The Limits of the Cosmopolitan Experience in Wharton’s *The Buccaneers*

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Edith Wharton’s final, unfinished novel, *The Buccaneers*, published posthumously in 1938, charts the great excitement of its eponymous characters’ initial journey to England and examines what happens when the exhilaration of travel ends and the reality of living abroad begins. Five young American women cross the Atlantic, marry, and settle into the storied homes of the British gentry. Playfully termed “buccaneers” by two older women who advise them and smooth the way for their social entrée, the young women are hardly, as the title implies, pirates, much less plunderers of traveling vessels. Rather than operating as rootless raiders free to transport their spoils across the globe, Wharton’s buccaneers are invaders who, upon settling into marriage, must confront the cultural expectations of their adopted home:

“I think I’m tired of trying to be English,” [Nan] pronounced. The Dowager rose also, drawing herself up to her full height. “Trying to be? But you *are* English. When you became my son’s wife you acquired his nationality. Nothing can change that now.”

“Nothing?”

“Nothing.” (413)

Near the end of *The Buccaneers*, this conversation between the Dowager Duchess of Tintagel and Nan, her young daughter-in-law and the current duchess, signals the end of a cosmopolitan fantasy wherein characters move easily between cultures. Sensing the futility of her hope to act as a citizen of the world (this being the broadest definition of a cosmopolitan subject), Nan addresses the dowager’s contention that, upon her marriage to the duke, she irrevocably assumed his nationality. This belief collides with Nan’s wish to remain nationally undefined. At issue is not only the fact that Nan does not self-identify as
a British subject but also that she quite possibly chooses not to embrace any nationalized identity, and certainly not one acquired through marriage.

As do other Wharton novels, The Buccaneers depicts the degree to which the act of joining a society requires the acceptance of possibilities and limits in equal measure. What particularly interests Wharton in The Buccaneers is the moment when nationalist interests emerge as a corrective to cosmopolitan openness—that is, when demands for conformity reveal an underlying cultural inflexibility that newly married young women find both surprising and troubling. Understanding the cosmopolitan as “an enlightened individual who believes that he or she belongs to a common humanity or world order rather than to a set of particular customs or traditions” reveals something of the openness of the cosmopolitan experience, where “common humanity” trumps local concerns (Trepanier and Habib 1). Taking pointed interest in the relationship between transnational marriages and the cosmopolitan experience, The Buccaneers stresses the difficulty of maintaining ideals about belonging to “a common humanity” beyond the romance of courtship. Transnational marriages seem to uphold a cosmopolitan ideal of exploring mutually rewarding differences traceable across cultural boundaries; however, as the young Duchess of Tintagel observes, the expectation to embody one’s new nation supplants a vision of “enlightened” world citizenship.

Wharton lived what could be described as a cosmopolitan experience; she was a lifelong enthusiastic traveler who recorded her travels and the insights they afforded her. Wharton’s recently published letters to her governess, Anna Bahlmann, begun when she was twelve, record her accounts of the bonds travel could create with both people and material surroundings (Goldman-Price). Similar letters to later correspondents would record the delights of many journeys. Born and married in New York, Wharton was a multilingual expatriate who spent her formative years largely in France and Italy and lies buried in Versailles. She published travel books on Italy, France, and Morocco, set her novels in both Europe and the United States, and saw her work translated into multiple languages. She also participated in the growing trend toward world travel alongside such contemporaries as Henry Adams, John Dewey, Henry James, and John Singer Sargent, whose roles as connoisseurs, expatriates, and repatriates blended together, often seamlessly. For these cultural elites, the permeable boundaries of experience seemingly opened up the world for enlightening exploration.

As an apparent beneficiary of the transnational experience, Wharton has long been associated with worldly sophistication, a quality she often affirmed and maintained by unfavorably comparing American mores with European traditions, particularly as they affected women’s lives.1 The focus of The Buc-
caneers on its American expatriates’ expectations of a broadly liberating cosmopolitan experience, however, highlights a skepticism of European worldliness that is seldom associated with Wharton’s oeuvre. More often in Wharton’s fiction, the larger world beckons Americans such as Ellen Olenska, Undine Spragg, John Campton, Kate Clephane, Martin Boyne, and Vance Weston. Given the relatively positive nature of such characters’ movements, those portrayals might posit world travel as both a refuge from the United States and a springboard to a richer intellectual life.

Unlike the novels featuring the aforementioned characters, Wharton did not write *The Buccaneers* during the era of her divorce and move to Paris, events that offered her multiple types of cultural and personal freedom. Rather, she wrote the novel between 1934 and 1937, amid concerns about lingering postwar hostilities that many feared might result in another international conflict. Describing that sense of the “grim and grimacing” political developments in Europe, Shari Benstock notes that Wharton’s response to visions of the future in novels such as *Brave New World* (1932) should be understood in relation to “[t]he rise of the modern, mechanized totalitarian state, whether in the form of Soviet communism or German and Italian fascism, [which] was appalling to Edith, and she thought Huxley’s novel had captured something of its terror” (448, 432). Whether writing of the 1934 Paris riots between communists and fascists or telling Gaillard Lapsley in a February 1936 letter that “Spain has gone Red!—What a world!,” Wharton was profoundly alarmed by trouble brewing in Europe (Benstock 448; *Letters* 591). Hermione Lee writes, “[U]nlike in 1914, they all saw what was coming,” pointing to June 1934, “when Hitler had all his rivals in the Nazi Party assassinated” (740). Anxious about “such a momentous hour of history” and the “troubled waters” of the present, Wharton referenced the “world gloom” she and others perceived in the wake of the flawed Versailles Treaty (740). In *A Backward Glance* (1934), Wharton recalls the devastation of World War I and despairs of the fragility of peace: “The world is a welter and always has been one . . . the welter is always there, and the present generation hears close underfoot the growling of the volcano on which ours danced so long” (379). These ominous visions, recorded by an author seemingly comfortable with world citizenship, suggest that the tensions of the mid-1930s forced even this most seasoned of world citizens to consider the “growling” and “troubled” present as a refutation of older, freer attitudes.

