



FORUM

University of Edinburgh
Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts
Issue 33 | 2022

Title	Transatlantic Exile and Othering in Edith Wharton's <i>The Age of Innocence</i>
Author	Tia Byer
Publication	FORUM: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture & the Arts
Issue Number	33
Publication Date	September 2022

FORUM claims non-exclusive rights to reproduce this article electronically (in full or in part) and to publish this work in any such media current or later developed. The author retains all rights, including the right to be identified as the author wherever and whenever this article is published, and the right to use all or part of the article and abstracts, with or without revision or modification in compilations or other publications. Any latter publication shall recognise *FORUM* as the original publisher.

Transatlantic Exile and Othering in Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*

Tia Byer

The University of Edinburgh

Edith Wharton's The Age of Innocence is a tale of transatlantic exclusion and differentiation depicting the Europeanized American Countess Ellen Olenska's return to the capitalist and insular society of Old New York. This article examines the fundamental irony of what is a broadly cosmopolitan novel, permeated by differing degrees of hierarchy, racial and ethnic labelling, and immigrant activity. In this novel, Wharton shows how continental expatriation, which is the legacy of being American, is written out of the national narrative. Ellen's status as the compromised and exoticized cultural 'other' becomes demonised as a corruptive force by the American elite, who fear that evidence of American cultural adaptability and cosmopolitan acculturation disproves the founding myths pertaining to exceptionalist notions of the New World's racial distinction. By tracing the tribal savagery that the upper echelons of New York society display in response to Newland Archer's and Ellen's flirtation, this article demonstrates the inaccuracy of enforced hemispheric binarization. I argue that Ellen's forceful and brutal eradication from New York society, although intended to reinstate the near-compromised dignity of American ideals and future bloodlines, instead derives from self-conscious misjudgement concerning national insularity

Introduction

As Edith Wharton's biographer Hermione Lee points out, even though "*The Age of Innocence* is obviously a novel about America . . . it is just as much a novel about America's relationship to Europe" (576). The following article will contextualize this transatlantic preoccupation as deriving from postcolonial national insecurity. Set during the 1870s, an epoch Wharton describes in her autobiography, *A Backward Glance*, as being characterized by "people . . . either just arriving from 'abroad' or just embarking on a European tour," *The Age of Innocence* focalises cultural ambivalence between the Old World and New through its contrasting views of cosmopolitanism (61). In the text, transatlantic passage is, at times, seen as an opportunity for cultivation, signified by references to the "rites" and "sophistication" (Waid 81) of "the grand tour" (Wharton 81), or the customary "European travel" (Wharton, *The Age of Innocence* 80). At other times, however, cosmopolitanism is characterized as a "regrettable taste for travel" (38), epitomized by the character of Ellen Olenska, whose recent

return from Europe raises “disconcerting questions” (38) about the stability of American identity as exceptional in its insularity and inherent innocence.

This article will interrogate the latter circumstance, tracing how transatlantic interaction, and subsequent flirtations, induce anxieties concerning hereditary pollution between the perceived purity of American “stock” (10) and the corrupting influence of the “queer Europeanised American” (120). In analysing transatlantic flirtation as one possible site of colonial destabilization in Wharton’s text, I trace how foreign incursion—whether sexual, moral or political—induces anxiety in the American literary characters. I argue that such apprehensions lead to a sense of transatlantic othering and categorisation, which encourages cultural demonization and exclusion. When external contaminators—characterised as exotic, dirty and possessing a seemingly dark otherness—appear erotic and sexually appealing, Wharton renders endangered the self-enclosed national identity of inherent innocence.

My reading interprets Ellen Olenska’s eventual rejection as the direct result of her apparent cultural transgression, which becomes a threat to both the protected American character and pedigree. Drawing upon textual issues pertaining to “international and sexual politics” (Bauer, *Edith Wharton’s Brave New Politics* 4), I argue that cross-contamination via cultural contact evokes a fear of the rigorously regulated American identity “being tainted with [a] ‘foreignness’” (Wharton 124) that could undermine American notions of “impregnability” (157). In particular, the following analysis charts the mythic discourse of De Crevecoeur’s rootless American, signifying a distinct and “*new* race of men” (55, emphasis added), which is discernible in Wharton’s characterization of national self-definition. The primitive “little tribe” (111) of New York, which “registers as the central crux of American identity” (MacMaster 461), seeks to prevent the love affair between the native Newland Archer and the transplanted Ellen due to fears of genetic pollution. By protecting both Archer’s “venerable and venerated family tree” (134) and acknowledging the exposed permeability of America’s cultural border, the social circle led by Archer’s wife and Ellen’s cousin, May Welland, forcefully eradicate the impure Ellen to ensure national continuity.

