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Transnational Relationships, US Feminism, and the Labor of Dark Foreign Men in the “New World” of Europe in Louisa May Alcott’s *Diana and Persis*

Leslie Hammer

- 1 The egalitarian relationships and uncommon level of womanly independence that we find in the final novel that Louisa May Alcott wrote in 1879, *Diana and Persis*,¹ are what have led scholars to praise this sentimental story as “one of [Alcott’s] most skilled, important, and feminist contributions,” to use Elaine Showalter’s words (xlii). Indeed, the novella is thought-provoking and important because of its impressive feminist vision of marital reform and feminine self-reliance. Yet even more intriguing is the transnational context through which the story puts forth its feminist agenda. In this essay, I explore how the foreign setting and sentimental representation of relations among US and non-US citizens in *Diana and Persis* offer a critique of US gender hierarchies, labor to teach women that gender equity should be sought outside of the US, and encourage women to emigrate from the US for good.
- 2 In so doing, the novel, I argue, provides a radical counter-narrative to the typical storyline found in nineteenth-century US fiction wherein women characters travel or live abroad. Both Diana and Persis serve as revised models of the quintessentially US American heroines who journey to Europe that we find in books by Alcott’s contemporaries, such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Susan Warner, and Henry James, to name a few—stories that include US sentimental heroines who encounter danger when living in Europe and who serve as warnings to readers who dare to follow in their footsteps.² Alcott rewrites the script of the Old World versus the New World. In *Diana and Persis*, the US represents the “Old World” and Europe stands as the “New World.” Both Diana and Persis engage in positive, life-transforming relations with non-

American citizens (especially with Europeans who are racialized) when they migrate to Paris and Rome, transnational sentimental relationships that facilitate Diana's and Persis's artistic maturation as well as fulfillment of their professional and personal goals. Diana and Persis serve as revised paragons of sentimental femininity, just as their trans-national/cultural/racial relationships stand as new models of marriage and other kinds of unions.

- 3 In navigating its white middle-class feminist agenda, the novel, like other sentimental and gothic works of Alcott's, employs a "flexible strategy of accommodation and resistance."³ That is, while *Diana and Persis* strives to help white middle-class US women acquire equal rights to men, it also suggests that equity for white middle-class US American women shall be forged through the subjugation of dark foreign bodies, restoring conventional nineteenth-century representations of foreign racial Others. The European males that Diana and Persis find sexually attractive and with whom they enter into relations are often racialized by Alcott. These transnational/cross-racial relationships are impressively revolutionary in many ways. Yet, at the same time, they replicate hegemonic racial hierarchies of the mid-nineteenth century. Persis's dark foreign husband, like other racialized men in the story, serves as what Toni Morrison calls an "Africanist presence" (6) whose dark body is "[s]erviceable to the last [and who] is permitted speech only to reinforce the slaveholders' ideology, in spite of the fact that it [may] subvert the entire premise of the novel" (Morrison 27).
- 4 Furthermore, *Diana and Persis* advances its feminist agenda through both undercutting, and contributing to, the impulses of "manifest domesticity" that, as Amy Kaplan has helped us to recognize, was common to U.S. sentimentalism in what she calls "traveling domesticity." In surprisingly radical ways, the novel conjures anti-American sentiment through encouraging women to abandon the U.S. for good because the nation has failed to fulfill its democratic promise to women. Alcott argues for women's emigration from the U.S. as a solution to gender inequity. However, in contradiction and ironically perhaps, Alcott's story also contributes to a nation-building project that is typical of nineteenth-century U.S. sentimentality, creating social desire for the U.S. to compete with European nations in their imperialistic race for world power.

Inspirations for *Diana and Persis*

- 5 Louisa May Alcott heavily based *Diana and Persis* on May Alcott's life abroad. Louisa's sister is virtually synonymous with the character of Persis. Not satisfied with simply vacationing overseas, May left the U.S. for good to settle in Paris to develop her creativity and artistic career. Daniel Shealy points out that "For May, Europe represented a chance not just to see antiquities but to explore her own artistic ability" (xxxix). May wrote in a letter home to her family that "Europe seems a cure for everything" (Shealy 100). Living an intellectually stimulating and unusual life similar to those of later expatriate U.S. women writers in Europe, May studied painting, drawing, and sculpture in Paris while living in a community of women that included world-renowned artists in Paris such as Mary Cassatt and Rosa Bonheur.⁴ Louisa envied and to some extent even resented May for the artistic and personal freedoms that she experienced in Europe and in her egalitarian marriage to a Swiss businessman and violinist named Ernest Nieriker.⁵ A couple of years prior to May's permanent move to France, Louisa took a carefree vacation to Europe with her sister when the enormous

success of *Little Women* (1868) gave her a rare reprieve from her lifelong burden of supporting her family through writing. “These days of recreation and wandering in Europe with May,” according to Caroline Ticknor, “were perhaps the happiest in Louisa’s life” (80). In an earlier trip to Europe, Louisa had been swept away by a Polish man named Ladislus Wisinewski, who she fondly nicknamed “Laddie.” Louisa reflected happily in her journal in 1865 about her “walks and talks” with her “very gay and agreeable” Laddie (Cheney 179) and how she felt “happy as a freed bird” when she was in Paris (Cheney 182). Louisa wished she could have the luxury to move to Europe permanently the way that May had. As Louisa later wrote in her journal in 1877, “Ought to be contented with knowing I help both sisters with my brains. But I’m selfish, and want to go away and rest in Europe. Never shall” (Ticknor 240). Louisa was right in predicting that she “[n]ever shall” have the opportunity to emigrate from the U.S. to “rest in Europe” as her sister May did. Louisa’s desire to live freely in Europe like May, I argue, was expressed vicariously in her final novel through the two main characters Persis and Diana, where she made Persis a thinly veiled version of May and wrote her own desires into the character of Diana.

