Roman Fever

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rendering the plight of the nineteenth-century, middle-class woman in graphic terms, Florence Nightingale wrote in 1852: “She is like the Archangel Michael as he stands upon Saint Angelo at Rome. She has an immense provision of wings, which seem as if they would bear her over earth and heaven; but when she tries to use them, she is petrified into stone, her feet are grown into the earth, chained to the bronze pedestal” (“Cassandra” 50). Nightingale’s revision of the “ministering angel” stereotype—which she herself has come to epitomize—exposes the gender ideology that constrained nineteenth-century British women and caused Nightingale to lament that “there is perhaps no century where the woman shows so meanly as in this” (50). Her feminist treatise, “Cassandra,” develops the pointed question, “Why have women passion, intellect, moral activity—these three—and a place in society where no one of the three can be exercised?” (25). Embodying her question in the image of the petrified angel, whose powerful wings are neutralized by their decorative status, Nightingale knew that to be idolized often meant to be chained to the altar.

At the same time, Nightingale’s appropriation of the statue revises the central symbol of Rome’s Castel Sant’Angelo in the service of a feminist argument. Both the archangel Michael, biblical victor over Lucifer’s dark forces, and Castel Sant’Angelo, a stone fortress connected to the Vatican by a hidden passageway through which popes historically escaped danger, exemplify masculine strength. Indeed, the towering sculpture itself, spreading its bronze wings and sheathing its mighty sword, is formidable, to say the least. Nightingale’s adoption and feminization of such a symbol emblematize the kind of revisionary strategy this study explores. The nineteenth-century American women writers I examine, similarly bounded by the ideology of the “angel in the house,” manipulate Italy and Italian
imagery in their texts, enabling their feminist projects by portraying escape from both domestic boundaries and the stereotype of nineteenth-century femininity.

In The Bonds of Womanhood, Nancy Cott argues that in the nineteenth century “the central convention of domesticity was the contrast between the home and the world” (64). This definition was relevant to White, middle-class women on a national as well as a personal level, making the term “domestic” multivalent in my study. In the first part of the nineteenth century, the term as it applied to the home, and specifically to middle-class women, became a powerful signifier; the “‘domestic sphere’ as woman’s pro-per realm” became codified (Cott 11). As early as 1545, however, “domestic” signified “pertaining to one’s own country,” in contrast to “foreign,” a meaning of signal importance in a century that began with the rise of Jacksonian republicanism and closed on the eve of the First World War. A third meaning of “domestic”—referring to a wild creature made tame—also operates in this project, as “living under the care of Man” becomes a source of conflict for late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century, middle-class White women (OED). Taken collectively, the various significations of “domesticity” collapse the realms of public and private; that is, they suggest the complicated interrelationship between issues of the home and issues of state that characterize selected texts written by nineteenth-century American women about Italy.

Critical studies of both male and female writers and artists have frequently acknowledged the nineteenth-century American fascination with Italian culture, art, and history. Starting with Van Wyck Brooks’s 1958 study, The Dream of Arcadia, and continuing with Nathalia Wright’s American Novelists in Italy (1965), Theodore Stebbins’s The Lure of Italy: American Artists and the Italian Experience (1992), and Leonardo Buonomo’s Backward Glances: Exploring Italy, Reinterpreting America (1996), twentieth-century scholars have demonstrated Italy’s unique and influential position in American arts and letters. Other critics have underscored the American attraction to Italy in more specialized terms: William Vance, for example, examines the Eternal City in his two-volume America’s Rome (1989), as do a number of contemporary scholars in Robert K. Martin and Leland S. Person’s collection Roman Holidays: American Writers and Artists in Nineteenth-Century Italy (2002); Jenny Franchot looks at Catholicism’s influence on American literary history in Roads to Rome: The Antebellum Protestant Encounter with Catholicism (1994). While all of these studies make important contributions, and several have influenced my discussion in significant ways, none specifically examines the impact of Italy on nineteenth-century American women’s writing.
My study groups six American women whose writings were shaped by their encounters with Italy to argue that we can expand our critical understanding of nineteenth-century American womanhood and nationhood by investigating women's attempts to leave behind the domestic, in all the senses of that term. My grouping, admittedly selective, provides a suggestive composite view of how middle-class, White, American women apprehended and represented the Italian land and culture. Their texts form a subgroup of American literature that is both cohesive and divergent, sharing common themes and differing in significant ways from men's texts produced during the same period. From the beginning decades of the nineteenth century, U.S. women not only traveled abroad but also composed texts that interrogated the artistic and political potential of both their gender and their country, concepts that they framed as inextricably linked. The following chapters show how Italy enabled such arguments by affording these women both a removal from and a reenounter with "domesticity" on the levels just now outlined: as a concept of state, as a thematics of the home, and as a tamed status in which wildness has been curtailed.

