

Introduction

The study of Edith Wharton's politics raises a number of challenges for the feminist scholar. Unlike Ezra Pound, whose conservatism has, in recent years, stimulated a wealth of critical controversy, Wharton's pedigree – her upbringing in a fashionable New York family of Dutch and English origin – has given many license to see her conservatism as a birthright, and her politics as less a site of deliberate forethought than a consequence of elite inheritance. Although Pound's dramatic espousal of "a virulently anti-democratic and elite egoism" has, in the words of Cary Wolfe, forced contemporary critics "either to bury or to praise" him, Wharton's conservatism, until now, has stimulated little critical attention (Wolfe 26). Indeed, many critics have taken a don't-ask-don't-tell approach to Wharton's conservatism. Even when her politics are faintly acknowledged, Frederick Wegener remarks, they tend to be "either neutrally presented and illustrated, or awkwardly defused, or reconceived on some more agreeable basis" ("Form" 134). In consequence, Wharton has become the May Welland of American letters. Like the genteel but underrated bride in *The Age of Innocence* (1920), she has been mistaken for a naïve and cosseted socialite, "so incapable of growth, that the world of her youth had fallen into pieces and rebuilt itself without her ever being conscious of the change" (Wharton, *The Age of Innocence* 290).

In a 1989 interview, R. W. B. and Nancy Lewis, the editors of Wharton's collected letters, were asked whether their editorial choices had been influenced by a desire "to protect Wharton in any way." The Lewises conceded that yes, on some level, their selections had been influenced by such factors. Recalling their publisher's warning that a letter with racist or anti-Semitic content "would over-shadow all the others in the media," they concluded that "it would be wrong to include an atypical letter that could distort the public view of Wharton" (Bendixen 1). However well intentioned, this protective impulse highlights a central and longstanding problem in Wharton criticism. Since 1921, when Vernon L. Parrington dismissed Wharton as a

“literary aristocrat” who was preoccupied with “rich nobodies,” Wharton’s conservative politics have been treated as an obstacle to literary analysis (Parrington 153). According to Robert Morss Lovett, an early critic, Wharton’s “conception of class [was] limited”; she was a writer for whom “The background of the human mass is barely perceptible through the high windows, and the immense rumor of the collective human voice is muffled by thick curtains” (Lovett 76). The complexities of American democratic politics had no place in such mannered settings. In the words of Irving Howe, “Mrs. Wharton had not a gift for the large and ‘open’ narrative forms . . . which in modern fiction have been employed to depict large areas of national experience” (4).

These assumptions bear witness to a widespread tendency in American criticism to oversimplify and patronize conservative politics. Among progressive literary critics in our own period, conservatism has been the straw man of choice, a flimsy opponent easily dismantled by the sophisticated instruments of liberal democratic thought. While recent scholars have readily probed the restive impulses that animate the socially oppositional writings of Mark Twain, W. E. B. DuBois, Stephen Crane and Nella Larsen, they have been less willing to acknowledge political and expressive complexity in the work of those whose ideas they do not share.

Edith Wharton forces us to confront a number of basic blind spots in American criticism. Her work calls into question some of our least contested assumptions about the relationship between social class, literary production and gender identity. If Wharton’s politics have been understood as so innate that they do not warrant critical analysis, it is because this premise itself is grounded in a limited conception of gender and class. Such assumptions imply not only that the principles of American conservatism are always already self-evident, but also that a patrician woman would have no reason to mobilize her conservative ideology with the same deliberate forethought that we have come to expect from writers like Wyndham Lewis, George Santayana or Henry James. And the circumstances surrounding Wharton’s re-entry into the American literary canon since the 1970s have only reinforced these impulses. Because renewed interest in Wharton criticism coincided with the ground-breaking impact of feminist scholarship, critics have been loathe to scrutinize her politics too closely. While Amy Kaplan and Nancy Bentley have discerningly acknowledged the role of class in such novels as *The House of Mirth* (1905) and *The Custom of the Country* (1913), other historically minded critics have all but ignored the cultural content of Wharton’s major writings. Dale Bauer, for example, has argued that Wharton’s early writings have “a strict preoccupation with form” – this despite Bauer’s own richly interdisciplinary readings of Wharton’s later

