

“Warm blood and live semen and rich marrow and wholesome flesh!”: A Queer Ecological Reading of Christopher Isherwood’s *A Single Man*

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Abstract

In Christopher Isherwood’s A Single Man, George, the novel’s main character, acts a barometer for the ecological destruction enacted by the “breeders”—the families and their children—who surround him. While mourning the sudden death of his longtime partner, George observes the suburban heterosexual couples and their offspring as well as the rampant growth and construction and the general environmental destruction occurring in California at the time. While the novel is traditionally read as a text that empowers and normalizes a gay man in a long-term relationship, I argue that these critics are ignoring the environmental signs spread throughout the novel. George notices the urban and suburban sprawl occurring in California, and he realizes that the sprawl (and humans) will die and “the desert, which is the natural condition of this country, will return” (A Single Man 111). Isherwood specifically uses his gay character to track the inevitable apocalypse that will be brought on by breeding and reverses the paradigm of queerness as unnatural by making reproduction unnatural and inherently apocalyptic. Besides this, George constructs spaces to support his queerness as well as the preservation of natural spaces. And instead of imposing new binaries in the narrative, Isherwood includes descriptions of touch and play, primarily that between George and his student Kenny, as a means of dissolving boundaries and opening upon the possibility of naturalized same-sex eroticism.

There are times when the change without apparent direction, and the growth without control, give the appearance of a socially acceptable madness, of a human population irruption that may well end tragically both for the people and for the land.

—Raymond Dasmann, *The Destruction of California*

In the “Mr. Lancaster” section of Christopher Isherwood’s 1962 novel *Down There on a Visit*, Mr. Lancaster explains that his assistant cannot make a party because “[h]is wife’s expecting another baby. Her fifth. They breed like vermin. That’s the real menace of the future, Christopher. Not war. Not

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disease. Starvation. They'll spawn themselves to death. I warned them, backed in '21. Wrote a long letter to *The Times*, forecasting the curve of the birth rate. I've been proved right already. But they were afraid. The facts were too terrible" (26). Lancaster laments that his Malthusian warning, notwithstanding its eugenicist undertones, has gone ignored by the larger population, particularly the media. Later in the novel, Ambrose, a gay man, describes his imaginary, utopian homosexual "kingdom." It is a space where gay men will be free to express themselves openly at the same time heterosexuality will become unacceptable, and heterosexuals will be kept in spaces on the margins, reserved for "people like that" (100).¹ Ambrose's kingdom will also be useful to women since they will "be beautifully looked after on the breeding farms, as wards of the State. And, surely, most of them would greatly prefer artificial insemination, anyway. It's quite obvious that they have no real interest in men" (100). This, Ambrose explains, is because "Women are all Lesbians, really—they take naturally to all the ineffectual feminine messing about—cuddling and petting" (101). Even if Ambrose's vision seems sexist, it reveals an underlying agenda—to combat heterosexism specifically by corralling women and curbing their reproduction.

The reason I begin an article on Isherwood's 1964 novel *A Single Man* with this mention of *Down There on a Visit* is because the passages highlight important features of my own queer ecological reading of the later novel. *A Single Man*, which follows George, a gay, middle-aged, English professor who has recently lost his partner, Jim, in an automobile accident, through twenty-four hours of his life, focuses on the prevalent themes of queer ecology. In its own way, the novel naturalizes queerness and makes it "ordinary" through George's conventionality and respectability. But rather than replacing a heteronormative paradigm with a naturalized sexuality, Isherwood remains ambivalent towards humans' ability to surmount or escape death, or more specifically, the past or future, in any way. According to reviewer Alan Pryce-Jones, Isherwood's "coherent philosophy" involves the "feebleness of our nature" and the knowledge that "we are going to be wiped up in a towel and poured down the sink anyway. Our loves, whether unorthodox or no, will not last, cannot save, deserve scant sympathy" (5). That Isherwood uses the gay George to critique the dominant narrative of the naturalness of heterosexuality and its acceptance of environmental devastation is not coincidental. Rather, he possesses the visionary ability to observe the subjugated since, as Isherwood himself asserts, *A Single Man* is not exclusively about homosexuality but "about minorities. And the homosexuals are used as a sort of metaphor for minorities in general" (Wickes 44). In particular, Isherwood's admission emphasizes what I see as a queer ecological examination of heterosexist, anti-nature, and anthropocentric control over the marginalized.

These passages demonstrate the complexity of a queer ecological ethos in Isherwood's work. Catriona Sandilands introduces the concept of erotophobia, one of things about which queer ecology speaks out, by relating it "to the regulation of sexual diversity; normative heterosexuality, especially in its links to science and nature, has the effect of regulating and instrumentalizing sexuality, linking it to truth and evolutionary health rather than to pleasure and fulfillment" (180). Suggesting a solution to the issue of erotophobia, Sandilands sees touch as "non-teleological, more part of a disruption than a continuation. As a central practice of an erotogenic ethics, touch is both transgressive and creative. [...] it ignites a knowledge of the other that is profoundly different from vision" (186). Erotophobia, then, denies other modes of physical contact by possessing a preoccupation with a death that can be remedied by procreation. The "de-eroticization" and "heterosexualization" of both the human and natural world, according to Sandilands, is the chief obstruction to free sexual expression, and the solution is an emphasis on *touch*, "an erotics of play, spontaneity, and disruption" in which "teleology gives way to unpredictability, and a naturalized normative heterosexual penetration to a desire to multiply queer the everyday world of tactile sensibility" (187). This emphasis on touch without reproduction and the

currency of the deployment of touch introduces the possibilities of a complex matrix of desire. Queer touch, that is, touch that does not result in reproduction, is concurrent with the instability and volatility of nature, featuring possibilities outside the paradigm of what is considered “natural” and “unnatural.”