Certainly, as recent criticism has established, the domestic sphere was central to nineteenth-century American constructions of middle-class womanhood. Yet a number of women were privileged and daring enough to leave home and nation, and the ways they made sense of their travel experiences in writing significantly affect any historical and critical understanding of nineteenth-century American gender roles. As Ann Shapiro reminds us in *Unlikely Heroines*, "If [nineteenth-century literary heroines] are different from the heroes of American literature, they are also surprisingly similar. They do not hunt whales or raft on the Mississippi, but they exhibit the same urge to break with tradition, the same rejection of conventional values, and the same desire for adventure" (4). Passion for adventure can be said to inspire the women writers of this study—Catharine Maria Sedgwick, Margaret Fuller, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Sophia Peabody Hawthorne, Constance Fenimore Woolson, and Edith Wharton—who utilized letters, travel narratives, newspaper columns, novels, and short stories to accommodate the new ideas and sensations that arose during their encounters with Italy.

Beyond its significance as the *Dream of Arcadia* Thomas Cole painted in 1838, Italy held a special charm for the women writers I study. Sophia Hawthorne called Rome the "Empress of the World." Margaret Fuller exclaimed, "City of the Soul! yes, it is *that*; the very dust magnetizes you, and thousand spells have been chaining you in every careless, every murmuring moment. Yes! Rome, however seen, thou must still be adored; and
every hour of absence or presence must deepen love with one who has known what it is to repose in thy arms” (238). Even contemporary critic Sandra Gilbert invests Italy with magical power: “[Italy] is a utopian motherland whose glamour transforms all who cross her borders, empowering women, ennobling men, and—most significantly—annihilating national and sexual differences” (198). Examining the particular attraction Italy held for these women travelers reveals as much about nineteenth-century American culture—its investment in art, gender, and nation—as it does about the Italian land itself.

Italy is useful to these women’s texts in many ways. Idealized as a golden Arcadia where sensual life could be savored and practicality abandoned, Italy represented a particularly tantalizing form of release to the nineteenth-century American mind. For women travelers, liberated from household chores and from a self defined solely in relation to home and family, Italy offered opportunities for education and contemplation unavailable in a domestic (or domesticated) context. The promise withheld from Isabel Archer in Henry James’s *Portrait of a Lady* (1881)—“Italy, as yet imperfectly seen and felt, stretched before her as a land of promise, a land in which love of the beautiful might be comforted by endless knowledge” (207)—is fulfilled, to a degree, for the women of my study, who could be personally and artistically liberated from the patriarchal marriage plot during their travels. These writers’ encounters—with Italian art, female Catholic saints, the social position of Italian women, contemporary Italian politics, historical monuments, and ancient Roman mythology—result in self-awareness and an interrogation of American republicanism, in stark contrast to the stifling marriage Isabel Archer endures with Gilbert Osmond. Margaret Fuller’s emphatic “Arcadia!—would the name were America” (98) exemplifies the idealistic and reformist agenda found in these women’s textual responses to Italy. The fantasy of the paradisiacal sweet life (“la dolce vita”), together with contemporary Italian social conditions, often fueled their discursive efforts to envision a better state at home.

