verse of others or her own; act many parts, with strange catch-words and burdens that seemed to act with mystical power on her own fancy, sometimes stimulating her to convulse in laughter, sometimes to melt her to tears. (119)

Mariana defies convention on several accounts. She does not act like a lady or even a “good” American. She is “foreign,” outlandish, and passionate. Several key words stand out in this passage—“excitement,” “action,” “mystical power”—invoking an image of Mariana as one in motion, in control, and perhaps dangerous. Mariana’s brain does not respond to imbalance and motion as one might expect. It serves as a catalyst to action. She can’t sit still except when she’s gazing out from a balcony, absorbing the outside world. She is comforted by enormity and the sublime beauty of nature, like Fuller herself, and stifled by the routine and confinement.

The word “excitement” recurs throughout the story of Mariana. Those around her consider it to be a negative aspect of her personality: “the excitement, as may be supposed, was not food for her” (119). But the narrator seems to see something positive in Mariana’s excitement: a bottled “genius and power” (120) that merely needs an appropriate outlet. Mariana’s energy is only increased by the “restraints and narrow routine of the boarding school” (120), but at last she finds a “vent” in “private theatricals” (120). Not coincidentally, most of the principal roles fall to Mariana and she insists on having the final say in all the workings and arrangements of the production, much to the chagrin of her peers. For a time, Mariana seems to “[shine] triumphant,” but her happiness is short-lived, as it seems always to be.

Mariana’s peers, irritated by her eccentricity, secretly mock her and one day arrange a scheme to humiliate her. They are intent on “punishing, once and for all, this sometimes amusing, but so often provoking nonconformist” (120). One evening at dinner, they play a particularly nasty trick on Mariana, who is “quite unprepared to find herself in the midst of a world which [despises] her” (121). Mariana maintains her composure and pretends to ignore the taunts of her peers, but after dinner she retreats to her room, locks the door, and is overcome by convulsions. Eventually she falls to sleep and wakes “an altered being” (122). No longer

enthusiastic and energetic, Mariana, who was “born for love,” comes to “[hate] all the world” (122). She discards her wild and inventive tendencies and her behavior becomes noticeably subdued. Out of remorse, and perhaps curiosity about the now reclusive Mariana, her peers seek her out and attempt to befriend her. But her residual anger causes her to act out of character and to provoke hostility among her peers:

And the demon rose within her, and spontaneously, without design, generally without words of positive falsehood, she became a genius of discord among them. She fanned those flames of envy and jealousy which a wise, true word from a third will often quench forever; by a glance, or a seemingly light reply, she planted the seeds of dissension, till there was scarce a peaceful affection, or sincere intimacy in the circle where she lived, and could not but rule, for she was one whose nature was to that of others as fire to clay. (122)

Mariana appears ladylike and is now popular among her peers, but her actions are unkind and unfeeling. Her newfound “mystery” is the result of bad, hateful feelings, and her sudden interest in social interaction is grounded in a desire to hurt people.

The narrator interrupts the story at this point, to describe her own interaction with the now vicious Mariana. In her first encounter with Mariana, the narrator is overwhelmed by her beauty, charm, and charisma, and pleads, “O Mariana, do let me love you, and try to love me a little” (123). But Mariana snatches her hand away and, laughing, retreats into her room. We hear little more about the narrator, giving further credence to the theory that the alleged friendship between the narrator and Mariana is fabricated. Fuller uses the story of Mariana as a strategic teaching device—an example of what happens to some highly energetic and original females. The narrator’s sympathy for Mariana is meant to encourage the reader to feel the same.

The narrator fades out of view again as we learn that Mariana’s actions eventually catch up with her. She is called to the principal’s office to “answer charges made against her” (123), but despite initial attempts to defend herself she must eventually submit to the truth. Mariana, with her characteristic passion “[dashes] her head, with all her force, against the iron hearth, on which

a fire [is] burning, and [is] taken up senseless” (124). When she regains consciousness, another great change takes place in the mind of the “passionate but novel-tempered” (124) child. She recognizes the “baseness and cruelty of falsehood” and the “loveliness of truth” (124), and becomes tragically convinced that “one great fault can mar a whole life” (125).

Eventually Mariana’s strength and will to live returns, and she apologizes to her peers for her misdeeds. Mariana returns home a “wonderfully instructed being” and enjoys for a time a “soft and indolent state” (126). Unfortunately, Mariana’s troubles are not complete. She falls in love with a man named Sylvain and the narrator’s tone immediately alerts the reader that “love” is not going to play a positive role in Mariana’s life. Mariana is immediately attracted to Sylvain, who is “well proportioned to her lot in years, family, and fortune” (126), but quite inferior to her in terms of personality and intellect. Mariana “reverses the natural relations” (126) between man and woman by loving first and most: “it is a curse to woman to love first, or most” (126). Of course, there would be no problem if Sylvain loved first or most. Mariana’s unconventionality even extends to her romantic relationships—she usurps the male role—and she suffers for it.

The couple is happy at first, but Mariana soon recognizes their incompatibility. She is an “intellectual being” (126) and as such requires intelligent companionship. Sylvain has no thoughts or “delicacy of sentiment” (126). He is incapable of appreciating Mariana’s intellect or engaging in stimulating conversation with her. Out of desperation and love, Mariana ignores the inferiority of her partner and overlooks that place in their relationship where she “feels a blank,” hoping that “further communion” might “fill it up” (126). Even when she realizes that he will never be a sufficient partner and that he stifles her “finer powers” (127), she decides that she would rather live miserably with him than live without him. Fuller cautions the reader not to judge Mariana who, possessing a “heart capable of highest Eros,” gives her love “to one who

knew love only as a flower or plaything” (127). After a few months of domestic life, Sylvain grows tired and determines that he wants “business and the world” (127) even though he lacks the necessary knowledge and faculties to pursue such things.

Ultimately, no compromise can be reached “between natures of such unequal poise” (127), at least not when the female is the superior being. Sylvain expects his wife to play the part of socialite, to “please and to shine”—a part that she consents to, but with “an unsatisfied heart, and no lightness of character” (128). The narrator reflects on the progress of Mariana’s life:

The sort of talent and faculty she had displayed in early days, were not the least like what is called out in the social world by the desire to please and to shine. Her excitement had been muse-like, that of the improvisatrice, whose kindling fancy seeks to create an atmosphere round it, and makes the chain through which to set free its electric sparks. There had been a time of wild and exuberant life. After her character became more tender and concentrated, strong affection or a pure enthusiasm might still have called out beautiful talents in her. (128)

Mariana’s talent is pure and genuine, the inspired talent of a great artist, not the artificial talent of a charming social presence. Fuller seems intent on portraying Mariana as an unappreciated genius. Cheryl Fish reads the transgressive body and desires of Mariana’s as Fuller’s “claim for social spaces for those whose acceptance she believed would herald the American form of genius.”<sup>54</sup> Mariana’s originality and intelligence, both traits that would have been admired in a male, serve as an impediment to her success. Where she might have been admired, she is instead ridiculed and policed, most often by the women around her. Her indolent, preoccupied husband is content in his life of leisure and exercises total power over his wife despite his intellectual and moral inferiority. As a wealthy man, Sylvain frequently travels with his male companions on “excursions of affairs of pleasure” (128). Mariana is trapped in her home, “conscious of secret riches within herself” (128) but lacking an outlet for her energies. She has come full circle and found herself in much the same situation as she was as a young girl in boarding school.

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<sup>54</sup> Fish, *Black and White Women’s Travel Narratives*, 97.

Lacking a “nobler road” or a “higher aim” (129), Mariana falls sick. She stops eating and withdraws from the world entirely. Her spirit has been slowly choked out of her, and it is as if she wills herself to die. Fuller’s portrayal of Mariana serves as an example of the way in which she “complicates the picturesque travel tradition with a discourse of the grotesque, ‘deforming’ it to produce a feminist critique of the traditional coding of the picturesque as male.”<sup>55</sup> The story of Mariana might be read as a “cultural critique”<sup>56</sup> through which Fuller imagines a restructured American society, one that both facilitates and embraces female genius, for her current society is not ready. In the next passage, Fuller considers the status of Indian women, frequently comparing the white woman with the Indian woman and illuminating the oppression of women across cultures. While Fuller depicts Mariana as possessing a number of stereotypically Indian characteristics—wild, restless, vibrant—she portrays the Indian women as behaving in ways that align with standards of white femininity. Fuller constantly challenges stereotypes by reversing and unraveling them, displaying them in new and powerful ways.

### **III. The Status of Indian Women**

One of Fuller’s lengthiest meditations on the status of women comes late in the narrative, chapter six, in which she observes first hand the interaction between men and women in several Indian tribes at Mackinaw. Mackinaw is an island famous for its beauty, which Fuller picked out specifically for an extended visit without friends or companions. Fuller was likely aware ahead of time that in the last week of August, the time at which she planned her visit, a large number of Indians hailing from the Chippewa and Ottawa tribes flock to the island to receive their annual payments from the American government. There are already around 2,000 Indians encamped on the island when Fuller arrives and she expects to see many more. She lands on the island in the

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<sup>55</sup> Fish, 97.

<sup>56</sup> Fish, 97.

pitch dark and is escorted by a stranger to her hotel. Fuller expects to sleep in her own room, but finds no such thing, resting instead in the common parlor and eating-room. She does not complain once. In fact, she seems to delight in the strange and unexpected and everything that “breaks in upon the routine that so easily incrusts us” (173).

Fuller’s sleeping arrangement ensures that she is up early, and “with the first rosy streak” she finds herself “out among [her] Indian neighbors” (173). She spends her first day exploring, admiring the island’s “gentle groves,” natural ruins made of ancient rock, and its luxuriant woods. There is a white fort on the island, Fort Holmes, from which she has a magnificent view of the “lake and straits, opposite shores, and fair inlets” (175). The high point of Fuller’s first afternoon on Mackinaw comes when she discovers an ideal height from which she can observe Indian lodges, with their “amber brown matting, so soft, and bright of hue, in the late afternoon sun” (175).

The lodges are scattered along the “fair, curving beach” (175), and the Indians are grouped about performing various activities. Fuller’s attention quickly gravitates to the females. She watches the women preparing food in kettles or frying pans over small fires and some girls cutting wood. They are laughing and Fuller finds their “low musical tone” (175) charming. The scene is beautiful, one of “ideal loveliness” (176) and contentment, but Fuller reminds herself at intervals that things are not always as they appear. She notices several happy babies with bright eyes who appear “as if born into a world of courage and of joy, instead of ignominious servitude and slow decay” (175).

Fuller is cautious and thoughtful in her judgments, especially when they concern gender inequities and the status of women. She is interested in seeing the whole picture and gaining as much first hand knowledge as possible. She doesn’t hesitate to speak as an authority when she

has first hand experience. When she does make an argument, as we saw in the first close reading, she provides several pieces of supporting evidence. In cases in which she lacks or has limited first hand-experience, she is apt to call upon outside sources.

Fuller takes advantage of every opportunity to watch and interact with the Indians. She immediately catches on to the vital role of gesture and relies on communication by signs to communicate with the other women. She carefully observes their movements and actions, noticing the difference between the gait of the women and the “steady and noble step of the men” (176). This would seem to indicate the inferior status of women, but Fuller admits that there has been much “eloquent contradiction” of this point. Fuller introduces the reader to an individual named Mrs. Schoolcraft,<sup>57</sup> an American Indian literary writer, who argues that Indian women undergo many unique hardships, but that their “position, compared to that of the man, is higher and freer than that of the white woman” (176).

Fuller’s texts functions at times like a dialogue. She calls upon the voices of others not to prove her own point, but to enliven the conversation, to provide fodder for deeper, more valuable thought. Fuller is attracted to Mrs. Schoolcraft’s argument for a middle ground of understanding: “Why will people only look on one side? They either exalt the Red man into a Demigod or degrade him into a beast” (177). She is interested not only in the roles of Indian men and women, but the reasons for and meaning of their roles. For example, she frequently describes the division of labor between men and women and its role in maximizing productivity. In the next few paragraphs, Fuller draws upon a medley of voices and offers the reader several lucid

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<sup>57</sup> See Jane J. Schoolcraft and Robert D. Parker, *The Sound the Stars Make Rushing Through the Sky: The Writings of Jane Johnston Schoolcraft* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), which includes the complete writings of Jane Schoolcraft, an American Indian literary writer (1800-1842).

images of Indian life. First, she includes a long passage taken from Mrs. Schoolcraft's experiences among the Mohawk Indians:

I have witnessed scenes of conjugal and parental love in the Indian's wigwam from which I have often, often thought the educated white man, proud of his Superior civilization might learn a useful lesson. When he returns from hunting, worn out with fatigue, having tasted nothing since dawn, his wife, if she is a good wife, will take off his moccasins and replace them with dry ones, and will prepare his game for their repast, while his children climb upon him, and he will caress them with all the tenderness of a woman; and in the evening the wigwam is the scene of the purest domestic pleasures. (177)

This is an interesting passage in that it simultaneously defies and confirms gender stereotypes.

Mrs. Schoolcraft admits that women are confined to the home and that their job is to care for their husbands, but she places this apparently hierarchical gender dynamic in the context of a hunting society. Mrs. Schoolcraft views gender roles as a necessary, healthy, and conducive to domestic function. Furthermore, she believes that as long as men and women's roles are both valued, an Indian woman can be "as nearly on par" (176) with her husband as the white woman is with hers. In fact, Mrs. Schoolcraft's comment about the "educated white man" (177) learning a lesson from Indian culture suggests that women's roles are more valued among the Mohawks and that this contributes to domestic happiness. It is also significant that the Indian father's affection for his children is described in feminine terms.

Fuller is intrigued by Mrs. Schoolcraft's narrative but she incorporates the ideas of another woman, Mrs. Grant, to represent an opposing viewpoint. Describing her less positive experience among the Mohawks of North America, Mrs. Grant writes:

Here a woman never was of consequence, till she had a son old enough to fight the battles of his country. From that date she held a superior rank in society; was allowed to live at ease, and even called to consultations on national affairs. In savage and warlike countries, the reign of beauty is very short, and its influences comparatively limited. The girls in childhood had a very pleasing appearance . . . every external grace was soon banished by perpetual drudgery, carrying burdens too heavy to be borne, and other slavish employments considered beneath the dignity of men . . . They were very early married, for a Mohawk has no other

servant but his wife . . . Wherever man is a mere hunter, woman is a mere slave . . .  
.The Mohawks took good care not to admit their women to share their prerogatives,  
till they approved themselves good wives and mothers. (177-8)

Mrs. Grant paints a very different picture than Mrs. Schoolcraft. According to her, young wives and mothers are afforded little respect and subjected to the most “slavish employments” (177). It is not until they reach old age as the mothers of dignified men that they are treated well.

Ultimately, Fuller values Mrs. Grant’s opinions over those of Mrs. Schoolcraft because the former “looks more at both sides to find the truth” (178), something that she strives to achieve in her own travel writing. Despite her own first hand experience among Indian groups and observance of gender roles, Fuller offers the insights of one more “expert” before revealing her own thoughts. She describes Carver’s travels among the Winnebagoes and how he came upon a queen presiding over the tribe instead of a sachem.<sup>58</sup> According to Carver, in some tribes the descent is given to the female line instead of the male. Despite the queen’s authoritative status, she adhered strictly to the gender expectations of her tribe, asking few questions and interfering little in matters of the state. The position of the Winnebago queen reminds Fuller of Queen Victoria in that both, in Fuller’s opinion, are queens only in name. Fuller draws frequent parallels between Indian women and white women, noticing their similarities far more often than their differences.

Fuller uses the aforementioned stories and anecdotes as a foundation upon which she places her own opinion. She develops a powerful argument, illuminating the positive and negative aspects of Indian life for women, especially in comparison to the life for Western women. She describes the “decorum and delicacy” of the Indian women as “striking” (179): “their whole gesture is timid, yet self-possessed” (179). They are extremely polite and careful,

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<sup>58</sup> See Jonathon Carver, *Travels Through the Interior Parts of North America, in the Years 1766, 1767, and 1768* (Minneapolis: Ross & Haines, 1956), the text which Fuller is referring to.

never pressing too close or staring. When Fuller shows the women some of her foreign-looking trinkets, they inspect each object with care then shut or fold it as necessary and return it “with an air of lady-like precision” (179). They are as proper, if not more so, than women hailing from “among the nations of European civilization (179). Many of the husbands among the tribes, like husbands in European culture, appreciate the beauty and enjoy the company of their young wives. But even those wives who are “neither esteemed nor loved by their husbands” exercise some degree of power at home as the caretakers of the household.

While Fuller recognizes the outlets of power available to Indian women, she insists such power is useless “unless the woman be wise to use it aright” (181). She asks the reader: “Has the Indian, has the white woman, as noble a feeling of life and it’s uses, as religious a self-respect, as worthy a field of thought and action, as man?” (181). Until Indian women and white women view themselves as possessing the same value and having access to the same life opportunities as men, they will occupy an inferior position. Women’s power is hopelessly limited if it is confined to one sphere.

Fuller’s nuanced analysis of the status of Indian women illuminates the positive and negative aspects of their cultural role. They are able, kind, and graceful, and domestic life seems to offers its fair share of pleasures, but it also confines and stifles them. Women are valued in their youth and in some cases in their old age, but they are overlooked for the majority of their lives. Fuller’s frequent comparisons between white women and Indian women indicate that she views their differences as largely based on culture. Ultimately, Fuller is unenthusiastic about the status of Indian women:

Notwithstanding the homage paid to women, the consequences allowed her in some cases, it is impossible to look upon the Indian women, without feeling that they do occupy a lower place than women among the nations of European civilization . . . More weariness than anguish, no doubt, falls to the lot of most of these women.

They inherit submission, and the minds of the generality accommodate themselves more or less to any posture. Perhaps they suffer less than their white sisters, who have more aspiration and refinement, with little power of self-sustenance. But their place is certainly lower, and their share of human inheritance less. (179)

Fuller's disappointment in learning about the status of Indian women is apparent, especially since it forces her to consider the status of white women. Both groups are severely marginalized, although the white woman is perhaps better able to evaluate her mistreatment.