In signifying a sexual invasion and “temptation” (150), Ellen’s role as *agent provocateur* is twofold in its manifestation. First, Newland’s attraction to the sexualized European other reveals the permeability of the supposed “well-defined” (Pennell 140) American character. Secondly, her presence reveals the self-conscious straits that the ‘tribal’ society undergoes to defend its nationhood’s founding legitimacy and secure its future, which in turn lays bare its

own artifice and fragility. As I will show, the latter tendency eventually ignites and ‘justifies’ Ellen’s ultimate exile.

Methodology

Within the novel, the misreadings, anxieties and paranoia that such international fraternization triggers derive from the postcolonial angst associated with confronting cultural differences that cannot easily be categorised and defined. I claim that this transatlantic ambivalence is indicative of what Kariann Akemi Yokota calls the nation’s perceived “postcolonial period,” or the transhistorical “process of unbecoming British” (10). Postcolonialism “calls attention to the negative heritage of colonial or national practices” (Rowe 79), whilst ‘to unbecome’ refers to the way in which Anglo-American “colonials-turned-citizens had to create an interstitial space between their former identity as British subjects and the new political and cultural context in which they now found themselves” (Yokota 11). The colonial heritage to which I refer is thus America’s British imperialist legacy and, genealogically speaking, the European immigrant-turned-settler. The “implicit supposition that there is a clean break between” the moment when the American “community loses its status as a ‘colony’” and when it “becomes a ‘nation’” is destabilized by Wharton (Watts 1). Yokota explains the revolutionary nation’s anxiety in being British by origin but American by political force (238), where “like people of other nations emerging from colonialism” the “American elites placed a premium on adopting elements of European culture as a way of establishing their own legitimacy” (8–9). American transatlantic ambivalence signifies a paradoxical “emulation and resentful adoration” of its colonising authorities; this is discernible in Wharton’s text through the New World’s concurrent reverence and jealousy of Europe’s history of tradition (240).

Whilst Yokota’s research is invaluable to my analysis, interrogating the cultural postcolonial relationship between America and its transatlantic forbearers nevertheless risks confusing postcolonial “methods, models and terminology with geopolitical realities” (Rowe 80). The geopolitical realities to which John Carlos Rowe refers include “those blind spots commonly overlooked within a trajectory of grand national narratives” (Giles, *Virtual Americas* 16), namely “the historical fact that the United States pursued colonial policies in conjunction with its anticolonial revolution” (Rowe 79). Rowe warns against “conclud[ing] hastily that because the United States emerged from the eighteenth-century anticolonial struggle, it qualifies as a postcolonial state” (79). Yokota does nevertheless claim that America

cannot qualify “in the traditionally defined ‘family of postcolonial nations’.” This is because she reads “the British version of high culture . . . common to all of Western Europe” as being America’s source of “postcolonial anxiety” (239). In categorising post-revolutionary America as an example not of “Third-World,” but “*Second-World* postcolonialism” (Watts 8), Yokota, and I too in this article, maintain that the nation as “the ‘settler’ colony . . . [is] a site of very particular dual inscription; a place that is colonized at the same time as it is colonizing” (Lawson 157). As such, this article refers to revolutionary Anglo-America’s postcolonial struggle as a self-qualified inhabitation.

Perceived national innocence and purity in Wharton’s text is the aspect of American identity that is threatened by cosmopolitan traffic. Accordingly, I rely heavily on R.W.B. Lewis’s twentieth-century reading of nineteenth-century literature, in which he proposed the identity paradigm of the American Adam. Intended to circumvent the mythic narrative describing national founding as “rightful” and “noble” (99–89), this Adamic figure encouraged and embodied American Exceptionalism, that is, the “belief in America’s special character and role in the world” (Friedman n.p.). Adam Philips and Ruth Bernard Yeazell’s analysis of flirtation and female codified behaviour helps elucidate how in *The Age of Innocence* the feared obliteration of national borders through interbreeding thwarts America’s existence as a separate, insular continent.

In Wharton’s fiction, the anxiety surrounding female sexuality and transgression become metonymic of fears about national intactness. The implications of this for the entire culture are projected onto the American female, whose symbolic “virgin purity” that cannot withstand “contamination” must be regulated (Bernard Yeazell 42). Female chastity becomes “imagined as a kind of boundary making, a virtue especially important to preserve at moments when other boundaries seem vulnerable,” establishing her as “both pure” and “serv[ing] as a talisman against danger” (23). However, as this article will show, in *The Age of Innocence* American male resistance to a foreign potential sexual partner becomes just as important. As such, control over these transatlantic flirtations and relationships exposes the residual postcolonial anxiety whereby America suppresses its cultural newness and hence vulnerability.

