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EDITH WHARTON AND THE POLITICS OF RACE

Edith Wharton feared that the “ill-bred,” foreign and poor would overwhelm what was known as the American native elite. Drawing on a range of turn-of-the-century social documents, unpublished archival material and Wharton’s major novels, Jennie Kassanoff argues that a fuller appreciation of American culture and democracy becomes available through a sustained engagement with these controversial views. She pursues her theme through Wharton’s spirited participation in a variety of turn-of-the-century discourses – from euthanasia and tourism to pragmatism and Native Americans – to produce a truly interdisciplinary study of this major American writer. Kassanoff locates Wharton squarely in the middle of the debates on race, class and democratic pluralism at the turn of the twentieth century. Drawing on diverse cultural materials, she offers close readings that will be of interest to scholars of American literature and culture.

JENNIE A. KASSANOFF is Associate Professor of English at Barnard College in New York. Her articles have appeared in *Arizona Quarterly* and *PMLA*.

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*For my parents
Dorothy Jane Spitzberg Kassanoff
and
Arnold Howard Kassanoff
and for
Dan*

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Acknowledgements

I felt that I was in great company and was glad.

Edith Wharton, 1934

This book focuses on one author, but it is not the study of one woman alone. Instead, it is an inquiry into the constellation of people, places, ideas and events that intersected to create the powerful writings of Edith Wharton. I find this approach eminently suited to my own situation, for in writing this book I have not been a single author. Rather, I have been at the crossroads of a dynamic group of teachers, friends, institutions and experiences that have alternately inspired, challenged, amused and enlightened me.

I have been the fortunate student of many extraordinary teachers. In my home town of Dallas, Texas, Christine Eastus and Ray Buchanan at the Greenhill School first introduced me to the pleasures and possibilities of literary and historical study. As an undergraduate at Harvard, I was privileged to work with Joseph A. Boone, Mary Carpenter, Sonya Michel and Henry Moses, each of whom instilled in me an enthusiasm for letters and learning. At Oxford, Kate Flint and John Bayley shared my interests in Edith Wharton, and encouraged me to “do New York.” Their exemplary generosity of mind was pivotal to my own growth as scholar.

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Although this book is sorely lacking in the way of broom-flying wizards and underpant-clad superheroes, my children Molly Schulman and Jake Schulman have been my own sources of magic and courage. Their curiosity, energy and enthusiasm inform every page of this enterprise.

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