Perhaps the most vexed aspect of Italy for nineteenth-century travelers, men and women, was Catholicism. Critic Paul Giles describes “the early nineteenth-century image of Catholicism as a sinister, gothic phenomenon, full of devious monks and dark dungeons” (76). Yet precisely what Americans found offensive about Catholicism—its ornamentation, idolatry, ritual—was also subordinated as feminine and placed in contrast to the more masculine values of Enlightenment Protestantism. This feminization of Catholicism seems to explain, in part, the complex relationship that often developed between American women in Italy and Catholic
sights. When Giles writes, describing the dominant, nineteenth-century American perspective that “one traveled to Catholic Europe for a broadening humanist education or for aesthetic frivolity, a temporary flirtation with the exotic ‘Scarlet Woman’ of Rome” (84), he does not describe the experiences of the women in my study. First, it is doubtful that these women traveled to Italy to flirt with an exotic foreign woman. Second, their texts reveal a far more complicated and often sympathetic view of Catholicism’s ideals, if not its practice. Margaret Fuller’s commentary on the barrenness of Protestant churches suggests what she and others, like Sophia Hawthorne, celebrated in Catholicism: “How sorrowfully bare is the interior of such a cathedral [the Minster of York], despoiled of the statues, the paintings, and the garlands that belong to the Catholic religion! The eye aches for them. Such a church is ruined by Protestantism; its admirable exterior seems that of a sepulchre; there is no correspondent life within” (83). Such passages suggest how grouping these women’s texts can enrich and complicate our understanding of the nineteenth-century American view of Catholicism.

Their work shares common pleasures, like Catholic ornamentation, as well as concerns, like fears about women’s condition both abroad and at home. Thus the “fever” of my title signifies both women’s enthusiasm for travel (and reform) and the dangerous consequences risked by American women abroad. Many women writers depict a divided Italy, simultaneously enchanting and lethal, lush host to the malaria that emblematized the danger awaiting ambitious or independent women. Harriet Beecher Stowe indicates Italy’s dual nature in her novel *Agnes of Sorrento* (1862), observing that “In our day, these lovely places have their dark shadow ever haunting their loveliness: the malaria, like an unseen demon, lies hid in their sweetness” (390). In *Letters from Abroad to Kindred at Home* (1841), Catharine Maria Sedgwick asserts that in Italy, “Nature is, indeed, here a tender restoring nurse” (II:72), while acknowledging later that many must flee the Roman campagna to save themselves from deadly disease. Sophia Peabody Hawthorne describes in *Notes in England and Italy* (1869) “the half-moon” that “shines without the thinnest veil over the dazzle of her radiance,” adding wryly, “and this is the atmosphere of the fatal campagna” (540); and Margaret Fuller, in “Dispatch 26” (1849), writes of a “Rome that almost killed me with her cold breath of last winter, yet still with that cold breath whispered a tale of import so divine” (238). 4

The main character of Constance Fenimore Woolson’s “Street of the Hyacinth” (1882), Ettie Macks, explicitly frames the passion and the risk that drew the female artist to Italy: “There comes a time when [artists] have to live on hope and their own pluck more than upon anything
tangible that the present has to offer. They have to take that risk. Well, I have taken it; I took it when we left America” (174). The hope of something “more” than “the present has to offer” motivates and unites the literary endeavors of the women discussed here. Despite danger, American women of the middle and upper classes traveled far to hear, and later to write, the “tale of import so divine” that Fuller describes. Historically, men’s literature—Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *Marble Faun* and James’s *Daisy Miller*, for example—has highlighted Rome’s (and love’s) dangerous power over women. But when the women in this study encountered Italy’s whisper for themselves, they heard a more complex narrative within which they were mobile, ambitious, brave, and independent. This is not to say that all six women included here interpret Italy in precisely the same way, telling the same tale six times, yet their texts share themes that emerge when we view this body of writing en masse. Escape from home and country ultimately freed them to expand their discursive territory beyond hearth and romance and to examine issues of a public nature in relation to their private experiences as women. Even Stowe’s novel *Agnes of Sorrento*, the most conventional in terms of narrative, uses a fifteenth-century Italian setting to alter the conventional marriage plot and accommodate a political activism that is national in scale.

Taken collectively, the texts I examine undermine simplistic nineteenth-century constructions of womanhood and nationalism. The writing often exhibits a brutal honesty that contrasts with pastoral myths of Italy and reflects the writers’ subject positions as women in a patriarchal culture. Texts by American men frequently fantasized an idyllic Italy, as William Vance argues in *America’s Rome*: “The Rome they loved was, even more than has been realized, ‘no Rome of reality,’ but an imaginary place, a Rome of the mind” (II:78). Women writers make use of this fantasy as well, yet they also describe the vulnerability and constraints on mobility they faced in a foreign environment. Sophia Hawthorne could forget neither her immediate surroundings nor her physical body when she was denied access to a painting that her male companion was permitted to see (451). Similarly, Sedgwick’s description of the “idle men, who collected about us and stared so unmercifully at the girls that they clung to me” (*Letters from Abroad* II:27) strikingly illustrates how Italy’s “reality” pressed in upon women travelers.