Preventing possible transatlantic interbreeding coincides with European demonization, whereby in having the potential to reveal the immateriality of Lewis’s “archetypal” (5) American cosmopolitanism, sexual relations become a threat. Harsh condemnation of the Europeanized culprit is counteractive, however, since in attempting to restore and “in resorting back to these myths as a way to show their strength of identity,” Americans “inadvertently

draw attention to how fragile this identity is” (Mitchell 7). Paul Giles’s formulation of the American political imaginary—of the idealised (and mythological) self-perception of its secure boundaries, national strength, solidarity and insularity, and how these are complicated by the transatlantic passage—serves to demonstrate the artificially contrived and maintained Adamic propensity that I interrogate. Othering of the European counterpart becomes the American characters’ strategic deflection, and Giles explains how this is exposed by transatlantic interactions. When America’s self-definition occurs through a process of external cultural comparison, American identity reveals itself as illegitimate and imagined.

Wharton’s authorial transatlantic ambivalence and its subsequent deconstruction occur within the text’s contrasting femininities. Wharton illustrates the female dichotomy through the “pure” (Wharton 115) and “innocent” (91) American feminine “ideal” (95) of May, and her continental counterpart, who is “experienced” (80) as wife to a “scoundrel” count (198) and rumoured “mistress” (174) to his secretary. Ellen’s removal back to Europe as “a conspiracy of rehabilitation and obliteration” (Wharton 203) hides “the mutability of culture” (Bentley 459) and reflects authorial questioning of binary hemispheric categorisations. Wharton’s “objective narrative eschews” and renounces the validity of national attribution to which the characters attach themselves regarding contrasting perceptions of female propriety (Bell, Introduction 6). Wharton’s ironic treatment of the transatlantically othered Ellen, whose guiltless conduct in the affair with Newland renders her most ‘innocent,’ deconstructs her supposed corrupting influence and, when she is expelled from New York society, her own illusions of a “safe” and “good” American refuge become decentred (Wharton 42).

As I will show, control over the homogenous identity and future of the American bloodline derives from the sustained national insecurity of post-revolutionary infancy. When the mythologized narrative of American exceptionalism and impenetrability—“in which, as yet, hardly a fissure had been made or a foothold gained” (31)—comes under pressure due to transatlantic mobility and invasion, America’s status as a postcolonial nation resurfaces. Wharton’s American self-regulation and purification of foreign and potentially corrupting strains (such as Ellen’s) occur as a result of the postcolonial angst that Yokota categorises as “displays of arrogance, violence, and hubris stemm[ing] from a position of ‘marginality’ and ‘insecurity’” (239). This close reading will show how, when “the Old New Yorker [comes] into continual contact with the land of his fathers” (239), the self-prescribed essentialism of Adamic national purity becomes unstable (Wharton, *A Backwards Glance* 61). In its

requirement for eugenic regulation, American cultural identity reveals its contingency, which in turn betrays its mythological origin.

Cosmopolitanism and Transcontinental Identities

For Wharton, Ellen's identity as a "queer cosmopolitan woman" is a direct result of the 'regretful' form of transcontinental travel that shaped her childhood (*The Age of Innocence* 120). In qualifying her upbringing as a "roaming babyhood" (38), Wharton links Ellen to the version of cosmopolitanism that induces an "existential state of non-belonging" (Goldsmith and Orlando 3) that risks individuals "mov[ing] easily between cultures" (Dawson 258). Born an American, Ellen is a descendant of the Mingott family, one of society's "ruling clans" (31). Beginning with the "English [and] Dutch merchants, who came to the colonies to make their fortune" (32), the Mingotts' "deep respect" (Chow 39) derives from "the past that they represent," namely a pure and "long American ancestry" (Lewis, *Edith Wharton: A Biography* 41). However, Ellen's cosmopolitan experience transgresses the prescribed "extreme isolationism of Americans abroad" (Edwards 486) characterised by, wherever possible, "never having exchanged a word with a 'foreigner'" (Wharton 117).

By failing to adhere to the encouraged cultural appreciation through mere tourism, Ellen becomes "tainted" (124) and falls victim to the influencing "dark menace from abroad" (80). Here, the fear of national contamination derives from anxiety about cultural augmentation achieved by crossing geographic borders. Ellen's infancy, her identity as a daughter to "continental wanders" (38) and subsequent marriage to a "Polish nobleman" (39) cause a cultural immersion that renders her "completely Europeanised" (90). Ellen's native identity becomes compromised and effectively erased as a result of her continental acculturation. The text, however, does not just evoke the fear that America in particular "risked its dignity in foreign lands" (123); native character becomes equally vulnerable with the arrival of foreign contaminators.

