

Introduction

The Modernist Misfit: Antisocial and Intersectional

I prefaced this book with Wallace Thurman's *The Blacker the Berry* and the notion of "being a total misfit." And how that phrase struck a nerve, suggesting an entire world—an entire worldview—immanent to the author who invented it, immanent to the narrator who reported it, and immanent to the character who "thought" it. There must be some hidden meaning in such a phrase, or even a pedestrian explanation for it. For Thurman wouldn't have described the notion in those terms if the notion of being a "misfit"—and, in extremis, being a "total misfit"—didn't already, in that historical time and place, mean precisely that. Mean the experience of double displacement, of alienation from one's home community (and one's home, at times) as well as from societal structures of domination. In other words, to answer the question often posed to me as a doctoral student—Why "misfits"?—well, the answer is immanent to the texts. Somehow, in my unconscious critical processing of Thurman's novel—and Christopher Isherwood's, Nella Larsen's, and Jean Rhys's—the constellation of similar lives written about in related ways shone by the light of terms like "total misfit" (Thurman), "unconformity" (Larsen), "nonconformist" (Isherwood), "underdog," and "doormat in a world of boots" (Rhys).

This last example is telling of the pessimistic, even dystopian, landscape of misfit-modernist novels. And I grant that these novels employ synonyms for consistent versions of the same semantic figure. But this introduction demonstrates the epistemological significance of this semantic figure for general modernist discourse, especially its fictional representation. Rhetoric about

misfits circulates as an idiomatic expression with a double meaning—either specific to marginalized identities, or universal shorthand for any social outsider or maladjusted individual—and, as I argue, in both senses at once. By contrast, the novels studied in *Misfit Modernism* share a consistency of focus on double exile and a spotlight on a doubly dislocated, minoritized antihero. Their mood is defined by a pessimism that Elizabeth Hardwick calls a “biological melancholy” in *A Single Man*.¹ The other authors in this study, too, imbue their narratives with an almost palpable mood of “biological melancholy” that permeates the misfit-modernist structure of feeling.

A Modernist Band of Misfits

All four authors collected in this study suffered for being misfits in their careers as well as in their lives. Most painfully, Thurman and Larsen exited the literary stage early and abruptly. Thurman died from alcohol-related issues in 1934, only two years after he published the remarkable roman à clef of the Renaissance *Infants of the Spring* (1932). (Thurman’s alcoholism can be read as self-induced suicide, a form of slow death, in the sense used by Lauren Berlant.²) Larsen lived a relatively long life; however, her literary career was cut short after a plagiarism scandal in 1930 and a painful divorce in 1933. As discussed in chapter 2, by the fall of 1937 Larsen had disappeared from the “New Negro” scene—ironically, by announcing her return to it.³ She continued writing, unsuccessfully, after 1930. Yet her links to the cultural ferment of the Renaissance were severed, not least by Larsen herself. Larsen deliberately distanced herself from the elite friends and circles of the Harlem literati, a scene in which she had been an important actor. For years after, she was thought to have “passed” into the white world, and her self-driven disappearance fostered historical amnesia, which erased memories of her many legacies—including serving as the first black librarian at what became the Schomburg Center. While Thurman’s death was radically premature, Larsen’s social death was slow, though perhaps even starker, in how it effaced her literary and cultural legacy.

Both misfits as well as consummate literary modernists, Larsen and Thurman represent the American context that rendered toxic any deviations from nascent minoritarian cultural norms. These norms, as we will see in their respective chapters, were enforced by both majority and minority cultural formations. Larsen’s protagonist Helga Crane drowns in the *Quicksand* (1928) of her choices, after being unable to reconcile being biracial. Harlem’s black bourgeois milieu will not tolerate her living white ancestry, her belonging to a white family,

and that family wanted nothing to do with her. Thus Helga Crane's double exile from these communities marks her misfit position. It is only by renouncing her racial and cultural hybridity, her individuality, that Helga Crane is "saved" by a black Southern preacher. Her salvation is a form of social death, a form of suicide, that impugns the rigidity of a social environment structured by the color line. This same rigid environment structures the psyche and social aspirations of Thurman's Emma Lou Morgan. Like Helga Crane, but in an ironic inversion of the color-coded "tragic mulatta" script that Larsen subverts, *The Blacker the Berry* (1929) features another instantiation of the intersectional modernist misfit. This time, the critique of the black bourgeoisie and of the anti-black racism of society centers not on a biracial protagonist but on one deemed "too black" by her own "blue-veined" family. Thurman's ironic tale explodes the trope of the tragic mulatta, while Larsen's modernizes it.

Fittingly, given his self-appointed role as *agent provocateur*, Thurman engenders a novel that Carl Van Vechten deemed rather mean-spirited. *The Blacker the Berry* thus creates an almost totalitarian environment of exile for its internally marginalized, gendered, and queered female protagonist. That it is her bisexual lover who betrays and humiliates Emma Lou Morgan serves as a fitting coda to Thurman's comprehensive critique of Harlem's—and the United States'—anti-black modern sociality. Thurman's heterosexist critique runs counter to his own heroine's same-sex encounters in the novel, not to mention the author's own ones in the real world. (Thurman was open about his love affair with a Swedish man who appears in *Infants of the Spring*; there are also reports of his being arrested for public exposure in Manhattan.) Moreover, the novel closes with a scene that includes a close-up of Alva, Emma Lou's faithless paramour, his face made physically repulsive by alcoholic cirrhosis and nightly carousing with "effeminate" boys. His face is a potent final symbol of Alva's queer male misogyny, directed at Emma Lou. And, ironically, Alva's objectification of Emma Lou—whom he dismisses, in their own home, as merely his child's "mammy"—symbolizes Thurman's own internalized homophobia. Unlike in *Quicksand*, there is not even the suicidal solace of disappearing into an impoverished enclave of Southern black culture. Indeed, Emma Lou walks out of *The Blacker the Berry*, forever frozen, while leaving this decadent scene of queer Harlem: black and brown, men and boys, sexually and socially intimate, creating their own world while excluding Emma Lou Morgan from it. It *is* a rather mean-spirited novel, most of all toward facets of Thurman's own complex intersectional identity.

So much for the queer-of-color utopia that many contemporary critics suggest is immanent in such cultural and social formations existent in today's

world. Thurman's novel, written in the 1920s and critiquing the elitism of the New Negro, seems to disallow—or disavow—this imagined twenty-first-century future. As Thurman might have put it, “’Tis new to thee.” He held no truck with utopian imaginings, even while centering his narrative on a modernist heroine oppressed by the racisms, sexism, and snobisms that she, in turn, internalizes from childhood. Thurman sought to show the social and affective *reality* of racism in America and how it affected black women in particular: those who, given their darker complexion, were seen as unsuitable mates for middle-class strivers such as the denizens of Striver’s Row in Harlem. This realism cuts everything in its path, leaving only a path to walking out into the world, away from queer sexuality premised on male homosociality, itself premised on the double oppression of a black sister. Thurman’s novel, in other words, seems to anticipate Kimberlé Crenshaw’s intersectional critique of the male-centered Black Power movement and white-centered Second Wave feminism. *The Blacker the Berry* foreshadows the rise of intersectionality as a discourse of black women’s empowerment. As I argue in chapter 3, Emma Lou Morgan’s “intersectionality,” her double identity, is interpellated as the condition of being a “total misfit.”

Misfits Before and After Intersectionality?

Of what use is it to us, this discourse and figure of “the misfit”? At least, I argue, it’s a historical recuperation of a forgotten twentieth-century epistemology, one this study focuses on, that projects complex, minoritarian perceptions and affections of doubly exiled citizens, the “total misfits” like Emma Lou Morgan, or Larsen’s Helga Crane, or underdogs like “the Rhys protagonist.” Is the notion of the modernist misfit diagnostic today? Can it be? What does it allow us to see, and what questions seem answered by this analogical figure?

A provocative set of questions is proposed by Jennifer Nash’s *Black Feminism Reimagined*, whose subtitle (*After Intersectionality*) speaks to a certain critical and conceptual exhaustion with the paradigm of intersectionality.⁴ The “after,” of course, also speaks to the promise of Crenshaw’s model of social difference. As the symbolic inversion of *queer*, or rather its antidote, *intersectionality* has dominated discourses in women’s studies, and queer studies after the rise of queer-of-color critique. Nash’s most provocative insight is in disentangling the discourse of intersectionality from black feminism itself. She argues, convincingly, that debates over who legitimately “owns” the paradigm of intersectionality—arguments about whether Crenshaw “invented” it, or merely coined the term, for instance—force black feminist critics into a defensive posture. Their intellectual

labor is spent defending their turf, so to speak. And, Nash argues, cultural defensiveness over who can legitimately use the term without appropriating it, or over whether some critic or argument is intersectional “enough,” perpetuates a “siege mentality.” Ironically, Nash claims, endless debates about intersectionality recapitulate a racist dynamic that limits the bounds of black women’s intellectual thought. Intersectionality becomes the last redoubt, the last area not colonized by white feminism. And other facets of black feminist discourse are subsumed under the rhetoric of intersectionality. What if, Nash asks, black feminism abandoned the defense of intersectionality and its identification with that paradigm as synonymous with black womanhood itself? Nash thus makes a bold claim for disaggregating the discourse of intersectionality from its conceptual identification with black feminism and its social identification with black womanhood. Symbolic ownership of the term, she argues, is poor recompense for limiting other areas of black women’s theoretical interests and aspirations. Let intersectionality fend for itself, Nash suggests; there is more to black feminism—and black women—than is written in intersectional philosophy.

Like Janet Halley in *Split Decisions*, Nash suggests a turn back to the future: the radical notion that, at times, it is better to adopt a single- or double-lens analytic rubric rather than follow the now formulaic expectation that everything be intersectional. Indeed, both Nash and Halley suggest the exhaustion of intersectionality’s usefulness as a paradigm, given its watered-down “citational ubiquity”:⁵ if the term has become a political football, then the spirit of intersectionality is lost, and only the dead letter remains as a pale tribute to the black feminist theorists—and black women’s experiences—who lived through it, and developed it, from the dawn of the New Negro in the late nineteenth century.

In the spirit of Nash’s scholarship, *Misfit Modernism* proposes another rubric to add to a reconceptualizing of critical discourse on social difference beyond the stalemate over the intersectional, in feminist thought, or the antisocial, in queer studies. The modernist rubric of the misfit, and the aesthetic structure of feeling I call misfit modernism, offer a new way to conceive of the referents of intersectionality without the baggage—affective as well as intellectual, following Nash—that seems to weigh down its application in the early twenty-first century.

