

Winter 2013

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## Recommended Citation

Gonzalez, O. R. "Isherwood's Impersonality: Ascetic Self-Divestiture and Queer Relationality in *A Single Man*." *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies* 59.4:758-783. (Winter 2013).

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## Isherwood's Impersonality: Ascetic Self-Divestiture and Queer Relationality in *A Single Man*

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MFS Modern Fiction Studies, Volume 59, Number 4, Winter 2013, pp. 758-783 (Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press  
DOI: [10.1353/mfs.2013.0065](https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.2013.0065)



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**ISHERWOOD'S IMPERSONALITY:  
ASCETIC SELF-DIVESTITURE  
AND QUEER RELATIONALITY IN  
*A SINGLE MAN***

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**Octavio R. Gonzalez**

Christopher Isherwood's celebrated novel *A Single Man* portrays a gay man as an ordinary human being. For its time, the novel's depiction of homosexuality as a legitimate minoritarian identity, rather than individual pathology, was a radical political gesture. Given this context, literary critics see the novel as anticipating gay liberation. Claude Summers, for instance, declares, "the minority consciousness of homosexuals and their oppression are crucial themes of *A Single Man*" (xiii).<sup>1</sup> The critical commonplace shows acceptance of the novel's incontrovertible identity politics: *A Single Man* champions an ordinary gay man as synecdoche for a burgeoning homosexual community, a political minority consciousness. Yet, as my argument will demonstrate, *A Single Man* endorses an ascetic ethos of queer impersonality, which pervades the majority of the novel's scenes of sociability and attachment. That impersonal asceticism severely qualifies the notion that *A Single Man* celebrates identity politics as the primary strategic weapon of literary-cultural gay activism. More broadly, my argument is that Isherwood's ethos of impersonality is evident in a broader conception of the Isherwood archive, from *Berlin Stories* to *My Guru and His Disciple*. The *Berlin Stories* are celebrated for their aesthetic of impersonal detachment, Isherwood's eponymous

narrator exemplifying Georg Simmel's figure of "the stranger."<sup>2</sup> In the wake of gay liberation and the Stonewall Era, however, critics and Isherwood both have reframed his career as a gradual coming-out process after his expatriation to the US in 1939. The American Isherwood, to borrow James Berg's phrase, became a staunch advocate of gay rights. Isherwood's later writings depict homosexual themes and scenes openly, which makes Isherwood's 1930s writings seem quaintly closeted by comparison. At least this is the dominant critical view of the Isherwood archive.

I do not dispute that Isherwood evolved into an outspoken author on behalf of what he himself called the gay male tribe.<sup>3</sup> His *Christopher and His Kind* recapitulates the Berlin years in autobiographical form, with the agenda of disclosing what had been veiled before. Isherwood, no less than his gay critics, viewed his pre-War writings as self-censored. For instance, on the first page of *Christopher and His Kind*, the author regards his *Lions and Shadows* as being "not truly autobiographical . . . The author conceals important facts about himself." This is a damning judgment considering that Isherwood's memoir is dedicated to divulging the secrets of his Berlin years, starting with the reason he expatriated to Berlin. Isherwood adds, "when *Lions and Shadows* suggests that Christopher's chief motive for going to Berlin was that he wanted to meet [anthropologist John] Layard, it is avoiding the truth" (2). That truth was that "Christopher was then unwilling to discuss [the] sexual significance" (3) of his move to Berlin—namely, that "Berlin meant Boys" (2). Isherwood, thus, famously critiques his own pre-War writings as "too much fiction and too little frankness" (3). His post-Stonewall memoir is framed as the belated account of his sexual liberation. The American Isherwood seems fully dedicated to the supposed frankness of autobiography.

But the standard readings of Isherwood fall victim to the notion, critiqued by Michel Foucault, that the truth of the self is a *sexual* truth—a tendency still rampant in accounts of the 1960s, an era defined in hindsight by the cultural logic of gay liberation and the sexual revolution. Perhaps coincidentally, the original French edition of *The History of Sexuality* and *Christopher and His Kind* came out in the same year, occupying seemingly opposite poles in the cultural politics of gay liberation. Foucault's is a demystification of the abiding truth-claims of sexual (including homosexual) cultural politics, whereas Isherwood's is a qualified deployment of this very logic of identity.

I take *Christopher and His Kind* to be a qualified deployment of the visibility discourse of gay liberation because, given Isherwood's artistic investment in impersonality as a modernist aesthetic doctrine, his use of memoir in the latter stages of his career is in tension with this doctrine.<sup>4</sup> So even as *Christopher and His Kind* is dedicated to

divulging the sexual secrets of the Berlin years in an ideological deployment of Isherwood's gay politics, Isherwood's sensibility of impersonality and self-divestiture is legible in this memoir as well, though less so than in his more self-vaporizing fictional narratives such as *A Single Man*, as we will see below. Isherwood subscribed to a distinction between the aesthetic orders of fiction and nonfiction, legible in his phrase "too much fiction and too little frankness" to describe the earlier novels and memoirs. Even so, *Christopher and His Kind* maintains formal if not political allegiance to Isherwood's aesthetic doctrine of impersonality, a modernist principle that is a permanent feature of his oeuvre.<sup>5</sup>

Given this introduction, the argument that follows revises the dominant Isherwood narrative. Rather than read *A Single Man* as laying the groundwork for his autobiographical 1960s writings,<sup>6</sup> which embrace homosexuals as a legitimate minority, I argue for Isherwood's aesthetic commitment to an ascetic ideal of impersonality, a queer ideal in a non-identitarian sense. The novel privileges this ideal with a governing thematic of the divestment of possessive personhood, in terms of collective or personal interest. With the aid of the anti-identitarian theoretical frameworks of Tim Dean, Leo Bersani, and Lauren Berlant, I read *A Single Man* as projecting an impersonal queer ethos. For my purposes, Bersani encapsulates this mode of queer impersonality as the "asceticism of an ego-divesting discipline" (*Intimacies* 35). Impersonal asceticism involves the urge to suspend or violate the self's personal integrity, to transcend the self, even evacuate personality, through means such as ritual. Such rituals can be as simple as performative displays of self-abnegation as we will see in *A Single Man*, which stages scenes that serve the protagonist's desire for negative self-transcendence in the service of an impersonal ascetic ideal.

My main contention is that *A Single Man* champions an impersonal queer asceticism, narratively staged in scenes depicting George, the protagonist, engaged in self-abnegating gestures. Thus, the novel represents Isherwood's impersonal ascetic ideal and queer ethics of relationality. One form of ascetic escape from the self is disidentification from cultural (or subcultural) identity. Another register of queer impersonality is the escape from the personal, as opposed to the cultural, self. The boundary between the two, of course, is not at all clear: the personal and the political bleed into each other, especially in a novel that foregrounds the importance of minority social identity. My argument isolates four main thematic representations of ascetic self-divestiture and queer impersonality in the novel, which also tend to bleed into one another: (1) what I am calling detached attachment to others, often mediated by negative affects, such as envy

or hate; (2) performativity and role-playing; (3) political disidentification from one's prescribed social identity; and (4) self-inflicted injury. Ultimately, the significance of *A Single Man's* valorization of ascetic self-divestiture and queer impersonality, in scenes that divest the ego of significance, lies in transcending the normative claims of the personal and the political. Such a queer impersonal aesthetic is ideologically inconsistent with the (albeit qualified) project of gay visibility in *Christopher and His Kind*.

