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## Code breaking, queer effect and “category crisis” in Christopher Isherwood’s South American travel diary

Aude Haffen

From September 1947 to February 1948, Christopher Isherwood and his life partner Bill Caskey<sup>1</sup> travelled to South America, following a route south through six countries: Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia and Argentina. Isherwood had been commissioned by the publishing company Random House to write a travel book based on his experience. *The Condor and the Cows: A South American Diary*, illustrated with photographs taken by Caskey, appeared in 1949. Although he repeatedly confesses his amateurism and lack of legitimacy as a travel reporter in this part of the world (he cannot speak Spanish and has only a superficial knowledge of the history and geography of the visited countries), Isherwood was already a published travel writer. Ten years before, with his friend W. H. Auden, he had co-written an account of their tour of war-torn China in 1938, *Journey to a War* (1939). In both *Journey to a War* and *The Condor and the Cows*, Isherwood toys with the discursive “pre-existent schemas” (Mills 1991, 39) of travel narratives: he shows that he is very much aware of the way these literary patterns, together with the codes delimiting gender boundaries and policing gender behaviours, reinforce a (neo)imperialist ideology which, as postcolonial theorists have shown, extols Western man’s enlightened rationality (objectivity, measuring, mapping) and encourages him to put his masculinity to the test by confronting the feminized Otherness of inferiorized countries. In other words, he knew that both the visited countries and the male visitor’s travelogue were apt to be “masculinising space[s]” defining a “male subjectivity” and producing a “colonial masculinity” (Holden 1996, 17).

In *Journey to a War*, Isherwood and Auden held a consistent standpoint as left-wing anti-fascist British writers trying to document the Japanese aggression against China. Nonetheless by foregrounding chaos, randomness and grotesque situations, by having subjective impressions take precedence over expert observation, and by telling multiple anecdotal stories instead of producing a linear historical narrative (Regard 2016), the two travel writers conveyed their complex, shifting positions, neither strictly Marxist nor simply liberal-humanist—Isherwood was about to embrace pacifism and Auden to renounce committed literature. Their Chinese travelogue also hints at their inadequacy in respecting the codes of traditional straight masculinity, not so much because they are homosexual, an autobiographical fact which may be perceptible to some readers, as because Isherwood’s humour and irony question the naturalness of gender behaviours, especially the kind of stoic male heroism displayed by professional war reporters and photographers (Bryant 2001; Regard 2016).

I argue that, somewhat paradoxically, travelling to formerly colonized countries<sup>2</sup>—where the Western male visitor embodies a superior enlightened rationality while the explored country

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1 Isherwood had left England to emigrate to the United States in 1939, and had become an American citizen in 1946. Caskey and Isherwood were in a couple from 1945 to 1951.

2 To Isherwood the subaltern status of Indians in the South American countries he visited amounts to a situation that is still de facto colonial, since the descendants of the Spaniards oppress the Indians culturally, economically and politically, especially in Peru and Bolivia (Isherwood 2003, 148). He also compares the attitude of US military expatriates in Ecuador to that of English troops in Ireland before Irish independence, thus implicitly drawing a parallel between the British colonial past and the United States’ post-War imperialism in South America (77).

is metaphorically gendered as female (i.e. as a passive, subaltern Other) (Mills 1991, 44)—offered Isherwood a cultural context where compulsory gender performances could be exposed as such and the (straight) male/(straight) female binary questioned. Furthermore, such an unsettling of gender norms allows his South American travel narrative to challenge other binary pairs and destabilize other dominant discourses. To Marjorie Garber, blurring the distinction between gender identities (“the transvestite effect”) erodes all the oppositional paradigms that conservative ideologies thrive on, thus triggering a “category crisis”:

A category crisis is a failure of definitional distinction, a borderline that becomes permeable [...]. What seems like a binary opposition, a clear choice between opposites that define cultural boundaries, is revealed to be not only a construct, but also—more disturbingly—a construct that no longer works to contain and delimit meaning. (Garber 1996, xiv)

[The introduction of a third term, e.g. transvestism, into a dual structure] puts in question identities previously conceived as stable, unchallengeable, grounded, and “known.” (Garber 1992, 13)

In *The Condor and the Cows*, the queer subtext generated by the social impact of Isherwood and Caskey’s semi-visible homosexuality, the artistic effect of their homoerotic gaze and the narrator’s sharp eye for minor transgressions of the sexual order works to disrupt other categories as well—(geo)political, economic, racial, literary etc. I will highlight how the narrative voice exposes the intricate links between gender/sexual performance and larger dynamics of power (within the local societies and between nations), thus thwarting the impetus of universalising liberal-progressive or conservative discourses apt to reinforce “*El Imperialismo Yanqui*” (Isherwood 2003, 38).