Wharton’s contemporaries also worried about the fervent nationalism visible across Europe. According to Jessica Berman, Paul Bourget’s 1893 novel *Cosmopolis* shows that “worldliness ultimately devolves into race-based nationalism, as characters who are thrown together in Rome come in the end to display their various national proclivities” (47). Morton Fullerton’s 1913 book *Problems*
of Power (which Wharton read in draft and about which she offered stylistic advice) had predicted that

the twentieth century tendency will almost uniformly be found to be towards a greater “national” activity. This activity is real, but the question is what is its origin, what is likely to be its durations. The chances are that the present phenomena of national expansions and of nationalistic concentration fall under the general “law” that “nationalism,” national spirit, is manifested only when nationality is menaced. (9)

Other figures in Wharton’s circle saw similar evidence of the perceived “menace” aligned with nationalist thinking; Bernard Berenson, for example, wrote to Wharton that he presumed that “even the Nazis could not be ‘so desperate as to pull the world down about their ears’” (Benstock 449). While the Nazis would exemplify the worst extreme of nationalist thought, the trend across Europe clearly concerned Wharton, and it is with this concern that she characterizes late-nineteenth-century English social practices in The Buccaneers.

Responding to changing attitudes about concepts such as identity and loyalty, Wharton and her contemporaries observed trends that historians describe as coinciding with an early-twentieth-century investment in the concept of nationhood. According to Andrew Vincent, whose book Nationalism and Particularity explores the rise of nationhood,

In many ways, the concept of national self-determination is a comparatively recent idea, arising after the Versailles Treaty (1919). It then became enshrined in United Nations documents. Terms such as the League of Nations or United Nations, and the like, all largely presuppose the pervasive terminology of the self-determining nation state. With the growing enthusiasm for this particular ‘political form’ over the mid-nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the older multinational states were seen increasingly as anachronisms. (37)

In the context of the early twentieth century, moreover, Vincent writes, “nationalism was seen as potentially totalitarian, theoretically specious and politically bellicose” (5). Robin W. Winks and R. J. Q. Adams place the development of the national ideal in the late nineteenth century: “The concept of nationhood easily led to the assumption that humanity was divided—by divine intent, nature, or the material force of history—into nations, and that therefore the course of history was toward the self-determination of those peoples” (49). Nationalism thus accorded with “beliefs held to be true and so central to a sense of identity that to question them at all is to be disloyal” (49).

Because cosmopolitan and nationalized ideals existed in some tension with one another near the century’s turn, it is no surprise that The Buccaneers
reflects that tension; it positions nationalism as the conceptual inverse of the cosmopolitan experience, dwelling on how the local, the rooted, and the patriotic emerge as counters to a free and open discourse among cultures. Notions of national loyalty thus intervene in a vision of a cosmopolitan attitude, free from traditional boundaries and enriched by cross-cultural contact, including a curious engagement with the unknown and accompanied by a suspension of judgment. Wharton’s ideal cultural interlocutor therefore is often an appreciative viewer who witnesses and endeavors to understand history and artifacts, exploring a culture on its own terms and through its particular traces.

THE EGALITARIAN NATURE OF THINGS

Unlike the roaming pirates suggested by the title, the five young American women in *The Buccaneers* are expected to settle and adapt to their new environments after their initial cross-cultural encounters. They are the offspring of wealthy families who attempt to launch their daughters in the London season after failing to advance their social status in Newport, Rhode Island, which they view as the springboard to New York high society. While the St. George, Closson, and Elmsworth families seek social acceptance abroad as American nouveaux riches, their counterparts, the families of young English noblemen, seem poised to accept the newcomers, in part to finance their increasingly unsustainable family estates. Even in the context of ostensibly complementary goals, the novel reveals the cosmopolitan encounter as an impossible fantasy of universal access and acceptance. Yet in response to its representation of strong, mutually supportive female characters, its 1870s setting, and its pleasingly aristocratic milieu, critics of *The Buccaneers* have dismissed it as a charming, lighthearted period piece of romance and riches. Avril Horner and Janet Beer describe the novel as “arguably . . . Wharton’s most nineteenth-century novel” (139). More pejoratively, John Updike characterizes it as “a pretty mess— an ambitious canvas spottily covered with pastel sketches” written by “an elderly Parisienne who herself was once an American girl” (216, 218). As Lee notes, the prevailing tendency has been to read the novel as “a benign, consolatory last work,” more fairy tale than serious endeavor (726).

Although unfinished, *The Buccaneers* helps enable a fuller, richer portrait of Wharton’s mature ideological vision. Read as a concerned world citizen’s interwar examination of cross-cultural exchange—not an elderly and nostalgic American’s reminiscence about her youth—*The Buccaneers* is far from benign. Its portrayal of nationalism’s devastation of the promise of cosmopolitanism exposes the ugly underbelly of transatlantic marriage, the novel’s metonym for international relations. *The Buccaneers* reveals the process by which cultural
openness gives way to anxious reaffirmations of borders, boundaries, and an imagined homogeneous past. Complicating the familiar characterization of Wharton as a champion of European culture, the novel demonstrates the extent to which even outwardly admirable, restrained cultures could resist what they view as foreigners and shore up their cultural boundaries. In *The Buccaneers* Wharton depicts the cosmopolitan experience as far from a progressive trajectory that leads from, say, courtship to marriage and to parenthood; rather, the full range of the cosmopolitan experience shifts from admiration for other cultures to anxiety about their threat to national identity. Values such as curiosity and openness present as admirable enthusiasm until they reveal a threatening disregard for and consequent diminution of tradition. The result is an unpredictable fluctuation of cultural boundaries that expand and contract, particularly when the participants settle in one nation and one cultural milieu.