In a second intervention, this study pushes beyond another critical quagmire: the schism between the intellectual legacy of white queer theory—sexuality-without-gender or race or any other mark of difference—and the overcorrection that I see in queer of color critics who insist on the bankruptcy of the antisocial thesis of homosexuality. This book demonstrates that even nonwhite gay-identified writers—beyond Isherwood!—found the structure of feeling of double exile a resonant cultural space for literary invention. The queerness of Larsen,

Rhys, and Thurman thus complicates the current identification of negative affects with white modernist queer archives, and the insistence on critical and affective utopianism as the province of queers of color. With the exception a few notable queer of color critics, like Darieck Scott and Hoang Tan Nguyen, the hostile takeover of queer theoretical discussion obeys this binary logic, of the “bad old days” of “bad feelings” based on a white queer structure of feeling and the new utopia of brown and black redemptive theorization and critical reclamation of lost voices and archives. The culturally exiled modernist misfit traverses this line diagonally, invested in the same antisocial impulses that Lee Edelman consolidates as “fuck the future.”⁶ As I discuss in chapter 2, Larsen’s *Quicksand* ends in a paroxysm of “all-consuming hate” for the holy triumvirate of white *and* black society: matrimony, children, and God himself. No less than *A Single Man*’s narrative fantasies of murdering US senators who persecute homosexuals during the lavender scare, novels by Larsen, Thurman, and Rhys attack minoritarian cultural utopianism—or the “propaganda” of “uplift,” in modernist idiom—as unmodernist literary values. Are Rhys and Larsen “queer”? Perhaps, but it might be best to say that they are certainly misfits wedded to a vision of nonconformity, of articulating the impasses of multiple worlds that traverse the identities of their protagonists. Worlds they themselves traversed, in their own lives, as women, as brown, black, non-American, non-British, and/or queer authors had to traverse in order to be legitimated as modernists. Their frustrations with the discourse of modernism are avenged in their tales of exilic misfits. These figures, though, are not recapitulations of the modernist Promethean archetype as Camus’s *Stranger* and Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus are. The latter antiheroes become all but majoritarian while retaining their anticonformist edge, in a paradox that defines mainstream modernism. What these *misfit* modernists did was integrate the minoritarianism of their lives into the modernist form of narration, creating a genuinely new—for their time—articulation of *intersectional* antisociality as a legitimate position of critique of majority culture *as well as* of the collusions of their *respective* communities with that modernist cultural wasteland. It is the work of this book to unforget the *culturally encoded* figure of the modernist misfit, particularly in her crossroads or “intersectional” position of double exile.

Misfits Among Us?

Indeed, this modernist archive is a reminder that these baleful minoritarian visions are not solely the province of white queer modernists—or contemporary

white queer *theorists*. And unlike the optimism of a Richard Bruce Nugent in “Smoke, Lilies and Jade” (1926), Thurman focuses on pessimism and queer sociality as cruel, as excluding women or any who don’t fully belong in their milieu. The queer is *already* antisocial *and* intersectional, in Thurman’s account. The queerness of Larsen’s *Quicksand*, by contrast, centers on the grotesque dimension of “reproductive futurity,” which defines Helga Crane’s childbearing as foreclosing her future, not enabling it.⁷ Larsen’s novel is thus a radical reimagining of the maternal as political, as Amber Jamilla Musser argues about Audre Lorde’s work.⁸ But *Quicksand* represents a bleak antisocial vision of reproductive futurity as “no future.” This is the insight of an early twentieth-century biracial novelist like Larsen, part of a band of antisocial intersectional authors I call misfit modernists. This archive challenges the whiteness of the antisocial queer theory archive, which has been dismissed largely for its Eurocentric canon, but it also challenges the political optimism of intersectional approaches to queer theory, which tend to dismiss the antisocial as inherently privileged and white rather than locating the intersectional within the antisocial, and vice versa, as I examine in this book. Fittingly, and ironically, Larsen’s antisocial vision of reproductive futurity is consistent with Edelman’s—all the more striking because the racialized maternal body is inherently political and harnessed to visions of New Negro futurity in the novel itself. Larsen’s horizon is thus one harnessing the negative energies of the misfit as an intersectional exile, as baleful a sense of the political as we find in Edelman’s archive.

Larsen’s intersectional feminist critique *avant la lettre* focuses on sexual subjugation and paternalistic violence against Helga’s deeply vulnerable maternal body, which comes close to death during labor. Musser draws out the liberatory potential of Lorde’s hyphenated identities—as a black lesbian feminist, as a poet and essayist, and, especially, as a mother. By so doing, Musser argues that Lorde eroticizes the bonds of motherhood among black women, many of whom were Lorde’s lovers. Musser examines the radical potential of resignifying motherhood within the space of black lesbian feminism—a space of intersectional identities—as not only biological but also social and erotic, a means of sensual energy and a resource for political renewal. Larsen’s novel, by contrast, presents a prescient counterpoint: black maternity not reclaimed but imposed, as the price to be paid for sexual satisfaction. Lorde’s famous essay “Uses of the Erotic” seems to stand against this very notion of eroticism, which stigmatizes black women in particular as symbols of sexuality’s transgressive force within a deeply anti-sex and anti-black culture. The controlling image of the Jezebel haunts Larsen’s novel and drags down her protagonist.⁹ Her maternal instinct is the agent that keeps her moored to her own oppression. To abandon

her children in order to live her own life again, as an autonomous individual, would mean the “rend[ing] of deepest fibers.” Helga Crane can’t do it. And so she drowns in the quicksand of maternity and racialized gender norms that subdue her, no less than does the love for her children.

This glimpse of the modernist misfit in the situation of the “tragic mulatta” would seem pitifully anachronistic. The contemporary impetus is to forget and to erase these baleful accounts of tragic black womanhood, tragic black motherhood, and the ongoing legacy of slavery that haunts Larsen’s novel. (She felt the gaze of her husband as the “lash of a whip,” indicating this link as instinctive and no less oppressive.) All *Quicksand* needs is black second-wave feminism, in other words, and the solution is not to take modernist novels about so-called intersectionality that seriously—especially those, like Larsen’s and like Thurman’s, that center on the intersections of gender and race and sexuality.

Perhaps adding these novels to a growing body of work on Afro-pessimism would do them greater justice. But if we do that, we miss the investment in modernism as a cultural formation, and in modernist narrative form, that defines Larsen’s and Thurman’s authorship (no less than Rhys’s and Isherwood’s). Individually, Thurman and Larsen saw themselves as part of the cultural wave of the New Negro that would usher in the integration of black sociality and cultural uniqueness into the great US melting pot. To ghettoize them as chiefly speaking to black constituents misses the importance of the Harlem Renaissance as a political application of culture—aimed squarely at the white US public, which then, as now, denied African Americans social, economic, and legal citizenship. So, Larsen and Thurman may “fit” into the paradigm of Afro-pessimism better than that of literary modernism, but their focus on “misfits” should caution against the impulse to fit them into only one category—be it race or gender or sexuality—that simplifies their multiple investments and identities. Their refusal to conform became the touchstone of their early novels, which centered on figures of “unconformity” and “total misfits.”

So, queer theory’s “aggressive impulse for generalization,” which Michael Warner argues characterizes the anti-identitarian queer politics in the 1990s, *also* characterizes the language of the misfit in modernisms like those of Larsen and Thurman.¹⁰ Radically general yet deeply particular—in terms of race and gender and sexuality, as well as class and region—the modernist misfits we encounter in *Quicksand* and *The Blacker the Berry* challenge this strict separation between queer, on the one hand, and intersectional indexes of power, on the other. The so-called antisocial thesis of homosexuality, in other words, was being developed by intersectional novelists like Thurman and Larsen—not to mention Isherwood and Rhys—in modernist eras and contexts.¹¹ These

contexts include the Harlem Renaissance, which extends to Boise, Idaho, and Los Angeles, for Thurman, and Copenhagen and Denmark, for Larsen. They also encompass the *longue durée* of Rhys and Isherwood: the hybrid Caribbean–Left Bank bohemianism of Rhys, and Isherwood’s peripatetic imaginings, border crossings, and cross-identifications from Weimar Berlin to the Vedanta Society of Southern California.

Misfits Beyond *Queer*

In “Rethinking Sex,” Heather Love writes, “While *queer* was supposed to name [a] coalition of the marginal, it has not always lived up to this potential. . . . Given the widespread commodification of the term, as well as its history of uptake in sexuality studies, it is not clear if *queer* can continue to do this work.”¹²

I think *misfit* can do this work.

Thus this study aligns contemporary understandings of *queer* with modernist understandings of being a *misfit*. In this introduction, I argue that the early twentieth century employed the term “misfit” in at least two overlapping yet distinct senses. One sense describes certain individuals as outside the social mainstream. The second describes individuals who belong to a certain kind of social group as misfits. Both senses overlap in the concept of *queer* that we use today: *queer* in the minoritarian sense, as a category of social identification, signals a member of the LGBTQ coalition. But *queer* also means a certain attitude, a certain oppositional, even anarchistic, political orientation: what Warner calls “resistance to regimes of the normal,” “queers, incessantly told to alter their ‘behavior,’ can be understood as protesting not just the normal behavior of the social but the *idea* of normal behavior.”¹³ Warner’s anti-identitarian focus has been justifiably critiqued as a metonym for queer theory, linked to the pioneering work of Gayle Rubin, which began by dissociating sexuality from other dimensions of social difference—especially gender but also, implicitly, race and ethnicity.¹⁴

Much ink has been spilled in trying to retain *queer* as an enabling critical term. But perhaps its half-life is over. It’s telling that communities of gender and sexual minorities identify with the LGBTQ+ initialism and not with the simpler, chicer term from the 1990s. “What’s Queer About Queer Studies Now?” is the title of a special issue of *Social Text*; by that point—2005—*queer* had become so expansive, and so vaporized, that it meant everything and nothing to do with sexuality, with gender, with social oppressions of any kind, type, or flavor.¹⁵ Now, queer studies studies everything *except* sex. (I exaggerate only slightly.) Queer

studies has bigger realms to conquer. Meanwhile, on the ground, queer and trans students, leaders, activists, and advocates speak in pronouns and initialisms and neologisms. (*Ace*, anyone? *Incel*?) It's time to talk about sex, again, as Rubin once said. Except she said it at the beginning, the big bang of queer theory. What is there to talk about when we talk about *queer* today?

What about talking about *misfits* instead? As I demonstrate in this book, the term and its associations enjoyed a wide circulation in the first two-thirds of the twentieth century. Martin Luther King Jr., early in his career, sermonized about the importance of becoming a “transformed *nonconformist*” in order to resist Jim Crow, sanctioned by religious authority.¹⁶ In that sermon, King analogized the story of the early Christians, who resisted Roman persecution, with the struggle to restore civil rights for African Americans. The story of the twentieth century, it is said, is the story of overcoming fascisms of every stripe, and the idea of being a misfit suits these early accounts of hegemony as the basic fact of social life. Social life in this era was defined by Jim Crow, by deep divisions and entrenched powers that were questioned only as a result of this prism, this view into social life through the lens of conformity or nonconformity. One-Dimensional Man, as Marcuse called it.

Is it the case that the variety of social movements, not to mention their successes, have been utterly misunderstood, over- and underestimated? Do we perhaps need better words to use to describe the reality *back then*, and perhaps use these words to describe our realities *right now*? Are we living, today, as One-Dimensional Men? But we no longer speak of one-dimensional *man*; we no longer speak of *one dimension*. To do so is to ignore the matrices of social difference as well as the achievements of the social movements in challenging and diversifying our notions of social cohesion, ramifying our ideas about social struggle. We don't need the idea of the misfit, of conforming or not conforming within a one-dimensional world order, because the world is split into *n* dimensions (or intersections, to use the paradigm).