### **Two gay travellers: queer disruptions of the sexual order**

In Isherwood’s most famous book, *Goodbye to Berlin* (1939), the semi-autobiographical narrator, a self-effacing figure recording the reality of a foreign city (“I am a camera, with its shutters open, quite passive, recording, not thinking” [Isherwood 1998, 9]), hovers between “passing” as straight (insofar as his gay sexual orientation remains off-camera) and making his homosexuality visible. His intimate friendship with a working-class teenager, his lack of sexual interest in women, the fact that when accused of being “queer” he reclaims the term instead of ignoring the insult or denying the implication (Isherwood 1998, 238) are all hints pointing to the narrator’s homosexuality (Haffen 2018). Similarly, Isherwood’s and Auden’s personae in *Journey to a War* are queer, not so much because of the homoerotic subtext as through the pair’s reluctance to perform the “manly” roles expected from war reporters. Allusions to his time in Berlin, when he relates his encounters with German expatriates, including his former teenage lover Bubi/Berthold (2003, 185), and to his Chinese travel experience, during the sea voyage to Venezuela (10) or when he compares Peruvian Indian peasants to Chinese peasants (143), link *The Condor and the Cows*’ narrator figure to Isherwood’s earlier literary avatars, already surrounded by a queer halo.

Direct references to homosexuality, which can be found in Isherwood’s unpublished travel diary and letters from South America, have been expurgated from the published diary, particularly his disparaging comments about the closeted local gay men’s sense that their sexuality is a shameful vice (Parker 2005, 568-69). However several passages in the text evoke the narrator and photographer’s casual domestic intimacy—a comic portrayal of Caskey as he lies sleeping in their shared cabin during the voyage to Venezuela (7) or Isherwood watching Caskey cutting his toenail in their hotel bedroom (47)—and the reader catches a glimpse of what looks like a drunk lovers’ fight when Caskey smacks the narrator’s face for no reason (120).

There is more often than not something homoerotic about the narrator's gaze and his choice of anecdotes, as he reports on his experience of the visited countries' social manners, culture, political life or national symbols. His eyes are sensuously drawn to "dark-skinned boys swimming in the bright rough water" (16), they flash on a lingering handshake between two Venezuelan boys (20), and in Quito they light upon a public statue representing two stark-naked wrestlers so engrossed in their embrace, it seems to the viewer, that they fail to notice the dragon they are tramping on and crushing to death (83). When he reports on a political meeting of the Peruvian opposition party, a close-up onto a muscular young orator's bare arms eroticizes the experience (135) and out of a second-hand anecdote meant to illustrate Bogota's Francophile culture worship, he conjures up a surreal and suggestive street scene staging a shoe-shine boy quoting the author of *Sodom and Gomorrah* on the "essence of love" (46).

A set of literary references—not only Marcel Proust, but also Virginia Woolf (whose novel *The Voyage Out* gives the first chapter its title), and Oscar Wilde (fleetingly evoked on the occasion of Isherwood's visit to the house of the late Colombian poet Guillermo Valencia (1873-1943), the translator of *The Ballad of Reading Goal*)—point to both South America's and the travel narrator's European cultural anchorage, but may also offer a coded queer reading pact to his readers. The first chapter also conjures up the erotically charged homosocial world of sailors: the mild satire of the gay travellers' straight fellow passengers on their luxury boat, viewed as conventional consumerist couples and families, gives way to a nostalgic flashback on the more stimulating social mix of the French ship that had taken him and Auden to China nine years before—a city-like microcosm, where marines that seem to come straight out of Jean Genet's *Querelle* (published in 1947, with illustrations by Cocteau) dance together on the third-class deck, "caps stuck on the backs of their heads, cigarettes in the corners of their mouths, [...] lewdly grinning" (10).

But as recent queer tourism studies have emphasized,<sup>3</sup> white male homosexual travellers from an economically hegemonic country may not behave much differently in terms of imperialist condescension and (neo)colonial exploitation than their straight counterparts—in his Chinese travelogue Isherwood had listed young female *and* male prostitutes among the Eastern commodities that Shanghai offered to Western businessmen (Auden and Isherwood 2002, 227; quoted in Bryant 2001, 180). What most disrupts the usual patterns of gender and sexual domination are the way the narrator figure is staged and constructed, and the way his voice is queered.

As he and Caskey set foot in Cartagena, the starting point of their land journey, the diarist imparts that he is aware of the ideological equation between travelling to a tropical country and proving one's masculinity—one's courage, but also one's virile ability to conquer a space gendered as female. After calling travelling an "act of penetration" (19), he confesses his fear at the prospect of having to tread into Colombia's mountainous region, which to him "represent[s] 'The Interior'—that somber anatomical phrase which suggests mysterious darkness, winding secret paths and ominous sounds" (22). The journey into a "dark" "interior" wilderness may refer to *Heart of Darkness* (1899), Joseph Conrad's novella about Congo, in which a quasi metaphysical moral pessimism coexists with an anti-imperialist stance, and where colonial territories are also homosocial spaces freed from late nineteenth-century Europe's social control, thus allowing "queer lapses into racial or sexual eccentricities" (Ruppel 2008, 40).<sup>4</sup> But the metaphor also calls to mind a mythic-psychoanalytical opposition between the "masculine" would-be explorer and a "feminine" exotic land, alluring and threatening, passive

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3 On the erotic lure of foreign places that some Western white middle-class gay tourists may still fantasize as "primitive" and "dangerous" spaces, and thus construct as exotic sites of transgressive sexual encounters, see Puar (2002a, 104, 113), and on the fact that some gay guidebooks may trigger a "colonial desire" to "conquer (and be conquered by) the [...] sexually charged, racial other," see Cantú (2002, 149).