American 'integrity' is set up as contrasting inherently with the Europeanized character; defining itself against the latter, it features as the Bourdieuan "doxic" experience in Wharton's text (164). In his theorization about the foundations of anthropology, Bourdieu claims that in any given society there exist commonly held beliefs about "what is essential" and "self-evident," calling such opinions "doxa" (164). However, a doxa is a subjectively drawn deduction; it does not provide evidence of societal truths, and, as such, it is contestable in its imagined capacity. In the context of the New World's interaction with the Old, America's doxa

is one of exceptionalism and insularity. This accordingly figures as a contrived and “absolute form of recognition of legitimacy through misrecognition of arbitrariness” (168), whereby America deduces its own unique innocence by constructing European otherness. The American characters recognise their distinction as “awfully moral” (Wharton 36) by emphasizing a sexualized Europeanized amorality. Whilst the text explores “all other forms of European identity” (Starcevic 112), ranging from the “desirable sources” of continental affiliation such as the van der Luydens’ cousin, the “Duke of St Austrey” (Wharton 37), to the dubious Julius Beaufort figure—a “‘foreigner’ of doubtful origin” (20) who can only be “tolerated” (157) since he married into “one of America’s most honoured families” (13)—as well as Polish, Italian, French and Dutch characters, it is important to remember that, as a Europeanized figure, Ellen is perceived to represent corruptibility. Europeanized corruptibility, indeed the continental characteristic under investigation in this article, is a specifically *sexual* immorality.

Competing Femininities and Erotic Miscegenation

Wharton others Ellen by establishing a binary between the female cousins, which in turn establishes “Europeanized Americans as culturally . . . more complex than their European or American ‘cousins’” (Starcevic vi). Ellen falls short of “becom[ing] a complete American again” (Wharton 42) when she transgresses the American female ideal, becoming more closely aligned with the cultural characteristics acquired “from the other side of the Atlantic” (100). Existing in a society “obsessed with female purity,” Wharton’s claim that “Ellen Olenska was like no other woman” (183) suggests that “female sexual experience itself [is] tainted with foreignness” (Waid xvii). For instance, when Ellen “mistaken[ly]” (Wharton 29) dresses in a way that reveals “a little more shoulder and bosom than New York was accustomed to seeing” (10), she provokes a “shocked and troubled” (11) reaction, making herself “too foreign for a New York which is caught between its self-protective parochialism, and its consciousness of European” sexualisation (Lee 120). Ellen possesses a “past” and compromised “reputation” (Wharton 17) as “a women who had run away from her husband, reputedly with another man” (145). Consequently, this establishes Ellen as the female sexualized ‘other’. Her distinctly European expression of femininity and sexuality makes Ellen a displaced member of the tribe.

Ellen’s sexualized foreignness and non-belonging pose a threat to New York’s nativist obsession with remaining “all alike,” where “not one of them wants to be different; they’re as scared of it as the small-pox” (95). This simile compares the fear of difference to the fear of illness. This evident stigmatisation is suggestive of a biopolitical undertone, whereby

discrimination is based upon what is considered ‘normal’ or ‘natural’. According to Michel Foucault, since the eighteenth century in “capitalist society, it was biopolitics, the biological, the somatic, the corporeal, that mattered more than anything” (*Dits et écrits* 210). Characteristics “of a set of living beings forming a population: health, hygiene, birthrate . . . race” can be used as a form of governing authority designed to manage a population (Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics* 317). Consequently, irrational prejudice and racism (both hetero-referential and internal) ensue. The body as a biopolitical reality in *The Age of Innocence* manifests via control over reproduction. In particular, the way in which Ellen’s stigmatised foreignness is categorised as abnormal and harmful betrays anxieties about cross-contamination.

Wharton elucidates this concern as one of cultural interbreeding through the depiction of the transatlantic love affair. For instance, Newland undermines American identity as an “impenetrable reserve” (117) when he begins to develop feelings for Ellen, eventually falling in love with her. The desire to see and be near Ellen becomes a “longing [that] was with him day and night, an incessant undefinable craving” (44). Newland describes their secret relationship as “our being together and not together . . . simply two human beings who love each other” (90). From initially viewing Ellen in accordance with the “cherished” and “allied” (40) tribal collective, by exhibiting xenophobic anxiety towards Ellen’s cultural difference, Newland begins to transgress hegemonic opinions in his attraction to and desire for her. Considering how “flirtation . . . puts in disarray our sense of order” (Elliot 310–311), however, Newland’s loyalties become estranged from the “habit of . . . solidarity” (Wharton 6). For instance, although “it was generally agreed . . . that the Countess Olenska had ‘lost her looks’” (38), Newland “rejected the general verdict” (40). This foreshadows “the novel[’s] concerns [with] Ellen’s erotic control over Archer” and its implications for the legitimacy of national character and cultural as well as geographic borders (Bauer 480).