A queer ecocritical reading also takes into account not just homosexual behaviors, which are most closely associated with the term queerness, but also heterosex that does not necessarily result in procreation. Queerness’s fluidity lends itself to readings of the varying modes of sexuality, and at the same time considerations of ecocriticism, which examines the boundaries between the human and other-than-human worlds, can easily dissolve rigid definitions. Because queer ecocritical readings acknowledge the presence and acceptability of the modes outside of heterosexual reproduction and question the necessity of reproduction, there is an acknowledged diminution in the valorization of the production of biological children. Queer ecocriticism’s concern with children centers on the rigidity of the pattern of reproduction and futurism. The cyclical motion of birth-marriage-reproduction-death signifies a “natural” sequence, but it is also restrictive in many ways. The heteronormative, dominant narratives value stability and constancy, a motioning toward the future. Therefore, a queer ecocritical temporality does not necessarily foreclose the future but rather values temporalities outside this consideration. Consequently, sanctioned reproduction and the contingent ecological destruction often generated by the hubris of human dominance, succession, and consumption runs counter to the idea of “queer time” as having creative solutions to the birth, marriage, reproduction, death narrative. Namely, I adopt Judith Halberstam’s notions of queer time, which she argues “develop, at least in part, in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction” (1). Queer time is in direct opposition to “family time” or “repro-time,” a temporality that emphasizes not only the endless cycling and scheduling of daily life that revolves around children but also the “time of inheritance” which “refers to an overview of generational time within which values, wealth, goods, and morals are passed through family ties from one generation to the next” (5). Repro-time is invested in an almost unchanging cycle of birth, courtship, marriage, child-rearing and death that is constantly accounting for and looking toward the future, i.e. children, as the *natural* route for humans to take. Interestingly, Halberstam also identifies the way heteronormative models of time are bound up in the possession of products and the constancy of one’s influence over the next generation. It is a restrictive sense of inheritance, to say the least.

In *A Single Man*, heterosexual coupling is inherently risky, tending toward apocalypticism because the people who “breed like vermin” create pressure on valuable natural resources, particularly food. That Isherwood’s brand of apocalypticism stems from problems created by the breeding of human beings within the dangerous and volatile nuclear family rather than the ever-present Cold War threat of nuclear war is telling. Reproductive sex is, essentially, the end of mankind, and the destruction of the environment directly correlates to the production of children. There is, for these childbearing couples, no future (to invoke Lee Edelman’s phrase) because they will surely kill themselves—and everyone else—off from too much reproduction. Isherwood infuses the heterosexual sex act with the power to create a generalized apocalypse, wiping away all life on the planet. At the same time though, heterosex, at the fault of the woman, is entirely stripped of any physical eroticism, making heterosexual acts purely reproductive and not pleasurable in any way. Isherwood is also preoccupied with the creation of a queer space that overturns heterosexism and homophobia in order to open up queer, erotic possibility, establish zones of safety for queerness, and expose ecological destruction, particularly through production and consumption.

The production-consumption of the postwar period correlates with the booms in both population and the economy after World War II. But the use of consumer products is not the only sort of environmental

destruction that took place in the postwar period; the abuse of land was apparent and other natural resources were widely affected too. Adam Rome's 2001 *The Bulldozer in the Countryside* addresses the questions of land use both historically and materially by tracing the roots of the environmental movements in America, arguing that they are a direct response to population growth as well as new techniques in construction and the affluence experienced in the years after World War II. Rome demonstrates that the postwar housing and baby booms involved an endless, destructive method, wherein one's lifestyle encompassed all manner of environmental disruption, so that "the single-family home with a full complement of consumer goods had become the most common image of 'the American way of life.' Yet the image of a mass consumer culture could only become reality with mass production of housing" (37). "Because the cheapest and largest tracts of land lay at the urban fringe," suburban sprawl, itself primarily responsible for the leveling of wilderness spaces and landscapes, the disruption of natural flows of water, the pollution of groundwater from sanitary systems and the complexity of those systems, and the requirements for energy, strip mining specifically, also brought an onslaught of automobiles and their attendant highways as well as other disposable household good into what used to be the untouched countryside (42). The reason behind suburban sprawl, as Rome aptly points out, was the "unprecedented demand of new families for space, the concern to smooth the return of veterans to civilian life, the fear of a postwar depression [...] To preserve social order, to give the average work a chance to own property, to provide a healthy environment for children, and to stimulate the economy" (34). All aspects of this environmental destruction were socially and governmentally sanctioned. More people meant the need for more housing, leading to the destruction of more land and the use of more resources. The correlation between the expansion of the nuclear family and the spread into "virgin" lands equals the recognition by queer ecocriticism of the destruction of natural resources and abuse of the land itself.

But queer ecology also acknowledges the impact and effect of *all* people on the Earth. It is not just reproductive couples that inhabit and utilize the planet but queers as well. Consequently, I do not suggest that queers are somehow instilled with some mystical or exclusive knowledge about the environment; rather, they are more likely to recognize the management of space, and in particular natural spaces, because of their status as outsiders. Consequently, an essential part of the policing of queer sexuality is the creation of specific spaces into which the oppressed are thrust. While these spaces are produced as a way of keeping queerness away from the eyes of mainstream propriety and maintaining control, queers often adopt and adapt these spaces for their own ends. In establishing and adopting spaces for their own occupation, as Gordon Brent Ingram argues, queers can institute possibilities for liberation and community-building, "at least in terms of greater visibility, some increase in freedom of behaviour, and the lowering of perceived risk of assault or other forms of repression" (95). Specifically, Ingram refers to outdoor space as particularly strategic to queers because it is "almost a home, because there are few other places to go" (101). This cooperation between nature and queers should not be assumed to be utopic; rather, the it is the recognition that particular outdoor spaces and other environments are specifically adopted for the transgression of normative behavior that is important. It is another human use of the natural world, but indeed a more changeable and libratory one.