4 Joseph Conrad is also the author of *Nostromo* (1904), a novel set in an imaginary South American state, which Isherwood mentions as one of his sources (Isherwood 2003, 5).

and deathly. The diarist subverts this opposition, which is both gender-normative and loaded with (neo)colonial significations, by expressing his unequivocal fear and disgust without a whiff of desire.

Indeed the narrative persona of the traveller-diarist appears to be flouting many of the gender codes of “male” travel narratives. While Caskey is portrayed as hyperbolically masculine, a World War Two veteran and tough, uncouth Kentucky cowboy prone to gratuitous fights and more interested in horses than in the arts, the travel diarist confesses or flaunts his own fastidious, squeamish, timid character, subject to fits of “tropical” melancholy and terrified of flying and fast driving. The vocabulary used to draw a grotesque sketch of a group of middle-aged North American female tourists on their tour of Peru (“gasping in the high altitudes, [...] rattled like dice in buses, dragged out of bed before dawn to race along precipice roads, poisoned with strange foods [...]” [145]) is very similar to the words the diarist applies to his own unadventurous temperament, thus blurring the line between mockery and empathy, and between the allegedly “masculine” and “feminine” responses to travelling conditions.

Another encounter with a woman, in an oil camp settled by Shell company in the Ecuadorean jungle, further erodes the gender divide: a young English schoolteacher and would-be novelist portrayed with the same term the diarist had used about himself during the sea voyage, “happy-go-lucky” (9, 99), and whose attempt at novel writing, based on first-hand observations of a neocolonial environment that is both “exotic” and “domestic,” matches Isherwood’s, she almost reads like a *doppelgänger* figure of the author. She disturbs the male/female polarity on several levels: not only by further connecting the diarist with feminine figures, but also because she combines supposedly virile qualities with attributes socially coded as feminine. A cryptanalyst during World War II, she travels on her own around the world, but her occupation in the camp is that of a schoolteacher—an adventurer and a writer together with a care-and-education giver, she disrupts gender codes, and her introduction as a former “expert on codes” (99) may imply a subtext of gender transgression.<sup>5</sup>

When it comes to displaying expected virile behaviours such as enjoying promiscuity with local girls or meeting a local beauty queen, the diarist notes how he and Caskey offhandedly decline their hosts’ invitations with obviously lame excuses (45, 66) in a manner reminiscent of *Journey to a War’s* camp comedy of “passing” [as straight] with winks to their queer readers. In contrast, if Isherwood’s report on his experience of Colombian bullfighting is devoid of the Hemingwayan mystique of male heroism, it eschews camp self-disparagement and does not debunk the spectacle’s aura of bravery and power of fascination. Instead, the diarist neutralizes the gender stereotypes associated with a violent performance, sport or ceremony where one confronts one’s own death and kills a living being. Resisting the aesthetic appeal of turning it into a ritual or symbol, he displaces his discourse onto the plane of ethical concerns. In other words, the traveller’s straightforward, dispassionate prose substitutes a gender-neutral ethical strength for the manly fortitude that toreros are usually made to metaphorically signify—although he admits to enjoying bullfights and even “find[ing] them very exciting,” he explains that he simply does not deserve to attend this spectacle since he would be far too terrified to be able to face a bull himself: “I despise myself for taking part in it, just as I despise the sadistic coward who yells at a beaten boxer in the ring” (54). Thus, the diarist’s failure to pass this test of virility is ethically reclaimed and the traditional paradigm of manliness offered by the supposedly “other” culture is somewhat neutralized.

The two gay travellers’ repeated failure to perform the rituals of masculinity invalidates (neo)colonial patterns of behaviour such as the male objectifying gaze. In La Guaira, Venezuela, the diarist offers us a glimpse of Caskey being outmanoeuvred as a would-be photo-journalist by the first interesting “model” he encounters, a black woman who engages him in a

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5 I would like to thank Dunlaith Bird for calling to my attention the implications of the polysemy of the notion of “code-breaking” in a context of queer subversion of gender categories and gender codes.



burlesque discordant pas de deux, as if, consciously or not, she was unwilling to let the photographer capture her image (15). Their next stop, wildly romantic Puerto Cabello, inspires the travel diarist to indulge in a series of Mediterranean Gothic clichés cohering into the opening chapter of an adventure tale (17). By having his exotic fictional imagination sow its wild oats in the first pages of his travel account, the diarist gives his readers a foretaste of the permeability between fiction and truth, performance and reality, subject and object, and therefore prepares them to accept the travel diarist’s inevitable failure at rationally defining and objectifying the visited countries. Thus, Isherwood sets the tone for the carnivalesque spirit that presides over a large part of the travel diary, in the sense that humour and fantasy often override seriousness, but also in the sense that borderlines, divisions and hierarchies are to be questioned.