Another noteworthy difference in women’s texts is their explicit concern with the material conditions of women in the United States and abroad. Encounters with Italian women who are both more and less liberated than their American counterparts provoke comparisons that undercut essentialist notions about womanhood. In Sedgwick’s and Fuller’s texts,
for example, the existence of female professors at the University of Bologna validates their sense of women's power and reinforces hope for the future of American women. In contrast, Fuller invokes domestic violence against Italian women, “the cries of mothers and wives beaten at night by sons and husbands,” as evidence for “the ills of Woman’s condition and remedies that must be applied” (245–46). Such gender-based observations are characteristic of much women’s writing and provoke a variety of responses, yet all the women’s texts examined here either make or imply the connection between individual women’s lives and the larger political climate of their day. At times transcending boundaries between nations, these nineteenth-century women link Italian and American women’s experiences and use both to bolster their arguments for more truly democratic republics.

At other times, however, the texts I examine are clearly invested in national borders. Benedict Anderson’s theory of modern nationalism, outlined in *Imagined Communities*, proposes nationalism as a concept that is both historically determined, originating out of changes that occurred in the eighteenth century, and imagined. That is, “because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them” (6), the connection that Americans feel to each other is entirely a product of their own minds. Aided by nationalist propaganda such as the newspaper and the flag, the idea of nation takes root in the individual imagination. Clearly women, as fully half of the nation’s population, participate in this construction of imaginary community; simultaneously, their relationship to public affairs has historically been circumscribed. How, then, did women imagine the nation and their relationship to it? Unable to vote, to hold public office, and to fight for their country in the militia, did nineteenth-century women exhibit a sense of themselves as Americans that differed from that of men?

The decades after the Revolution bred anxiety for American nationalism. Although from our contemporary vantage point it seems that the major battles for the nineteenth-century American nation were fought on domestic soil, a significant number of Americans were traveling to Europe, and specifically to Italy, to confront a cultural frontier almost as fraught as the “savage” frontier of the American West. As a newly constituted republic, the nineteenth-century United States sought cultural legitimacy in addition to political actualization. No longer tied to England, the United States needed a literary aesthetic that would validate its
nationhood and differentiate it from older European cultures. Emerson’s assertion in “Self-Reliance” (1841) that “it is for want of self-culture that the superstition of traveling, whose idols are Italy, England, Egypt, retains its fascination for all educated Americans” betrays an anxiety about American culture from which he sought refuge in his concept of self-reliance (186).

Many travel texts of the period reflect both this fear of inadequacy as well as a sense of political and artistic destiny. Nineteenth-century travelers, men and women, who made the pilgrimage to Europe confronted their nationality on many levels, and those who textualized their experiences through journals, letters, and fiction returned incessantly to the subject of political and artistic Americanness. Politically, the nation had already taken on the mission of actualizing humanitarian ideals by becoming a democracy where, in theory, all “men” were created equal and all citizens could achieve prosperity. Yet, as a role model for other emerging democratic states, the United States had to confront failures in the form of slavery, a genocidal policy toward the native population, and restrictions on the rights of women. Artistically, travel writers attempted to compose a distinctly American portrait, aided by what they saw as the sharpened outline of the American traveler against the foreign background and motivated in part by the competition such juxtapositions engendered.

In Nation and Narration, Homi Bhabha describes “the political ‘rationality’ of the nation as a form of narrative” (2). If nation is itself a narrative—if both “lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizons in the mind’s eye” (1)—what story of American nationalism do the women’s texts grouped here tell us? In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the concept of republican motherhood was available as one way for free women to conceptualize their role in nation formation. Their contribution to a healthy republic was the production of civic-minded children well versed in the components of republican virtue. As Suzanne Gossett and Barbara Ann Bardes argue, such an arrangement provided middle-class women with only an indirect relationship to politics: “[T]he republican mother had to be well-educated and politically aware, although her only participation in political decision-making would be through others—her husband and sons” (16). In contrast to this limited political agency, by the turn into the twentieth century the suffrage movement had gained tremendous strength, with women gaining the vote in 1920. During the period between republican motherhood and women’s voting rights, roughly a century, literature was a pivotal space in which women could proclaim their political views to a national audience; indeed,
the texts I explore provide detailed examples of how nineteenth-century women imagined and narrated their nationalism.