fictions (xiii). Novels like *Ethan Frome* (1911) and *The Reef* (1912), Bauer insists, are best served by a “way of reading . . . first developed out of the New Critical model” (xii). In relegating Wharton’s most widely read texts to the margins of cultural analysis, Bauer concurs with Walter Benn Michaels, who sweepingly claims in *Our Country* that “The major writers of the Progressive period – London, Dreiser, Wharton – were comparatively indifferent to questions of both racial and national identity.”¹

For her part, Wharton would have balked at the suggestion that her writings were immune to the dissonance of modern experience. Repeatedly rejecting the “kind of innocence . . . that seals the mind against imagination and the heart against experience,” she condemned the impulse to police “the public view” of an artist as noxious (*Age of Innocence* 123). Early stories like “The Muse’s Tragedy,” “The Portrait” and “The Angel at the Grave” all register her cynical opinion of the reverential votary who scrupulously patrols the factitious image of some late great creative genius. From Wharton’s standpoint, more interesting material lay in “regions perilous, dark and yet lit with mysterious fires, just outside the world of copy-book axioms, and the old obediences that were in my blood” (*A Backward Glance* 25).

Blood, I will show, is a central and complex Kate Chopin signifier in Wharton’s work, as it is in the work of Pauline Hopkins, and William Faulkner. Profoundly invested in the interconnected logic of race, class and national identity, Wharton’s early fiction articulates a host of early twentieth-century white patrician anxieties: that the ill-bred, the foreign and the poor would overwhelm the native elite; that American culture would fall victim to the “vulgar” tastes of the masses; and that the country’s oligarchy would fail to reproduce itself and thereby commit “race suicide.” In this regard, Wharton shared the turn of the century’s expansive conception of race. Unlike today’s observers, who often narrowly construe race as an exclusive matter of skin color, Wharton’s generation applied the term liberally to a diverse array of possible identifications. Henry James, for example, noted in 1879 that Nathaniel Hawthorne was “by race of the clearest Puritan strain,” while Thorstein Veblen, the sociologist and economist, confidently declared in 1899 that “canons of taste are race habits” (H. James, *Hawthorne* 12; Veblen 240). The settlement house pioneer Jane Addams embraced general humanity when she noted that “at least half of the race” was in need of social services; yet in nearly the same breath, Addams invoked specific notions of ethnicity and nationality when arguing that many disadvantaged Chicagoans were “held apart by differences of race and language” (Addams 98). As the novelist and historian Henry Adams dryly observed in 1918, despite the fact that “no one yet could tell [. . . him] what race was, or how it should be known,” the

concept itself was indispensable. Without race, Adams declared, “history was a nursery tale” (*Education* 411–12).

Despite its often ferociously reductive effects, race, as a causal agent in turn-of-the-century American social rhetoric, proved to have an expansive and curiously elastic range. This most disputed term could refer to anything from national origin, religious affiliation and aesthetic predilection, to geographic location, class membership and ancestral descent. In expressing her own concerns about America’s future, Wharton drew freely on these protean possibilities. Although Wharton was not alone in making such claims (Henry Adams, Sarah Orne Jewett and Theodore Roosevelt expressed similar concerns), her unique position as a best-selling writer and a respected literary figure made her one of the most potent voices of her time. While Wharton could elicit passionate responses from everyday readers (as in the case of a woman who sent her a two-cent stamp and begged her to allow *The House of Mirth’s* Lily Bart to live happily ever after with Lawrence Selden), she could equally inspire the admiration of her highbrow literary peers (R. W. B. Lewis 152). T. S. Eliot, for one, declared Wharton “the satirist’s satirist,” while Pound solicited her to write for the *Little Review*.²