In this sense, Isherwood's novel is more queer than gay; George may represent a single gay man, but the novel's ascetic ideal and ethos of queer impersonality argues against reading the narrative as a cultural instrument for gay identitarian representation. Indeed, at the basic, formal level, Isherwood's aesthetic of queer impersonality is evident in his consistent use of an external third-person narrator even in his nonfiction. The impersonal ascetic ideal argues against possessive investment in a political homosexual identity. Indeed, I argue that the ascetic impersonality in *A Single Man* is in direct tension with the novel's representation of gay identity as a minority consciousness.

By contrast, the asceticism and queer forms of detached attachment depicted in *A Single Man* articulate an alternative or "misfit" vision of minority subjectivity: the novel calls George and others of his kind "nonconformists." This vision clearly departs from the novel's farcical presentation of George's rage as a grotesquely violent passion keyed in his consciousness as a gay "minority-sister," in the novel's famous formulation. The novel instead stages principled departures from the political narrative of possessive personhood, as well as other liberal tenets of tolerance and equality, in favor of envisioning a queer ethos of ascetic impersonality.<sup>7</sup>

Isherwood's relationship to queer history is a vexed one. Pace his own increasingly vocal advocacy in the 1960s, it would behoove us to analyze the fiction to glean Isherwood's concerted stance toward the aesthetic politics of gay liberation. Here, generic distinctions are decisive. Isherwood's derogation of *Lions and Shadows* (and *Berlin Stories*) as "too much fiction and too little frankness" lays bare his modernist aesthetic of queer impersonality. Isherwood's fiction adheres to an aesthetic doctrine defined by an ethos of queer impersonality and a self-dissolving ascetic ideal, both reflective of Isherwood's minoritarian nonconformity with identity politics. This literary practice exemplifies the cultural concept I term the "misfit minority," even in the face of a paradigm shift in cultural politics with gay liberation. In an important sense, Isherwood's late-career turn to autobiography and nonfiction memoir is explained by his modernist autotelic doctrine of fictional representation. Art could never truly

function for Isherwood as propaganda, which is why he revisits Berlin not in fictional *Stories*, but in factual autobiography, in order to better effect a turn toward identity politics that his aesthetic approach to literary representation and his aesthetic of the ascetic ideal of queer impersonality did not allow. By Isherwood's own admission, *Lions and Shadows* fails the test of frankness of nonfictional autobiography that his later memoirs take up. Isherwood's novels follow this logic of generic distinction, which distances fiction from the claims of real-life factuality or frankness, which Isherwood maintains was properly the province of nonfictional autobiography.<sup>8</sup> As noted, however, even in the mode of memoir, Isherwood formally maintains an impersonal remainder not subsumed under the aegis of pure political advocacy; his reliance on third-person narration even in the mode of political autobiography signals his continued skepticism toward the entailments of identity even as he paradoxically mobilized impersonal form to advance a liberationist agenda.

The next section develops Bersani's concept of ascetic impersonality and Berlant's notion of lateral agency in order to ground my argument regarding *A Single Man's* queer nonconformist or misfit-minoritarian ethos of impersonality and ascetic self-divestiture. Then, I consider important moments from the novel that stage this ideal and practice. In the conclusion, I return to the issue of Isherwood's political investments in gay representation and misfit-minority consciousness, arguing that the theme of ascetic impersonality in *A Single Man* helps us reconceive Isherwood's oeuvre as developing an aesthetic politics of principled detachment from personal and collective projects.

Ultimately, I am arguing for a broader recuperation of Isherwood's pre-Stonewall queer poetics and politics, including the use of the impersonal Berlin narrator, denigrated as "sexless" by Edmund White (2), among others. Rather than read Isherwood's long career as divided thematically by the event of Stonewall, as many critics do, I maintain that his modernist aesthetic practice values queer impersonality and ascetic self-divestiture and that his literary positioning does not ultimately conform to the claims of identity politics in the Stonewall narrative of modern gay liberation. His outspoken advocacy as an author on behalf of gay rights must not overshadow his literary valorization of ascetic impersonality and nonconformist queer consciousness. *A Single Man* projects a political spirituality invested and divested of possessive personhood and what poet Reginald Shepherd calls the "prescriptive and restrictive" burdens of minority identity (11). Indeed, Isherwood protected his fiction from devolving into "political propaganda," to borrow the vocabulary of his time. Throughout his career, Isherwood sustained an early developed identification with the modernist ideal of the autonomy of art.<sup>9</sup> This

aesthetic ideal, I argue, explains his 1960s turn away from literary fiction to nonfiction autobiography: his embrace of gay liberation entailed a different genre of writing practice. His fictional works, I believe, remain ambivalent about the claims of homosexuality as a political identity.

My argument thus finds continuity between pre- and post-Stonewall Isherwood, whereas most critics find a break in his turn toward American-style identity politics in his self-representation as an engaged, gay author.<sup>10</sup> The Isherwood of the earlier fictional works, in short, is more queer than gay. It is only if we measure Isherwood according to the dictates of our own contemporary frame of Stonewall that his pre-1970s works seem closeted by comparison. I think we should celebrate the impersonal *Berlin Stories* and Isherwood's ego-attenuating and impersonal queerness, an oblique mode of queer intersubjectivity represented in early and later novels alike.

### Ascetic Self-Divestiture and Lateral Agency

Leo Bersani's *Intimacies* names a form of self-attenuation that we might find articulated in *A Single Man*.<sup>11</sup> Bersani locates the cultural practice of ascetic self-divestiture in a particular form of seventeenth-century mysticism, a practice of radical submission to an impersonal divine being that invades and annihilates the self. Isherwood's novel exemplifies this form of self-annihilating impersonality.<sup>12</sup> In a sense, the opposite of self-divestiture that Bersani—and, I argue, Isherwood—represent is the conventional conception of identity. In the same chapter in which he elaborates the impersonal ascetic ideal, Bersani recapitulates his notion of self-shattering in relation to sexual jouissance.<sup>13</sup> In *Intimacies*, he touches on the "at once violently aggressive and self-shattering ego-hyperbolizing of racial, national, ethnic, and gendered identities" (55). This phrase implies that minoritarian social identity is consolidated at the expense of openness to the other.<sup>14</sup> By contrast, Bersani analyzes the mystics' surrender to an inhuman or anonymous other, to whom one grants affective, cognitive, and perhaps sexual access, to the point of self-erasure. Bersani's "pure love" (51) mystics exemplify the self-shattering embrace of alterity. These ascetics represent the opposite of normative self-mastery or what one might call executive personhood.