Indeed, in Isherwood’s text the gendered discursive codes of travel writing undergo all kinds of queer disruptions. As Sara Mills remarks, a gendered cliché regarding travel writing is that “male” narratives were supposed to provide an authoritative stand on a nation’s general attributes, while female accounts were expected to give pride of place to personal involvements and relationships: “Because of their oppressive socialisation and marginal position in relation to imperialism, despite their generally privileged class position, women writers tended to concentrate on descriptions of people as individuals, rather than on statements about the race as a whole” (Mills 1991, 21). But here the male diarist is generally reluctant to generalize and lecture: when he tackles general issues such as anti-American feelings, leftist radical parties’ links with the USSR, territorial disputes, or Argentina’s imperialist ambitions, he seldom speaks in his own voice, and mostly quotes from others’ opinions. The relative length of his individual portrayals, including those of European or American expatriates who do not embody any South American “character,” but are valuable to the narrator for their idiosyncrasies only, compared to the scarcity of discursive commentaries, shows that the narrator leans toward the personal, the intersubjective and the relational.<sup>6</sup> An example of his subversive take on objective expert discourse is the narrative construction of an episode recalling a series of political conversations he took part in or witnessed in Peru: after recounting a talk with a Ministry of Foreign Affairs official about Peru’s expansionist policy and alluding to the fact that guests were discussing “Russia and war” at a party, and before launching into a detailed second-hand account of a political murder that may cause deep civil unrest, he casually inserts a digression on an American couple’s private habit of always kissing before drinking in order to avert drunken fights (130). This disruptive effect, close to a cinematic montage, has the domestic interfere with the global, and an apparently irrelevant detail challenge relevant expertise.

More generally, throughout the travel narrative, the objective ethnographic gaze is contested by the narrator’s playful indulgence in impressionist perceptions and sympathetic fallacy—the blue of the sky is described as “innocent” (134), the Peruvian climate is “melancholy and languid” (123), alligators have “an air of contented depravity” (38), the atmosphere in La Paz is “manic-depressive” (183). Minutely particular, incongruous details that elude any general explanatory patterns are given pride of place: “an exquisite flamingo-pink oil tank” (18), the dancing performance of a cross-eyed little girl dressed in strange elaborate finery (18), the “colored zig-zag pattern” of dish-shaped hats and their precarious balance on Guambia Indian women’s heads (67), the delicate embroidery on a torero’s jacket (53) that outshines the actual bullfight. In this aesthetic context, his wonder at a priest’s report that there exists an Indian language spoken by one man only (70) seems like a *mise-en-abyme* of the diarist’s own *ethos* as a writer and traveller, for whom the particular prevails over the generic or the typical.

The travel diarist’s voice itself can also be queered, thus neutralizing the male/female binary opposition. On the ship sailing to Venezuela, a straight American couple that the gay couple becomes acquainted with is the target of the diarist’s mild satire, but also an object of identification: he pokes fun at the cliché of their mid-life crisis, at the husband’s materialism,

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6 This is actually one of the cornerstones of Isherwood’s aesthetics. See Haffen (2018).

and what he calls the “limitations” of their life-style, but his voice merges with the woman’s when he imagines her hopes and anxiety regarding their common adventure to an unknown continent—a hope and anxiety that echo his own: “Is it [the South-American adventure] self-sufficient, deep, brilliant and compact as a Vermeer? Or a messy amateur sketch which doesn’t compose?” (8). In *The Condor and the Cows* Isherwood frequently adopts the fictional technique of free reported speech and employs the pliable second-person pronoun of travel guidebooks, a narrative code that is supposed to blend the travel writer’s and the reader’s experiences. These stylistic choices allow him to fuse with persons of both genders, identifying indifferently with male and female locals, expatriates or tourists, blurring perspectives to express sometimes connection and empathy, sometimes ironical dissonance.