Five trends crop up in this passage that further characterize Fuller's travel writing as a whole: polyvocality; a willingness to learn and to suspend judgment; a tendency to offer open-ended arguments and flexible conclusions; a sustained and genuine interest in women and their lives; and finally, an eagerness to find similarities between stereotypically dissimilar groups. I will now consider these trends in terms of this last close reading that deals with the status of Indian women. First, this passage is marked by polyvocality, a concept that William Stowe has developed at length. Fuller's travel narrative functions as a "vehicle for multiple voices"<sup>59</sup>—we hear the voices of Mrs. Schoolcraft, Mrs. Grant, and Carver—but Fuller also encourages us to imagine the voices of the Indian women telling their own story. Next, Fuller's observations are marked by a "willingness to interrogate rather than conclude"<sup>60</sup>; she acts as observer not conqueror. Fuller isn't quick to offer her opinion on the status of Indian women. She weighs the pros and cons for a while and calls upon the opinions of several other scholars. When she finally admits her belief that the Indian women "occupy a lower place than women among the nations of European civilization" (179), she still leaves ample room for debate. Fuller is fascinated by the humanity of the women, admiring their grace and self-possessed bearing and their ability to make the best of their situations.

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<sup>59</sup> Stowe, "Conventions and Voices," 242.

<sup>60</sup> Fish, *Black and White Women's Travel Narratives*, 103.

Unlike many white female travel writers during the early nineteenth century, Fuller is more apt to draw similarities between different cultures and people than she is to highlight differences. On multiple occasions, Fuller emphasizes the compatibility between Indian and European modes of behavior: “their decorum and delicacy are striking, and show that when these are native to the mind, no habits of life make any difference” (179). Fuller disrupts the stereotypical, but largely transparent barriers between cultures, social classes, races, and genders. Fuller’s unique style contributes to the “indispensable merit”<sup>61</sup> of her travel writing and to the potency of her gendered social critique. Fuller’s interest in translation and communication, her open-mindedness, her tireless reading, and her curiosity regarding social roles and gender hierarchies, are precisely the tools that enable her to develop a transgressive narrative. *Summer on the Lakes* is a text that challenges sexism, racism, and classism, often by leading the reader down apparently tangential paths that turn out to be quite relevant after all.

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<sup>61</sup> Capper, *An American Romantic Life*, 155.

CHAPTER 4  
EDITH WHARTON: TELLING TALES FROM TRAVELS ABROAD AND DEMYSTIFYING  
THE MOROCCAN HAREM

Edith Wharton, born in 1862, is widely considered one of the United States's most talented novelists and short story writers, with an outstanding critical reputation and a "place in American letters as one of the premier practitioners of realism."<sup>1</sup> She was a best-selling, critically and commercially successful author during her lifetime, at one point earning the distinction of "highest paid living American novelist,"<sup>2</sup> and her popularity has perhaps increased in the decades since her death in 1937. To a lesser extent than Willa Cather, Wharton's "relationship to literary history has been uneven,"<sup>3</sup> and despite her critical acclaim she was not always confident in her reputation or the literary legacy that would leave.

Wharton is known for her fiction, but she also composed a significant body of non-fiction, including her extensive travel writing. Wharton was recognized among her contemporaries as an exceptional writer, "perhaps the best female novelist of her time, perhaps even the best American novelist,"<sup>4</sup> no small achievement. Remarkably, Wharton's reputation declined rapidly following her death and her work was pushed out of the canon of "serious" American authors. It required great effort on the part of scholars, such as Wharton biographer Blake Nevius,<sup>5</sup> and intellectual interest groups such as the Edith Wharton Society, organized in 1984, to resuscitate her literary reputation.

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<sup>1</sup> Carol J. Singley, introduction to *A Historical Guide to Edith Wharton* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2003), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Singley, introduction, 3.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>4</sup> James W. Tuttleton, Kristin O. Lauer, and Margaret P. Murray, introduction to *Edith Wharton: The Contemporary Reviews* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1992), xxi.

<sup>5</sup> See Blake Nevius, *Edith Wharton: A Study of Her Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953). This early biography treats Wharton as a serious literary figure.

This chapter will examine Edith Wharton's *In Morocco*, an account of her one-month visit to Morocco in 1918. I will preface my reading of the travel narrative with a description of Wharton's professional, commercial, and political intent in writing and publishing *In Morocco*. The introduction to this chapter examines Wharton's personal and professional history, tracking the evolution of her reputation over the course of her life and after her death. I will unpack Wharton's specific economic and social circumstances, and situate her travel writing in the context of her larger career. Wharton hailed from an extremely prominent and wealthy family, which enabled her to pursue her writing career and to promote her work with more ease than Fuller or Cather. Her parents "represented a class of aristocrats made comfortable from inherited wealth, steeped in traditional values, and well practiced in patterns of ritualized behavior,"<sup>6</sup> placing Wharton in a structure of entrenched social beliefs and hierarchies.

Wharton was an inveterate world traveler, traveling "so frequently in Europe between the ages of five and twenty-one that, according to the estimate of R. W. B. Lewis, she had lived a total of eight of her first twenty-one years abroad."<sup>7</sup> According to Shari Benstock, she crossed the Atlantic over sixty times and took advantage of the time to develop new writing projects or to work on existing ones. She would often write on a portable typewriter while crossing Europe by carriage, train, or automobile and the "freshness and spontaneity of her travel writing owes much to this practice of writing en route."<sup>8</sup> Perhaps because of the major role that travel played in her life from an early age, travel writing offered Wharton an important outlet for self-discovery: "her

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<sup>6</sup> Singley, introduction, 5.

<sup>7</sup> Mary S. Schriber, "Edith Wharton and Travel Writing as Self-Discovery," *American Literature* 59.2 (May 1987): 257.

<sup>8</sup> See Shari Benstock, preface to *Edith Wharton Abroad: Selected Travel Writings, 1888-1920* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), xxviii.

‘passion’ for travel and the ‘obsession’ to tell stories joined together to form the primary springboard of [her] creativity.’<sup>9</sup>

It is significant that some of Wharton’s earliest attempts at professional writing came in the form of travel writing, and her travel books were finely written with the “same selectivity and craft in the construction that had served her so well in fiction.”<sup>10</sup> Mary Suzanne Schriber suggests that Wharton’s travel books might be understood as a kind of fiction. She supports her claim by describing the process by which Wharton composed her travel writing: she would compile her recollections in narrative form, create a realistic narrator, insert suspense into the plot, and incorporate literary metaphors and personifications. She would also revise her narratives over time as one might a novel.<sup>11</sup> Wharton’s travel writing is frequently “graced with literary and theatrical efforts”<sup>12</sup> that give it a novelistic feel. Sarah Bird Wright suggests that *In Morocco* “echoes themes of Scheherazade in *Arabian Nights*,”<sup>13</sup> the legendary Persian Queen and storyteller of *One Thousand and One Nights*. I will return to this concept of travel writing as quasi-fiction in my reading of *In Morocco*, especially as it relates to issues of colonialism and the tourist gaze.

Much of this chapter will comprise a close reading and gendered analysis of *In Morocco*. Published only two years after Wharton’s Moroccan journey, *In Morocco* is at once a guidebook, a feminist travel narrative, and an engaging fairy tale with literary flare. It might also be read as an endorsement of French colonialism, a concept that I will explore in further detail. It includes a preface, five sections devoted to Wharton’s travel experience in particular regions, and four

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., xviii.

<sup>10</sup> Schriber, “Travel Writing as Self-Discovery,” 261.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 261.

<sup>12</sup> Benstock, preface, xix.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., xix.

informative, historical grounded sections, including “A Sketch of Moroccan History” and a “Note on Moroccan Architecture.” The text is interspersed with maps and black and white photos. I will focus mainly on chapter five of the text, “Harems and Ceremonies,” in which Wharton describes her experience entering the inner circle of a harem. I will situate this narrative in the context of Wharton’s larger body of writing and indicate its relationship to her other pieces of travel writing. I will also describe its initial reception and indicate its legacy as part of the Wharton canon as well as a body of writing predicated on Oriental and colonial ideologies.

Wharton's narrative simultaneously illuminates her specific and personal understanding of a woman’s role and her understanding of gender construction across cultures. Despite Wharton’s major literary reputation and the positive reception of *In Morocco*, the text has been critically neglected and rarely mined for its rich gendered content. Its reception and ensuing neglect, despite its rich material and apparent popular appeal, illuminate the meaning of women traveling and the value given to women’s narratives of travel. In this way, it is like *Summer on the Lakes* and *Willa Cather in Europe*. All three texts were well-received, or at least critically acknowledged, and then eventually discarded, forgotten, and denied a place alongside popularized travel narratives written by male literary figures, such as Henry David Thoreau, Mark Twain, and Henry James.

I will posit *In Morocco* as a feminist text that reflects Wharton’s understanding of “what it means to be a woman, to be a woman in relation to men, and to be a woman in relation to society.”<sup>14</sup> I will also suggest that, despite her reliance on tropes of colonialism and Orientalism, Wharton’s text “contains the germ of an alternative politics which, though far from realized or even directly articulated, has the potential to destabilize Wharton’s radical dichotomy of

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<sup>14</sup> Tuttleton, introduction, xxi.

Occident and Orient . . . *In Morocco* suggests the possibility of supplementing the colonial gaze with aurality and orality.”<sup>15</sup>

### **Biography, Social and Class Location**

George C. Jones and Lucretia Rhineland Jones welcomed their third child, Edith Newbold Jones, on January 24, 1862. Edith Newbold Jones was to become the writer Edith Wharton, a “consummate professional” who devoted herself to a daily writing schedule and “took charge of the literary business as few authors of the generation before her had done.”<sup>16</sup> The Joneses were a prominent family in New York City and Wharton’s mother was “reputedly the best dressed woman in New York and inspiration for the phrase ‘keeping up with the Joneses.’”<sup>17</sup> The family had a townhouse in the city and a cottage in Newport, Rhode Island, and depended on an extensive staff to maintain their extravagant lifestyle. Wharton was expected to follow in the footsteps of her celebrated mother, dressing and acting as a lady and embracing “civic and charitable responsibilities,”<sup>18</sup> but she was more inclined to steal away to her father’s library.

Like many wealthy New York families, the Joneses had lost money during the Civil War. In 1866 they relocated to Europe and traveled for six years. They were able to maintain their lifestyle abroad for less money while renting out their New York and Newport homes. Thus, between the ages of four and ten Wharton lived in several European countries, including Italy, France, Germany and Spain, and she quickly became proficient in Italian, French, and German. Wharton’s early experiences abroad proved “formative” and greatly impacted the course of her life and career: “she discovered the values, behaviors, languages, and aesthetic principles that

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<sup>15</sup> Lucas Tromly, “‘The Small Talk of the Harem,’: Discursive Communities and Colonial Silences in Edith Wharton’s *In Morocco*,” *Studies in Travel Writing* 13.3 (Sept. 2009): 243.

<sup>16</sup> Singley, introduction, 7.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>18</sup> Shari Benstock, “Edith Wharton 1862-1937: A Brief Biography” in *A Historical Guide to Edith Wharton* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 19.

would underwrite her art and her way of life.”<sup>19</sup> The Joneses returned to New York in 1872 and Wharton had a “powerful reaction to the ugliness of the city.”<sup>20</sup> She had difficult time transitioning back to American culture and its increasing industrialism and was disillusioned by its transportation, mining, and construction industries on which the nouveaux riche had built their fortunes.

Wharton did not have the traditional training that one might expect from a woman who would go on to publish twenty-five novels. Nonetheless, on account of the personal initiative that Wharton took to educate herself and her atypical exposure to travel at an early age, Wharton acquired a solid education that set her apart from most of her female peers. Most young people of Wharton’s social class would not have attended school or university, as Wharton grew up in a “severely stratified society” in which “middle-class families sent their children to college, but the children of wealthy families were educated at home, taught by private tutors.” Consider here that both Fuller and Cather, hailing from humbler backgrounds than Wharton, were educated away from home at some point in their academic careers.<sup>21</sup>

Daughters, of course, received a very different education than sons. Young women were tutored in art, music, and foreign languages, while young men were educated in logic, mathematics, and Latin. Wharton refused to accept a second rate education, listening “on the threshold of her father’s library while her brothers were tutored” and “immersing herself in the classics, as well as novels and romances her mother had forbidden her to read.”<sup>22</sup> Throughout her childhood, Wharton took great pleasure in concocting stories and her “work as a social satirist is

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<sup>19</sup> Benstock, *A Brief Biography*, 21.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>21</sup> Fuller was sent away to Miss Prescott’s finishing school during her teenage years and Cather earned her bachelor’s degree from the University of Nebraska.

<sup>22</sup> Singley, introduction, 6.

evident in much of her youthful writing.”<sup>23</sup> Her father’s library was of an average size, but it housed the “English classics and the standard early 19<sup>th</sup>-century writers” as well as the “great poets and dramatists” and writings in English, French, and German.<sup>24</sup>

The 1870’s and 1880’s marked a time of intellectual growth for Wharton. Her father’s library provided the “primary source”<sup>25</sup> for her self-education, and “despite restrictions and taboos, literature was part of her life from childhood onwards and she moved from one author to another as her enthusiasm urged her.”<sup>26</sup> Between 1876 and 1877, Wharton wrote her first thirty thousand-word novella, *Fast and Loose*, and between 1880 and 1882, Wharton published two poems in the *New York World*. Neither of Wharton’s parents knew how to properly respond to their daughter’s voracious passion for reading and her unrelenting desire compose stories. Wharton’s mother, Lucretia, supported her daughter’s writing to an extent. She transcribed stories and agreed to privately publish a compilation of Wharton’s poems, titled *Verses*, in 1879. Ultimately, Lucretia worried that Wharton’s writing would prevent her from finding a suitable marriage partner and interfere with her social engagements. Edith had her societal “debut” in a memorable black dress in 1879, just before her eighteenth birthday. Wharton married Edward Robbins “Teddy” Wharton only six years later in 1885, and the two initiated their tradition of traveling four months out of the year (the two were inveterate travelers their entire lives).

### **Publication History, Financial Success, Evolution of Career**

Considering her prolific career, during which she completed twenty-five novels, eighty-six short stories, three books of poetry, several volumes of travel writing, and many other pieces of short writing, it is remarkable that Wharton got a relatively late start as an author. Up until her

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<sup>23</sup> Benstock, “A Brief Biography,” 24.

<sup>24</sup> Geoffrey Walton. *Edith Wharton: A Critical Interpretation* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1971), 19.

<sup>25</sup> Benstock, “A Brief Biography,” 21.

<sup>26</sup> Walton, *A Critical Interpretation*, 20.

marriage and in the years immediately after her union with “Teddy,” Wharton confined herself mainly to short stories and travel writing. In the years between 1894 and 1895, Wharton traveled in Italy and wrote travel essays, and spent the next few years after that revising a series of short stories, which were published in a collection called *The Greater Inclination* in 1898. From her earliest publications, critics were forced to admit her skill as a writer, but her “literary competence did not always win her plaudits.” In fact, some critics criticized her for writing too elegantly.

The editors of *Edith Wharton: The Contemporary Reviews*, the most comprehensive collection of the early reviews of Wharton’s writing, suggest that the reception of Wharton’s body of work can be properly understood in three “phases.” The first phase, from 1899 to 1905 was marked by occasional praise but mostly comparison to Henry James. Wharton resented the constant comparison of her work with that of James: “the assertion that she was James’s literary heiress annoyed Wharton at the start of her career as well as later.”<sup>27</sup> The second phase of Wharton criticism comprises the period between 1905, the year in which she published her bestselling *The House of Mirth*, to 1920, the year in which she published *The Age of Innocence*, for which she won the Pulitzer Prize. With the publication of *The House of Mirth*, Wharton finally achieved a degree of separation from James in the eyes of literary critics and popular audiences: “here was a work of independent power and literary distinction.”

In the third phase, from 1920 to 1938, Wharton published eight novels, four novellas, four collections of short fiction, a volume of ghost stories and a volume of poetry, an autobiography, and a book discussing the craft of fiction. Despite her continuing output, Wharton was never to

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<sup>27</sup> Bell, introduction, 4.

revisit the professional highpoint that she reached in 1920. Her work was “greeted respectfully”<sup>28</sup> but treated as inferior to her earlier writing. These three phases provide a useful lens for assessing the critical and popular reception of Wharton’s work, and in situating *In Morocco* in the context of her larger literary oeuvre. The notes for *In Morocco* were composed during Wharton’s visit to Morocco in 1918, around the height of her literary career, and the narrative was published as a book in 1920. *In Morocco* was Wharton’s final travel book and with its publication “an epoch in foreign travel drew to a close.”<sup>29</sup>

### **Success in the Literary Marketplace as a Female Writer and Success of Travel Writing**

Wharton made a point of involving herself in all aspects of her career. She “oversaw each stage of the publishing process and spoke forcefully for adequate publicity and compensation.”<sup>30</sup> Having spent years writing in the shadow of Henry James, Wharton recognized the importance of establishing a good reputation among critics and she understood the obstacles to being taken seriously as a female writer. Nonetheless, in the years between the turn of the nineteenth century and the 1920’s, Wharton went from being an obscure poet to one of the foremost novelists of the period. Wharton was a commercial gem, and she “never altogether surrendered”<sup>31</sup> her early-acquired success in the literary marketplace, commanding large sums up until her death. She produced several bestselling novels, including *The House of Mirth*, which remained at the top of the list for four months and sold 140,000 copies during its first year in publication. *The Age of Innocence*, for which Wharton won the Pulitzer Prize, was serialized for \$18,000 and sold 115,000 copies in the United States, Canada, and Great Britain. Wharton never allowed her

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>29</sup> Scriber, *Writing Home*, 2.

<sup>30</sup> Singley, introduction, 7.