Lauren Berlant's concept of lateral agency, too, is helpful here. Berlant's lateral agent shrinks from the sovereign mode of subjectivity; the latter is linked to the self-obsessed power wielded by Bersani's "ego-hyperbolizing" subject. Berlant cites as an ordinary example of sovereign subjectivity the impulse to go to the gym. The subject's investment in futurity and development—bettering one's physical form



by regular exercise—is an effective strategy or a strategy of being effective. This example illustrates what psychologist Roy Baumeister terms "high-level self-awareness"—of oneself as the subject of *bildung*, the teleological—or theological—self (29). This self depends on a timocratic notion of personhood in our society, in Orlando Patterson's terms—a self-mythologizing leader of men. Sovereign personhood, and its extension as sovereign agency, is anathema to self-divesting subjects, among which my interest is in misfit minorities, who remain lateral. They remain at the margins of scenes of collective triumph, even minoritarian collectives. The lateral agent, in contrast to gym-frequenting overachiever, habitually skips the gym: this shift in self-elaboration entails spreading out, rather than moving forward. According to Berlant, lateral self-management occurs when people stop trying to build personal monuments to themselves. In these moments of lateral, as opposed to vertical, self-extension, the subject thinks in terms of inertia, impasse, and immediate if ephemeral satisfaction. In some ways, "thinking" is the wrong term for these self-suspending scenes of inhabiting oneself without building one's life as a narrative of development. Sovereign subjects negotiate what Baumeister calls the "burden of selfhood" (29); the ascetic subject spreads himself laterally to escape this burden in what Berlant calls "small vacations from the will" ("Slow Death" 779).<sup>15</sup>

Berlant's concept of the lateral agent seems, on the surface, to have little to do with what counts as agency proper. Socially symbolic forms of action—such as being thin, wearing shoes that match, and other ordinary practices of self-management—represent a burden that individuals sometimes put aside. Certain individuals adopt lateral moves rather than vertical trajectories of self-extension, remaining stuck, in Berlant's terms. Her social phenomenology seeks to articulate the many ways in which individuals are engaged in nonsovereign forms of being themselves, of being ordinary, of lacking "effective" agency, thereby evincing "desires *not* to be an inflated ego deploying and manifesting power" ("Slow Death" 757).

Bersani and Berlant share the sense that alternative modes of living entail an aesthetics of existence as well as a queer ethics of relationality. My interest in this critical framework is how it illuminates minoritarian negotiations with double exile, or the double burden of normative personhood and minoritarian uplift. In ordinary habits of impersonal self-suspension, these lateral investments represent a queer way of being in the world. Rather than centering oneself on personal interest, the lateral agent, or Bersani's impersonal ascetic, looks to self-divestiture as a means of acceding to otherness—including the otherness within—and inhabiting the world in a nonnormative or queer ethical relation. The forms of political possibility that such

anti-imperial self-elaboration allow is a key question for me and for Bersani and Berlant, who valorize queerness not as an identity free from the constraints of power, but as an impersonal mode of relationality and self-declension that dissipates rather than consolidates authority over others and mastery over the self.

As the following examples in *A Single Man* illustrate, Isherwood's aesthetic is devoted to an impersonal ascetic ideal and a queer ethics without reducing queerness to sexual identity. The novel dramatizes and epitomizes a misfit-minority mode of subjectivity—chiefly its protagonist's—in scenes of impersonal negotiation and self-abnegation. These scenes suggest that *A Single Man* should not be filtered through a retrofitted lens of gay liberation, at least not primarily. Rather, the novel explores queer impersonality through the suspension of self-possessive personality and political identity in decidedly unheroic ways.

### **"I am with you, little minority-sister": Pedagogy of the Oppressed**

The central instance representing the minority consciousness of *A Single Man* occurs during George's turn at the podium in the lecture hall, when he discusses Aldous Huxley's *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan*. The classroom scene turns on George's impassioned critique of "pseudoliberal sentimentality" (71). More specifically, the discussion is sparked by a question raised by Huxley's novel. A student asks whether Huxley was an anti-Semite for declaring the stupidity of the biblical text, "they hated me without cause" (69). This is a central theme in the novel: Multiculturalism in Los Angeles and the relationship between minorities and the hegemony of liberal thought in the US during the Cold War. Isherwood's novella identifies this American political consensus with George's neighbors, Mr. and Mrs. Strunk, who function as the personification of this "blandly annihilating" liberal majority: "Mrs. Strunk . . . is trained in the new tolerance, the technique of annihilation by blandness" (27). The Strunks represent liberal tolerance toward minorities, a political category that in Isherwood's novel clearly includes homosexuals. Such tolerance, however, as we will see from George's lecture, is a form of domesticating the strangeness—or otherness—that minoritarian subjects represent. So, while integration into the polity is a chief political goal, such integration carries its risk: Isherwood knew this as a lifelong thinker regarding the challenges that cultural identity posed to large-scale political systems such as democratic liberalism in Britain and the Communisms and fascisms of an earlier era.<sup>16</sup>

The classroom scene foregrounds George's perspective that social exchanges are never between, say, absolutely privileged and absolutely disenfranchised subjects. Rather, the narrative presents, in principle, the social contingency and relativity of power. Particularly in this scene, the novel notes how power and resistance operate on a sliding scale and vary by context. A privileged British accent helps George deal with a world from which he feels excluded, for instance. The novel's discourse shows how relatively privileged and less privileged individuals make use of, or even exploit, the sociocultural assets at their disposal.

*A Single Man's* treatment of the relative nature of class and other institutionalized forms of privilege rejects liberal pressure to ignore social differences in the name of equality. Since the novel implies that paying lip service to equality is a way of avoiding the reality of oppression and resistance, George argues against this facile solution:

Minorities are people—*people*, not angels. Sure, they're like us—but not *exactly* like us. . . . It's *better* if we admit to disliking and hating them than if we try to smear our feelings over with pseudo-liberal sentimentality. If we're frank about our feelings, we have a safety valve; and if we have a safety valve, we're actually less likely to start persecuting. (71)

The heart of the scene rests in disputing the liberal notion that majorities persecute the other without cause and, relatedly, that minoritarian subjects are paragons of virtue ("angels"), innocent of all hate. By contrast, George lectures his students that there is always a cause for hate. He asserts that the cause for hate is the majority's perception of the other as a threat, even if this hate is imaginary and without merit, regardless of what liberal sentimentality says. George describes a world where hate begets hate and aggression begets aggression—no matter how imaginary the causes for the hatred of the other, the hatred exists, and those so disenfranchised by power react in kind with their "own kind of aggression":

A minority has its own kind of aggression. It absolutely dares the majority to attack it. It hates the majority—not without a cause, I grant you. It even hates the other minorities, because all minorities are in competition: each one proclaims that its sufferings are the worst and its wrongs the blackest. And the more they all hate, and the more they're all persecuted, the nastier they become! (72)

This passage resonates as an implicit explanation of George's own hate of the "Mr. [and Mrs.] Strunks of the world" and, by synecdo-

che, of heteronormative society. The novel spends a great deal of time—especially in the driving scene that shortly precedes George's classroom tirade—describing George's rage and detailing his murderous fantasies as Uncle George, in which he effects a large-scale campaign of terror on the civilized world.