Wharton’s readiness to engage in the heated cultural debates of her time may account for her diverse appeal. Her writings draw on a constellation of discourses, from the mundane to the sublime. She once remarked that “Every artist works, like the Gobelins weavers, on the wrong side of the tapestry” (*A Backward Glance* 197). In this sense, my methodology reveals my desire to take Wharton at her word – to follow her, that is, to the other side of the loom where the knotted and frayed cultural threads of her historical moment are interwoven. This study follows these discursive strands dialectically from their place within the text to their position outside of the work of fiction in order to formulate and explain their cumulative role within the novel itself. By taking Wharton’s pre-war fiction as both my starting point and my destination, I examine not only the role of race and class in Wharton’s fiction, but also the extent to which Wharton’s writings registered and, in some instances, shaped the larger patterns of American cultural discourse in the early twentieth century.

In seeking to account for Wharton’s conservative place within the framework of American politics and culture, I have been compelled to describe a political and historical position not my own. This necessity, however, has forced me to identify and defend certain core scholarly principles that my close engagement with Wharton’s conservatism has brought to the fore. We need to evaluate Wharton’s work on its own terms, unconstrained by either well-meaning protectionism or patronizing neglect. With this approach, we can better see how Wharton’s resistance to popular culture and mass

politics highlights not only the ongoing role of dissent in the United States, but also the unformulated and at times tenuous nature of America's multi-ethnic and multi-racial experiment. In seeking to critique and contain the *vox populi*, novels like *The House of Mirth* (1905) and *Summer* (1917) remind us afresh of the radical nature of the democratic project. Indeed, we ignore Wharton's conservative opinions at our own peril. By overlooking what we do not wish to see, we risk not only whitewashing the complexity of American cultural politics, but also underestimating the forceful arguments that drove writers like Edward Bellamy, Frances E. W. Harper, Upton Sinclair and Charlotte Perkins Gilman to respond.

I begin my exploration of this unfamiliar terrain by examining Wharton's role in the construction of certain basic American mythologies about race and national origin. "Invaders and Aborigines: playing Indian in the Land of Letters" examines Wharton's curious – and surprisingly various – comments on aboriginal identity. When *The Custom of the Country's* Ralph Marvell identifies himself as an "aborigine" and his parvenu wife Undine as an "invader," he participates in a longstanding American practice of "playing Indian" that dates back to the Boston Tea Party. Although by the early twentieth century Native Americans had become synonymous with anti-modern simplicity and indigenous authenticity in the minds of many Americans of white European descent, the practice of masquerading as an Indian revealed the opposite possibility – that American identity was nothing more than a minstrel act. In a nation whose equivocal origins were mired in the indeterminacies of colonialism, slavery and western expansion, the danger of confusing an imitative identity with the real thing had a peculiarly visceral import. Wharton responded to the possibilities of racial and ethnic hybridity by forging a racial aesthetic – a theory of language and literature that encoded a deeply conservative, and indeed essentialist, model of American citizenship. If her native land generously welcomed the world's huddled masses, then the novel, under Wharton's neo-nativist laws of "pure English" and her colonial determination to suppress "pure anarchy in fiction," formed an architectural, aesthetic and political bulwark against the menacing possibilities of democratic pluralism (*The Writing of Fiction* 14).

Wharton puts this racial aesthetic into literary practice in *The House of Mirth*, her first best-selling novel. Faced with imminent Anglo-Saxon doom, Lily Bart sacrifices herself on the altar of racial purity and eugenic perfection. Chapter 2 examines how Lily's aestheticized decline functions as both a tragic extinguishment and a demographic climax: Lily's death, I suggest, simultaneously marks the annihilation of a rare, endangered species, and a stylized act of preservation. Wharton's heroine becomes a version of Carl Akeley's idealized taxidermic *tableaux* in the American Museum of Natural

History. Captured and immobilized at the peak of racial achievement, she embodies a stylized alternative to a slow decline in New York's competitive racial wilderness.