Hereditary Purity and Reproductive Politics

The issue of “blood” (Wharton 20) and hereditary purity is evoked through the “eugenicist ideologies” (Bauer, *Brave New Politics* 21) in the text, by which American society controls its own “reproduction politics” (22). Newland’s paranoia about being at “the centre of countless silently observing eyes and patiently listening ears” (200), as he and Ellen try to find “somewhere where we can be alone” (185), communicates fear of what Bernard Yeazell identifies as the outcome of flirtation’s “biological urge” (233). When the consequence of

flirtation is “a form of exchange between people” (Phillips xxii), and ultimately sex, there inevitably follows an increased risk of “reproductive chances” (Gersick and Kurzban 550). The suitability of May as a reproductive mate is made clear through the mythological conceit of Diana the Huntress. For instance, the simile describing how May “looked like a Diana” (Wharton 42) evidences her society’s concern with eugenics as the Roman “virgin goddess was . . . responsible for overseeing the rites of childbirth” (Waid 42). If May, as an American, represents ‘ideal’ maternity, Ellen, as her corrupted cousin, represents impurity and contamination.

In *The Age of Innocence* breeding is “a social cement” (Bauer, “Whiteness” 476), with Wharton claiming that “people cling to any convention that keeps the family together, protects the children” (71). Reproductive policing becomes a biopolitical strategy. American “purity of lineage” determines the sanctioned romance (Pennell 140), as when because “there was no better match in New York than May Welland” (7) Newland was “bound to” her (74). He had to choose a well-regulated and preserved future bride from his own set. Newland’s patriotic pedigree in having a “great-grandfather [who] signed the Declaration” (32), and May’s shared but uncorrupted Mingott heritage, fulfils “social reproduction” (Rae Greeson 420). By “preserving fluid” (Wharton 115) upon marrying into the Archer clan, May confidently expresses how nothing bad “ever can happen now” (114).

Regulation of American purity protects the “exceptionalism” and “insularity” that Mark Dyreson identifies as the “fulcrums of American nationhood” (940). Such ideologies are derivative of displays affirming that “the [American] frontier had closed” (940) and that the nation was complete in its establishment. This exclusionary and all-determining process, however, becomes disrupted through cosmopolitan mobility. The self-professed “tight little citadel” is in fact afraid of any threat that might provoke the deviation, weakening, and dilution of American identity (Wharton 20). Inclusion is not welcome. America as the “proud city built on rocks stronger than oceans,” with its protective “city walls” (Reagan n.p), becomes radically destabilized when faced with cultural invasion.

The fear of difference in *The Age of Innocence* is epitomized by Europeanized-American cultural fluidity and hybridisation. Newland, in his potential to mate with Ellen and mix bloodlines, poses a threat to the textual American process of “reproducing itself without contamination” (Knights 27). To “receive a foreigner” into the American gene pool and cultural arena means that the exceptional and desired “congenital supremacy” (MacMaster 470) of ‘impenetrable reserve’ will “not appear as a single, monolithic construct” (Starcevic 112). The

implications of the feared sexual union, with its potential for “racial degeneracy” (Bauer, *Brave New Politics* 31) and evocation of “borderless solidarities” (Culbert 539), intensify when Newland’s transgressions see him question the way in which national identity maintains itself by using “arbitrary signs” of reinforcement (Wharton 29).

Transatlantic Flirtation and Cultural Penetration

When Newland welcomes external penetrability by visiting Ellen’s parlour, he begins to undergo a transatlantic transformation and enlightenment. He crosses over from the disbaring convention of his culture into the remote sphere inhabited by the distinctly othered Ellen. Cultural infusion experienced within the overwhelmingly “foreign . . . atmosphere of the room,” into which “he was being too deeply drawn” (Wharton 49) disrupts his nativist affiliation. Newland finds Ellen’s status as ‘other’ appealing when viewing her environment through the lens of erotic difference. The alliteration seen in the line describing Ellen’s house as “perverse and provocative” yet “undeniably pleasing” in its foreignness, aligns Ellen with the exotic Orient (67). When Ellen’s “strange quarter” meant “New York seemed much farther off than Samarkand” (49), Wharton makes explicit her use of orientalist fetishization. In being “conceptualised . . . as feminine, erotic, [and] exotic” (Reina Lewis 54), Wharton characterises Ellen as the sexually experienced foreigner who is constantly othered due to her “evocation of fear and desire” (Waid xviii).