Putting aside the politically untenable posture that George assumes in this rant,<sup>17</sup> George's tirade represents a powerful if silent advocacy for homosexuality as a protected minority, akin to Jewishness. His lecture articulates the political desire to end the persecution of others by allowing democratic subjects to speak the "unspeakable," which is George's term for negative affects repressed by the norms of "pseudoliberal sentimentality." Such a belief in speaking truth to power—confess your sins and you shall be free—follows a 1960s cultural logic against repression. This logic, in the form of the so-called repressive hypothesis, was Foucault's principal target in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*. Unenlightened by this Foucauldian critique, George expounds the cultural belief that releasing one's social prejudices and blindspots creates, in his terms, a social "safety valve" that dissipates the hate and aggression that we all share. More importantly, George argues that voicing prevailing negative attitudes toward the other prevents the eventual return of the majority's aggression in the political form of persecution ("if we have a safety valve, we're actually less likely to start persecuting"). This line of thinking is a utopian wish for political rapprochement across all classes of social and political division following from agnostic democratic dialogue.

And this radical principle of liberatory de-repression, in Herbert Marcuse's terms, is what Foucault attacks as misguided. George imparts this notion of liberation through unfettered personal expression to his students, culminating in a wish-fulfillment fantasy. Expounding on the irreducible distinctions that divide the social body—what we would call the nature of identity and difference—George voices the dated and facile example of the difference between "a Negro and a Swede" (71). At once, he regrets his choice. The narrator records George asking himself in interior monologue, "Why, oh why daren't George say 'between Estelle Oxford and Buddy Sorensen?'" (71). Estelle and Buddy are two of his students, then present in the classroom. George wonders whether "if he did dare" to use student names, instead of using impersonal identity categories, "there would be a great atomic blast of laughter, and everybody would embrace, and the kingdom of heaven would begin, right here in classroom 278. But then again, maybe it wouldn't" (71). Here we see how George's diatribe against liberal repression of cultural difference expresses a utopian wish for transcending these differences, which divide his students and the social body as a whole.

But George is not so un-Foucauldian as it might appear. He also deflates such a wistful fantasy, admitting how far-fetched such an outcome would be. Despite his utopian motivation, in other words, George does not believe entirely in the efficacy of his own fantasy of liberation, of transcending hierarchical social differences through democratic dialogue and free expression. Rather, George's utopianism is balanced by his curmudgeonly anti-sentimentality, his refusal to romanticize the oppressed, or even oppression. Such a position runs the risk of political relativism ("all minorities are in competition: each one proclaims that its sufferings are the worst"). But George seeks to shock his students out of their complacency—their own pseudoliberal biases—and thus allows himself the role of gadfly. He takes up the modernist injunction to *épater le bourgeois*, typical of a character drawn from another era—the era that Huxley and Isherwood knew first hand. George's students believe in the fantasy of liberation through the absence of discourse, the refusal to accept the darker emotions and motives of even benighted groups. His frankness in admitting negative emotions, especially that of aggression ("every minority has its own aggression"), reflects George's own aggressive impulses, as noted in his murderous fantasies. *A Single Man* thus represents the aggression of a minoritarian subject, such as George's "murderous rage," even prior to the recognition of the political legitimacy of this rage: the radicalized homosexual, before the moment of Stonewall and modern gay liberation, itself a violent uprising against political repression. In this sense Isherwood's novel functions as a cultural weapon against American society's oppression of homosexuals, especially during the Cold War. Dignifying the political anger of George's murderous Uncle George fantasies, as we will see below, the classroom lecture is a pedagogy of the oppressed to the complacent majority, a counterpoint to the queer ethics of ascetic impersonality that the novel represents.

Given this scene, therefore, it is curious how the majority of the novel champions a self-effacing mode of minoritarian subjectivity, a misfit or nonconformist style of being distinguished by ascetic self-suspension and impersonal intersubjectivity. Rather than celebrating the minoritarian subject's clamoring for representation and recognition, the novel usually clamors to show an alternative poetics and politics of the minority subject. This alternative queer model has been illegible to Isherwood's critics as a form of agency, a mode of political subjectivity. Yet, the classroom scene prepares us for the "aggression of the minority," and I argue that these scenes demonstrate just what such aggression, and other affects, signify in a narrative economy that privileges the impersonal ethos and pathos of a self-diminishing minoritarian subject.

Rather than assuming the sovereign mode of subjectivity that George personifies in the classroom scene, he more frequently acts as a self-effacing protagonist, engaging figures to whom he is attached impersonally—his student Kenny, or Doris, his deceased partner's former lover. This alternative ethics of living in self-suspension, in modes counter to aggression and hate and other affects of political extension, informs Isherwood's queer impersonal sensibility. This sensibility is pre-Stonewall and far from the recognizable political modes of sovereign subjectivity. This is what I consider the novel's aesthetic political agenda—its imagining of an alternative or nonconformist mode of minoritarian subjectivity, marked by affects and postures that embrace impersonal detachment and ascetic self-abstention rather than normative filiation and self-interest. *A Single Man* endorses a self-diminishing, impersonal mode of being minoritarian or being doubly "minor," a mode far from the triumphs of Stonewall and the retroactive will-to-power of gay liberation.

### Queer Ascetic Impersonality

I now turn to *A Single Man* more systematically to analyze key scenes that project the ego-divesting ideal of impersonality that is signally oriented to an ethics of queer relationality. The following scenes track the novel's development of queer impersonality and ascetic self-divestiture as a misfit-minoritarian theory and practice. The classroom scene, which precedes the others, laid the theoretical groundwork in touching on the inescapable tensions haunting the social field: the inequities of minority and majority. George's lecture articulates the ordinary realities of social difference and political marginalization and gestures toward a way of reconceiving minoritarian subjectivity, thereby engaging with this political reality in an alternative fashion. The lecture scene also employs the persistent theme of social existence as a series of performances, or as performative being—a theme introduced in the very first passage of the novel. Isherwood's protagonist argues against what he terms "pseudoliberal sentimentality" (71) and what such an ideology of idealizing minorities entails for the multicultural world of Cold War Los Angeles. In short, George lectures his students regarding the negative affects and the historical intransigence of social conflict based on structural inequality.

George's classroom lecture thus prepares the reader for the following scenes, which put the theory of social marginality into practice. At the intersubjective level, this theme highlights how social position haunts interpersonal relations and thereby depicts ascetic impersonality as an ideal practice of ethical exchange. These depictions illustrate how the personal impinges on the social, how performativity

and negative affects provide a model for impersonal attachments, and how to practice impersonal performativity and self-effacement in moments of recognition and reconciliation of social differences.

