

JÚLIA BRAGA NEVES

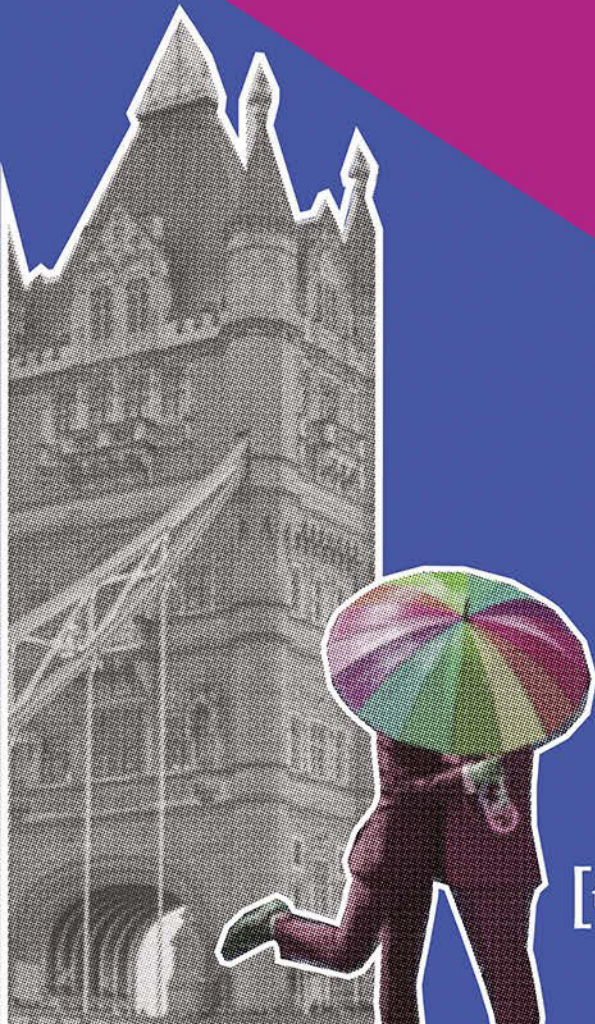
LONDON, QUEER SPACES

AND HISTORIOGRAPHY

IN THE WORKS

OF SARAH WATERS

AND ALAN HOLLINGHURST



[transcript] queer studies

Júlia Braga Neves
London, Queer Spaces and Historiography
in the Works of Sarah Waters and Alan Hollinghurst

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[transcript]

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For Vladimir.

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Preface

This book is the result of a research project that started with my master's thesis on Sarah Waters' *Tipping the Velvet* at Humboldt University in Berlin, and which was later developed into a doctoral research project that I began in 2012 and finished in 2018, at Humboldt and at King's College London. Rereading the book that you finished writing four years ago makes you question your previous thoughts and, in a way, engage in a discussion with the author from the past. *London, Queer Spaces and Historiography* is the final result of my years as a postgraduate student in Berlin and in London. At that point, my perspectives on postmodernism informed my belief in its critical potential to question authority and universal narratives, alongside its claim to reflect upon marginalized histories and identities. The research that I have been conducting in the last couple of years, however, have made me review many of the discussions about postmodernism and history that I put forward in this book.

Rereading my discussion about historiography and fiction, particularly those conveyed by Linda Hutcheon, has led me to question much of what has been discussed in the realm of postmodernism in relation to history and historiography, and the approximation between fiction and history. In a moment in which fake news and the refusal to acknowledge objective historical facts seem to have taken over the social and political contexts all over the world, it is problematic to claim that history is limited to the ways in which “the *reality* of the past [is available only in] its *textualized accessibility* to us today”.¹ Although it is true that our access to history relies on its representation, it cannot be simply reduced to narrative, for historiography, as opposed to fiction, relies on documentation, sources and historical archives. This does not mean, however, that fiction and historiography cannot be approximated.

According to Reinhart Koselleck, both history and fiction rely on rhetoric and language to represent events and, like the poet, the historian also counts on imagination to write history. Nevertheless, Koselleck asserts that there is a crucial distinction between the two, namely that history represents events that actually took place and, therefore, depend upon historical evidence; while fiction portrays events that might have happened. For Koselleck, “historical reality never entirely overlaps with what can

1 Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, p. 114. Emphasis in original.

be articulated in it and about it”, and “history is never identical to language”.² What is interesting is that Koselleck also sees in fiction the potential to articulate history, since novels, like historiography, yield the illusion of totality and unity to series of events. This discussion about the limits of language in the representation of events as well as the distinctions between history and fiction are crucial because they do not part from the premise that fictional and historical discourses are the same. Instead, they reflect on the rhetorical and linguistic tropes that constitute fiction and history in order to evince their distinctions in terms of representing factual and imagined events.

Editing this book for publication has made me realize that Sarah Waters’ and Alan Hollinghurst’s works are indeed examples of fiction that bring to light the historical experience of gay and lesbian subjects in London in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. However, I believe that Hutcheon’s concept of historiographic metafiction would be insufficient to deal with the historical aspect of their works, particularly in the case of Waters’ Neo-Victorian novels. The reading that has been prominently established of these works, to which I myself have subscribed in this book, views these novels as means to imagine what the lives of lesbian women might have been like in the nineteenth century. Although there is historical truth in these novels, as I point out in Waters’ depiction of music hall culture and male impersonation acts, of prison and of Victorian upper- and middle-class domesticity, I would re-consider my understanding of her novels as pieces of “fictional lesbian historiography”. This is due to the fact that these novels do not rely on historical documentation about female homosexuality in the nineteenth century, as do Waters’ 1940s novels.

Hutcheon’s claim that historiographic metafiction “plays upon the truth and lies of the historical record”³ is certainly a dangerous one because it suggests that there is a lack of reliability on what has been registered in historical documentation. This is certainly an assertion of which I am very critical today, especially considering the political events of the last few years, such as Brexit, Donald Trump’s election in the United States, Jair Bolsonaro’s election in Brazil and the innumerable pieces of fake news that have been spread about Covid-19 and vaccination around the globe. It is true that history lies on the paradox that it is only accessible to us through its representation, documents, official records and testimonies. However, it is extremely important to stress, as Koselleck does, that history cannot be reduced to its representation; its dimension extrapolates its registers, and its effects are not curbed by its narration. History is factual and cannot be constructed only through the narrative of possible or imagined events. Of course it is possible to contest the veracity of a piece of historiographical work when its content is incoherent or somehow misrepresents what is stated in historical documents or archives. This kind of rebuttal cannot happen in fiction, given that its content is still valid even when it contradicts historical events. I still think that Sarah Waters’ Neo-Victorian novels have been crucial to dealing with lesbian invisibility in fiction and the possibilities of imagining how they might have lived in the nineteenth century. However, I would qualify my assertion

2 Koselleck, “Fiction and Historical Reality”, p. 17.

3 Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, p. 114.

that she creates “fictional historiography” about female homosexuality, even though her nineteenth century novels do convey several historical aspects of this period, as I elucidate in my readings of *Tipping the Velvet* and *Affinity*.

The content of this book has not been modified for publication, although I have edited several passages and made corrections where I thought necessary. I believe that, despite its theoretical limitations, this volume offers a good contribution to literary criticism about Waters’ and Hollinghurst’s works, as well as to the discussions on gay and lesbian history and queer spaces. *London, Queer Spaces and Historiography* is a book that must be situated in the context of my years as a postgraduate student, which have been crucial for my formation as a researcher and as a professor, for it points to the research interests that have accompanied me throughout my academic trajectory, which revolve precisely around the (at times conflictive) relationship between history and fiction.

Introduction

In this book, I aim to analyze London, its sexual histories, and geographies by reflecting on Sarah Waters' and Alan Hollinghurst's representations of gay and lesbian histories and the ways in which their characters relate to the spaces that they inhabit. I am interested in the ways in which London has been portrayed across the historical periods that feature in both Waters' and Hollinghurst's works, which present some of English history's most important milestones, and the ways in which these events are entangled with London's geographies of sexuality. These historical periods consist mainly of the late Victorian period, the Second World War, and the Thatcherite Era in the novels that I have chosen to examine.

It is relevant to note that while Waters' literary works have been coined as historical fiction, Hollinghurst's novels have not been discussed within the framework of the historical novel. *The Swimming-Pool Library* and *The Line of Beauty* do not present a significant temporal distance from the historical past they portray, which is the Thatcherite period, given that they were published in 1988 and in 2004 respectively. However, in reading these novels in the second decade of the twenty-first century, it is possible to argue that Hollinghurst discusses many events concerning gay history; these events include the depoliticization of the gay movement, the AIDS crisis, its corollary of hysterical homophobia, which culminated in Section 28,¹ and the debates about cultural and political assimilation brought about by the legalization of gay marriage.²

In this book, I take up Linda Hutcheon's definitions concerning the terms 'historical event' and 'historical fact'. In asserting that Waters' and Hollinghurst's historical novels are historiographic metafiction,³ I follow Hutcheon's explanation that this sub-

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- 1 Section 28 will be examined thoroughly in chapter 6. As we know, Section 28 prohibited local authorities, community centers, and educational institutions from 'promoting' and discussing homosexuality as an 'acceptable' form of sexuality. This seriously compromised society's engagement with the gay community and hampered their ability to offer support for people who had AIDS and their partners (Cf. Watney, *Imagine Hope: AIDS and Gay Identity*, pp. 38–39; 139).
 - 2 Cf. Duggan, "The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism" in Castronovo and Nelson (eds.) *Materializing Democracy*; Spade, *Normal Life*; Warner, *The Trouble with Normal*.
 - 3 Hutcheon's concept of 'historiographic metafiction' will be elucidated in chapter 1 and will be analyzed more deeply in relation to Waters' and Hollinghurst's novels in chapter 8.

genre of the postmodernist historical novel questions the very essence of ‘historical facts’, not in the sense of refusing to acknowledge their existence,⁴ but in questioning which *historical events* can become *historical facts*.⁵ While it is true that historical documents and archives provide evidence of a specific event in history, the interpretation and narrativization of official documents by historians or by writers, and the specific cultural and ideological context in which historical narratives are produced will determine whether or not a certain historical event will become an established ‘truth’ about the past.⁶ As we know, what we have generally learned as historical facts is that homosexuality is abnormal, deviant, and promiscuous; however, as Foucault has taught us, these historical facts have contributed to the consolidation of heterosexuality as the ‘normal’. The rise of gay and lesbian movements worldwide, as well as the introduction of disciplines such as ‘women’s studies’, ‘gay and lesbian studies’ and finally ‘queer studies’, have greatly contributed to the assertion of queer subjects in history and in literature. This has, in turn, also created a fertile ground for the emergence of historical novels that deal with queer historiography, such as Waters’ and Hollinghurst’s works.

In Waters’ novels, I reflect on female homosexuality in the late Victorian period in *Tipping the Velvet* and in *Affinity*, and the Second World War in *The Night Watch*. My focus on Hollinghurst’s novels mainly pertain to Margaret Thatcher’s government and its neoliberal policies regarding the AIDS epidemic and its influence on gay urban culture, especially in *The Swimming-Pool Library* and in *The Line of Beauty*. Lastly, I shift my analysis to the trope of the Edwardian English country house in my reading of Hollinghurst’s *The Stranger’s Child*. In this novel, the narrative ranges from 1913 until the beginning of the twenty-first century, recounting the stories of ‘Two Acres’, the country house located in rural Stanmore, which is now part of London’s suburbs.

I argue that Waters’ and Hollinghurst’s representations of London and its queer spaces are crucial for their construction of gay and lesbian histories by following the ‘spatial turn’ in the humanities, which “assert[s] that space is a social construction relevant to the understanding of the different histories of human subjects and to the production of cultural phenomena”.⁷ In the novels examined in this book, space is regarded in its textual, physical, and social aspects, and it is considered to be a categorical element in the production of historical fiction. While time has been perceived as a dominating feature of history and historiography, scholars such as Henri Lefebvre, Edward Soja, and Doreen Massey have stressed the importance of space to the

4 It is important to note that questioning how ‘historical events’ become ‘historical facts’ does not mean to deny that certain historical events actually took place. As we have unfortunately seen in the last few years, certain groups have reclaimed this idea to deny facts such as the Holocaust, slavery or even current affairs regarding the environmental crises. Historical revisionism as a means to produce post-truth is certainly not the debate that I engage with in this book. Rather, I reflect upon the ways that gender and sexuality have entered the realm of historiography, and how historiography is articulated both in Waters’ and Hollinghurst’s literary works.

5 Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, p. 122.

6 Cf. White, *Tropics of Discourse*, pp. 84–90; *Figural Realism*, pp. 4–15.

7 Warf and Arias, *The Spatial Turn*, p. 1.

production of history and have done so from the 1960s onwards.⁸ Massey, for instance, argues that space and time are “inextricably interwoven”,⁹ and she suggests that time and space should be considered in relation to each other, instead of prioritizing one category over the other.

Geographers and social scientists have claimed that space is a crucial factor in the understanding of social phenomena.¹⁰ The spatial turn in the humanities is also embraced by other fields, such as cultural studies, literature, and history of art. Space functions within a complex network of knowledges, actively influences the formation of societies, plays a central role in the construction of identity, and serves as a fruitful apparatus in our reflections on cultural phenomena. As Doreen Massey points out, it was in the 1970s that geography became legitimately recognized as a relevant aspect of social analysis with the affirmation that “space is a social construct”, but it was not until the 1980s that this claim was complemented with a second assertion that “the social is spatially constructed too.”¹¹

In my readings of Waters’ and Hollinghurst’s novels, I will fall back on the relationship that Massey proposes in the sense that my literary analyses attempt to understand the ways in which the historical past of gays and lesbians is articulated *through* and *within* London’s sexual geographies, and through the relationship that characters maintain with their spatial surroundings. Not only do these novels reflect upon the pasts of gay and lesbian subjects in London, but they also contemplate how national governments, ideology, and shifting notions of sexuality shape and influence London’s geography. As Simon Avery has pointed out, the metropolis played a great role “in the history of formation of the modern sexual subject from the mid-nineteenth century onwards”,¹² having often been described as a site of various sexual possibilities. Houlbrook delves further into this argument by postulating that “sexual practices not only take place *in* the city, but are also shaped *by* the physical and cultural forms of urban life, just as they in turn shape that life”.¹³ These forms of control also provide the conditions for urban sexual subcultures to emerge in much the same way that governmental regulation and mappings of non-normative sexualities in urban spaces contribute to coining embodiments of ‘sexual deviancy’; in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries this mainly concerned the figures of the male homosexual and the female prostitute. In turn, as Houlbrook explains, these sexual underworlds influenced the city’s urban landscapes and played an important role throughout the course of gay and lesbian history.

8 Cf. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p. 38, pp. 275–276; Soja, *Postmodern Geographies*, pp. 12–16; Massey, *Space, Place and Gender*, p. 254.

9 Massey, *Space, Place and Gender*, p. 261.

10 Cf. Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*; Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*; Massey, *Space, Place and Gender*; Soja, *Postmodern Geographies*.

11 Massey, *Space, Place and Gender*, p. 254.

12 Avery, “Structuring and Interpreting Queer Spaces of London” in Avery and Graham (eds.) *Sex, Time and Place*, p. 8.

13 Houlbrook, “Cities” in Cocks and Houlbrook (eds.) *Palgrave Advances in the Modern History of Sexuality*, p. 136.

However, it is relevant to highlight that urban sexual geographies do not necessarily produce homogeneous experiences in the city. Houlbrook argues that class, gender, and race determine a subject's engagement with urban space. Cook also takes up these different subject positions in his analyses by showing how working-class and upper- and middle-class men did not share the same experiences in London's sexual subculture at the end of the nineteenth century. According to Cook, "[w]orking-class men were apparently unable to shape their own sexual lives in London except as renters or blackmailers",¹⁴ while upper- and middle-class men were able to afford hotel rooms and sexual adventures in the city.

These social differences are also noted in terms of gender. Where gay men have historically had the privilege of circulating in the city under the premises of metropolitan anonymity, women's circulation in urban space has been restricted. This restriction occurred not only in terms of their gender and of the discourses about the city's sexual dangers and the perils of becoming a 'fallen woman', but also due to their financial disadvantage in comparison to men.¹⁵ As I will discuss in chapter 8 of this book, these gender differences are central to comprehending the distinct ways in which gay and lesbian urban cultures were formed in London and, subsequently, in the ways in which Waters and Hollinghurst represent queer spaces in their novels.

Although London is the main spatial trope that this book examines, the city does not feature exclusively in terms of its cultural and sexual geographies. In Waters' *Affinity*, for instance, London is represented through the parallel between female incarceration at Millbank Prison and female confinement in the domestic sphere. In this novel, Waters evokes Foucault's reflections on sexuality as a technology of control, as prominently elucidated in *The History of Sexuality*, as well as the trope of the Benthamite panoptic prison, which Foucault has famously discussed in *Discipline and Punish*. In Waters' novel, Foucauldian thoughts about classifications of 'normal' and 'deviant' sexualities and behavior are articulated alongside the French philosopher's perceptions of the ways in which the utilitarian panopticon has been employed as a model of surveillance in modern society.¹⁶

In this study, Foucault's reflections on surveillance and sexuality are taken up in tandem with his thoughts about space and biopolitics in order to discuss how controlling and governing individuals came to be a means of optimizing the functioning of the body and the regulation of societies. If, as Foucault contends, "[s]pace is fundamental in any form of communal life; space is fundamental in any exercise of power",¹⁷ then it is possible to argue that governments became increasingly attentive to the mappings of deviant sexual behavior in cities in the nineteenth century. According to Foucault, it was at the end of the eighteenth century that governments began to be concerned with *how* to govern the people that inhabit a specific territory, just as the idea of society emerged as "a complex and independent reality that has

14 Cook, *London and the Culture of Homosexuality, 1885–1914*, p. 39.

15 Cf. Houlbrook, "Cities" in Cocks and Houlbrook (eds.) *Palgrave Advances in the Modern History of Sexuality*, p. 146.

16 Cf. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, pp. 206–219.

17 *Idem*, "Space, Knowledge and Power" in Rabinow (ed.) *The Foucault Reader*, p. 252.

its own laws and mechanisms of reaction, its regulations as well as its possibilities of disturbance".¹⁸ The idea of space becomes strongly related to forms of regulation within society, as a necessity in order to govern and to classify subjects within a specific territory, to enable their socialization while knowing, at least to some extent, who circulates where.