Gender binaries are also challenged by the diarist’s imagery, which conveys unconventional mental associations. His contact with the “heart of darkness” of the Ecuadorean jungle is given a camp Hollywood twist through the use of an unexpected feminizing simile which deflates the horror and hints at the subculture of drag: to him the eyelashes on the shrunken heads collected by the head-hunting Jibaro Indians “look more beautiful than [Greta] Garbo’s” (95). Many of his other similes and descriptions are mixed in terms of gender, and expected male or female attributes are often swapped. Isherwood and Caskey’s Argentinian host, Victoria Ocampo, the “extraordinarily handsome” aristocratic owner of a literary journal, is so commanding that she makes the narrator feel “like a murderer under police escort,” while her economic power allows her to “import guests from the corners of the earth” like any local corporate mogul importing foreign goods (194–95). Frau Schneider, an expatriate from Prague who calls herself “a firm rider with *his* hands on the reins” (81, emphasis added), is another strong woman that the traveller feels much attracted to when he stays at her pension. In a collector’s private museum in Bogota, the diarist records the juxtaposition of Bolivar’s pistols and an old American sewing machine (62–63), and while real adventures, namely a complex rough journey off-the-beaten-tracks into Peru, are about to start, the manly performance of the perilous trip’s preparations is played down and feminized by being compared to “a wonderful cooking recipe that never quite works out” (113). Those gender-bending textual effects may go beyond playful self-reference to a queer view distancing itself from the masculine order, and partake of a more deeply subversive writing strategy that disturbs not only gender categories, but other paradigms as well.

### **Gender performances, natural drag and “category crisis”**

Queer or gender-bending subversion of the male/female binary logic is sometimes blamed for being blind to the social and political realities of actual gender inequalities. Here the diarist is aware of the gender segregation he observes in most ethnic groups and social categories, for instance when he does not fail to notice that the Parisian-style bohemian artistic elite in Lima, in upholding “the traditions of Latin gallantry” (129), does not quite live up to its avant-garde agenda when it comes to gender relations. He also portrays Caskey being outraged by the sexist double standards of American sailors (18). But more fundamentally, he constantly emphasizes the socially constructed and more or less consciously performed dimension of what passes for natural sexual differences.

His depiction of tough masculine attitudes can be sympathetic, though somewhat tongue-in-cheek: with his lewd jokes, sexual boasting and drunken wrestling, Oklahoman-Irish driller Notchey O’Keefe Starr is already a movie character playing his own role (90) and Caskey’s drunken aggressiveness toward fellow American men is distanced as an ethnographic curiosity likely to intrigue the Guambia Indians (108). Isherwood is more scathingly dismissive of what he calls Argentina’s “excessive cult of *Machismo*” (205). His diary becomes unusually discursive and analytical as he deconstructs Latin virility, exposing its mythology and comparing it with its North American counterpart. Although they share common legendary

roots—the myth of the gaucho wandering the plains and that of the cowboy of the Old West—the canons of Argentinian and North American masculinities turn out to be so different that the cultural codes signifying a healthy manly attitude in Argentina may signify the opposite in the United States, and vice versa. The two components of the Argentinian test of virility, show-off womanizing and a vital defence of “honour” that demands the ritual of the duel, are not perceived as virile in North America, where defending one’s honour sounds laughable and excessive love-making is suspiciously viewed as alien, somewhat effeminate and deviant (206). What Judith Butler and other queer and feminist theorists called the “performativity” of gender and sexuality, that is to say the imitative repetition by gendered bodies of cultural norms or codes disguised as essential attributes and desires,<sup>7</sup> is literally compared to a show by the travel writer, who happens to work as a Hollywood scriptwriter and is only too aware of the scripted, performed, advertised dimension of straight masculinities. His not-so-gratuitous digression on the way Hollywood studios reinforce gender stereotypes by making lead characters perform supposedly manly feats (205) blurs the boundaries between life and fiction, and suggests that behaviours generally perceived as natural may depend not only on cultural codes, but also on an actor’s skills. Isherwood’s choice, in his account of Argentina, to feature almost exclusively powerful, independent women and to zoom in on his former lover Berthold can read as another means to implicitly undermine macho national mythologies and patriarchy in general.

Femininity is also equated to acting, obviously so in the ambivalent portrayal the diarist draws of Eva Perón, a “star” who owes much of her popular appeal and political power to her ability to play the right feminine roles (207) and advertise a carefully constructed image. Earlier in the book feminine erotic appeal is also tightly associated with a gender performance involving a wider symbolical apparatus and suggesting that erotic power has much to do with other sorts of power. Indeed, if Carmen, an upper-class Colombian girl travelling with her parents, attracts the diarist’s attention and comes centre-stage in his account, it is probably because this Americanized teenager draws much of her charm from her barely conscious ability to embody the phantasmagoria of the “Californian campus belle” (31) and to perform her “act as the American college girl” (36). The diarist’s eyes are very perceptive to the theatrical dimension of gender expression, and also to the fact that the “effects” (31) produced by Carmen’s flirting involve a certain degree of fetishism where the sexual meets the commodified and where erotic power is propped by signs of economic and cultural power. In other words, as queer theorist Anne-Emmanuelle Berger argues, the heterosexual erotic parade may work very much like a drag show involving self-parody and masquerade—without “drag,” no flirting, no sexuality is possible (Berger 2013, 75). Besides, logics of desire and logics of (economic, political, cultural) domination reinforce each other: wearing a “[North] American mask” (Berger 2013, 74) in 1947 South America, Isherwood implies, is an integral part of the pretty upper-class Medellín girl’s femininity.