However, Wharton decodes the process of cultural othering, a phenomenon Edward Said recognised as a deliberate distortion and a “corporate institution for dealing with the Orient, dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it” and “dominating [its] restructuring” (3). Conscious of the curious way in which she reversed his values” (66), Newland’s reality becomes decentred by Ellen, which in turn “dramatizes the forces of dislocation pressuring a whole social group” (Bentley 454). By observing the self-regulation of American purity from the standpoint of the metaphorical ‘Samarkand,’ which emphasises his newfound disconnection from America’s self-categorisation, Newland appreciates how difference becomes overemphasized in the process of ensuring American insularity. To understand how this ‘other’ is constructed undermines what the American characters seek to protect—the legitimacy and security of their Adamic innocence. Xenophobic exclusion is revealed to be deliberately enforced.

Ellen reveals the contrived inaccuracy with which “America is ostensibly contrasted with Europe” (MacMaster 472) by implying that in viewing Europe as inherently morally corrupt,

America “*projects* onto the object” (466 emphasis added) an intentionally narrowly enforced distinction, used for its own gain. This communicates how exoticized othering “stem[s] from the divide between . . . a largely imaginary line that was less about physical geography as it was a human construction of an Oriental realm that was the polar opposite to a similarly constructed ‘West’” (Herath 32). As such, transatlantic flirtation becomes threatening, not only due to its risk of biological contamination via interbreeding, but also psychological corruption in its potential to spread ‘disconcerting’ questioning about national integrity, which for Newland undermines “the structure of his universe” (65).

Postcolonial Insecurity and Tribal Exclusion

In choosing the biologically and ideologically unfit Ellen over the idealised female May, who “was *supposed* to be what he wanted” (Wharton 30 emphasis added) as an American, Newland implicitly reveals the mythologically fashioned national identity to which his society pertains. His enlightenment betrays America’s “bifocal” (Watt 2) tendency, signifying its postcolonial dependency as a “culture that looked in different directions simultaneously” (Giles, *Transatlantic Insurrections* 2). Looking back upon and across to the continent from which America derives, the offspring nation, as culturally insecure and comparatively infant, requires a reminder of its legitimate founding cause. When others suspect this, it induces a “tribal discipline” (153) further revealing the construction and cultural insecurity by which Americans have abided. America must invent an ‘other’ to measure itself against and to promote its own purity, and Ellen, in her overly-sexualized role, is turned into the “black sheep that their blameless stock had produced” (10).

As an anomaly, Ellen represents how the “individual . . . is nearly always sacrificed to what is supposed to be the collective interest” (71). She is a force that betrays how cultural mutability and permeability of borders chameleonicly change and augment when faced with what Bourdieu deems the “objective crisis” of cultural contact (168). This “brings the undiscussed into discussion,” and occurs when transatlantic flirtation induces a “breaking . . . between the subjective structures and the objective structures” of society (169). The hegemony forcibly “armour[s]” (Wharton 121) itself against the revelation of “cultural secrets” (Bercovitch 5) that have been “hidden from view by interpretation,” such as America’s status as cultural artefact, deriving from narratives of origin reconstituted by a procession of “great minds and talents” (9).

Transatlantic flirtation and cultural invasion penetrate the proposed impenetrable nation and national character, causing Wharton to render the “little republican distinctions” artificially contrived and thus vulnerable (57). Newland laments that when “there was always a traitor in the citadel . . . what was the use of pretending that it was impregnable?” (157). Faced with a “love affair [that] threatens the ritual transmission of American cultural values” (Bauer, “Whiteness” 476), the “hieroglyphic world, where the real thing was never said or done” (Wharton 29) and which is signified by desires to be “spared whatever was ‘unpleasant’” (61), is where Wharton most effectively reveals American identity to be “represented by a set of arbitrary signs” (29).

The fact that “the very boundaries that determine cultural identity and meaning are silently, and in times of crisis, actively policed” (Bentley 457), evokes a form of cultural amnesia embodied by the postcolonial hang-up about cultural infancy and hence insignificance. This is a transhistoric phenomenon and is indicative of how the repressed adverse facts of cultural formation, where America’s founding was a “barbaric context made [romanticized] text,” becomes re-enacted when the self-prescribed innocence requires continued surveillance (Bercovitch 12). A cultural artefact deriving from narratives of origin, America’s enforced birth was achieved by revolutionary violence and genealogical separation that becomes reconstituted into a mythically noble cause. Consequently, this twofold aspect of American identity necessitates repression and denial. Within a transatlantic context, the Europeanized American “destroys self-evidence” (Bourdieu 168) of the “artificially . . . self-baptized” Adamic identity (Slotkin 6). This figure’s cultural hybridization and fluidity undermine notions of America’s distinct individuality by “lay[ing] siege to the tight[ly]” imagined national identity (Wharton 20).