According to Foucault, the advances in capitalism between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries in Western countries transformed the politics of death into the politics of life.¹⁹ Sovereign power starts to be exercised through the lives of individuals in the seventeenth century, instead of by way of the threat of death, leading to what Foucault designates as *bio-power*: the form of control and regulation of populations through the discipline of the body and through its optimization as a means by which to reproduce and maximize the potential of life. In the eighteenth century, the discipline of the body and the capacity to manage populations are devised through the employment of demography to evaluate the relationship between resources and inhabitants; this form of management allowed for an analysis of how wealth circulates, for instance. Moreover, Foucault considers institutions such as schools and the army as vital means for the imposition of disciplinary bio-power mechanisms upon individuals. For Foucault, bio-power was an essential element in capitalism's development because it allowed for the controlled entrance of bodies into the mechanisms of production and arranged the new phenomena of population within the economic system.²⁰

Bio-power influenced political technologies regarding health, the body, habitation, modes of subsistence, and social spaces. Moreover, it augmented the norm's significance in the guise of operating as law just as the judicial system came to be ingrained into other institutions (i.e., medical, administrative, educational). In operating as law, the norm creates a "normalizing society [that] is the historical outcome of a technology of power centered on life".²¹ By the nineteenth century, sexuality was already one of the most powerful technologies of discipline and control, given that sex became inseparable from the notion of sexuality and the latter was deployed as a means to govern, regulate, and order entire populations.

Discourses about sexuality, according to Foucault, are deployed as mechanisms of regulation and control. Along with the shift in the importance of space in governing a population, the eighteenth century was also the period in which sexuality entered the field of knowledge as a technique of power to regulate and control populations: birth and death rates, fertility, illnesses, and health began to be state concerns.²² Pedagogy, medicine, and economy were already fundamental sources in the proliferation of discourses on sex and sexuality by the end of the eighteenth century, thereby making "sex not only a secular concern but a concern of the state as well; [...] sex became a

18 *Ibid.*, p. 242.

19 *Idem*, *The History of Sexuality*, pp. 106–107.

20 *Ibid.*, pp. 139–141.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 144.

22 *Ibid.*, pp. 24–25.

matter that required the social body as a whole, and virtually all of its individuals, to place themselves under surveillance".²³

It was also during this period that sex came to be ordered in the medical institution, in terms of defining 'normality' and in discussion of the problems of life and death. In the nineteenth century, the medicine of sex separated from the medicine of the body and formulated a truth about sex that was far removed from an economy of pleasure, but was instead ingrained in a system of knowledge.²⁴ While discourses on sexuality in the eighteenth century are marked by the division of licit and illicit sex, and often focused on matrimonial relations, discourses on sexuality in the nineteenth century came to focus on perversions, and the multiplicity of sexualities that are not attuned to reproduction, but to the pleasure of the body. The determination and ordering of peripheral sexualities ensued persecution to subjects who embodied or practiced them, thereby leading to judicial regulation of 'perversions' such as prostitution and sodomy.²⁵ These forms of classifications were also transposed onto the cities' geographies, as I will discuss further in chapter 1.

In Avery's words, "there is a keen focus on the disorderly, undisciplined body which requires policing in its assumed challenges to urban and, by extension, national order".²⁶ This is especially true because these 'undisciplined' bodies undermined the traditional moral standards of heterosexual marriage. For Chris Waters, it was in the nineteenth century that medical doctors and legislators began mapping cities in terms of 'abnormal' sexual behavior, seemingly sharing the concern that deviant individual bodies could 'contaminate' the social body as a whole and might infringe traditional sexual mores based on heterosexual marriage and on the basis of clear-cut gender divides.²⁷ Throughout the nineteenth century, Waters explains, "cities were increasingly defined [...] as spaces in which customary moral restraints were being eroded";²⁸ this is particularly true with respect to metropolitan life which offered considerable anonymity and provided a means for illicit encounters that were not always visible to the authorities and to the ordinary passer-by.

Although molly houses date back to the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in London,²⁹ it was in the second half of the nineteenth century that specific places in the city came to be associated with male homosexuality. According to Cook, accounts about a gay subculture in London became featured in books on sexology and in literary texts, such as Havelock Ellis' and John Addington Symond's *Sexual Inversion* (1897) and Jack Saul's *The Sins of the Cities of the Plain* (1881), thereby "expos[ing] the risks of homosexual activities in London but also [inculcating] a sense of permanence and

23 *Ibid.*, p. 116.

24 *Ibid.*, pp. 69; 117.

25 *Ibid.*, pp. 36–37; 41–45.

26 Avery, "Structuring and Interpreting Queer Spaces of London" in Avery and Graham (eds.) *Sex, Time and Place*, p. 10.

27 Cf. Waters, "Sexology" in Cocks and Houlbrook (eds.) *Palgrave Advances in the Modern History of Sexuality*, p. 43.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 44.

29 Cf. Cook, *London and the Culture of Homosexuality, 1885–1914*, pp. 8–11.

belonging”.³⁰ Narratives about cruising sites, such as St. James’ Park, about pubs and clubs that were meeting points for gay men, were a testament to the rise of a male homosexual culture in London which underwent several transformations throughout history. The West End, for instance, is one of the areas that was known for its cosmopolitanism and for its sexual subculture, having been well-known for its theatrical scene and was very popular among gay men and prostitutes. It is no coincidence, then, that the West End is a prominent trope of sexual possibilities in both Waters’ *Tipping the Velvet* and in Hollinghurst’s *The Swimming-Pool Library*.

It is important to clarify, however, that the mapping of homosexuality in London in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was almost exclusively related to gay men. As Jennings explains, in the process of tracing histories of sexuality in the modern city, “historians have traced attempts to control deviant behavior through legislation and policing, inevitably focusing on the figures of the male homosexual and the prostitute”.³¹ While gay men had been addressed by the law, especially since 1885 with the Labouchère Amendment,³² it was only in the early twentieth century that lesbian sexuality entered legal discourses as “an evil that requires regulation”.³³ Although there were no laws that criminalized same-sex relationships between women, there were punitive consequences for lesbians that were enacted by other institutions. As Oram and Turnbull note, Church authorities in England had punished women that were caught in romantic relationships with other women since the seventeenth century by sending them off to reformatories and even to prison.³⁴

Oram and Turnbull argue that lesbianism in the nineteenth century was often perceived as a threat to heterosexual marriage and as an enactment of immorality, rather than being considered a criminal activity. They interpret the invisibility of female same-sex desire in the nineteenth century juridical discourse as a corollary effect of the “belief in the sexual passivity [...] of women”,³⁵ since the form of ‘active’ and ‘deviant’ sexuality in the eyes of the law was embodied by the figure of the prostitute. Terry Castle, for instance, argues that lesbians have “been effectively ghosted – or made to seem invisible – by culture itself”, given that “Western civilization has for centuries been haunted by fear of women indifferent or resistant to male desire”.³⁶ The question of lesbian invisibility will be analyzed in greater detail in chapter 8 and also in my readings of Waters’ novels, having in mind that her body of work largely addresses lesbian urban culture and the creation of a fictional lesbian historiography in the neo-Victorian novels.

While male homosexual subjects have had the material and social conditions to explore urban space and to take part in an urban subculture since the eighteenth

30 *Ibid.*, p. 22.

31 Jennings, *Tomboys and Bachelor Girls*, p. 5.

32 Although the amendment spoke of ‘act of gross indecency’, Cocks contends that it came to be interpreted as ‘act of sodomy’, and therefore it came to mainly address homosexual men (cf. Cocks, “Secrets, Crimes and Diseases, 1800–1914”, p. 108).

33 Oram and Turnbull, *The Lesbian History Sourcebook*, p. 156.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 155.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 157.

36 Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian*, pp. 4–5.

century, Jennings notes that lesbians' spatial experiences have been associated with the private and domestic spheres, given that most women did not have the financial means to be part of a bohemian urban culture.³⁷ Since the sites of pleasure and leisure were mostly frequented by men, who were financially self-sufficient to afford life in these commercial sites, Jennings contends that the narratives we have of a gay urban subculture in the nineteenth century generally effaces female homosexuality because they were mostly restricted to the domestic sphere. For Jennings, women have had "unequal access to services in urban environment" and have been "excluded from participation in urban design to the extent that their needs have not been met in the built environment".³⁸ These factors, she explains, are of great importance in contemporary analysis about lesbian spaces in cities and mark pivotal differences in the course of gay and lesbian history in London.

In chapter 1 of this book, I will discuss the most significant conceptions of space, about the mapping of sexualities in London, and about queer spaces as a means to outline the ways in which I will carry out my spatial and historical analyses of Waters' and Hollinghurst's works. I elucidate that space is a product of complex social, cultural, epistemological, and subjective relations by discussing reflections on the production of space, such as those by Henry Lefebvre and David Harvey. Additionally, I introduce key concepts in queer theory in order to contemplate the production of queer spaces by arguing that queer spaces can also reproduce forms of oppression attuned to class, gender, and race, even though these spaces enable encounters between gays and lesbians and the possibility of engaging with meaningful political alliances.

As I will show, my reading of Waters' and Hollinghurst's novels will pursue an intersectional approach that aims to reflect primarily upon the relations between class, gender, and sexuality in the spaces that they represent. Both Waters and Hollinghurst engage with the complexity of spatial formation in their representations of London, as they articulate history, geographical locations, and English culture in distinct historical periods with literary devices that concern genre, narrator, intertextuality, and literary history. I wish to present an overall framework of the ways in which I will engage with the authors' works by providing an analysis that deals with the relationship between queer spaces and historiography, with the subjective relationship the characters maintain with their spatial surroundings, and with the literary strategies Waters and Hollinghurst put forward in their historical novels. In so doing, I will reflect on theories about spaces, London's history of sexuality, its sexual geographies, and queer spaces.

The first part of this book will focus on my readings of Sarah Waters' *Tipping the Velvet* (chapter 2), *Affinity* (chapter 3), and *The Night Watch* (chapter 4). I have chosen to examine these novels because they are set in London and because they relate lesbian culture and identity to the city's history and geography.³⁹ While I do not analyze

37 Cf. Jennings, *Tomboys and Bachelor Girls*, pp. 5–7.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

39 I take up a brief discussion of the novel *The Paying Guests* in my conclusion, given that it was only published in 2014 when this thesis was already in an advanced stage. This novel is also set in London.

Fingersmith and *The Little Stranger* thoroughly in this chapter, I do address these novels in chapter 8. Although *The Little Stranger* does not present a lesbian character, I discuss it in comparison with Hollinghurst's constructions of the country house in *The Stranger's Child*. In the chapters dedicated to Sarah Waters, I argue that her constructions of queer spaces in *Tipping the Velvet*, *Affinity*, and *The Night Watch* enable the narration of lesbian history and portray a notion of lesbian culture from the perspective of feminist autonomy and agency.

As I will show, Waters' works address the question of lesbian cultural and historical invisibility, particularly in the neo-Victorian novels, as she creates spaces in which lesbian culture might have existed. In my reading of *Tipping the Velvet* and *Affinity*, in chapters 2 and 3 respectively, I discuss the ways in which Waters construes Victorian London and the panoptic Millbank prison as a means to create a fictional, spatial, and historical account of lesbian culture in the nineteenth century. In both novels, the representation of same-sex desire between women is conveyed by Waters' employment of late twentieth century discussions about gender and sexuality in order to critically engage with Victorian ideals of femininity and sexuality.

While in *Tipping the Velvet* Waters uses the late-Victorian theatrical scene in London and the prominent male impersonation acts to contemplate notions of gender performance, in *Affinity* it is the trope of the prison and of Victorian spiritualism that contextualizes same-sex desire among women. Unlike Waters' endeavors to create a fictional lesbian historiography in her neo-Victorian novels, in *The Night Watch*, Waters reflects on the rise of a lesbian urban culture in London and the Second World War's effects on gender and sexual relations. The topic of lesbian invisibility in this novel is associated with urban destruction and with the meagre autonomy that women obtained during the war, since they acquired access to salaries (which were obviously lower in comparison to men's salaries) and to a greater degree of participation in both the urban and public realms. This will be thoroughly discussed in chapter 4.

As I will show in my reading of Waters' novels, the articulation of lesbian identity and desire cannot be dissociated from class relations. I will argue that class relations are often reduced to identity categories and social standards that will go on to determine the characters' behavior in *Tipping the Velvet*. In contrast, *Affinity* displays more complex class relations that are attuned to middle and upper-class femininity and their dominating effects in the education of working-class subjects. In *The Night Watch*, class relations are deemed relevant in terms of the positions that women took up during and after the war. In her novel, Waters dismantles the war effort as a unifying force among the population in London, as she emphasizes how individual participation in the war was determined by class, gender, and sexuality in many ways.

In the second part of this book, my analysis will turn to Hollinghurst's *The Swimming-Pool Library* (chapter 5), *The Line of Beauty* (chapter 6), and *The Stranger's Child* (chapter 7). I have chosen to examine *The Swimming-Pool Library* and *The Line of Beauty* because of my specific interest in Hollinghurst's representation of London and of gay culture under Thatcher's government, particularly in terms of how it is reflected in the relationship between neoliberalism and urban space. In *The Stranger's Child*, Hollinghurst introduces his first female protagonist marking a striking difference from having gay protagonists who nurtured intense sex drives and acted out egotistic and hedonistic

behavior in his first novels. In my reading of the novel, I will argue that the lead character, Daphne Sawle, suggestively addresses history and historiography in relation to literary tradition and gay culture.⁴⁰ Moreover, his 2011 novel depicts space according to the trope of the country house and its social hierarchies, a topic that I will examine in detail in my reading of the novel and in chapter 8.

My analyses of *The Swimming-Pool Library* and of *The Line of Beauty* concentrate on the relation between class, race, gender, and sexuality by reflecting upon the effects of neoliberalism on gay culture and by exposing the limitations of the period's gay politics. In chapter 5, I will argue that the protagonist and narrator of *The Swimming-Pool Library*, Will Beckwith, epitomizes the neoliberal subject whose sexual relationships consist of objectifying men of color and those from working-class backgrounds. In recounting Will's sexual adventures in London, Hollinghurst shows how the protagonist's privileges of class, whiteness, and of education give him individual freedom in his circulation in London. In Hollinghurst's first novel, London is constructed as a cruising ground in Hyde Park, Bloomsbury, in Soho, and in working-class neighborhoods in East and South-East London. Although AIDS is not mentioned in *The Swimming-Pool Library*, I will focus my reading on the ways in which Will's account is constructed through irony and exaggeration, thereby producing a narrative about gay life in London that sells the image of individual freedom in the summer that directly preceded the outbreak of the AIDS epidemic.

AIDS features as a central theme in *The Line of Beauty* and is directly linked to how London is portrayed in the novel. In Hollinghurst's Booker-Prize winning novel, the AIDS epidemic is related to the Thatcherite government and its negligence towards the spreading of the disease. While the protagonist cruises in various parts of the city in *The Swimming-Pool Library*, seeking new sexual adventures, in *The Line of Beauty* London is depicted mainly in terms of domestic spaces located in Notting Hill (more specifically in Kensington Park Gardens), in Brent, and in Kensington. In the chapter dedicated to this novel, I contend that Hollinghurst's depiction of gay culture in homes, instead of gay venues, displays how hysterical homophobia propagated by the media and the government alike constricted gay men's circulation in London and caused gay life to retreat to the domestic sphere.

Lastly, chapter 7 will discuss Hollinghurst's 2011 novel, *The Stranger's Child*. In this chapter, I will analyze the trope of the country house by examining Hollinghurst's use of metafiction, history, and historiography in the construction of the country house as a textual space. In my reading, I will reflect on the homosocial relations that take place in the novel's country houses in tandem with the writing of literary and gay histories. In focusing my analysis on Daphne Sawle's character, I suggest that Hollinghurst's representation of the country house is articulated through notions of

40 My decision to analyze *The Stranger's Child* instead of *The Spell*, which is also set in neoliberal London, stems from the turn that Hollinghurst undertook in writing *The Stranger's Child* (2011) by including a female protagonist who is fully implicated in the narration of homosexual and literary history. In the conclusion of this book, I will briefly discuss *The Spell* in relation to Hollinghurst's other novels.

homonormativity that entail heterosexist and misogynistic relations⁴¹ which prevent women, especially Daphne's character, from participating in the intellectual realm of authorship.

In chapter 8, I provide an analysis that is situated between Waters' and Hollinghurst's novels by comparing the ways in which they engage with history, with intertextuality, and with queer spaces. In reflecting upon key conceptualizations about historical fiction,⁴² I contend that Waters' and Hollinghurst's works can be read as historiographic metafiction because their historical novels articulate historical and literary discourses, engage with metafictionality, irony, and parody as linguistic tropes and they convey self-reflexivity, which are the main characteristics that Hutcheon postulates in her definition of this subgenre.⁴³ I will argue that it is mainly gender differences that determine Waters' and Hollinghurst's association between space and homosexuality and, subsequently, the ways in which they represent London. I will show that they create spatial histories of gays and lesbians in London by portraying the idea that the city's sexual landscapes are deeply informed by the constrictions of female circulation in the city and by the freedom that men have historically had in exploring urban space. Although they share common spaces in their representation of gay and lesbian histories, such as the West End, Soho, and East London, the histories that they put forward about these places distinguish themselves not only in terms of the historical periods that they represent, but also in regard to gender differences that have determined social roles for men and women and the ways they have engaged with urban space.