However, if this study shows anything, it is the capaciousness and elasticity of this modern notion. Generally, in modernist discourse, a *misfit* (definition 1: *any outsider within general society*) is a culturally anonymous “anyone”—that is to say, a generic nonconformist, usually coded as *man* and not a woman, *white* and not black or brown or yellow or green, usually of sound mind and body. By contrast, a *misfit*, definition 2, is *a member of a minoritarian community defined as a distinct collectivity, or an individual possessing durable or permanent cultural, psychosocial, or sociobiological characteristics alien to the institutions, norms, and values of majority culture*. Georg Simmel's sociological archetype of the stranger (*The Stranger* [1908]) fits this description:

a single-identity person who is marginalized within a majority culture but remains essential to it. Simmel's chief example for the minoritarian misfit is the Jew in Europe, historically barred from certain social institutions (such as landownership) but allowed to carve out a place of social, economic, or cultural exchange for the benefit of the larger populace. The stranger is thus the type of cultural misfit who represents a minoritarian *group* that self-identifies as such; this archetype also includes individuals marginalized by their disabilities, sexualities, racial coordinates, and other structural differences *before* these differences coalesce into discrete cultural-political "identities" throughout the long twentieth century. Modernist novels featuring these characters arguably helped jump-start discourses of self-legitimation, collective liberation, and recognition from majority culture, disturbing the first notion of the social as a homogeneous, unmarked, organic whole. The best examples in the American context are the great African American literary tradition and ethnic American immigrant fiction. In the early to mid-twentieth century, a literary exemplar is Alain Locke's *The New Negro* (1925). But this study's archive centers on nonconformists *within* these rarefied groups, as in Thurman and Larsen's fictional challenges to the modernist New Negro's straight masculine paradigm. (A figure like Langston Hughes is enticing because he seems to exemplify this cultural-nationalist position yet personally seems queerer than he let on. This is a major reason Hughes isn't a subject of this book: he did not accept the further burden of double marginalization due to his sexuality.) So authors in this archive are even further afield, more alienated, constituting the modernist *misfit's* definition 3: *culturally articulated figures defined by their alienation from majoritarian values, norms, and institutions, as well from their own cultural groupings, which recapitulate those same systems*. This type of misfit experiences a double alienation enforced by the collusion of majoritarian norms re-created within minoritarian collectivities in their march toward progress. *This double displacement is what makes these modernist misfits "queer," in our parlance today.*

Maybe, just maybe, being—or feeling like—a misfit is still a useful way to understand individual discomfort with the hegemonies of everyday life, and with the hegemonies of social power operative in minoritized social groupings (definition 3), whose norms and values (especially sexual norms and values) ape those of the majority even as their culture resists hegemony. (This is the critique of the LGBTQ community's focus on gaining a foothold in conservative institutions like holy matrimony and the US military.) The stories of double exile studied here demonstrate diverse modernist writers' principled maladjustment and the "adjustment proceedings" (in Thurman's terms) necessary for these

minoritarian subjects to negotiate their internal marginalization from majoritarian-*lite* communal norms of belonging.

A Modest Proposal

The concept of *queer* served its purpose in pointing out the disparity between social identities and their exclusions—often visited upon racialized, gendered, and sexual minorities—that social movements engendered in order to breathe politically free air. Perhaps the rhythm of conformity, rather than that of normativity, is the true beat for these older stations of the misfit—and for the newer stations of marginality that continue to haunt the halls of minoritarian belonging.

A term like *queer*, unlike one linked to a specific identity, has been used as a solvent of identity purposefully. *But perhaps we need a different solvent.* My modest proposal is not *Let's substitute "misfit" for "queer" and call it a day.* Rather, it is *Let's look at these modernist self-conceptions of social marginality and double exclusion and think about why the notion of misfit-ness was so powerful, frequent, and overutilized—even as it remains, today, underanalyzed—before we coalesced around the rubric and rhetoric of identity.* The narratives studied here suggest a way to have our *three-way* with difference, the way our modernist forebears did: by coalescing around three definitions of social misfits, thereby gaining purchase on the realm of the majority through the backdoor rhetoric of universal exclusion and minoritarian particularity. Misfits like the modernists studied here indicate an analytic, if not a diagnostic, of social reality before the social movements took firm hold—but also before our late machine age remixed these Sixties revolutions and incorporated them into an even greater assemblage of capitalist engineering. The misfit is a conceptual, and *historical, ménage à trois* between intersectionality, identity, and humanity. An interface that perhaps helps us see through an older age's thought about difference beyond the cul-de-sac of the identity categories, or the intersection that leads to so much incoming traffic. Thinking intersectionally might be easier when routed through the universalism—and political efficacy—of identity, but only if it leads to a solvent of identity toward reassembling the social as a truly inclusive, homogeneous heterogeneity: meaning, a *solution* in the form of a liquid structure of feeling, not evaporating with the infinite regress of adding identity categories to the mix, but moving like quicksilver through fingers of every color, of every length, size, and even number.

As we will see, a kind of protomaterialism, as proposed by Rosemary Garland-Thompson, should be embraced, given the *misfit* idea that anybody

can, and is, and will be outside the social mainstream, in some shape or another, at some time or another, “for one reason or another.” And that means everybody is potentially a misfit, as everybody is potentially “intersectional,” as anybody is that crosses the multiple lanes of social traffic. But the aim is not to minimize the greater hurts of greater historical oppressions (those who are “more misfit” than others). It is to elevate everyone to the same level, without forgetting those differences and without surreptitiously allowing for the false universal to remain the default, as “nonintersectional.” To remember the misfit is to remember that the intersectional is universal, and vice versa, without forfeiting the particulars of hierarchical differences that, again, render some more intersectional—more “mis-fit”—than others.

This doubleness of meaning in the concept of nonconformity, maladjustment, and nonbelonging in the discourse of the misfit is the subject of the next section, which seeks to stabilize the tension inherent in universalizing versus minoritizing notions of the term.

Epistemology of the Misfit

“For one reason or another every one of you weren’t happily adjusted back on Earth. Some of you saw the jobs you were trained for abolished by new inventions. Some of you got into trouble from not knowing what to do with the modern leisure. Maybe you were called bad boys and had a lot of black marks chalked up against you.”¹⁷ So says the captain of the space mission to his new recruits in Robert Heinlein’s “Misfit” (1939), one of his early stories. Focused on one of those recruits, Andrew Jackson Libby, “Misfit” centers on Libby’s extraordinary mathematical and logical abilities. Libby’s “genius” sets him apart even within this band of misfits, men considered dangerous or disposable enough to enlist in astro-colonization (65).

I cite this example as a privileged figure for the misfit’s social maladjustment, nonconformity, and nonbelonging (definition 1). This kind of misfit, as Capt. Doyle’s speech implies, does not “fit into” society “for one reason or another.” But Libby’s “intuitive knowledge of all arithmetical relationships” sets him apart from the bounds of human faculties, not to mention the rest of his crew (64). So Heinlein’s story turns on Libby’s uncanny computational capacity. The narrative illustrates a symbolic equation of man and machine, first by personifying a space-age “ballistic calculator” as a protoccomputer comprising “three Earth-tons of thinking metal,” which Libby “subconsciously thought of . . . as a person—but his own kind of a person” (65–66). After

personifying the “thinking metal” as Libby’s “own kind of a person,” the narrator describes Libby as a human “calculator.” In the climax, when the machine fails to track an asteroid’s orbit, Libby begins blurting out astronomical coordinates, miraculously saving the colonizing mission: “*Four hours later Libby was still droning out firing data, his face gray, his eyes closed. Once he had fainted but when they revived him he was still muttering figures.* From time to time, the captain and the navigator relieved each other, but there was no relief for him” (66, emphasis added). Libby proves a better machine, a better “computer,” than his beloved machine made of “thinking metal.” He doesn’t fail to “apply the data”; he might faint, but his superhuman mind keeps processing, unerringly accurate (66). Libby’s autonomic computations save the day, if not the galaxy. Heinlein’s sci-fi allegory thus recuperates a misfit into a super-antihero. The plot of “Misfit” equates Libby’s person with the marvels of the space age: marvels that his computational superpower recuperates, in turn. (Echoing the story’s paradoxical isometric logic about the superiority of mechanical calculation beyond the limits of a mechanical calculator, Libby’s explanation for detecting any and every technical miscalculation is that the data just “didn’t fit” [64].)

This glimpse into Heinlein’s space colonization story illustrates the modernist idea of being a “misfit.” As I discuss below, misfit discourse encompasses varying yet related issues of the individual’s relation to society, normalcy, and commonality. The idea of being a “misfit” includes forms of nonconformity, nonbelonging, or maladjustment. The term performs heavy yet invisible epistemological labor. Thus Heinlein’s story about a misfit never utters that word, except in its title. Fittingly, the rhetoric of misfit-ness applies at various levels of social discourse. As I show in this introduction, discourse about “misfits” was a powerful one in the early to mid-twentieth century. And in the history of ideas, I argue that *misfit* discourse is a precursor to terms and concepts related to identity that we now take for granted: identity and all of its semantic entailments, including culture (as in collective identity); intersectionality (as in multiple, complex, or intersecting aspects of identity); positionality (as in how identity shapes one’s standpoint in the social order); and broader terms for social subjugation and hegemony, such as oppression, exclusion, and alienation; majority and minority and their lexical variants (including minoritarian); and community, solidarity, and home culture (or family). All of these important ideological abstractions, and more, date from the late twentieth to the early twenty-first century. More importantly, they displace an older rhetorical fabric, one covering a general society without culture and other false utopias: the rhetoric not of *identity* and *community* but of *misfits* and *society*.

But, as we see in this study, the rubric and rhetoric of the *misfit* is directed to address cultural differences and their intersection, including in the specific way developed by the authors in this study: double marginalization, or stories about culturally different protagonists whose identity and community are in conflict, which renders the *modernist misfit* doubly alienated—from her or his own kind as well as from broader society. As we will see, the paradigm for addressing myriad levels of individuation and enculturation, of oppression and liberation, was constituted through these different semantic and rhetorical fields: *before the rhetoric of “identity,” we talked about “misfits.”*

And yet writing about a “misfit” like Andrew Jackson Libby is different from writing about a “total misfit” like Emma Lou Morgan in Thurman’s *The Blacker the Berry* (1929), or Helga Crane in Larsen’s *Quicksand* (1928). Libby is as majoritarian as it gets. As “Andrew Jackson’s” namesake, he is an avatar of American white-settler patriarchal individualism. This “misfit” is thus worlds apart from Rhys’s “underdogs” and “doormats in a world of boots,” as in her novel *Quartet* (1929), or Isherwood’s multicultural “non-conformists” resisting the postwar nuclear-industrial complex in *A Single Man* (1964).

But how can this seemingly antiquated term meet all of these varied fictional uses? “Misfit” describes a default super-antihero like Libby, but also a modernist culturally inflected antihero like Thurman’s intersectional Emma Lou Morgan and Rhys’s deracinated Marya Zelli. The story I am telling is about how the term *misfit* oscillates between the “Libbys” of the hegemonic order and the “underdogs” and “nonconformists” so labeled for their gender, race, sexuality, nationality, and other structural “isms” of identity. Before the various Sixties liberation movements—which Isherwood’s novel anticipates but does not yet envision—and the rubric and rhetoric of identity politics, the term of art was this oddly misfitting term about “misfits.” I say *oddly misfitting* because of its rare elasticity and generality: encompassing both “Andrew Jackson” and queer, black, female, or (post)colonial protagonists, often inhabiting multiple identities.