- 6 Louisa based her novel so heavily on her sister’s experiences that entire passages from May’s letters are quoted almost verbatim in *Diana and Persis* (Rosenfeld 10-11). In letters written in the 1870s to Louisa and other family members about her life abroad with Nieriker, May often reflected on the advantages of living as a woman and wife in Europe. In a letter sent to her family in 1878, for example, May comments, “America seems death to all aspirations or hope of work [whereas Europe offers] the perfection of living; the wife so free from household cares, so busy, and so happy. I [...] lead the delightfully free life I do now with no society to bother me, and nothing to prevent my carrying out my aims and in succeeding in something before I die” (Ticknor 267-68). A month later, in April 1878, she writes in another letter to her family, “Nothing would ever induce me to live in Concord again burdened with cares after this taste of all life can be. If woman wants a new lease on life let her come here [...]. This foreign life is so satisfactory so full of the picturesque, so independent & charming that Concord or Boston would be like a prison to me” (qtd. in Rosenfeld 17). May goes on to reiterate these sentiments in another missive, noting that in Europe, “we can live for our own comfort not for company,” which “[i]n America [...] cannot be done” (Ticknor 278). The notion that Europe provides a woman “the perfection of living” and the opportunity to “lead [a] delightfully free life” while the U.S., in contrast, is a “prison” that leads to “death to all aspirations or hope of work” is one that May returned to repeatedly in her journal entries and letters while she traveled and lived abroad. It is also the theme of Louisa’s *Diana and Persis*.
- 7 *Diana and Persis* opens with a young lady, Persis/May, who is a free spirit, announcing to her closest friend Diana that she is leaving the U.S. behind and heading to Paris where she can pursue her art. The novella follows the typical opening to sentimental stories of an orphan leaving home.⁶ Like most sentimental heroines, Persis, who is referred to as Percy by the narrative voice in the story,⁷ is an orphan whose grandmother raised her. In Paris, Percy enjoys living with a commune of women artists who are progressive, independent, and committed to art. Percy paints nude male models, freely comments on the (usually dark) male subjects of her art to whom she is attracted, enthusiastically debates on the pressing political issues of the time, and wears her hair down as a rejection of the tradition of women wearing their hair pulled up. Percy grows

increasingly focused on her art, rejecting conventionally feminine interests. Eventually her dream of having one of her paintings selected for the world renowned *Salon* comes true.

- 8 After her victory at the *Salon*, Percy enters into an egalitarian marriage and has a baby with a dark Swiss man named August Müller, a character whom Alcott racializes and feminizes. The dark August represents a revised model of masculinity who redefines manly ideals, and the transnational marriage between him and Percy is meant to stand as a paragon of what marriage should be. Meanwhile, Diana, inspired by Percy's experiences and accomplishments in Europe, decides to sail to Italy to pursue her own artistic career as a sculptor. On her way to Rome, she makes a stop in France for the purpose of seeing if Percy's professional and personal goals have been reached. After leaving the U.S. and arriving in Paris, Diana, like Persis, feels liberated. She is impressed by Percy's and August's egalitarian relationship and is delighted to meet their child.
- 9 Then, Diana, who is modeled after the nineteenth-century U.S. American woman sculptor Harriet Hosmer, heads to her original destination, Rome, to develop her own artistic career as a sculptor.⁸ In Italy, Diana meets a five-year old boy named Nino whose mother is dead. Diana and Nino instantly bond to one another as mother and child, and she acts as his surrogate mother. It turns out that Nino's father, Antony Stafford, is a world-renowned European sculptor. Like August, Stafford is a dark European man whom Alcott racializes. Diana instantly falls in love with Stafford. Likewise, Stafford becomes deeply enamored with Diana because they are both interested in sculpting and because she is his equal in terms of art and intellect. The story idealizes the egalitarian relationship between Diana and Stafford in Rome as well as Diana's maternal union with Nino.
- 10 That Margaret Fuller, who lived in Rome herself, had a son named Nino is likely more than coincidental. As Rosenfeld points out, "Louisa must have had Margaret Fuller in mind in the fourth chapter of *Diana and Persis*, for Fuller's own child was named Nino" (19). Showalter, as well, links the novel's Nino to Fuller's son, showing how that connection "powerfully suggests Fuller's choice to seek fulfillment in her Italian exile had inspired Alcott" (xi). Fuller's emigration to Italy left an impression on Alcott, who greatly admired Fuller for her extraordinary intelligence and uncommon independence. According to Sarah Elbert, Fuller was "Louisa May Alcott's lifelong heroine" (1978 xiii). Elbert suggests that there was a reciprocal relationship between Alcott and Fuller in that it was not just Alcott who looked up to Fuller as a model of feminist reform, but, rather, that Fuller, too, admired Alcott as a "prototype of a new generation of Americans who might shape a more democratic Eden" (1978 xiii). Louisa heeded Fuller's call to "shape a more democratic Eden" with her feminist story *Diana and Persis*, which is partially inspired by the legacy of Fuller.

Europe as the New World

- 11 When Percy leaves the U.S. to sail to Paris, she excitedly exclaims, "I feel like Columbus going to discover a new world [...]. I go alone [to Europe] with only my common sense and courage to protect me" (Alcott, 1988 389). Identifying with Columbus and alluding to the "common sense" made famous by Thomas Paine, Percy views her journey to Europe as a revolutionary act. Also driven by an imperialistic impulse, she imagines

that the “new world” shall be a site where she and those women who follow her lead may colonize and attain glory—a place where, as Percy proudly tells her family and friends in her letter to home, a U.S. American woman can produce art that will be “surveyed by admiring nations” (408). Frequently referring to Europe as the “new world,” *Diana and Persis* reverses the usual script. Suggesting that U.S. American women rely on their “common sense,” the text also propagates a new revolution—a feminist revolution that can be, the text suggests, achieved in Europe but not the U.S.