Like *The House of Mirth*, its successor, *The Fruit of the Tree* (1907), circulates around the prone, immobilized body of an elite American woman. After a paralyzing equestrian accident, Bessy Amherst, a wealthy mill heiress, falls prey to the impassive mechanisms of modern medicine. Her comatose body, plied with repeated rounds of stimulants and narcotics, incarnates what, for Wharton, was the nightmarish loss of upper-class agency. In this sense, *The Fruit of the Tree*, the subject of chapter 3, explores the threat posed by machine culture to the traditions of class entitlement. Only a merciful act of euthanasia at the hands of a well-meaning and well-born nurse can restore Bessy's imperiled agency. In marked contrast to Mattie Silver, the working-class victim of *Ethan Frome's* climactic sledding accident, Bessy escapes the torture of a living death only through a singular act of elite compassion.

If technology represented one threat to elite hegemony, then changing sexual mores at the turn of the century posed another. In chapter 4, I suggest that sexuality effectively democratized the Victorian body by subordinating the mind's authority to the commonplace impulses of passion. Sex, according to Wharton, put all Americans on a common plane, blurring distinctions of race and class. In *The Reef* (1912), Wharton explores the relationship between the body human and the body politic, between the "regions perilous" of sexual desire and the "unmapped region outside the pale of the usual," where the country's other half dwelled (*A Backward Glance* 25). In likening her heroine's sexual awakening to a working-class rebellion, Wharton shows how sexuality can topple the sacred abstractions of the genteel tradition by unleashing the unwieldy chaos of direct experience. In this respect, *The Reef* marks Wharton's most immediate engagement with the pragmatism of William James. Sophy Viner, the novel's disruptive American governess, wreaks havoc on the codes of class and race by having an affair with her employer's fiancé. Like the *H.M.S. Titanic*, which sank into the North Atlantic several months before the novel was published, *The Reef* explores a comparable emotional shipwreck. Submerging class distinctions in the turbid waters of direct experience, sexuality threatens to sink everyone into a disastrously erotic democracy.

With the violent arrival of World War I, Wharton was forced to rethink her brief flirtation with democracy. If *The Reef* revealed the egalitarian temptations of pure sensation, then *Summer* marked the revival of Wharton's most austere brand of conservatism. As she toured the battle lines near Verdun, she saw countless French dwellings reduced to rubble, their

private interiors brutally exposed to the pitiless sky. For Wharton, the shattered privacy of the roofless house came to epitomize the war's uncanny havoc. As I suggest in chapter 5, *Summer* represents Wharton's concerted effort to restore Europe's wartime refugees, and indeed America itself, to the conservative rites and rituals of the racially homogenous "old home." By engaging a number of contemporary discourses – from tourism and philanthropy to abortion and incest – *Summer* proposes a strategy of cultural containment and racial restoration that seeks to repair the fissures wrought by modern democracy.

In the years following the war, Wharton was forced to acknowledge the failure of the recuperative strategy she had explored in *Summer*. If *The House of Mirth* marked a monumental act of historic preservation, then *The Age of Innocence*, its Pulitzer Prize-winning successor, conceded the inevitability of elite defeat. As the novel's adulterous lovers gaze at Louis di Cesnola's Cypriot antiquities in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, they simultaneously recognize the hopelessness of their unconsummated passion and the transience of America's vanishing aristocracy. Someday, Ellen Olenska speculates, Old New York will similarly be the stuff of an antiquarian's collection, its obsolete artifacts labeled "Use unknown" (258). Despite its nostalgic poignancy, this moment, I argue in the coda, is a quintessentially American one. Despite the lovers' appeal to the museum's cultural authority, by the 1880s the Metropolitan had itself become a locus of controversy and debate. Rumor had it that Cesnola's artifacts were fakes. Their display in the gallery set off a public commotion that was followed, in turn, by a dramatic trial.