The gradual erasure of cosmopolitan attitudes in the wake of British American marriages is particularly striking in a novel apparently inclined toward “alliances, connections, links . . . of marriages, love affairs, friendships” (Wershoven 210). Described in somewhat different terms, the novel at first seems consonant with the cosmopolitan subject’s resistance to “the protected or rigid boundary” that cultures erect around themselves. It also appears to depict comparisons and continuities across cultural backgrounds, not an enforcement of boundaries and the protective gestures that accompany them (Commissiong 38). Displaying an unstudied behavior that initially strikes the British gentry as delightful, the American women enter society through their brashness and their millions, their flirtations and their gambling. Virginia St. George’s beauty and conventional behavior mark her as eminently marriageable. Her younger sister Annabel, or Nan, is more anomalous. Less complacent and more curious than her sibling, Nan is an avid reader and student of history who becomes a favorite of the sisters’ worldly governess Laura Testvalley, who translates the British social order to the Americans, explains Wall Street wealth to the British, and extols the value of Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s work to both. Italian by heritage and British by training, Miss Testvalley embodies worldliness to the young women as she prepares them for their adult lives.²

While Miss Testvalley enjoys the benefits of transatlantic employment by wealthy and aristocratic households, her success and prospects remain limited. She earns little money, caters to demanding families who scarcely remember her once she no longer works for them, and has had several ill-advised romantic relationships. A youthful liaison with the son of her aristocratic employers almost jeopardizes her position and reputation. Later in the novel, her relationship with Sir Helmsley Thwarte is equally risky given his superior rank, reputation as a womanizer, and rigid, hypocritical standards of behav-
ior. Despite her education and sophistication, Miss Testvalley lacks social and financial independence, so she must adapt to the specific contexts and shifting standards that characterize the cosmopolitan experience. From her relocation to the United States to earn more money to her subsequent return to England with the St. Georges to improve their social and her professional prospects, Miss Testvalley’s travels, like her romances, are the result of opportunity rather than full self-determination. Her class position and gender circumscribe her access to full cosmopolitanism.

Wharton depicts Nan’s cosmopolitan trajectory as equally double-edged. Initially a bystander in the romantic adventures of Virginia, Conchita Closson, and Lizzy and Mabel Elmsworth, Nan spends her time contemplating poetry and history and thinking little of marriage or position. Her adventure begins with the tourist’s model of exposure to and appreciation of the greater world, both because of her personal inclinations and because she is not officially “out” in society and is therefore free of its obligations. Because she is not focused on finding a husband, Nan is free to experience English culture intellectually, curiously, and fancifully. Her approach to the old world reflects what Kwame Anthony Appiah describes as cosmopolitan “conversations” that cross “boundaries of identity—whether national, religious or something else” and “begin with the sort of imaginative engagement you get when you read a novel or watch a movie or attend to a work of art that speaks from some place other than your own” (85). Like the much-traveled governess whom she emulates, Nan explores places “other than her own,” journeying from her West Virginia birthplace to Newport to London; by the novel’s end, she is poised to accompany her lover, Guy Thwarte, to South Africa, where he will work as an engineer. But as romantic as this trajectory may appear, it results from disillusionment and disappointment, failed romances with the places and people she had associated with egalitarian possibilities.

Unlike her peers, Nan is far more interested in English architecture, history, and poetry than in opportunities for social climbing. At Allfriars, the home of the Marabel family, Virginia sets her sights on Lord Seadown while Nan pays little heed to the unmarried eldest son, directing her attention to the house instead; here she imagines the potential for the cross-cultural “conversation” Appiah describes, but with objects that “speak” to her about their pasts. In contrast to her sister’s “survey of the world [that] was limited to people, the clothes they wore, and the carriages they drove in,” Nan’s perspective is shaped by her fanciful engagements with architecture and history (253). “I like to imagine all those people on the walls, in their splendid historical dresses, walking about in the big rooms,” she tells her sister. “Don’t you believe they come down at night sometimes?” (253). We learn, too, that
[u]nfamiliar scenes and faces always palpitated in her long afterward; but the impact of new scenes usually made itself felt before that of new people. Her soul opened slowly and timidly to her kind, but her imagination rushed out to the beauties of the visible world; and the decaying majesty of Allfriars moved her strangely. Splendor neither frightened her, nor made her self-assertive as it did Virginia; she never felt herself matched against things greater than herself, but softly merged in them. . . . She lay for a long time listening to the mysterious sounds given forth by old houses at night, the undefinable creakings, rustlings, and sighings which would have frightened Virginia had she remained awake, but which sounded to Nan like the long murmur of the past breaking on the shores of the sleeping world. (253–54)

As part of her prevailing investment in exploration and exchange, Nan displays a curiosity akin to what Ross Posnock describes as the cosmopolitan’s “interrogative spirit that punctures certitudes,” for she engages in imaginative queries, which then become the basis of her interactions with her English hosts, namely, Guy Thwarte, Guy’s father, Sir Helmsley, and the young Duke of Tintagel (802). But her first love, clearly, is the materiality of history itself. Interpreters of the novel have read Nan’s appreciative viewing as reminiscent of Wharton’s lifelong respect for historical objects and storied locations.3

Nan’s attitude, reverent and respectful though it is, nonetheless becomes a self-set trap as her naïveté and her romanticization of history allow her to consider her “conversations” with objects more significant than her interactions with their far more prosaic owners. The particular trap into which Nan falls is that she romanticizes her English adventure, believing that her interests in valuable and historical objects in turn inscribe her worth. Moreover, the belief that her curiosity affords her communion with material history lulls Nan into a fantasy of cross-cultural communication, a cosmopolitan fantasy of a world without boundaries. Nan experiences English heritage as a series of sites and objects through which to “merge” with the surrounding historical scene (a process cast in vaguely erotic language), in part because she associates no negative consequences with tradition; she thus thinks little about the cultural hierarchy implicated in the history she appreciates. Nan’s fascination with Allfriars suggests how the unfamiliar not only stimulates the self but also affirms personal identity in a way that the interactions with “her kind” do not (253). None of “her kind”—humankind, in the largest sense—affirms her sense of a communicative self. Awakened by new scenes, Nan reveals a capacity to expand intellectually not only around objects but also in a new environment as she actively embraces the imagined unknown.
If Nan’s relationship with England were limited to the dynamic governing her exchange with Allfriars, all would end happily; however, given the limited potential for reciprocity between persons and objects, this exchange appears impossibly idealistic. As Nan’s experience demonstrates, what makes the appreciative cosmopolitan’s exploration so attractive—and so seductive—is the degree to which an appreciation for history lulls travelers into a belief that they participate in an egalitarian form of cultural exchange. In this dynamic, artifacts offer up history and tradition and, in return, receive viewers’ admiration and identification. Suggestive of a cross-cultural ideal wherein the individual experiences a true exchange, Nan’s idealized encounters with the objects at Allfriars are among the best and most conceptually open of the relationships in all of Wharton’s work, in part because, in this imagined circuit of communication, no human voice is raised to defend tradition or mark its boundaries. The communication Nan experiences is aesthetic rather than nationalized, imaginative rather than territorial, and for these reasons the process appears egalitarian rather than hierarchical.