<sup>31</sup> Bell, introduction, 7.

market success to dictate her subject matter and often wrote “against the prevailing norms of her generations.”<sup>32</sup>

Wharton’s travel writing serves as a prime example of her desire to take up controversial subject while writing for a popular audience. Like her larger body of travel writing, *In Morocco* was both critically and commercially successful. The book went through four editions between 1920 and 1927<sup>33</sup> and copies are still widely available today in major bookstores. That is not to suggest that *In Morocco* is particularly popular or even known among most contemporary students and critics of literature. As with Margaret Fuller’s *Summer on the Lakes* and Willa Cather’s *Travels in Europe*, it failed to receive sustained critical and popular attention in the wake of its initial popularity. *In Morocco* receives only a brief mention in major Wharton biographies and is not classified among her more important works. In the last few years, a handful of interdisciplinary scholars, including Lucas Tromly and Robert Hunter, have expressed their interest in the text, making one wonder why it disappeared in the first place.

### **Historical, Professional, and Personal Context of Publication**

Based on Wharton’s travels in Morocco between September and October of 1917, *In Morocco* is a dynamic travel narrative that vividly depicts Morocco’s major cities, describing the people, architecture, customs, and history of the regions, and represents the dramatic changes occurring in Morocco in the aftermath of the First World War. It is an eclectic mix of first hand observations, historical accounts of Moroccan history, and positive representations of French colonialism. Wharton was present at that “brief moment” in Moroccan history in which “the ‘old life’ was still visible, before the onrush of Westerners would change the country utterly . .

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<sup>32</sup> Benstock, “A Brief Biography,” 43.

<sup>33</sup> Robert F. Hunter, “Manufacturing Exotica: Edith Wharton and Tourism in French Morocco, 1917-1920,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 46.1 (January 2010): 76.

.Morocco was on the verge of a tourist explosion.”<sup>34</sup> *In Morocco* has all the ingredients of best-selling travel narrative: an exotic location, a celebrity writer, and social and financial backing.

Wharton was at a distinct and important place in her life at the time of her travel in Morocco. She was a well-known writer in the United States and abroad—“a hot commodity”<sup>35</sup>—having published a series of best-selling and critically acclaimed novels in an extraordinarily short period of time. She was eager for a new adventure. But it was not Wharton’s literary prestige, but her friendship with General Lyautey, Resident General of France in Morocco, that landed her a writing assignment abroad. General Lyautey invited her to attend a fair at Rabat, and soon after Wharton proposed to her publisher, Scribners, the concept of writing several illustrated articles based on her trip to Morocco, which would later be published as a book. She suggested that such an idea was “unique” considering that “the interior of the country had only recently been open to the Europeans.”<sup>36</sup> Scribners agreed and Wharton embarked on her 41-day trip through Morocco.

Wharton arrived at a “crucial time”<sup>37</sup> in the history of Morocco and took advantage of the rare opportunity to traverse a country that had been closed off to Westerners for decades, to act as explorer. She received VIP treatment from General Lyautey, who made what might have been an “expensive, difficult, and dangerous”<sup>38</sup> trip quite pleasurable. Wharton met with the general at the beginning of her visit, and he quickly “assigned her a motor coach, a military chauffeur as driver, and a French staff officer.”<sup>39</sup> He also offered her financial support, oftentimes arranging

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 62.

“luxurious accommodations,”<sup>40</sup> and making certain that she had every opportunity to meet important Moroccan and French military and civil authorities.

Thus, a series of outside circumstances shaped Wharton’s plan and experience of travel in Morocco and the form and content of her travel narrative. She was accountable to the French General as well as to her publisher in the United States. How she negotiated writing her own narrative while placating her sponsors is a topic for another paper, but it is relevant to bear in mind Wharton’s multiple interests when assessing her narrative. As a side note, Wharton does devote an entire chapter to General Lyautey’s legacy in Morocco.

### **Wharton’s Politics**

Wharton’s choice to visit Morocco and publish her experiences just as the country was launching a tourism initiative was, of course, professionally and economically strategic. Readers were eager to hear about the inner workings of Morocco and Scribners was eager to make a profit. Furthermore, it is hard not to align Wharton with the French colonial mission when the Resident General of France in Morocco sponsored her travels and she vehemently supported French intervention in Morocco. Some recent critics, such as Lucas Tromly, posit *In Morocco* as an “endorsement of French colonialism underwritten by central tropes of Imperialism.”<sup>41</sup> While this is a valid and important assessment of the text, it is still useful to consider Wharton’s particular understanding of French colonialism in Morocco, however problematic, and to evaluate the relationship between Wharton’s feminism and her Orientalism.

Some scholars, including Nancy Bentley, describe the way in which Wharton differentiated between French colonialism and the colonialism of other Imperial empires, such as England. According to Bentley, Wharton saw French intervention as a means of salvaging

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>41</sup> Tromly, “The Small Talk of the Harem,” 239.

Moroccan art, architecture, and traditions that had been destroyed by Moroccans themselves during the First World War.<sup>42</sup> She believed that French intervention on the part of individuals such as General Lyautey served to counter the “European improvements” (182) that undermined the country’s traditions and beauty. This perspective is flawed for two major reasons: first, it overlooks the destructive repercussions of French colonialism while condemning the colonialism of others countries; and second, it infantilizes the Moroccan people by discounting their agency. Wharton doesn’t deny France’s colonial occupation, Bentley explains, but she attempts to “fold it into a curatorial role that is preoccupied with preserving national treasures.”<sup>43</sup> If Bentley is attempting to justify Wharton’s colonialism, her argument falls short.

In examining Wharton’s understanding of French intervention in Morocco it is appropriate to mention Edward Said’s canonical work *Orientalism* (1978), which posits the relationship between the Occident and the Orient as one of “power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony,”<sup>44</sup> in which the Occident is imagined as superior and the Orient is treated as inferior. According to Said, “colonial rule was justified in advance by Orientalism,”<sup>45</sup> as Orientals or Arabs were treated as uncivilized, exotic, and child-like, in need of intervention and care from more “advanced” societies. Wharton utilizes Orientalist tropes of Moroccan vulnerability and weakness in justifying French colonialism. Even as she distances herself from the negative aspects of modernity wrought by colonialist intervention, Wharton’s belief that the Moroccan people cannot appreciate the beauty of their own cultural artifacts and are consequently “unfit to protect”<sup>46</sup> them is grounded in colonialist and Orientalist thinking.

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<sup>42</sup> Bentley, “Wharton, Travel, and Modernity,” 166-168.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

<sup>44</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 4.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>46</sup> Bentley, “Wharton, Travel, and Modernity,” 167.

Moroccan culture is treated as a cultural artifact that must be preserved for western appreciation and enjoyment.

We must not overlook the role that women travel writers played in “imperialism and the production of imperial knowledges,”<sup>47</sup> but it is also important to differentiate between the imperial experience of men and women. Cheryl McEwan argues for a “nuanced reading of gendered imperial knowledges,” one that “acknowledges the importance of other relationships of power shaping the authorial identity (class, ethnicity, sexuality, etc.).”<sup>48</sup> Wharton’s experience of Imperialism and relationship to colonialism is distinct from that of her male counterparts and also very different from the experiences of colonized women. Her tour of Morocco and her travel narrative are dependent on financial and social backing from men. While she might exercise colonial power over the women that she encounters in the harems, she is still in a position of limited power.

I will posit *In Morocco* as a feminist text and my reading will illuminate the ways in which the narrative acknowledges, but frequently undermines, Oriental stereotypes by revealing their speciousness. Wharton absolutely employs tropes of Orientalism, but often in a way that destabilizes and effectively disrupts gender stereotypes associated with the Harem. The cracks in Wharton’s Orientalism are most noticeable in her interaction with the women in the harem in the form of “quotidian speech like gossip, local stories, and personal anecdotes.”<sup>49</sup> While such dialogues “may not generate extended stories or long conversations,” they effectively “accommodate experience otherwise inadmissible”<sup>50</sup> into the narrative. We hear the voices of the Moroccan women and are able to envision their lives prior to entering the harem. Wharton’s

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<sup>47</sup> McEwan, *Gender, Geography, and Empire*, 8.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>49</sup> Tromly, “The Small Talk of the Harem,” 243.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 243.

willingness to work within a structure of colonial power makes her part of the colonial system, but it also enables her to gain access to the inner sanctum of the harem and communicate with women that she would otherwise never have encountered.

### ***In Morocco: Format, Content, and Area of Focus***

*In Morocco*, published in 1919, comprises a preface, eight chapters of narrative, a list of books consulted, and an index. The first four chapters describe Wharton's experiences in various parts of the country: Rabat and Salé; Voluis, Moulay Idriss and Meknax; Fez; and Marrakech. The fifth chapter focuses specifically on the harems that Wharton visits in each of these cities. The sixth chapter is an overview of General Lyautey's work in Morocco. The next two chapters include a sketch of Moroccan history and an analysis of Moroccan architecture. "Harems and Ceremonies," the fifth chapter in Wharton's *In Morocco*, is significant for its rich, gendered analysis of the women that Wharton encounters in the inner sanctum of the harem. It is also the chapter in which Wharton's "Orientalism is most pronounced and least stable."<sup>51</sup> Americans traveling abroad in the early twentieth century, especially those with European connections, like Wharton, witnessed the collision between the past and present, modernity and "backwardness," colonial imposition and opposition among the colonized. Wharton quite literally "motors" into the Harem—the ultimate clash between the speed and mobility of the modern world and the indolence and lethargy of the ancient world.

Several themes recur in each of the five sections of this chapter, and provide an excellent framework for analyzing Wharton's intentions as an author, a feminist, and a sponsored travel writer. First, Wharton's representation of Morocco is novelistic. The reader often feels as if she has stepped into a fairy tale, but Wharton frequently juxtaposes the surreal with the harsh realities of the lived experience of women in Morocco. Wharton's preoccupation with the status

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 245.

of women represents a second theme; her interest in the landscape as well as political and social dignitaries is constantly overshadowed by her observations regarding the women. Modernity also plays a foremost role in the text, both in terms of the motor vehicles that Wharton rides around in and the frequent clash between the “old world” and the “new world.” Finally, the text is structured around tropes of Orientalism and colonialism. These themes differ in some ways from those that crop up in the travel writing of Margaret Fuller and Willa Cather, but in others they overlap. All three authors hover around the delicate boundary line that separates travel writing from fiction, charting their narratives around physical geography as well as the complex geography of their minds. They use the genre as a tool for breaking down gender and class stereotypes and challenging normative ideas.

### **I. The Crowd in the Street**

“Harems and Ceremonies” is styled after a good story, perhaps even a fairytale, and it immediately relies on suspense to engage the reader. The opening section of “Harems and Ceremonies,” “The Crowd in the Street,” is by far the shortest in the chapter, only two pages, but it sets the scene of Wharton’s tale. The reader is plunged into the Moroccan street, amidst colorful crowds that are a “feast to the eye.”<sup>52</sup> Wharton points out the “skilful drapery” and “sense of colour” (162) that characterize the clothing, and contribute to the beauty of the scene. Almost immediately, Wharton comments that only a few foreigners have access to the “hidden sumptuousness of the native life” (162), hinting that she is one of them. Wharton situates herself simultaneously as an outsider and an insider—a civilized American observing the beauty of the foreign crowds and an honored visitor privy to the “hidden sumptuousness” (162) that is locked behind closed doors. Later during her visits to several harems, Wharton’s gender identity

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<sup>52</sup> Edith Wharton, *In Morocco: Illustrated* (Hopewell, N.J: Ecco Press, 1996), 162. Further references will be followed by page numbers in parentheses.

coupled with her identity as an American woman will also position her in a dual role as a female insider and a cultural outsider. I call attention to the distinction between outsider and insider because Wharton dances along the thin line that separates insiders from outsiders, men from women, and the wealthy from the poor to incite suspense. Anyone might have been born on the other side of the line.<sup>53</sup>

The conclusion to this short opening is jarring and indicative of Wharton's underlying prejudices. Having just elucidated the beauty of the country and the harmonious interaction among city-goers, Wharton reminds us, "nothing is as democratic in appearance as a society of which the whole structure hangs on the whim of one man" (163). It is clear to whom Wharton refers as the villain in her travel narrative.

## **II. Aid-El-Kebir**

The second section of "Harems and Ceremonies" opens with Wharton standing in the verandah of the residence of Rabat I, "looking out between posts festooned with gentian-blue ipomeas at the first shimmer of light on black cypresses and white tobacco-flowers" (163). As a part of Madame Lyautey's entourage, Wharton has been invited to the "great religious rite of the Aid-el-Kebir," an "unprecedented" (164) honor since women are usually prohibited from attending such ceremonies. Like Fuller and Cather, Wharton does an excellent job of depicting the scenery around her. However, unlike in Fuller and in Cather, one senses here Wharton's detachment from the scene, as an outsider looking in. In contrast, Cather immerses herself in her environment, and describes the scene in terms of her relationship to it. Perhaps this difference can be attributed in part to General Lyautey's sponsorship of Wharton; she was offered a

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<sup>53</sup> See Ruth Behar and Deborah A. Gordon, introduction to *Women Writing Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 1-29. Behar and Gordon discuss "othering" and insider and outsider status based on class, gender, and race affiliation.

window into the Oriental world, but not a door through which she might enter completely and feel herself at home.

Wharton “motors” past the gates of the Sultan’s palace “in attendance on the Governor’s wife” (164). The image of the motor car entering the massive gates of the Palace, where the Sultan’s black Guard is drawn up, represents a symbolic as well as a literal clash of cultures. Once inside the palace, colors become ripe with meaning and serve as a guide for Wharton. She notices the canvas palisade “dyed with a bold black pattern” that surrounds the Sultan’s tents, the “snowy-robed officials,” and a colorful group of musicians in “almond-green, peach-blossom, lilac and pink” (165). Everyone is robed and their faces are hidden, thus the dark, light, and colored robes indicate the social status and role of each individual within the palace. Color seems to be linked with frivolity, while black and white signify positions of dignity. Color also plays a major role in the Imperial Harem, as we will see.

It is announced that the Sultan has come to kill the sheep, and a “sense of impending solemnity” (167) runs through the crowd. Wharton explains that the Sacrifice of the Sheep represents one of four great Moslem rites, meant to ensure the Sultan’s prosperity in the coming year. Wharton suggests that the ceremony is related to the “dark magic so deeply rooted in the mysterious tribes peopling North Africa long ages before the Phoenician prows had rounded the coast” (167), implying that it is at once outdated and evil. After the ceremony, several muscular horse grooms appear to lead five or six of the Majesty’s horses, each of a different color, back and forth between the Black Guard and the tents. The Sultan likes to have a colorful array of options when choosing which horse to mount.

The Sultan’s arrival is a major event and a lengthy train of followers, including the court dignitaries and the musicians in their “bright scant caftans,” flank his “Imperial presence” (168).

A lengthy ceremony commences, in which more than ten thousand horsemen and chieftains pay their respects to the Sultan. Wharton relies on descriptions of the weather to capture the mood of the ceremony. She describes the change in the weather as the event progresses—“as the ceremony continued the dust-clouds grew denser and more fiery-golden, till at last the forward-surfing lines showed through them like blurred images in a tarnished mirror”—and she later describes the sun as a “brazen ball in a white sky, darting down metallic shafts on the dust-enveloped plain” (169). There is great movement among the crowds and in the sky, but the Sultan sits unmoved.

Wharton is struck by the contrast between the “motionless figure” of the Sultan and the “wild waves of Cavalry beating against [him]” (169). She feels that this disparity somehow illustrates the “strange soul of Islam” (169), which rewards its high-powered men with a life of languor and stillness. Wharton’s description of the Sultan is unflattering:

The fat man with a soft round beard-fringed face, wrapped in spirals of pure white, one plump hand on his embroidered bridle, his yellow slippered feet thrust heel-down in big velvet-lined stirrups, became, through sheer immobility, a symbol, a mystery, a God . . . he sat on, hour after hour, under the white-hot sky, unconscious of the heat, the dust, the tumult, embodying to all the wild, factious precipitate hordes a long tradition of serene aloofness. (170)

The Sultan’s fatness and immobility make him like a small child or even a baby, unable to move or take care of himself. He seems like a God only because he is so detached from human experience. Even his senses are apparently numbed. He is not bothered by the heat or the dusty atmosphere, nor is he frightened or threatened by the raucous crowds. Wharton is opposed to such an indolent lifestyle, and her revulsion becomes more apparent as the narrative progresses.

### **III. The Imperial Mirador**

Wharton escapes the monotonous ceremony by way of a rapidly driven motorcar. The next stop is the Imperial Harem, where by the Sultan’s orders, Mme. Lyautey and her guests are to be

welcomed and entertained by ladies of the interior. The Sultan, meanwhile, is to meet with General Lyautey. Wharton describes the palace as a “labyrinth of inner passages and patios” (171) and as she traverses each layer of the maze, she steps closer and closer to the inner sanctum. Wharton and her friends allegedly encounter a “princess out of an Arab fairy-tale “ at the base of a narrow staircase, who leads them up the landing, where another princess-like girl, “blushing and dimpling under a jeweled diadem” (171), greets them. They encounter a third princess on the final landing, and thus enter the tall mirador, home to the harem, “encircled by the three graces” (172).

One suspects that Wharton’s account of the three princesses is fictionalized, at least in part, but it recreates the surreal nature of her experience. Wharton reifies Oriental stereotypes by drawing upon images from Arabian fairytales<sup>54</sup> and evokes what Renato Rosaldo would term “imperialist nostalgia”—a nostalgia for a colonized culture as it was “traditionally.”<sup>55</sup> Rosaldo explains that imperialist nostalgia involves a paradox in that “a person kills somebody, and then mourns the victim.”<sup>56</sup> We see a similar paradox at work in Wharton’s narrative: she condemns the harem as backward and stifling and yet she delights in its surreal and exotic qualities. Wharton’s Oriental discourse is frequently disrupted by such contradictions, thus “disclosing the nature of the dominant discourse” while “constituting a critique from the margins.”<sup>57</sup>

The harem is housed in a “large room, enclosed on all sides by a balcony with panes of brightly-coloured glass” (172), a detail that plays a major role in the scene. A dozen “houris” (a name alluding to the beautiful virgins of the Koranic paradise) enter the room, “round-faced

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<sup>54</sup> See Said, *Orientalism*, in which he talks at length about the prevalence and function of Oriental stereotypes.