41 Cf. Ruiz, "The Violence of Assimilation: An Interview with Mattilda aka Matt Bernstein Sycamore", p. 238.

42 Cf. Fleishman, *The English Historical Novel*; Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*; Lukács, *The Historical Novel*.

43 Cf. Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*.

Chapter 1

Sex(in') the City

Lefebvre and the Conceptualization of Space

The relation between society and space is well articulated in Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*, which has been a seminal work within discussions of space in humanities scholarship. Making use of a Marxist approach, Lefebvre argues that modes of production play a crucial role in the creation of space, whereby social spaces are produced by individual and collective actions undertaken by subjects who *situate* themselves in a determined space, "in which they must either recognize themselves or lose themselves, a space which they both enjoy and modify".¹ The idea of the subject's location, as part of a whole that precedes them, implies a dialectical relation between perceived, conceived, and lived spaces.²

The first, the perceived space, is characterized by a mastering and appropriation of space by society, associating daily routine and urban reality. The idea of a perceived space operates within a system of knowledge and as a mode of production, since it explains space in terms of people's lives therein and about the way they make use of urban reality in their daily routine. Harvey refers to Lefebvre's perceived space as 'material spatial practices', describing it as the flow and transfer of money, goods, communication, people and labor power, which warrant production and social reproduction. For Harvey, material spatial practices are related to the statist and administrative divisions of communities and neighborhoods, and to the ways in which society makes use of land and private property.³

Lefebvre's second concept, the conceived space, reflects on the ways in which we give order and coherence to space by producing thoughts and narratives about it. Here, space is discussed within epistemological frameworks related to science, sociology, architecture, urbanism, and geography, for instance, all of which produce discourses and narratives about space through the use of language. The conceived space

1 Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p. 35.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 33; pp. 38–39.

3 Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, pp. 218; 220.

also operates within a system of knowledge and mode of production; however, these representations of space prioritize space itself, instead of focusing on the relationship between individuals and their social spaces.⁴ Harvey goes further into Lefebvre's notion of conceived space to add that this axiom of space production also consists of making maps that include social, psychological, and physical distances; these maps are also mental and exist within spatial hierarchies and produce spatial discourses.⁵

Lastly, Lefebvre describes the lived space which functions as a space that the imagination seeks to change and to appropriate through more or less coherent systems of symbols and signs. Unlike perceived and conceived spaces, lived space is not so much related to the daily relation between society and space and to the conceptualization of space itself as it is to mental space, to writers, philosophers, or 'inhabitants' who seek to appropriate space and describe it through cognitive and intellectual interpretation. Furthermore, lived space also consists in the unconscious embodiment of spatial codes and symbols that could imply social norms and discourses that are acquired by assimilation within a determined social space. This conceptualization of space implies the influence that social space has on the formation of a subject, since it is the cognitive interpretation of social norms that determines the conditions in which a specific space shall be lived.⁶ Harvey describes lived spaces as "mental inventions" that consist of "codes, signs, 'spatial discourses', [...] imaginary landscapes [...] that imagine new meanings or possibilities for spatial practices".⁷

Harvey discusses Lefebvre's concepts by emphasizing the socio-economic aspects of capitalist space production. He relates and elucidates the concepts of perceived, conceived, and lived spaces with the ways in which capitalism molds social relations as a whole; this point of departure serves as a means to support his argument of time-space compression in postmodernism. According to Harvey, the shift from industrial to neoliberal capitalism in the late-twentieth century comprises "an intense phase of time-space compression that has had a disorienting and disruptive impact upon political-economic practices, the balance of class power, as well as upon cultural and social life",⁸ accelerating consumption, emphasizing the ephemerality and volatility of products, the labor force, and production techniques. His analysis of time and space is, thus, based on how capitalism, and neoliberalism in particular, affects our time-space experience in culture and social relations.

The discussion of neoliberalism's effects on urban space and on sexual practices will be particularly relevant in chapters 5 and 6, in which I discuss Hollinghurst's *The Swimming-Pool Library* and *The Line of Beauty*, respectively. As I will elucidate in more detail, I reflect on neoliberalism in Foucault's and Harvey's terms, in which they regard it as a method of governing that "liberat[es] individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private prop-

4 Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, pp. 38–39.

5 Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, p. 221.

6 Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, pp. 40–41.

7 Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, pp. 218–219.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 284.

erty rights, free markets, and free trade”.⁹ Moreover, Harvey notes that neoliberalism “seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market”,¹⁰ thereby suggesting that all social relations become informed by the rules of the free market. Not only does the mode of production affect the ways in which we experience time and space, but it also influences the ways in which sexual practices are enacted. In *The Swimming-Pool Library*, for instance, the protagonist’s sexual encounters are often measured in terms of profit, given that the narration of cruising in London puts forward a notion of gay culture that is imbued with the logics of individual freedom, competition, and entrepreneurship.

In this sense, Lefebvre’s theories about the production of space can be extended to the relationship between sexuality, gender, space, and mode of production (i.e., capitalism), since his conceptualization of space outlines a complex network of actors who are involved in the formation of space. Firstly, the conceived space, which entails various forms of conceptualization about space, can be discussed in terms of governmental decisions regarding urban space, for instance. Having in mind the idea that the regulation of sexuality has been employed as an important technology of social control, as Foucault has prominently elucidated, it is accurate to say that it also became a relevant aspect in the constitution of space. Mapping and controlling deviant sexuality in urban spaces was not only devised by creating legislation and by augmenting law enforcement, but also by producing narratives that asserted the dangers of sexual immorality in the city; this is an issue that I will elucidate in the subsequent section of this chapter. Secondly, the perceived space, which consists of the ways in which individuals and groups of people use and appropriate the spaces that they inhabit, becomes particularly relevant in the production of the city’s sexual subcultures. While legislation and governmental regulation sought to map and to control deviant sexualities in cities, the opposite motion was also at play: individuals who embodied non-normative sexual and gender identities began to appropriate space throughout history and, as Bell and Valentine put it, “queered the streets; [...] queered the whole city”.¹¹

In London, a gay urban culture emerged in the eighteenth century and consolidated itself throughout the nineteenth century,¹² while a lesbian subculture was only made visible in the beginning of the twentieth century and was only consolidated in the post-war period.¹³ It was from the 1970s onwards that cultural commentators, geographers, and historians began to write about sexual subcultures in London. These cultures, according to Avery, are a phenomenon very much attuned to the ‘spatial turn’ in the humanities.¹⁴ For Avery, the most relevant collaboration of works that relate space, gender, and sexuality include the ways in which people “interrogate how spaces

9 *Idem*, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, p. 2.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

11 Bell and Valentine, *Mapping Desire*, p. 18. Emphasis in original.

12 Cf. Cook, *London and the Culture of Homosexuality, 1885–1914*, pp. 7–41; Cocks, “Secrets, Crimes and Diseases, 1800–1914” in Cook (ed.) *A Gay History of Britain*, pp. 107–144.

13 Cf. Jennings, *A Lesbian History of Britain*, pp. 131–136.

14 Cf. Avery, “Structuring and Interpreting Queer Spaces of London” in Avery and Graham (eds.) *Sex, Time and Place*, p. 8.

create, promote, control or close down sexual identities, practices and communities – and how, in turn, these identities, practices and communities influence and structure particular spaces”.¹⁵ Avery’s comment about the relationship between sexual identities and spatial practices summarizes the dialectic relationship between the perceived, conceived, and lived spaces: while the conceived space enfolds official, scientific, and social discourses about space, the perceived and lived spaces directly entail the ways in which individuals can challenge these discourses and can change the landscapes in which they circulate. Where the perceived space consists of people’s daily routines in the city, and how they create certain rituals within certain spaces, the lived spaces are linked to individuals’ mental and subjective spaces and their relationship to their environment; this relationship can also be reflected in the ways in which writers and journalists, for instance, write about those spaces and contribute to the construction of an identity about those spaces.

As I have noted previously, Lefebvre relates lived space to the ways in which individuals *interpret* and *construct narratives* about space and how space informs the subjects who inhabit it. In many ways, conceived and lived spaces overlap in their meanings and in the role that they play in the production of space. This is due to the fact that conceived spaces entail the ways in which scientific discourses define spaces, and the lived spaces consist in the process of producing and understanding these discourses, which are crucial for the subject’s formation. Thus, I believe that the difference between conceived and lived spaces lies in the matter of product and process: while the conceived space speaks *about* space under the premise of research and science, the lived space indicates the intellectual and cognitive relationship between individual and space, meaning that it points to the process of interpreting and reflecting on an individual’s spatial surroundings and how these surroundings actually form an individual. In reading Lefebvre’s notion of lived spaces as constructions of spaces that can entail new spatial practices, Harvey also references the ways in which artists imagine and portray spaces.¹⁶ This is a significant perspective in the ways in which I will conduct my literary analyses in this book, particularly in my readings of Waters’ and Hollinghurst’s novels.

In their novels, both Waters and Hollinghurst combine imaginary and realistic London spaces by depicting them according to the historical period in which their plot unfolds. In *Tipping the Velvet* and in *Affinity*, Waters focuses on histories of London that privilege a lesbian perspective, creating spatial practices that constitute a fictional lesbian historiography. This will be one of the main topics of discussion in chapter 8 of this book in which I discuss the importance of creating spatial references for lesbian history, which, in spite of their fictionality, nevertheless address the question of lesbian invisibility in cultural and historical discourses.¹⁷ In *The Night Watch*, however,

15 *Ibid.*

16 Cf. Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, p. 221.

17 Cf. Doan and Waters, “Making up lost time: Contemporary lesbian writing and the invention of history” in Alderson and Anderson (eds.) *Territories of Desire in Queer Culture: Refiguring the Contemporary Boundaries*; Houlbrook, *Queer London*, p. 10 and Jennings, *Tomboys and Bachelor Girls*, pp. 7; 111.

Waters represents the Second World War as a possibility for the emergence of a lesbian urban culture, due to the relatively small financial and individual autonomy that women eked out during the war. In his turn, Hollinghurst creates a London that is almost exclusively inhabited by gay men; this is particularly evident in *The Swimming-Pool Library* and in *The Line of Beauty*. While gay culture is depicted on the streets of London in *The Swimming-Pool Library*, Hollinghurst shifts gay culture to affluent domestic spaces in *The Line of Beauty*, which account for the transformations in London's gay neighborhoods with the AIDS epidemic. In *The Stranger's Child*, the domestic sphere is reiterated, but this time in the form of the country house. In my reading, I trace a parallel between the country house, gay history, and literary tradition, arguing that the social hierarchies that are present in the pastoral estate privilege the bonds of gay men primarily, for they are able to thrive in their intellectual careers, whereas the female characters are excluded from the entitlement of intellectual and literary recognition.

Bearing in mind the dialectical relationship between the perceived, conceived, and lived spaces elucidated by Lefebvre, it becomes impossible to dissociate space from cultural, subjective, and historical practices, and from their imaginative forms of representation. In this sense, my analyses of Waters' and Hollinghurst's novels will examine the interconnections between London's history and geography with the city's histories of male and female homosexualities, concentrating on how the authors choose to represent both these spaces and their histories. What I wish to point out in my reading of Waters' and Hollinghurst's novels is how they articulate cultural, social, and literary histories through literary practices that combine discourses about London's sexual geographies and contemporary queer theories. Moreover, I am interested in the relationship between the characters and their spatial surroundings, and in the ways in which these spaces inform them as characters and their sexual identities.

Cook explains that, as homosexuality becomes a part of a visual urban experience, it not only attracts the eyes of men who want to partake in that subculture, but it also becomes attached to the identity of certain spaces in the city, which had been stigmatized by the immorality ascribed to homosexual identity.¹⁸ The process of appropriating spaces in the city by creating meeting places and through the propagation of discourses about certain spaces can be read in terms of Lefebvre's notion of perceived, conceived, and lived spaces, as the daily routines of certain groups, their habits, their shared interests, their history, and the places in which they circulate become part of the fictional and non-fictional narratives about these spaces in the city. Thus, Lefebvre's prominent argument, which states that "(social) space is a (social) product",¹⁹ summarizes the complex process of production of space, given that it stresses the view that space is intimately coupled with the social relations that inhabit it. The argument that Lefebvre advances also shows how discourses produced

18 Cf. Cook, *London and the Culture of Homosexuality, 1885–1914*, p. 12.

19 Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p. 26.

within and by these social relations create reflections and narratives about spaces, their inhabitants, and their identities.²⁰

Lefebvre's argument contemplates how capitalism (mode of production) informs the production of space and the social relations that generate space. Although this is not the central topic of this book, shifts in capitalism have definitely played a role in London's sexual landscapes. Gay subculture continued to expand with the city's rapid urban growth throughout the nineteenth century and by the end of the century the "city's scale and complexity offered the possibility of evasion, of personal transformation and anonymity, and of encountering others who might not conform to the projected 'norm'".²¹ The West End, for instance, came to be known in this urban context for "its reputation for cosmopolitanism, entertainment and consumption",²² and also for its crowds and "risqué entertainments and an increase in prostitution on the main shopping streets".²³

In discussing space through the dialectical relationship between perceived, conceived, and lived spaces Lefebvre interrelates notions of socio-economic shifts in history with the ways in which individuals appropriate spaces, how they write and reflect upon these spaces, and how spaces form them as subjects. I take these aspects into consideration in my readings of Waters' and Hollinghurst's novels, considering that the spaces that are presented are fictional constructions of real London spaces and their histories. I also examine their deployment of traditional spaces that are present in English literature and culture in addition to Waters' and Hollinghurst's representations of London and its sexual geographies and histories.

For instance, in my reading of *The Stranger's Child*, I argue that Hollinghurst's spatial configuration combines the country house and its social hierarchies with gay historiography and with the metaphorical space of literary tradition; in this novel, this space is dominated by white, upper, and middle-class men. In depicting gay culture in a rural landscape, Hollinghurst writes a version of gay history that begins in the countryside and moves on to the city, thereby challenging the metropolis as the birthplace of gay culture and the conventional premise of the pastoral as a trope of innocence and morality.²⁴ In this spatial construction, the shifting interpretations of the country house (as an indicator of social status) is conveyed in parallel with the changes in the perceptions of homosexuality throughout history: while in 1913 and 1926, two of the temporal marks presented in the novel, homosexuality is criminalized and the country house is considered a space of social prestige, in 1967, homosexuality is decriminalized and the country house is already going through the process of social

20 Although Lefebvre opened the debate in the field in the 1970s, other theorists have extensively expounded on the relation between social relations, space, time, politics and economy: cf. *Post-modern Geographies* (1989) by Edward Soja, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1990) by David Harvey, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991) by Fredric Jameson, *Space Place and Gender* (1994) by Doreen Massey.

21 Cook, *London and the Culture of Homosexuality, 1885–1914*, p. 41.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 22.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 23.

24 Cf. Williams, *The Country and the City*, pp. 46–54.

decay.²⁵ In contrast to the spatial and social transformations evident in the cultural symbol of the country house and in gay culture, the women in the novel, especially the protagonist Daphne Sawle, remain objects of exchange between the male characters.

As historical novels, Waters' and Hollinghurst's works contribute greatly to narratives about London's queer spaces and their ongoing transformations throughout history. While some of these spaces are already well known, as is the case for Hollinghurst's depiction of Soho and Hyde Park in *The Swimming-Pool Library*, other queer spaces are derived from popular literary tropes such as the prison and female domesticity in *Affinity* and the country house in Hollinghurst's *The Stranger's Child* and Waters' *The Little Stranger*. In *The Line of Beauty*, London is portrayed from the vantage point of a mansion in Kensington Gardens, which features the conservative environment of Tory politics under Thatcherism and suggests the ways in which the AIDS epidemic transformed gay culture in London. In *Tipping the Velvet*, Waters combines the West End's theatrical scene, more specifically male impersonation acts, with Judith Butler's theories about gender performativity, a topic that will be examined in greater detail in chapter 2. In *Tipping the Velvet* and in *The Swimming-Pool Library*, East London is constructed as a place for lesbian and gay encounters. However, while Waters' novel represents Bethnal Green as a space of socialist, feminist, and lesbian resistance in the late nineteenth century, Hollinghurst's text instead stresses the class conflicts and social inequalities in 1980s London.

The novels that I examine in this book contemplate spaces that often feature in historical accounts about gay and lesbian history in London; however, their deployment in fictions creates new meanings for those spaces by engaging them with renowned literary practices that pertain to the intertextual references that Waters and Hollinghurst deploy in their writings. Waters and Hollinghurst contextualize these spaces within the realm of literary history and historical fiction because, as Avery explains, literature has been an important source for "the circulation of ideas about queer spaces [in London]", playing a significant role "in the shaping of the queer capital".²⁶ While these discourses help to historicize the configuration of gay and lesbian cultures in London, they have also been used to control and regulate sexuality in the city, as I will discuss in the following section.

25 In *The Stranger's Child*, the most prestigious country house, Corley Court, becomes a boarding school in the 1960s. As Terentowicz-Fotyga points out, it was in the post-war period that country houses began to lose their social prestige, due to rationing in building supplies and therefore the difficulties involved maintaining such estates. While the 1950s saw the largest amount of country houses being demolished, legislation was passed in the mid-1970s that sought to preserve country houses as cultural monuments by investing in their maintenance as part of national heritage (Terentowicz-Fotyga, *Dreams Nightmares and Empty Signifiers*, pp. 23–24).