- 12 In making Europe the new New World, Alcott writes a counter-narrative to much of the U.S. fiction written by her contemporaries. By the mid- to late nineteenth century, journeying to Europe had become a “must do” for the middle- and upper-middle classes of U.S. Americans if they wished to be held as “cultured.” One of the outcomes of this bourgeois travel trend was that it became common practice for authors to write about young, white, U.S. American women touring through and living in Europe, as Louisa May Alcott does in *Diana and Persis*. As William Stowe contends, “Early American travelers such as Thomas Jefferson and John Adams were eager to define themselves in transnational terms as ex-Europeans with a special relation to European culture, whereas their successors in mid-century—Fuller, Greeley, and Twain, for example—were more concerned with asserting a uniquely American identity” (Stowe xi). In “Culture,” Ralph Waldo Emerson famously wrote, “we go to Europe to be Americanized” (Emerson 141), a motto that is in line with his call for a distinctly U.S. American literature and culture in “The American Scholar.” This Emersonian theme gets translated into much of the fiction written by the nineteenth-century U.S. American literati, where journeying to Europe or elsewhere is encouraged and even celebrated, but ultimately for the purpose of creating and reinforcing a distinctly U.S. American identity that can be set apart from—or above—Europe or elsewhere.
- 13 While such stories shaped and reinforced the cultural desire to sail across the Atlantic to Europe because they presented Europe as the pinnacle of artistic and social sophistication, the moral of these stories differed from *Diana and Persis* in that they often taught, at the same time, that Europe pollutes the purity of U.S. American white womanhood and may even endanger the lives of young ladies who travel and live there, especially those who dare to enter into romantic relations with European men. These works sent a strong message that white middle-class U.S. American women would be wise to remain in—or return to—the U.S. and marry men of their own nationality and race. Urging that U.S. citizens marry only other U.S. citizens was a way of maintaining a national family that upheld white U.S. American middle-class men as models of ideal masculinity and worked self-consciously against potential competition from European men.
- 14 Examples are many. In Nathaniel Hawthorne’s sentimental romance, *The Marble Faun* (1860), the fair expatriate ingénue, Hildy, not only risks tainting her “snowy whiteness” and “purity of heart” when she abandons the U.S. to develop her artistic talents in Italy, but also (literally) imperils her life (Hawthorne 54-55). Hildy’s feminine virtue and life itself are rescued at the conclusion of the story only by her returning to the U.S. and tying the knot with her fellow U.S. citizen Kenyon. Hawthorne closes his romance with a serious reminder that “the years, after all, have a kind of emptiness, when we spend too many of them on a foreign shore [...]. It is wise, therefore, to come back” (Hawthorne 461). Similarly, a decade earlier, in Susan Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World* (1850), the prototypical sentimental heroine, Ellen Montgomery, falls into the

most vicious hands of all of her caretakers when she leaves the U.S. to settle in Scotland with the Lindsay family. We are relieved when the U.S. American hero, John Humphreys, finally “saves” Ellen from the cruel Scots by returning her to the U.S. and marrying her. A little later, Henry James, too, would caution that there are dire consequences for women who “spend too many [years] on a foreign shore.” After all, it is in Europe that Daisy Miller and Isabel Archer, two of the most famous—and famously American—of all heroines, lose their innocence, respectively in *Daisy Miller* (1878), published the same year that *Diana and Persis* was written, and *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881). In both, Europe serves to accent Daisy Miller’s and Isabel’s distinct Americanness, to reinforce their U.S. American identity. Daisy’s and Isabel’s experiences in Europe, like those of Hildy and Ellen Montgomery, ultimately serve to make the characters more American and emphasize the Old Worldness of Europe.

- 15 In contrast, *Diana and Persis* sends a message to young ladies that the danger comes from clutching on to U.S. American culture and remaining in the U.S.—a “prison cell” for women (Alcott, 1988 410). In Christine Doyle’s analysis of how Louisa May Alcott “talks back” to Henry James in her fiction, she argues that in *Daisy Miller* there are no benefits to U.S. American women living in Europe, and that James’s “views [on living in Europe] directly contradict Alcott’s perspectives in *Little Women*” where Europe is presented as positively shaping U.S. American women’s identity (Doyle 211). Amy and other characters in *Little Women*, Doyle demonstrates, are “learn[ing] from Europe while not being bound to it” and “return to America to pursue productive lives” (209). This same lesson is taught in Alcott’s *Shawl Straps*, a fiction based upon May and Louisa’s travels in Europe. At the closing of *Shawl Straps*, Alcott writes:

[...] we would respectfully advise all timid sisters now lingering doubtfully on the shore, to strap up their bundles in light marching order, and push boldly off. They will need no protector but their own courage, no guide but their own good sense and Yankee wit, and no interpreter, if that woman’s best gift, the tongue, has a little French polish on it.

Dear Amandas, Matildas, and Lavinias, why delay? Wait on no man [...]. Bring home empty trunks, if you will, but heads full of new and larger ideas, hearts richer in the sympathy that makes the whole world kin, hands readier to help on the great work God gives humanity, and souls elevated by the wonders of art and the diviner miracles of Nature. (Alcott, 1872 306-307)

Diana and Persis takes a step further than Alcott’s earlier works like *Shawl Straps* and *Little Women* by teaching that U.S. American girls and women not only reap rewards from visiting Europe and returning home with “heads full of new and larger ideas,” but that they would be wise to hop on a boat and sail for good out of the U.S. as fast as they can and engage in romantic relations and friendships with foreigners in the New World of Europe. There is no indication that U.S. American women should even return to the U.S. in *Diana and Persis*. Percy advises Diana in one of the letters she writes from Paris, “you must prepare to join me [...] and persuade the dear old lady to come along. You would find yourself a *new world*, and she would enjoy this life immensely” (Alcott 1988 405, emphasis added).