<sup>55</sup> Renato Rosaldo, *Culture & Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 69.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 69

<sup>57</sup> Mills, *Discourses of Difference*, 23.

apricot-tinted girls in their teens, with high cheek bones, full red lips, surprised brown eyes between curved Asiatic lids,” laughing and whispering to each other. The young women are dressed in their finest clothing in honor of Madame Lyautey’s visit, and Wharton notices that “their freedom of movement” is made difficult “by their narrow sumptuous gowns” (173). The Sultan’s “favourites” cannot communicate with Wharton and her friends, but they seem to speak instead through their “caressing eyes” (173). The use of “eyes” as an alternative mode of communication is a recurring theme in “Harems and Ceremonies,” and Wharton frequently illustrates the mental state of the women she encounters by describing their eyes.

The physical appearance of the young women has been altered to the extreme by dress, body and face make-up, and jewelry. Wharton devotes several pages to the physical description of the young women:

Above their foreheads the hair was shaven like that of an Italian fourteenth-century beauty, and only a black line as narrow as a penciled eyebrow showed through the twist of gauze fastened by a jeweled clasp above the real eye-brows over the forehead rose the complicated structure of the head-dress . . . On each side of the red cheeks other braids were looped over the ears hung with broad earrings of filigree set with rough pearls and emeralds, or gold hoops and pendants of coral; and an unexpected tulle ruff, like that of a Watteau shepherdess, framed the round chin above a torrent of necklaces . . . (174)

The young women are painted and decorated like dolls, and their garments are of light and playful colors, in contrast to the deep Scarlet robes of the Black Guard and the perfect white draperies of the court attendants. Wharton playfully compares the harem to an “aviary,” in that the beautiful creatures are caged like birds. The decoration of the young women detracts from their humanity by denying each of them a unique identity. Wharton is unable to distinguish among the young women, because they all appear the same.

A young girl enters the harem, remarkable for her bare face and less extravagant dress. She is “shy and hesitating, her large lips pale, her eye-brows less vividly dark, her head less jeweled,”

but she garners a great deal of respect among the painted women. She greets Madame Lyautey and introduces herself as the young princess, the legitimate daughter of the Sultan. In an interesting reversal that is apparent in all of the harems that Wharton visits, the less decorated girl or woman is of higher status. Wharton notices the “sad eyes” (175) of the Sultan’s daughter, so different from the “caressing eyes” of the Sultan’s “favourites.” After a brief exchange of compliments, the daughter removes herself from the group and sits in silence, “letting the others sparkle and chatter” (175). The sad eyes of the Sultan’s daughter indicate that she is perhaps unhappy in her role, that she is more aware of her marginalized status. Perhaps she is more educated than the other young women in the harem, or at least better informed of life outside the isolated compartment.

Holding a conversation is tedious because of the language barrier, and Wharton and her companions are told that they might “push open the painted pane” (176) and look out at the crowd below from the mirador. The “butterfly group” immediately draws back, so as not to see or be seen by the “forbidden world” (176) outside the tower. As Western women, Wharton and her friends have a different relationship to the public, and they are able to look past the colored glass and see the world as it is. Wharton watches another procession of the Sultan and his retinue below, an interesting scene in that Wharton, a female, acts as surveyor of the Sultan from above. The image invokes a reversal: the harem is conventionally a place where females are looked upon as objects, and yet for Wharton it serves as a site in which she can look upon men. She is in the position of power—of seeing—while the Sultan is the surveyed. Wharton usurps the role of

the traditionally male explorer and traveler and enacts the “monarch of all I survey” scene, but as a Western woman looking down on the Sultan of Morocco.<sup>58</sup>

Upon hearing some excitement, Wharton leaves the window and returns to the harem. An elderly lady, with a “round ruddy face and an “inexplicable air of majesty” (177) is admitted into the room. This “impressive old lady” (177) is the Sultan’s mother, and like his daughter she is less ornately dressed than the “favourites” but still “[carries] her headdress of striped gauze like a crown” (177). The old woman fascinates Wharton: “if such a woman deceived and intrigued it would be for great purpose and for ends she believed in: the depth of her soul had air and daylight in it, and she would never willingly shut them out (178). Wharton contrasts the intrigue of the old woman with that of the young “favourites” to show the humanity of the former and the emptiness of the latter. Wharton is not surprised to learn that the Sultan’s mother is his “most trusted advisor” and easily the “chief authority in the palace” (178). Wharton does not doubt the intelligence and ability of Moroccan women; she condemns instead the cultural and gender norms that curtail the education of women. Of course, Western society during this period placed its own set of restrictions on the education of women.

The “crowning incident” (180) of Wharton’s visit comes when the Sultan makes an unexpected appearance in the harem, an event which turns out to be quite anticlimatic. The Sultan does not impress Wharton, and she is sarcastic in her treatment of him. She playfully wonders “with what Byzantine ritual the Anointed One fresh from the exercise of his priestly functions would be received among his women” (180), implying the absurdity of several young and beautiful women doting on a single man. Her use of “his women” is meant to mock the idea that a man might own females as he might chattel.

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<sup>58</sup> See Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992), 201-221.

Wharton calls attention to the physicality of the Sultan as a means of bringing him down to earth and depicting him apart from the extravagant persona of the Sultan. In reality, the Sultan is merely a “fat man . . . shuffling along on bare yellow-slippered feet” (180), with his equally simple son trailing behind. The closing of this section is absurd and humorous. His Majesty, Moulay Youssef, walks to the corner of the room and “[applies] his sacred lips to the telephone” (181). Again, Wharton subtly dispels the glamour of the Sultan by painting him as an ordinary and even unsightly older man, and shatters the mystique of the harem by depicting the young women as confined and uninformed. Polygamy and female subordination are drained of their glamour.

#### **IV: In Old Rabat**

In this section of “Harems and Ceremonies,” we see oppositional forces at work that complicate and undermine Wharton’s Oriental discourse. Wharton expresses her concern with unregulated Imperialist intervention, draws parallels between gendered aspects of Western society and Morocco, and imagines herself as a silent member of the harem. Of course, Wharton’s dismay at the Wharton’s might Wharton describes her feelings regarding “the indignity of European improvements,” complaining that “one must traverse boulevards scored with tram-lines, and pass between hotel-terraces and cafes and cinema-palaces, to reach the surviving nucleus of the once beautiful native town. She delights in the parts of the city that are untouched by modernity, retaining “the dignified reticence of the windowless Arab house-fronts” (182). While Wharton’s dismay at the encroachment of modernity might be dismissed as imperialist nostalgia,<sup>59</sup> it is more difficult to disregard her conversations with the women in the harem.

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<sup>59</sup> See Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth*, 68-87.

In Old Rabat, Wharton visits the home and harem of a high government official, “a Moroccan dignitary of the old school” (182). Wharton notices the gendered inferences in the phrasing of invitations and greetings. For example, when the Moroccan dignitary invites the Madame Lyautey and her friends to tea, he adds a side note indicating that the ladies of the house will be glad to receive them. The official will not be entertaining the ladies himself, as that would be socially unacceptable. The house of the official is modest, but possesses a spectacular view of the city below from a raised oriel window. One can look out over the “white and blue terrace-roofs of the native town, with palms and minarets shooting up between them, or the shadows of the vine-trellis patterning a quiet lane” (183). Wharton’s attention to the beauty of the exterior world makes the imprisonment of the women inside all the more startling.

The brother-in-law of the host welcomes Wharton and her friends, and soon indicates his role as overseer of all communication between the American and Moroccan women. As Wharton anticipates, the host disappears with the men of the party after a brief series of introductions, leaving a “rosy fair-haired girl, dressed in Arab costume, but of evidently of European birth” (184) to interpret, although her role is quickly usurped by the brother in law. The wife and daughters enter the room to entertain the guests, all dressed in simple and “sober” (184) clothing. The mistress of the house is an Algerian with “sad expressive eyes” and the younger women are described as “pale, fat, and amiable” (184). Wharton suggests a visual parallel between the group of women before her and that of a professor’s family in an English or American University town: “respectability wears the same face in an Oriental harem as in England or America” (185).

Wharton notices that there is no apparent difference between the Moroccan women and their Western counterparts, save slight variations in dress, thus encouraging readers to loosen expectations and relax stereotypes. Despite their amiability and comportment, Wharton discerns

“vacuity” (184) in the faces of the women, as if they are not accustomed to thinking seriously or holding meaningful conversation. Determined to imbue the women with voices, Wharton attempts to derive meaning from the expression of their eyes. As noted earlier, she reads the eyes of the mistress of the house as “sad and expressive” and later describes the eyes of the young women as “remote and passive” (187).

Wharton is left alone with the mistress and her “daughters,” one of the few times in the narrative in which she is left without the support of her Western acquaintances, and a fascinating exchange ensues with the brother-in-law acting as translator:

Had I any children? (They asked it all at once.)

Alas, no.

“In Islam” (one of the ladies ventured) “a woman without children is considered the most unhappy being in the world.”

I replied that in the Western world also childless women were pitied.

The choice among the Moroccan women to ask first if Wharton is a mother reveals their value system, but it also illuminates the similarities between Western and eastern cultures. Both expect women to be mothers and pity those women who do not choose motherhood or who are unable to bear children. Wharton makes no attempt to downplay her childlessness, and she bravely admits to her culture’s standing on the topic. She is quick to change the subject, though, by querying the women about their thoughts on stiff tailor-dresses in the European fashion: “Don’t they find them excessively ugly?” (185). The brother-in-law responds to Wharton in the affirmative.

Wharton’s next question is a bit more controversial. She asks if the ladies ever have the desire to travel or visit the Bazaars, as the Turkish ladies do. The brother-in-law responds strongly to this question, asserting “No, indeed,” and indicating that they are “too busy to give

such matters a thought” (186). He explains that in this country, women of the highest class devote themselves to their household and to raising their children (any extra time is spent on needlework). It is important to call attention to the role that the brother-in-law plays in mediating, and thus monitoring, the interaction between Wharton and her friends and the women in the harem.

The gender dynamic at play is fascinating. As a Western woman, Wharton is able to speak, but the women of the harem are not able to respond, at least not directly. Wharton is aware of the power imbalance caused by the constant intervention of the brother-in-law. In an attempt to facilitate unmediated communication, Wharton turns directly to the “fair-haired” interpreter who up until this point has “not been allowed by the vigilant guardian of the harem to utter a word” (186). She asks the girl in French about her mother, but owing to nervousness or lack of language skills, the girl can only speak a few words. Wharton remarks on the disjunction between the European appearance of the young interpreter and her timorous demeanor and “remote and passive” eyes, exactly like those of the Moroccan women. The harem “has placed its powerful imprint upon her,” and her soul is no longer her own but the “soul of Islam” (187). Wharton’s feminism is problematic in that she implicates all of Islam in suffocating women, thus reifying stereotypes of eastern backwardness while ignoring the subjugation of women across cultures.

Wharton does not always distinguish between eastern and Western women. In multiple instances she emphasizes similarities between American women, including herself, and Moroccan women, thus avoiding the Orientalist tendency to pit east against West (and the implication that the former is exotic and backward and the latter is normal and civilized). Wharton emphasizes the peculiar circumstances of patriarchy and isolation that contribute to the

ignorance of the Moroccan women. She portrays the Moroccan women as uneducated and trapped, comparing them to caged birds, but she doesn't imply that they are therefore inferior or incapable. They are not unintelligent and incompetent; they are exploited and silenced. In the closing scene of this section, Wharton, now infuriated by the watchful brother-in-law, feels her "own lips stiffening into the resigned smile of the harem" (187). She thus places herself, at least for a moment, in the same position as the ladies of the Harem. Wharton delights at the return of her friends, who swoop in just in time to alleviate her growing feeling of powerlessness, a sensation familiar to women in both the east and the West.

## **V. In Fez**

In the opening to this section, Wharton reflects on her experiences visiting the harems thus far. As her impressions begin coalescing, they take on a new significance in her mind and her sensitivity to the experience of the Moroccan women is heightened. Unable to communicate with the Moroccan women, Wharton is left wondering about "what thoughts, what speculations . . . go on under the narrow veiled brows of the little creatures destined to the high honour of marriage or concubinage in Moroccan palaces" (187). Wharton is being ironic, since she obviously views concubinage as blight, not a "high honour" (187).

She strays from the strict course of her narrative for a few pages and indulges her imagination. She thinks about the diverse origins of the women forced into concubinage, hailing from rural and urban environments and from a range of class backgrounds. She imagines that some are "brought down from mountains and cedar forests, from the free life of the tents where nomad women go unveiled" (187). Others might venture from the "turreted cities beyond the Atlas, where blue palm-groves beat all night against the stars" (188). Some are raised in magnificent and airy palaces "among pomegranate gardens and white terraces," while others are accustomed to a "stifling Mellah" (188). But one day a "fat vizier" spots and admires them and

they are quickly “acquired for a handsome sum” (188) and transported like slaves to their master. The fate is worst of all for the first group of women, those hailing from the mountains who have experienced the freedom of the open air and the beauty and power of nature.

Wharton dispels mystique of the harem and humanizes the women therein by giving them a past. But all of these women, regardless of their origins, are eventually “transferred to the painted sepulchre of the harem” (188), where they are cordoned off from the world and treated as human property. Wharton is obviously disturbed by the concept of young women trapped and essentially jailed in “well-nigh impenetrable” (188) palaces. The sarcasm that marks Wharton’s first experience of the Imperial harem is replaced here by an undertone of sadness, anger, and even despair. She reasons that perhaps it is for the best that these women rarely receive visitors, lest someone should remind them that “somewhere the gulls dance on the Atlantic and the wind murmurs through olive-yards and clatters the metallic fronds of palm groves” (189).

Wharton is invited to yet another harem in the home of one of the chief dignitaries of the Makhzen at Fez. The description of the harem is reminiscent of a catacomb, perhaps in part for dramatic effect. Wharton and her companions descend with hesitation through “steep tunneled streets,” as if they were “being lowered into the shaft of a mine” (189). The sky is obscured and all signs of outside life are cut off. The masonry closes in as Wharton gets closer to the inner sanctum. Finally, Wharton enters “an almost subterranean labyrinth which sun and air never reach,” and arrives in front of a few buildings with “blind mysterious house fronts” (190). Her description incites claustrophobia and panic. It is impossible to gauge direction or to locate an exit route. The very architecture seems to be a metaphor for the fate of the women confined to the harem.

The women are greeted by “a charming youth with intelligent eyes,” who speaks good French and is thus prepared to speak with visitors. Wharton and her companions are introduced to the host, a “patriarchal personage, draped in fat as in a toga” (190). Like the Sultan, this man is old with a “swarthy silver-bearded face” (190). Wharton describes the languor that seems to have infected all of the inmates of the household, as well as the servants and hangers-on. The only individuals who seem not to have eaten of lotus flowers are a group of three young black women who are positively “vibrating with activity” (193), running to and fro performing a great variety of tasks.

Wharton and her companions are eventually introduced to the “ladies of the household,” a group of seven or eight “passive looking women over whom a number of pale children scrambled” (192). The mistress of the house, an Algerian woman with a “sad and delicately-modeled face” (192), is the oldest of the women. The younger women are her daughters, daughters-in-law, and concubines. Wharton takes this opportunity to dispel any misconceptions regarding the word “concubine,” a term often associated with lust, exoticism, and seduction in the Western world. Wharton insists, based on her visits to several harems, that the Moroccan harem is rarely a place of sexual seduction. For example, she portrays this particular harem as a “stuffy curtained apartment,” a place of “melancholy respectability” in which the women sit still like “cellar grown flowers” (192). The grandeur and “frivolity” of the Imperial harem is apparently not reflective of most harems, which are characterized instead by a “dignified dowdiness” (192).

Wharton is struck by the somber décor and the sober style of dress among the women, but she is most concerned by the apathy of the young women. They are completely disconnected from the outside world, “imprisoned in a conception of sexual and domestic life based on slave-

service and incessant espionage” (193). She tries to communicate with them, but they merely shake their heads or nod. They have no occupation and are not even accustomed to cooking, household arts, or playing with their children. Wharton describes their lives as “colorless” and laments their dependence “on the favour of one fat tyrannical man, bloated with good living and authority, himself almost as inert and sedentary as his women, and accustomed to impose his whims on them” (194).

There is a single redeeming aspect of the “stagnant domesticity” (194) of the harem, and that is the love and tenderness that parents show to their children. But Wharton is cautious even to embrace such “unfeigned tenderness,” cautioning against the tendency to idealize these “much-petted children” without recognizing the ways in which their basic health and education are neglected: “ignorance, unhealthiness and a precocious sexual initiation prevail in all classes” (194). Education consists solely of learning large portions of the Koran by memorization, and it is cut short by the early marriage at the age of eight or nine. Wharton’s critique of Moroccan society, particularly the upper classes, emphasizes the relationship between limited education, precocious sexual activity, and oppressive patriarchal norms. Children are denied the information or skills to effectively challenge the system, and they drift early into a life of languor and stagnancy.