26 Avery, "Structuring and Interpreting Queer Spaces of London" in Avery and Graham (eds.) *Sex, Time and Place*, p. 13.

Mapping and Controlling Sexuality in London

Legislation drafted in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Britain concerning sexual mores clearly displayed the state's interest in regulating sexualities on the streets – women's sexuality and sodomy in particular – by reinforcing moral values that strengthened traditional social structures regarding gender, class, and sexuality. Lord Hardwicke's Marriage Act of 1753, for instance, sought to regulate clandestine marriages by passing a law that aimed to ensure that marriages throughout England and Wales were only valid if performed in a church, according to the banning rules, and with parental consent for men and women under the age of twenty-one.²⁷ The anxiety over clandestine marriages stemmed mainly from lawyers' increasing concern with the transfer of property, since any marriage performed by a priest using the Book of Common Prayer was recognized as lawful, which facilitated deception, the seduction of women, and interclass marriage.²⁸

Ogborn discusses Hardwicke's Marriage Act in terms of sexual geographies, as he understands that “sexualities and the responses to them were spatially constituted across a range of different sites” in the eighteenth century.²⁹ According to Ogborn, clandestine marriages were deeply related to geography, since one of the primary debates on these activities revolved around the locations in which they took place. Although these sites could be found across the country, the Fleet was one of the places in London in which a large number of clandestine marriages were held. Located in front of the Fleet Prison, a debtors' detention institution, the area was known for its peculiar marriage shops that conducted non-normative unions; at times these included same-sex marriage, whereby one of the partners was cross-dressed so that they could pass as a heterosexual couple. Many of the ceremonies took place in the Fleet Prison's chapel and it was not uncommon that prisoners attended them as guests.³⁰ The Fleet presented its own subversive geography that conflated the presence of the law and its own disruption, the longing for sexual morality and its own failure.

Lynda Nead discusses the relationship between urban development in Victorian London alongside regulation over gender and sexuality, emphasizing the need to create order within chaos. She points out that two urban principles marked the city's development in this period: mapping and movement.³¹ The idea of mapping can be related to Lefebvre's concept of conceived spaces, since it is intrinsically associated with the desire to make the city comprehensible and legible, freezing life in London streets by transforming it in terms of plain cartography. London's urban planning reflects the city as a human body, whose streets are its arteries and veins and whose organs should function effectively. Moving within the city was also related to the human body's circulation system, as “[m]otion and circulation in the urban body are

27 Ogborn, “This Most Lawless Space”, p. 11.

28 *Ibid.*, pp.15; 25.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

30 *Ibid.*, pp. 18–24.

31 Nead, *Victorian Babylon*, p. 13.

read as signs of health and morality”.³² A heart attack or a stroke can occur when there is an occlusion or a contingency within the movement of the blood, thereby disrupting the whole body’s functioning.

Mort and Nead point out that sexuality in the city can appear as a topic of potential “cultural disturbance”, since “[o]fficial geographies of immorality and obscenity have repeatedly been a focus for the attempted imposition of strategic order”.³³ The process of mapping sexuality in the city functions as a means to both detect and identify sexual practices that pose a threat to daily urban life.³⁴ It is through the constant regulation and control of bodies, which are considered deviant and immoral, that it is possible to reinforce what constitutes the norm in the realm of kinship and sexuality: the image of the white, heterosexual middle-class family. In the late nineteenth century, immorality was ascribed to the figure of the prostitute and of the male homosexual. Prostitutes and gay men were the urban figures that most drew the attention of the authorities in the regulation of sexuality; this can be seen in the Contagious Diseases Act of the 1860s,³⁵ which regulated prostitution, and the 1885 Criminal Law Amendment Act, which criminalized homosexuality among men in Britain under the premise of protecting boys from homosexuals’ ‘gross indecency’.³⁶

The mapping of urban space and the attempt to make immoral behavior legible is also related to the control and regulation of the female body and of women’s participation in the urban sphere. As Wilson notes, the anxieties about the increasing circulation of middle and upper-class women in the streets of London and in overcrowded environments pertained to an overall fear that they would engage in behavior that went against the idealized model of femininity; this model had been constructed on the basis of the image of domesticity, marriage, and motherhood. After all, taking part in metropolitan life also meant having contact with social environments that conflated and mixed all of the social classes.³⁷ The promiscuity conveyed by the interaction of people from different classes also caused difficulties in defining and identifying ‘respectable women’ on the streets and, according to Wilson, it was commonplace for unaccompanied women to be mistaken for prostitutes. Since the defining lines of the respectable woman were tenuous and opaque, public discourse often suggested that working-class women were one of the main sources of female immoral behavior.³⁸

Wilson develops her work about women’s lives in different cities by emphasizing their participation and circulation in urban space and by taking into consideration

32 *Ibid.*, p. 16.

33 Mort and Nead, *Sexual Geographies*, p. 7.

34 Cf. Matt Houlbrook’s *Queer London*; Nead, *Victorian Babylon*; Nord, *Walking the Victorian Streets*; Wilson, *The Sphinx in the City*; Walkowitz, *The City of Dreadful Delight and Prostitution and Victorian Society*.

35 Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, pp. 4–5. As Walkowitz notes, the Contagious Diseases Act was more interested in controlling the prostitute’s active and exposed sexuality than actually preventing sexually transmitted diseases from spreading. This becomes clear from the fact that the authorities arrested prostitutes, while the men were left untouched and unbothered.

36 Jackson, *Child Sexual Abuse in Victorian England*, p. 105.

37 Wilson, *The Sphinx in the City*, p. 29.

38 Cf. Skeggs, *The Formation of Class*, pp. 42–50; Wilson, “The Invisible Flâneur”, p. 104.

the fact that they actually represented a small portion of middle-class women.³⁹ The conflict between working- and middle-class women is clear in her depiction of the period, as the former were constantly demonized as the source of urban chaos because they worked outside of the home and were, therefore, the core reason for family disintegration. Wilson writes that: “Urban life overturned a symbolic natural order, and the linchpin of this natural order – the family – was the woman.”⁴⁰ She discusses Edwin Chadwick 1842 *Report on the Sanitary Conditions of the Labouring Classes* by challenging the idea that the report was created solely to improve urban conditions and health among the lower income population. Wilson also suggests that its aim was actually to discipline, control, and regulate working-class behavior and gender norms that threatened the Victorian family ideal. She draws attention to the way in which Chadwick claims that the working-classes are a source of urban horror, especially working-class women who did not learn to implement a domestic economy properly because they began to work at an early age and, thus, could not meet the necessary requirements to take care of their husbands.⁴¹

Wilson argues that the main conflicts between the working- and middle-classes take place once the latter vehemently acts against the first’s immorality; this is intrinsically related to cleaning, hygienic, and sanitary habits.⁴² Moreover, the concern over prostitution and sexuality among the lower-classes became increasingly important: “[n]ineteenth century campaigns to curb the unsuitable enjoyments of the lower-classes were inextricably linked to attempts to restrain and domesticate disruptive sexuality”,⁴³ which was widely projected onto the figure of the prostitute.

Legislation about sexuality aims to preserve strict gender roles that sustain the heterosexual family as the only possibility of kinship; it also strongly endorses male domination and homophobia as structural aspects of society, both in the regulation of homosexuality and of prostitution. The act of mapping deviant sexualities in the city displays a clear interest in locating transgressions as a means to know which places represent a greater danger for the social order. Nevertheless, the urge to appropriate heteronormative spaces has been crucial in the assertion of non-normative forms of gender and sexual identities as inextricable aspects of social space, in both cities and rural areas. In urban spaces, subjects who enact these identities have been socially marginalized in the city, creating a subculture that resisted heterosexist culture and slowly structured a set for new cultural identities to actively take part in urban life, particularly in the nineteenth century. The emergence of this subculture in the first half

39 Wilson mentions the roles played by the reformist professional classes in this process, mentioning the works of the philanthropist Octavia Hill and the journalist Josephine Butler, for instance (cf. Wilson, *The Sphinx in the City*, pp. 32–33)

40 *Ibid.*, p. 33.

41 *Ibid.*, p. 35.

42 Wilson claims there is a direct linkage between hygiene and sanitary habits, since “morality was inextricably entwined with cleanliness, disorder with filth”. She points out that “excrement became a metaphor and a symbol for moral filth”, and this was often related to the working-class itself. Hence, “when they spoke and wrote of the cleansing of the city filth, refuse and dung, they may really have longed to rid the cities of the labouring poor altogether” (pp. 36–37).

43 *Ibid.*, p. 38.

of the twentieth century became even more evident in the city, and sexual liberation movements emphatically participated in the demand for rights for social recognition of the LGBT community by the end of the century. This community represented, at least partially, a group of subjects who presented non-normative sexual and gender identities.

Is it Queer? Gay and Lesbian Spatial Appropriations

The relationship between non-normative sexualities and spaces came to be a fertile field of discussion in the 1990s. Throughout most of this decade, the interdisciplinary field of queer studies also focused on gay and lesbian communities in cities, relating the lives of subjects and their relation to the spaces they inhabit in order to discuss aspects of resistance and/or assimilation, questions of identity related to specific spatial frameworks, the formation of communities and political bonds within these spaces, and the relations between the global and the local.⁴⁴ Ingram et. al, for instance, argue that queer spaces enable “people with marginalized (homo)sexualities and identities to survive and to gradually expand their influence and opportunities to live fully”.⁴⁵ Bell and Valentine’s and Ingram et. al’s collections of essays about queer spaces assert that homophobia is a crucial point of departure to understand the necessity of creating bonds, relationships, and communities among subjects who support anti-homophobic practices and politics. The formation of queer communities reflects how space and identity come into play: subjects appropriate parts of the city in a movement of resistance against homophobic norms, thereby creating new identities for the spaces they come to inhabit and, simultaneously, asserting spatial (and political) possibilities for the enactment of their own identities.

The appropriation of space by gays and lesbians is often depicted as a collective history of coming out, in which the Stonewall riots in 1969 is considered a milestone in the political act of taking over public space. In light of this perspective, homosexual culture has its origins in an underground cultural scene, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, gradually emerging as a counterculture force throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Scholars such as Dianne Chisholm and Julie Abraham have followed this teleological view of spatial accounts of queer history and spaces. They focus namely on literary and biographical representations of gay and lesbian subjects and their emergence in the modern city, coining homosexual identity as essentially metropolitan.

Chisholm argues that queer spaces designate “an appropriation of space for bodily, especially sexual, pleasure” as a means to create heterotopias,⁴⁶ spaces that function as

44 Cf. Bell and Valentine, *Mapping Desire* and Ingram et al., *Queers in Space*.

45 Ingram et al., *Queers in Space*, p. 1.

46 Chisholm, *Queer Constellations*, p. 10. Here Chisholm refers to Foucault’s concept of ‘heterotopia’, which will be discussed more thoroughly in chapter 4, when I discuss Kilian’s concept of ‘literary heterotopias’. In Chisholm’s text, she mainly uses Foucault’s term to designate spaces of sexual resistance within urban space.

sites of resistance. However, she contends that this subversion is never fully effective, given that it cannot completely subvert capitalist power structures. Chisholm relates the emergence of queer historiography to the increasing visibility of venues that served as meeting points for gays, lesbians, and trans subjects, represented by bars, saunas, baths, and clubs.⁴⁷ For Chisholm, the development of print culture in the nineteenth century enabled “the divulging of homosexual haunts in police reports and scandal literature, semi-autobiographical writing and realist fiction”, which gave the “queer city [...] graphic exposure for public consumption” and offered the possibility of “a historical re/collection”⁴⁸ about queer urban life. In analyzing historical and literary representations about gay and lesbian metropolitan spaces, Chisholm concludes that the act of collecting memories and narratives about these spaces hinders the possibility of queer subjects taking part in grand narratives of History (with a capital ‘H’). This is due to the fact that homosexual subjects collect fragments of history, which she dubs “the trash of history”,⁴⁹ and represent themselves as abject individuals who enlose themselves within the private sphere of queer spaces.

Although I agree with her that queer spaces are a crucial aspect of queer historiography, an issue I will discuss in greater detail in chapter 8, I dispute the fact that these historical and literary narratives are to be considered ‘trash’ or abject history. On the contrary, the queer histories that Waters and Hollinghurst narrate point to questions that touch upon the affirmative participation of homosexual subjects in history by situating gay and lesbian history, in London particularly, within the ideological and cultural frameworks of historical periods, such as the Victorian era, the Second World War, and Thatcherism. In their works, history and literature are devised to include gay and lesbian histories as part of England’s history; they are not abandoned as an ‘abject’ part of it.

My aim with this book is to examine the historical narratives constructed within the fictional works of Waters and Hollinghurst, associating these narratives with the queer spaces that are represented. In my view, their works, in spite of their fictionality, can be considered a great source of historical narratives about gay and lesbian history in London, since Waters and Hollinghurst depict areas of the city, such as the West End, that were extremely relevant for the city’s development of a queer culture. In many ways, my readings of their novels also draw from the works of literary scholars who have used literature to reflect on gay and lesbian culture and historiography.⁵⁰ Abraham, for instance, discusses queer spaces by tracing historical representations of homosexuality in various literary accounts of the modern city. She does not uphold a fatalist viewpoint on queer spaces and history as Chisholm does, even though she also uses historical research and literature to understand how homosexuality has

47 Cf., *Ibid.*, pp. 17–20.

48 *Ibid.*, p. 17.

49 *Ibid.*, p. 125.

50 Cf. Abraham, *Metropolitan Lovers*; Cook, *London and the Culture of Homosexuality, 1885–1914*; Munt, *Heroic Desire*; Sedgwick, *Between Men and Epistemology of the Closet*; Sinfield, *The Wilde Century and Gay and After*; Waters, *Wolfskins and Togas*.

influenced urban life in different cities. Abraham contends that the increasing representations of gay and lesbian lives in the city, beginning with the image of sexual deviants on through to their effective participation in politics and cultural movements, contributed immensely to the great cities' contemporary identities.⁵¹

She concentrates on figures such as Oscar Wilde, Radclyffe Hall, and Jane Addams to illustrate their cultural and historical contributions to the formation of the modern city. Abraham discusses the effectiveness of queer spaces in the metropolis, questioning if the formation of queer communities and spaces actually threatened heteronormative behavior or if they just increased homosexuals' isolation and marginality in society.⁵² She considers the formation of communities among homosexuals to be crucial for the establishment of a network and for political activism in cities' histories. She draws attention to the ways queer life, as counterculture, threatened social orders in aspects regarding gender and sexuality by evoking literary figures to make her case for gay and lesbian cultural influence in normative history. Nevertheless, Abraham presents a restrictive perspective on gay and lesbian identities (the masculine lesbian and the effeminate gay), given that she fixates on Wilde and Hall as the main representatives of queer lives. Since Abraham suggests that homosexuals came to be *effectively* part of the city due to political allegiances formed in bars, clubs, saunas, or other places where gays and lesbians went and socialized, she automatically claims that *all* queer spaces involved social resistance. This view overlooks the intersection that these spaces presented in relation to other forms of subjugation, such as those entailed by classism and racism, for instance.

While Hollinghurst's works point to a desire to have gay literature and history recognized as part of a grand narrative regarding national history and literature, Waters' books involve questioning the very authority and homogeneity of totalizing historical and literary narratives. In her novels, Waters shows an awareness of the dangers of totalizing narratives, given that these narratives can efface the histories of subjects who have faced obstacles to speak out (i.e., women and homosexual subjects, working-class subjects). Waters' works suggest that, although it is relevant to give visibility to lesbian identity and culture, it is not crucial that they become part of a tradition or of grand historical narratives. In this sense, her historical novels foster the emergence of lesbian culture and history as part of English history; however, making lesbian history visible does not mean that it should comply with mechanisms of oppression based on class and race, for instance. Class is a pivotal aspect to be analyzed in her works, since she constantly refers to class culture as a formative axis of lesbian identity. However, as I will show in my reading of *Tipping the Velvet* in chapter 2, the representation of class in her debut novel is reduced to uncritical stereotypes of upper-, middle- and working-class women.

Waters constructs her lesbian characters as women who wish to challenge the social norms around them, particularly in terms of gender and sexuality. Where all of Waters' novels convey criticisms of the limited roles attributed to women in society, and portray positive representations of female sexuality, they sometimes lack critical

51 Abraham, *Metropolitan Lovers*, pp. 14–16.

52 *Ibid.*, pp. 100–104.

reflection about class relations. This is especially true in *Tipping the Velvet*. In Waters' debut novel, I argue that her representations of gender and sexuality denaturalize the binaries of male/female and hetero/homosexuality. However, while she does depict working-class culture in a positive way that evokes solidarity and a sense of community among the inhabitants of the East End, the class relations that are construed are often reproduced as rigid stereotypes of upper-, middle- and working-class women, as she renders class relations in the light of respectability and moralism.⁵³

In my reading of queer spaces, I do not regard queer spaces as systematic sites of social and cultural resistance, since I take into consideration the ways in which these spaces articulate gender and sexuality with class and, in Hollinghurst's first novels, with race. As mentioned previously in this chapter, Chisholm and Abraham coin queer spaces as the result of a history of 'coming out' and as spaces that produce 'social resistance', even though Chisholm asserts that this resistance is restricted. It is true that queer spaces are crucial for the formation of communities, since, as Ingram et al. note, they have enabled homosexual life in many ways. Nevertheless, it is necessary to comprehend the factors that have made queer spaces a necessity for queer life by questioning the relationship that they maintain with parts of the city that are pervasively perceived as straight and by tracing their connection with other forms of social relations.

Regarding queer spaces only as a celebrative expression of gay and lesbian identities has the effect of restraining the political force that the term 'queer' has carried in terms of activism involving gender and sexuality. Judith Butler discusses the term queer as a "site of collective contestation" that should function as a means to disrupt the historicity of discourses by reflecting upon the historical aspects that they convey.⁵⁴ The term 'queer', once employed in a depreciative, shaming, and pathologizing way, had to be appropriated by the subjects whom it stigmatized in order to turn it against the insulting form in which it was used. The word's linguistic appropriation not only disrupted the homophobic historicity ingrained in the term 'queer', but it turned it in favor of subjects who enacted non-normative gender and sexual identities.