Such interactions align with Posnock’s observation that the cosmopolitan “regards culture as public property and nurtures the capacity for appropriation as a tool for the excluded to attain access to a social order of democratic equality” (804). Democratic equality involves a careful balancing act, for the viewer’s initial submission to an observed culture is counterbalanced by a democratic exchange between traveler and object. Yet Nan’s encounter with tangible history also produces difficulties that develop over the course of the novel and powerfully suggests the limits of curious interrogation, especially when the relationship is with people rather than objects. Human exchange may require the curious subject to submit to another culture and its votaries rather than participate in a democratic exchange of ideas.

While touring the ruins of Tintagel Castle by herself, Nan encounters its young, single owner, Ushant Folyat, Duke of Tintagel, and again falls under the spell of a cosmopolitan fantasy. While their conversation about the ruins seems like an egalitarian exchange about a shared interest, this encounter is a mirage based on a misunderstanding. Nan will eventually marry the young, stolidly unimaginative duke because of what Horner and Beer characterize as “her susceptibility to myth and legend” and at the behest of “her lively imagination” (138, 145). More specifically, as Suzanne Jones contends, Nan “falls in love with the history and romance of Tintagel, a place she read about in Tennyson’s *The Idylls of the King* under Miss Testvalley’s tutelage” (20). As Jones notes, earlier in the novel Nan falls in love with Honourslove, Sir Helmsley’s house (16). Men and their houses come with very different meanings; the democratic model of
appreciative viewing does not extend to the heirs of storied properties or to the
structure of aristocratic British marriages.

Ushant declares that he is “sick of being tracked like a wild animal” without
realizing that it is his embodiment of national tradition as a duke that makes
him hunted in his own land (290). Yet his assertion that he “shall never form
an attachment until I meet a girl who doesn’t know what a duke is!” suggests
that only a culturally unininitiated bride can grant him the freedom he is deter-
mined to uphold (290). Tellingly, however, he also defines his prospective
spouse entirely in the negative or as impossibly ignorant. He meets Nan soon
after this pronouncement and sees in her “a certain fearless gravity” before he
learns the essential thing: she knows neither that he is a duke nor that the ruins
are his ancestral castle (299). For Ushant, however, being a duke is not the
problem that being recognized is; he craves relief from the burden of his title
while retaining its privileges.

Nan’s mistaking the duke for Mr. Hector Robinson prompts Ushant to con-
sider her a “lovely child” and therefore attractively unimposing (302). Ini-
tially he vows, “I shan’t rest till I’ve found an English girl exactly like her,” only
to realize that the English version of a girl who doesn’t know what a duke is
would likely be “too ignorant of worldly advantages” to be “attracted by his
responsibilities” (339). Ushant’s ideal wife, then, might hail from “some still
backwater of rural England,” as the young duke embraces a profoundly asym-
metrical vision of marriage (295). This desire for a wife who cannot recognize
a duke but who nonetheless respects the duchy suggests the paradoxical and
self-serving nature of Ushant’s vision. After he meets Nan, however, his ideal is
revised slightly, for Nan embodies the secondary cultural status the aristocrats
associate with the United States. As the international version of the “backwa-
ter” bride, she will be expected to adapt to her husband’s national traditions,
ceding her American ways before English cultural authority, which Ushant
imagines she will consider superior. Ushant suggests as much when he declares
to his mother, “I shall be able to form her” (365). Although he is vaguely aware
that “he [is] dull himself” and “crave[s] the stimulus of a quicker mind” (as
Nan seems to possess), Ushant cannot imagine that a prospective wife might
contribute anything of lasting personal or cultural value to their union (295).
Embodying the dangers of the cosmopolitan romance, the eventual union of
the young duke and his West Virginia bride reveals the difficulties that occur
when representatives of a (supposedly) secondary culture are invited to meet
the needs of an established society without contributing and, crucially, without
challenging its traditions.
John Campton, the protagonist of Wharton’s 1925 novel *A Son at the Front*, considers his life as an expatriate in Paris during the early days of World War I. A painter who has made his fame in his adopted city, Campton wonders whether he was a foreigner: “And what was the criterion of citizenship, if he, who owed to France everything that had made life worthwhile, could regard himself as owing her nothing, now that for the first time he might have something to give her?” (14–15). Campton’s reflections on “foreignness” and belonging, identity and responsibility suggest something about Wharton’s recurring late-career interests in the tangled confluence of nationalism, debt, and patriotic feeling.

In *The Buccaneers*, as in *A Son at the Front*, belonging to a nation is never straightforward or complete, for it is always subject to questions and conditions. As Liah Greenfeld writes, “nationalism, among other things, connotes a species of identity . . . [as it] defines a person’s position in his or her social world. It carries within itself expectations from the person and from different classes of others in the person’s surroundings, and thus orients his or her actions” (20). Focused on how the concept of nationhood erects limits around personal identity, Wharton’s final novel examines the degree to which assumptions about cultural and racial purity became the mechanisms by which nationalist thinking defines individuals’ relations to both nation and class.