- 16 When Diana accepts Percy’s advice to follow her lead and move to Europe, Diana indeed passes like a pilgrim from what she perceives as the Old World to the New. Alluding to John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress from This World to That Which Is to Come*, Alcott sentimentally describes Paris as the “Celestial City,” which, in *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, is the term for heaven, or “that which is to come.” Anne Phillips has shown how central a role Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* plays in *Little Women* and *Jack and Jill*. She argues that the

pilgrim metaphor in *Little Women* empowers the pilgrim. According to Phillips, “the pilgrims in *Little Women* demonstrate a tendency to move beyond the limits of city and society as a way of authorizing the self” (Phillips 225). She claims, moreover, that “the power of the pilgrims as embodied in *Little Women* stems from the sentimental tradition” and that “self-reliance elevates them above the limitations of their social and economic position in the world” (Phillips 214-15). The allusions to Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* in *Diana and Persis* serve a similar purpose to *Little Women*. Diana’s and Persis’s pilgrimage to Europe spiritually elevates them beyond the gender codes that confined them in the U.S. When first setting foot in the “great city” of Paris, Diana “felt like one released from the quiet solitude of a prison cell and suddenly turned loose” and is so overwhelmed with the joy that “her eyes filled with sudden tears and set wide the doors of her heart to let a new emotion in” (Alcott, 1988 410-11). Describing her first impression of Paris to Percy, Diana cries “[Paris] looked like the Celestial City in this light,” and we are told that she “yield[ed] herself to the spell [...] of this woman-city of the world” (414). Percy agrees with Diana’s impression of Paris as the “Celestial City” and the “woman-city of the world,” and answers by affirming her own pilgrimage from the U.S. to Europe, telling Diana that Paris has proven to be “Heaven” to her (414). Throughout the story, Europe is referred to regularly in New World terms, sometimes as “the promised land” (391) and at other times the “land of promise” (425). If Percy and Diana correlate the U.S. to a “prison cell,” an Old World from which they are thrilled to finally be “turned loose,” it is, the text suggests, because they feel constrained by U.S. American gender codes that prevent them from growing artistically and personally (Alcott, 1988 384). As Percy says, “I am tired of everything [in the US]. I cannot find [inspiration and freedom] here so I am going to look for it!” (384). The U.S. stands in contrast to Europe, which is labeled in New World terms, and Percy and Diana are presented as pilgrims in that new New World. In representing Europe as “the promised land” and the “Celestial City,” then, Alcott both critiques and appropriates what Sacvan Bercovitch calls “the typology of America’s mission.” To Diana, the U.S. is a far cry from the “city on the hill.” Alcott calls for a withdrawal from the U.S., suggesting that the U.S. never turned out to be the “New Jerusalem” and that the “errand” failed, at least for women (Bercovitch 95-96). If *Diana and Persis* employs U.S. American jeremiad rhetoric, Europe replaces the U.S. as the New World and offers a “vision of the future” because, Alcott suggests, Europe offers far more freedom and equality for women.

- 17 Europe is idealized because Percy finds an unusual degree of artistic and personal freedom living, something that was unavailable to her as a woman when she lived in the U.S. Percy and her roommates in Paris are happily self-sufficient and have the luxury of devoting themselves entirely to their careers in art. As Percy writes to Diana, “we live, three merry spinsters, doing most everything for ourselves in the simple, free and easy way best suited to our professions and our purses” (Alcott, 1988 395). May’s sketches and Louisa’s letters to home describe such enjoyment during the trip they took to Europe with their friend Alice Bartlett; in Alcott’s *Shawl Straps* and *Aunt Jo’s Scrap Bag* as well, much of the comedy is related to the American spinsters’ independence in Europe and prompts Louisa to even sign letters, “Spinsterhood Forever” (Elbert, 1987 25-26). France offers Percy Mary Cassatt and Rosa Bonheur as women models after whom she fashions herself. Importantly, Europe, the novel stresses, is a world that poses no conflict between romance and art for women. That is what especially makes Europe the New World. In the “promised land” of Europe, Percy

can unabashedly paint a male model with a “superb physique and the head of a god” and feel entirely comfortable expressing how he “distracts” her as “great drops [of sweat] come upon his forehead and every muscle shows” (Alcott, 1988 396). Her sexual attraction to the male model here as well as her desire for other male models that pose for her are unleashed in Europe, releasing her from the Protestant prudery of New England. In France, Percy feels free to express and explore her sexual desires, and Italy triggers a sexual awakening in Diana. Moreover, Percy can retain her “liberty-loving nature” (384-85) and Diana can remain a “strong, self-reliant woman” (391) while having relationships with men. They are not forced to choose between their careers and personal lives. Instead, the text suggests that romance and professional development coincide harmoniously.

- 18 In reality, however, Europe was not the “promised land” that could deliver more rights to women than the U.S. as Alcott makes it out to be in *Diana and Persis*. The women’s movements in the U.S. and throughout Europe were moving at roughly the same pace in the nineteenth century. Olympe de Gouges and Mary Wollstonecraft were certainly towering icons for women’s rights in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and there were important waves of feminist activism in the nineteenth century throughout Europe, particularly in the 1860s. Yet it was not really until the 1890s, many years after Alcott wrote *Diana and Persis*, that the “flowering of feminism” in Europe began to seriously take off (Offen 346). In fact, Karen Offen has shown that “resistance [to women’s rights] in Europe remained so considerable in the nineteenth century that no thorough overhaul of the legal status of married women would occur until the middle of the twentieth century” (Offen 343). Social and legal gender codes for women in Europe were not all that better, if at all, than in the U.S. in the mid- to late nineteenth century, especially in Italy, the nation where Diana is sexually liberated and enters into a blissful, romantic, egalitarian relationship.
- 19 So why the fiction of a freer Europe? Certainly, May Alcott’s enthusiasm for Europe and her happy marriage in Paris to the Swiss Ernest Nieriker captured the imagination of Louisa, who, burdened with supporting her family, was generally unhappy in the U.S. and envied the carefree life May led in Europe. Louisa also greatly admired Margaret Fuller whose experiences in Italy partly inspired her to write *Diana and Persis*. I would suggest, however, that Louisa makes Europe the setting of her novel not because Europe really represented a utopia for women—it did not, and Alcott would surely have known that—but, rather, because Europe could serve as a safe backdrop to criticize the legal and social gender codes in the U.S. That is, the fact that Europe represents the New World is less significant than the fact that the U.S. stands as the Old World. As I pointed out earlier, by representing Europe as the “promised land” for women, writing a counter-narrative to the tale of the Puritans’ pilgrimage to the New World, Alcott offers a sharp feminist critique of the U.S.