Yet, beyond the interpersonal domain, lies the political and cultural significance of the homosexual as victim of heteronormativity, or what George at another moment calls "the American utopia, the kingdom of the good life upon earth" (126). This is a "kingdom" "co-owned" by his banal neighbors, Mr. and Mrs. Strunk. George bitterly reflects how they "are proud of their kingdom," one that he feels excludes him (126). In consonance with the minoritarian valence of *A Single Man* that critics focus on, the novel thus depicts moments that register George's cultural-political rage. At one point, George entertains a political fantasy of becoming a homicidal "Uncle George" in response to the fact that a "local newspaper editor has started a campaign against sex deviates" (36). George's political rage is directed at his editor, his neighbors, and the heteronormative "three-quarters of the world" (40) that, symbolically, took Jim away from him. Notable for its hyperbolic—or, following Bersani, its "ego-hyperbolizing"—aspect, George's sadistic revenge fantasy (to "launch a campaign of systematic terror" [38], in his words) is directed against individuals who represent the dominant power structures in society, such as a US senator: "His wife may be kidnapped, garroted, embalmed and sealed in the living room to await his return from the office. His children's heads may arrive in cartons in the mail" (39). In Bersani's terms, this mode of identity politics is keyed to hyper self-extension. George admits that his rage stems from a belief that "All are, in the last analysis, responsible for Jim's death; their words, their thoughts, *their whole way of life willed it*, even though they never knew he existed" (40; emphasis added). Such powerful representations of George's "minority consciousness" extend an expansive sense of cultural politics ("their whole way of life") into the personal arena in ways that we can appreciate as militant; these moments allow Isherwood's critics to identify the novel with a straightforward politics of gay liberation.

Yet, in contrast, the novel gives us disciplined abdications of sovereign self-interest. Such an escape registers the queer subject's ambivalence toward fighting for a collective cause, ambivalence toward the "Uncle George" register of minoritarian political representation. It is important, therefore, to recognize the impersonal narrator's self-parodying tone as he ventriloquizes the Uncle George fantasy. In such a fantasy, the narrator ironically notes, "Jim hardly matters anymore. Jim is nothing now but an excuse for hating three quarters of the population of America" (40). The narrator continues: "What *is* George's hate, then? A stimulant, nothing more. . . . Rage,

resentment" (40). The free indirect style undercuts George's incendiary homosexual "rage [and] resentment." Now the rage is "but an excuse" and this "hate" "nothing more" than a testament to George's "middle age," an impersonal affect mobilized as political passion. The "middle age" qualifier ("nothing more") ironizes George's passionate political identity, undercutting its politically murderous seriousness.<sup>18</sup>

I am much more interested in the novel's ordinary moments of escape from self-aggrandizing identitarian political claims and entailments, the latter of which surface in the semi-parodic "Uncle George" fantasy. More common than such hyperbolic fantasies that align pink-baiting newspaper editors and red-baiting US senators with modern totalitarian regimes such as the Khmer Rouge are moments such as George's self-effacing refusal to go to Jim's funeral, despite being invited by the latter's family. Such resistance conveys George's discipline of self-diminution: his queer, antisocial (and anti-familial) rejection of inclusion in the "sacred family grief," as the novel sarcastically puts it (126). Indeed, George usually chooses the opposite of sovereign self-extension. He refuses the normative response, which would be to defend his self-interest, indeed his self-respect. George also enacts narcissistic self-injury and abdicates the burden of representation that defending the honor of his homosexual identity would entail. The novel thus champions an alternative or misfit minoritarian ideal, distinguished by an ethos of queer impersonality and ascetic self-abnegation, contrary to contemporary social norms that champion self-interest and the reification of identity.

### **"[R]age without resentment," "abuse without venom"**

At the Starboard Side, the bar that George visits later in the novel and the place where George first set eyes on Jim, he overhears an old couple arguing drunkenly. The narrator calls their exchange "rage without resentment," "abuse without venom" (150). Echoing George's grammar of impersonality and negative affects, the novel here combines self-contradicting concepts. What is rage without resentment or abuse without venom if not an ascetic practice of impersonal intimacy? The performative function of these roles is what renders the rage free of resentment and the abuse devoid of venom. In this scene, the novel continues to depict a paradoxical practice of impersonal attachment—here based on performativity and distancing entailed in the use of roleplay—one that is laced with negative affects and erotic desire. From George's increasingly inebriated, limited point of view, the narrator describes an older couple rehearsing the vibrant impersonal script of their romance as "two nonconformists"



practicing their way of love: a mild quarrelsome alcoholism which makes it possible for them to live in a play-relationship, like children. *You old bag, you old prick, you old bitch, you old bastard*: rage without resentment, abuse without venom. This is how it will be for them till the end. Let's hope they will never be parted, but die in the same hour of the same night, in their beer-stained bed. (149–50)

This perversely romantic description might bring tears to a reader's eyes. But said reader would have to be a misfit herself, a nonconformist "unhypnotized" by the norms of pseudoliberal sentimentality (149). These social norms, like the "pseudoliberal" norms of political discourse, eschew negative intensities because they seem "abusive" and "resentful." But these intensities are, instead, performative utterances cementing a "play-relationship" that constitutes a paradoxical practice of love. To the conformist reader who adheres to strictly affirming models of self-sovereignty and reciprocal relationality, especially the romantic kind, there is no such thing as abuse without venom, rage without resentment. For such conformists, allowing self-diminishment, in a scene embracing insult and self-injury, is anathema to the very idea of interpersonal romance. Here, a queer ethics of impersonality triumphs—note the lack of proper names, and the lack of normative forms of expressing love—which paradoxically enables the couple to continue their romance into middle age and beyond.

This scene epitomizes Isherwood's skewering of the "sacrosanct value of selfhood," a fundamental value of liberal society. Yet, this is a value, according to Bersani's formulation, that "may account for human beings' extraordinary willingness to kill in order to protect the seriousness of their statements" (*Culture of Redemption* 4). This couple's performative interaction underscores the novel's investments in minimizing the "sacrosanct value of selfhood," here dramatized in a self-conscious "play-relationship." Indeed, George's murderous revenge fantasy stands in parodic contrast to the impersonal negativity that mediates the couple's interaction; their rage has no resentment, their abuse no venom. Here, *A Single Man* makes a case for the importance of such perverse affective relations, which value the discomfiture of impersonal intimacy and abdicate the burden of defending the self against real or perceived narcissistic injury. Indeed, this scene perversely delights in a playful, sadomasochistic exchange of insults and equates it with a durable form of intimacy.

As we see below, *A Single Man* stages various scenes of dynamic resistance to pseudoliberal sentimentality, to normative models of individuals as sacrosanct entities, and to relationships solely based on liberal tolerance, affirmation, and equality. This resistance is based on the novel's argument that such sentimental norms simply hide the

truths of a social reality composed of violence, aggression, injustice, and inequality. Moreover, the novel's critique of what it terms pseudoliberal sentimentality is due to its implicit claim that hypocritical disavowal of such reality serves only to perpetuate that very same status quo. To engage with the terms of this status quo is a form of truth-telling of an impersonal sort.