In the final paragraphs of this section, Wharton shifts from an explanation of Moroccan society to a powerful series of images. Wharton and her companions return to their host, who is still resting with contentment on his cushion, when a handsome man of about thirty years old, with “delicate features and a black beard” (195), enters the room. The host introduces the individual as his oldest son and husband to several of the women in the harem. Next, the patriarch’s youngest child, a tiny boy, rushes into the room and dives into his father’s “rapturous

arms” (196). His two school-age brothers, returning from studying the Koran, follow close behind. The scene is one of great tenderness and yet there is something peculiar about it:

All the sons greeted each other affectionately, and caressed with almost feminine tenderness the dancing baby so lately added to their ranks; and finally, to crown this scene of domestic intimacy, the three [black slaves], their gigantic effort at last accomplished, passed about glasses of steaming mint and trays of gazelles’ horns and white sugar-cakes. (196)

With the exception of the three African slaves, who are not welcomed as part of the patriarch’s family, there are no females present in this loving exchange. There is apparently no place for women among the ranks of the men, especially since female servants can attend to the traditionally female duties. There is nothing natural about the absence of women in this scene, the mothers and wives that brought life into being. The hierarchy between patriarch and servant, and between the grown women and the children is also unnatural. If this is a scene of domestic bliss, then it is one predicated on patriarchal privilege and power that virtually erases women from the scene.

## **VI. In Marrakech**

Wharton’s gender analysis, as well as her race consciousness, becomes increasingly pronounced as this chapter continues. From the beginning of the chapter, Wharton is conscious of the presence of African slaves and describes their appearance, comportment, and duties, but she does not attempt to unpack the role of slavery in Morocco. She pushes further in this section of the narrative. “The farther one travels from the Mediterranean,” Wharton says, “the closer the curtains of the women’s quarters are drawn” (197). As we have seen, interaction with the women in the harems is policed to a severe degree. The only harem in which Wharton and her companions have the benefit of an interpreter is that of the Sultan himself. In all the others, they are forced to trust the translation of a French-speaking relative. In this section, Wharton visits

one of the “stateliest” (197) palaces in Marrakech, home to the Caïd (a French term meaning “boss” or “chief”).

The women are met at the door by the chamberlain to the Caïd, who guides them through a series of “cool passages lined with the intricate mosaic-work of Fez” (198). The house is magnificent and reflects the Caïd’s appreciation for the ancient Imperial palaces. Wharton and her companions are served tea with the Caïd, whom Wharton describes as a “great fighter and loyal friend of France” (198). The Caïd is an impressive “eagle-beaked man, brown, lean and sinewy, with vigilant eyes” (199). He is more athletic, active, and intelligent than the other patriarchs that Wharton encounters, and he is further distinguished by an impressive military background. Wharton’s impression of the Caïd is greatly diminished after she observes his interaction with the slaves in his household. Wharton is particularly distressed by a tiny African child, only six or seven years old, who stands motionless awaiting his every need:

Like most of the Moroccan slaves, even in the greatest households, she was shabbily dressed. A dirty *gandourah* of striped muslin covered her faded caftan and a cheap kerchief was wound above her grave and precocious little face. With preternatural vigilance she watched each movement of the Caïd, who never spoke to her, looked at her, or made her the slightest perceptible sign, but whose least wish she instantly divined, refilling his tea-cup, passing the plates of sweets, or removing our empty glasses, in obedience to some secret telegraphy on which her whole being hung. (200)

Just as she does with the women in the harem, Wharton insists on the humanity of this young girl by trying to read her expression, commenting on her behaviors, and admiring her abilities. The little girl is graceful, intelligent, and perceptive. She moves like a phantom, or perhaps even an angel, performing her duties with the utmost precision. While the Caïd might initially appear distinct from other Moroccan men—more enlightened and cultivated as “a friend of the arts, a scholar and diplomatist” (200)—he is still prone to the kind of thinking that enables and condones slavery. He is oblivious to the “tiny creature watching him with . . . anxious joyless

eyes” (200) because he does not view her as a dynamic human being with real emotions.

Wharton condemns the “abyss that slavery and the seraglio put between the most Europeanized Mahometan and the Western conception of life” (201), thus indicating her colonialist prejudices even while she advocates for abolitionism. Her abolitionism, like her feminism, is well-intentioned but delimited by its Orientalism: “Wharton’s concern for this apparent victimization is ultimately andocentric . . . her attention returns to Oriental masculinity.”<sup>60</sup>

Wharton rarely alludes to the Westerners in her company, but she is only able to gain entry into the harem of the Caïd because she is in the company of her friends Captain de S. and his wife. Wharton’s access—her entry into each of the harems in the narrative—is enabled by her affiliation with others, namely powerful men. Even as a well-known Western writer, Wharton’s gender limits her clout and contributes to her reliance on others. An African slave woman in tattered garments invites Madame de S. and Wharton into the harem, a “commonplace room with divans and white-washed walls” (201). Wharton notices that even in the most extravagant palaces, such as this one, the women’s quarters are shabbily decorated. The ladies of the Caïd’s harem are elaborately dressed like those of the Sultan’s harem, but their faces are more European in appearance. Wharton learns that most of them were brought up in an environment of relative freedom and happiness in Constantinople, and their fond memories of happier times shine in their “wistfully smiling eyes” (202).

The women are welcoming and candid with the visitors, eagerly showing faded photographs of their lives prior to entering the harem. One photograph shows a group of “plump provincial-looking women in dowdy European ball-dresses” (202). The women appear far less attractive in the old photograph than they do in the luxurious dress of the harem, and yet they are

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<sup>60</sup> Tromly, “The Small Talk of the Harem,” 246.

proud of the picture and of their former freedom. They delight in their memories of the past. Wharton emphasizes the “perfect equality” (203) that seems to prevail among the women in the harem and in all of the harems that she has visited. She claims that it is nearly impossible to distinguish the “favourite” because the interaction among them is so kind and free. While this observation might be idealized, it indicates the survival strategies of women within the harem while breaking down stereotypes of hostility and competition among Concubines in the mythologized eastern harem.

The closing scene of “Harems of Ceremonies” is appropriately disturbing and symbolic. One of the women in the harem asks Madame de S. about her children, and she in turn inquires about the Caïd’s little boy, the child of a wife who died. A slave is ordered to bring in the child and the women quickly swarm around the “large-eyed ghost of a child” with their “bracelet-laden arms” (204). The small boy is decorated with heavy amulets and ornate garments. In her usual fashion, Wharton focuses on the eyes of the child, perhaps trying to read his mind. She stares at the “poor baby on whom such hopes and ambitions hung” and he looks back at her with a “solemn unamused gaze” (204), as if already aware that he is to be looked on and looked after for the rest of his life.

Would all his pretty mothers, his eyes seemed to ask, succeed in bringing him to maturity in spite of the parched summers of the south and the stifling existence of the harem? It was evidence that no precaution had been neglected to protect him from maleficent influences and the danger that walks by night, for his frail neck was hung with innumerable charms . . . Perhaps they would ward off the powers of evil, and let him grow up to the shoulder the burden of the great Caïds of the south. (205)

The society that places all its attention on men, that caters to them and bedecks them with jewels from their early infancy, is not healthy for men or women. Unfortunately, Wharton fails to take her observations one step further and recognize that Western society also stifles women and gratifies boys and men.

CHAPTER 5  
WILLA CATHER: THE FEMINIZED TRAMP ABROAD AND THE REVAMPED  
EUROPEAN TOUR

**Introduction**

Like Edith Wharton, Willa Cather, born in 1873, achieved great commercial and critical success as a writer during her lifetime and was awarded a number of prestigious literary awards in recognition of her contribution to American literature. She earned the Pulitzer Prize in 1923 for her novel *One of Ours* and The American Academy of Arts and Letters awarded her the Howells Medal in 1930 for her novel *Death Becomes the Archbishop*. In 1944, the National Institute bestowed upon Cather the Institute's Gold Medal, their most prestigious award honoring "an entire body of work, the sustained output of a whole career."<sup>1</sup> Cather is secure in her place as a major American writer of the twentieth century,<sup>2</sup> as an author who is "widely read . . . regularly taught . . . and the subject of intense critical scrutiny and controversy."<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, Cather's popularity has been steadily on the rise since the late twentieth century, in large part because of her treatment of gender and sexuality and its appeal to contemporary scholars. Beginning in the 1990's and continuing into the 2000's, scholars specializing in cultural studies and queer studies have produced numerous gendered analyses of Cather's work: "Cather studies have undergone a transformation in the last thirty years as feminist critics," among others, "have encouraged a gendered analysis of her life and works."<sup>4</sup>

Many scholars today place Cather firmly in the canon of American literature, but her popularity and reputation fluctuated greatly over the course of her career and in the years since

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<sup>1</sup> Phyllis C. Robinson, *Willa: The Life of Willa Cather* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1983), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Margaret Anne O'Connor, preface to *Willa Cather and the Contemporary Reviews* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. xvii.

<sup>3</sup> Marilee Lindemann, preface to *The Cambridge Companion to Willa Cather* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 1.

<sup>4</sup> Lindemann, preface, 3.

her death in 1947. Like Fuller and Wharton, Cather has been lost, reinvented, and resurrected many times by literary scholars. She was considered a “major American novelist” in the 1920’s, only to fall from favor in the 1930’s and 1940’s, during which time she was subject to scathing reviews and criticism. In her article “Becoming Noncanonical: The Case Against Willa Cather,” Sharon O’Brien attempts to “situate Cather’s decanonization historically,” describing the ways in which Cather’s marginalization coincides with the “self-conscious attempt of reviewers, critics, and academics to create an American literary canon.”<sup>5</sup> O’Brien insists that while Cather “has been considered an important writer,” she has never been classed as a “‘major’ one . . . an equal colleague of Hawthorne, James, or Faulkner.”<sup>6</sup> I will explore this idea further in terms of the marginalization of Cather’s travel writing.

While contemporary Cather studies have resulted in a revival of much of Cather’s work, scholars have neglected much of the journalistic work that defined her early career and they have virtually ignored her travel writing. Journalism, mobility, and art were importantly linked in Cather’s life and played a vital role in her writing. Cather’s career as a journalist enabled her to leave Nebraska and travel to Pittsburgh and New York, among other places. It also provided her with the social connections and financial means to make her first trip across the Atlantic and prompted her to record her observations as a professional writer. Travel is also one of the few pastimes that Cather pursued both as a journalist and as a professional writer—“she returned West periodically to renew ties with family, friends, and land, yet she never lingered long. . . [she] doubled restless back and forth across the continent, spending part of the summer in Nebraska and then escaping to Pittsburgh, New York, New Hampshire, or her island retreat on

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<sup>5</sup> Sharon O’Brien, “Becoming Noncanonical: The Case Against Willa Cather,” *American Quarterly* 40.1 (Mar., 1988): 111.

<sup>6</sup> Sharon O’Brien, “Becoming Noncanonical,” 110.

Great Manan, New Brunswick to translate reawakened emotions and remembered impressions into literary form.”<sup>7</sup>

Cather’s vocation as a writer was always “tied to geographic mobility,”<sup>8</sup> perhaps because she began her life as a professional writer when she left her family home and went away to University. As we will see, Cather’s travel writing in *Willa Cather in Europe* is significant for a number of reasons. It serves as a biographical resource, illuminating Cather’s understanding of what it meant to be an American abroad, and most importantly, offers insight into her early understanding of gender identity, especially as it intersects with nationality, culture, and class. The material within the letters is relevant to the evolution of Cather’s career and person and to her gradual shift from journalistic to novelistic writing. The letters also provide richly gendered analyses of a variety of issues and cultural habits, and they reflect Cather’s understanding of herself as an American woman traveling abroad.

Cather scholars lament the dearth of biographical materials on Cather, and yet Cather’s travel writing represents an untapped resource. Unlike other writers, such as Mark Twain and Edith Wharton, Cather “tried to regulate the public’s access to her literary and personal texts, directing her executors to refuse radio, film, and dramatic adaptations of her fiction and forbidding publication of her correspondence.”<sup>9</sup> She was particularly steadfast at obscuring her “lengthy apprenticeship as journalist, high school teacher, and managing editor of *McClure’s* magazine.” Cather’s first trip abroad and the letters that she sent back to Nebraska thus serve an invaluable biographical resource.

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<sup>7</sup> Sharon O’Brien, *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 59.

<sup>8</sup> Janis P. Stout, *Willa Cather: The Writer and Her World* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), 136.

<sup>9</sup> O’Brien, *The Emerging Voice*, 3.

Cather embarks on the traditional “European tour” well aware of the sights that she is expected to see, the reactions that she is supposed to have, and the language that she is supposed to use when recording her impressions. But Cather does not engage in the kind of blind veneration of Europe that one might expect from an aspiring female writer. She acknowledges her gender difference and her class location and is determined to transgress social expectations at every stop along the way. In her theoretically driven biography of Cather, Stout posits Cather as a “deeply conflicted writer” in terms of her “puzzled performance of gender, including her relation to the emergence of the New Woman” and “her participation in, but also resistance to, pervasive cultural assumptions regarding ethnicity and American pluralism, including issues of social class.”<sup>10</sup> Stout’s thesis is particularly resonant in terms of Cather’s travel writing, in which she is constantly conflicted “between impulses toward Europe and toward a kind of heartland Americanism.”<sup>11</sup> Hers is at once a narrative of the European tour and a transgressive and volatile text that rejects the idea of a “traditional” European experience.

This chapter will focus on *Willa Cather in Europe*, a collection of fourteen articles that Willa Cather composed while touring Europe with her friend Isabelle McClung in 1902. She sent the letters back home, where they were published in the *Nebraska State Journal*. At the time of her first journey abroad, Cather was a relatively well-established journalistic and drama critic, but she had yet to embark on her career as a novel writer. The letters were published, posthumously, as a heavily annotated book in 1956.

### **Biography**

The daughter of Charles and Mary Virginia Cather, Wilella Cather was born in her grandmother’s house in Back Creek Valley, Virginia on December 7, 1873. The eldest of the

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<sup>10</sup> Stout, *The Writer and her World*, xii.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, xii.

seven children, “Willie” was spirited and intelligent from early childhood. She invented her own name “Willa,” which she recorded in the family bible “altered from the original Wilella.”<sup>12</sup>

Cather was born a southerner at a time of great turmoil and change, less than a decade after the Civil War. Many familiar with Cather’s work today might find it hard to imagine her spending her “formative years in the close-knit structure of an extended southern family,”<sup>13</sup> since her literary identity is so intricately bound with images of the Western prairie.

The dynamic between Cather’s mother and father was somewhat notable in that Virginia Cather served as the authoritarian and disciplinarian in the family. Virginia Cather was a “strong-willed, imperious woman who overshadowed her gentle, more easy-going husband.”<sup>14</sup> Cather had difficulty understanding her mother’s “volatile, paradoxical nature”<sup>15</sup>—at once harsh and sympathetic, staunch and yet ladylike. The precocious Cather recognized that her mother’s authority in the private realm of the home did not extend to the public realm, in which she was ultimately powerless. Cather’s relationship with her mother was always rocky, especially during her rebellious teen years and her college years as a self-professed “New Woman,” but Cather got along well with her father. Cather shared a remarkably close relationship with Charles Cather, a “self-educated” man who “took pleasure in “reading poetry aloud to his children.”<sup>16</sup> He was proud of his daughter’s intelligence and supported her love of learning and desire to attend college. The relationship between Cather’s parents revealed to her the complexity and artificiality of gender construction and illuminated the possibility of fluid and flexible gender

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<sup>12</sup> James L. Woodress, *Willa Cather: A Literary Life* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 21.

<sup>13</sup> Stout, *The Writer and Her World*, 3.

<sup>14</sup> O’Brien, *The Emerging Voice*, 40.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

roles. Furthermore, Charles Cather provided his daughter with a “personal, familial resource for questioning the social construction of gender.”<sup>17</sup>

The Cathers were among Black Creek’s “most prominent citizens,”<sup>18</sup> although more for their good name than for their wealth. Originally from Wales, the Cathers immigrated to Virginia in colonial times and made their living as successful farmers. Cather’s childhood home was a beautiful three-story house with a “sturdy brick façade, pierced by large, evenly spaced single windows” and “fronted by a portico with fluted columns.”<sup>19</sup> Cather thus passed the first nine years of her life in Virginia in a “society of extraordinary stability,”<sup>20</sup> despite the social turmoil that pervaded the South. Several of Cather’s biographers describe her ambivalent feelings toward the South. In her fiction and letters, Cather expresses admiration as well as aversion to the South.

Cather’s life took an abrupt turn in 1883 when her father uprooted the family and moved them to Nebraska. In the spring of 1883, the Cather’s departed Virginia by train and arrived in Webster County, located in south-eastern Nebraska. The family lived first on an isolated farm and Charles Cather attempted to continue his work in the family business of farming. The Cather family relocated only eighteen months later, for reasons not entirely known, to Red Cloud, a vibrant and thriving frontier town. Biographers suggest that Virginia Cather and her children were perhaps eager to escape the isolation and desolation of their original home in the “sparsely populated Nebraska divide.”<sup>21</sup> Charles Cather opened an insurance office in Red Cloud, but “his career as a businessman was only marginally successful and the family’s financial situation,

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>19</sup> James L. Woodress, *Willa Cather; Her Life and Art* (New York: Pegasus, 1970), 23.

<sup>20</sup> E. K. Brown and Leon Edel, *Willa Cather: A Critical Biography* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), 18.

<sup>21</sup> O’Brien, *The Emerging Voice*, 61.

though never dire, was over the years often precarious.”<sup>22</sup> Like Margaret Fuller, Cather would have to work as a young adult in order to pursue her ambitions and likely to contribute to her family.

At the age of nine, Cather was introduced to an entirely new world. The move from the South to the West was extremely traumatic for Cather, who later confided to a colleague at *McClure's* that “she had almost died from homesickness during her first year in Nebraska.”<sup>23</sup> She was initially frightened by the “vastness of the prairie,” which she conceived as “inhuman and overwhelming.”<sup>24</sup> This move marked an entry into new territory for Cather—“she was moving from an inscribed to an unwrittenland”<sup>25</sup>—and her sense of dislocation and adjustment crops up frequently in her writing. Janis Stout suggests that Cather’s childhood displacement “generated a long textual engagement with tropes of both departure and homing,”<sup>26</sup> a notion that a string of Cather biographers have evoked. As an important side note, Cather’s first trip abroad marked a perhaps equally drastic change of scenery and custom, and yet biographers pay little attention to it. I will argue that Cather’s European experience had a major impact on her development as an artist, and that it is not coincidence that upon her return from Europe “she was more determined than ever to concentrate on serious writing.”<sup>27</sup>

It didn’t take long for Cather to “come to love her home with a passion,”<sup>28</sup> and to embrace the Nebraska landscape and culture. Cather’s adolescence in Nebraska was a lively and rebellious one. During her seven years living at home in Red Cloud between the age of eleven

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<sup>22</sup> Robinson, *The Life of Willa Cather*, 24.