The transatlantic unions in *The Buccaneers* gradually intersect with boundaries that surround constructs of nationhood, beginning with the marriage of Lord Richard Marable (the wayward third son of Lord Brightlingsea and an inveterate gambler) and Conchita Closson, daughter of a wealthy Brazilian businessman. After Conchita introduces them, Virginia St. George marries Lord Seadown, Richard’s oldest brother and the Brightlingsea heir. These marriages produce multiple points of tension as the American brides discover how they and their millions are implicated in estate incomes, inheritance laws, and careful negotiations of familial and national traditions. Virginia, for example, is mother to a future Lord Brightlingsea, while Nan is expected to produce dukes. As the Dowager Duchess of Tintagel declares, “Ushant must have two sons—three if possible,” and she frets over Nan’s reluctance to fulfill her wifely contract (410). In such circumstances, the nationalist model demands that foreign wives adopt the value system manifest in British property and inheritance. The obligations that these traditions dictate leave women little opportunity for meditations on architecture and history, for touring ruins and listening to the murmur of history—precisely the pursuits that Nan most cherishes.

The gentry, among them Guy Thwarte, feel degrees of “the old sense of
inherited obligations which had once seemed the very marrow of his bones,” or affiliations that shift with time and circumstances; the novel particularly attends to the difficulties brought about by demands for strict loyalties to property and tradition (386). These pressures cannot be underestimated, and they affect characters in *The Buccaneers* no less than culturally insular traditions oppress characters including Newland Archer, Charity Royall, and Ethan Frome in Wharton’s other novels. While the ideal of achieving one’s independence from a limiting milieu was a recurrent aspect of Wharton’s vision, in *The Buccaneers* that hope is dashed soon after the American women have united with the aristocrats, for only then do the young Americans discover that they are perceived as having very little to offer English culture beyond conformity to it. Instead of viewing their marriages as triumphs over tradition, they gradually recognize in those marriages the persistence of tradition.

As the courtship rituals in *The Buccaneers* give way to marriage, so too does exploration yield to heritage and cosmopolitan collapse in the interest of nationalism. When she critiques the work of “trying to be English,” Nan rejects the notion that her marriage entails a narrow form of ideological conformity (413). She also declares herself unwilling to engage in the biological acquiescence “to be a mother of [future] dukes” (414). While part of Nan’s reluctance stems from her aversion to a man who, as she claims, doesn’t have “very strong feelings—about me,” she also resists the expectation to produce *dukes* as opposed to *children* (414). Becoming the mother of young English aristocrats would cement her own relation to her adopted nation and membership in its upper class. Viewing Nan’s “senseless rebellion” as the epitome of “impertinence—such blasphemy” that must be stamped out, the dowager likens the role of duchess to an army commission; as she avows to Nan, “Duchesses, you know, are like soldiers; they must be under arms while others are amusing themselves” (415, 412). That metaphor of defense as if against possible invaders suggests the interconnection of nationalism and militarism.

At such moments the disastrous consequences of Nan’s marriage appear inevitable, making it important to recall that the crucial event in her courtship, the encounter with Ushant at the Tintagel ruins, seemed to promise an egalitarian exchange. Her solitary visit to the crumbling castle was richly evocative, especially when she was joined by a young man who seemed as impartially interested in history as she. After marriage she finds herself living in a structure devoid of history’s romance with a man who takes great pride in his title and position, and she belatedly realizes that the ruins “had played a large part in her wooing” (369). Nan’s mistake was that she attributed the “magic castle by the sad western sea” to “her vision of the castle’s owner” (369). She soon realizes that the evocative setting shaped her early relation with the duke, for
“she had thought that he and she might get to know each other more readily there [at the ruins] than anywhere else” (369). Later, Nan recalls the voice that “spoke with that rich low murmur of the past which she had first heard in its mysterious intensity that night when she had lain awake in the tapestried chambers at Allfriars” (369). Those imagined conversations with history led Nan to marry a “dull young man” who turns out to embody the unyielding conservatism of his class (370).

The prosaic nature of aristocratic life, essentially one of resource management, confronts Nan after her marriage when she discovers that dukes and duchesses do not frequent their ruins or commune with emblems of the past. Her bedchamber at Longlands strikes her as “a stupid oppressive room—somebody else’s room, not [hers],” hung with family portraits that she longs to displace as well as a group of Correggios that have traditionally hung in the duchesses’ bedroom but appear too precious for their setting (365). At such junctures, the historical elements of England that previously appeared so mysterious and compelling to Nan fade before the mundane, arbitrary nature of an oppressive tradition. Longlands strikes her as a perpetually “empty” structure, vast and imposing; even more ominously, the house seems “like a sepulchre to her; under its ponderous cornices and cupolas she felt herself reduced to a corpse-like immobility. It was only in the open that she became herself again—a stormy self, reckless and rebellious” (436, 437). Unlike her curious, appreciative cosmopolitan former self, Nan is now cast as a spiritually dead woman entombed in a house and a nation that allows for no imaginative engagement with the larger world, no cross-cultural conversation. Like Daniel Touchett in Henry James’s *The Portrait of a Lady*, Nan remains “assimilated yet unconverted” by her experiences in England, unable to transition from curious traveler to defender of land and tradition (James 43). Her confrontations with property and propriety, tradition and familial obligation, will lead her to reject the nationalism she comes to associate fully with England.

Proof that nontraditional unions do not necessarily lead to innovative approaches to the world but may instead lead back to established and conservative patterns, Nan’s marriage traces a trajectory wherein intransigent traditions make an egalitarian exchange between representatives of different nations impossible to maintain. While “the negative aspects of tradition and custom” are clear throughout her experience, they are especially profound in stories about racial hybridity perceived as threats to English heritage (Horner and Beer 136). Responding to the challenges inherent in any cosmopolitan experience, nationalist thinking particularly highlights what Appiah describes as the “impure” or non-homogeneous experiences that attend cosmopolitanism (xv). This “impurity,” which Appiah treats as a positive infusion into existing cul-
tural values, can also be understood in negative terms, such that the inquisitive traveler can be cast as an invader, a foreigner, an infiltrator, or an imposition. When racial boundaries fuse with national ones (as some would argue they do by definition), nationalist thinking can appear as unexpected as it is offensive. The British aristocrats whom Wharton portrays perceive cosmopolitan experiences as threatening to English traditions through not only culture but also blood. In keeping with Appiah’s reminder that cosmopolitanism is of necessity “impure” because it is potentially democratizing, the Brightlingseas’ social circle perceives the Americans as a threat to the purity of aristocratic blood. Accordingly, the English gentry repeatedly casts the young American women as racially marked cultural savages.