As her quiet allusions to the Cesnola controversy would seem to suggest, Wharton deplored the instability of American identity. Railing against the country's hybrid origins, she formulated a critique of American democracy that was as complicated as it was conservative. In exploring a number of strategies to contain what she saw as the pluralist excesses of American life, however, Wharton inadvertently profited from the cultural diversity she was determined to resist. In drawing on the considerable cultural resources of American popular discourse, Wharton gave her own fiction a hybrid force that could withstand and even countermand the limiting hauteur of her message. This pluralism, while a keen source of Whartonian anxiety, remains of palpable concern for scholars today. By limiting the range of critical inquiry, contemporary critics risk reifying a progressive genealogy that celebrates the pursuit of diversity, while – ironically – marginalizing its diverse opponents. To engage the complex conservatism of Edith Wharton is to take a step toward addressing this problem by confronting American pluralism in *all* of its manifestations.

CHAPTER I

*Invaders and Aborigines: playing Indian in
 the Land of Letters*

Edith Wharton's 1934 memoir, *A Backward Glance*, begins on a curious note of historical rupture. Recalling the New York birthplace of her father, George Frederic Jones, Wharton describes a "pretty country house with classic pilasters and balustraded roof" on land that eventually became East Eighty-first Street. Although the original dwelling has long since disappeared, an heirloom print shows a columned residence with "a low-studded log-cabin adjoining it under the elms" (17). According to family legend, the rustic cabin was actually the "aboriginal Jones habitation," and its colonnaded neighbor a later addition. Wharton, however, doubts the veracity of this account. The log cabin was not, in all likelihood, the family's ancestral seat, she remarks; it was "more probably the slaves' quarters" (18).

The rapidity with which this picture of Yankee self-reliance dissolves into its uncanny double – a repressed portrait of African enslavement – is as breathtaking as it is blunt. For all of its Lincolnian connotations, the Jones log cabin inexorably betrays the system of forced servitude that sustained the Jones family's economic, social and political ascent.¹ Indeed, Wharton's account betrays what Susan Scheckel calls "the fundamental ambivalences of American national identity . . . the deep ambivalence of a nation founded on the conceptual assertion of natural right and the actual denial of . . . natural rights" to Indians, African Americans and women (14). Despite the prescient observation of Mariana Griswold van Rensselaer, a nineteenth-century critic who remarked that "nothing . . . save the wigwam of the North and the pueblo of the South" could be a truly American home (19), Wharton craved a site of political, social and racial legitimacy that could offset the country's hybrid, disingenuous origins. Unlike France, the country of Wharton's "chosen peoplehood," America was Europe's derivative step-child, itself both a subject and an agent of domestic conquest (Sollors 128). This dichotomy was vividly encoded in the Jones home, whose classic pilasters testified to its share in "the great general inheritance of Western culture," and whose slave quarters bore

witness to the moral ambiguity and racial pluralism of American origins (*French Ways* 96).²