Revising Sentimental Models of Masculinity and Marriage

- 20 In Europe, the “land of promise” (Alcott, 1988 425), Percy marries August Müller, a Swiss man who, as his name “August” suggests, is meant to inspire respect and admiration. He is a thinly veiled representation of May’s Swiss husband, Ernest Nieriker. In her analysis of May’s portrayal of Ernest in her letters, Azelina Flint claims,

“Ernest comes across as the ideal suitor and husband, for there was nothing he would not do for his wife” (60). In turn, Alcott portrays Percy’s transnational/cross-cultural relationship with August as utopian, an egalitarian model of marriage for which readers should strive. She draws upon and appropriates the conventions of sentimentality to revisit some of the very tenets of the culture of sentiment. She revises the sentimental masculine ideal, making August the new model of manhood. He represents a new kind of knight in shining armor. He does not “save” the heroine by providing her with the economic support of marriage. A large part of what makes August the new masculine ideal is that he overtly supports equal rights for women, contending that a woman should not have to devote her entire life to the man she marries and live the conventional domestic life sanctioned by the culture of sentiment. August argues openly that women should be able to pursue a relationship with a man and maintain a professional career and that there is no conflict between the two: “I believe a woman can and ought to have both [a professional career and a relationship with a man] if she has the power and courage to win them. A man expects them, achieves them, why is not a woman’s life to be as full and free as his?” (Alcott, 1988 424). Alcott lends moral authority to the feminist inquiry, “why is not a woman’s life to be as full and free as his [a man’s life]?” by having August, a husband and respected middle class white man, repeatedly articulate questions and comments that defend women’s rights. If he is “August” and the new model of masculinity, it is because of his courage to speak out on behalf of women’s right to pursue professional careers.

- 21 Moreover, the text presents August as rivaling U.S. American men. Egalitarian relationships between European men and U.S. American women occur in other Alcott works as well, as seen, for example in Jo’s relationship with the German professor Friedrich Bhaer in *Little Women*. In her analysis of the romantic relations between Friedrich and Jo, Sarah Wadsworth shows that “by unsettling the conventional coordinates that positioned the heroine as inferior in power and authority [...] Alcott presents Jo’s courtship as that of an emotionally independent woman who is on an equal footing with her ‘match’ in terms of maturity, class, and gender expectations” (186). This is also true in Alcott’s representation of relations between European men and U.S. American women in *Diana and Persis*. Entering into a relationship with a European man like Friedrich or August, Alcott advises, reaps rewards for U.S. American women, as Alcott noticed in May’s blissful marriage to the Swiss Ernest Nieriker.⁹ August challenges the notion that US American men are the model of manhood that is sanctioned in U.S. American sentimentalism. He adamantly supports “the success of [his] splendid wife,” and, as the text points out, in some ways, “he was more ambitious for this young wife of his, both as woman and artist, than she was herself” (Alcott, 1988 420). Percy contrasts August to U.S. American men, noting, “There, Di! Could the most liberal-minded American say more than that? I did not convert him, he came to it himself through his own love of liberty, being a free Switzer with as great a hatred for tyrants as our glorious William Tell himself” (424). Percy’s remark suggests that even the most “liberal-minded American man” could not compete favorably against European men. Furthermore, the quality of Percy’s life is high because August not only verbally espouses women’s rights, but, importantly, acts upon his words. We see him carrying his fair share of the domestic duties, if not actually bearing a greater load than Percy, and helping his wife in whatever ways that he can to support her artistic career. Often, “August rocks the baby” (414), which frees time for Percy to paint. He also does much, if not all, of the shopping and cooking. In ways like this, the story encourages

women readers to abandon the US, like Percy does, to marry European men and to find a better life.

- 22 What makes Alcott's story even more daring is that her new model of manhood is not only a foreigner, but a *dark* foreigner. In many ways, sentimentality in *Diana and Persis* challenges the culture of sentiment in the U.S. by breaking the taboo of a white woman desiring a non-white foreign man as a husband and lover. It is worth noting that Ernest Nieriker, May Alcott's Swiss husband after whom Louisa modeled August, was actually a fair man in real life.¹⁰ Alcott wrote August (read: Ernest) into her story as a man with "warm coloring and dark hair" (Alcott, 1988 423). With his "clustering dark hair" (417) and "dark head" (411), August represents more of a brown or black foreign Other than the fair European man that Ernest actually was. Alcott rewrote Ernest into her sentimental text as a non-white man, racializing him just as she does with other male characters in many of her sensational stories.¹¹
- 23 Although clearly a sentimental story rather than a sensational story, *Diana and Persis* shares with many of Alcott's sensational thrillers a foreign setting where unconventional cross-cultural/racial relationships take place. Betsy Klimasmith's discussion of interracial desire in Alcott's sensational stories, "M.L." (1863), "My Contraband" (1863), and *A Long Fatal Love Chase* (written 1866) is helpful in thinking about *Diana and Persis*. Klimasmith writes:

Alcott is less interested in the extremes than in the middle of the spectrum, where ambiguously-raced, highly-eroticized male bodies must be read and re-read by their female viewers in order to be made "safe" to interact with. By making identifiable characteristics ambiguous, Alcott can construct and manipulate her own syntax of race, nation, and genre to write the (almost) unwritable narrative of interracial love. (Klimasmith 116)