In this book, the word 'queer' will be employed to designate gay and lesbian sexualities and, as is the case in *Tipping the Velvet*, Nancy's non-normative gender identity. However, 'queer' will also be used as a verb in the sense that Butler postulates (i.e., as a means to subvert norms and historicity of discourses). This is particularly the case with my readings of Waters' novels, since her depiction of lesbian history challenges

53 Cf. Skeggs, *Formations of Class and Gender* and "The Appearance of Class: Challenges in Gay Space" in Munt (ed.) *Cultural Studies and the Working Class*. In her analyses of working-class culture, Skeggs notices that respectability features as a 'class signifier' in which a working-class community or subject can only be legitimated after they have proven that they are entitled to a 'respectable' image that goes against the usual images of danger, threat, and filth (p. 1). For Skeggs, respectability is a "property of middle-class individuals", who have historically "defined [themselves] against the masses" (p. 4). In so doing, they have become the image of respectability through which working-class individuals own their own legitimacy, since they can only prove their social value once they can prove that they can enter the realm of social respectability; this realm concerns the norms of domesticity, obedience, cleanness, health, and education.

54 Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, p. 228.

traditional definitions of literary genres, of historiography, and of the relationship between women and urban space. In *Tipping the Velvet*, for instance, Waters' representations of the theater and of nineteenth century male impersonation acts produce spaces that challenge the dichotomies of male and female gender identities, and of public and private spaces. In chapter 2, I discuss Butler's theories about gender performance in *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter* in order to examine the queer spaces that are constructed in the novel. As I will show, it is the protagonist's mobility and her ability to enact a gender identity that exists within the male and female categories that allow for the possibility of queer spaces to emerge. On stage, Nancy Astley's performance as a man also functions as a means to enact lesbian desire with her partner, Kitty Butler, while in the city Nancy's male performance grants her the possibility of taking part in a sexual underworld that is almost exclusively available to gay men.

Although *Tipping the Velvet* mostly conveys the notion of queer as a possibility for the disruption of norms, Waters also presents queer spaces in the sense introduced by Ingram et al., Bell and Valentine, and Chisholm: the 'Cavendish Club' in the West End is a meeting point for upper-class lesbians who enjoy the privilege of 'keeping' vulnerable girls as sex toys, and the pub 'The Boy in the Boat', located in the East End, is a meeting place for working-class lesbian women who are mainly involved with feminist and socialist movements. While the 'Cavendish Club' does not portray a site of political resistance, due to its exploitative characteristics, 'The Boy in the Boat' is introduced as a space that allows for the rise of feminist alliance and of political resistance.

In *Affinity*, the notion of queering spaces appears in Waters' representation of the prison, more specifically Millbank. As opposed to *Tipping the Velvet*, Waters' second novel focuses first and foremost on challenging class relations that are related to upper- and working-class femininity. It is the performance of spiritualism in *Affinity*, enacted by the medium Selina Dawes, that allows her to escape from prison and to break free of the teachings of Victorian upper-class femininity. Having been convicted for assault and murder, Selina is doomed to spend time at Millbank in order to learn the 'proper' mannerisms of domesticity, religion, and marriage. As a woman who has worked throughout her life, Selina uses her fame as a medium to convince one of the matrons to help her to escape. Selina also counts on her partner's help, Ruth Viger, to complete her plan, since Ruth works at the Prior residence, where lady Margaret Prior lives. The latter has been visiting the prison in order to collect information for a history book about Millbank and to do charity work with the prisoners. As Margaret struggles with mourning her father's death, she takes up her activities at Millbank as a means to overcome her depression. In Margaret's diary entries, the prison functions as a space that makes her think that she is entitled to a kind of freedom that the prisoners do not have. However, as she falls in love with Selina, Margaret comes to associate her life at home, under the scrutiny of her family, as a more severe form of surveillance than that experienced by the inmates at Millbank.

In my reading of *Affinity*, I contend that the parallel that Waters constructs in her novel between domesticity and imprisonment is problematic, since it suggests that the violence and oppression that prisoners undergo in jail can be compared to the oppression derived from ideal Victorian domesticity. I dispute the argument that

the prison can be regarded as a queer space that enables lesbian desire, as critics such as Braid, Llewellyn, and Pohl have conveyed.⁵⁵ Instead, I claim that it is Selina's use of spiritualism within the prison that enables the creation of a queer space that can free her from the oppression of upper- and middle-class norms of femininity, which are mainly constructed within the realm of domesticity and respectability. In this sense, queer as a means to disrupt norms in this novel addresses the imposition of strict norms of femininity that have informed upper- and middle-class notions of womanhood and that have been imposed upon working-class women as the only respectable model of female behavior.⁵⁶ While in the novel the home and the prison appear as institutions that disseminate these norms, it is only in prison that they can be resisted and subverted.

Lastly, Waters' representation of queer spaces as the disruption of norms and of the historicity of discourses is found in *The Night Watch* in which she employs the trope of the Second World War and urban destruction as a means to challenge traditional temporal and spatial frameworks. In an article about the novel, Mitchell discusses the queer temporality in Waters' fourth novel by claiming that conventional time frames are disrupted with the novel's backward temporality, since it begins in 1947 and it ends in 1941.⁵⁷ In my reading, I will examine the novel's queer temporality in relation to queer spaces. The queer spaces narrated in the novel mostly pertain to the ways in which the war breaks with the characters' perception of conventional space and time and how this affects their sexual and gendered practices in London. In this novel, most of the protagonists are queer, with the exception of Viv, who is a straight woman that has a relationship with a married soldier. In *The Night Watch*, Waters also introduces her first and only gay character, Duncan, who refuses to serve in the war and outlives his best friend in a double suicide attempt, which is supposed to be a heroic anti-war gesture.

Waters' re-working of queer spaces is mostly attuned to feminist political stands that vindicate female autonomy, affirmative representations of lesbian sexuality, and the possibility to challenge class norms and to create interclass relations, as I will discuss in my readings of *Affinity* and *The Night Watch*. In Hollinghurst's works, contrastingly, queer spaces correspond to spaces in which gay men cruise and socialize, and yet they do not yield possibilities for the disruption of social norms regarding gender, sexuality, class, and race. Instead, they expose classist, racist, misogynist, and conservative behaviors in these spaces and the ways in which they are reproduced by white middle- and upper-class gay men. While male queer spaces in his novels coin promiscuity and public sex as pivotal features of gay culture that have, at least to some extent, subverted traditional heteronormative standards based on the nuclear

55 Cf. Braid, "Victorian Panopticon: Confined Spaces and Imprisonment in Chosen Neo-Victorian Novels" in Ciuk and Molek-Kozakowska (eds.) *Exploring Space*; Llewellyn, "'Queer? I should say it is criminal!': Sarah Waters' *Affinity*"; Pohl, "Sexing the Labyrinth: Space and Sexuality in Sarah Waters' *Affinity*" in Mitchell (ed.) *Sarah Waters*.

56 Cf. Skeggs, *Formations of Class and Gender*, pp. 42–47.

57 Mitchell, "'What does it feel like to be an anachronism?': Time in *The Night Watch*", in Mitchell (ed.) *Sarah Waters*, pp. 85–87.

family, marriage, and monogamy, these spaces have also been informed by traditional masculinity, class domination, and by white privilege.

In the spaces that I analyze in both Waters' and Hollinghurst's novels, I attempt to tackle the power relations, namely those concerning class, gender, and sexuality, that are at stake in a social space as a means to understand the subject's stance within these relations, given that the interplay of the various social categories will form a subject in different ways. Haschemi Yekani et al. define categories "as effects of processes of constructions rather than stable entities", arguing that each category "is always already intertwined in multiple frameworks of inequality".⁵⁸ They suggest a 'corrective methodology' to propose new ways of looking at intersectionality and to contest the presumption of clear-cut intersections of identity categories. They demand a larger focus on the relations of inequality within the structures of identity politics in order to emphasize the idea that identity categories are always subject to transformations and always operate in relation to each other: some categories will stand out, while others will function as a backdrop for the identity in question; this depends on the specific context and social environment.

Evoking the concept of 'interdependencies', their article also points to the ways in which identity categories, when fixed within traditional disciplinary grids, can produce a politics of exclusion and oppression. Haschemi Yekani et al. suggest paying closer attention to the ways in which these categories are formed by keeping in mind "the simultaneity and multidimensionality of subjectivation, discrimination and the exertion of power".⁵⁹ As a term, interdependencies imply an approach to the problem of categories, shedding light on the intersection of power relations and of inequalities in which identity categories are imbricated and draw attention to the subject's multiple and concomitant positionalities within the social space in which s/he finds themselves. In fact, the authors call for the deployment of interdependencies in reflections that involve spatial, temporal, and social dimensions of queer studies, thereby claiming that sexuality must be thought about in relation to other forms of domination and categorization, such as class, gender, ability, and race.

The notion of queer spaces I aim to suggest here goes in a similar direction as elucidated by Haschemi Yekani et al. Since space is formed by various socio-economic forces, discursive relations, and identity practices, analyzing sexuality within spatial contexts demands greater attention to the ways sexuality, as a technology of power and regulation, interacts with other mechanisms of control. In the case of homosexuality, one must question the ways it can elide expressions of racism, sexism, or classism, for instance.⁶⁰ I understand queer spaces as spaces that are formed by historical, social, and cultural discourses and relations that question traditional norms

58 Haschemi Yekani et al., "'Try Again. Fail Again. Fail Better.' Queer Interdependencies as Corrective Methodologies" in Yvette et al. (eds.) *Theorizing Intersectionality and Sexuality*, p. 80.

59 *Ibid.*, p. 90.

60 Haschemi Yekani et al. criticize, in a German context, how homosexuality and same-sex marriage are used as mechanisms of racism and xenophobia in Germany. They cite the 'Muslimtest', a test that was given for migrants applying for German naturalization, which initially posed a question about the acceptance of homosexuality, asserting that 'tolerance' of homosexuality was a Western accomplishment that the Muslim community has not yet achieved (pp. 84–85).

of gender and sexuality, which are based on heterosexuality, monogamy, marriage, and reproduction. However, the following literary analyses will also show that, even though queer spaces question heteronormativity, at least partially – since homosexuality is not a normative sexuality – they do not always challenge norms that constitute class, race, and gender relations. Drawing from Haschemi Yeakni et al.'s conceptualization of interdependencies, I also argue that it is important to insist on a notion of queer spaces that involve strategic political demands and that will denounce and confront inequality and subjugation in relation to other forms of oppression. In this case, it is not enough, in my view, to automatically consider gay and lesbian spaces to be subversive for openly displaying a sexual identity that diverts from heterosexuality, especially if they engage in practices that reinforce racism, classism, and sexism.

The existence of gay and lesbian spaces is certainly important for homosexual politics, socialization, and community formations, often offering comfort and a sense of belonging to those who are confronted with homophobic violence daily. Nevertheless, producing a space that embraces homosexuality does not necessarily mean a process of queering in the sense of challenging or subverting norms. At times, the queer spaces presented in Waters' and Hollinghurst's novels function within the paradox of sexual resistance and of reinforcing norms that already exist.

In Hollinghurst's novels, the notion of subordination to heteronormativity and to the ideal of 'normality' and 'respectability' is even stronger, given that the queer spaces he depicts are only modestly subversive in the sense that they allow for promiscuous sexual behavior. The queer spaces that Hollinghurst represents in *The Swimming-Pool Library* and in *The Line of Beauty* are deeply rooted in neoliberal ideology, consumerism, and political conservatism, which strongly influence the characters' relationships with the spaces in which they circulate. In *The Stranger's Child*, political conservatism, social tradition, and strict social hierarchies are devised in the portrayal of the country house, which I associate with a space of literary tradition and gay history. In my reading of Hollinghurst's novels, I examine his depiction of queer spaces in terms of homonormativity, which Lisa Duggan has defined as "a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them", thereby producing "a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption".⁶¹ In my reading of *The Stranger's Child*, I discuss homonormativity in light of Warner's and Mattilda's reflections about the concept which relates to the ways in which the gay movement and gay culture have sought recognition and respectability through social and political assimilation with heterosexist norms and culture.⁶²

My analyses of *The Swimming-Pool Library* and of *The Line of Beauty* will reflect upon homonormativity according to Lisa Duggan's conceptualization, which correlates sexual politics with neoliberalism. She warns us against a politics of assimilation, in which gay political struggles are limited to heteronormative patterns of kinship and

61 Duggan, "The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism" in Castronovo and Nelson (eds.) *Materializing Democracy*, p. 179.

62 Cf. Interview with Ruiz, "The Violence of Assimilation: An Interview with Mattilda aka Matt Bernstein Sycamore", and Warner, *The Trouble with Normal*.

social relations (e.g., gay marriage). Moreover, she criticizes the shifts in sectors of the gay movement in the 1990s, as they moved closer to neoliberal ideals of governance which prioritize private assets, a free market, and set aside political engagement with social welfare. For Duggan, this political framework is antiegalitarian and it affects cultural politics in damaging ways by promoting sexual politics that understands gay equality “as access to the institutions of domestic privacy [marriage], the ‘free’ market, and patriotism”.⁶³ A central aspect of neoliberal sexual politics entails the deployment of identity as an instrument of control and regulation through domesticity and marriage, in addition to transforming counterculture and subversive non-normative sexual spaces into niches of sexual consumptions. In this sense, gay and lesbian spaces can produce homonormative spaces that uphold other forms of oppression devised through class or race.

In *The Swimming-Pool Library*, for instance, Hollinghurst evinces the power of exclusion in male queer spaces, which are mainly located in West and Central London. While it is true that the queer spaces depicted in Soho and in Bloomsbury (i.e., the Corinthian Club) display the circulation of gay men from different class backgrounds, the relationships that Will Beckwith maintains with men of color and working-class men are depicted as demeaning and humiliating. In Hollinghurst’s novels, interclass and interracial relationships between men bring out the ways in which gay culture also reproduces oppressive relations based on classism, racism, and misogyny.

Other scholars have discussed the relation of neoliberal capitalism and queer culture, drawing attention to the ways in which gay and lesbian spaces have increasingly undergone processes of gentrification and have drifted away from queer politics as resistance.⁶⁴ Andersson discusses consumerism and (male) gay culture, analyzing the appropriation of Shoreditch, in East London, as a response to Soho’s gentrified queer spaces, which became increasingly concerned with displaying an environment of health and cleanliness due to the AIDS epidemic. Andersson points out that the AIDS epidemic strongly influenced the design and presentation of gay venues in Soho, as they came to favor white walls and minimalist furniture, for instance, as a means to create a ‘clean’ and ‘healthy’ environment that challenged gay spaces as “contaminated spaces”.⁶⁵ In doing so, these establishments asserted restrictive spatial and cultural forms of gay identity, embracing commercial interests that uphold “Soho’s more sanitised version of gay culture”.⁶⁶

The impact of AIDS on London’s male queer spaces is a topic that will be analyzed in my readings of *The Swimming-Pool Library* and in *The Line of Beauty*. AIDS is not mentioned explicitly in Hollinghurst’s first novel, but we can perceive the imminence of hysterical homophobia once gay venues, which are supposedly safe spaces for gay men to cruise, become spots for arbitrary police arrests. This happens as Will Beckwith’s

63 *Ibid.*

64 Cf. Andersson, “East End Localism and Urban Decay”; Binnie, “Trading Places: Consumption, Sexuality and the Production of Queer Space” in Bell and Valentine (eds.) *Mapping Desire*, pp. 182–188; Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, pp. 62–65; Spade, *Normal Life*.

65 Andersson, “East End Localism and Urban Decay”, p. 55.

66 *Ibid.*, p. 56.

best friend, James, goes to the Coleherne in Earls Court and is arrested by a policeman who tries to make a pass at him. While Will's autobiographical narrative portrays a 'gay lifestyle' that is characterized by hedonism, cruising and luxury, demonstrations of homosexuality in the city, including in places that are publicly renowned for their gay venues, are compromised by the increasing dissemination of homophobic discourses. These discourses are only narrated metaphorically in the novel. In *The Line of Beauty*, AIDS is categorically represented, and it directly affects the lives of the book's gay characters. In my analysis, I contend that the escalating persecution of gay venues and the establishment of neoliberal ideology in Thatcher's government alter gay life in London at large, given that the representation of queer spaces shifts to the realm of the domestic sphere. In this novel, the domestic spaces, mostly depicted through wealthy homes, are sites for cruising, sex, and promiscuity, and yet they also function as the stage for Tory politics and conservatism.

Queer Spaces and Literary Practices

I have previously discussed notions of space by taking London and the interdependence of class, gender, and sexuality in queer spaces into consideration. The analyses and critical works presented above point to specific epistemological productions of spaces that will establish sites in which the subject will form their understandings and enactment of homosexuality. In this section, I wish to discuss literature's potential as a space for representation of urban space, history, and their interdependencies. I am interested in the ways in which the intersections between class, gender, and sexuality are put forward in Waters' and Hollinghurst's novels and the ways in which they use historical fiction as a genre to recount gay and lesbian histories. Moreover, as the literary analyses of Waters' and Hollinghurst's novels will elucidate, the characters' relationships with their spatial surroundings deeply influence how they act out their gay and lesbian identities. Additionally, I contend that it is possible to reflect on how Waters and Hollinghurst employ queer spaces in order to convey queer historiography.

As I have noted in the introduction, Hollinghurst's *The Swimming-Pool Library* and *The Line of Beauty* have not been read as historical fiction, since they depict late twentieth century historical events, namely Thatcher's government. I argue that this focus has been overlooked because, in these novels and in *The Spell*, Hollinghurst writes about the late twentieth-century and the early twenty-first century respectively, and the traditional theories about historical fiction postulate that it is necessary that the author have temporal distance from the past in order to be able to represent it faithfully. In Lukács' seminal work *The Historical Novel*, for instance, he writes:

[the relationship between past and present in] really great historical art, does not consist in alluding to contemporary events [...] but in bringing the past to life as the prehistory of the present, in giving poetic life to those historical, social and human

forces which, in the course of a long evolution, have made our present-day life what it is and as we experience it.⁶⁷

For Lukács, the distance between past and present is a premise in writing historical fiction so that the author is able to study history and can provide representations of historical events that will entail the notion of progress in history and the idea that the world has somehow ‘evolved’ from the past until the present moment.