Building on Anderson's notion of nationalism as imagined, Bhabha's concept of nation and narrative as linked entities, and the work of historians of women in the United States such as Gossett and Bardes, Roman Fever reveals how these American women's texts both contribute to and contest men's literary patriotism. Of this gendered nationalism I would highlight two salient aspects. First, American women recognized and manipulated traditional structures that promoted nationalism; their texts utilize the rhetorical strategies and symbolism that male writers often invoke. Second, these women sought to establish connections between their own experiences as women and the "domestic" state as a whole. Women like Stowe "imagined" a republic that reflected the values—like religious devotion and maternal compassion—to which they were committed in their daily lives. I want to emphasize the coexistence of both strategies so as not to imply either that all nineteenth-century, middle-class women's texts participated unproblematically in the master narrative of nationalism, or that all such writing depicted state affairs solely in terms of women's homes. It is important to recognize the combinations of public and private that these women undertook to write.

Ernest Renan's definition of "nation" suggests the synthesis these women's texts attempted. Anticipating Benedict Anderson's work by just under a century, Renan's "What Is a Nation?," a lecture delivered at the Sorbonne, stresses the interiority of nationalism and its roots in the citizen's individual consciousness. The "soul" of a nation, Renan writes, is constituted by two components that reside in the individual: "[O]ne is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present-day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form" (19). The issue, then, for the women in my study was how, as women, to lay claim to this "rich legacy of memories," how to establish their connection to the nation's past, and how to "perpetuate the value of the heritage" in their contemporary contexts. Connections to the nation's past and future could be made through literary productions that promoted women's role in both.

The desire to connect to the past that motivated these nineteenth-century women writers also motivates my project now. Contemporary feminism demands a reevaluation of women's contributions to the American canon; we must acknowledge that women writers were prolific and popular, that they wrote beyond the narrow boundaries still ascribed to them by too much twentieth-century criticism, and that the unified voice
of American individualism turns out to be a false construct. I want to emphasize that many women wrote in ways that challenged the status quo and that readers consumed these texts, at times voraciously. We have useful criticism that examines White, American women's relationship to the North American landscape, like Annette Kolodny's *The Land before Her*, yet nineteenth-century White women and their texts were shaped by international influences as well. Italy, viewed by many nineteenth-century Americans as the center of art and culture, drew certain privileged women writers who wanted to see this illustrious history for themselves and to interrogate and fortify their connection to Western culture's past.

My intent in foregrounding some central nationalist texts by women and reconstituting this countertradition in American literature is to promote the aims of materialist feminism, specifically its historicist project. Rosemary Hennessy describes the political imperative of this approach: “Materialist feminists need to insist on one of the strongest features of feminism's legacy—its critique of social totalities like patriarchy and capitalism—without abandoning attention to the differential positioning of women within them” (xii). Hennessy challenges feminist criticism to maintain feminism's strength while acknowledging that “woman” is not a monolithic concept, but a culturally and historically based one, and suggests that “without forfeiting feminism's specificity, materialist feminism fosters the alignment of a feminist standpoint with other political movements” (xviii). The following chapters align feminism with nationalism, with the intention of broadening our perceptions of concepts that continue to be sites of contested meaning in early-twenty-first-century America.

In *Reconstructing Womanhood*, Hazel Carby explains materialist analysis as “interpreting individual texts in relation to the dominant ideological and social formations in which they were produced” (6). My goal is to read America women's Italianate texts by foregrounding historical context in order to present a nonessentialist view of American womanhood and nationalism. At the same time, I want to resist a reductive biographical approach, which seems to be applied widely to women authors but much less extensively to men. My intention is neither to speculate on Margaret Fuller's feelings for her lover based on close readings of her dispatches, nor to suggest that the primary influences on her journalism were her romantic affairs. My goal is to read the texts as products of and contributions to particular historical circumstances. When I invoke biography, then, it is either as a means of gaining insight into the primary texts, or as a text that itself can be read as a product of a historical age.