Upon revealing May’s complicity in Ellen’s tribal erasure and final exile, Wharton elucidates the arbitrary signs of national figuration. As an “aggressive assertion of superiority” (Yokota 240), when New York conducts an exorcism of the impure by eliminating Ellen, it embodies the postcolonial condition that Yokota describes as “patriotic pride in American strength [which] often arose out of situations in which Americans were not in positions of power” (239). American ‘innocence’ “is quite ironically regarded” (Bell, Introduction 6) when the tribe “triumphantly” (Wharton 203) ensures Ellen’s return “passage for Europe was engaged” (200). Wharton renounces the validity of the binarizing national categorisation when the “‘Europeanized’ woman of experience [becomes] vulnerable” (Bell 6). In choosing to forego her romantic potential with Newland upon learning of May’s pregnancy (a condition

that May had pre-emptively revealed to Ellen “a fortnight” earlier, that is, well before May had received the medical confirmation enabling her to tell Newland and hence claim “victory” [205]), Ellen becomes the innocent victim punished for immoral behaviour she had yet to act upon.

Although identified as the main “culprit” (26) and a “temptation to Archer” (150), Ellen wards off his affections since consummation would “destroy” the lives of the Mingott clan (187). Ellen’s embrace of Europe has not compromised her integrity, thus disproving the insecure tribe’s fears and projections. Ellen’s “self-containment and chasteness” which, due to her European affiliation remains “unthinkable to the family” (Knights 33), undermines not only Ellen’s own belief in the ‘good’ America but also demonstrates how the ‘Adamic’ society draws on primitive and “uncivilized” behavioural techniques to “convert the very arbitrariness of manners into a continuing source of meaning and cohesion” (Bentley 454). Americans become the very “savages” (Wharton 120) and “barbarians” (197) Bercovitch identifies as the national insecurities that originally fostered the creation of myth as a form of national assertion. When Adamic “innocence is ideological” and a “mask” worn “while we engage in our actual atrocious intersubjective behaviour” (Mitchell 13), May’s apparent “curtain” of “niceness” is a strategic deflection, which eventually lifts to reveal her duplicitous truth (Wharton 129).

May’s American female innocence reveals its artifice when she removes Ellen (30) and shows that “to commit to the American Adam is to evoke . . . the existence of an *a priori* state of innocence,” and not one based on fact (Mitchell 13). May’s brutalized scheming, which Wharton deems “New York’s way of taking life ‘without effusion of blood,’” reinstates the near compromised ‘dignity’ of American ideals and future bloodline. This extreme action, however, demonstrates how categories of national and hemispheric affiliation cannot easily be reduced to a set of binary characteristics, and instead derive from self-conscious misjudgement (201).

Conclusion

When in *The Age of Innocence* American geographic and ideological borders intersect, the threat posed to one by a Europeanized invasion likewise weakens the other. Othering features as a self-perpetuating oscillation between enviable cultural status and integrity and accusatory cultural renunciation. This is the frailty of American identity, which must remain concealed during transatlantic cosmopolitanism. Promoted as inherently insular in its exceptionalism, this identity requires rigid regulation (Wharton 61). Ellen, and Newland’s desire for her, reveal the

nature of America and its connection to the Old World, in which “New York managed its transitions” and problems by “conspiring to ignore them till they were well over” (Wharton 157). Discrepancies and incongruities facing the idealised American doxa must remain unacknowledged and controlled. Through her ironic narrative voice, Wharton therefore deliberately exposes these hemispheric characteristics, figured by two counteracting female (and cultural) identities, as being arbitrary in their signification. By directing readers’ transatlantic comparative perspective, Wharton lays bare the national insecurity deriving from America’s revolutionary angst concerning continental vulnerability, infancy and feared insignificance.