This is definitely not the case in Hollinghurst’s first novels, as *The Swimming-Pool Library* was written and published during the AIDS crisis and during the Thatcherite government and *The Line of Beauty* came out in 2004, when the effects of Thatcherism were extended under Tony Blair’s New Labour government. Although Hollinghurst wrote these novels based on his own memories and experiences from the 1980s, and does not conduct thorough historical research as Waters does, it is possible to consider his work to be historical fiction because he anticipates many features that are known to be part of late-twentieth century gay history: the depoliticization of the gay movement, the gentrification of gay neighborhoods such as Soho, and the struggle of gay men to be recognized as ‘normal’ and ‘respectable’ by being included in the heterosexual standard of marriage and the nuclear family.⁶⁸ In *The Stranger’s Child*, the historical aspect of Hollinghurst’s novels becomes even more evident, given that he specifically addresses historiography’s blind spots through metafictionally representing the process of writing history by mocking, at least to some extent, the notion of progress in gay history. The notions of historiography that he articulates are deeply related to the trope of the country house, to gay history, and to the literary tradition, as I will show in chapter 7 through my reading of his 2011 novel.

In chapter 8, I closely examine Waters’ and Hollinghurst’s employment of history in their literary works by arguing that they pertain to the subgenre of historiographic metafiction, as theorized by Linda Hutcheon. She defines historiographic metafiction as a subgenre of the historical novel that consolidates itself under the postmodernist premises regarding the questioning of authority and of authenticity, fostering the ideals that enable the plurality of narrative voices.⁶⁹ Thus, Hutcheon asserts that historiographic metafiction narrates the histories of ‘ex-centric’ subjects who have been historically marginalized, thereby stressing “the implied recognition that our culture is not really the homogeneous monolith (that is middleclass, male, heterosexual, white, western) we might have assumed”.⁷⁰ For Hutcheon, this subgenre of postmodernist historical fiction reflects upon the silences and loopholes of traditional historiography, which has often effaced the narratives of peripheral subjects, such as people of color, gays, lesbians, working-class subjects, and women.

Waters and Hollinghurst narrate the histories of lesbians and gay men by affirmatively associating their presence and participation in London’s history. In this book, I

67 Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, p. 53.

68 Cf. Duggan, “The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism” in Castronovo and Nelson (eds.) *Materializing Democracy*; Spade, *Normal Life*; Warner, *The Trouble with Normal*.

69 Cf. Hutcheon, *The Poetics of Postmodernism*, pp. 6–8; pp. 57–60.

70 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

consider their works to be relevant contributions to queer historiography precisely because they engage with gay and lesbian culture by articulating historical events with literary texts that have dealt with homosexuality, either directly or indirectly. This becomes clear in my reading of the Jamesian narrator in *The Line of Beauty* and the connection that I make between the Victorian Gothic and Waters' use of spiritualism in *Affinity*.

In this book, I wish to analyze the ways in which Waters and Hollinghurst represent queer spaces and how they articulate it through London's history and with different English literary genres, authors, and styles. In my view, literature appears as a space in which it is possible to critically reconstruct spatial and social relations that do not necessarily mirror reality. Jurij Lotman, for instance, defines the work of art as "a finite model of an infinite universe".⁷¹ For the Russian scholar, art provides the possibility to reflect infinite objects within a delimited space that constructs its own reality and spatial relations. Therefore, the depiction of the infinite reality in a finite one is always a process of *translation* that can never faithfully copy reality, but it creates its own *topos*, a spatial continuum in which objects found in reality are represented.⁷² In this process of translation, the author can describe history and spaces by evoking the 'real', which in Waters' and Hollinghurst's works is conveyed by their representations of London and of history. However, this does not mean that their historical representations of the city is 'reality' itself, since they rely on language and on literary devices – such as the selection of historical events and of literary intertexts, and the choice of the kinds of narrator they wish to construe – to create a literary work that fictionally portrays London's history and geography. In other words, it is important to emphasize that Waters' and Hollinghurst's representations of London, and of its queer history, hinge upon fictionality to exist, and cannot simply be regarded in terms of the 'reality' or 'truthfulness' of historical facts.

A similar thread of thought can be traced considering the representation of urban space in literature by thinking about the translations of cities into literature. If, as Lotman contends, works of art are conceived through the process of translating reality (infinite objects) into the realm of the finite, then translating urban space into literary texts implies the construction of cities that will convey elements of the originals by which they are inspired; however, these originals will become transformed by giving them new meanings. In literary texts, cities are described through the portrayal of buildings, streets, nature, parks, or monuments, for instance, to acquire an afterlife that only represents reality by transforming spaces through the lives, actions, and gestures that characters engage with throughout the plot. In this sense, places could acquire very different meanings when represented in literature because of the spatial relations and appropriations that the author conveys in the construction of characters, genre, plot, and temporality.

The relationship between space and time in literature has been expounded by Bakhtin in the introduction of his concept of the chronotope, which consists in "the

71 Lotman, *The Structure of the Artistic Text*, p. 210.

72 *Ibid.*, p. 231.

intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature”.⁷³ Bakhtin emphasizes that space and time are inseparable categories, but he considers time to be a primary category in literature, since it is time that becomes artistically visible and palpable, whereas space functions in response to the plot’s temporal movements. Bakhtin considers the chronotope to be a pivotal aspect in the construction of a literary work, given that it determines the genre and defines a narrative’s artistic unity: the chronotope is, therefore, “the place where the knots of narrative are tied and untied”, providing the fundamental grounds for “the representability of events”.⁷⁴ In spite of his constant emphasis that time and space cannot be separated, Bakhtin asserts that the chronotope’s main function is to materialize time *within* space, thereby reinforcing the idea that the temporal is always prior to the spatial. Although space plays an important role in the narrative, Bakhtin suggests that it operates as static scenery, in which historical time and biographical time are developed. For Bakhtin, space always passively responds to the effects of time, suggesting that the spaces represented in a novel will be construed as a means to convey the temporal verisimilitude of a specific epoch or social relations that are at stake in the narrative.⁷⁵ The notion of the chronotope will be analyzed in chapter 4 in my reading of *The Night Watch*.

I take up Bakhtin’s concept to reflect on the queer chronotopes in the novel that emerge alongside London’s destruction in the Blitz and with the process of the city’s reconstruction in the post-war period. Thus, I argue that the extraordinary circumstances brought about by the war disrupt the conventional measures of time and space, which are depicted by the characters’ subjective temporal and spatial experiences during wartime in the novel. As I will further elucidate in my reading of *The Night Watch*, space is also a primary category in narrating history, not just time, since the characters’ subjective perceptions of and experiences in the air raids and urban destruction also materialize the notion of chaos and of an overall expectation (that is not fulfilled) that there will be progress in terms of class, gender, and sexual relations once the war ends. This is also put forward through Waters’ choice of narrator, since she deploys a heterodiegetic narrator that focalizes on each character and recounts their own imaginative and subjective interpretation of their environment.

The narrator employed in each of the novels examined in this book is also a central topic that will be explored in my literary analyses. Rimón-Kennan defines the narrator “as the agent which at the very least narrates or engages in some activity serving the needs of narration”.⁷⁶ In *The Swimming-Pool Library*, Will Beckwith narrates his circulation throughout London in an autobiographical form, thereby conveying gay life in 1980s London through a perspective that evinces his social privileges and the commodification of gay culture. As I will demonstrate in my reading of the novel in chapter 5, Will’s account of London is set out as an advertisement of ‘gay life’, as an object to be consumed, given that the narration of his life ironically portrays a

73 Bakhtin, “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel”, in *The Dialogic Imagination*, p. 84.

74 *Ibid.*, p. 250.

75 Cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 243; 250.

76 Rimón-Kennan, *Narrative Fiction*, p. 91.

hedonistic, glossy, and exaggerated sexualized city that is available to affluent, white, gay men. While he does relate the lives of gay men of color and from working-class backgrounds, these men are depicted merely as sexual objects that attend to wealthy gay men's sexual desires. It is in this sense that I associate his autobiographical narration of gay London with the figure of the neoliberal subject: he is egotistic and his sexual and affective relations are acted out to obtain individual profit; this points to the neoliberal premise of the rules of free market informing all social relations.

In *The Line of Beauty*, Hollinghurst's deployment of the Jamesian center of consciousness yields distinct perspectives on the protagonist Nick Guest's relation with the spaces in which he circulates, which mostly consists of a Tory and conservative social environment. In the first part of the novel, the Jamesian center of consciousness evinces the effects of neoliberal ideology upon the protagonist and upon his effort to belong to an upper-class environment, into which he was not born but only entered coincidentally. In the second part, the role of the center of consciousness indicates that Nick has apparently settled in within this milieu, given that the narrator ascribes Nick the role of confidant and interclass mediator. In the last part of the novel, the center of consciousness becomes secondary, as Nick becomes an object of surveillance and as he loses his position as a privileged observer. In *The Stranger's Child*, Hollinghurst ironically employs an omniscient narrator that can supposedly convey an impartial and universal historiography about the poet Cecil Valance and two country houses: Two Acres and Corley Court. By using metafictionality in his account, Hollinghurst describes the process of writing history, reminding us of the impossibility of obtaining a historical narrative that is neutral, given that all authors rely on the selection and interpretation of events in order to narrate history.

In Waters' novels, narration is devised as a means to evince subjective accounts of history, as I have noted in *The Night Watch*. *Affinity* is written in diary form, introducing accounts of the protagonists Margaret Prior and Selina Dawes. Their diary entries present two different temporalities in the novel: while Margaret's diary relates the fictive present, which includes her visits to Millbank prison and her life in a conventional Victorian upper-class home, Selina's diary features the fictive past prior to her imprisonment. The ways in which their diaries are devised in the novel are crucial for my analysis, since I contend that Selina's diary is constantly overlooked by critics because it does not put forward reflections, feelings, or personal memories that can offer the reader information about her self; it should be borne in mind that this is a primary characteristic of diary narration.⁷⁷ Instead, Selina's diary recounts her daily routines, her appointments, and financial information about her work as a séance leader. Since the reader has access to narration about the prison through Margaret's diary alone, which fulfills the premise of narration of the self, we are lured into falling into the trap of accepting the parallel between Victorian domesticity and incarceration as equal forms of female confinement. In focusing my analyses on both diaries, I dispute the construction of this parallel in order to argue that the apparent equality in surveillance and oppression within these two spaces, the Victorian home

77 Cf. Abbot, *Diary as Fiction*, pp. 18–21.

and the prison, can only be asserted because Margaret's diary is perceived as more reliable than Selina's.

In Waters' debut novel, *Tipping the Velvet*, London is constructed with an auto-diegetic narrator-protagonist that engages with the city by enacting different gender identities that, as I will discuss in the second chapter, are informed by the social environments in which she circulates. These spaces consist of the theater, the West End, St. John's Wood, and Bethnal Green; the gender identities that Nancy Astley performs are strongly influenced by the class norms that these neighborhoods impose. In the following passage, Nancy finds herself walking around Leicester Square, where she had once been with her ex-lover, Kitty Butler, and their former manager, Walter Bliss. She sees the Shakespeare statue and remembers the day that Walter had taken them there, thinking about how her perception of London had changed since her arrival:

How had my sense of the world changed, since then! I had learned that London life was even stranger and more various than I had ever thought it; but I had learned too that not all its great variety was visible to the casual eye; that not all the pieces of the city sat together smoothly, or graciously, but rather rubbed and chafed and jostled one another, and overlapped; that some, out of fear, kept themselves hidden, and only exposed themselves to those upon whose sympathies they could be sure. Now, all unwittingly, I had been marked out by one such secret element, and claimed by it as a member.⁷⁸

In her translation of Leicester Square into literature, Waters evinces the queer and straight sides of the area. The translation of urban space, in this passage, exposes the blind spots of heteronormativity in the city, as her protagonist appropriates parts of London that are not necessarily perceived as queer.

As Avery notes, "urban spaces are often produced and enacted as [straight spaces]", yet "this 'straight space' has the potential to be contested and challenged, both implicitly and explicitly".⁷⁹ In Waters' novel, Nancy's mobility in the city and her ability to queer the sexual and identity categories that are imposed upon her allows for the portrayal of a queer subculture that is not always available to the 'casual eye'. As Nancy's narration shows, the memories of her arrival in London had only captured the straight side of Leicester Square. However, once she becomes a member of 'the secret element', she is able to recognize and partake in the area's sexual underworld. Waters gives voice to "hidden lesbian histories" and "insert[s] lesbian stories into history"⁸⁰ by contrasting the normal and the deviant in her depiction of Victorian London and by exploring the interdependencies of gender, class, and sexuality as categories that form space, determine its conditions, and limits her characters' power to queer that space.

78 Waters, *Tipping the Velvet*, pp. 200–201.

79 Avery, "Structuring and Interpreting Queer Spaces of London" in Avery and Graham (eds.) *Sex, Time and Place*, p. 9.

80 Mitchell, *Sarah Waters*, p. 6.

Urban mobility and the characters' ability to move through different spaces in the novel is another aspect that I engage with in my analyses, particularly in my examination of *Tipping the Velvet* (chapter 2) and *The Swimming-Pool Library* (chapter 5), and in my comparison between Hollinghurst's and Waters' novels in chapter 8. Michel de Certeau argues that walking in the city creates a "network of moving"⁸¹ that enables the walker to explore fragments of urban space within the trajectories that they pursue. He considers the act of walking to be analogous to speech acts.⁸² Like the speaker, de Certeau explains, the walker appropriates space in order to perform in it, as they take up different positions while walking, changing the ways in which they perform according to the spaces that they are going through, in the same way that one must perform language according to the interlocutor with whom they speak and to the environment in which they speak.⁸³

De Certeau's reflections on the relationship between subject and space are particularly interesting in *Tipping the Velvet*, since Nancy's 'enunciations' are produced according to the possibilities that she encounters to appropriate space. The first part of the novel is marked by her circulation in London as led by her manager, Walter Bliss, who introduces her to Leicester Square, the second part of the novel is marked by her taking over her agency and by her exploring the city on her own terms. She rapidly realizes that, as an unaccompanied woman, her circulation in the city is compromised. Therefore, she decides to cross-dress as a man; this allows her to partake in a completely different geography of the city that is mainly marked by the West End's cruising world and, later, by Diana Lethaby's upper-class environment, where Nancy presents herself as Neville King.

The differences involved in circulating in the city as a man and as a woman are part of my discussions in chapter 8. In literature, it is impossible to dissociate the possibilities of urban mobility from the figure of the *flâneur*. In his renowned work *The Painter of Modern Life*, Baudelaire defines the *flâneur* as a man whose "crowd is his domain [...] [whose] passion and [...] profession is to merge with the crowd". The *flâneur* is a literary figure who gets "[t]o be away from home and yet to feel at home anywhere; to see the world, to be at the very centre of the world, and yet to be unseen of the world, such are some of the minor pleasures of those independent intense and impartial spirits".⁸⁴ Because the *flâneur* is a character who sees and is not seen, who is free to wander around the world and be a 'free spirit', it becomes obvious that this figure, in Baudelaire's perception, can only be a man.

This is precisely the point that feminist scholars such as Janet Wolff, Deborah Epstein Nord, Elizabeth Wilson, and Sally Munt have taken up in their discussions about the *flâneur*. Wolff contends that "the dandy, the *flâneur*, the hero, the stranger – all figures invoked to epitomise the experience of modern life – are invariably male figures".⁸⁵ For Wolff, since the modern city is ultimately experienced by male

81 de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 93.

82 Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 97.

83 Cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 97–98.

84 Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life*, p. 26.

85 Wolff, "The Invisible Flanêuse: Women and the Literature of Modernity", p. 41.

actors, according to the traditional definition of the *flâneur*, the city comes to be a male territory in which the female *flâneuse* is completely effaced. Wilson disputes Wolff's reading of Baudelaire's modern hero because Wolff overtly emphasizes a clear-cut separation between the private and public spheres in the Victorian period and in modernity and she reinforces the idealized notion of female domesticity and passivity. Wilson explains that many women in the late Victorian period, in spite of this ideal, circulated in the urban realm. Her main example is the creation of department stores, which, in her view, corresponds to an upper-class version of idling in the city.⁸⁶

Moreover, Wilson calls attention to the fact that working-class women were often described as "violent, wild and bestial" by upper- and middle-class philanthropists and social workers due to the threat they posed to the ways in which they "thronged the streets",⁸⁷ and often frequented places such as pubs, theaters, and music halls. Apart from working-class women, Wilson notes that many middle- and upper-class female journalists and writers at the end of the nineteenth century took to the streets of London, participating in the city's bohemian and cultural life along with their male counterparts.⁸⁸ Nord also focuses on female journalists and writers to challenge the modern city's perception as a male domain, as she notes how female intellectuals acquire their "consciousness of transgression and trespassing, from the vexed sexuality [their] position implies, and from [their] struggle to escape the status of spectacle and become a spectator".⁸⁹ While Wolff stresses the idea of domesticity and passivity through the invisibility of the '*flâneuse*', Wilson and Nord both affirm a female presence in the modern metropolis, although they do recognize that women's circulation in the city does not pertain to the dominant model of the femininity of the period.

It is this perspective that Waters emphasizes in *Tipping the Velvet*, as she asserts the ways in which women actively took part in London's life, particularly in the theatrical scene in the West End and, later, in the feminist-socialist environment of Bethnal Green. In my reading, I contend that Waters appropriates the *flâneur's* male gaze to create a cross-dressing *flâneur* who exists within the binary of male-female, and who becomes a lesbian *flâneur* in the third part of the novel. Sally Munt postulates mobility as a crucial aspect for explorations of urban space and for sexual experimentation.⁹⁰ In her words, "the lesbian *flâneur* signifies a mobilised female sexuality *in control*, not out of control".⁹¹ It is Nancy's mobility, and her ability to perform, that enables the creation of queer spaces in the novel: these queer spaces are products of her narration, of her subjectivity, and of the ways in which she is able to appropriate the city's supposedly heterosexual spaces.

In my reading of *The Swimming-Pool Library*, the notion of the *flâneur* is conveyed by the practice of cruising. The association between cruising and walking in the modern

86 Cf. Wilson, "The Invisible Flâneur", p. 101.

87 *Ibid.*, p. 104.