Misfit’s Ladder; or, Levels of Modernist Alienation

Representations of the modernist misfit in the early to mid-twentieth-century novel, then, include these increasingly minoritarian, increasingly contemporary understandings of the subject and the hierarchies of social difference. At the most general level, modernist fiction centered on the figure of the misfit represents maladjusted protagonists generically coded as general nonconformists, like Heinlein’s space colonists. These are indicatively male, abstract-universal misfits. What sets them apart is their criminality or antisociality, which can be remedied or redeemed. In Heinlein’s story, the captain of this band of misfits tells

them that, “*every one of you weren’t happily adjusted back on Earth,*” furnishing the rationale for their enlistment and for the story’s title. Yet Heinlein’s Libby instances a special kind of displacement. In “Misfit,” Libby is a one-of-a-kind human supercomputer. He is presented at first as a run-of-the-mill misfit, like the others. But Libby is special: his “disability” is a super-ability, which elevates as it excludes him. Less fortunate examples from this archive of unique-individual misfits, excluded due to their physical, mental, or emotional disposition, or a particular disability or debility, are the mainstay of what I call mainstream modernist fictions, such as Virginia Woolf’s shell-shocked Septimus Warren Smith (*Mrs. Dalloway* [1925]) or Albert Camus’s probably-on-the-spectrum, existentially adrift Meursault (*L’Étranger* [1942]).¹⁸ Even in this sketch of fictional modernist alienation, we see that a misfit is *not* a misfit is not a misfit . . .

Increasing the political dimension of nonconformism, maladjustment, and nonbelonging within this fictional universe are figures who represent a cultural valence of minoritarian subjectivity in the context of majoritarian domination. These are modernist characters closer to our own epistemology of social power and subjectivity. They are excluded due to permanent systemic cultural differences set against oppressive social hierarchies. Here we can glean the discourse of empire and colony and other structural divisions based on gender, race, and sexuality, perhaps most famously figured by James Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus (*A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* [1916]), whose burning alienation from Ireland and its stultifying normative institutions, such as the Church and the language of the English oppressor, subjugate the modernist antihero in cultural exile. And finally, in the smallest concentric circle within this modernist circle of alienation, we can discern misfits who inhabit multiple positions that are in conflict within the misfits themselves and are thus mutually constitutive yet disidentifying. These outsiders represent misfits who personify nonconformism at various social levels and within various kinds of cultural wholes, with the result being a story of double marginalization. The marginalization manifests as being ideologically or behaviorally set apart from broader society; from universal norms of physical, intellectual, or dispositional comportment; from culturally inflected, structural hierarchies that define different social bodies; and from their own cultural (even familial) home, for nonconformity with the communities, ideals, values, norms, or institutions created by and for their own kind, as in the fiction grouped under the rubric of misfit modernism.

To return to the example of Joyce: the astute reader will ask, why *not* Stephen Dedalus? He is as deeply exiled as any other figure in these books, and Stephen’s alienation is keyed to his nonconformity within, and maladjustment to, the conservative Ireland of Joyce’s youth. Joyce, too, satisfies the autobiographical

criteria set for analyzing misfit modernism: his self-exile is also paradigmatic of the cultural misfit's displacement. And though Joyce could indeed constitute a chapter in this study, his case is different enough to merit some discussion in this introduction. First, and foremost, is the ironic distance Joyce maintains toward his antihero. *Portrait* is conceived with authorial irony that destabilizes the seriousness of Stephen's misfit consciousness. As Wayne Booth writes, "As the young man goes into exile from Ireland, goes 'to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy' of his soul 'the uncreated conscience' of his race, are we to take this . . . as a fully serious portrait of the artist . . . ?" Booth asks whether Stephen's rejection of the priesthood counts as a "triumph, a tragedy, or merely a comedy of errors."¹⁹ The narrative instability qualifies the alienation of Stephen Dedalus in his own novel, rendering it perhaps a sign of immaturity rather than a painful reflection on double exile.

The second main reason to question whether Joyce is properly emblematic of the misfit-modernist archive is his second major antihero: Leopold Bloom. As with Stephen, Bloom is culturally alienated—a misfit if only for being a Jew in Ireland—and emasculated. But Joyce's vision for *Ulysses* is ultimately a comic one. As Stephen's interior monologue states in Telemachus, "*And no more turn aside and brood.*"²⁰ Joyce's modernist aesthetic, in other words, encompasses a vision of the misfit in Dedalus and Bloom, but it is by no means comprehended by this theme alone. Indeed, Joyce's loving and detailed re-creation of Dublin and Irish culture while in self-imposed exile is symbolic of his enduring attachments to a cultural nationalism that he held to all the closer for being alienated from it. (Joyce was a real Irish patriot, unlike his Citizen.) And third, concomitantly, the "biological pessimism" that Hardwick identifies in Isherwood's *Single Man*—and that extends to the other novels in this study—is ironized in Joyce's *Portrait* and sidelined for a comic, universal vision of humanity in *Ulysses*. And so the Joycean structure of feeling transcends the parameters of this narrower, and more painful, vision. His imperial-level canonicity—coregent of English letters, with Shakespeare and Milton—registers the arc of Joyce's authorial trajectory: a minoritarian on steroids, Joyce thoroughly transformed the terms of English fiction, no less than Henry James before him. That grand ambition and reception dissolves the focus on double marginalization of *Misfit Modernism*.

"A Writer of 'Misfits'" (1)

Employing the critical lens I call *immanent reading*, which draws out the significance of the *misfit* term and constellated concepts from the novels themselves, in this section, I provide a materialist sketch of the long and rich history of twentieth-century applications of the term and its evolving meanings. In the

following section, I discuss how literary critics have analyzed the theme of the misfit. An important distinction from these historical treatments and the argument that this book makes, however, rests on the particulars of definition. As described below, Rosemary Garland-Thompson defines *misfits* and *misfitting* as the disjointed juxtaposition between body and environment, predicated on a materialist disability-studies theoretical framework. Her understanding of *misfit* is thus closest to my own, the misfit as a *cultural* as much as *social* position of nonconformity and maladjustment.

Evidence for the resonance between the early twentieth-century notion of the *misfit* and our contemporary paradigm for marginalized sociocultural *identity* is furnished by perhaps the most visible queer modernist, John (Radclyffe) Hall. In a letter to her lover, Hall writes:

Why is it that the people I write of are so very often lonely people? Are they? I think that perhaps you may be right. I greatly feel the loneliness of the soul—nearly every soul is more or less lonely. Then again: *I have been called the writer of “misfits.” And it may be that being myself a “misfit,” for as you know, beloved, I am a born invert, it may be that I am a writer of “misfits” in one form or another—I think I understand them—their joys & their sorrows, indeed I know I do, and all the misfits of this world are lonely, being conscious that they differ from the rank and file.*²¹

Jack Halberstam, in an essay on Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness*, cites this letter to argue for the female “invert’s” use of fashion to express female masculinity.²² Halberstam thus notes the importance of self-fashioning for modernist inverts like John Hall and her most famous creation, Stephen Gordon, *The Well’s* famously lonely protagonist. But Halberstam’s argument does not complete the cognitive connection: the notion of being a misfit is presented but also elided, as self-evident in its meaning, as synonym for invert and other forms of outsiderdom. Halberstam never questions why Hall centers on this term in particular. Why not “outsider” or “outcast”? What special meanings does “misfit” convey that these other terms do not?

Emma Liggins also discusses Hall’s letter.²³ Liggins does not gloss over the term, linking it (as Hall does) to the sexological category of the “invert.” But the “misfit” in Liggins’s account functions as a synonym for Hall’s subcultural lesbian identity—interchangeable with “odd,” “abnormal,” “outlaw,” and so on. While Liggins echoes the connection Hall makes in this letter, even construing notions such as “misfit identities,” these are yoked to synonymous phrasings

like “outlaw identities” and “lesbian identities.”²⁴ Such substitutions seem to dissolve the specificity and salience of the term “misfit,” a specificity invoked by Hall herself. Liggins and Halberstam gloss over the ambiguity of the term. Here, being a “misfit” is synonymous with a cultural identity that is benighted by general society—that of the sexological invert. But being a misfit, as Hall views it, also connects her to “misfits of one form or another”—not simply other “inverts” like her. Hall’s letter, importantly, does not provide examples of what these other “forms” could be. Most abstractly, a misfit is anyone who occupies—whether for a moment or for a lifetime—the position of social outsider “for one reason or another” (Heinlein), in the generic sense that lacks the cultural and political meaning Hall invokes.

Of course, this sense of the misfit—the social, even *antisocial*, outsider, as we see in early social science reports—is famously personified as the baleful villain called The Misfit in Flannery O’Connor’s short story “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” (1953). The Misfit’s murderous shadow perhaps obscures much of the symbolic potential this term might once have contained. For even if O’Connor’s dark emanation serves as a figure for “the Other *par excellence*,” as Dan Wood argues, this Southern Gothic image is more mirage than reality: a dark fairy tale, perhaps.²⁵ The term circulated for decades to name the position of marginalized *people* and *populations*, individuals *and* collectivities, construed as the “misfits of the world,” as evinced by Hall’s letter.

Etymology of *Misfit*

The importance of this term as an umbrella concept not simply for social deviance but for cultural minorities—such as Hall’s female “inverts” and so-called Sapphic modernists²⁶—is the heart of this study, which articulates how visions of *cultural* “misfits of one form or another” are narratively formulated in the modernist novel.

Etymologically, the first meaning of *misfit* (1823) is sartorial: “A garment or other article which does not fit . . . the person for whom it is intended.” But its meaning quickly slides into defining the “wearer” herself as a misfit, in the general sense of maladjustment to one’s environment: “A person unsuited or ill-suited to his or her environment, work . . . [*especially*] one set apart from or rejected by others for his or her conspicuously odd, unusual, or antisocial behavior or attitudes” (1860).²⁷ The meanings of *misfits* in Hall’s letter explicitly draws on this last definition. In the adjectival definition of *misfit*—“Of, relating to, or designating *social misfits*”—the *Oxford English Dictionary* cites articles in the *Journal of Educational Sociology* in 1929 and 1936: “These misfit *personalities* constitute an increasingly serious *social problem*,” stressing the

volitional aspect of being a misfit: maladjustment due not to DNA or built environment, but just a bad attitude.²⁸ Thus early understandings of the misfit are about abstract individuals' volitional "maladjustment" or "unsocial behavior."²⁹ These accounts provide evidence of the resonance of this discourse in the early twentieth century, during which the idea of *being a misfit* frames discussions of social problems *caused by* maladjusted individuals of all stripes and persuasions: abstract persons with no cultural label.

Yet early discourse also paints a vaguely social-Darwinist portrait of misfits.³⁰ For instance, a 1937 article, "First Aid to the Misfit," addresses "the maladjusted child."³¹ Looking closer, maladjustment is increasingly ascribed not to volitional individuals but to structural factors, such as physical disability. The author, Helen Cummings, writes, "We *now* look upon these manifestations of misbehavior *as merely symptoms*" in order to uncover root "*causes* and remove them."³² A "primary cause," Cummings adds, "has been found to be *physical disabilities* which bring in their wake a trail of emotional conflicts and conduct disorders by which the child seeks to escape the handicap of his physical nature."³³ These disabilities occur across the social field. Cummings shows how the discourse about misfits "now" finds root causes in the realm of natural or environmental differences, rather than the other way around, which centers on the individual as an autonomous social actor. The fault for being a misfit, then, progressively lies in our stars.