Works cited

- Bauer, Dale M. *Edith Wharton's Brave New Politics*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994. Print.
- . “Whiteness and the Power of Darkness in *The Age of Innocence*.” *The Age of Innocence: Authoritative Text, Background and Contexts, Sources, Criticism*. Edited by Candace Waid, New York: Norton, 2003, pp. 474–482. Print.
- Bell, Millicent. Editor. Introduction. *The Cambridge Companion to Edith Wharton*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, pp. 1–19. Print.
- Bentley, Nancy. “Realism, Relativism, and the Discipline of Manners.” *The Age of Innocence*. Edited by Candace Waid, New York: Norton, 2003, pp. 447–461. Print.
- Bercovitch, Sacvan. *The Rites of Assent: Transformations of the Symbolic Construction of America*. New York: Routledge, 1993. Print.
- Bernard Yeazell, Ruth. *Fictions of Modesty: Women and Courtship in the English Novel*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991. Print.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. 1972. Translated by Richard Nice, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. Print.
- Chow, Sung Gay. “Pollution Control in Old New York: Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*.” *CEA Critic*, vol. 60, no. 3, 1998, pp. 37–49. EPUB.
- Culbert, John. “Mobility, Exile, and Native Identity in the Work of Edith Wharton.” *Mobilities*, vol. 12, no. 4, 2017, pp. 534–547. EPUB.
- Dawson, Melanie. “The Limits of the Cosmopolitan Experience in Wharton's *The Buccaneers*.” *Legacy: A Journal of American Women Writers*, vol. 31, no. 2, 2014, pp. 258–280. EPUB.
- De Crevecoeur, J. Hector St. John. *Letters from an American Farmer*. 1782. Carlisle, MA: Applewood Books, 1904. Print.
- Dyreson, Mark. “Prologue: The Paradoxes of American Insularity, Exceptionalism and Imperialism.” *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, vol. 22, no. 6, 2005, pp. 938–945. EPUB.
- Edwards, Brian T. “The Well-Built Wall of Culture: Old New York and Its Harems.” *The Age of Innocence: Authoritative Text, Background and Contexts, Sources, Criticism*. Edited by Candace Waid, New York: Norton, 2003, pp. 482–506. Print.
- Elliott, Anthony. “On Flirtation.” Review of *On Flirtation*, by Phillips, Adam. *Free Associations*, vol. 6, no. 2, 1996, pp. 310–313. Print.

- Foucault, Michel. *Dits et écrits II*. Paris: Gallimard, 2001. Print.
- *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978–79*.
Translated by Graham Burchell. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. Print.
- Gersick, Andrew, and Robert Kurzban. “Covert Sexual Signaling: Human Flirtation and Implications for Other Social Species.” *Evolutionary Psychology*, vol. 12, no. 3, 2014, pp. 549–69. EPUB.
- Giles, Paul. *Transatlantic Insurrections: British Culture and the Formation of American Literature, 1730–1860*. Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001. Print.
- *Virtual Americas Transnational Fictions and the Transatlantic Imaginary*.
Durham: Duke University Press, 2002. Print.
- Goldsmith, Meredith, and Emily J. Orlando. *Edith Wharton and Cosmopolitanism*.
Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2017. Print.
- Knights, Pamela. “The Social Subject in *The Age of Innocence*.” *The Cambridge Companion to Edith Wharton*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, pp. 20–47. Print.
- Lee, Hermione. *Edith Wharton*. London: Chatto & Windus, 2007. Print.
- Lewis, Reina. “‘Only Women Should Go to Turkey’ Henriette Browne and Women's Orientalism.” *Third Text*, vol. 7, no. 22, 1993, pp. 53–64. Print.
- Lewis, R.W.B. *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century*. 1955. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959. Print.
- *Edith Wharton: A Biography*. London: Harper & Row, 1975. Print.
- MacMaster, Anne. “Wharton, Race and *The Age of Innocence*.” *The Age of Innocence: Authoritative Text, Background and Contexts, Sources, Criticism*. Edited by Candace Waid, New York: Norton, 2003, pp. 461–474. Print.
- Mitchell, Jonathon. *Revisions of the American Adam: Innocence, Identity and Masculinity in Twentieth-Century America*. Norfolk: Fakenham Prepress, 2011. Print.
- Phillips, Adam. *On Flirtation*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994. Print.
- Rae Greeson, Jennifer. “Wharton’s Outlines for *The Age of Innocence*: Three Versions.” *The Age of Innocence: Authoritative Text, Background and Contexts, Sources, Criticism*. Edited by Candace Waid, New York: Norton, 2003, pp. 413–421. Print.
- Reagan, Ronald. “Farewell Address to the Nation: January 11, 1989.” *Ronald Reagan: Presidential Library and Museum*, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/011189i>. Accessed 4 April 2022. Website.

- Said, Edward. *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*. 1978. London: Penguin, 1995. Print.
- Slotkin, Richard. *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier 1600–1860*. 1973. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2000. Print.
- Starcevic, Jasmina. *Passing and the Figure of the Europeanized American in Edith Wharton's Fiction*. 2005. Purdue University, PhD dissertation.
- Waid, Candace, and Wharton, Edith. *The Age of Innocence: Authoritative Text, Background and Contexts, Sources, Criticism*. New York: Norton, 2003. Print.
- Watts, Edward. *Writing and Postcolonialism in the Early Republic*. Charlottesville, University Press of Virginia, 1998. Print.
- Wharton, Edith. *The Age of Innocence*. 1920. Edited by Candace Waid, New York: Norton, 2003. Print.
- *A Backward Glance*. 1934. New York: Scribner's, 1964. Print.
- Yokota, Kariann Akemi. *Unbecoming British: How Revolutionary America Became a Postcolonial Nation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. Print.