Wharton's preoccupation with her country's beginnings were symptomatic of a wider set of anxieties at the turn of the twentieth century. At a time when even Warren G. Harding, then candidate for President, was rumored to have "black blood," America's fixation on the lurking possibility of "invisible blackness" made race a site of national hysteria (Williamson 106). As Eric Sundquist notes, by the mid-1890s America had begun its headlong "rush toward racial extremism in law, in science, and in literature." By abridging the equal protection guarantees afforded under the Constitution, state and federal courts sought to "render the African American population invisible or, what was more fantastic, to define color itself not by optical laws but by tendentious genetic theories that reached metaphysically into a lost ancestral world" (228). The "crisis in the loss of distinction" that ensued is evident in a letter from Wharton to her editor at Charles Scribner's Sons, William Crary Brownell, in 1902 (Sundquist 259). Admitting that she "hate[d] to be photographed because the results are so trying to my vanity," Wharton nonetheless agreed to have a new publicity photograph taken. "I would do anything to obliterate the Creole lady who has been masquerading in the papers under my name for the last year."³ The comment is at once self-mocking and oddly self-defining. Wharton no doubt realized that the very methods of mass production that had made her first novel, *The Valley of Decision*, a popular success in 1902 were spawning a culture of imitation, replication and deception. Photography offered a particularly vivid locus for this concern. Summarizing nineteenth-century uncertainties about photography, Miles Orvell asks, could "the camera – a mechanical instrument – . . . deliver a picture of reality that was truthful," and if so, "what was a 'truthful' picture of reality?" (85). What truth did the Creole lady express? As a photograph put to the service of advertising and publicity, was it not doubly suspect, evoking the "carnavalesque tradition" that, T. J. Jackson Lears suggests, "subverted unified meaning and promoted the pursuit of success through persuasion, theatricality, and outright trickery"? (*Fables* 212). The Creole lady, however, embodies additional instability within the discourse of race. As P. Gabrielle Foreman has observed, while the camera was touted "as an antidote to illusion in an increasingly unstable and unreadable mid-century America," photography "also heightened 'the problem of racial discernment'" by challenging viewers' assumptions about the phenotypic status of light-skinned African Americans in photographs of the period (528). The Scribner's publicity shot had effectively transformed Wharton into an imitation white woman.

Undermining the guarantees of personal authenticity, mechanical reproduction transformed race into just another variable in the changeful algebra of modernity.

Wharton found that American origins, like her own publicity photograph, were mired in a system of similarly fallible signs. Despite her longing for a more “subtle way of . . . indicating, allusively, [a nation’s] racial point of view” (*Uncollected Critical Writings* 92), these distinctions in the United States were difficult, if not impossible, to make. After all, America was a country in which a genteel family’s “aboriginal habitation” could be mistaken for the slave quarters. Under such circumstances, national origins were uncertain at best.

Wharton saw her native land as “a world without traditions, without reverence, without stability,” a “whirling background of experiment” incompatible with racial purity. Like the declining New England town at the center of Wharton’s 1908 short story “The Pretext,” Yankee life was disappearing and taking its quaintly “inflexible aversions and condemnations” with it. Villages like Wentworth, and other “little expiring centers of prejudice and precedent [made] an irresistible appeal to those instincts for which a democracy has neglected to provide” (Wharton, *The Hermit and the Wild Woman* 152). America’s accommodating welcome to immigrants, workers, feminists and newly minted millionaires had put an end to Yankee rule. In the wake of the wildcat railroad strikes of 1877, the Haymarket Square bombing in 1886, and the assassination of William McKinley by a self-proclaimed anarchist in 1901, genteel Americans grew increasingly convinced that America was becoming “a society unhinged” (Wiebe 78). Josiah Strong, a popular minister of the day, saw the “urban menace . . . multiplying and focalizing the elements of anarchy and destruction” (qtd. in Boyer 131). Looking down from his perch high above “the turmoil of Fifth Avenue,” Henry Adams likewise compared New York to “Rome, under Diocletian.” One was aware of “the anarchy, conscious of the compulsion, eager for the solution, but unable to conceive whence the next impulse was to come or how it was to act” (*Education* 499–500). Rupture – not connection – was to be the twentieth century’s characteristic gesture. With the arrival of the year 1900, “a new universe” had been born – one “which had no common scale of measurement with the old.” In this “supersensual world,” Adams could measure “nothing except by chance collisions of movements imperceptible to his senses, perhaps even imperceptible to his instruments, but perceptible to each other” (*Education* 381–2). The scale, the pace and the reach of modern America defied causal sequences; predictable trajectories that had formerly connected origin to issue, and theory to practice, now