<sup>23</sup> O’Brien, *The Emerging Voice*, 61.

<sup>24</sup> Lindemann, preface, 5.

<sup>25</sup> O’Brien, *The Emerging Voice*, 61.

<sup>26</sup> Stout, *The Writer and Her World*, 26.

<sup>27</sup> Robinson, *The Life of Willa Cather*, 116.

<sup>28</sup> Lindemann, introduction, 5.

and seventeen, Cather “acted out an intensified and somewhat idiosyncratic form of the adolescent rebellion experienced by many young people,”<sup>29</sup> but her rebellion was grounded in her non-traditional view of the world and she carried her alternative attitudes with her throughout her life. Cather was fiercely ambitious and “set her sights on ambitions that would have been described as more appropriate for males or perhaps even unavailable to females, and she adjusted her interests and self-presentation accordingly.”<sup>30</sup> Cather enjoyed wearing her hair short and dressing in a boyish manner, a trend that she would continue during her first few years as a college student.

Having passed her adolescence “groping for ways to evade conventional female decorum,”<sup>31</sup> Cather moved on to the University of Nebraska, where she was able to challenge gender stereotypes in more drastic ways and provoke controversy as a “New Woman.” Cather was determined to attend college, despite the social and financial constraints that made such a choice controversial. Cather was among the first generation of college-educated women in the United States to attend public, coeducational institutions, where women were availed the same educational opportunities as men.

### **Journalistic Career**

Cather was still a student at the University of Nebraska when she initiated her career as a professional journalist. She began work for the *Nebraska State Journal* during her junior year in college, authoring an anonymous column titled “One Way of Putting it.” By the spring of 1894, Cather was also the *Journal*’s drama critic. In her biography of Cather, Phyllis Robinson describes Cather’s strong personality and viewpoints: “whether she was castigating authors or admiring actresses Willa was ready with opinions on every conceivable subject, and she entered

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<sup>29</sup> Stout, *The Writer and Her World*, 15

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

vigorously into the fray when controversy was in the air.”<sup>32</sup> In her final two semesters of college, between September 1894 and June 1895, Cather published “close to a hundred pieces in the journal,”<sup>33</sup> as much as a full time reviewer.

Cather’s career as a journalist would last almost two decades, until 1912, and would take her “from Lincoln to Pittsburgh and finally to New York,” and of course, overseas as well. Cather’s travel writing represents an important, but neglected, part of her journalistic career. Cather’s letters from abroad have not been compared to those of other major writers, such as Mark Twain or even Edith Wharton, despite their rich content and poetic style. Remarkably, Cather is rarely remembered for her extensive career as a newspaper and magazine writer.<sup>34</sup>

After graduation from the University of Nebraska in 1895, Cather returned home with high hopes of pursuing a “double literary life,”<sup>35</sup> continuing her work for the newspaper but also pursuing creative writing on her own. Unfortunately, Cather did not find Red Cloud, or Lincoln for that matter, conducive to realizing her literary ambitions. Cather’s time at home made her restless and she was consequently unproductive and eager for a permanent change of scenery. By 1896, only a year after graduating, Cather relocated to Pittsburgh to pursue a career in magazine journalism. In June of that year she began work as an editor of *Home Monthly*, a women’s magazine. She also began working as a drama critic for the *Pittsburgh Leader*, which would continue to employ her in various capacities until her resignation from the newspaper in 1899. By the turn of the twentieth century, Cather had carved out a successful niche for herself as a

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<sup>32</sup> Robinson, *The Life of Willa Cather*, 55.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>34</sup> Woodress, *A Literary Life*, 89, explains that when Cather died in 1947 the public was virtually unaware of her extensive career as a newspaper and magazine writer. He attributes this silence in part to Cather’s own unwillingness to discuss her early career.

<sup>35</sup> Robinson, *The Life of Willa Cather*, 70.

journalist and a drama critic, with a “reputation that extended beyond Nebraska,”<sup>36</sup> and she was about to embark on her first trip abroad.

Cather’s first tour of Europe must be understood in the context of her journalistic career and demonstrated skills as a critic and writer. But we must also bear in mind her traveling companion, socialite and patron of the arts Isabella McClung. When she was first introduced to Isabella McClung in the last years of the nineteenth century, Cather was “living alone in the city, earning her own money, answerable to no one but herself.”<sup>37</sup> McClung was attracted to Cather’s reputation as a drama critic for the Pittsburgh *Leader*, and the two became fast friends. It was upon the advice of McClung that Cather resigned from the *Leader* in 1901 and began teaching in the spring of 1901. She also moved into the McClung household in 1901, and the two women departed for Europe together in 1902. In fulfillment of her agreement with the *Nebraska State Journal*, Cather kept a journal and wrote about her experience abroad in travel articles that were sent back to American for publication.

### **Travel Writing**

Cather’s travel writing marks an important turning point in her career, demarcating the transition from journalistic to creative writing and prefiguring the role that women and gender issues would play in her novels. Like her contemporary Edith Wharton, Cather initiated her career as a writer of novels relatively late in her life. She was always writing—as a child writing stories, as a journalist in college, and as a professional journalist in her twenties and thirties—but she did not publish her first novel until she was thirty-eight years old.<sup>38</sup> Hence, Cather’s travel writing represents an important part of her journalistic career, prior to her pursuits as a creative writer. Cather constantly incorporates themes of travel and mobility in her fiction. She imagines

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<sup>36</sup> Woodress, *A Literary Life*, 111.

<sup>37</sup> Robinson, *The Life of Willa Cather*, 4.

<sup>38</sup> Woodress, *A Literary Life*, xvi.

the road as a “space of challenge, flux, danger, possibility, and liminality.”<sup>39</sup> Travel is importantly linked to creativity and change in Cather’s mind, and her travel writing served a fundamental creative outlet.

### **Format, Mediation, Style and Tone**

*Willa Cather in Europe: Her Own Story of the First Journey* is a compilation of chronological articles, dated July 1, 1902 through September 6, 1902, which Cather wrote while in Europe and sent back to the United States. They were collected and published posthumously, but scholars have paid them little critical attention and biographers of Cather have mentioned them only briefly. Editor and historian George N. Kates acts as mediator of Cather’s voice in *Willa Cather in Europe*. As editor and compiler of *Willa Cather in Europe*, Kates attempts to appropriate the text by way of excessive annotation. His lengthy introduction and “incidental notes” comprise a large portion of the text and are strategically placed before Cather’s own writing so as to guide the reader’s experience of the narrative. The introduction serves as an extended disclaimer of sorts, indicating that Cather’s letters from abroad were “made for pay, jotted down quickly” and “often in obvious haste.”<sup>40</sup> The purpose of the introduction seems to be threefold: first, to alert the reader to the imperfections of the text; second, to indicate the value of the material “in spite of all of its marks of unplanned and unorganized writing” (vi); and third, to provide an interpretation of the “general conclusions” that can be drawn from such “miscellaneous material” included in Cather’s letters.

Kates’s criticism of the text is overpowering—at one point he claims, “there are so many superficial imperfections that one can only deduce real impatience” (ix). Kates insists on

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<sup>39</sup> Lindemann, introduction, 8.

<sup>40</sup> George N. Kates, preface to *Willa Cather in Europe: Her Own Story of the First Journey* (New York: Knopf, 1956), v. Further references will be followed by page numbers in parentheses).

inserting his voice before Cather's, which detracts from the reader's experience of absorbing the text for the first time. He provides too much detail in his prefaces to each of the letters, often quoting exact lines, so the reader feels as if she is reading Cather's words twice. He seems intent on determining the meaning of each of the letters for the reader, leaving little room for gendered or class-conscious analysis. Finally, he acts as stylistic critic, assessing the quality of the writing and praising or criticizing it as he sees fit.

Kates presents Cather as a naïve and inexperienced, albeit well educated, "country-bred girl" (vii). He admits that she was "well read, in several literatures," classically educated in Greek and Latin, and "properly grounded . . . in her knowledge of European art" (viii), but he does not view her as a literary artist. Kates still envisions Cather, age 28, as a novice writer with a career that "still lay wholly ahead of her" (vi). Such a viewpoint overlooks Cather's academic achievements and remarkable career in journalism as a writer and drama critic. It minimizes the value of her travel writing, and treats it as non-literary. In contrast to Kates, I will posit Cather as a skilled thinker and writer at the time of her travels abroad, eager to learn new things and discard old assumptions when appropriate, but already extremely knowledgeable on a diverse range of subjects and skilled as a journalist, critic, and literary artist. Cather may not have been a novelist, but "she was already a supreme storyteller."<sup>41</sup>

Cather's style is informal and her tone is frequently nostalgic and poetic. She is blatantly honest, to the point of perhaps causing offense. In the opening pages of the first letter, she describes the "unfortunate carriage" of the English women in Liverpool, calling it a "national disfigurement" (7). And soon after she describes the Prince of Wales as "foppish and effeminate to the last degree" (11). She is also comical and often uses humor, as Wharton does, as a way of

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<sup>41</sup> Robinson, *The Life of Willa Cather*, 114.

broaching difficult subjects such as class and gender. For example, there is a hilarious scene on the train from Paris to Avignon in which a lower-class mother forces her “wretched infant” (33) on an unprepared Cather.

The articles merit attention from historians and literary critics, particularly those interested in gender studies and travel literature. In my close reading, I will examine Cather’s travel writing in terms of several recurring and overlapping concepts: nation and national identity; the time-honored tradition of the European tour; and finally, social class and its wide-ranging implications. Gender undergirds each of these concepts and informs Cather’s opinions and analyses. For example, Cather’s identity as an American woman writer colors her experience abroad, and she holds strong opinions regarding the ways in which national identity intersects with both gender and class. Furthermore, as a literary artist touring the monuments of Europe, Cather is partaking of her own version of the Grand tour. But through her poetic observations and digressions, her nontraditional historical accounts, and her interest in common people and simple dwellings over impressive structures and historical figures, Cather perpetually challenges and undermines the traditional structure of the European tour.

I will group my analyses according to these emerging themes. There is much overlap: for example, Cather’s analyses of the women in London are related to national identity and class identity, and of course gender is relevant to both of these issues. The first theme that I will look at is nation and national identity and its intersection with gender. In several of the articles, Cather positions herself as an American in contrast to the Europeans that she encounters, and she uses this structure of opposition to differentiate between the American female and the European female.

## Nation and National Identity

The first article in *Willa Cather in Europe*, “Liverpool,” is dated July 1, 1902 and describes Cather’s arrival in Liverpool in the midst of an overwhelming celebration. The country is celebrating the coronation of Edward VII, but news of his illness had put a damper on the festivities. Cather describes the city as presenting “such an array of colour, flowers and banners as nearly disguised the grimness of the city itself.”<sup>42</sup> She is overwhelmed by the extravagant displays, including “canopies, arches, and flags” and “chains of paper roses for miles” (5), but not impressed. She is immediately skeptical of the joyous displays, and senses a “palpable shadow in the air that did not belong to the festival” (5).

Cather can’t deny the “gay” effect of the enthusiastic crowd, but can’t help but compare the scene before her with her native country. In surveying the English crowd she notes: “there is nothing of the smartness and neatness and trimness of the American crowd” (6). Cather is particularly critical of the English girls and women of the middle class, who stand with their “chest sunk in and the lower part of the torso thrust forward” and who dress in “badly made, home concocted silks and satins and lawns and dimities” (7). The implication is that American girls and women of all classes dress “neatly” and maintain a respectable posture, a notion that Cather returns to time and again. Cather has a strong sense of “good taste” and “respectability” that she determines based on characteristics—such as honesty, hard work, good hygiene—that transcend socioeconomic circumstances.

Later in the article, Cather describes her experience attending a dinner for the poor at St. George’s Hall. She is appalled at seeing old men and women so sick and hungry and convinced that “no American city could have nurtured such an array of poverty and decrepitude” (9). Cather

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<sup>42</sup> Willa Cather, *Willa Cather in Europe: Her Own Story of the First Journey* (New York: Knopf, 1956), 5. Further references will be followed by page numbers in parentheses.

is particularly concerned by a number of older, unmarried women who are shut out of the dinner and left to sit on the steps in desperation. The ambivalence apparent in this first letter is characteristic of the larger body of Cather's travel writing—a tendency to condemn poverty, for example, but then to distinguish among the deserving poor and the undeserving poor. This is perhaps problematic, as it places Cather in the role of judge, but she nonetheless refrains from making overarching statements about particular class groups or nationalities. And as we will see in later articles when she visits several villages in Provence, Cather immerses herself in the local culture and resides among the working poor.

Cather alludes to American society in almost every one of her articles. She is able to process the new culture and environment that she is experiencing by comparing it with what she knows: “constant comparisons are the stamp of the foreigner; one continually translates manners and customs of a new country into the terms of his own, before he can fully comprehend them” (9). This notion of comparing in order to comprehend is particularly important in Cather's gender analyses, as we will see. Cather has a specific and positive conception of American identity, one that is inextricably bound with her understanding of gender in America. We learn more about Cather's nationalism and its function as we move through the articles and witness her questioning and restructuring her conceptions, such as in her article “Dieppe and Rouen,” in which she relates her first experience of France.

Cather's excitement at seeing the shores of France for the first time is palpable. We witness Cather in motion, crossing from Newhaven to Dieppe “on a night when the Channel ran smoothly as glass and the stars stood clear in the midnight sky” (93). Cather describes the “common blackness of the sea and sky” as her boat moves out into the middle of the ocean. The decks are crowded with “miserable shivering” (93) passengers, who return to their rooms in a

state of “heaviness and discomfort” (93). The entire scene shifts from one of gloom to one of joy as the coast of France appears in the distance. At 3 o’clock in the morning, Cather is awoken by “a rush of feet aft” and after putting on some warm clothing she rushes to the deck:

Above the roar of the wind and the thrash of the water I heard the babble of voices, in which I could distinguish the word ‘France’ uttered over and over again with a fire and a fervour that was in itself a panegyric. Far to the south there shone a little star of light out of the blackness, that burned from orange to yellow and then back to orange again; the first light of the coast of France. All the prone, dispirited figures we left two hours before were erect and animated, rhetorical and jubilant . . . they clutched and greeted each other indiscriminately, for it was the hour when all distinctions were obliterated and when the bond of brotherhood drew sweet and hard. (94)

The suspense of this passage is bolstered by the vivid imagery, riveting word choice, and nationalistic sentiment. Cather writes as a novelist and the reader feels herself immersed in the scene as it springs to life. This passage provides further insight regarding the meaning of Cather’s nationalism. Cather’s loyalty to her identity as an American is grounded in her association between America and certain positive traits, including a willingness to work hard, cleanliness, and a strong moral inclination. Cather perceives similarities between American and French identities, in that both countries stress hard work and aesthetic neatness across social classes. In comparing England to France, Cather insists, “certainly no body of water as small as the English Channel ever separated two worlds so different” (95).

Cather’s voice shifts when she enters France, perhaps because she is adjusting to Europe, but more likely because she feels more comfortable in France. Her initial experience of the country is distinct from that of England. Arriving in Dieppe, Cather is impressed by the railway station in which “every poster [is] a thing of grace and beauty” (95). The people are markedly different as well: the porters speak in “smooth, clear voices” and the “cries of the street boys are musical” (95). Cather passes the poor on her way to the hotel, all of whom are hard at work despite their age and obvious hunger. The next morning, Cather’s first in France, signifies a kind

of rebirth: “when we awoke and revisited the world about eight o’clock, everything else seemed to feel as happy and freshly created as ourselves” (96).

### **Grand Tour**

The European tour or Grand tour served as the capstone to the classical education of privileged white men, usually from Western societies, and was also a common pastime for esteemed writers and artists looking for material and inspiration. As an educated American, knowledgeable in history, art, and literature, Cather is a Western scholar embarking on a tour of Europe, but as a female, her experience will never be that of the privileged male. This is Cather’s first trip to Europe, but she recognizes that she is walking on charted territory and that most of those who have come before her were male. As a woman hesitant to follow tradition for its own sake and always eager to defy convention, Cather is hesitant to embrace Europe, particularly England. She is skeptical of the historicity of Europe and makes clear that she will see for herself, make her own assessments, and report back honestly as an American journalist.

In the second article, “Chester and its Cathedral,” dated July 1, 1902, Cather travels six miles from Chester to Hawarden Castle, once home to Mr. Gladstone. She is more enamored by the village of Hawarden than she is by the magnificent castle. She appreciates the “thatched” cottages, “overgrown with dog and climbing roses” (18). This article is interspersed with historical accounts of various sites around her, but such sites serve merely as jumping boards for Cather’s musings. She seems only to ponder the history, and then to wander off with her own thoughts and ideas. Cather is not the usual tourist. When she and “her friend” (she never mentions Isabella McClung by name) come upon the famous Norman Tower, they plop down and spend their day rejoicing in the “utter solitude at the foot of the tower” (18), paying homage not to the past, but to the present and the possibilities of the future.

In the third article, "Shropshire," dated July 11, 1902, Cather continues being the non-traditional tourist, insisting in the first line that her intention is not to follow the "beaten track of the summer tourist in England" (27). She is charting her own path and exploring an area of the country virtually never visited by foreigners. This article represents one of several instances in which Cather challenges the masculine tradition of the "European tour." Cather acts as explorer, not follower, and she develops her agenda based on personal, not popular and historical, interests. Her eagerness to see Shropshire derives from her attachment to the poet A. E. Housman, who had yet to achieve great fame at this point. Cather momentarily lapses into the familiar role of literary critic, praising the "simplicity, spontaneity, and grace" of Housmann's verses. She expresses her opinion with her usual confidence and assures the reader of Housman's future success.