As with Hall's notion of being a "born invert," defined as a natural trait maligned by institutional norms that render that essence problematic (such as marriage), children with congenital disabilities, such as deafness or blindness, become "social problems" requiring "first aid to the misfit." Yet Cummings stresses the importance for educators to "prevent the acquisition of similar defects by *the normal, healthy child*" by providing "proper lighting and ventilation, the inculcation of good health habits and instruction in safety education."³⁴ The "born" "abnormal" child and the "normal, healthy child" can both be misfits. In both cases, they need "first aid," or accommodation. In both cases, the root "cause" is not willful behavior but natural or social forces, or their interplay.

Thus rhetoric about misfits develops an increasingly complex discourse about systemic forces impinging on individuals *and* environments, forces progressively fixed as categorical physical, psychological, and sociological differences, such as disability or sexuality. Structural aspects of one's *identity*, in contemporary terms. This transition in worldview regarding the origin of social differences supports volume one of Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, which documents a Western epistemological transition from regarding sexual acts as behavior to conceiving sexuality as the essence of the individual. In this para-

digm shift, deviant sexual behaviors are anthropomorphized into “personages,” or negative avatars of newly construed norms of gender and sexuality, such as “the homosexual” for heterosexuality. This scientific shift develops clinical terms like “sexual deviate,” “gender variant,” “sodomite,” and, of course, “invert.” Hall’s letter adopts this discourse in the reverse—as Foucault describes it—to speak on her own behalf.

The discursive mesh of cultural meanings surrounding the term *misfit* in the modernist era, as a structural understanding of maladjustment to collective norms “of one kind or another,” seems oddly self-evident, yet curiously undertheorized. The modernist discourse of the misfit is elided even in scholarly interventions, such as Halberstam’s, that invoke this term in the context of minoritarian subjectivity, such as Hall’s “born invert.” Why the resistance to carrying through the early modernist idiom of misfits into our own time? The answer lies, I think, in the term’s conceptual lability, which causes cognitive dissonance—a cognitive dissonance reminiscent of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s claim about the figure of “the closet,” or sexual identity itself, as we see in the next section.

“The Great Assassins of History”

A post-Second World War lecture by Roger Tredgold employs the discourse of the *misfit* as shorthand for antisociality in the abstract individual, but also for varied forms of structural subordination. The title, “Changes in Social Responsibilities—and the Misfit,” bemoans the transformation in British society in the postwar era, which the speaker blames for the rise of “misfits” in the general population. The lecturer, a physician, focuses on people “who suffer . . . from mental deficiency or senile decay.” The increase in number of the mentally ill or senile caused greater demand for their “institutional care,” while families seemed unwilling to shoulder the burden—an aspect of weakening social bonds, in his view.³⁵

The good doctor blames a host of factors for the rise in so-called misfits, including the “break-up” in family systems, the loosening of authority in the education system, and the influence of media, such as the wireless and television.³⁶ All of these forces and institutions have neglected their duty to instill a sense of collective responsibility in the ordinary citizen, according to Tredgold. And in light of this collective failure, misfits from all walks of life “appear in various guises—to the psychiatrist they will be anti-social psychopaths; to the soldier, barrack-room lawyers, or sometimes mutineers; to the magistrate and police, criminals; to the industrialist, trouble-makers, sometimes ‘communists,’ though they would not be communists in Russia, or anywhere else that Communism

was in power. . . . Finally, to their parents, they are an abiding disgrace.” And, in peroration, he concludes that “in past ages, they were often found at the bottom of some of the world’s trouble-spots; and they have on occasion been played on by circumstances, or by the unscrupulous, to swell the ranks of the Great Assassins of history.”³⁷

This swelling description recapitulates—and expands—the distinction Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick makes between minoritizing and universalizing understandings of the closet. Even in Hall’s letter, *misfit* includes “inversion” but is not exhausted by it, as her vision expands beyond sexuality: “misfits of the world *in one form or another*.” Similarly, in Cummings and Tredgold, misfits come in many forms: the physically or mentally disabled, caused by congenital or environmental factors, but there are also gestures toward general situations where individuals are at odds with their environment (“being played on by circumstances, or the unscrupulous”). (I think Hall exploits this understanding of misfits.) Hence, scientific discourse about the social problem of “misfits” in the early twentieth century uncannily recapitulates one of Sedgwick’s key arguments in *Epistemology of the Closet*: that understandings of homosexuality draw upon mutually exclusive explanations. The universalizing view posits that everyone can be a little bit of both, as in Freud’s notion of childhood’s polymorphous perversity. The opposite view, the minoritizing understanding, sees homosexuality as the attribute of a minority of the population: this is the “ten percent” or “born this way” model. The minoritizing paradigm is thus an ethnic model of queer identity, construing homosexuals as constituting a distinct class of persons and, therefore, deserving protection from discrimination. Sedgwick argues that homosexuality is seen in both ways at various times and with no sense of cognitive dissonance in this bifurcated epistemology, which would be evident if it treated any other issue beyond homosexuality itself (according to her). Such was the deranging power of queerness to Western epistemological foundations—a key foundation of knowledge itself is the sexual, as Foucault maintained, but Sedgwick added that this knowledge centered on the distinction between hetero and homosexual as if the fate of the world depended on it.

In this study, I make a similar claim for the connotative itinerary of *the misfit* as a figure for social deviance: it invokes both a universalizing category of individual maladjustment and a minoritizing category of, well, what we call a *minoritarian identity*, such as Hall’s “born invert.” Hall’s letter, like the sociological discourses on misfits as social problem, seems to oscillate between both connotations of *misfit*. One is a misfit as an ordinary individual who simply doesn’t fit in within his or her environment. That is the generic, social-outsider definition, the one that predominates in most treatments of the term as a catchall category. But

there is another, culturally attuned definition: the misfit as a *collective* subject, representing a certain “species” of individual—such as Foucault’s history of when “the homosexual became a species,” or, in a gesture that exploits both senses, in the case of Hall’s letter, “the invert,” a minoritizing category drawn from the general class of misfits “in one form or another.”

The centrality of this term to general social-deviance theory, in other words, as well as to discourses of minoritarian self-definition has been shockingly missed by practically everyone. Even Halberstam’s deployment of Hall’s letter glides over this interesting deployment of the rhetoric of the misfit as a generic *type* (all the ways one can be excluded from “the rank and file of society”) and as a given *token*—the *specific way* that Hall and her kind are excluded from “the rank and file of society.” The causes of misfit-ness are thus legion. Misfits are even caused by developments as broad as societal decay in itself. Hall’s letter emphasizes that misfits come in many forms. A misfit is set apart, but the causes of such isolation can be congenital or accidental, durable or transitory.

Except some forms are permanent. The general meaning is blind to structural distinctions and views misfits as volitional subjects, such as criminals, who can be rehabilitated once they pay their debt to society. Such management of spoiled identity allows the misfit to become part of the fold once more. A misfit like Hall is not able to “pay” this “debt,” because the debt is by definition a core state of being. And by insisting that inverts are misfits, Hall ironically neutralizes the stigma of sex-gender deviance by tying it to the universal meaning of misfit as general nonconformity, unencumbered by strata of difference that cannot be erased. Hall’s love letter implicitly shows the two sides of the misfit’s Janus-faced meaning, and it is not too much to say—reading *immanently*, as explained in my methodology—that Hall’s letter constitutes an important literary invocation of the misfit as a cultural, even political, social category. Hall joins the cultural notion of the term to the universal sense of misfit-ness as contingent as it is individual. Hall’s rhetoric, in short, argues for the individual and social dignity of “born invert[s]” as included in the world as any other “manner or form of misfit.” Anticipating the single (gay) man of Isherwood’s novella, Hall invokes a subordinated collective sexual identity and joins it to the abstract, universal dialectic of the social and the individual. Inverts are not only misfits, in other words; they are people, too.

Again, in Hall’s invocation, we see a reverse discourse that Foucault defines as a key strategy for sexual minorities speaking on their own behalf. So far, so understood. But the linchpin in Hall’s strategic deployment of the rhetoric of sexology to justify her love—her sexual and gender “identity,” in our terms—is the terminology she uses. Perhaps like the term *cosmopolitan*, whose ancient

roots were revived in the modernist moment, *misfit*, too, becomes a conduit for renewed interrogations of the social dialectic. Perhaps terms like *misfit* function as discursive bridges between a universalizing discourse of “the individual” outsider, undefined by material oppressions such as gendered or racialized embodiment, and a burgeoning deployment of collective, cultural uniqueness—be it inversion or be it the New Negro, as we shall see—that elevates the status of the individual as representative of a structurally marginalized group. Thurman’s Emma Lou Morgan, who need not be a “total misfit,” exemplifies this burgeoning deployment of the rhetoric of misfit-ness beyond the realm of the false universals, of individual versus environment, toward the concrete particulars of minoritized individuals within concentric circles of cultural differences and beyond, to a social realm revealed as stratified structurally, rather than idealized as a homogeneous whole.

The conception of the misfit is therefore a key discursive ingredient in this shift, proclaiming the misfit as precursor to the notion of identity as the foundation of minoritarian community. In other words, the double meaning of “misfit,” as invoked in Hall’s letter and in the novels in this study, rests on the idea that anyone can be a misfit, but that certain kinds of people are more “misfit” than others. These kinds of people—the misfits of the world, in one form or another—are the stratified segments of cultural groups, ethnic sodalities, sexual subcultures, religious minorities, and the like. Each can invoke being a collective misfit, drawing on the generality of the idea to define abstract individuals. By so doing, ironically, such invocations elevate the claims of minoritarian difference, appropriating the dignity of universal individuality, thereby exposing the default individual’s *lack* of gender, race, ethnicity, and other entailments as a fiction. When deployed in this double sense simultaneously, *misfit* as a rubric implies the falseness of the unmarked individual by *claiming* this universality in the realm of the particular.

Thurman’s “total misfit” employs this double meaning. Emma Lou Morgan is ostracized for being *female while being “too black”*; a dark-skinned male would be able to “pass.” The notion of a “total misfit” thus envisions a universal image of outsiderdom—evident in the impersonal pronoun “no one”—but joins it to the particular entailments of Emma Lou Morgan’s embodiment within an oppressive environment, with the resulting internalization of her *embodiment* as oppressive.

Here we have glimpsed the strange, modern career of the term *misfit*, which generally means *social outsider* and thus appears in social science discourses concerned about broad sectors of society. But the idea of being a misfit narrows down, even in social-problem commentary, to structural particulars, which

became the cultural basis for identitarian or minoritarian groups—such as disability-rights coalitions—in the march toward liberation.

“A Writer of ‘Misfits’” (2)

But let us briefly return to a key exponent of the *culturally attuned* definitions of the misfit. As Hall’s letter indicates, such an understanding of the term centers on a minoritarian consciousness: Hall’s parenthetical remark to her beloved, “for . . . I am a born invert,” indicates the causation between being a misfit and being a “writer of ‘misfits.’” She adds that she “understand[s] them—their joys & their sorrows . . . all the misfits of this world are lonely, being conscious that they differ from the rank and file.” What Hall understands is that it takes one to know one: she is “a writer of ‘misfits’” because she is a misfit in a specific form, while this understanding extends to knowing “all the misfits of this world” and writing about “‘misfits’ in one form or another.” The autobiographical chain of being is incredibly tight, and it extends beyond the autobiographical contingencies of Hall’s situation—she does not only write about “born inverts,” after all, but about a full range of sexual and gender dissidents, including, in that indelible scene in *The Well*, the young man in the Paris cabaret who calls Stephen Gordon “*ma soeur*.” Thus even in the realm of sexual and gender “misfits,” there is variation—Hall’s “beloved” was feminine, unlike John Hall (or Stephen Gordon) herself. But the larger point is the significance of the *misfits of the world* being defined by their social exclusion, as well as the “writer of ‘misfits’” being defined by her “understanding” of this exclusion because she experienced it personally.