As a detached observer, George here seems to champion an impersonal model of romance personified by this couple from a bygone era—they belong to the first colonists who founded the picturesque seaside town George lives in. And this model of romance is beyond Freud's pleasure principle, for the scene represents an alternative, drawn from the combination of both erotic and aggressive forces that underlie a marriage as well as other intimate relations. This reality suggests that impersonal intimacy dramatized in a sadomasochistic "play-relationship" can sustain, instead of threaten, a lifelong marriage and even allow the spouses to maintain a "childlike" innocence beyond middle age. Even alcoholism ("mild quarrelsome alcoholism"; "beer-stained bed") is valorized in this impersonal attachment, this mutual, performative abnegation of personal sanctity. Their bad romance runs counter to a sentimental vision of social hygiene that disavows the possibility of a "beer-stained bed" without alcoholism—eschewing the stigma of addiction—or of lovers projecting rage without resentment or abuse without venom.

### **"Because the dialogue is by its nature impersonal"**

Perhaps the most important scene of impersonal ascetic relationality involves Kenny Potter's entry into George's drunken world. This moment dedicates itself quite openly to a celebration of the value of a queer impersonal dynamic sustaining a self-abnegating, detached intimacy. The tenor of George and Kenny's exchange is pining for a bygone era when, in Kenny's words, "you could call your father sir" (159). In the discourse of the novel, such a desire reads as the longing for a formal mode of attachment. George recognizes Kenny's desire for a hierarchical structure between them, given their respective power imbalance and age difference. After Kenny longs to be living in a time "when you could call your father sir," George warns Kenny that he will soon forget this. Kenny submissively agrees: "Well if you say so—okay." George: "Okay, *sir*." Kenny: "Okay, *sir*!" Kenny "beams" with "pleasure" (159). Such dialogue entails a mode of relating between impersonal, formally hierarchical categories of social identity, such as, in the case of Kenny and George, "Youth" versus "Age" (154). The novel implicitly advocates misfit or nonconformist social and affective intimacies that such hierarchical relations can

afford for both minority and, perhaps, majority subject positions. As with the practice of nonconformist intimacy expressed as rage without resentment, here we have another form of self-dispossession that constitutes libidinal, yet formal, ethical contact.

The novel suggests that there is a salutary function in an ethos of embracing social polarization in order to achieve impersonal intimacy, a form unavailable to politically over-determined modes of exchange. George notes that in this type of "symbolic dialogue," "what really matters is not what you talk about, but the being together in this particular relationship" (154). The content of the conversation is not as important as the formal relationship being forged—one that lets interlocutors "talk about anything and change the subject as often as [they] like" (154). Implicit in this line of thinking is the fact that seldom do individuals stratified and polarized by social hierarchies engage in dialogue at all, so beholden are they to individual and collective self-interests, especially vis-à-vis the burdens of sustaining them in the face of the other.

George advocates this queer paradigm of impersonal intimacy achieved through detached attachment, as we see in George's engaged observation of the couple, and qualified de-individuation, which enables personal engagement with impersonal otherness. For instance, George insists that the symbolic dialogue only works if both "[y]ou and your dialogue-partner [are] somehow opposites" (154). This type of formal interaction is based on depersonalization (Kenny calls him "sir" rather than "George"). Suspending one's individuality thus fosters a queerly impersonal attachment, laced with erotic energy, as this scene makes clear. The novel's psycho-narration builds a defense of George's ascetic ideal of queer impersonality, which, in addition to entailing denial of individuality and self-investment, also entails unself-interested attachment to one's social (or "symbolic") identity.

Why do the partners have to be opposites? the novel's narrator asks, focalizing George's interior monologue: "Because you have to be symbolic figures—like, in this case, Youth and Age. Why do you have to be symbolic? Because the dialogue is by its nature impersonal. . . . It doesn't involve either party personally" (155). At this moment in the novel, the doctrine of impersonality is rhetorically reinforced as precisely a doctrine of asceticism, or aesthetics of existence.<sup>19</sup> George argues that one must rely on an impersonal relationship to one's own symbolic identity in order to dialogue across reciprocal yet polarized lines—here, generational, but also national. Ironically, the purpose is not to identify, but to disidentify: to see across the divide and not to reify that division, as with normatively minoritarian injunctions of self-advocacy and self-representation. The self is suspended in an

abstract or impersonal intimacy of polar opposites as dialogic equals—an ethical experiment in impersonal intersubjectivity, in the name of an ascetic ideal of lateral self-extension through de-individuation. Such lateral ascesis momentarily suspends the burden of selfhood and its possessive political entailments.

Among the queer desires George evinces in his intimacy with Kenny is the desire for impersonal mutuality, in which the self is depersonalized and divested, replaced by the ironic performance of a hierarchical role—as the nostalgia for "sir" makes clear. More importantly, such abstract encounters stage the desire to play with social identity in a drama of power exchange. As we have seen, George resists espousing the "pseudoliberal sentiment" of denying social differences in the name of civic equality. In fact, he perversely urges the opposite, the performative intensification of differences as a nonnormative or queer ethical principle for negotiating a salient interaction. But this identification is nonpossessive and nonadversarial: or, in the novel's parlance, without resentment and without venom. The recognition is an effort to bridge across identitarian divisions, rather than to emphasize them as a political form of self-extension. The scene's sadomasochistic energy lends this queer relation an added frisson, which could be claimed as antithetical to a visibility ethos of gay liberation, as George flirts with his student, but they never openly address the erotic undertow of their exchanges.

This queer model of interpersonal discourse, as with the couple engaging in a paradoxical impersonal intimacy, depends on embracing socially determined identities as a performance, a (role) play, and not as one's self. That self is too personal to be of use in this meeting of cultural personae. Developing an impersonal ascetic ideal of relationality suggests that playing with power differentials and symbolic identities is one form of potentially transforming one's relation to oneself, as well as to the other, by performing a script as social actors embedded in a hierarchical social world. This queer ethical alternative contrasts a possessive form of political identification, one the novel satirizes in the genocidal fantasies of Uncle George.<sup>20</sup> The novel stages George's misfit minoritarian subjectivity in impersonal encounters rich in affective and libidinal intensities.<sup>21</sup>

### **Conclusion: Ascetically, Impersonally Queer**

To be clear, I am not arguing that *A Single Man* anticipates and also proleptically critiques what we now understand to be the cultural logic of identity well before Stonewall and other triumphs of minoritarian collective actions and the at times violent transformations

of the 1960s and 1970s. My argument is that the novel represents Isherwood's considered and consistent alternative to the politics of identity, what I call a misfit-minority poetics of detachment and qualified resistance to grandiose self-possessive projects, an ascetic ideal of queer impersonality that is legible to us from our contemporary vantage point. Ultimately, Isherwood resisted the call to write himself into what David Garnes terms the "pantheon of modern gay literature," if by "literature" we mean "fiction" (201). *A Single Man* conveys a contrary tendency away from prescriptive and restrictive claims of political identity, projecting instead a nonconformist minoritarian model of ascesis, depicting modes of self-divestiture and what I consider Isherwood's quintessential queer ethos of impersonal attachment, which perhaps defines his contribution to Anglophone letters and queers everywhere. In this sense, to call Isherwood a proleptic advocate for an identitarian politics of gay visibility in *A Single Man* is to miss his proleptic aesthetic demurral from such prescriptive and restrictive models of relationality and subjectivity. Isherwood deconstructs the very subject he reconstructs, in a literary novel that is politically resonant in a contrary sense to the politics of gay identity he is most known for now.