It seems critics have read women's writing through a biographical lens
due to a tradition of associating women with the home, rather than with schools of thought or mainstream literary traditions or political events. In criticism, we read more about women writers’ spinsterhood than we do about most male writers’ bachelorhood because men had access to a professional milieu (and a means of self-definition) in which a wife was not required. Women like Sedgwick, on the other hand, were expected to marry as part of their responsibility to the “woman’s sphere.” Yet she did not marry. She did become a published writer; therefore I believe it is imperative to read her texts, and those of the other women included here, as contributions to a national literary moment, rather than as clues to understanding an idiosyncratic personal decision.

My study is a necessary counterpart to critical works that overlook these women entirely or offer them as minor players in the nineteenth-century’s major movements. Indeed, Percy Adams’s study, Travel Literature and the Evolution of the Novel (1983), while it recognizes travel’s literary influence, makes no mention of Catharine Maria Sedgwick, Sophia Hawthorne, Margaret Fuller, or Harriet Beecher Stowe, all of whom wrote travel-influenced literature contemporaneously with Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry James, and William Dean Howells (male writers included in Adams’s survey). Likewise, William Stowe’s Going Abroad: European Travel in Nineteenth-Century American Culture (1994) omits Sedgwick, Sophia Hawthorne, and Constance Fenimore Woolson in favor of the more conventional Henry Adams and Mark Twain. Stowe does offer a chapter on Margaret Fuller, perhaps the most-often-studied woman in my group. And despite its broad subtitle—American Writers and Artists in Nineteenth-Century Italy—Roman Holidays maintains a relatively narrow focus, with eight essays on Hawthorne and two on James, and only two chapters that depart from those twin icons of the international theme. One of the Hawthorne essays incorporates Fuller, but other women are notably absent from the study. In the most unfortunate cases, then, women’s contributions are elided entirely; in other studies they are subordinated to the more canonical male tradition.

As Mary Suzanne Schriber writes in Telling Travels, “It is indisputable that during the nineteenth century, American women, the majority of them white and middle class, began to travel abroad in significant numbers for the first time in history” (xi). This phenomenon started in the 1820s, according to Schriber, when increased affordability and accessibility of transportation facilitated women’s travel. As Schriber’s observation about class and race suggests, the economics of travel contribute to my study’s almost exclusively White, middle-class focus. Cultural oppression in the forms of poverty, slavery, and racism barred working-class women
and most women of color from access to the Grand Tour. Thus, in the
creative tradition I examine, produced by women who sought educational-
and cultural expansion in Italy, African American women are under-
represented. One notable exception is Edmonia Lewis, whose work I
discuss in chapter 4, alongside Sophia Hawthorne’s travel narrative. A
sculptor of Chippewa and African American ancestry, Lewis sold enough
copies of her sculptures to fund a trip to Rome in 1868 and later achieved
fame for her exhibition of six works at the 1876 Centennial Exposition in
Philadelphia. As for working-class travelers, Constance Fenimore Wool-
son portrays poor female characters abroad in her exploration of the eco-
nomics of artistic study, yet Woolson herself came from a middle-class,
New England background and cannot be labeled “working class.” The
critical work of exploring how women of color and the working class
imagined nationalism and contributed to the American national narrative
remains a fruitful area of study but lies outside the scope of my work.
Future studies of these issues, as I hope is true of my project as well, will
contribute to a more multifaceted and thorough understanding of nine-
teenth-century American nationalism than has traditionally been offered
by mainstream history.