However, while Hall describes how misfits feel, she did not develop a distinctive misfit narrative idiom at the level of form. By contrast, the novelists in this study endeavored to transform the contours of fictional form to represent narrative life-worlds from a “misfit” point of view. It is partially for this reason that, despite the importance of Hall’s point of view on misfits and “inverts” as a kind of misfit, her hypercanonical lesbian novel does not occupy a chapter in this book. But this was by design. *The Well*’s famously middlebrow accessibility—its formal conventionality—serves an important ideological purpose. By so doing, however, Hall sacrifices the potential to explore the idea of “being a misfit” via modernist narrative form. As Hannah Roche claims, Hall’s conventional or “Victorian” realism “boldly appropriat[es] an accepted (and heteronormative) genre,” that of the Bildungsroman, to make an ideological “statement about the rightful position of lesbian writing . . . in ways more direct and profound than the audaciously avant-garde.”³⁸ Facing an obscenity trial in November 1928, *The Well*, Roche reminds us, “offended adversaries with both the radicalism of its sexual politics and the apparent conservatism of its prose,” a style that Woolf dismissed.³⁹ This

formal conservatism is at odds with the transformative prose of misfit modernists like Rhys and Isherwood. Larsen and Thurman, as realists—Thurman developing a form I call *affective* realism—appear closer to Hall’s novel and its (more properly Edwardian) realism. But Hall’s conservatism is not merely a stylistic fluke; it lies at the very heart of her novel’s design. *The Well* is a “born invert’s” Bildungsroman. Thurman’s *The Blacker the Berry*, by contrast, develops its realism of affect within a narrative structure that eschews the closures of what Roche calls Hall’s “Victorian” realism. Isherwood’s and Rhys’s novels, in turn, are more recognizable experiments in modernist form—such as *A Single Man*’s single-day structure and *Quartet*’s deployment of limited points of view to construct its unsettling narrative mood. Larsen’s *Quicksand*, again like Thurman’s novel, employs a more recognizable realist code of narration, while its experimentation involves the modernist exploration of depth psychology in the technique of psycho-narration. But Larsen’s novel is modernist also insofar as its exploration of Helga Crane’s complex psychology serves to subvert, and thereby deconstruct, the stereotypical sentimental flatness of the nineteenth-century “tragic mulatta” character. Ironically, *The Well* exploits a sentimentalizing idiom—we could call it the realism of the *tragic congenital invert*—in order to argue for the decency, normalcy, and sheer humanity of its queer protagonist.

Other Modernist Misfits

Flannery O’Connor’s baleful yet iconic character The Misfit has drawn the most critical commentary on this term, albeit without reflecting on the discursive history of “misfit” as the modernist term of art for describing social differences at varying, and overlapping, micro- and macroscopic levels.⁴⁰ Similarly, my conception of the cultural, intersectional misfit in the modernist novel differs from legacy understandings of modernism as a literary formation of the anti-hero with a thousand faces. In criticism, one can look to Paul Levine’s “J. D. Salinger: The Development of the Misfit Hero” (1958) to trace a consistent critical idiom about modernist misfits as *social* outsiders, and perhaps even as *cultural* outsiders⁴¹—but not, as is the focus of *Misfit Modernism*, as narrative figures who occupy multiply inflecting identities and are displaced within both majority culture and within their cultural home. Existing critical formulations of the misfit in modernism, in short, tend to generalize the notion of nonconformity within the social field, presenting paradoxically transcendent antiheroic figures such as Joyce’s Leopold Bloom even while they are culturally marginalized—because of Bloom’s sexual nonconformity, as an uxorious

cuckold, no less than because of his being a Jew. The “Everyman” label conventionally attached to Bloom is indicative of this more generic understanding of the misfit in modernism.

By contrast, this study mines a *discrepant* literary formation that ushers in an intersectional notion of being a misfit—by authors who are autobiographically entailed in their creations. Bloom’s example—no less than that of Salinger’s “misfit antiheroes,” in Levine’s essay—belongs to a normative vein in literary modernism wherein the social outsider is the modernist hero par excellence. Stephen Dedalus, no less than Meursault, occupies a paradoxically central anti-heroic position in the modernist novel. As noted above, I don’t believe that either Bloom or Dedalus—despite their cultural displacements—are defined *solely* through their identitarian predicaments. Far from it. Leopold Bloom’s odyssey is fundamentally classic, comic, and cosmic. Stephen’s tragicomic “brooding” and desire to “forge in the smithy of [his] soul the uncreated conscience of [his race],” by contrast, signals the self-aggrandizing gesture of Refusal of mainstream modernism. And this gesture is indicatively that of a masculine universal subject position that is antithetical to an intersectional, culturally determined figuration as created by the discrepant authors studied in *Misfit Modernism*. Perhaps Joyce knew this, and that’s why he deflated Stephen’s aspirations as never to become realized, to remain *uncreated*.

In another high-modernist counterexample, let me draw on the minor character of Miss Kilman in Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*. In that novel, the overweight, queer, and unpatriotic Doris Kilman symbolizes the abject modernist misfit. She haunts the gilded halls of the Dalloways’ townhouse. Miss Kilman is marginalized within the moral economy of that novel. The title isn’t *Miss Kilman*, after all; it is Mrs. Dalloway who decides to buy the flowers herself (in the famous opening line of that novel). Clarissa as a protagonist recapitulates the antihero in the becoming-majoritarian vein of mainstream modernism, centered on a once-queer society matron.

The Misfit in Literary Criticism

A recent critical invocation of modernist form and misfits—though not of the *misfit* itself as a modernist discourse—is Rob Hawkes’s *Ford Madox Ford and the Misfit Moderns*.⁴² But Hawkes’s notion of “misfit moderns” bears only a superficial resemblance to the argument in this book. As Hawkes’s subtitle suggests—*Edwardian Fiction and the First World War*—his study is situated in an earlier period, which saw the emergence of impressionists such as Ford and Conrad. Hawkes’s notion of Ford as a “misfit modern” centers on Ford’s style as premodernist and post-Edwardian. Hawkes’s study centers on the “misfit” of

Ford's aesthetic, neither a form of the "materialist realism" of the Edwardian era, as described by Woolf in her essays on "Modern Fiction" and "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," nor a form of high modernism, as in the stream of consciousness of Dorothy Richardson, Joyce, and Woolf herself. In no sense does Hawkes convey the culturally displaced condition of double exile that *Misfit Modernism* invokes as its overarching theme.

Uncannily, an author in this study was originally Ford's protégée: Jean Rhys. If an epistemology of the misfit in modernist discourse shows us anything, it is how ironically fitting notions of the misfit and the modern seem to be. The question may not be *Why are critical accounts centered on the misfit and the modern?* but, rather, *What seems to disconnect them from accruing the intellectual force of a coherent formation—such as occurred, famously, with cosmopolitanism and modernism?* Why are scholars still failing to discover the epistemological centrality of the misfit to modernism itself? The answer might lie not only in the political unconscious between all of these accounts of modernist misfit forms and formations. The answer might appear, instead, in the local node of cultural and aesthetic and social history that links Rhys and Ford themselves. If the conceptual apparatus of this book holds, then these questions allow us to investigate the taken-for-granted-ness of any invocation of the misfit and the modern, which serves mostly to preclude sustained investigation of the codevelopment of these symbolic codes in the twentieth-century history of ideas.⁴³

Hence, a key intervention this book makes is the dual epistemology of the term. A misfit like Ford, no matter how aesthetically variant, is *culturally* as far from being a misfit—in the *misfit modernist* sense—as it gets. Hawkes in fact struggles with the cultural conservatism of Ford's most famous novel, *The Good Soldier*, granting its formal innovativeness but eliding the reactionary cultural values—and privileged social positions—of Ford's character systems and Ford himself. However ably Ford subverts these conservative institutions—not least the institutions that profited from world war—his life and work seem more of a piece with canonical narratives and understandings of modernism itself. Again, we see how the misfit's very marginalization is made universal.

Rhys makes for an excellent foil: no impresario or scion of English letters, she. And in broader contrast, she and the other authors in this study center on the social experience of *feeling like a misfit*—in the early twentieth-century sense of the term ("A person unsuited . . . to his or her environment . . . *esp.* one set apart from or rejected by others for his or her conspicuously odd, unusual, or antisocial behavior or attitudes"). So the minoritizing meaning of *misfit* governs this study as representative of doubly dislocated cultural selves, rather than that of Ford or other mainstream modernists plausibly seen as "misfits."

In sum, literary criticism of misfits superficially draws from the discourse that Hall invokes in her letter. This is an underexamined idiom arising in early twentieth-century writing, both literary and scholarly, which, as we have seen, centers on the idea of the misfit as universal nonconformity or minoritarian nonbelonging. Nonbelonging due to what we now call issues of identity, such as Hall's "born invert," or multiple, intersecting, dimensions of cultural personhood as elaborated by the novels in this study: racial and gendered otherness, as in Thurman and Larsen, or transnational origin, gender, class, and sexuality, in the novels of Isherwood and Rhys. All of these fictional artifacts explore a condition of double exile: a cultural outsider displaced from majority culture and also alienated from her own kind. The novels in this study compose a collection of case studies somewhat dissimilar from one another, which test the limits of representation, in both aesthetic and political senses of the word.

The "Misfit" as Theoretical Construct

Such elasticity in the term *misfit* and its dual epistemology is one reason for its undertheorization. To date, there is one contemporary theory of "misfit-ness," which harkens back to early twentieth-century understandings. Rosemary Garland-Thompson suggests that we take the *misfit* concept seriously as a way out of the quandary of single-identity politics, on the one hand, and, on the other, as a way to resolve the ambiguity in the notion of disability as a social rather than a corporeal standpoint. In "Misfits," Garland-Thompson proposes the concept as a way to move past a critical impasse in disability theory, between the social model of disability—a view in which "oppression . . . emanates from prejudicial attitudes," socially reproduced in concrete forms such as "architectural barriers"—and a radical model of disability that draws on materialist feminist understandings of impairments—such as pain and "functional limitation." Her work joins that of other disability theorists who distinguish "between [impaired] bodily states or conditions . . . and the social process of disablement" that views disability as sociopolitical, not biomedical. Thus Garland-Thompson writes, "People with disabilities become misfits not just in terms of social attitudes—as in unfit for service or parenthood—but also in material ways. Their outcast status is literal when the shape and function of their bodies comes in conflict with the shape and stuff of the built world."⁴⁴

Thompson likes *misfit* as a concept because it focuses on the materiality of environment and embodiment without, however, "rely[ing] on generic figures delineated by identity categories." She adds that "encounters between body and environment that make up misfitting are dynamic. Every body is in perpetual transformation not only in itself but also in its location within a constantly

shifting environment.” Garland-Thompson specifies that although “*misfit* is associated with disability and arises from disability theory, its critical application extends beyond disability as a cultural category and social identity toward a *universalizing of misfitting* as a contingent and fundamental fact of human embodiment.” She adds that “focusing on the contingency of embodiment avoids the abstraction of persons into generic, autonomous subjects of liberal individualism,” a “foundational myth . . . of Western culture.”⁴⁵ Garland-Thompson’s framework thus centers on the interaction between body and world that is universal and yet radically individual, depending on context. Her concept of misfit thus opens up a twenty-first-century space for thinking through multiple dimensions of embodied social existence.⁴⁶

Of course, as I have demonstrated, *misfit* was used in the early twentieth century to think through disability and other dimensions of embodied existence—*before* the identity categories that usurped that discursive space, and the cultural and political capital, which Garland-Thompson sidesteps as “reigning notion[s] of oppression” at once atomized and universalized, too reliant on liberal-individual models of personhood. Such a contemporary reliance on identity, as I have argued, reinstates this universal within the particular—as Hall does in her love letter—in distinction to the archive of *Misfit Modernism*, which questions this complicity between minoritarian and hegemonic codes of personhood such as social respectability, individual autonomy, and moral conventionality.