Cather moves on to Ludlow, describing the scenery with stunning artistry:

High green hills rise to the north and West, all marked off into tiny pocket-handkerchief fields bordered by green hedgerows and looking like the beds of a large hillside garden. To the south lies the valley of the Teme, with low, round hills on either side, none of them wood-covered . . . There are no naked, straggling clay banks; the river does not flow through the bottom of a ravine, but on a level with the fields, like a canal, and it runs deep and green and clear quiet under its arched stone bridges. (29)

Cather is a master surveyor of her environment, and her surroundings seem to play a vital role in determining her mood and thoughts. The passage above reflects Cather's inherent talent for travel writing, for capturing her dynamic experience whole and presenting it as a novelist might. The "high green hills" and "deep and green and clear" river are in motion, and they take on vibrant personality. *Willa Cather in Europe* is remarkable for its content, but it is also significant as a work of artistry.

The town of Ludlow is dated, with "patched up" (30) homes and ancient shops. Cather spends the night at the Feathers Hotel, remarkable for its black oak interior as well as the huge

beams than span the ceiling and its windows with tiny diamond panes. Despite its age, Cather greatly admires the place and imagines that she will never again “sleep in a place so beautiful” (31). She notices every detail of the hotel, from the “spike studded” doorknocker to the “chimes that ring the quarter hour so melodiously” (32), and takes as much interest in these small things as one might a historical monument or a famous painting. Cather ends her article with a history lesson regarding Ludlow Castle, but she doesn’t allude to sources and the material is so riveting that it sounds more like fiction than fact. She relates a scene in which the princess of Ludlow Castle stabs herself with her lover’s sword and jumps from her window. Cather doesn’t explain her choice to include this story, and yet somehow its abruptness mimics the random and fleeting impressions that one enjoys while traveling in new lands. The story is like another unfamiliar but beautiful mark on the landscape. Cather is re-envisioning history and the landscape, and re-inventing the Grand tour.

Even when Cather shifts her attention to seemingly traditional and non-controversial themes, such as pre-Raphaelite art, she still provokes the reader to think about uncomfortable issues, such as the relationship between class and art. In an undated article titled “London: Burne-Jones’s Studio,” we witness Cather’s mixed feelings about the “European tour” and the homage that aspiring artists pay to their traditionally masculine forefathers. Unbeknownst to most readers, the content of this article, in which Cather visits the studio of a well-known artist, turns out to be most likely fabricated: “the story makes colorful reading but there is reason to believe Willa may have fictionalized her account.”<sup>43</sup>

The article begins with Cather moving from Trafalgar Square Westward through St. James’s Park and Hyde Park. She delights in the cheerier side of London, describing the

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<sup>43</sup> Robinson, *The Life of Willa Cather*, 109.

transition from “the grimy blackness of the smoke-laden towns to a splendid grey about the National Gallery and St. Martin-in-the-Fields” and how “the colour runs gradually into a higher and higher key” (70). As usual, Cather admires the colorful and dynamic gardens, and it is against a garden wall that she finds the studio of Sir Edward Burne-Jones. The house is no longer occupied, as Burne-Jones is apparently deceased and his wife has located, but still gains entrance into the studio by way of the former valet. James, the friendly and loyal “valet “to Sir John’s person and to his art” (72), apparently refuses to leave his post.

Cather offers the reader a detailed account of her private tour of the studio, but her attention is devoted primarily to James, whom she describes as “wide and red of countenance, with diminutive mutton chops and a keen grey eye, a very typical English gentleman’s gentleman” (74). One senses Cather’s slight irony in the phrase “gentleman’s gentleman,” perhaps mocking the idea of “owning” the help. What is remarkable about this seemingly ordinary article is that James, the lively and colorful valet, is a “figment of [Cather’s] imagination.”<sup>44</sup> According to Phyllis Robinson, Burne-Jones never had a valet and the studio was completely empty by 1902, the year of Cather’s visit.

It is significant that Cather would choose to imbue a fictional character with an “indisputable conviction of an authority” (76). Cather displaces the illustrious male artist with a simple, good-natured common man, who adopts the authority usually displayed by the master. Cather seems to be mocking the passion of those “soulful and penetrating and comprehensive” (77) lovers of fine art, who are willing to believe anything about a painting and to see the artist as a mythic figure. Cather transgresses further by challenging the traditional dynamic of the European tour in which the tourist, student, or intellectual, passively absorbs historical facts and

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 109.

the like in order to later regurgitate them as a sign of class status. In this circumstance, an invented character with no claim to talent or class status is narrating the history. Cather's sense of humor and irony, perhaps derived from her love of the theatre, is subtle but omnipresent.

Cather is eager to act as authority, especially when it comes to judging works of art. In her seventh article, "The Merry Wives of Windsor," composed in Paris on August 8, 1902, Cather interrupts her narrative of travel to review a play. Cather gladly takes up the familiar role of drama critic, and her comfort as artistic authority is apparent. From the first line of the article, her voice is strong and her opinion assured; she informs the reader that "probably no play has been produced in London for some years which has proved so solid a financial success as Mr. Beerbohm Tree's revival of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*" (83). She attributes this success to two factors: first, people are glad to see whatever comes to His Majesty's Theatre; second, this particular production has "brought about a truce between the two most popular women on the English stage—Mrs. Kendal and Ellen Terry" (83).

Cather covers all of the bases of a seasoned drama critic, transitioning from a discussion of the "mechanical appurtenances of the production" to "costuming and scenic embellishments" (85) and finally to the "form" of the play. Her opinions are carefully crafted and supported, which seems to justify even her sharpest criticisms. Cather finds some difficulty in passing a verdict on the play because of its farcical nature, but ultimately she determines that "if the production is at all to be justified, it is the two merry wives who do it" (88). The two female leads impress Cather with their talent, particularly Ellen Terry:

But the spirit, the dash and gleam of the whole performance emanate from Ellen Terry. Neither a dull daughter nor a stolid Falstaff can daunt her. She plays as though she were seventeen yesterday; with an elasticity, a lightness, and a relish that might well have captivated even so dull a Falstaff. It is not her grace, her spirited reading, or her bounding step only that she . . . she seemed the only player

wholly in the atmosphere, the only one who was imbued with the spirit of things Elizabethan. (88)

Cather is powerful in her role as drama critic, and she uses that power in this article to illuminate the capabilities of two actresses who have made their mark in the theatrical world. Cather places Ellen Terry securely in the tradition of English theatre as part of the Elizabethan tradition. She imagines Terry as Shakespeare's ideal prototype, despite the fact that Shakespeare would not have cast a female in any role. Cather sees in Terry a woman who is remarkable for her "harmonious and graceful art," a great actress who captivates the audience with her "carrying power" (89).

Cather continues to find beauty and value in unique places. Not long after her visit to the theatre, Cather finds herself roaming the cemeteries of Paris in an article dated August 21, 1902. The cemeteries of Paris represent an important symbolic destination on Cather's unconventional version of the European tour and that they provide excellent fodder for social criticism. It is interesting to witness Cather, an aspiring American female author, as she visits the resting places of Europe's great male literary figures. Cather writes that "a really appreciable attitude toward Paris cemeteries is well-nigh impossible for anyone but a Frenchman" (107), yet she seems to take great pleasure in visiting a series of famous resting grounds.

Cather is playful in her description of the cemeteries in France: "in their death as in their life the Latins are more socially disposed than we, and the graves in their cemeteries almost always touch each other" (107). The only exceptions that she finds to the "execrable taste exhibited in Paris cemeteries" are the "tombs of its great men, which are usually very impressive" (108). Cather visits the tombs of Alphonsine Plessis, Heinrich Heine and his wife, Mathilde, Alfred de Musset, Frédéric Chopin, and the monument dedicated to Félix Faure. Her tone is slightly mocking and ironic when she describes the homage paid by great artists as well

as ordinary citizens to the tombs of great men. She describes how Balzac used to wander in the Père-Lachaise cemetery during his apprenticeship, reading the names of the greats as if he might sponge up their successes for himself. Cather expresses no desire to have her name immortalized in stone; she is more attracted to the French custom of naming streets after significant Parisians, as this at least “keeps the men still in the mouths of the living” (114).

In her eleventh article, “Avignon,” Cather departs Paris and travels southward by train to Avignon, displaying her witty sense of humor at several points and reminding the reader that she doesn’t take herself or travel too seriously. She quickly adjusts to any group of people, and her impressions of Avignon illuminate her non-traditional value system. Cather and her “friend,” Isabella McClung, feel that it is their duty to “be economical and to journey down to Avignon third class” (132). She complains, good-naturedly, of the “eight women and one wretched infant in the compartment, most of them women of the people and of the soil.” Cather is referring to their social class and occupation as workers of the land. Despite the malodorous companions, and the crying infant that is thrust upon her, Cather can’t help but admire the fantastic scenery: “no troubles of that sort could be really unbearable, with the Rhone just outside your window” (133). Vineyards surround Cather on all sides and many are dotted with the white ruin of some ancient castle:

Everywhere is the glossy green of the fig and the dusty grey of the olive, everywhere the relentless glare of the fervid sun of the Midi. The farmhouses are all low, rambling structures built of cobblestone . . . all the gardens are hedged with hollycocks and sunflowers . . . the villages are white clusters of stucco and cobblestone houses with red-tiled roofs, with grapevines trained above all the windows . . . every street is a fine avenue of sycamores. (134)

Cather captures the idyllic scene of the Midi, still untouched by modernity. Cather pays careful attention to the scenery, particular to gardens, in nearly all of her articles. She is fascinated by the restorative power of nature, and the simplicity of some lifestyles. She enjoys bathing in a

washbasin and going to bed by candlelight. She appreciates the magnificent food, and describes her first dinner in Avignon in great detail, praising each of the ten courses and indicating her surprise at the cheap price: “yet for all this luxury we pay something less than two dollars a day” (136). In reflecting on Avignon she writes, “people know how to live in this country” (135).

Cather’s attentiveness to the natural world and to the “common folk” in the towns and cities that she visits on her first tour of Europe challenges the conventions of the masculinized European tour. Cather cooperates with tradition by visiting the appropriate historical sites and venues and paying homage to men of letters, artists, poets, and the like, but her attention is constantly diverted. Several of Cather’s articles, including this one, develop a dual narrative. Cather offers the standard guidebook material, but she inevitably twists it around, frames it in a peculiar manner, or juxtaposes it with interesting human material. For example, Cather begins her article on Avignon with a discussion of the natural world and her interaction with locals and fellow visitors, but halfway through she shifts abruptly shifts her attention to the formal history of the region. Cather feels an obligation to fulfill the expectations of her readership, and she does provide a miniature history lesson. But inevitably, her discussion of the popes, “luxurious fellows” (137), quickly evolves into a vivid account of the papal gardens with their “interminable plains of figs and olives and mulberries, of poplars and willow hedgerows” (138). History lesson abandoned, Cather closes her article with a tribute to the people of Avignon, who are sublimely “awake to the beauties of their town” (140). Each day passes according to the rhythm of the sun, the fluctuation of the temperature, and the intensity of various smells. To Cather, Provence embodies beauty, ritual, and healing.

In her twelfth article, “Marseilles and Hyères, written on September 6, 1902, Cather enters the “country of the fabulous, where extravagance ceases to exist because everything is

extravagant, and where the wildest dreams come true” (145). This article evokes several similar themes: her unconventional approach to tourism and the European tour; her love and appreciation of the natural world; and her knack for witty and dramatic story telling. She is in Monte Cristo’s county, where Dumas set his classic novel *The Count of Monte Cristo*. Upon entering Marseilles, Cather immediately sees the “little white island of the Chateau d’If” (144), the famous state prison from which Edward Dantès successfully escapes. Seeing the Chateau d’If firsthand prompts a “marked change” in Cather’s feelings—she is overwhelmed by the power of literature to evoke such strong emotion. She insists that the prison in which a fictional character was imprisoned and the tiny island are as “important to (her), quite as hallowed by tradition, quite as moving to contemplate, as Westminster or Nôtre Dame. Again, Cather is challenging the traditional value system of the European tour, which values significant building, monuments, and personages over ideas, feelings, and memories.

The women travel eastward from Marseilles, through olive country, past fields and fields of olive trees “terraced along the hillsides” (146). Cather’s perception of the olive tree and its role in the environment sums up her impression of Provence:

It is such a gracious and humble tree; it struggles so hard and patiently against circumstances the most adverse, and yet, like the people who love it, manages always to preserve in its contour, no matter how stony the soil, or how heavy the white dust hangs on its leaves, something of grace and beauty. (146)

This description could also be applied to the people of Provence, as we will see in the next two articles, “Le Lavandou” and “Provence and Arles Again.” The remainder of the article is devoted to meditations on the scenery and the weather, brought to life with Cather’s lively word choice and skilled arrangement. Cather immerses herself in her environment and seeks to understand the culture and traditions of the natives of Provence.

Entering Lavandou in one of her last articles, dated September 10, 1902, Cather is once again eager to stray from the conventional tour abroad. She and Isabella decide to visit Lavandou, primarily because they cannot find anyone who has been there and because Parisians seem “never to have heard of the place” (154). Lavandou is a fishing village with less than one hundred inhabitants (hardly a tourist destination), situated on a bay on the Mediterranean. The village’s hut-like homes are built of mud and stone and scattered along the beach. There is a single café and a single hotel, at which Cather and her friend sleep.

During the day they are the “possessors of a villa on the Mediterranean, and the potentates of a principality of pines” (158). The villa, made of white stucco with a red-tiled roof and a little stone porch, is nestled amidst amidst a sea of pines. It is the studio of a painter during the winter, but he spends the other seasons in Paris. Cather delights in the porch bathed in pine needles. “It is good for one’s soul,” she tells the reader, “to sit there all day through, wrapped in a steamer rug if the sea breeze blows strong, and to do nothing for hours together but stare at this great water that seems to trail its delft-blue mantle across the world” (159).

Cather enjoys interacting with the locals, making the acquaintances of “certain neighbouring princes and princesses” (159), who turn out to be two little girls who bring their goat to pasture, an old man who sells figs, a lonely Parisian in exile, and a woman who sells lobsters. Cather and Isabella leave the village one day for a day trip six miles down the coast, but they quickly return to their little villa as “there is nothing else quite so good” (161). She enjoys the quiet days and the breeze and returning to the hotel at night “so hungry that the dinner, however homely, is a fête, and the menu finer reading than the best poetry in the world!” (162). She is disappointed when the visit nears its end, and laments leaving Lavandou for the “glare and blaze of Nice and Monte Carlo” (162).

Cather is impressed by the food—“good fish . . . fresh figs and peaches, and the fine little French lobster called Langouste” (155)—especially since the environment is not conducive to bountiful harvests. She admires the work ethic and good nature of the natives, who are severely limited in what they can grow in the “dry, sandy soil” (156) or harvest from the sea. They burn pine knots and cones to keep warm and to cook, and they are resourceful enough to “make a savoury dish of almost anything that grows” (156). Despite the challenges that they encounter, the locals are happy, “singing--always singing” (157). It is fitting that Cather, so attracted to hard work and modesty, committed to family, and enraptured by the beauty of nature, should feel particularly attached to this location.

Out of every wandering in which people and places come and go in long successions, there is always one place remembered above the rest because the external or internal conditions were such that they most nearly produced happiness. I am sure that for me that place will always be Lavandou . . . I am sure I do not know why a wretched little fishing village, with nothing but green pines and blue sea and a sky of porcelain, should mean more than a dozen places that I have wanted to see all my life . . . One cannot divine nor forecast the conditions that will make happiness; one only stumbles upon them by change, in a lucky hour, at the world’s end somewhere, and holds fast to the days, as to fortune or fame.” (158)

Of course, Cather does know why she should be attracted to this village. It brings her closest to nature, to people, and to solitude. It is not a coincidence that Lavandou is a reminiscent of “certain lonely stations in Wyoming and Colorado” (161). It contains all that she values most in the world.

### **Class and the Common People**

Cather’s interest in the lower and working class pervades virtually all of her travel writing. She has an enduring respect for hard working people with limited financial resources and for individuals who delight in simple things, like food and family, and who express no desire for the luxuries and extravagances of modernity and wealth. Cather’s admiration extends past that of the conventional tourist in that she immerses herself in the villages that she visits and

seeks to live as the locals do. She does not attempt to set herself apart from the locals, to exercise power over them, or to impress them. Cather's understanding of class is multi-faceted, and inevitably bound up with national, cultural, and gender location as well as her physical location. My reading of Cather will emphasize her willingness to contemplate, challenge, and transcend class boundaries, even as she acknowledges their persistence and significance. Cather is exposed to what contemporary scholars might label "class construction" in several scenes. While it is not likely that Cather herself viewed class as entirely constructed, her narrative indicates that she does not always see it as absolute. She seems to recognize that class, like gender, fluctuates in different contexts.

From the beginning of her narrative, Cather focuses her attention on the common, working class people and their way of life. In the second article, dated July 1, 1902, Cather visits Chester and its Cathedral. While she admires several of the area's large estates, including Eaton Hall, the summer place of the Duke of Westminster, she is most attracted to the humble homes that are scattered about her. For her, the "chief charm of the town . . . lies in the dwellings of the common people . . . they are quaint red brick houses, the majority of them very old, with diamond window-panes and high-walled gardens behind" (16). Her flat and hasty description of the large and "handsome" buildings stands in contrast to the rich, detailed picture that she paints of the small, modest homes.