In fact, through the creation and maintenance of queer spaces in the novel, Isherwood not only emphasizes the value of keeping open the possibilities of queer desire but also the contingent importance of ecological preservation and a temporality that focuses on the present. Isherwood makes George's home and the beach on which he first meets Jim safe havens for queerness as well as conservation of the natural world. Reviewer Stanley Kauffman describes George as a man who "is no more an exile essentially than any man of sensibility faced with a world for which he is increasingly

unequipped. [...] There is no future for him, he knows, only a Now, and in that Now only a hunger for sex and company" (24). While Kauffman's assertion that George merely craves sex and company is suspect, he aptly indicates George's insistence on the Now. Although the narrative's timing is strictly linear, the sense of queer temporality established in the novel centers on the ever-ready deployment of the Now as opposed to the heteronormative fixation on the future. George's personal sense of time remains always in the present because timing for him is how he sets himself apart from the heterosexuals and their destructiveness. Without the threat of consequences, a queer sense of time can remain open to all fluctuating possibilities. Conversely, heterosexual couples' obsession with the future, centered primarily on reproduction and the motif of the nuclear family and the child, fits into a paradigm that is incessantly, mindlessly re-cycling itself in a loop of production-reproduction-consumption. Isherwood labels these heterosexuals "breeders" because of their unchecked and heedless reproduction. Like the heterosexual vermin in *Down There on a Visit*, the breeders in *A Single Man* will eventually cycle out themselves through their careless procreation, their unbridled and destructive use of natural resources, and their dependence on endless consumption of goods and technology which is directly connected to environmental destruction. The novel is shaded with a fatalism that stems from a distrust of the breeders as well as George's recognition of the increasing victimization of the natural world brought on by humans' destructive hubris. This makes any all natural spaces or attempts at queerness necessarily transitory and always at the behest of George's fixation upon death.

It is essential to remember that at the novel's core is George, a man grieving the loss of his partner. Because of his grief, George's main motivation in the novel revolves around not just remembering Jim by keeping him present but also in raging against the forces that brought about Jim's death. For example, George claims to feel a "kind patriotism for the freeways," despite his hatred for automobiles, because his participation in the act of driving to work and the forward motion signified by the freeway means he can "claim to be a functioning member of society. He can still *get by*" (33). Jim is always present, everywhere George moves, but particularly in their own home, where George imagines Jim visiting him like "an observer from another country who is permitted to peep in for a moment from the vast outdoors of his freedom and see, at a distance, through glass this figure who sits solitary at the small table in the narrow room, eating his poached eggs humbly and dully, a prisoner for life" (15). The weight of George's sadness is evident in both of these descriptions. I include these descriptions as a way of illustrating the privileging of George's personal relationship over every other narrative in the novel. Despite his ecological visions, George is no environmentalist. Rather, he blames breeders, specifically Doris whom I discuss later in this article, for Jim's death. All other motivations spin off from the primacy of the Jim's (non)presence in the novel. Although he comprehends the destruction that breeding and consumerism inflicts upon the natural world, George himself does not privilege the natural world as a space or force that has value on its own. Rather, he subordinates it to human definition, desire and appropriation, seeking out spaces that will serve his queerness and his need to keep Jim present foremost and not vice versa. The relationship involves an interplay between privileging both queer and ecological narratives, but queerness—George's homosexuality chiefly—takes precedence over all else.²

Much of the previous criticism on *A Single Man* focuses on the frank and positive depiction of George's sexuality. Isherwood also revises the stereotypes of homosexuality prevalent in the 1960s partially through what Joseph Bristow calls "the mutable—even chimerical—form of [George's] identities" (148). David Garnes argues Isherwood makes George's sexuality unremarkable and that "George is meant to be seen as a kind of Everyman, a character whose closely observed life reflects the human condition" (198). Similarly, David Garrett Izzo emphasizes George as "an Everyman who just happens to be gay and that his bereavement is no less painful for him that it would be for anyone else" (235). David Bergman

sees Isherwood as revising “the received notions of gay people, and *A Single Man* stands in marked contrast to the two reigning images of the homosexual in the sixties: the denizen of the demimonde and the beautiful ephēbe” (206). Reed Woodhouse argues that George is a “warrior—a ‘single’ one and unlikely to win” and locates George’s “heroism” in “his willingness to fight back against time, his body, the sentimental hypocrisies of his society, the cult of sexual normality, the multiple untamed selves that cohabit his psyche” (156).³ And while Mario Faraone gets closer to my own queer ecological interpretation with his assertion that George is “a perfect symbol of the sterility and spiritual desert in which he lives,” Faraone ultimately eschews George’s *desire* for erotic exchange in favor of “the impossibility of true connection” (255). While these critics’ arguments are plausible, they do not take into account what I see as Isherwood’s obvious embrace of environmental language. By focusing exclusively on George’s queerness, they are limiting their interpretations to the sexual proclivities of the human world while ignoring the other-than-human world. In fact, Isherwood’s candid treatment of George as a middle-aged, gay man is mutually dependent upon George’s observations of an encroaching, destructive, heterosexual world, which is determined to accumulate possessions, spread like an epidemic, and diminish the natural world and queerness.

The beach in *A Single Man*, the public, outdoor space that serves as a central queer site for George, is, in Ingram’s words, an important space for “learning social skills, for exchange of information, for peer support, and for identity formation” (104). The beach is where George first meets Jim, touching off a long-term, devoted (mostly) relationship between them. But it is not a space reserved exclusively for gay men. The beach is a natural, queer site because it remains, until the end of World War II and the consequent Baby Boom, untouched by encroaching suburbia and its destructive residents and their attachment to heteronormativity. “In the beach-months of 1946,” the “magic squalor of those hot nights, when the whole shore was alive with tongues of flame, the watchfires of a vast naked barbarian tribe” allows for “coupling without shame in the sand” for *all* participants (*Single Man* 148). Completely unrestricted, the beach permits a full range of unabashed erotic contact and play. This “bohemian utopia” supports free and open sex as well as a kind of pagan embrace of nature.