Drawing on Garland-Thompson’s critique of the generic “individual” and unitary notion of “identity,” and based on archival histories of the term’s use, this study analyzes novels elaborating the semantic figure of the “misfit.” Each novel centers on a figure who stands culturally apart, *even within their own home-worlds*, not to mention from majority culture. A figure who doesn’t fit in with their home environment not because they are essentially different, but because they are seen as embodying a difference that sets them apart even from their own group. Furthermore, the kind of *misfit* that this study centers on departs from the framework of disability (as well as sexuality), profiting from Garland-Thompson’s generous conception of being a misfit as radically embodied but also radically universal. Just as everyone will someday be disabled, so does this study’s formulation of the misfit extend universally while retaining its culturally specific parameters. *Never* is the modernist misfit a transcendental subject. The figure that emerges from the pages of the authors collected in this study—and, partly, that emerges in the careers and personae of the authors themselves—is never a universal subject of modernist alienation. Rather, the narratives surrounding this figure are always focused on the cultural dimension of alienation as an embodied, and particularly nonuplifting, if not outright antisocial, form

of intersectionality. And while intersectionality is a concept that informs this study, its particularity as an optic of black feminist theory seems particularly misfitting for a study that ranges transatlantically, is situated earlier historically, and engages nexuses of identity beyond that origin. Thus while using the term *intersectionality*, especially in its antisocial form, as I read it in the modernist novel, the idea of the misfit remains more flexible for its immanent circulation within these novels themselves: Thurman's narrator describes the notion of being a "total misfit," and Larsen's that of "unconformity"; Isherwood's that of "nonconformists," and Rhys's of marginalized underdogs (or "doormats"). In all of these cases, the novels elaborate each misfit's cultural particulars as sites of double alienation. Ranging from the US context of the Harlem Renaissance through the Parisian expatriate scene and the West Coast multiculturalism of postwar Los Angeles, all of these narratives formally "theorize" the subjectivity of a cultural misfit.

Novels of Double Exile: Chapter Descriptions

Using critical methods such as immanent reading, this study draws out the contours—the structure of feeling—of modernist literary novels focusing on what one might consider as *antisocial intersectionality*. I discuss the critical methodology developed from this book's archive in the first chapter, illustrating the symbolic parallelism of this hermeneutic approach and the broader aesthetic ideals of modernism as a cultural formation.

The authors featured in this study are not meant to be exhaustive; they are instead the most visible emblems, the most resonant evidentiary examples of the semantic figure of the misfit and of a literary formation I call misfit modernism, within the archives of the transatlantic modernist novel. The theoretical framework provided by these case studies that span the twentieth century delivers a "proof of concept" for the resilient theme of the modernist misfit and its exploration of antisocial intersectional subjectivity—before these terms were coined—or living between two cultures and being unwanted by both. This last part is essential and distinguishes this study from others that focus on the narratives of modernity from the point of view of racial, ethnic, sexual, or gender oppression. To remember the misfit is to question anew how the progressive political march toward group liberation pressures intersectional individuals to conform to universal notions of agency, autonomy, and liberal individuality. And to remember the misfit is to also question how ethnic and other minority cultures also pressure intersectional individuals to conform to certain notions

of uplift and communalism—as well as agency, autonomy, and liberal individuality—despite their counterhegemonic social contexts.

Chapter 1: Methodology

The first chapter explores the style of close reading I call *immanent*, by way of rereading Raymond Williams’s influential account of the structure of feeling. I argue for the importance of nonaided close reading, or noninstitutional frameworks for understanding misfit modernist fiction. Immanent reading takes a stand in the so-called method wars for the nuance of close textual attention to the novel form, over and above trends of interpretation that draw on theoretical frameworks adopted from other fields of (scientific) knowledge, such as recent “turns” to midcentury sociology and cognitive psychology, not to mention quantitative or “distant” reading approaches. More importantly, as shown in the chapter on Jean Rhys, official discourses of close reading is a way of deflecting from a troubling misfit aesthetic or structure of feeling. Concomitantly, immanent reading is a way to stay close to troubling misfit structures of feeling. I view certain critical approaches as tactics for managing such narrative structures of feeling—deflecting by turning to psychoanalysis, for instance, in the succor offered by respectable concepts such as melancholia rather than the messy, immanent, aesthetic structure of feeling misfit modernists compose in their troubling fiction. For instance, the Rhys chapter argues that institutionally recognized powerful theories steamroll over the misfit’s worldview, which is not legitimized by existing institutions or shared by others.

Chapter 2: Nella Larsen

The second chapter is the first case study, which focuses on Harlem Renaissance novelist Nella Larsen and *Quicksand* (1928). This debut novel centers on Helga Crane, a biracial and bicultural young woman whom the narrator describes as a “despised mulatto.” Larsen’s novel subverts the sentimental nineteenth-century literary trope of the “tragic mulatta” and modernizes it in the nonetheless tragic figure of Helga Crane. This chapter describes Larsen’s formal technique of *psycho-narration*, used to convey deep insights into her protagonist, insights that the protagonist herself may not share. Larsen’s novel thus intercedes in the tragic-mulatta stereotype by delving into her heroine’s complex psychology—a feat hitherto unknown in modernist novels about black female protagonists. By creating a complex psychological portrait of Helga Crane, Larsen’s novel serves to humanize and dramatize the cultural and racial boundaries a “despised mulatto” was forced to obey, despite these cleaving her very sense of self. As the narration puts it, “Why couldn’t she have two lives, or couldn’t she be satisfied in one

place?” That the question is rhetorical emphasizes its force. There is no place, at the time, for someone who trespasses the color line with her very being, as Helga Crane does by having a white mother and black father. The homogeneity—and its Jim Crow enforcement—of each of her “two lives” means she must choose one or the other, which presents an impossible choice that is as existential as it is deeply intersectional. Helga Crane’s submersion in the quicksand of her final choice—to marry a black preacher and lose herself in a Southern folk community—is akin to her destroying what makes her special to begin with: her doubleness of identity and vision, resonant as a form of double exile, but resonant nonetheless. The loss of her complexity is the tragedy of the novel, not the fact of Helga Crane’s biraciality (as would be the case in naïve, sentimental treatments of the “tragic mulatta”). Unlike most critiques of *Quicksand*, this chapter centers on the narratological dimension that Larsen employs to explore the subjectivity and antisocial intersectionality of her protagonist.

Chapter 3: Wallace Thurman

The Larsen chapter also demonstrates how immanent reading can provide a pathway to understanding a complex psychological portrait of double exile, an approach I recapitulate, at a higher, more complex level, in the third chapter. Chapter 3 centers on the archive of Wallace Thurman, a key figure in the Harlem Renaissance, although less well known today than his contemporaries Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes. Thurman was a provocative writer and editor known for his critique of class-bound New Negro ideals of uplift and respectability. Thurman sought to challenge the burden of representation on the New Negro artist (the “racial mountain,” in the words of Langston Hughes), a burden chiefly represented by the influential writings of Alain Locke and W. E. B. Du Bois. *The Blacker the Berry* addresses the prevalence of intraracial prejudice within segments of the bourgeois black community. Thurman’s novel represents the systemic ostracism and internalized stigma that shadow its protagonist, Emma Lou Morgan.

This chapter argues that Thurman’s fiction operates according to an aesthetic ideal that I call *affective realism*: the dedication to documenting the painful realities of feeling unrelieved by uplifting narrative arcs in the context of representing intersectional subjectivity as a form of double exile. Thurman’s novel calls this experience of intersectionality the “adjustment proceedings” of social prejudice and internal exile from one’s community. Moreover, the narrative discourse employs a social-Darwinist paradigm in its naturalist idiom, representing what it calls “the haunting chimera of intra-racial prejudice” as a sociological phenomenon. In this mode of affective realism, while it focuses somewhat on

social determinants—most important, Emma Lou’s upbringing and family—it is the sharp delineation of the feelings of exclusion that distinguish this novel.

The Blacker the Berry thus represents a phenomenology of racism within Harlem. This internal critique and internal presentation centers on an affect the narration codes as “lonesomeness,” a term repeatedly used to name Emma Lou’s experience of double exile. The second key term in the novel is “total misfit,” which reinforces the sense of isolation that the doubly exiled undergo. In social terms, Emma Lou as a “total misfit” registers her exclusion not simply from white culture but from Harlem’s thriving artistic scene. Emma Lou’s ostracism by figures known to Thurman—and even by a figure modeled on Thurman himself—ironically distances the author from the social movement that gave him voice to begin with.

Chapter 4: Jean Rhys

With the fourth chapter, we cross the pond by way of the Caribbean modernism of Jean Rhys. The transatlantic crossing made by Rhys, in other words—also reflected in Larsen’s Dutch West Indian ancestry—mirrors the transatlantic leap made by misfit modernism as a whole. This diasporic crossing defines the porousness of national borders that defined the biographical itineraries of the authors in this study. Moreover, this national hybridity defines modernism as a whole, but as regards the subjects of this book, however, this crossing of national boundaries remains incomplete, unfinished. The example of Rhys serves to highlight the unavailability of national identification for these misfit authors. As a white “Creole” native of the West Indian island nation of Dominica, as British but not English, Rhys was caught between multiple national and colonial fault lines that divided transatlantic modernity.

Rhys’s early fiction represents these and other cultural intersections: race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, and what could be called the pre-postcolonial condition. But her first published novel, a roman à clef about her affair with Ford Madox Ford, *Quartet* (1929), centers on a figure Rhys famously focused on throughout her career: the social “underdog,” in Ford’s words. Using the modernist narrative device of hypothetical focalization, Rhys’s novel spends much time on what *might* happen, what someone *would* be thinking, what *could* be the case. To explore the case of the underdog, in modernist narrative form, entails in part creating the social reality or mood of being an underdog through the use of nonindicative moods. What is an underdog if not someone whose view of reality is reliably *not* ratified by the rest? The idea of the underdog—or, to borrow Rhys’s idiom, “a doormat in a world of boots”—is telling, as it invokes the importance of societal power in the discourse of the modernist misfit. Rhys is special

partly through her exploration of various states of being, not only of being a misfit due to cultural intersectionality—above all gender, nationality, and class—but of being treated as an underdog, or seeing oneself as an underdog, besides. Rhys’s stating the case of the underdog, in *Quartet*, happens not simply through the “top-dog” antagonism of Lois and Hugh Heidler but, more importantly, through the very narrative infrastructure of the novel. Its deployment of focalization within third-person narration is the key to understanding the theme of intersubjectivity, and of the third-rail political dimension of the intersubjectivity between “top dogs” and “underdogs” in “this three-cornered fight.”