88 Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 105.

89 Nord, *Walking the Victorian Streets*, p. 12.

90 *Idem*, *Heroic Desire*, pp. 37–38.

91 Munt, "The Lesbian Flâneur" in Bell and Valentine (eds.) *Mapping Desire*, p. 121, emphasis in original.

city was introduced in Turner's *Backward Glances*. He argues that, as a visual experience, the *flâneur's* act of walking and gazing is indeed a gendered practice, much like Wilson, Wolff, and Nord contend; however, it should not be read exclusively through the binary of male/female positions, since not all men and women move through the city in the same way and, therefore, they inevitably create "different meanings in urban space".⁹² For Turner, walking and seeing in the city is always a more complex and diverse experience and, thus, the cruiser can easily be (mis)taken for a *flâneur*.

Turner explains that the exchange of glances always depends on the possible interactions, and detecting a specific glance, a sexual glance, is a recurrent possibility. It is within this specific network of glances that Turner defines the cruiser as "every other street walker", whose real interests are not necessarily intelligible to all passers-by: "[h]e is the anonymous wanderer who bathes in the multitude [...] in order to seek out another individual [...] whose gaze will meet his own. The cruiser positively *longs* to be seen, but not by everyone, and not in all streets."⁹³ This is the kind of interaction that Will seeks on the streets of London and in the gay venues that he frequents. His highly sexualized narration of London hinges on the sexual possibilities that the city offers, and his privileged status of a white, upper-class gay man places him in a position of dominance in relation to the gay men of color and the working-class men with whom he flirts.

However, his success in finding sex with other men also depends on where he cruises: while his social privileges give him advantages in cruising in West and Central London, he does not obtain the same success in the city's working-class areas. As he approaches a teenage boy in East London, he is promptly rejected, as the boy clearly states that he is only interested in having sex with him in exchange for money.⁹⁴ Later, in New Cross, in South-East London, he exchanges glances with local skinheads, expecting them to show sexual interest in him, as a skinhead once did in Camden Town, but he is brutally beaten up.⁹⁵

Hollinghurst's novels remind us that, in spite of the decriminalization of homosexuality in 1967, homophobia is perpetuated throughout history as a structural relation in society. In *The Swimming-Pool Library*, this is represented with the juxtaposition of Will's account of gay life in the 1980s with Lord Charles Nantwich's diary entries from the beginning of the twentieth century, in which he narrates encounters with prominent 'homophile' figures such as E.M. Forster and Ronald Firbank. Lord Nantwich epitomizes a previous generation of gay men who were persecuted and imprisoned because of their homosexuality, given that he himself was a victim of the 'gay witch hunt' in the 1950s. Not only is homophobia described in terms of violence and juridical prohibition in Hollinghurst's works, it also features in the construction of the female characters of his novels, particularly in both *The Line of Beauty* and in *The Stranger's Child*.

92 Cf. Turner, *Backward Glances*, p. 34.

93 *Ibid.*, p. 36. Emphasis in original.

94 Cf. Hollinghurst, *The Swimming-Pool Library*, pp. 133–134.

95 Cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 174–175.

As Sedgwick has remarkably noted, male bonds have always been charged with homophobia and sexism. Since homosexuality has been historically related to homosocial bonds between men, the boundaries between sexual desire and friendship are blurred, and the corollary effects entail “an endemic and ineradicable state of [...] male homosexual panic [as] the normal condition of male heterosexual entitlement”.⁹⁶ Because the lines between social and sexual are so tenuous, and because homophobia is a paramount aspect of (Western) masculinity, it becomes crucial that men can trace this boundary, which is performed by compulsory heterosexuality. In order to prove that a homosocial bond with another man is not homosexual, women constitute “an absolute of exchange value”, they are the “ultimate victims of the painful contradictions in the gender system that regulates men”.⁹⁷ Thus, Sedgwick contends that homosocial bonds and their intrinsic, compulsory heterosexuality are fundamental to the maintenance and reproduction of the patriarchal order, which enables homophobia. In discussing homosocial relations between men, Sedgwick sees a valuable source to reflect on the ways in which male bonding has shifted throughout history, in literature from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, showing how the features of homosexual panic, homophobia, and heterosexual compulsion remain key elements of these relationships.

The reproduction of elements of homophobia, heterosexual compulsion, and sexism in Hollinghurst’s works suggest that, while there have been shifts in gay culture throughout history, there are still spaces in which homosexuality is not tolerated. On the one hand, his works affirmatively represent male homosexuality as part of a cultural, literary, political, and historical English tradition, since his gay characters circulate in conservative and traditional spaces such as the Oxbridge circles, the parliament and high-rank governmental positions; on the other hand, though, Hollinghurst points to the fact that the idea of ‘sexual freedom’, put forward by gay liberation movements in the 1960s and 1970s, is limited to specific historical and cultural circumstances. Where *The Swimming-Pool Library* portrays Will’s supposedly free circulation in certain parts of London, *The Line of Beauty* depicts the ways in which AIDS, hysterical homophobia, and Thatcherism negatively impacted gay culture in London and restricted the possibilities of cruising.

In his works, Hollinghurst interconnects past and present by evincing the ways in which homophobia is systematically reproduced, even at times when there is no juridical prohibition regarding homosexuality and by dialoguing with literary styles, genres, and authors that have been coined as part of a ‘homophile tradition’. In *The Line of Beauty*, for instance, he employs intertextual references to Henry James’ works and to nineteenth century aestheticism to depict London under Thatcherite government and its consequences for the lives of gay subjects during that period. Like Waters, he relies on intertextuality to represent London, focusing predominantly on affluent and white parts of the city, spaces that bring out the class, gender, and racial privileges that mark most of his characters.

96 Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet*, p. 185.

97 *Idem*, *Between Men: British Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, p. 134.

While Waters' translation of London into literature hinges on feminist and queer politics⁹⁸ by engaging with popular literary genres and by introducing female and lesbian characters in predominantly male plots⁹⁹ (e.g., the picaresque novel in *Tipping the Velvet*), Hollinghurst's intertextual references stem from canonical writers such as Oscar Wilde, E. M. Forster, and Henry James. As many critics have elucidated, Waters is one of the most acclaimed writers of neo-Victorian fiction, returning to the past to critically revise it and to engage with the nineteenth century's literary genres, such as the sensation and gothic novels, to include lesbian history within canonical tradition and to create a fictional lesbian historiography.¹⁰⁰ Not only does she reverberate the works of celebrated authors such as Charles Dickens, Wilkie Collins, and the Brontës, but she also incorporates contemporary queer and feminist theories in her plot as well as in her characters' relationship to London. As I will discuss in greater depth in chapter 8, Waters' and Hollinghurst's intertextual references, and the ways they appropriate established literary genres and styles, are deeply informed by the gender differences ascribed to the literary canon, the participation of women in literature, and the ways in which male homosexuality has always been more visible in English culture than female same-sex desire.

As contemporary writers, Waters and Hollinghurst look back on English and literary history to reflect upon the ways in which gay and lesbian cultures have marked London's cultural geography. The depictions of places, buildings, and historical events are not only employed as sources to produce historical fiction, but also as means to insert homosexuality in English literature. In other words, Waters and Hollinghurst intertwine past and present in their constructions of London by simultaneously articulating historical and fictional narratives that provide different perspectives of gay and lesbian histories in the city. In the chapters that follow, we shall see the effects of translating London and its queerness into fiction, contemplating the ways in which these distinct authorial lenses recount gay and lesbian histories and their relation to London's sexual geography.

98 Cf. Jones and O'Callaghan, "Sarah Waters' Feminisms" in Jones and O'Callaghan (eds.) *Sarah Waters and Contemporary Feminism*, pp. 10–15.

99 Cf. Palmer, "Representations of Queer London in the Fiction of Sarah Waters" in Avery and Graham (eds.) *Sex, Time and Place*, pp. 82–83.

100 Cf. Armitt and Gamble, "The Haunted Geometries of Sarah Waters' *Affinity*"; Carroll, "Re-thinking generational history: Queer histories of sexuality in neo-Victorian feminist fiction"; Heilmann, "Doing It With Mirrors: Neo-Victorian Metatextual Magic in *Affinity*, *The Prestige* and *The Illusionist*"; Mitchell, *Sarah Waters*, pp. 5–8.

Sarah Waters

Chapter 2

London is a Stage

Gender Identity, Class and Urban Theatrical Artifice in *Tipping the Velvet*

Introduction

Published in 1998, Sarah Waters' *Tipping the Velvet* depicts London's late-Victorian period, taking the reader on a journey through the city that was known for its wicked lifestyle, but which concurrently tried to assert itself as a city of virtues and well-established social manners. In *Tipping the Velvet*, Waters focuses on lesbianism at the end of the nineteenth century in London, narrating a history of the city and of the period that has often been overlooked by dominant historical accounts. History is told through the life of Nancy Astley, a young girl from Whitstable, in Kent, who goes to London after falling in love with the male impersonator Kitty Butler. Divided into three parts, the novel begins with Nancy's sexual awakening as she watches Kitty perform at a local theater in Whitstable. In the first part of the novel, Nancy's debut as Kitty's sidekick on stage displays the possibilities of theatrical performance as a means to denaturalize gender and sexuality as fixed identity categories, given that Nancy uses the stage as a way to live out her sexual relationship with Kitty and to perform a non-binary gender identity. In the second part, which is marked by the end of Nancy's career as an actress in London theaters, Nancy finds places on the streets of the city on which she can stage her performance as a man and can explore London's sexual possibilities, on the streets of the West End in particular. Lastly, the third part of the novel takes the reader to East London, and to Bethnal Green more specifically, where Nancy encounters other women who, like herself, are masculine and who nurture same-sex desire for other women.

In this chapter, I aim to elucidate how Waters employs the theater as a literary device to discuss vulnerability and legibility in gender and sexual performance in the city, asserting that theatrical artifice and the necessity to perform identity is something that must be negotiated in order to warrant the protagonist's subjectivity and survival in urban space. Additionally, I propose an analysis of the role played by

class in the representation of different parts of London and in the development of Nancy's character throughout the novel. In so doing, I will argue that Waters uses class to determine the ways in which the protagonist will perform each of her gender identities and the ways in which they are enacted in distinct spatial configurations.

The novel's central thematic and aesthetic elements, which are attuned to gender performance, have been discussed previously by several critics.¹ However, none of these critics has directly addressed class as a defining category in the construction of gender and sexual identity, as they mainly focus on the Butlerian performance of lesbian identity and of female masculinity.² In my reading of *Tipping the Velvet*, I wish to associate London's socio-economic geography in late-Victorian London with its sexual and artistic subcultures, which are located in the cosmopolitan West End, in Brixton, Soho, and East London in the novel. As Alden has noted, *Tipping the Velvet* is "the most performative of Waters's texts".³ In choosing the performative aspect of gender as a central topic in the novel, Alden contends that "Waters makes explicit the provisional nature of any enactment of gender, in any period, and simultaneously makes explicit the performative, provisional nature of historical fiction more generally".⁴ For Alden, Waters' employment of Butlerian reflections about gender performance and performativity in the novel functions as a way to evince the contingency of gender identity. If Waters' novel displays the provisional nature of gender identity, as Alden points out, then it is important to stress that this provisionality is, in fact, informed by historical, cultural, and spatial frameworks that are at stake during a specific period.

In *Tipping the Velvet*, the Victorian past and contemporary reflections about gender are conflated to challenge the passivity of women in the nineteenth century and the widely spread assumption of female (passive) domesticity from that same period. Language is a pivotal concern in Waters' novel, as she imitates the style of prominent Victorian writers such as Charles Dickens, but in the act of repeating Victorian vocabulary and terms, she accrues contemporary meanings to nineteenth-century vocabulary and language that pertains to the sexual and gender politics of our time. A recurring example is the use of the word 'queer' throughout the novel, which often varies from its nineteenth century meaning of strangeness and oddness to its contemporary meaning of LGBTQ sexualities. For instance, as Nancy is in Whitstable to watch Kitty's performance, she has a view, which is "side-on and rather queer, but

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- 1 Cf. Alden, "Accompanied by Ghosts': The Changing Uses of the Past in Sarah Waters's Lesbian Fiction" in Jones and O'Callaghan (eds.) *Sarah Waters and Contemporary Feminisms*; Davies, *Gender and Ventriloquism in Victorian and Neo-Victorian Fiction*; Neal, "Neo-Victorian Impersonations: Vesta Tilley and *Tipping the Velvet*"; O'Callaghan, "Crisley "L" business': Re-valuing Female Masculinity and Butch Subjectivity in *Tipping the Velvet* and *The Night Watch*" in Jones and O'Callaghan (eds.) *Sarah Waters and Contemporary Feminisms*.
 - 2 Cf. Davies, *Gender and Ventriloquism in Victorian and Neo-Victorian Fiction*; Neal, "Neo-Victorian Impersonations: Vesta Tilley and *Tipping the Velvet*"; O'Callaghan, "Crisley "L" business': Re-valuing Female Masculinity and Butch Subjectivity in *Tipping the Velvet* and *The Night Watch*" in Jones and O'Callaghan (eds.) *Sarah Waters and Contemporary Feminisms*.
 - 3 Alden, "Accompanied by Ghosts': The Changing Uses of the Past in Sarah Waters's Lesbian Fiction" in Jones and O'Callaghan (eds.) *Sarah Waters and Contemporary Feminisms*, p. 66.
 - 4 *Ibid.*

when [Kitty] strode, as before to the front of the stage it seemed to [Nancy] her step was lighter".⁵ Later, after Nancy had already seen Kitty's act several times, she realizes her "wildness of the past seven days", and she thinks "how queer it is! – and yet, how very ordinary: *I am in love with you*".⁶ In this passage, the word queer resonates the contemporary meaning of same-sex desire (i.e., queer love) as it still makes reference to Nancy's feeling of oddness in discovering her sexual desire for another woman.

It is the act of repetition in Waters' novel that interests Davies in her analysis of *Tipping the Velvet*. Davies questions whether Waters' portrayal of the late Victorian period actually yields transformations in patriarchal history or just simply repeats Victorian norms without any "liberatory transformation".⁷ Drawing on discussions about Butler's gender theories, Davies concludes that, where Butler foresees possible shifts in the repetition of gender norms, Waters is ambivalent about these transformations. On the one hand, she argues that "gender trouble repeatedly emerges as Nancy re-cites and subverts the heteronormative script of gender to express development of her queer subjectivity"; on the other hand, though, Davies writes that Nancy "can never wholly free herself from the machinations of gendered scripts [...] which constrains her agency and autonomy".⁸ In Davies' reading of the novel, even as Nancy finds true love in the feminist-socialist milieu in Bethnal Green after she meets Florence Banner, the protagonist realizes that "stepping outside of this system is not an option",⁹ and that one's agency is always constrained by norms and regulation.

Nancy recounts her story retrospectively, in an autodiegetic narration, giving an account of her trajectory in discovering sexual desire for other women and in performing a non-binary gender identity. In doing so, her story expresses viewpoints of alterity and of Nancy's own perception of selfhood. I will argue that the slippages that propel the development of her queer subjectivity are precisely the moments in which others' perceptions of her coincide with the non-binary gender identity that she wishes to convey through her identity. Conversely, it is in the moments that she cannot enact an ambiguous gender identity, which happens precisely as she begins to circulate in London in masculine attire, that her agency becomes limited to the 'gender scripts' to which Davies refers. In my reading of the novel, I am interested in the ways in which some spatial configurations enable the emergence of a non-binary gender identity, and the enactment of same-sex desire, while other spaces curtail the possibilities for more fluid identities. As I will elucidate further in this chapter, class plays a pivotal role in the materialization of Nancy's various identities, since it is class that dictates the 'gender scripts' that she must perform.

As we will see, the first two parts of the novel mark the passage of the stage in the theater to the city as a stage. The first part focuses on Nancy's career as a male impersonator in London theaters, and the second on her performance as a young man in London's various social spaces. I argue that it is possible to read these two parts

5 Waters, *Tipping the Velvet*, p. 17.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 33.

7 Davies, *Gender and Ventriloquism in Victorian and Neo-Victorian Fiction*, p. 115.

8 *Ibid.*, pp. 115–116.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 124.

in light of Butlerian notions of gender construction: firstly, this can be undertaken in terms of the function exercised by drag performances in revealing the imitative characteristic of gender construction, and secondly concerning the *necessity* to perform gender in order to yield substance and coherence upon one's gender and sexual identity as a means to obtain intelligibility within a social space. In the third part, however, I argue that the notion of performance is ultimately superseded by notions of *naturalness* and *authenticity* of self and identity that is suggestively associated with working-class femininity.

The development of Nancy's queer subjectivity is defined by the challenges that emerge throughout the narrative in many ways. On stage, Nancy must perform as a soldier and as a gentleman and, in order to do so, she must learn specific gestures and body language that will provide the impression of a woman impersonating a man. As Nancy becomes a renter in the second part of the novel, her roles are given by chance, not by her manager Walter Bliss. As a renter, Nancy must embody a 'real' man who moves through the West End's cruising networks, so that she can encounter the sexual gaze of other men. As Diana Lethaby's escort, Neville King, Nancy must perform masculinity according to the upper-class economy of language and behavior. Later, as she meets Florence, Nancy's gender identity finally consolidates as a working-class butch who is portrayed as more authentic than the other identities that Nancy takes up in the novel.