Significantly, this is the same place George takes Kenny, a student whom George attempts to seduce. With Kenny, George is able to temporarily reclaim the beach as a site of spontaneous queer seduction, play, and touch. After a trip to the Starboard Side, George’s favorite bar, the two descend to the beach and shed their clothes. As the couple drunkenly runs toward the water, “their bodies rub against each other, briefly but roughly. [...] Their relationship, whatever it now is, is no longer symbolic” (161). Their play is sanctioned and encouraged by the natural world. As they descend into the water, naked and eager, it appears the “waves and the night and the noise exist only *for their play*” (163, my emphasis). Kenny is an elegant “water-creature,” like Venus emerging from the ocean foam, while George sputters and chokes, receiving “the stunning baptism of the surf [...] becoming always cleaner, freer, less” (162-3). Of the images of baptism, James Berg suggests that they

are not merely a reaching back to prewar texts (the scene is reminiscent of the ‘sacred lake’ in *A Room with a View*) but also owe a debt to Isherwood’s study of Vedānta and Hindu texts as well as his involvement with Southern California beach culture. The images of borders and refugees may relate to Europe and Mortmere, but they owe at least as much to California and Mexico (as we can see from *Down There on a Visit*) and from being an outsider (gay, in this instance) in a world organized against him. (“American Isherwood” 17)

The water washes George of the labels he despises, includes him in a queer community of his own invention, making him, as well as Kenny, a more natural creature immersed in the ocean and in queerness. Their mutual ejaculatory release is also undeniable here: they play with themselves and are made wet together.

The beach scene's positioning in the novel makes it the climax (pun intended) and the closest George gets to having a sexual encounter within the novel, and it is all of George's making. That Kenny is seemingly heterosexual and only interested in using George's home for trysts with his girlfriend is beside the point. He is certainly queered in the novel, open to George's invitation. The erotic encounter forces George to question, "[W]hat is this life of ours supposed to be *for*? Are we to spend it identifying each other with catalogues, like tourists in an art gallery? Or are we to try to exchange some signal, however garbled, before it's too late?" (174). What's important here is George's insistence on *exchange*, some kind of bodily, physical communication that would eliminate harmful social identifiers, confirm his existence and iterate his sexuality, generate some human-to-human connection, and formulate a relationship with the natural world. After George's questions comes his repudiation of the "miserable fools and prudes and cowards" who do not realize "what the bed *means*—that's what experience *is!*" (174-5). In fact, according to George, the tragic condition of the modern world is the emphasis on "flirtation instead of fucking" (176). Although George fails to bed Kenny, their flirtation enables a spontaneous, playful and ever-changing dialogue between them. "[B]ut not a Platonic dialogue," Isherwood cautions, "not a debate on some dreary set theme. You can talk about anything and change the subject as often as you like. In fact, what really matters is not what you talk about, but the being together in this particular relationship" (154). It is a dialogue that does not look forward or back; rather, their conversation remains in the present.

While the implementation of the memory of things past might seem antithetical to the now-ness of queer temporality, the way Isherwood intersperses memories of Jim into the main action of novel (itself written in present tense) is powerful. Isherwood uses the fragments of George's memory to make his home space another natural, queer site in the novel. Memories of his domestic life with Jim come in pieces but make up a dialogue with the past that reinforces the domestication and isolation of their queerness. "As good as being on our own island," George observes when he first sees their future home (20). Indeed, everything about the home suggests a kind of environmental economy absent in the homes of their breeding neighbors: the garage, overgrown with ivy, is home to Jim's menagerie of animals rather than an automobile, indicating the couple's emphasis on conservation of nature rather than acquiring technological items; the house is "a tightly planned little house," suggesting not only resistance to expansion of *any* kind but also the promise and recovering of physical play and contact—"constantly jogging, jostling, bumping against each other's bodies by mistake or on purpose, sensually, aggressively, awkwardly, impatiently, in rage or in love" (12); it is an older, lived-in home, not like the brand new structures built by his neighbors; and it is, for all purposes, George's refuge, isolated and distant, where his memories of Jim and his queerness are preserved. Ecologically speaking, George's home space is abounding with an ethic of conservation.

When Jim declares, "Oh, well, I expect [the house will] last our time," he embraces the home's separateness and decrepit state (it is only accessible by an old, rickety bridge) as well as the "our time" which he assigns only to himself and George. Later, George claims the home's isolation for the sanctioning of his queerness. Imagining himself as a monster in a fairy tale in his isolated lair, George also vocalizes his resistance to his breeding neighbors: "The fiend that won't fit into their statistics, the Gorgon that refuses their plastic surgery, the vampire drinking blood with tactless uncultured slurps, the bad-smelling beast that doesn't use their deodorants, the unspeakable that insists, despite all their

shushing, on speaking its name" (27). By opposing the status quo and refusing consumerism, George iterates his queerness and ecological awareness as well as his ability to disrupt normative modes of time by remaining in the "our time" and the bohemianism that Jim embraces. Jamie M. Carr identifies a queer temporality by arguing that Isherwood's earlier novels emphasize a "sense of time that is not linear [...] nor 'progressive,' as a privileged temporal structure of history," a sense of time that seeks to shift the "paradigms of progress" (2). By imagining himself as the monster isolated from his breeding neighbors, he is separating himself from their brand of temporality as a way of reclaiming his lost love.

Remaining in the present is George's weapon against the breeder mentality and his means of reclaiming Jim from the past. The following declaration is prefaced by George's oscillating consciousness, which highlights the fragility of George's vision. In this moment of self-questioning and -answering, George in turn convinces himself: "Jim is in the past, now"; "But George remembers him so faithfully"; "Jim is my life"; "Jim is death"; "But George is getting old. Won't it very soon be too late?" (182). The tension between the present and past is more a symptom of George's confused grief than it is his irresoluteness. Jim, though spoken of in the past tense throughout the novel, is fully present to George, a force or energy with which George is constantly engaging. The culmination of George's past-present debate is the following proclamation: "Damn the future. Let Kenny and the kids have it. [...] George only clings to Now. It is Now that he must find another Jim. Now that he must love. Now that he must live" (182). As I stated before, George's main motivation is reclaiming Jim to the present moment. By condemning the future and giving it over to "the kids," George firmly places himself and his need to find "another Jim"—whatever form he might take—in the present moment.