Cather's article describing the canals of England, written in July of 1902, is perhaps the single most significant letter in this compilation in terms of its richly gendered and class-conscious content. In her riveting description of the largest canal in England, Cather explains that in England "the one great Canal largely takes the place of the freight car, affording a circuitous but continuous passage from Liverpool to London" (39). Several important themes emerge in

this letter: American identity abroad; technological innovation and its role in enabling movement and national progress; the fluidity of gender roles across cultures; and finally, class identity, particularly working class identity. Each of these interrelated concepts mimics the overarching themes present in *Willa Cather in Europe* and each illuminates the specific context in which Cather was acting as a female travel writer. Cather was writing at a time of great change and flux in terms of technology, international travel, gender ideologies, and social and class affiliation. Her experience abroad enabled her to perceive the ways in which different cultural groups express gender expectations, as we will see in her observations of the canal people, thus illuminating the fluidity of gender across social, economic, and cultural lines.

Cather begins with a logistical description of the canal, which runs from Liverpool to London, and from the Liverpool harbor to Chester, Shrewsbury, Birmingham, and southeast back to London. The canal is owned by several companies and consequently called by several names. The canal is winding and easy to lose track of since it is only thirty feet across at its widest point. Cather is immediately interested in the differences between the great canal and the canals in America: “it is in every way smaller, quieter, less obtrusive, seemingly not be to greatly depended upon, but in reality quite as reliable as anything we have” (39). The great canal appears less modern than many American canals, but it is absolutely as functional.

Only two types of boats are seen on the canal: the largest, running seventy-five feet in length and fifteen feet across, are called bachelor boats, and the smaller boats, as long as the barges but extremely skinny and lightweight, are called “flats.” The bachelor boats are drawn by a single horse and manned by four men and they carry provisions such as grain, pig iron, wrought iron, and other heavy freight. Cather makes notices that women are not allowed in the crew. The flats outnumber the larger boats and are loaded with “every sort of merchandise, from

perfumes and fruit to upright pianos” (41). Neither the barges nor the flats have a traditional “deck.” They have only a tiny cabin for the individuals on board, as most of the boat serves as cargo space.

Cather notices the boatmen and boatwomen on her first night in Chester and is immediately fascinated by this “peculiar sect of people” that populate and man the narrow boats called flats, insisting that they are “a solitary and peculiar people who have not their like in the world” (41). Her critique extends past a She perceives a strong work ethic as well as an uncivilized roughness in the canal boatman: he is a “sort of half-land, half-water gypsy, a vagabond who manages to keep within the trace of labour, a tramp of one road, the best-paid and worst-nourished manual labour in the kingdom” (41). In her role as journalist, Cather can justify her supreme curiosity as she begins an investigation into the lives of the men and women who spend their lives traversing the canals of England.

One night after the canal folk have eaten their evening meal, she has an opportunity to observe their behavior. The men go off to the public house and the women dress up for the coronation festivities. The women change their clothing “in the open air, in the vestibule to their cabin” (44). The gaze of passersby does not disconcert them as they nonchalantly bare their backs, breasts, and arms to the world. Cather understands that their seeming immodesty derives from their upbringing aboard a canal boat. There is nothing sexual or shameful about their undressing almost in public, because their culture has its own gender norms. Cather continues to remark on the habits and expectations of canal women, likely considering their lives in contrast to her own. Cather is fascinated by the physicality of the boatwomen, who are “quite as good boatmen as their husbands, and take the more difficult of the two principal tasks, managing the tiller while their husbands follow the towpaths” (42). The woman’s job is a dual one. Unlike her

husband, she must perform her duties on board with “half a dozen children clinging to her skirts” (42). Cather observes that gender expectations are subject to change across culture and class and that women are capable of performing traditionally masculine activities on par with men. Yet there are important similarities between the social roles of canal women and more privileged land-going women that Cather fails to articulate, such as the expectation that they will bear and raise children, take care of the family, and keep the living quarters tidy.

Cather watches one woman dress her small child, and thinks about all the hardships that the woman has likely experienced: “born in the cabin of a flat . . . grown to maidenhood shut in a box five by six . . . courted and married somewhere between the tiller and the towpath . . . and born her children in the cabin where she herself was born” (44). Yet, the woman doesn’t consider herself unfortunate. Cather has a peculiar admiration for the tranquility of boatwomen even as their children “clamber all over the top of the boat like monkeys” (44). They have adapted to their situation beautifully. Cather learns that the boatman, his wife, and their half dozen children inhabit a “cave-like cabin” (41) in the stern of each flat, where they live all seasons in extreme heat and cold. They seldom have a change of clothing and sleep in what they wore during the day. The profession of boatman is handed down through the generations, as it is expected that a son will follow his father into the profession.

Cather is interested in the life cycle that the boatmen and women enter into and replicate generation after generation: “the shackles of cast were never more adamant among the hindoos than these people have made for themselves” (41). As soon as a boy is old enough to get his own boat, he marries “to avoid wasting his earnings on a hired helper” (45), and only a boatman’s daughter knows how to tend a boat beside a boatman. The couple conceives as soon as possible so that they will have more help on the boat. When the sons and daughters are grown

and married, the husband and wife must run the boat without assistance, even though they are “old and stiff and given to drink” (46). Cather seems particularly disturbed by the circumstances of the women, because they continually get the short end of the stick in a life cycle predicated on manual labor, child bearing, and child-rearing. But despite the richly gendered content of her narrative, she frequently stops short of gender analysis, perhaps because she lacks the terminology to articulate her concerns.

She concludes by suggesting that despite this cycle of hard work and minimal reward, the boat people are content and “apt enough at getting what they want out of life” (47). Thus, in her final analysis Cather refrains from differentiating between the hardships of the boatmen and those of the boatwomen. This article illuminates the way in which lives and human relationships are structured by society, particularly the hierarchical relationship between a husband and wife based upon stereotypes of masculine superiority and feminine inferiority. In order to sustain their livelihood aboard a canal boat, the canal women work together with their husbands, perhaps not as complete equals, but at least as a team in which both players are indispensable. This article also illustrates the relationship between class location and gender construction; Victorian ideals of separate spheres don’t work in the context of the family living and working aboard a canal boat, but gender still plays a role in the division of labor. The women are expected to perform physical labor alongside their husbands. Yet, the women are still burdened with bearing children and raising them. Cather recognizes the particular disadvantages that the canal women face based on their gender. They are essentially treated as second-class citizens despite their significant contributions.

While the material in Cather’s travel writing varies drastically from article to article in terms of location and subject matter, she is consistently fascinated by people and drawn to lower

class females in particular. In the fifth article, dated July 22, 1902, Cather visits the East End of London. She is not afraid to launch criticism where she thinks it is deserved, but her understanding of class and gender is complex and she refrains from stereotyping all women or all poor Londoners in one group. In her candid representation of the East End of London, Cather unapologetically depicts the darker side of the city.

Cather attempts to be both economical and practical in selecting a hotel in the London, selecting a hotel on King Street, off Cheapside, close to the Bank of England and the Lord Mayor's residence. She recognizes that she is staying in "rather the bargain-counter end of London" (55), but she is still surprised and appalled by the individuals she encounters on the street. She describes setting off for the day only to find herself stopping and "watching the procession with perplexity" (55). She is unsympathetic toward the "absolutely gin-soaked" (56) working people that she sees hanging out of bars and behaving recklessly on the streets at all hours of the day and night. She criticizes the men and women in equal part, and in a few memorable lines juxtaposes the beauty of the architecture with the ugliness of the drunken city-goers: "The beautiful river front on the east side of the Thames called the Albert Embankment, from which one gets the most satisfying and altogether happy view of the Houses of Parliament up the river, is night and day thronged with drunken, homeless men and women who alternately claw each other with nails and give each other a chew of tobacco" (57).

Cather's disgust with lower class Londoners, while again problematic, has more to do with American norms of respectability and character than class or gender prejudice. In typical fashion, Cather compares the "shop girls" of London with working girls in America. She argues that the Londoners have "absolutely nothing of the neatness and trimness which characterize our working girls at home" (59). She suggests that the British girls are vain and would likely "blush to wear a

gingham shirtwaist, preferring rather to feel elegant in a cotton satin one of unspeakable grimness” (59). They relish ornate and gaudy clothing over simple, humble garb and value make-up and fake jewels over adequate hairpins and hygienic practices. Cather envisions the American girl as sensible, honest, and smart, not to mention modest and well groomed. Cather’s sense of national identity, especially as it related to gender and class identity, crops up in nearly all of her articles from abroad.

The second half of Cather’s July 22, 1902 letter attests to her enduring interest in industrious and family-oriented members of the working class. She does not attempt, like some of her contemporaries, to lump all members of the working class into one category. She is more apt to distinguish between groups based on different traditions, occupations, beliefs, and morals, than she is based on economic status and class standing. One Sunday, Cather has the opportunity to witness a procession, in celebration of the feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, in the Italian quarters of London. Cather’s friend, Dorothy Canfield, joins her and Isabella for the event.

The day is dismal, with “ashen grey” skies that appear “hopeless and changeless,” and the streets are a “thick, gritty paste of mud” (61). Cather’s is buoyed by the optimism and courage of the community despite the morose weather. The Italian quarter is overcome by poverty, and yet its inhabitants put great time and energy into their festival, which takes on an “intensely appealing and individual” (61) air. Cather watches closely the stoic older girls who march in the line of the procession and the older women who are “simply dignified and melancholy” (62). Cather finds herself immersed in the ceremony: “so far from being a street show, the procession was a religious ceremony, even to me, who understood neither its origin nor significance” (62). Cather juxtaposes the “beautiful experience” (62) that she is privy to among the working class Italians with the “howling, hooting, heathen London mobs; men drunk, women drunk, unwashed

and degenerate” (63). Cather sees in the Italians in London the dignity and respect that she expects of all people, across class lines, and she has no patience for the poor who worsen their situation through sloth, drunkenness, and abuse of others.

We see Cather’s admiration of the working poor, particularly of the female sex, as well as the value that she places on a simple lifestyle and a secluded location, once again in her tenth article, “Barbizon.” On September 10, 1902, Cather takes a train from Fontainebleau, where Napoleon built his palace, to the tiny village of Barbizon, a “little place of one street” (119). Barbizon served as home to a number of famous artists and intellectuals, including Millet and Rousseau. Despite its few famous inhabitants, Barbizon is a primitive village with no new buildings, electric lights, or sewage systems. Cather describes the village as a “little forest town; the home of hard-working folk, desperately poor, but never so greedy or so dead of soul that they will not take the time to train the peach tree against the wall until it spreads like a hardy vine” (120).

Cather stays at the Hotel des Artistes while in Barbizon, primarily because it is “more reputable for women travelling alone” (121) than other more interesting hotels, one of the few indications she makes of the way in which her gender affects her travel options. The hotel is nestled in the forest and subject to frequent rainstorms, which Cather greatly enjoys. The walls of the hotel are covered with oil sketches painted by locals and the guests are a dynamic mix of individuals, including some French families and a “snaky little painter” (124).

Cather admires the strength and good spirits of the villagers, especially the females. The women who work in the fields are “bare-headed and brown faced and broad of shoulders” and they dress in “wooden shoes” (122) without stockings. Some of the field workers are extremely old and their stature is bent, yet they are happy, humming and making “good-humoured remarks”

(122). Cather cannot turn away from the women in the fields and watches them until they return to their homes, tired and hunched over, to sing their “tired children to sleep” (123).

Before leaving Barbizon, Cather spends a day walking through the forest of Fontainebleau. She encounters family after family expressing their love for each other by holding hands and walking arm and arm. She watches how they delight in each other’s company, wrapping their arms around trees and touching fingertips. Cather leaves Barbizon unwillingly, driving away at sunset. Her last image is of the harvesters working in the field and the last things that she hears is the “chatter of the brave old pleasant women” (127). Their voices are, to Cather, the “best kind of music” (127). Looking back on the travel writing of Fuller and Wharton, we recall similar intersections of nationalism, gender, and class. All three narrate their travels through a feminist lens, and in doing so illuminate structural inequalities that negatively impact many multiply marginalized groups.

## CHAPTER 6 FULLER, CATHER, AND WHARTON: CONCLUSIONS

Fuller dared, almost alone in her time, to consider women the intellectual equals of men. This defied centuries of tradition and custom that ranked women as mentally, socially, and physically inferior to men. Further, she lived by that belief, to the bewilderment and disapproval of others and at enormous cost to herself.

-Margaret Vanderhaar Allen, *The Achievement of Margaret Fuller*<sup>1</sup>

Fuller, Cather, and Wharton all enjoyed spectacular careers, at odds with the expectations of their families as well as those that society held for women. Travel played a major role in their personal and professional lives and shaped their understanding of the fluidity of gender expectations and ideologies across cultures. As mobile women who wrote about their travels, Fuller, Wharton, and Cather “made incursions into male territory and male prerogatives,”<sup>2</sup> challenging patriarchal norms and threatening the social order by confronting the “economic, legal, and ideological restrictions that sought to keep [women] ‘in place.’”<sup>3</sup>

All three writers were highly praised among both popular and critical audiences, despite suffering periods of marked unpopularity. Fuller was undeniably one of the most influential and skilled critics of the nineteenth century and some considered her “*the* best critic in America before 1850.”<sup>4</sup> Wharton was recognized as a writer of “exceptional literary distinction,”<sup>5</sup> and hailed by some as “the best female novelist of her time, perhaps even the best American novelist.”<sup>6</sup> Cather was equally notable, considered one of the most prominent American novelists of her day and awarded a Pulitzer Prize at the height of her popularity in the early 1920’s.

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<sup>1</sup> Allen, *The Achievement of Margaret Fuller*, 134.

<sup>2</sup> Schriber, *Writing Home*, 27.

<sup>3</sup> Roberson, “American Women and Travel Writing,” 218.

<sup>4</sup> Allen, 79.

<sup>5</sup> Tuttleton, introduction, ix.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, xxi.

Furthermore, Fuller, Wharton, and Cather each fared extremely well in a literary marketplace that was often hostile to women in the years between the turn of the nineteenth-century and the dawn of the twentieth-century: “both commercial success and female authorship” were regarded as “suspect, dangerous.”<sup>7</sup> All three were “successful businesswomen who manipulated the market to their advantage,”<sup>8</sup> involving themselves in every stage of the publication process. They were acutely aware of the significance of popular appeal and the importance of good publicity. Travel writing offered Fuller and Wharton, in particular, an excellent genre for appealing to the masses while working toward their social and political goals, and it offered Cather an opportunity to tour Europe on her own terms while earning a living.

Ultimately, Fuller, Wharton, and Cather desired more than commercial success; they sought a place among the literary greats of the nineteenth century. At the time that Wharton and Cather were writing, and certainly at the time when Fuller was writing, “the tradition of women’s writing . . . made no claim to be ‘art’ and was taken less seriously than men’s writing.”<sup>9</sup> It is not sufficient to correlate the increasing number of women writers, and female travel writers, with gender parity in the literary marketplace. Any sense of commercial equality between the sexes is “contradicted . . . by the articles, reviews, and essays that ran alongside this fiction, which expressed opinions, ‘that cast women as inferior to men, defined their difference from male writers as deviations from an approved standard, and satirized or belittled qualities labeled ‘feminine.’”<sup>10</sup>

The years between 1820 and 1920 saw the transformation of travel and the entry of women and their voices into the public sphere. But, as Schriber reminds us, “an era of travel that had

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<sup>7</sup> Williams, *Not in Sisterhood*, 4.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 2.

begun in the 1820's effectively ended in the trenches of World War I."<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, women's early forays into the public sphere as traveler writers have been largely overlooked and their travel writing has often been dismissed as the work of neophytes. While much travel writing, composed by men and women alike, was indeed clumsy and poorly crafted, some of it was great. "To participate meaningfully in the public sphere and to articulate more just public policies," women such as Margaret Fuller, Willa Cather, and Edith Wharton "journeyed to outposts of conflict and imperial expansion" and "showed up at crossroads where emancipation and emigration were creating mobile, racially hybrid populations."<sup>12</sup> Their writing is as honest and revolutionary as it is beautiful and literary.

The goal of this paper has been threefold: to illuminate the marginalization of important pieces of travel writing; to indicate their significance as feminist and literary tracts; and to suggest ways in which scholars might mine them for their rich content while acknowledging their shortcomings. The female travel writer of the nineteenth century is not a monolith, and must be placed in social and historical context; likewise, nineteenth century travel narratives occupy a broad spectrum from the overtly sexist and racist to the obviously feminist and anti-racist. Fuller, Wharton, and Cather came from different backgrounds and possessed different degrees of privilege, which impacted the content and format of their narratives. Fuller's narrative must be understood in terms of her Transcendentalism, which informs her progressive views on women's rights, the abolition of slavery, the rights of Indians, and the conservation of nature. In contrast, Wharton's text relies on tropes of colonialism and Orientalism. While we must acknowledge the Orientalism that pervades *In Morocco*, we might also recognize the way in which Wharton resists a singular "other" by "allowing for . . . the textual construction of multiple

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<sup>11</sup> Schriber, *Writing Home*, 201.

<sup>12</sup> Fish, *Black and White Women's Travel Narratives*, 3.

others.”<sup>13</sup> In some instances, Wharton refers to the women of the harem as exotic and foreign, but at other times she imagines herself as part of their group. Cather’s text forces us to think about issues of class across cultures and the relationship between class and gender construction. Through my close readings, I have sought to recover and assert the agency of Fuller, Wharton, and Cather as feminist travel writers and literary artists, but not at the expense of the marginalized groups that appear in their narratives.

The travel writing of these three ground-breaking women thus holds pragmatic value for the historian, the sociologist, and the anthropologist, among others, and provides excellent material for thinking about the historical construction and deconstruction of gender, the evolution of social movements, and the propagation of racial stereotypes. But as I have argued throughout this paper, *Summer on the Lakes*, *In Morocco*, and *Willa Cather in Europe* are also valuable as literary tracts. They possess the same artistic knack for observation, witty commentary, and rich material as many male-authored “travel classics” composed in the same century. The travel writing of Fuller, Wharton, and Cather represents an untapped resource, a rich body of cutting-edge writing that was performing “gender specific cultural work”<sup>14</sup> far before its time.

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<sup>13</sup> McEwan, *Gender, Geography and Empire*, 10.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* 7.

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