A characterization of the Americans as cultural and eugenic threats infiltrates even the most apparently approbative gestures in the novel, as in the tour of Honourslove that Sir Helmsley gives Nan. Noticing her interest in the house and recognizing the value of her imaginative curiosity, he

soon dropped his bantering note to unfold the romantic tale of the old house. Annabel felt that he understood her questions, and sympathized with her curiosity, and as they turned away from the chapel, he said, with his quick smile: “I see Miss Testvalley was right, Duchess—she always is. She told me you were the only foreigner she’d ever known who cared for the real deep-down England, rather than the sham one of the London drawing-rooms.” (464)

Nan replies by announcing her belief that those figures whom Sir Helmsley fears, namely, “foreigners,” possess an enhanced capacity to appreciate the lands they visit, noting that “Miss Testvalley, who’s a foreigner too, has shown me better than anybody how to appreciate” English life (465). Praising Nan’s “fresh eyes and imaginations” and articulating the wish that “more of our Englishwomen felt it all as you do,” Sir Helmsley appears to acknowledge parallel acts of appreciation and approval but not necessarily the more egalitarian acts of “blending” and “merging” that Nan idealizes as part of a cosmopolitan encounter (465).

Because Nan’s appreciative attitude focuses on objects and places, histories and narratives, she cannot understand the degree to which cross-cultural conversations are rife with “ethnocentrism[s]” that would seem to contradict cosmopolitan experiences (Robbins 259). Despite his apparent approval of Nan’s appreciative attitude, when Sir Helmsley wishes that an Englishwoman might articulate Nan’s views, he voices a desire for transference, a fantasy wherein the representative of a nationalist paradigm supplants the appreciative traveler. In this process, the traveler may enhance a land by supplying new resources, but she will never quite embody or replace the values associated with nationhood. Similarly, after meeting Nan, Lord Brightlingsea tells his wife that the young
American is someone who “had plenty to say for herself. . . . She seemed to know the whole history of the place. Now why can’t our girls talk like that?” (254). This wish that the gentry’s daughters might share Nan’s feelings resembles Sir Helmsley’s view that the traveler’s appreciative attitude is most valued if in fact detached from the traveler; it is also reminiscent of Ushant Folyat’s desire for an English bride just like Nan. In such cases the aristocracy considers cosmopolitan attitudes most compelling in a onetime cosmopolitan who ceases to identify as a world citizen. Later in the novel, when Nan seeks to claim something that Sir Helmsley views as English property, namely, the son and heir whom he sees destined for Parliament, Wharton represents his response as characteristic of his duty-bound class; in her outline for the novel’s completion, Sir Helmsley disinherits Guy after he and Nan leave England.

Like Sir Helmsley, the Dowager Duchess of Tintagel and Lady Brightlingsea infuse the cosmopolitan experience with the novel’s most extreme strains of nationalism by associating American influences with racial contamination, particularly when the American wives fail to conform to the traditions of their new “home”-land. This older generation also repeatedly casts Americans as insidiously hybrid. Tradition is not available for reinvention, contends Sir Helmsley, whose Honourlovel embodiment the “priceless quality” of tradition (227). As he represents it, tradition emerges from a nationalized expression of class-bound taste; associating closely with the Americans means submitting to a “barbarian invasion,” as does associating with the “whole spitting tobacco-chewing crew, the dressed-up pushing women dragging their reluctant backwoods-men after them,” who raise the possibility of their “polluting [his] house, and desecrating” his time with his son (233–34). Articulating stereotypes common among his peers, Sir Helmsley sees the Americans as culturally destabilizing in the extreme. Even his more open, egalitarian son, Guy, tells Nan, “We fight like tigers against change” on “this tight little island” (406). Hence, as the English take up a “fight” for their primacy, the Americans are rumored to be culturally inassimilable “Seventh-Day Baptists, or even Mormons” (396).

As part of their insistence on the primacy of a “priceless” British heritage, the English gentry insist on the nativist logic that Americans—all Americans—are interchangeable with both “Negros” and “Wild Indians.” In so doing, the English stoke fears of the type of biological hybridity that Americans will introduce into their own land; in this imagined trajectory, the Americans’ songs and dances are only the most visible signs of a cultural melting pot. While English culture is admired for its production of an honored and reliable past (one cast as homogeneous), American heritage is interpreted as a series of cross-cultural borrowings, wherein idiosyncratic religious groups blend as seamlessly into American culture as do various races. The uncharted nature of the collec-
tive American past thus renders it a shocking polyglot. Ironically, it is at the moment when the novel’s transcultural marriages begin producing heirs that fears of a barbaric American invasion turn from conversations about culture to concerns about blood. The olive-skinned Conchita, the first of the American wives to produce a child, is repeatedly described as black and rumored to be a “West Indian octoroon” (234). After learning of her son’s marriage, Conchita’s mother-in-law cables Miss Testvalley, “Is she black[?]” (211). Associated with dancing, guitars, and performances, Conchita performs “a Negro chant—they said it was Negro” at a Christmas party (398). Likewise, in the text’s most pejorative language, rumors of Virginia’s “getting up an amateur nigger-minstrel performance for the Christmas party” associate her—and the state that shares her name—with white ancestry (363).