George's declaration is an empowering one, and Isherwood's speculation on his death only a few pages later is interesting in light of queer time's relationship to longevity. The temporality and now-ness in this scene is reminiscent of the opening of the novel in which George awakes from a night's sleep:

Waking up begins with saying *am* and *now*. That which has awoken then lies for a while staring up at the ceiling and down into itself until it has recognized *I*, and therefrom deduced *I am*, *I am now*. *Here* comes next, and is at least negatively reassuring; because *here*, this morning, is where it has expected to find itself: what's called *at home*. But *now* isn't simply now. *Now* is also a cold reminder: one whole day later than yesterday, one year later than last year. Every *now* is labeled with its date, rendering all past *nows* obsolete, until—later or sooner—perhaps—no, not perhaps—quite certainly: it will come. (9)

Appearing at the very beginning of the novel, this passage introduces the importance of the present deployment of time and George's concern with staying in the moment as well as the inevitability of death. The intermingling of the *I-am-here-now* and George's insistence on being *at home*, rather than establishing a sense of progression that parallels repro-time, actually highlight the acknowledgement of temporality that is not concerned with inheritance. "*I'm afraid of being rushed*," George declares to his reflection in the mirror, despite the fact that "The creature we are watching will struggle on and on until it drops. Not because it is heroic. It can imagine no alternative" (11, 10). George is not delusional or romantic about the future; it is merely an inevitability that cannot be supplanted by inheritance or procreation.

Significantly, in this novel written at the height of the Cold War, Isherwood associates apocalypse with unchecked reproduction, misuse of the land, and overextension of resources, particularly water, rather than with nuclear warfare. The hills outside Los Angeles, once so wild and largely uninhabited, except

for the wildlife—coyotes, rattlesnakes, and deer—have seen the encroachment of human populations.⁴ I include this lengthy quote because it is to me the key behind the potential apocalypse in *A Single Man*:

True, there are still a few uninhabited canyons, but George can't rejoice in them; he is oppressed by awareness of the city below. On both sides of the hills, to the north and to the south, it has spawned and spread itself over the entire plain. It has eaten up the wide pastures and ranchlands and the last stretches of orange grove; it has sucked out the surrounding lakes and sapped the forests of the high mountains. Soon it will be drinking converted sea water. And yet it will die. No need for rockets to wreck it, or another ice age to freeze it, or a huge earthquake to crack it off and dump it in the Pacific. It will die of overextension. It will die because its taproots have dried up—the brashness and greed which have been its only strength. And the desert, which is the natural condition of this country, will return. (111)

Desert, signifier of barrenness and loneliness, is, in fact, “the natural condition” for that part of the country. Anyone who does not conform to what Isherwood identifies as the breeders’ falsified image of an “American utopia,” for which they are “ready to purge and starve themselves for generations, in the hopeless hope of inheriting it,” is subject to Alan Nadel’s concept of the nuclear gaze and its distrust of ambiguous motives (26). The city is described as a living organism, but it is a parasitic, unsustainable one. This is an apocalypse, an end of times, *not* brought about by nuclear warfare or even an uncontrollable natural disaster.⁵ Rather, it is apocalypse that comes at the hands of people—too many people whose “brashness and greed” is manifested by its misuse of the Earth. George fears surviving into a “Rubble Age.”⁶ The Rubble Age will come, George imagines, because it will “be quite natural for Mr. Strunk to gun down Grant and his wife and three children, because Grant has neglected to lay sufficient stores of food and they are starving and may therefore possibly become dangerous and this is no time for sentiment” (88).

Traces of the oncoming apocalypse show up at the end of World War II when the utopian, bohemian, queer spaces of George’s past turn into spaces reserved for the sanctioning of the nuclear family and their impetus to consume in excess. The arrival of the breeders, characterized as a faceless, nameless mob that acquires endless objects, erases all traces of the natural landscape and the queerness that existed in George’s bohemia. With the onslaught of the “domesticated servicemen,” beach fires and pagan parties are prohibited on the once-queer, natural space of the beach, and “you must eat sitting up on benches at communal tables, and mustn’t screw at all” (148). The Starboard Side installs a new television, that ever-ready symbol of technology and consumerism. George sees the television as responsible for the hypnosis and frigidity of the bar’s patrons. They are absorbed in the television screen, disconnected from each other and firmly attached to this electrified object. Jean Baudrillard argues that people in a modern consumer society “are surrounded not so much by other human beings, as they were in all previous ages, but by objects” (25). These objects, he further explains, are “neither a flora or a fauna,” apart from the “natural ecological laws,” since “they are always arranged to mark out directive paths, to orientate the purchasing impulse towards networks of objects” in which the consumer becomes entrapped (25, 26, 27). Or, as George puts it, Americans are only living symbolically, they are adhering to a strict and confining “building code which demands certain measurements, certain utilities and the use of certain apt materials; no more and no less” (91). “The Europeans hate us,” George continues, “because we’ve retired to live inside our advertisements, like hermits going into caves to contemplate. We sleep in symbolic bedrooms, eat symbolic meals, are symbolically entertained” (91).