Klimasmith's point holds true in the sentimental context of *Diana and Persis* as well. August is marked as a racial Other, yet he can simultaneously be read as an Anglo man. Alcott makes August's "identifiable characteristics ambiguous," so that interracial desire can be read "safely." One cannot pinpoint the text as directly being a story that sanctions interracial transnational marriage. At the same time, no one could overlook the fact that the story subtly propagates just that.
- 24 Like August and other European male characters in the novel such as Stafford, Alcott had a dark complexion like her mother, Abigail May Alcott, who is described by Alcott as "Spanish-" looking. Betsy Klimasmith, Elaine Showalter, and Sarah Elbert have all demonstrated that Alcott's hallucinations that she experienced when she was ill in a Civil War hospital with typhoid fever, dreaming that she married a "stout, Handsome Spaniard, dressed in black velvet, with very soft hands, and a voice that was continually saying, 'Lie Still, my dear!'" reflect the ways in which Alcott's self-identification of gender, race, and sexuality were blurred and explored in her fiction. As Elbert notes, Alcott was a "dark-skinned 'white' woman with a 'boy's nature' and a writer's gift. Whatever she felt in the confusion of gender and race was released in her delirium, and it found outlet in her fictions" (1978 xxxi). This is true in *Diana and Persis* where Alcott explores interracial desire and projects her own identification with racial Others and men onto her male characters.
- 25 August's racial Otherness also signals an ambiguity regarding his citizenship. The fact that he is not fair-skinned nor has light hair like the "real life" August (Ernest Nieriker) calls his European identity into question. His national origin becomes almost as questionable as his race, although there were certainly blacks, mulattoes, and other

dark-skinned people throughout Europe. The text blurs his citizenship, making him a racial Other whose foreignness cannot easily be identified. In the imagination of the reader, he could be a foreign racial Other without a definite national identity or he could be a mixed-race Swiss man. It is not clear, and Alcott leaves it as such.

- 26 Foreignness and darkness are not just masculine qualities valued by Percy. When Diana goes to Rome after visiting Percy, she, too, falls in love with a dark foreigner whom she is on her way to marrying.¹² A renowned sculptor named Stafford, whose skin is “bronzed by the ardor of Spanish skies” and whose “hair and head are still dark below but white above as if with a sudden snow fall,” sweeps Diana off her feet and triggers Diana’s sexual awakening (433). Although Stafford lives in Rome, it is unclear whether Stafford’s national origins are English or Italian or Spanish or something else altogether. What is clear is that he is another attractive dark non-American man who is appealing not just because he is handsome, but because he, like August, represents the revised masculine ideal.
- 27 What makes the relationship between Diana and Stafford ideal, even more than the marriage between Percy and August, is that they view one another as equals and “felt the charm” of the “mutual interests” they share (Alcott, 1988 434). Despite the fact that Stafford is a “well-known sculptor whose fame was already made” (431), he admires Diana’s sculpting. Stafford and Diana show professional respect for one another. Stafford refers to her as a “genius [and] comrade” (438), viewing her as talented as himself. The text presents Stafford as the masculine ideal and idealizes his transnational romance with Diana because there is no gender hierarchy in their relationship; they see “eye to eye” (438). What is more, Stafford, like August, happily performs the “feminine” domestic duty of childcare, which Diana finds attractive. Rather than following the traditional course of hiring a nanny to care for his son Nino when his wife dies, Stafford recognizes the value of “devoting his life” to Nino and decides to perform “his duty” of raising his son himself (431). The story teaches that a key trait of the masculine ideal is being a hands-on father like Stafford and August, both of whom actively care for their children rather than dismissing childrearing as women’s work. In this sense, the text revises the role of men in the culture of sentiment.

Dark Foreign Men and the Liberation of White U.S. American Women

- 28 Although *Diana and Persis* promotes egalitarian relationships that cross conventional gender boundaries, as well as sexual boundaries in terms of race, culture, and nation, the novel does not escape the tendency of white feminist sentimentalism to subjugate dark Others in the service of liberating white, middle-class U.S. American women. As we see in *Diana and Persis*, the personal and professional liberation of Percy’s white U.S. American body depends on the service of dark foreign Others—her husband August as well as the exoticized dark foreign men who work as models for her paintings.
- 29 August’s labor grants Percy the freedom to pursue her career and live carefree. As such, the marriage between August and Percy replicates the sentimental racial hierarchy of white mistress to dark servant. Percy acquires an unusual amount of freedom for a nineteenth-century woman and a blissful lifestyle because in her home, which Percy aptly refers to as “my kingdom” (412), her foreign dark husband cares for the baby,

cooks, and runs Percy's errands. At times, Percy speaks to August more like a servant than a spouse, telling him, for instance, "you must be trained, my love" (416). August proves to be very well trained, for, as we read, he "does his errands with a good will that lent romance even to prosaic marketing" (418). Not only does he attend to Percy's every need, he does so with "good will." He represents the ideal servant who is taught so well that his happiness stems from his ministering to Percy's needs.