Amid allusions to banjo strumming and Stephen Foster songs, the novel’s most privileged landowners exchange gossip about American blood couched in consistently vague, distancing language (363). The aristocrats’ responses to these entertainments operate through passive, agent-less constructions (“was said”) or repeated stories that underscore their outlandishness and are speakable precisely because they denigrate American heritage while remaining unattributable. “I was certainly told it was a Wild Indian war-dance,” announces the Dowager Duchess of Tintagel at the same party where Conchita is suspected of interracial musical borrowing (400). The dance in question, the Virginia reel, in actuality an English dance brought to the American colonies, becomes an emblem of extreme and negative reactions to cosmopolitanism; in its wake, transatlantic marriages are associated with an overly liberal attitude toward cultural appropriation, a suggestion that projects inferiority onto young American women who are assumed to have acquired knowledge of the dance though an act of cultural (and perhaps racial) promiscuity.

According to Sir Helmsley, who both participates in racial discourses and gleefully observes racial confusion, the “bewilderment” of the British “is so great that, when one of the girls spoke of archery clubs being fashionable in the States, somebody blurted out: ‘I suppose the Indians taught you?’; and I am constantly expecting them to ask Mrs. St. George how she heats her wigwam in winter” (354). Even the exceptionally open-minded Miss Testvalley mentally compares her young charges to Indians when she first meets them. As Horner and Beer note, Miss Testvalley quotes to herself two lines from Keats’s “Song of the Indian Maid” upon first seeing the St. George girls and their friends (149). While Miss Testvalley suspects that the girls will erupt in savage behavior, she relinquishes her nationalist and racialized stereotypes as the novel progresses.4 The novel’s upper-class characters, however, maintain their suspicions that alliances with the Americans will result in cultural and racial inferiority.
That the songs and dances occur after the marriages begin producing offspring is deeply suggestive. Dale M. Bauer reads the young women’s efforts to set themselves apart from the black and indigenous ancestries associated with US history as evidence of their “need to shore up their own cultural superiority by invoking slavery and racial superiority” (184). It is also quite likely, I would argue, that this intervention into American ethnicized social practices constitutes a strategic moment of parody. By associating themselves with more obvious forms of otherness, the young women highlight the mechanisms by which English insularity operates against them, suggesting that reactions against young American heiresses are an iteration of the broader English reaction against other forms of racial and cultural difference. Conchita and Virginia, who are the first of the young women to bear children, play to concerns about social and eugenic purity by mocking fears that the American women may have lowly, specifically non-Anglo, forebears. The act of “playing Indian” engages with indigenous culture in a superficial, even parodic way while affirming the women’s distance from Indian blood. Yet it is also clear that, even while the women disavow any deep connection to an ethnicized America, they participate in the cultural and genetic hybridizing of English culture already under way. The novel’s interest, therefore, lies not only in England’s fears of otherness but also with the possibility that increasing numbers of American women marrying into the aristocracy will compromise cultural and eugenic boundaries.

The racial confusion projected onto Americans did not originate with the Brightlingseas, Thwartes, or Folyats. According to Jennifer DeVere Brody, Victorian discourses produced “the utility of ‘black’ women (mulattas, octoroos, prostitutes) for the (re)production of certain forms of English subjectivity” (7). Specifically, Brody contends, “‘black’ . . . women were indispensable to the construction of Englishness as a new form of ‘white’ male subjectivity” (7). In The Buccaneers, a similar strategy is at work: American women, who are repeatedly associated with both black and indigenous cultures, are essential to the articulation of a “priceless” and homogeneous English heritage just as that heritage is in the process of undergoing change. While the English novel produced desires for what Brody terms “impossible purity,” The Buccaneers represents the eugenic thrust of nationalism as the ugly underbelly of cosmopolitanism: a tendency to produce a virulent and reactive nationalism that sees the Americans both culturally and ethnically other (18). When Sir Helmsley predicts, “There won’t be a family left in England without that poison in their veins,” he alludes to the delimited racial purity of the British upper classes at precisely the moment when transatlantic marriages threaten their supposed racial exclusivity (234).

The novel’s implicit critique of idealized purity as a product of a reactive
nationalism does not only complicate cosmopolitan ideals; it also challenges the racial conservatism often ascribed to Wharton. As Jennie Kassanoff writes, Wharton’s work advanced a conservative attitude toward racial “hybridity” in that it promoted “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” (5). Hildegard Hoeller argues similarly that Wharton’s novella “The Old Maid” (1924) doubles the narrative’s sense of sexual illegitimacy by compounding it with racial hybridity, describing the main character as possessing recognizably black and Irish features. Contending that “The Old Maid” brims with “racial angst—about being racially misconstrued, revealed, contaminated, diseased, and obliterated,” Hoeller follows Elizabeth Ammons’s assertion that Wharton at such moments is a “raced writer” who “invisibly implicates herself” in the text’s racial politics, thereby upholding period interests in eugenics (50, 49).

But in her final novel, Wharton not only invokes but also derides the essentialist model of citizenship as rooted in race, for it is clear in this context that race functions as a projection and an extension of cultural norms, a societal creation rather than a biological category. Her depiction of cosmopolitan experience in *The Buccaneers* is not one of cultural “anarchy,” as her representations deviate from their customarily racist connotations. Here, by projecting racial discourses onto the defenders of a culture that believes itself under external assault, *The Buccaneers* unambiguously satirizes the ways in which discourses of racial difference serve national prejudices. The injustice of the nativist and racialized caricatures projected onto the American characters further suggests a deliberate and perpetuated ignorance of US history, a narrative turn in which the Europeans, not the Americans, maintain ignorance through privilege. In portraying at least some Americans as capable of embracing cultural complexity but ridiculed by British aristocrats more invested in defending their presumptive purity (while using American economic resources to maintain it) than in pursuing true cosmopolitanism, *The Buccaneers* challenges the ease with which Wharton’s work can be associated with any essentialism regarding American citizenship. The supposed pluralism produced by transatlantic marriages appears more menaced than menacing in this novel, with its English characters positioned as the proponents of alarming racial political views.