What the breeders do not recognize is that they will inevitably destroy everything and everyone in the world because they reject environmental stewardship, and their notions of inheritance and futurity are utterly ridiculous. Isherwood describes the “The Change,” the transition from the nature-friendly, erotically-charged queerness of George’s world:

[...] in the late forties, when the World War Two vets came swarming out of the East with their just-married wives, in search of *new and better breeding grounds* in the sunny Southland, which had been their last nostalgic glimpse of home before they shipped out to the Pacific. And what better breeding grounds than a hillside neighborhood like this one, only five minutes’ walk from the beach and with no through traffic to decimate the *future tots*? So, one by one, the cottages which used to reek of bathtub gin and reverberate with the poetry of Hart Crane have fallen to the occupying army of *Coke-drinking television watchers*. (18, my emphases)

The breeders’ only motivation is acquiring household goods, building homes, and making babies. They come and destroy the beach. Their children must be protected at all costs from death by automobile (although it is gay Jim who is ironically killed in an automobile accident).⁷ It is no mistake that these are “breeding grounds” for which they search. Like vermin who seek ideal territory for the purpose of their propagation, these people clear out land for their own purposes without a thought to environmental impact. “[L]itter after litter after litter” of “tots” appear in the neighborhood, forcing the expansion of schools and supermarkets. Isherwood’s use of the word “litter” is concrete evidence of their sheer, overwhelming *number* as well as their relationship to debris and waste.

Since “breeding and bohemianism do not mix,” Isherwood is able to enact a complete ideological and temporal separation between the bohemian George and the breeders who are his neighbors. Isherwood’s biographer, Peter Parker, points out that, in Isherwood’s notes to the earlier version of *A Single Man*, which had been tentatively titled *The Englishwoman* and centered on the character of Charlotte rather than George, an interesting pattern emerges: “When she first comes to America after the War she feels a great romance in this attitude of his. [...] But then they have a child and everything changes. The Husband is scared. Suddenly he believes in Security. He has to Get a Job and Support His Loved Ones. He is a bit like a zombie. He moves away from her” (qtd. in Parker 615). The Husband is literally the living dead, stripped of autonomy and living only for the upkeep of His Loved Ones. The introduction of the child is the end of the romantic, bohemian relationship between the husband and wife. Isherwood’s deliberate capitalization of such terms as “Get a Job” highlights them as Platonic ideals. So, to be a breeder “you need a steady job, you need a mortgage, you need credit, you need insurance. And don’t you dare die, either, until the family’s future is provided for” (*A Single Man* 19).

A good deal of Isherwood’s distrust of reproduction and overconsumption lies within the characterization of women and children in the novel. Isherwood, in a telling and significant passage I quote at length, characterizes Woman as Enemy for both very personal reasons and reasons relating to the queer ecological tone of the novel as a whole. While visiting Doris, the woman with whom Jim was having an affair and who was with Jim in the fatal automobile accident, in the hospital, George observes her in horror:

What has it to do with that big arrogant animal of a girl? With that body which sprawled stark naked, gaping wide in shameless demand, underneath Jim’s naked body? Gross insucking vulva, sly ruthless greedy flesh, in all the bloom and gloss and arrogant resilience of youth, demanding that George shall step aside, bow down and yield to the

female prerogative, hide his unnatural head in shame. I am Doris. I am Woman. I am Bitch Mother Nature. The Church and the Law exist to support me. I claim my biological rights. I demand Jim. [...] because Doris was infinitely more than Doris, was Woman the Enemy, claiming Jim for herself. No use destroying Doris, or ten thousand Dorises, as long as Woman triumphs. (95-6)

Although Doris is not technically a breeder, the specter of her reproductive possibility, which is represented by her anatomy, is particularly disturbing to George. The misogynistic undertones in George's tirade illustrate his underlying discomfort with all things female, including Doris and representations of Mother Nature. The discomfort stems not only from the unchecked and wild breeding potential that George believes lies in women but also George's own enraged narrow-mindedness. This is as close as Isherwood gets to imposing a more acceptable paradigm than heterosexuality. Although I would argue that George has every right to be upset about his partner's death, I also point out that George's suspicion of all things heterosexual is deeply linked with his sense of queerness and environmental destruction.

Highlighting the futility of killing "ten thousand Dorises," George articulates the insurmountable biological imperative of heterosexuality. Killing her will not erase all the other breeders. George's revulsion for the vagina reflects his horror and culminating disdain for the breeding, consumptive lifestyle, as well as his own personal contempt for Doris's attempt to "convert" Jim to heterosexuality. She is shameless, open and spread wide, a vacuum-like vulva unnaturally consuming the entire world. Besides this, she is the ultimate consumer personified. He plays up the irony of associating the natural with a procreative mother image because he does not see a natural association between the two. There is deviation from his own appreciation of the natural world—namely, the beach, the unpopulated landscape, and any other space that supports his queerness—and the destructively procreative and entirely constructed image of Mother Nature. In the horror of this vision, the "Bitch Mother Nature" is a deviation from the benevolent and loving Mother of lore. Rather than produce natural resources for the good of her "children," Bitch Mother Nature reverses the process by eating them alive. Her demand to "claim" Jim stems from the biological imperative of Woman's (with a capital "W") reproductive capabilities, the so-called "female prerogative." George is not far off the mark, though, by thinking that Doris's sexuality is state sanctioned. The Cold War-era politics of reproduction supported the notion of a Baby Boom and the building of an insular home space filled to the ceiling with consumer goods.

A product of the Baby Boom, Benny Strunk, is symbolic of the future for George's breeding neighbors. He is the representative Child in the novel, confirming the heteronormative belief that the "Child remains the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, the fantasmic beneficiary of every political intervention" (Edelman 3). But he is a perversion, and Isherwood uses the boy to illustrate the illegitimacy of the reproduction-consumption pattern. Portrayed as a "junior consumer," Benny is destructive and violent toward natural entities and on a direct course to perpetuating his parents' lifestyle. An ominous "CHILDREN AT PLAY" sign appears in George's neighborhood, and it is a threat rather than a mere observation. The child's "play" is not the kind of play depicted by Sandilands as being essential to queer ecology—his play involves no spontaneous touch and redeploys heteronormative consumerism. Benny, "hammer in hand" begins smashing a broken bathroom scale he retrieves from the trashcan as George watches from inside his home. "[M]aking believe the machine is screaming with pain," Benny appears violently disturbed to George (*A Single Man* 23). Mrs. Strunk, however, believes "Benny is passing through his Aggressive Phase, right on schedule; it just couldn't be more normal and healthy" (23). The notion of "phases" that a child must pass through conforms to the conceptualization of normative temporality. Mrs. Strunk sees Benny's behavior as the "anarchy of nature," but

Isherwood's derision toward these notions is evident—Benny's "play" is a perversion and totally unnatural in the realm of queer play (24).