Isherwood's novel thus represents a particularly resonant, non-conformist minoritarian subjectivity that survived two World Wars, expatriation and self-imposed exile, and the multicultural American century. From his wide experience with transnational homosexual politics in the 1930s, Isherwood wrote the modernist impersonality into *A Single Man*. These social and affective norms that the novel suspends serve as a now-familiar critique of what Eve Kosofsky Sedwick called our own supposedly post-AIDS era and "the strategic banalization of gay and lesbian politics" (13). In our time, I think we ought to consider the lateral agency of Isherwood's queer "minority-sister" as a response to the "slow death" that marginalized subjects bear and represent, as Berlant claims.<sup>22</sup> We might view the scenes of ascetic enjoyment in a diminished sense of self, as well as the enjoyment of playing impersonal roles within slightly sadomasochistic intensities, as forms of "slow life," or impersonally queer lives. Minoritarian subjects can impersonally enjoy suspending the burden of selfhood, of sovereign agency, and even entertain transcending the claims of the social—if interpellated as the call to aggressive action and violence—altogether.

## Notes

My sincere and warm thanks to Marianne DeKoven, Sue Hodson, John Kucich, David Kurnick, Rebecca Walkowitz, Philip Longo, Nimanthi Rajasingham, Debapriya Sarkar, and the journal's dedicated editors and readers.

1. Summers adds, however, that these issues are "balanced and qualified by a transcendent religious vision" sustained by Isherwood's forty-year investment in spiritual asceticism, grounded in Vedanta Hinduism (xiii). Many of the concepts at work in this essay—asceticism, detachment, divestment of the ego—are concepts shared with the belief system and ritual tradition of Vedanta. Isherwood was a faithful disciple of Vedanta, studying under Swami Prabhavananda (and initially intending to become a monk) in the Pasadena-based Vedanta Society of Southern California, part of the Ramakrishna Order in India. This Western version of Vedanta, which was introduced to Isherwood by his friend, noted intellectual and spiritual confidant Gerald Heard, promulgated the essential insignificance of the self and the essential equivalence of all living things. Isherwood describes Heard's and Prabhavananda's influence on him (referring to himself in the third person, which is a signature of his style) in this fashion: "As the result of his talks with Gerald [Heard] and Gerald's friend and teacher, the Hindu monk Prabhavananda, Christopher found himself able to believe—as a possibility, at least—that an eternal impersonal presence (call it 'the soul' if you like) exists within all creatures and is other than the mutable non-eternal 'person'" (*Christopher and His Kind* 305–06). However, I believe that Isherwood's allegiance to an impersonal ascetic ideal precedes and indeed fortifies his postemigration dedication to Vedanta ritual and religious practice. For more on Isherwood's spiritual dimension, see *My Guru and His Disciple*.
2. Georg Simmel theorized the social "type" of the "stranger," a sociological concept that describes individuals who mediate between social worlds given their own position as relative outsiders. The cosmopolitan stranger that Isherwood best represents in the early fiction is his eponymous narrator, named William Bradshaw, in "The Last of Mr. Norris" and Christopher Isherwood in "Goodbye to Berlin" respectively. In both cases, the impersonal and detached observations of Isherwood's reserved English narrator illustrate the insight a stranger has while looking into the maelstrom of political and cultural changes taking place in a foreign society, such as Isherwood's with regard to Berlin in the Weimar Era. According to Simmel, the stranger can view his social surroundings "objectively" because "he is not bound by roots to the particular constituents and partisan dispositions of the group" (145). Isherwood's allegiance to an aesthetic doctrine of impersonality and ego-divesting ascetic ideal underscores the virtues of the stranger as a privileged yet reserved social observer—his famous "I am a Camera" in the Berlin writings and, I argue, beyond.
3. In the typescript "First Draft" to *Christopher and His Kind*, for example, Isherwood calls E. M. Forster "a great chieftain" of the homosexual

"tribe" (55). As other critics can attest, the "tribe" concept is key to Isherwood's worldview of homosexuality as an oppressed cultural identity or minority, on par with socioeconomic class, since his earliest days in Berlin. The difference between "tribe" and "kind," however, is subtle: "kind" entails a solidarity with other minority groups, as *A Single Man* makes clear in the classroom scene. Thus, even in *Christopher and His Kind*, usually taken to be his gay manifesto, Isherwood argues for cross-identitarian (or minoritarian) solidarity. For a different reading on the "tribe" versus "kind" distinction, see Jamie Carr (2). While Carr also argues that Isherwood "resists essentialized categories of identification" (2), her larger argument is about the anti-linear and antiprogressive sense of queer temporality represented in Isherwood's writings.

4. Tim Dean's queer Lacanian work draws on modernist impersonality and a conception of the unconscious as the otherness within. See, for instance, his "T. S. Eliot, Famous Clairvoyante," where he elaborates a notion of the modernist poet as a medium for alien forces and voices, thereby evacuating the self. Dean thus draws out the queer implications of Eliot's modernist doctrine of impersonality. For other takes on modernist impersonality, see the now-classic Maud Ellman and the recent Sharon Cameron.
5. In *Christopher and His Kind*, see, for instance, Isherwood's reliance on the third-person "Christopher" or even "Isherwood" when speaking of his past selves, which grammatically insists on the impersonal distance between the authorial persona and its past instantiations, present even in the memoir. One could say that in *Christopher and His Kind*, Isherwood mobilizes impersonal form on behalf of the politics of identity, a frank ideological stance missing in the purer fictional narratives, which eschew the entailments of identitarian political representation in favor of impersonality keyed to a self-divesting ascetic ideal.
6. Marianne DeKoven, in "Psychoanalysis and Sixties Utopianism," argues that the 1960s in the US stretched into the 1970s—what she calls "the long sixties" (263).
7. I am using the term "queer" in the strategically nonspecific sense of forms of being and belonging that are opposed to all regimes of normativity, as articulated by Michael Warner in the introduction to *Fear of a Queer Planet*. Warner writes against the "dominant concept" of "gay and lesbian community" as "a notion generated in the tactics of Anglo-American identity politics and its liberal-national environment": "in the liberal-pluralist frame [the notion of lesbian and gay community] predisposes that political demands will be treated as demands for the toleration and representation of a minority constituency" (xxxv–xxxvi). Isherwood's novella resists this "reduction," in Warner's terms, of the political model of sexual dissidence to a community model of discrete identities under a liberal umbrella. Indeed, *A Single Man* criticizes what it calls the "pseudoliberal sentimentality" of "tolerance," which the novel considers merely a tacit form of an-

nihilation through social ghettoization. At the same time, the famous diction of "minority-sister" in the classroom scene is in tension with this queer impersonal and ascetic ideal.