While many historians associate American identity with racial ambiguity, *The Buccaneers* suggests that English projection of racial indeterminacy

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onto Americans affirms their own exclusive claims to power and superiority through blood as well as culture. Accordingly, the aristocracy reveals its tendency to disqualify the cultural other, as in Lady Glenloe’s casual remark that “luckily” Guy Thwarte’s young Brazilian wife died in Rio, permitting him to return to England and (presumably) make a respectable English marriage (458). Similarly, the Duke of Tintagel affirms his cultural purity by professing to know “few Italians” when Rossetti’s name is mentioned (302). He also loudly protests that his mother may want to marry him to “a Jewess,” as a way of resisting what he views as an unthinkable alliance (291). Less interested in articulating fears of racial and ethnic heterogeneity than in interrogating them, Wharton’s final novel implicates such concerns as part of a reactive contraction of openness that follows the meeting of two ostensibly equal cultures, one possessing wealth and the other possessing cultural power.

The casting of Americans as foreign in both visible and invisible ways emerges as an example of ethnocentrism maintained through willful ignorance. The narrative reveals, for example, that “[t]hough there were two splendid globes, terrestrial and celestial, at opposite ends of the Allfriars library, no one in the house had ever been known to consult them” (211). Thus, geographical confusion—that Brazil is part of the United States and that Americans speak Spanish as “their native language”—is traceable to an English lack of curiosity about the larger world, a tendency symbolically suggested by the two Allfriars globes that yield a bifurcated view of the world: there is England, and there is an amorphous and unimportant elsewhere (220).

Though unevenly drawn, Sir Helmsley is the one character who reconsiders his blind championing of British nationalism after encountering Nan at Honourslove. In a compelling moment of self-awareness, Sir Helmsley observes that the Americans cannot “grasp the meaning of such institutions [as the aristocracy] or understand the hundreds of minute observances forming the texture of an old society,” a position, he confesses, that nonetheless causes him to see, “for the first time in my life . . . the absurdity and the impressiveness of our great ducal establishments, and the futility of their domestic ceremonial, and their importance as custodians of historical tradition and of high (if narrow) social standards” (352). In a curious twist on cosmopolitan thinking, the passage begins by addressing the limited knowledge of the Americans, proceeds to the “absurdity” of tradition, and yet simultaneously alludes to its “importance,” both claiming to gain insights into the flaws of the British system from the Americans and, in response, attempting to uphold British tradition. Reactive and defensive, such observations contribute to the novel’s presentation of cosmopolitan encounters as precipitating a recursive and contradictory pro-
cess wherein exchange leads to self-protection, and a willingness to embrace change yields a desire to preserve tradition—and back again.

While the novel’s critique of the British aristocracy reveals nationalist impediments to cultural exchange, it also explores how the naive assumptions of its American “invaders” contribute to their marital distress. They focus on achieving social acceptance and then on marrying into the British gentry, but they give little thought to the realities of their new social positions. Beyond its depiction of Virginia St. George’s lack of imagination, the novel offers far less critique of American cultural immaturity and unoriginality than a novel like *The Age of Innocence*. Rather than indict American attitudes, *The Buccaneers* focuses on the mechanisms through which a society maintains its traditions in an age of dawning cosmopolitanism.

When Wharton characters such as Ellen Olenska, Kate Chephane, and Martin Byne find themselves hemmed in, wrongly directed, or isolated by their own desires, they choose to leave the constrictions of both family and nation. In the final finished chapters of *The Buccaneers*, Nan, too, acts on her distaste for British tradition by developing an intimacy with Guy Thwarte. In Wharton’s outline, Nan would leave England with Guy, severing them both from their families and Guy from Honourslove. In return for aiding the lovers in their elopement, Miss Testvalley would lose Sir Helmsley’s Thwarte’s affection and, as a “great old adventuress,” would grow old alone and poor (479). Wharton’s planned ending appears pointedly attentive to the limits of the cosmopolitan experience and the severe penalty for not upholding national traditions.

*The Buccaneers* leaves Nan and Guy poised to leave England for South Africa and perhaps South America, where Guy previously worked as an engineer. There they would be free to take up Nan’s inquisitive, appreciative model of cosmopolitan engagement with the world. Wharton’s outline provides a happy ending for one set of lovers, but nationalism triumphs in the analogous cosmopolitan plot, subjecting many others to a set of insidiously reactive cultural and racial insinuations. Those characters who profess to love nation, home, and “honour” must choose between constriction and curiosity, opportunity and nation. For the imaginative traveler, there is but one clear choice.

NOTES

1. For readings of Wharton’s intellectual affiliation with Europe, see, for example, Goodwyn and Beer as well as Ammons.

2. Bauer contends that Miss Testvalley is “variously referred to as ‘dark’ or ‘brown,’ with her Italian blood marking her as foreign,” and with an ancestry that includes “‘exiled revolutionaries and antipapists’” as well as “‘artists and agnostics’” (179).
3. Readings of the novel hence tend to underscore its material setting and Wharton’s familiarity with similar traditions. See Horner and Beer, who discuss the text in relation to the British country house tradition, emphasizing a nineteenth-century materiality with which the author would have been familiar, arguing that “the novel’s settings and the customs it portrays are as important as its story” (136). Tintner explores the novel as invoking a scenario similar to Consuelo Vanderbilt’s marriage to the ninth Duke of Marlborough and the cultural conditions surrounding this doomed union of an American woman from Wharton’s milieu (17). Going highlights the novel’s relation to Pre-Raphaelitism in the original text and in the Mainwaring completion of the novel (272–75), while Orlando places The Buccaneers in relation to Wharton’s knowledge of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (15, 25, 198); Jones explores the novel in relation to Vernon Lee’s approach to material history as it influenced Wharton’s approach to the representation of specific places in England (9–13).

4. While characters have general tendencies in terms of their approaches to cosmopolitan thinking (with Nan and Miss Testvalley appearing as the most open and imaginative), many characters’ attitudes shift over time or vacillate back and forth. The openness of courtship, however, largely operates as a moment of cosmopolitan imagination, wherein traditions may seem complementary and boundaries less consequential. But such relations are bound to be reframed over time and in response to provocations of various types, such that no character occupies an ideologically unified position; even Nan will occasionally identify as an American, all the while resisting being called a British subject.

5. Deloria deploys the term “playing Indian” to explore an empty parody of Indian-ness as part of a nostalgia for the premodern and presumably authentic American past.

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