There are times, of course, when the texts in my study reveal the
biases and blindesses of their age, as my work no doubt does, too. Stereotypes of Italians as childlike, of convents as unnatural and per-
verse, and of Italian workers as lazy and avaricious appear even in texts
that are elsewhere supportive of the Italian people. For me, these
moments are the most problematic, the most difficult to reconcile with
the writers’ humanitarian agendas. Although intent on democratic
reform, these writers were blinded by the rhetoric of race that shaped
the American perception of southern European countries, including Italy,
and insisted that certain foreigners were essentially and temperamentally
different from Anglo-Americans—in the case of Italians, passionate,
sensual, indolent, and effeminate. This ethnocentrism simultaneously
developed from and bolstered nationalist sentiment by promoting the
notion that members of a particular nation constituted an identifiable
race, a belief that contributed to patriotism’s power to unite U.S. citizens
against people of other nations. Unfortunately, this rhetoric pervaded the
nineteenth century, and, if even reformist writers failed to overcome such
biases, we may be less than surprised to see that, at the start of the twen-
ty-first century, violence in the name of race and nation persists. The
question that underlies this study but remains ultimately unanswered is,
why do certain forms of nationalist bias, which have historically divided
the world and engendered such violence, continue to be insurmountable?
My study proceeds chronologically, roughly following the contours of women’s travel, which became extensive in the early-nineteenth century. I begin in 1841, with the publication of Sedgwick’s *Letters from Abroad to Kindred at Home*, and end with Wharton’s 1934 short story “Roman Fever.” My discussion thus opens with the rise of Jacksonian republicanism in the first half of the nineteenth century and continues through the first part of the twentieth century, when the modern era revised concepts of womanhood and nationhood. The boundaries of this study mark important historical spans in both Italy and America. In Italy, the nineteenth century witnessed the revolutionary movement known as the *Risorgimento*, the 1861 unification of previously disparate states into one nation, the abolition of the pope’s temporal power in 1870, and the rise of the Fascist party in the years after the First World War. These changes, combined with American political and cultural shifts and evolving attitudes toward Italy and the “foreign,” produce the rich historical backdrop that informs women’s writing of this period. Early in the nineteenth century, as Theodore Stebbins observes, “Almost every nineteenth-century observer contrasted the practicality of modern, utilitarian, materialistic America with the joyfulness, the impracticality of daily life in Italy,” but by the beginning of the twentieth, “the myth of Italy as Arcadia, as a place with links to the Golden Age, was finally shattered” (21, 26).

During this historical span, the American women I discuss were moved from their home turf, enmeshed in Italian culture and politics, and liberated from what has been described in criticism as the “pull” of the American land. In much American writing, Christopher Mulvey notes, “A universal, cosmological scheme focused upon America, represented by the great forest, the great valley, or the great prairie, could generate a religious and millennial awe as it excited a personal and patriotic identity” (13). The absence of the “great” American landscape afforded women travelers a different perspective, no doubt aided by a European ideology in which the myth of individualism was not held sacred. Indeed, Joyce Warren argues that in Europe, individualism was “a negative concept connoting selfishness and social anarchy. . . . American republicanism differed from democratic tendencies in other countries, where the emphasis was on collectivism and social unity rather than on individual rights” (*Narcissus* 4). Europe’s cultural climate, with its emphasis on community, reinforced women writers’ discursive attempts to redefine America based on communal values.

Moving chronologically, my study focuses in chapter 1 on Sedgwick’s
Letters from Abroad to Kindred at Home. By manipulating the travel narrative genre, Sedgwick inserted herself into a male literary tradition to address the concerns of nineteenth-century, middle-class American women and other marginalized groups. Letters reveals how Sedgwick’s experiences in Italy shaped her conception of herself and her nation. Her firsthand encounter with the Austrian occupying forces in northern Italy, for example, and her inquiries about the condition of Italian women ignited and expanded her political activism. Using the travel genre to insist that the rights of others, especially women, must be incorporated into a truly humanitarian republic, Sedgwick’s letters from abroad are designed to convince her nation to “bind to its altars its domestic ties and its charities” (II:155).

Part of a similar political project, as chapter 2 explains, Margaret Fuller’s New York Tribune dispatches (1846–1850) present the Italian Revolution, in which she became actively involved, as a lens through which to view American democracy. I take Fuller’s journalism and involvement in an emergent republic as examples of her participation in the construction of nationhood. Her dispatches reveal that not only do issues of state affect how individual women live, but women’s activities also contribute to nation building. Ultimately, Fuller reproaches her nation while holding out hope for future American greatness: “I do not deeply distrust my country. She is not dead, but in my time she sleepeth, and the spirit of our fathers flames no more, but lies hid beneath the ashes” (230).

In chapter 3 I examine Harriet Beecher Stowe’s 1862 novel Agnes of Sorrento, which also promotes a humanitarian and idealistic agenda. A sentimental novel that champions the domestic values of religion, community, and selflessness, Agnes reveals the implication of the personal in the political and vice versa. The romantic story of young Agnes intersects a political narrative concerned with the fifteenth-century Italian struggle for religious reform. My reading explores the interpenetration of the two plots, demonstrating how the sensibilities of Agnes make a significant contribution to her suitor’s revolutionary agenda. I also examine Stowe’s revision of concepts like “home” and “mother” in her projection of an ideal republic, a democracy inspired by a woman’s valor.