8. I use the term "nonfictional autobiography" to stress the generic ambiguity of texts like *Lions and Shadows*. As Isherwood reminds us in his "Note to the reader," that book "is not, in the ordinary journalistic sense of the word, an autobiography . . . it is not even entirely 'true'" (7). Thus, Isherwood presents *Lions and Shadows* as a curious mixture of fiction and autobiography, a fictionalized, if not wholly fictional, autobiography, in contrast to the scrupulous "journalistic" adherence to facts—especially regarding his sexuality—that characterizes his later *Christopher and His Kind*. The latter thus stands as a political correction of the former.
9. As I do, Joseph Bristow argues that *A Single Man* does not anticipate gay liberation, but rather is continuous with Isherwood's earlier novels, which in Isherwood's and many critics' eyes "tactful[ly] silenc[ed] his [narrators'] gayness" (147). I agree that the novel "extends Isherwood's sustained interest in representing homosexuality in some of his earlier novels" (Bristow 147). Yet, Bristow's larger argument regards Isherwood's writings as primarily "backward-looking," which sidesteps Isherwood's evolution as a politically aware writer constantly adapting to his time and place (World War in Europe and the Pacific; the Cold War; Weimar, Germany; Los Angeles). It is just that Isherwood resisted the normative claims of politics, especially if these stigmatized homosexuality, but even especially if these claims threatened to usurp the relative autonomy of literary practice. Isherwood belonged to what he termed the "cult of the Artist," or the modernist cult of aesthetic autonomy. See, for instance, Isherwood's "Unused Chapter" to *Christopher and His Kind*: He writes that "the artist stands alone" (13); and: "It was Edward Upward who had read Baudelaire to Christopher and who had initiated him into the cult of the Artist" (13). In fact, I argue against Bristow that *A Single Man* is a modernist, pre-gay liberation or impersonally queer work, whereas the nonfictional *Christopher and His Kind* documents Isherwood's direct advocacy for gay liberation.
10. In 1974, Isherwood famously gave an MLA address on homosexuality and literature. See Berg 9–10.
11. See especially in *Intimacies* Bersani's "Shame On You" 31–56 and "The Power of Love and the Power of Evil" 57–88.
12. Pace Bersani, whose analysis of contemporary queer ascetic self-divestiture focuses on unsafe sex between men (or barebacking), *A Single Man* is devoid of gay sex. While George masturbates in the penultimate scene of the novel—before his presumable death—the remainder of the narrative is oddly chaste. There are several scenes of George's homoerotic appreciation for male bodies, for example, but none that dramatize these bodies getting it on. Isherwood's ascetic ideal is thus evident in the novel's subtle treatment of erotic desire. This ascetic ideal arguably explains the narrative's sublimation of



sexual desires and elevation of nonsexual desires for detached or impersonal attachment.

13. This is how Bersani famously formulates it in "Is the Rectum a Grave?" for instance.
14. I have many concerns with minimizing the specificities and entailments of identity, disenfranchisement, and histories of oppression that a queer theory of impersonality and ascetic self-vaporization, such as Bersani's, raise. For a sensitive treatment of the double burden of a queer, though not yet gay, aesthetic subjectivity, see Heather Love's chapter on Walter Pater in *Feeling Backward*.
15. The use of the term "vacation" might be emblematic of the bourgeois privilege attending such scenes of lateral agency. But I think misfit minorities also practice escaping the burden of self through ostensibly lateral means.
16. In the 1930s, Isherwood termed British society and its liberal governance a "British heterosexual dictatorship" (Unused Chapter of *Christopher and His Kind* 5). In the same section, Isherwood scorns the "so-called democracies" of the West, whom he saw in the 1930s as no better than the totalitarian states of Germany and Russian Soviets. He writes: "Only the anarchists of Spain would seem to have affirmed the homosexual's right to live" (9).
17. George sides with something called the majority and speaks of minorities as the other in condescending and reductive terms. Note his use of the pronoun "we" to refer to an imagined majority ("Minorities are people . . . like us . . . It's better if we admit to disliking and hating them . . ." [71]).
18. As we will see with the old married couple, the words "rage" and "resentment" reappear later in the novel, transformed by a perversely romantic discourse of impersonal attachment mediated by performative insult.
19. I borrow the term "aesthetics of existence" from the second and third volumes of Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, where the philosopher's study of eroticism in the West became a study not of systematic control over subjects and populations, but a study of ancient self-fashioning and an ethics of care of the self (*The Use of Pleasure* and *The Care of the Self*).
20. Engaging in such symbolic exchanges allows for impersonal understanding, without the sugarcoating or "bland annihilation" that Mrs. Strunk practices with George (27–29). Her "incurious" tolerance betrays a resistance to engage with George as an other. But beyond allowing the dialogue to take place, the impersonality of playing a social role self-consciously adds a safeguard. One cannot take personally the enactment of a social role; rather, the responsibility now belongs to society for structuring itself along these differential lines to begin with. One's personal culpability fades as the determinism of social roles comes into sharper focus; abdicating burdensome at-

tachment to one's cultural self pays dividends in demonstrating the entailments of identity formation outside an individual purview.

21. These are very retrograde desires represented here: wanting a more impersonal, more hierarchical, relationship. Yet, George reaches a rapprochement across social divides. By so doing, he ensures that the novel refuses to ignore these divisions (as "pseudoliberals" would) or to relegate them to the collective level of political rage (with resentment, as in the politics of identity). The novel offers escape from the liberal tenet of sovereign agency and the rhetoric of identity. In what I read as misfit minoritarian poetics and politics, the novel stages scenes of self-attenuation, affective and libidinal negativity, antisocial detachment, and impersonal relationality as paradoxical intimacies.
22. By "slow death," Berlant indicates an ongoing ordinary experience that "refers to the physical wearing out of a population and the deterioration of people in that population that is very nearly a defining condition of their experience and historical existence" (754). Berlant's focus on "death" is dramatically political, in order to demonstrate that the "general emphasis of the phrase ['slow death'] is on the phenomenon of mass physical attenuation under global/national regimes of capitalist structural subordination and governmentality" (754). One could say that my focus is on slow life, or the less-dramatically inflected phenomenon of ongoing physical and social experiences of marginalization, lack of access to the good life, yet perseverance through affective and social, not to mention aesthetic, means such as ritualized religion, literary and cultural invention and consumption, and so on. To call such ongoing experiences of limited pleasure, limited transcendence of social and political marginalization "slow death" is in some ways to minimize the creative potential for any individual or "population," to use Berlant's term, to enact resistance, however fleeting or weak, to regimes of domination. For a different conception of nonsovereign or suspended agency, see Sianne Ngai. For a classic example of the possibility of cultural vibrancy despite systematic oppression, see Patterson on African American antebellum cultures under slavery, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*. Like Berlant's emphasis on slow death, Patterson's focus on social death takes into account the potential for limited agency among the oppressed despite such morbidly repressive conditions. Such agency bespeaks a form of optimism that might qualify as cruel, in Berlant's terms. However, such optimism can also be read as a mode of affirmation. See Michael Snediker for more on queer optimism. Also see Heather Love for a touching reminder of the importance of attending to negative affects and queer structures of feeling.

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