- 30 The story romanticizes August's devotion to pleasing and serving Percy. When Diana observes August combing the garden for items to include in the salad and salad dressing he prepares for their dinner, for instance, she notes that what turns August into a "far manlier man" with a "nobility of expression" that makes him stand out from other men is that he makes domestic tasks like preparing salad dressing a serious endeavor. For August, making a salad dressing that suits Percy's tastes is worth concentrating on. A foreign man with "dark clustering hair" who has visions of "salad dressing" and "strawberries" running through his head while he searches the garden for items for dinner are, the story teaches, "the sure index of a character in which rectitude and resolution reign" (417).
- 31 Alcott rewrites the masculine ideal so that domestic duties are included in the model of manhood, but this feminist revision of masculinity has an ethnic bias to it. Alcott can only imagine a dark foreign man being able to serve a white U.S. American middle-class woman in a domestic capacity, revealing the limitations of her feminist vision and the complex ways in which she mutually critiques and reinforces the tenets of the culture of sentiment. She does offer a bold vision of a new masculine ideal that includes performing domestic tasks conventionally confined to women; she does idealize Percy and August's mixed-race, transnational marriage. However, the story conjoins August's servitude to his "darkness," making the combination of his domestic servitude and presumptive ethnic origin a key aspect of Alcott's revised model of masculinity. Diana Paulin's analysis of interracial desire in Alcott's sensational thrillers, "My Contraband" and "M.L." is useful here too.¹³ Paulin convincingly shows that "Alcott's black characters [in "My Contraband" and "M.L."] provide the impetus for articulation of white female agency and transformation. The interracial relationship remains 'safe' as long as the black male character occupies a nonthreatening position" (Paulin 120). Although *Diana and Persis* draws from the sentimental tradition, rather than the sensational Gothic tradition, the representation of interracial desire and its relationship to white female agency are similar. I would extend Paulin's analysis to the context of the foreign: in the context of *Diana and Persis*, it is both August's "darkness" and foreignness that "safely" provides the "impetus for articulation of white female agency and transformation," to use Paulin's words. That is, the sentimental moral of the story is that white female agency can be acquired by breaking down the color line and the borders of the U.S.
- 32 It is not just August's dark foreign body that engenders the liberation of Percy and Diana. The dark-skinned foreign models who serve as the objects of Percy's art trigger her sexual liberation. Like August, the models are racialized and often exoticized. One of the "new models" that Percy is attracted to and writes home about is a "handsome Moor" who is a "negro" that she names "Othello" because of his "fine dark face" and "brave breast with scars on it" that makes him look like "every inch a soldier and a prince" (402). She notes in her epistle that her "Othello" gave her that "nod which makes our hearts leap" and "flashed a smile at [her] as he vanished behind the screen"

which “left her as red, with surprise and pleasure, as the drapery he flung over his shoulder with a superb gesture” (403). This risqué image of a naked black man flirting with Percy is suggestive of the great extent to which Percy has broken free of the sexual and racial mores of the U.S. and directly reflects May’s own experiences painting a partially clothed African model in Paris.¹⁴ Similarly, Percy’s sexual desire for another dark nude model who has the “superb physique and the head of a god” is hard to miss in her letter to Diana (396). She describes the challenge she has in focusing when drawing the dark model in “a magnificent pose”:

His rich coloring distracts me because I can not paint it all day, and I try vainly to get a good copy of his great dark eyes, proudly dilating nostrils and picturesque head with its jovelike curls. The pose is perfect, and it is wonderful how he can keep it so long. Figure to yourself the difficulty; head thrown back, eyes raised, stepping forward with an air of rapid motion in every limb, and so he stands for an hour like a statue, and we draw like mad, for soon great drops come upon his forehead and every muscle shows, so great the effort and yet so perfect his control [...]. So much for school. (396)

Percy objectifies and exoticizes this nude model who poses for her with “great drops” of sweat dripping down his “forehead” while “every muscle shows.” It is difficult to read him as anything but a sexual object whose desirability is based solely upon the features of his dark nude “superb physique.” It is his “rich coloring,” “great dark eyes,” “dilating nostrils,” “picturesque head,” and “jovelike curls” that “distract” Percy. That the portrayal of this model appears in Percy’s first letter to home signals to readers that her voyage abroad is marked by the unleashing of pent up sexual desires and rejection of the U.S. sexual mores that reward prudery in women and condemn interracial sexual relations. This letter, like other epistles in the story, entice women to venture to go abroad and sends the message that not only do U.S. American women have the freedom to live independently and pursue their interests abroad, but they can also enjoy the pleasure of being unfettered by sexual constraints. In sum, Percy’s letters to home promise women that leaving the borders of the U.S. will lead to sexual liberation.

- 33 But this sexual liberation for white middle-class women largely depends upon what Toni Morrison calls “black surrogacy” (13). Alcott’s linking Percy’s sexual liberation to dark foreign men like the “handsome Moor” is certainly bold. Yet, it also duplicates the racial stereotypes and hierarchy of the culture of sentiment. Men like Percy’s “Othello” and the sweating dark model with the “superb physique” described above are flat characters, whose sole purpose in the text is to forward the storyline of white middle-class feminist liberation. The dark models are under the gaze of white middle-class women, who literally use them as objects to produce their art and obtain their independence. The models appear mysterious and exotic to the reader, reinforcing the stereotype of the exotic dark Other.
- 34 Importantly, the foreign dark models have no voice of their own. They are only given voice through Percy. For instance, when the “negro” model “Othello” sparks a debate on slavery among the women painting him, Percy states in her letter home that “He could understand little English but I know he felt what was said, for his eyes kindled and the brave breast with the scars on it (better than medals in my eyes), heaved now and then as if he longed to speak, while he looked what he is, every inch a soldier and a prince” (403). Both “beast” and “prince” at once, “Othello” represents a Rousseau-like noble savage. As was typical in nineteenth-century U.S. American sentimental works, the dark Othello, like the other dark models, is spoken for by a white middle-class

woman. Percy is so confident—she “know[s] he felt what was said” and that “he longed to speak”—that she launches into an “antislavery lecture which would have delighted [her] Grandma” (403). In Alcott’s text, the authority shifts to the middle-class white U.S. American woman who speaks on behalf of the foreign dark man, performing the classic sentimental triangular rhetorical model wherein sympathy is evoked for a black body only to silence that body and redirect power and sympathy to a white body.¹⁵