While artifice and drag parades are emphasized in order to challenge the male/female binary and question the very concept of a sexual nature, conversely, when actual cross-dressing is to be witnessed, the diarist makes transvestism look natural and mundane. He mentions in passing that the Guambia Indians, liberal peasants and inveterate rebels who keep launching into small acts of anti-colonial resistance against the Colombian authorities, used to wear kilts and skirts when pants were made compulsory (67). Similarly, the caption underneath a photograph representing costumed Bolivian Indians during a carnival procession in Oruro, “Carnal womanhood, an angel, and friends, Oruro,” (facing page 108, illustration no. 27) gives the scene an ordinary touch rather than emphasizing the drag flamboyance of the costumes or enhancing

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7 See, for instance, Paul B. [Beatriz] Preciado’s synthesis of queer theories highlighting the biopolitical production of gendered and sexual subjects through “performative coercion” (2013, 69). He argues that gender and sexuality are “somatic fictions” whose existence is based on “performative repetition” (69), “norms internalized in the form of bodily style, representation and public dramatization,” and “corporal choreographies regulated by codes of representation” (268).



their religious-symbolical function. The second-hand description, based on Caskey's account, that the diarist gives of a formal reception with the dancers at the Prefect's mansion after the Diablada (a symbolic dance staging the triumph of Angels over Devils) achieves the same effect, insofar as it maintains a balance between the "grotesque" and the "beautiful," the eccentric and the normal, comedy and realism, and thus neutralizes the distinction between acting and being:

[...] the old state chamber, with its pink walls, baroque mirrors and Colonial portraits, and the dancers, still wearing their gorgeous costumes but now unmasked and showing their dark strongly-carved Indian faces. [...] The high moment of the evening was when the Prefect asked Carnal Womanhood for a dance. She was a big man with enormous feet, and the Prefect had a hard time avoiding them. (179)

This spectacle, although endowed with religious and political significations that make it quite extraordinary to a foreigner, is not that far removed—the casual humorous tone implies—from other performances that are made to pass as ordinary expressions of gender identities, such as Carmen's flirting, the reckless driving of a truck-driver trying to emulate a torero's fearlessness (120), or the Oklahoman oil-driller's noisy show of salacious virility in the Ecuadorean Amazon jungle. The actual carnival which is described here, which like any other carnival is intended to be a socially controlled interruption of social hierarchies and a momentary subversion of the "natural" order, has many echoes in a travel book that questions the sexual order, as well as other dominant structures of thought and patterns of oppression.

A white male middle-class North American, former British citizen and well-known author received in British and American embassies, consulates, and cultural institutes, Isherwood benefited during his South American travel from the privileges associated with the cultural aura of Great Britain, now a weakening imperialist power, and with the hegemonic material and symbolic influence of the United States, a superpower whose neo-imperialist push was ubiquitous. At the same time, he was situated at the intersection of several fringe positions, being gay in a "heterosexual dictatorship" (Isherwood 1971, 273), a pacifist in a Cold War context, and having converted to Vedantist Hinduism—a marginal faith in his new country, it carried subaltern associations in his native country insofar as it was linked to a former colony of the British Empire. His complex identity makes Isherwood a sharp observer of the social and theatrical dimension of gender identities and sexual desires, which cannot be dissociated from other paradigms, including racial, political, economic, (neo)colonial ones. Following Marjorie Garber's "category crisis" theory, it is possible to go further and analyse how the queering effects generated by the text (its foregrounding of performance, its subversion of the masculine/feminine divide, its undermining of the masculine gaze and the male voice) neutralize other dominant paradigms, notably the simplistic frames based on binary thought and imbued with (neo)imperialist ideology which diplomatic services tend to impose on South American societies.

Introducing a third term like the "phantasmatic" (Berger 2013, 65) paraphernalia of American golden youth in the supposedly binary economy of straight erotic desire reveals the drag and fetishist dimension of heterosexuality, but it also signifies the erotic appeal and self-advertisement of American culture. "Natural" straight femininity is questioned because it becomes clear that female glamour actually performs the "idea" of America and is mediated by emblems of power (Berger 2013, 65), but the "natural" (in the sense of supposedly rational) appeal of the American Way of Life is questioned as well. The contiguity between erotic parades and material objects, or the juxtaposition of the "erotic sensation" provoked by Carmen among the boat passengers with posters calling Colombian workers to fight "*El Imperialismo Yanqui*" (Isherwood 2003, 38) suggest that there is much more to American capitalism than economic progress offered to underprivileged populations. In other words, the text implies that the economically backward/modern-capitalist binary underlying neo-imperialist Cold War

ideology is a simplistic frame hiding a more complex reality of irrational libidinous desires and self-advertising. Although he is portrayed with as much sympathy as irony, Carmen's brother, Stevie, also embodies an Americanization displaced from rational, practical grounds onto fetishized, quasi eroticized objects: fearing passengers from the lower classes should scratch their initials on the family car, a Buick purchased in the United States, he jealously supervises its transport back to Medellin on a barge. What Isherwood had assumed to be a "saner" Latin American way of "us[ing]" and "misus[ing]" the profusion of imported U.S. goods without making them the fetishes of social success and power (16) is contradicted as he becomes more familiar with this Colombian family.<sup>8</sup>