My immanent reading of *Quartet*, as with the Thurman chapter, indicates how misfit modernism is defined partially through immanent *writing*: recapitulating the thematic in formal terms. Such an aesthetic procedure is perhaps the thing all modernisms have in common. But misfit-modernist novels formalize the themes of maladjustment and nonbelonging even as the narrative focuses on a cultural outsider who is doubly displaced. Like Marya, Rhys’s other protagonists have no home to speak of and find no succor from majority culture, despite all the “Good Samaritans” who come to her aid. Instead, these “doormats” live in “a world of boots,” a pessimistic vision of social reality: the underdog’s vision, warranted by her culturally marginal, intersecting identities.

In the emblematic case of Rhys, the early novels are instances of how minoritarian subjects are represented as misfits, in her case as vaguely racialized, hypersexualized women who are “underdogs,” marginalized in their own stories as decadent fallen women or weak New Women. But such misfit status is not simply an artifact of Rhys’s unrealized literary talents, nor a symptom of the general absence of a feminist sense of community in her era, nor a shameful effect of Rhys’s belated identification with her Caribbean heritage. In the case of Rhys, when *Wide Sargasso Sea* appeared, her earlier novels reappeared. Many critics in the ’70s, including V. S. Naipaul, speak of the narrative logic of minoritarian overcoming. But Naipaul also speaks of the precocious timeliness of Rhys’s early novels (“Rhys thirty to forty years ago identified many of the themes that engage us today”).⁴⁷ In some sense, then, they are considered ahead of their time—and also hopelessly behind the times, simultaneously. Within the minoritarian frame, Rhys’s preoccupation with misfits who represent socially stigmatized “inferior beings” seems antiquated, as embracing their own oppression. Within a larger frame, however, one encompassing the losses of human history altogether, which in Rhys’s case include the horrors of the two world wars and the realities of colonization and decolonization in the West Indies, these novels seem timely for their depiction of a “friendless and worthless but pitiful woman,” as Rebecca West once claimed.⁴⁸

West adds that Rhys “proved herself to be enamored of gloom to an incredible degree,” claiming that Rhys’s “preference for gloom is not artistic but personal.” But this notion of the personal is limited, and in our present historical consciousness we can better appreciate Rhys’s exemplary attachment to the modernist misfit’s experiences of “inferior being,” of being doubly dispatched from subcultural collectivity while remaining in the margins of majority culture. Such negative early modernist images remind us of the price to be paid for narratives of development: integration into a collective identity and norms of majority culture, such as aggrandized agency, liberal autonomy, and self-possessed individualism. The cultural price might be losing the attachments to loss, including self-loss, itself. Some minorities do not enjoy this privilege and remain mired in the cultural shadows of “inferior being” that Rhys depicts consistently.

Chapter 5: Christopher Isherwood

The fifth chapter is on Christopher Isherwood; specifically, it analyzes the ideological parallax between Isherwood’s “nonconformist” sensibility in the modernist novella *A Single Man* (1964) and his identitarian post-Stonewall memoir of Berlin in the 1930s, *Christopher and His Kind* (1976). The germ of this project began in the Isherwood archive, which deals extensively with the politics of sexuality as a legitimate social identity. A gay-rights activist *avant la lettre*, Isherwood was a modernist critic of what we now term heteronormativity *as well as* a critic of what we now call homonormativity or homonationalism.⁴⁹ Isherwood was ambivalent about the idea of homosexual *identity* and remained steadfast in his espousal of a modernist doctrine of impersonal individuality, aesthetic autonomy from political causes, and what today we recognize as a principled queer critique of the social sphere. Isherwood’s writing evinces the complex politics of a queer-rights activist before Stonewall, while also withdrawing from state-sponsored political movements, which refused to dignify queers as legitimate minorities.

Hence, Isherwood was a gay liberationist before gay liberation. But *A Single Man* problematizes the politics of positive gay representation by extending beyond queer as an identity to discover a discourse of coalitional identities in multicultural Cold War Los Angeles—something defined by an anticomunal cultural pessimism that inflects Isherwood’s modernist resistance to the cultural logic of Stonewall, of asserting a visible, collective gay identity. Isherwood was never a “joiner”: writing of his past self in the third person, Isherwood claims, “Not only was Christopher a homosexual, he was in his deepest heart, an individualist.”⁵⁰

The double exile in Isherwood’s novel, and his broader archive, turns on the protagonist’s ambivalence toward some facets of his queer identity and his sympathetic identification with other cultural groups as fellow “minorities” (or “minority-sisters,” in the novel’s parlance). Isherwood himself underwent chosen exiles, in a reverse migration away from his native Christian English identity and the war effort, on the one hand, and his increasing self-identification as a Hindu disciple and Americanized, “out” gay writer, on the other. The novel delves directly into questions of negotiating multiple identities in postwar Los Angeles, revealing the tensions among groups—such as “Negro” and “Swede,” in the obsolete words of the narrator—and within such groups, as in the “minority-sister” phrase that represents queer belonging for Isherwood’s protagonist. The novel portrays a model way of understanding “minority” identity through the lens of impersonal attachment and self-attenuation, which privileges empathy across identity forms that seem too often premised on antagonism—the “aggression of the minority,” in the novel’s terms.

Conclusion: Beyond the “Progress Narrative”

This introduction provides the theoretical and historical framework for the book. *Misfit Modernism* is a study of a particular trope, a figure of cultural nonconformity, of social nonbelonging and internal marginality, personified in the figure of the protagonist. This figure experiences what I term double exile—feelings of alienation and ostracism within the character’s home community and within majority (white, male, bourgeois, heteronormative) culture. This figure of social exclusion and melancholy antisociality differs from the existential angst of the classic modernist antihero, as their cultural exile is grounded in minoritized identity: racial, gender, sexual, national, and class position might all play a role in their social exclusion. Their double exile is thus keyed to their intersectionality, and their often painful self-abasement and disidentification from homogeneous home or majority cultures, as represented in the historical contexts and literary forms of the transatlantic modernist novel. These contexts include the Harlem Renaissance, for the two (African) American authors in this study; the expatriate scene in Paris and London of the 1920s, for Jean Rhys; and the Berlin of the 1930s as well as the Los Angeles of the 1950s, for Christopher Isherwood, whose career traversed multiple modernist epochs and locales.

Not only are the authors in this study construed as “writers of ‘misfits’” for writing about feeling like a “‘misfit’ in one form or another.” But they are also writing their lives as “works of art,” thus no less literary—or aestheticized. The

notion captured in this book's title is meant to highlight the rupture of the boundary between historical identities and affiliations that are part of the history (or story) of being a "total misfit." The cross-identifications of Thurman, for instance—for whom Locke's injunction to draw inspiration from "Africa" was a nonstarter—were with modernism more than with a putative African vernacular culture. (He wasn't alone in this respect, of course; Countee Cullen's famous poem, "Heritage," pointedly asks, "What is Africa to me?") Their autobiographical writings signal the self-fashioning inherent in their self-invention: authors writing themselves self-consciously into being modern. Being modern then was what we call being modernist now, to distinguish aesthetic from historical dimensions of modernity. And being modern entailed a level of self-consciousness about personal effect and affectation that, as I noted, was created through social networking, self-fashioning, and other tools of interaction that supplemented the stylistic words on the page. One could not be modern—what we now call modernist—without being aware of how to be modern, as well as how not to be. That is what these authors' emphasis on being "modern" meant: like any fashionable style of dress, of comportment, of collective norms of social being. And in part, their modernism is what exiled them.

Moreover, as exemplary fictional accounts of double exile as a structure of feeling "*in solution*," the novels explored in *Misfit Modernism* question a prevailing progress narrative of minoritarian collectivity. Christopher Nealon, in *Foundlings*, argues for a similar teleology for queer subjects in the twentieth century. His book locates early twentieth-century or modernist queer narratives—such as *The Well of Loneliness*—as originating a minoritarian tradition in the absence of a robust queer audience. Hence, Nealon entails a three-stage process for minoritarian (in this case, queer) narrative representation. He begins with the solitary queers of Hall's controversial novel and ends with queer writing that has its own preexisting audience. In the middle are figures such as Hart Crane, midcentury writers who originate within a shared sense of commonality but lack the articulated community of our contemporary identitarian moment of name-your-identity pride parades.

Love's *Feeling Backward* argues against this conventional mode of minoritarian cultural forgetting in the context of queer subjects and the "losses of queer history." Love faults the compulsory optimism of today's assimilating queers, for such optimism hides the "bad old days" of queer self-loathing. Nealon seems to deploy queer modernist texts such as Hall's in such a fashion, as a period relic of an unreconstructed solitary subjectivity formation, which indicates how far "we've come." More importantly, Love argues, such optimism forgets the *continuing* "bad days" of today. In other words, and in the terms of this study,

modernist misfits are not simply artifacts of an earlier unreconstructed past. There might be “modernist” misfits in our supposedly postcolonial, postracial, postgay, and postfeminist present.

This introduction, and the study as a whole, questions the teleological narrative that glosses over the losses of minoritarian, and not only queer, history. “History,” for me, includes fictional narratives and their reception, including our own contemporary attachments. As Love claims in the context of queer subjects, something about the “bad old days” is intensely affecting to this day. *The Well of Loneliness* is still the most widely read lesbian novel in English—although, Love reminds us, in a shockingly simple insight, it is also “the novel most hated by lesbians themselves.”⁵¹ Even as its narrative is less salient in our own time, Hall’s novel presents a potential mirror for *misfit* subjects who, it is said, should not resemble the self-loathing, solitary, and alienated subjects of yesterday. Except, perhaps they do.

Misfit Modernism looks at narratives and authors whose lives and fictions contradict yet also corroborate this teleological framing of the process of becoming a minoritarian subject. I choose the term “minoritarian” and not identitarian because, as we have briefly seen with Rhys, such authors occupy various intersections of identity and fit uneasily within such matrices. Yet their fictions—and their lives, as well as the critical reception, which is colored by both realms of experience—seem to belie the minoritarian Bildungsroman of late modernity. This conceptual and historicist Bildungsroman operates as a three-part story of singularity, which then finds community, and finally this community finds its path to visibility and acculturation, if not assimilation, within a majoritarian framework. This framework exists at the level of cultural and aesthetic representation: canonization as legitimized minority experiences that then become all-but-majoritarian. Becoming is overcome.

In what sense is this now established narrative of minoritarian overcoming missing something vital—something that constitutes the central problematic of *Misfit Modernism* as a whole? In the sense that such a metaphor of minoritarian Bildung (1) apes majoritarian political values of affective optimism and personal autonomy and (2) reinforces evaluative aesthetic norms, such as formal sophistication and imaginative distancing of the personal from the aesthetic, with the “merely” personal rendered abject; indeed, (3) the minoritarian metanarrative of overcoming hinges on canceling out “earlier” stages—such as Rhys’s rootless, lost urban protagonists. From the vantage point of minoritarian Bildung, such earlier stages—as in the refrain of Rhys’s “earlier novels”—are retroactively seen as mere back-formation. By reconstituting the modernist novel about misfits and taking a second look at modernists whose lives and careers track

along their nonconformist aesthetic preoccupations, we can better realize the persistence of a misfit structure of feeling defined by alienation from minoritarian community norms and from majority cultural ideals and their mirroring of one another. Modernist fiction about cultural misfits represents a salient critique of this double valence to minoritarian existence. Unless we understand the failures of assimilationist, even integrationist, cultural ideals of progress, we will forever ignore the misfits who refuse to bend to the will of the majority within the minority.