Conclusion: The Imperialistic Mission

- 35 In encouraging white U.S. American middle class women to venture beyond the borders of the U.S. to empower themselves, *Diana and Persis* both challenges and perpetuates U.S. American imperialism. On the one hand, the story uses the conventions of sentimentalism to critique the U.S. for not delivering social and legal equity to women. The text suggests that this failure of the U.S. to provide equal rights to women has resulted in women being forced to flee from the U.S. and immigrate to the “new world” to acquire the gender equity that the “old world” cannot provide. In this respect, it conjures anti-American sentiment that runs counter to the hyper-patriotic mentality that propels U.S. American imperialism. Moreover, through its daring representation of transnational relationships, the text challenges hegemonic gender, racial, and sexual mores. Yet only to a certain point because the story also restores U.S. American imperialistic desires and racial/national hierarchies by teaching that the labor of dark foreigners in the “new world” is what makes emigration—or colonization—so profitable to white U.S. American middle-class women who go abroad.
- 36 In effect, Europe provides a decoy for the real “new world” where white U.S. American middle-class women are urged to go: the story suggests that foreign nations with dark-skinned people shall provide women with the liberation and power they cannot find in the U.S. Emigration from the U.S. and colonization elsewhere becomes the solution to solving U.S. American women’s problems with gender inequity. The story, however, also links white U.S. American middle-class liberation to foreign exploitation and colonization. In *Diana and Persis*, however, Europe is not clearly Europe. Alcott racializes almost every “European” that Percy and Diana encounter. Whatever the case, the novella urges in sentimental fashion that U.S. American white women go abroad to seek empowerment and liberation, which, the story promises, can be attained with the assistance of dark foreigners. Percy’s exclamation at the start of the story, “I feel like Columbus going to discover a new world” (389), signals to readers the imperialistic mission of her venture abroad. The utopian “new world” that Percy finds abroad is one where white middle-class U.S. American women find professional, personal, and sexual liberation through the labor of dark foreign men.

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NOTES

1. *Diana and Persis* was written in 1879, but was not published during Alcott's lifetime. The manuscript was left unpublished until 1978.
2. Although Hawthorne and James are often viewed by critics in contradistinction to sentimental writers—and even the authors themselves would distance themselves from sentimentalism—I would argue, as other critics have, that many of their works can be characterized as sentimental. See, for example, Brian Artese, Robert Levine, Marianne Noble, and Jennifer Mason.
3. I borrow the phrase, “flexible strategy of accommodation and resistance,” from Viet Thanh Nguyen (5-7).
4. For more on May Alcott's life in Europe, see Ticknor.
5. According to Natania Rosenfeld, “[Louisa] dreamed of escaping the dreary atmosphere of Concord, Massachusetts, and, like her sister, finding self-fulfillment in Europe. Her resentment at the role she had to play and at May's freedom and good fortune are recorded in her written works. Even in her last years, she expressed her anger and misery in journals and letters” (4).
6. See Nina Baym for more on the typical plotlines of sentimental novels.
7. For a discussion of the links between Percy Shelley and the goddess Diana to the characters Persis/Percy and Diana, see Showalter's “Introduction” to *Diana and Persis*.
8. For more on the connections between the character of Diana and Harriet Hosmer, see Showalter.
9. These positive representations of transnational relations between European men and US American women were not only inspired by May's blissful marriage to Ernest Nieriker, but also by the happy, romantic relationship Louisa developed in Europe with Ladislav “Laddie” Wisniewski, the young Polish man who many critics have pointed out left such a major impression on Louisa that he was the inspiration for Laurie in *Little Women*.
10. Rosenfeld points out, “Mueller's physical appearance differs from that of Ernest Nieriker. May described her husband [in her letters to home] as fair” (Rosenfeld14).
11. For more on how Alcott racializes men in her sensational stories, see Paulin and Klimasmith, as well as Elbert's introduction to *Louisa May Alcott on Race, Sex, and Slavery*.
12. Because Alcott left the novel unfinished, we do not know for certain whether or not she ties the knot with Stafford. However, most critics agree that “the novel [...] strongly suggests that Diana was going to marry her sculptor-hero [and] become a mother to his little boy” (Showalter xlii).
13. See also Elbert. Though Elbert, like Paulin, focuses on Alcott's gothic thrillers, her essay is useful in thinking about interracial/transnational desire in the sentimental context as well. Elbert shows that the Spanish man of Alcott's dreams appears in her texts and that “A Spanish spouse and ‘Spanish’ was frequently a code word for black” (Elbert, 1997 xxxv). I would extend Elbert's claim to *Diana and Persis* and suggest that dark foreigners are coded as black in this text as well, just like Spanish men.
14. See Azelina Flint on May's representation of painting a half-nude African model in her letters home and how that might have been perceived at home.
15. For more on the triangular sentimental rhetorical model, see Shirley Samuels. I have extended Samuels's discussion here to include foreignness. Samuels's focus is on African American bodies.

ABSTRACTS

This paper examines romantic relationships between U.S. and non-U.S. citizens in *Diana and Persis*, Louisa May Alcott's 1879 sentimental novella set in Europe and based on May Alcott's life. The essay argues that Alcott uses sentimental, transnational relationships and the adulation of France and Italy to question gender and racial inequities in the U.S., as well as to encourage U.S. American women to escape the dominant patriarchal ideology through emigration to Europe. Although these transnational relationships propagate a feminist agenda that challenges gender and racial hierarchies in powerful ways, the novella also complexly participates in the subordination of dark foreign Others and the US imperial project.

Cet article examine la façon dont Louisa May Alcott représente les rapports amoureux entre citoyens américains et non-américains dans *Diana and Persis* (1879), longue nouvelle sentimentale qui a pour cadre l'Europe et fut en partie inspirée par la vie de May Alcott. Combinées à une vision idéalisée de la France et de l'Italie, les relations transnationales et sentimentales qui se développent entre les personnages permettent à Alcott de remettre en question les inégalités de genre et de race aux États-Unis et invitent les Américaines à émigrer en Europe afin d'échapper aux pressions de l'idéologie patriarcale. Toutefois, même si ces relations transnationales véhiculent des positions féministes qui participent à la déconstruction des hiérarchies de genre comme de race, la nouvelle, paradoxalement, renforce aussi le projet impérialiste américain, et la subordination d'un autre racialisé.

INDEX

Keywords: Louisa May Alcott, sentimentalism, transnationalism, feminism, imperialism, gender, race

Mots-clés: Louisa May Alcott, sentimentalisme, transnationalisme, féminisme, impérialisme, genre, race

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