The introduction of a third term that disturbs binary thought disseminates from the writer's redistribution of gender codes into other aspects of the cultures he encounters. He relates his visits to local Catholic priests and criticizes the simplistic opposition between Catholicism, caricatured as fanaticism and backwardness, and Protestantism (associated with North American imperialism) or secularism (associated with progress, either in its capitalist or its communist version [176]). He also undermines such binaries textually and stylistically, through his poetics of contiguity and mixed similes summoning dissonant associations and exposing the permeability of borderlines (Garber 1996, xiv). Carnivals and fiestas are foregrounded insofar as they offer him the opportunity to show how porous the categories of the sacred and the profane are. For example, when he describes the famous Copacabana festival, he focuses on back-and-forth movements between the church and the square, calling attention to the fact that moments of respectful devotion are hectically preceded and followed by wild, drunken, intensely physical merriment (2003, 173). Isherwood's detailed account, partly humorously detached, partly intrigued and absorbed, insists on the contradiction between a very ritualistic separation of spaces and genders, and many encroachments and overlaps—paganism fusing with Catholicism, or the animal world mixing with the human sphere in the staged bullfights and animal disguises. His narrative of the carnival manages to bring its make-believe status very close to reality, as well as to convey the fundamentally syncretic dimension of a celebration of the Virgin that actually resurrects the Indians' Incaic past, present in a trance-like excitement and sense of magic that the visitors are able to participate in.

During the Oruro carnival, not only do ancient Indian rituals blend with present Catholic ones, but the dressed-up procession also hints at other kinds of syncretism, as the narrative hovers between on-stage illusion and off-stage realities. The sumptuous costumes and masks cannot be separated from the poor Indian peasants' extreme financial sacrifices to acquire them, and the procession involves a sense of social hierarchy that also gives yet another glimpse of North American commercial penetration, the wealthiest inhabitants riding in American trucks (178). Once again, the diarist's ability to highlight syncretism, grotesque contiguities and permeability disseminates from the realm of gender categories to other fields, trumping the binary frames that structure objective discourse and thus calling for re-signification. Isherwood's description of the Oruro carnival points to the provisional suspension of everyday reality, with its economic and racial hierarchies, which carnivals are supposed to bring. It may also read as a means for the travel writer to set categories in motion in a more radical way: the final scene depicted, featuring the half-masked, half-unmasked Indian dancers and the dancing couple formed by the Prefect and the big-footed Indian man in female carnival drag (179), is so strikingly hybrid and thoroughly queer that it may undermine in advance the smug objectivity of the next and final entry of his Bolivian chapter, a sombre discursive catalogue of the racial, economic and political crisis that hits the country.

Isherwood's own faith, he explains as he visits a small Ramakrishna centre near Buenos Aires, is most itself in the guise of the marginal, displaced, neutral microcosm it represents in

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<sup>8</sup> In his 1939 diary, Isherwood, who had just settled in the United States, was very critical of what he called the "imaginary social, erotic, autohypnotic values" of North American materialist culture (Isherwood 2011, 60).

Argentina. Neither a religion nor a philosophy, Vedantist spirituality should not be set in opposition to other religions since it accepts the tenets of other faiths (203). Besides, it avoids seriousness and embraces a spirit of fun, humour and even clowning (204–05). Combined with his queer positioning, his distrust of religious dogma and his carnivalesque disturbance of expected hierarchies translate into a narrative voice that playfully impersonates others: because he exploits the fictional technique of free reported style and the narrative conventions of travel books such as the use of the second person pronoun, Isherwood is able to blur his own voice with other voices, which allows him to operate multiple shifts in identification and perspective. Thus, his queering of his voice during the sea voyage paves the way for many other transient identifications, which in turn makes individual, cultural and religious boundaries appear permeable: with head-hunting Jibaro Indians (97), with an exhausted village priest losing his temper against Indian superstition (21), with an American airline pilot talking about the hazard of flying and landing in Peru (140), with the Guambia Indians' belief in witchcraft and the supernatural powers of animals (68) as well as with Catholic villagers' belief in an old miracle (91), and even with the neo-colonial idiom of oil companies, when he describes Shell-Mera Camp as a site reclaimed from "swampy virgin jungle" (92).