The real anarchy of Benny's play lies in his disregard for and disengagement from other people and creatures. Any queerness that *might* be perceived in "the masculine hour of ball-playing" is erased because the children's ball-playing is a carefully detached performance, one they have learned from their fathers. Benny, joining the other children to dig a hole in a vacant lot, "spits on his hands and picks up the spade. He is someone or other on TV, hunting for buried treasure" (24). The imitation of some TV personality places Benny on the side of Baudrillard's consumer society, indicating by the consumption of his parents' television that objects "are always arranged to mark out directive paths, to orientate the purchasing impulse towards *networks* of objects in order to captivate that impulse" (Baudrillard 27). Isherwood further observes, "These tot-lives are nothing but a medley of such imitations. And soon as they can speak, they start trying to chant the singing commercials" (24). Consequently, children's play in the novel is always in imitation of something unnatural and always placing them in their parents' destructive network.

In order to escape this seemingly inevitable network of consumption, reproduction, and violence toward nature, one must fully embrace the possibility of death. I say "possibility" because at the end of George's day, Isherwood only conjectures that he dies. Or, as Bergman again highlights in reference to Isherwood's normalizing of homosexuality, George's "death is not the wages of sin, a penalty paid for being gay. Instead it is a quiet, gentle, painless death—the 'good death' we believe granted only to the virtuous, and the biological death that all mortals must eventually suffer. In this remarkable ending, Isherwood plays deftly with the requirements of the gay novel, simultaneously recognizing and rejecting them" (207). The requirements that Bergman references are the previously accepted literary tropes that a gay male character must die a violent death, usually via suicide or overdose, at the end of the novel. It is an important revision, and much of Isherwood's novel refocuses the camera's gaze by reassigning it to the homosexual. The critique of "deviant" ways is relocated in *A Single Man*. The homosexual is given the chance to disparage and condemn the perverse and destructive means and ends of the breeder majority, the living dead, further indicting them by transmitting the responsibility for apocalypse to them. It is not enough for Isherwood to say their fixation on futurity through reproduction is futile; he must also acknowledge that their consumptive, restrictive patterns and their ecologically destructive actions are ridiculous and potentially hazard to every other person who lives on Earth.

But lest we assume Isherwood is embracing the image of the apocalyptic homosexual, who in traditional narratives of the queer *had* to die at the conclusion, let us recall Sedgwick's words in *Epistemology of the Closet*: "...the phobic narrative trajectory toward imagining a time *after the homosexual* is finally inseparable from that toward imagining a time *after the human*; in the wake of the homosexual, the wake incessantly produced since first there *were* homosexuals, every human relation is pulled into its shining representational furrow" (128). That is, to envision no homosexuality, or no queerness, is to envision an end of all human beings, and in my estimation, either a total recovery of natural spaces or the total destruction of them. That is certainly permissible to George. He has already accepted the end of man and the natural world at the hands of an irresponsible population. His final gesture is to acknowledge fully the end of life and become "now cousin to the garbage in the container on the back porch" (186). If this sounds fatalistic, that is because it is. Isherwood has already repeatedly pronounced the final destruction of nature and its resources at the hands of overpopulation. Akin to garbage, the human is capable only of wasting in the end, and must, like the waste created by humans,

“be carted away and disposed of, before too long” (186). George is thus implicated in creating waste by *merely existing*.

But that is if one assumes the novel’s end is also George’s. Isherwood cleverly leaves George’s death up to speculation as a means of reversing the conventional homosexual death. Isherwood quips that George’s death this night is “wildly improbable,” but he speculates that George’s heart condition (because this is what he is describing) began the moment he “walked into the Starboard Side and set eyes for the first time on Jim, not yet demobilized and looking stunning beyond words in his Navy uniform” (185). It is one thing to die of depravity tied to one’s sexuality, as the previous trope represents; it is quite another to die a romantic death, the death of a (literal) broken heart. But before George can be released into the Majority made up of the Dead and join Jim, he is trapped in the same daily cycle that condemns the breeders. Isherwood puts him in the same bed in which he begins the novel, and one could flip back to the beginning of the novel and start all over again. His visions, it seems, are for nothing, and Isherwood cannot make George’s vision redemptive since heteronormativity, the certainty of the breeders’ apocalypse, and their environmental wastage is insurmountable. Whether George lives or dies is actually irrelevant. Neither option is liberating for George. Death is waste, and life is a trap.

Endnotes

¹ Notice the interesting co-option and revision by Isherwood of the epithet often leveled at homosexuals. To be “like that” is a phrase often applied to homosexuals in order to differentiate and marginalize them.

² But the scene also takes on more complexity when the gay community, or lack thereof, in the novel is considered. When the book begins, Jim is already dead, and George experiences increasing isolation. In a 1973 interview, Isherwood, explaining the choice of not “juggling a domestic homosexual relations on top of all the other factors in the book” by making Jim dead from the beginning of the novel, describes George’s lack of “philosophical support” once his partner is dead: “The more intense the happiness, the more poignancy one feels in the fact that it can only be for a certain while, that things change, and that one is separated from people by death and circumstances” (Kaplan 122, 123). His only friend is Charlotte, an English exile like himself but decidedly heterosexual. Gregory Woods, who aptly mentions George’s hatred of his suburban neighbors and their children as well as “his misogyny in silent rants against heterosexual breeding habits,” reduces George’s “jaundiced anti-heterosexuality” to a one-dimensional problem—the lack of a gay community in the novel (345). I think the lack of a gay community in *A Single Man* is not so much as problem that the author should have solved but rather a symptom of George’s condition. That gives his vision greater weight. So, even if George does not get an external, gay community of his own, Isherwood endows him an ability to queer whatever he wants.