Chapter 4 deals with Sophia Hawthorne’s Notes in England and Italy (1869), a text that centers on Hawthorne’s encounters with Italian art and celebrates strategies for distributing rare paintings to a wider audience. Hawthorne sees art as a vehicle for emotional and religious advancement, a necessary remedy for contemporary societal ills: “We need more Fra Angelicos to open the doors of Paradise for us” (416). Adding her own (textual) representation to the process, Hawthorne examines copying as a
means of encouraging a return to pre-Renaissance values. This chapter also considers the work of two American sculptors working in Rome during the same period, Edmonia Lewis and Harriet Hosmer, whose art shares Hawthorne's feminist ideals: belief in women's potential both to succeed as artists and to serve as noble subjects for great art.

In chapter 5, I examine two short stories by Constance Fenimore Woolson, “Miss Grief” (1880) and “The Street of the Hyacinth” (1882), in which the woman artist’s Roman studies culminate in a tragic confrontation with male standards. Of the work included in this study, Woolson’s indicts the domestic harness most explicitly by invoking the connotation of “domestic” that requires the elimination of wildness or freedom. I am particularly interested in her critique of prescribed feminine sensibility, as well as her exposure of how economics maintained both the nineteenth-century’s separate spheres and her characters’ domestic confinement.

With chapter 6, my focus shifts to the twentieth century and Edith Wharton’s short story, “Roman Fever” (1934). Like Woolson’s, this narrative presents domestic values as confining, yet gestures toward a liberation from domestic constraints that corresponds to the more general cultural movement into the modern age. My reading of Wharton’s fiction, which serves as a conclusion, emphasizes the story’s thematics of change through the understated presence of Fascism, portraying major shifts on both personal and state levels. In this final chapter I consider how twentieth-century historical events redefined domestic themes and concerns, for the nation and the women within it, offering a provisional optimism for the future.

Each of my readings attempts both to foreground women writing beyond domestic boundaries and to counteract dominant stereotypes of American women abroad. In James’s Portrait of a Lady, for example, Henrietta Stackpole is condemned as unwomanly because of her direct gaze and self-assurance. Ralph Touchett’s remark, “if [Henrietta] was not a charming woman she was at least a very good fellow” (84), suggests the risk involved for women whose professional choices emphasized their connection to the public realm. To Isabel’s observation that Henrietta “knows a great deal, and I know enough to feel that she is a kind of emanation of the great democracy—of the continent, the country, the nation,” Ralph replies, “You like her for patriotic reasons. I am afraid it is on those very grounds that I object to her” (86). Both acknowledge a woman’s implication in nationhood, yet Isabel glorifies a woman who serves as an active contributor while Ralph objects to such boldness, preferring the woman who reflects well on her nation by knowing her place and staying home.
At the other end of the spectrum, William Dean Howells’s Theodore Colville, in *Indian Summer* (1886), observes of the American women in Florence, “Women of fashion always interested him; he liked them; it diverted him that they should take themselves seriously. Their resolution, their suffering for their ideal, such as it was, their energy in dressing and adorning themselves, the pains they were at to achieve the trivialities they passed their lives in, were perpetually delightful to him” (15). Mainstream, nineteenth-century constructions of White femininity seemed to limit male portrayals of women abroad to two categories: the assertive “feminist,” whose forthrightness as a person and an American signify as “masculine,” and the hyperfeminine lady, whose superficiality trivializes her as a nontaxing diversion.

In recovering travel-inflected texts by American women writing about Italy, we discover characters and authors who move beyond these stereotypes. Their concerns involve far more than a preoccupation with personal appearance, and their articulation of political goals does not make them men; rather, their politics and their gender are interdependent. The work of recovery has recently begun on the texts included here, with Schriber’s inclusion of selections from Sedgwick’s *Letters from Abroad* in her anthology, *Telling Travels*; the publication of Fuller’s complete dispatches in “These Sad but Glorious Days”; and the addition of Woolson’s “Miss Grief” to the 2002 *Norton Anthology of American Literature*. Yet Sophia Peabody Hawthorne’s work remains unavailable, as does Sedgwick’s complete travel narrative, and no study has as yet grouped these texts to highlight the literary tradition they reveal. I hope that the following chapters contribute to the study and recovery of these texts, which have much to say about what it meant to be a middle- or upper-class woman, a writer, and an American in the nineteenth century.