Therefore the queer and drag disturbances that generate the "category crisis" in *The Condor and the Cows* should be read as a textual form of resistance to any exclusionary discourse that claims to "pass" as a universal one. The codes of travel writing are not so much transgressed as they are reused and hijacked. They allow the diarist to display many different masks: male, female, catholic, secular, local, expatriate. Gender identities, that one can "pass" as (straight) male or female provided one offers the adequate performance and responds to the viewer's desires, are exposed as biopolitically constructed and socially regulated codes, and thereby the diarist deprives the male-female binary of its natural, essentialist aura. Thus, other allegedly universal hegemonic systems may be challenged and subverted as well, as the constraining fetishisms and power dynamics they also rely on are unveiled, most prominently those of North America's Cold War political and commercial imperialism.

One reading of *The Condor and the Cows* might conclude that Christopher Isherwood's pluralist and gender-bending stance amounts only to a Western-liberal perspective with a subversive queer twist; that it questions commodification and exploitation, yet lacks any radical indictment of the early (neo)colonial forms of globalisation he was able to witness. (The diarist's report on the presence of Shell Oil Company in Ecuador may sound complacent and ethically problematic, for example, as the multinational company was ruthlessly destroying the indigenous populations' ways of life and natural environment.) In the same modest way that his narrative persona claimed queer and antifascist labels in *Goodbye to Berlin*, the travel writer, whose sympathy for local liberals, whether Guambia Indians or Peruvian poet Emilio Adolfo Westphalen, is obvious, seems to welcome the "liberal" label. However he voices his awareness of the weakness of this "tragic and honourable" (133) ethical and political position when faced with communist or populist forces on one side and conservative authoritarian ones on the other side.

Isherwood may actually be wary of the discursive impetus of the liberal-humanist position and of its links with the Western master narrative of enlightenment and progress, complicit with imperialist ideologies. *The Condor and the Cows* was written at a time when homosexual travellers from Western countries such as Great Britain and North America were still subaltern citizens in their home countries, criminalized and/or pathologized as "deviant." Thus it would be anachronistic to read a 1949 travel book from the perspective of recent research in the field of queer tourism studies, where it is debated whether white gay travellers to places they consider to be more traditional and less secularized may not be perpetuating gay/straight, modern/backward binaries through narratives which celebrate supposedly liberatory queer

disruptions of supposedly homogeneously “straight” places<sup>9</sup>. However, it may be fruitful to re-read *The Condor and the Cows* in the light of today’s queer radical critique of the way the gay travel industry may be complicit with a Western liberal negation of local realities in the name of a global progressive worldview. To a certain extent, Isherwood’s queer travel writing strategies, namely his ability to subvert binaries, conjure up multiple differences and eschew the pitfall of constructing “Otherness,” may prefigure early twenty-first-century strategies of queer self-critique and radical resistance within LGBTQ politics and theory.

Isherwood’s choice to foreground the carnivalesque and welcome all gender-bending transgressions—and thus to convey the notion that masculinity and femininity are produced through performances and through the internalisation of advertised standards of sexual appeal—also relates to the trend in recent queer/trans theory of questioning not only male/female essentialism, but the feminine/masculine gender binary itself. By highlighting the fetishized, erotic, “autohypnotic” power of mainstream American values and the way they commodify and shape gender and sexual codes on a global scale, the queer travel writer opens the way for more radical challenges to gender and sexual binaries. As queer/trans theorist Paul B. [Beatriz] Preciado argues, since the end of the Second World War the gendered, sexualized “subject” has become the “biotech” product of global “pharmacopornographic” and “multimedia” biopolitical control (Preciado 2013, 50–51)—hormonal treatment, gender-reassignment therapies, drugs and images projected by the media industry have blurred the boundaries between bio-sex and tech-sex, and have both invaded the very bodies of the “subjects” they produce, and allowed for multiple sites of resistance to normative identities and “places for the invention of subjectivity” to develop (Preciado 2013, 93). And as transgender theorist Heath Fogg Davis explains, intersex experience can now be used to “fundamentally challenge the idea that the terms ‘man’ and ‘woman’ imply particular body parts” (Fogg Davis 2017, 31).

In the light of such new radical challenges to gender norms and to gender itself, through its playful interrogation of what it means to be visible or invisible, to “pass” or to be “out,” through enhancing the drag comedy of straight sexuality and the casual seriousness of actual drag, Isherwood’s travel narrative can be read as already eroding the conservative codes that have disparaged the trans or intersex experience, together with gay and lesbian relationships, as imitations, either grotesque failures or deceptive success (Fogg Davis, 10), of a straight, cis-binary “natural” ideal, falsely advertised as inhabiting a separate sphere from class, race, (bio)politics and global capitalism.

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9 On this “neocolonial impulse” of queer travel, see Puar 2002a, 104, 112-13 and Puar 2002b, 935.

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