³ And as Peter Parker states, “Isherwood felt no one could be more single, more isolated, than a homosexual man whose partner had died, because society did not acknowledge the partnership, and so did not recognize this particular bereavement. He had also taken a single man, just one individual, to illustrate a whole culture and way of life, and he had done this by taking a single day in this man’s life, which begins with an assertion of individuality” (623). The novel is in many ways an imagining of how a middle-aged homosexual man would cope with the loss of his partner. Some, including Isherwood himself, have suggested that the novel arose from a turbulent period in the partnership between Isherwood and Don Bachardy, thirty years his junior.

⁴ Raymond F. Dasmann’s 1965 *The Destruction of California* is an indictment of the population and building explosion in postwar California. His call for restraint in the proliferation of human beings, ecological destruction and suburban sprawl includes these questions about the alteration and devastation of California’s geography: “Is it better now that the whole mass is blended together and covered with a pall of smoke? Was it really worth while corralling the Colorado and channeling the waters of northern California, to effect this

change? Will the future development make it better or worse?" (4). Dasmann's subjects are the rapidity of population growth, the alteration of the landscape, and the evidence of the sheer amount of stuff—cars and houses, specifically—that begin to clutter the landscape after the Second World War. The redirection of waterways particularly disturbs Dasmann. Redirection of rivers will cause further demand for water in places where it is not already accessible, causing "further growth of population and industry that will in turn create fresh demand for water, until every drop that can be captured anywhere will be used and reused. And then what happens? Are we planning for this day? Or do we expect some Armageddon to intervene before we must reach this final decision?" (20). While Dasmann's questions smack of the popular argument that there *are* plenty of resources available but they are only getting distributed to the wealthy, his questions are a response to what he sees as the rampant and unchecked proliferation of human beings and their contingent demands on the landscape.

⁵ Excerpts from Isherwood's diaries reveal a similar concern with the waste and sprawl of California in his personal life. A February 6, 1961 entry reads: "One thing I won't forget—driving up to the top of the hills with Monroe and Bill Enge and John Connolly yesterday, after Marguerite's party, and looking down over the city. All the platforms cut out of the hillsides, ready for pretentious French chateau-style houses "worth" eighty thousand maybe, but no more than slum dwellings because so crowded and viewless and altogether wretched. And I had the sense of something spawning itself to destruction, spreading and spreading out until its strength is exhausted and then shriveling up and dying, and then the rockets, or the new ice age, or the whole slab of coast cracking off along the earthquake fault and sliding into the sea; lost in any case. And the quickie promoters and real estate agents hustling to make their dollars before it happens. Such a sick sad knowledge that this is "Babylon the great city" and it can't end well—and was never and could never be great, anyway" (*The Sixties* 46-47). Over a year later, on April 5, 1962, Isherwood writes: "Yesterday, Michael Barrie drove Gerald, Joe Ackerley, Don and me to Laguna Beach and San Juan Capistrano. We were supposed to look at the flowers. Certainly, the hills around Laguna Canyon were a beautiful bluish green, with thick patches of lupines, and mustard, and white flower-clumps, like streaks of late snow, which Gerald and Michael call elyssium—I can't find that name in the dictionary, however; only alyssum. But the rest of the drive, down through Long Beach, was a wretched cavalcade of billboards, telegraph wires and poles, fluttering pennants on used car lots, gas stations, hot-dog stands, etc. etc., and I could feel Joe thinking, 'This is their America, is it—well they can keep it'" (174). Both of these excerpts reveal Isherwood's very real preoccupation with the state of California's ecology. Note also how both entries involve driving—another annoyance of the environmentally aware Isherwood.

⁶ The apocalypse appears to be localized, unique to the state of California, where Isherwood sees the unchecked spread of people and their materialism which will literally dry up the land. In his short essay entitled "Los Angeles," written about 15 years before *A Single Man*, Isherwood experiences similar sentiments. He sees "the monster market-garden," the sea of advertisements that greets people coming into the city as vapid yet seductive, making "this rude abundance [...] nearly as depressing as the desolation of the wilderness. The imagination turns sulky" (157). The way to fight the influence of consumerism and "to live sanely," says Isherwood, is to "cultivate the art of staying awake." Again, I quote this passage at length because it contains some of Isherwood's most powerful commandments on surviving the city and its corresponding usurpation, by way of consumerism, of free will: "You must learn to resist (firmly but not tensely) the unceasing hypnotic suggestions of the radio, the billboards, the movies and the newspapers; those demon voices which are forever whispering in your ear what you should desire, what you should fear, what you should wear and eat and drink and enjoy and what you should think and do and be. *They have planned a life for you—from the cradle to the grave and beyond—which it would be easy, fatally easy, to accept.* The least wandering of the attention, the least relaxation of your awareness, and already your eyelids begin to droop, the eyes grow vacant, the body starts to move in obedience to the hypnotist's command. Wake up, wake up—before you sign that seven-year contract, buy that house you don't really want, marry that girl you secretly despise" (161, my emphasis). To give into consumption, to buy the house and marry the girl, is to give up on one's free will. The alternative to resistance is compliance, which is in turn confinement and death-in-life.⁶ He illustrates this lifestyle, the one I have identified with "repro-time" and the environmentally destructive tendencies of the

breeders, which Isherwood and George scorn. Isherwood's command here to stay awake reads a lot like the opening to *A Single Man* in which George wakes himself from sleep and becomes conscious—fully conscious—of the destruction and entrapment around him.

⁷ It is significant that Isherwood chooses the automobile as the “vehicle” of Jim's death. He is killed in an accident while engaging in a heterosexual affair, so the automobile is doubly damnable—as both the quintessential consumer item and environmental destroyer as well as the conveyance of his foray into heterosexuality. It seems that Isherwood makes the automobile a sort of death trap for Jim, punishing him for the engagement in a relationship with a women and his unseemly ride in the automobile.

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