It is through Nancy's life-journey in London that Waters discusses representations of homosexuality, gender, class, and different cultural backgrounds, articulating them in concert with the rapid and overwhelming urban development experienced by Londoners in the late Victorian period. As Lynda Nead has argued, London was the Victorian Babylon; "it was a place that symbolized material wonder and tumultuous destruction; a city whose splendour was its downfall".¹⁰ On the one hand, London was the notable capital of the Empire, which stood out for its accelerated urban development and advanced technology; on the other hand, urban growth also meant the rise of subcultures and the possibility of anonymity in the city. Cook explains that urban growth and the increase of anonymity in the city allowed "a subcultural network to become more organized and integrated into city life",¹¹ resulting in venues frequented by 'mollies' or 'sodomites'. However, it was mainly men who circulated in London's sexual subculture. As I will discuss further in chapter 8, lesbian spaces in the nineteenth century have been largely invisible throughout history and culture, since women's circulation in urban spaces was more restricted than men's and they did not have the same financial independency as their male counterparts.¹²

Apart from the ascent of a sexual subculture, there was also great fascination with working-class communities and slums during the Victorian era. As we can see in the writings of Charles Dickens, the London underworld came to be a prominent trope to represent the variety of 'street stereotypes', as well as the contrasts between the

10 Nead, *Victorian Babylon*, p. 3

11 Cook, *London and the Culture of Homosexuality, 1885–1914*, pp. 9–10.

12 Cf. Gowning, "History" in Medhurst and Munt (eds.) *Lesbian and Gay Studies: a Critical Introduction*, p. 61; Houlbrook, *Queer London*, p. 10

rich and the poor in an urban context. Wilson notes that a large part of Victorian journalism “was a literature of voyeurism, revealing to its middle-class audience a hidden life of the city which offered not so much grist for reform as vicarious, even illicit enjoyment of the forbidden ‘Other’”,¹³ as is the case with George Augustus Sala’s texts about London life. For Wilson, Sala and Dickens were writers who “saw everything from [their] privileged perch on an omnibus roof”,¹⁴ as they were able to remain invisible while watching the city as a spectacle. Women, of course, were not granted the same privilege. Wilson maintains that the gaze presented in Victorian literature is almost strictly a male gaze that was able to be anonymous and watch, while women were always the object of that gaze and were, therefore, considered vulnerable to it. It is in this context that the circulation of women in cities was of great concern to governmental authorities and society, given that public discourse claimed control over women under the premise of guaranteeing their safety in urban space.¹⁵

With their limited agency to circulate in the city, it is not a coincidence that the period’s popular genres, such as the picaresque novel and the *Bildungsroman* are, as Emily Jeremiah puts it, “by definition masculinist forms”.¹⁶ Jeremiah reads Waters’ first novel as a queer version of the picaresque novel and the *Bildungsroman*, arguing that *Tipping the Velvet* challenges these genres’ masculinist conventions by introducing a queer heroine who “progresses from oyster-girl to dresser, to music-hall artiste to rent boy, to sex slave to housewife/parent and socialist orator”.¹⁷ Although I do see elements of the *Bildungsroman* in the novel, which are mainly articulated in terms of the protagonist’s maturing and psychological development,¹⁸ my reading of the novel will focus mainly on the picaresque plot, since its episodic narration is constructed around the frequent shifts in the spaces in which the protagonist circulates.¹⁹

In creating a lesbian picaro, Waters appropriates the dominant male gaze that is historically attributed to the figure of the *flâneur* as a means to represent “Victorian London from female and queer viewpoints”.²⁰ In so doing, Palmer argues that Waters’ depiction of London in the novel juxtaposes already established references of “dominant culture with its marginalized counterpart” that are found in Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins, to include discussions about gender and sexuality in “feminine and queer areas of metropolitan life at which [these authors] merely hint”.²¹ In her debut novel, Waters brings the participation of women in London to light by exploring the 1880s as an important moment for the circulation of women in urban space. It was in the late Victorian period that women began to effectively take part in the city’s

13 Wilson, *The Sphinx in the City*, p. 27.

14 *Ibid.*

15 *Idem*, “The Invisible Flâneur”, p. 90.

16 Jeremiah, “The ‘I’ inside ‘her’: Queer Narration in Sarah Waters’s *Tipping the Velvet* and Wesley Stace’s *Misfortune*”, p. 135.

17 *Ibid.*

18 Cf. Garland, *The Oxford Companion to German Literature*, p. 87.

19 Cf. Hartveit, *Workings of the Picaresque in the British Novel*, pp. 12–14.

20 Palmer, “Representations of Queer London in the Fiction of Sarah Waters” in Avery and Graham (eds.) *Sex, Time and Place*, p. 83.

21 *Ibid.*

life, accessing theaters, department stores, libraries, and parks, for instance, and to promote new models of femininity that did not necessarily converge with the familial and domestic spheres.²² By the late 1870s, women comprised a great part of the audience in music halls, which thirty, forty years earlier had consisted, by and large, of men.²³ In theaters, women increasingly became a visible part of the audience and, as artists, they achieved great success on London stages.

One of the most prominent acts in the late-Victorian theaters were male impersonations, which destabilized gender norms, parodied the dominant male behavior of the time, and presented models of femininity that conflated masculine gestures, language, and dressing.²⁴ Stokoe points out that the first generation of male impersonators, whose popularity was at its peak in the 1870s and 1880s, “thrived on theatrical realism, stereotypically ‘masculine’ gestures and attributes, and the resignification of male-coded behaviours”.²⁵ Throughout the 1880s, male impersonation acts came to embody more elements of femininity and androgyny in their performance, as was the case with the popular male impersonator in this period, Vesta Tilley. Stokoe interprets this shift to be a result of the anxieties that were exposed in women acting out male roles. In adding “affectation of ‘refinement’ and delicacy [...] with a deliberate replication of childish innocence”, the act could be considered, according to Stokoe, “less threatening to stereotypical gender roles”.²⁶ As I will show, the success of performing masculinity on stage, something Kitty and Nancy achieve, hinges on their ability to display their femininity as a form of entertainment. That is, as performers, they must always ensure that they are women pretending to be men; they must not be associated with inversion and, therefore, homosexuality or be perceived as a woman who enacted masculine gestures in her daily life.

Music hall culture triggered a great deal of anxiety in London’s conservative society due to its “connotations of degeneracy, vulgarity and the potential danger to the sexual mores”. In this sense, “the female cross-dresser on the stage posed a further concern to society”,²⁷ being often considered, in Marjorie Garber’s words, “a sign and symptom of the dissolution of boundaries, and of the arbitrariness of social law and custom”.²⁸ The perils of gender and sexual transgressions were not the only cause for concern in late-Victorian music halls. As Stedman Jones explains, music hall culture was most popular among the working-class population and it was considered an extension of the public house, because of the sale of alcohol in the venues. Although there were central palaces in London that were attended by a middle-class audience, music halls were predominantly a working-class leisure activity not only because of its audience, but also because the performers stemmed mainly from a working-class background

22 Cf. Nord, *Walking the Victorian Streets*; Nead, *Victorian Babylon*; Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight* and Wilson, *The Sphinx in the City*.

23 Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight*, p. 45.

24 Cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 45–46.

25 Stokoe, “Are Drag Kings Still Too Queer for London? From the Nineteenth-Century Impersonator to the Drag King of Today” in Avery and Graham (eds.) *Sex, Time and Place*, p. 98.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 99.

27 Neal, “(Neo-)Victorian Impersonations: Vesta Tilley and *Tipping the Velvet*”, p. 56.

28 Garber, *Vested Interests*, p. 25.

and the songs' and sketches' contents narrated working-class life and culture.²⁹ For Stedman Jones, music halls were so attractive to the working-class because they were "escapist and yet strongly rooted in the realities of working-class life".³⁰

While Stedman Jones regards the music hall as a way to escape the difficulties of poverty, scholars such as Neal, Stokoe, Garber, and Walkowitz perceive music halls as places for potential transgression in gender and sexual mores. As a matter of fact, Neal points out that Waters' performers, Kitty Butler and Nancy Astley, were inspired by the prominent male impersonators in Victorian music halls, Vesta Tilley and Hetty King.³¹ The features of subversion of sexual mores and the aspects of class appear as historical artifices for the depiction of late-Victorian London music halls and the discussion of performance of gender and sexuality in *Tipping the Velvet*. Waters' descriptions of music hall audiences, venues, and male impersonation acts are described according to social class and neighborhood. In the beginning of the novel, Kitty and Nancy are usually found performing in music halls in the East End and in South London in which they encounter working-class audiences. As they become more popular, they come to perform in better-off theaters in the West End, such as the Theatre Royal, and in East London, such as the Britannia Theatre in Hoxton, where there are middle- and upper-class audiences.

As I will elucidate elsewhere in this chapter, Waters explores the contrasts between working-, middle- and upper-class music hall cultures in London in tandem with the potential subversion of male impersonation acts. While Nancy's life as a music hall artist is shown as the beginning of sexual discovery and a potential starting point for the embodiment of a non-binary gender identity, music hall culture is also depicted as a possibility of class ascension. Stokoe writes that Vesta Tilley married her manager Walter de Frece partly as a means to obtain respectability from the media. According to Stokoe, Tilley's marriage offered her the possibility of moving from a modest working-class and musical background to the status of an upper-class artist, thereby repelling "any suspicion of impropriety that might have been allotted to her as an actress at that time".³² Waters composes a similar story in the development of Kitty's character, as she marries their manager Walter Bliss to obtain respectability and eschew the rumors of her being a 'tom'. The novel suggests that both Kitty and Nancy come from working-class backgrounds, yet while Kitty opts for social ascension and respectability through marriage, giving up her life on the stage, Nancy rejects her life as an actress and takes to the streets to turn them into stages in her journey.

In *Tipping the Velvet*, Waters intertwines historical narratives about London in the late-nineteenth century, regarding namely urban development, the participation of women in the public sphere and music hall culture, with contemporary reflections on gender performance. The thematic scope of male impersonation and Victorian class culture permeates the whole novel, but Waters appropriates these topics to queer the

29 Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class*, pp. 204–205.

30 *Ibid.*, pp. 227–228.

31 Neal, "(Neo-)Victorian Impersonations: Vesta Tilley and *Tipping the Velvet*", p. 56.

32 Stokoe, "Are Drag Kings Still Too Queer for London? From the Nineteenth-Century Impersonator to the Drag King of Today" in Avery and Graham (eds.) *Sex, Time and Place*, p. 100.

boundaries of the picaresque novel. Where the traditional male protagonist explores the world to obtain social ascension, as is usually the case in the picaresque plot, Nancy rejects this objective straight away. In doing so, she chooses to explore the world by embodying different gender identities, choosing sexual pleasure over financial comfort, and confronting the risks of being sexually deviant in a city of intense moral surveillance.

London, History, and the Music Hall

Prior to pursuing my analysis of gender performance in the novel, I wish to provide an overall background history of class culture in London in the late-nineteenth century and discuss Waters' representations of the city's different socio-economic milieus. As I will show throughout my reading of the novel, social class is, as Michael Savage and Andrew Miles contend, deeply related to space. In reflecting on the working-class and urban space, Savage and Miles write that "class formation is a spatial process"³³ in which places acquire social meanings according to the social groups that inhabit them and the ways in which individuals organize themselves within them. They suggest that, to a certain extent, people produce the identity of the place they inhabit in much the same way that their own identities are formed in relation to those spaces.

Savage, Miles and Stedman Jones argue that territorial issues played a great role in the formation of working-class culture in the Victorian period. Stedman Jones points out that, in the first half of the nineteenth century, the middle-class displayed great anxiety towards workers' political positions (e.g., Chartism, trade unionism, and republicanism) and also towards their ways of living, given that there were innumerable problems of urban order that involved illnesses, such as cholera and scarlet fever, and waves of high unemployment combined with the formation of slums and an increase in price of food.³⁴ By the end of the nineteenth century, lower middle-class populations began to migrate to the suburbs in search of "the realm of security and peace" just as middle-class concerns over paupers and poor areas in East London increased and as public transport developed in the city.³⁵ Savage and Miles argue that a working-class culture emerged, especially in East London, in this new context of urban mobility in the late nineteenth century, in which members of lower-middle classes moved to the suburbs and could commute to central parts of London.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, workers generally worked closer to their homes and experienced more conviviality in the workplace and also at local pubs, which also functioned as sites for political organization and discussions.³⁶ Stedman Jones, Savage and Miles assert that it was at the end of the nineteenth century and

33 Savage and Miles, *The Remaking of the British Working Class*, p. 57.

34 Stedman Jones, *The Language of Class*, pp. 194–195.

35 Savage and Miles, *The Remaking of the British Working Class*, p. 62. Savage and Miles state that the peak of the suburbanization process in London took place between 1890 and 1914: "In 1891, 538 million journeys were made on local trains, trams and buses [...]. Elsewhere, however, suburbanisation only began to have a marked impact on urban living after 1900" (p. 63).

36 Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class*, p. 217.

beginning of the twentieth century that working-class culture gradually instituted itself and came to be recognized as distinct from middle-class culture. While churches and philanthropists sought to ‘civilize’ and ‘moralize’ working-class subjects in the first half of the nineteenth century, the territorial separation between the middle- and the working-classes in the second half of the century contributed to the development of a new working-class culture that was “impervious to evangelic or utilitarian attempts to establish its character or direction”.³⁷ In Stedman Jones’ analysis, he defends that this new working-class consciousness entailed less radicalism in class politics, passive approval of imperialism, a growing interest in pubs, race-courses, and music halls, and less engagement with politics and education.³⁸

In Waters’ first novel, these historical aspects are construed in terms of the spatial segregation that divides and distinguishes upper-, middle-, and working-class neighborhoods in London, emphasizing the ways in which these spaces influence the protagonist’s identity and subjectivity. As is the case with Dickensian literature, the contrasts between the lives of the working- and middle-classes in London depict the unequal material contexts that determine the characters’ lives, agency, and citizenship. In *Tipping the Velvet*, notions of class lend the plot an aesthetics of realism that historically portrays different class cultures in London and their spatial organization. In Waters’ representation of London, middle- and upper-class neighborhoods, such as the West End and St. John’s Wood, display great material disparity in relation to their working-class counterparts, such as Brixton and Bethnal Green.

The contrasts between light and darkness, commonly used in Dickens’ novels, define the unequal access that certain social milieus had to urban development; we can see this in Waters’ depictions of the West End, described in terms of colors, variety, and cosmopolitanism, in contrast to East London and Brixton, which lack both safety and light.³⁹ The different spatial and social conditions represented in Nancy’s mobility in London are crucial for the making of the picaresque novel, in which the protagonist circulates through several social contexts and overcomes challenges in order to find a place in which they can belong. Nancy’s character is constructed in terms of her ability to easily adapt to and move through numerous social environments; these abilities are some of the features that define the figure of the picaro, whose “chameleonlike skill in adopting the language and manners of the class he is trying to infiltrate is also evidence of the extent to which he has been bitten by social ambition”.⁴⁰

Waters uses the established picaro character as the basis for the construction of her protagonist. As Hartveit notes, the picaro usually comes from a low-class origin and maintains a conflictive relation with their surroundings, struggling to find a position in society.⁴¹ Nancy Astley is presented as a chameleonlike figure, as Hartveit describes, who moves from one social group to the next, confronting villains and overcoming many misfortunes, such as the breakup with Kitty, the end of her career

37 *Ibid.*, p. 215.

38 *Ibid.*, pp. 217–219.

39 Cf. Waters, *Tipping the Velvet*, pp. 344–345.

40 Hartveit, *Workings of the Picaresque in the British Novel*, p.16.

41 Cf. *Ibid.*

as an actress, and her life as Diana Lethaby's sex toy. Waters queers the picaresque plot by both introducing a lesbian protagonist and also by shifting the picaro's ambition. While Hartveit contends that the picaro's main ambition lies on their desire to obtain class ascension, Nancy seeks spaces in which she can openly act out her sexual and gender identity.

Following the picaresque plot's features of mobility and adventure, Nancy Astley's circulation in the city also operates as a means to present London's spatial inequalities, starting with the colorful West End and Brixton's darkness, moving through the affluent St. John's Wood, where Diana lives, and ending up in working-class East London. In the first part of the novel, Nancy only circulates in carriages and never alone, given that she is often accompanied by Kitty and, when out on the streets, by their manager Walter Bliss. As soon as both girls arrive at Charing Cross, Mr. Bliss takes them on a carriage tour starting in Trafalgar Square, passing Haymarket, and finally taking a look at some of the theaters near Leicester Square. Nancy and Kitty are overwhelmed by the glamour of the bohemian West End and by the grandiosity of theaters such as the Empire and the Alhambra. As a spectator, Nancy describes the variety of people she sees on the streets: men and women getting off their carriages, women dressed in shawls and in neckties, soldiers, black men, Italians, and Greeks. After a quick drink near the Shakespeare monument in Leicester Square, they begin their journey to Brixton, in South London, where Nancy and Kitty shall live:

Once we had left the West End and crossed the river, the streets grew greyer and quite dull. The houses and the people here were smart, but rather uniform, as if all crafted by the same unimaginary hand: there was none of that strange glamour, that lovely queer variety of Leicester Square. Soon, too, the streets ceased even to be smart, and became a little shabby; each corner that we passed, each public house, each row of shops and houses, seemed dingier than the one before. [...] I kept my face pressed to the window, wondering when we should ever leave behind these dreary districts and reach Greasepaint Avenue, our home.⁴²

Nancy's crossing of the river displays stark differences between the North and the South of the River Thames, describing the areas around Leicester Square as colorful and diverse, which are related to better material conditions, in contrast to poorer areas of the city, such as Brixton, which are perceived as grey, dark, and dodgy; the latter's characteristics are reminiscent of the protagonist's own home in Whitstable. In fact, Nancy's disappointment when they arrive in Brixton concerns the similarities found between Greasepaint Avenue, a popular name for the fictitious Ginevra Road, and the streets of her hometown. Before going to London, when Walter says they are going to live on a street where many artists live, Nancy fantasizes about a place where streets are "set out like a make-up box", and each of the houses has a "different colour roof".⁴³ The reality that gets closer to her fantasy is the one visited in the West End, an entertainment area for middle- and upper-class groups that had been stage to much of the theatrical and artistic life in late-Victorian London.

42 Waters, *Tipping the Velvet*, p. 67.

43 *Ibid.*, p. 61.

While the traditional picaresque plot proposes the performance of class to achieve social ascension, *Tipping the Velvet* suggests the performance of gender and sexuality as a means to achieve a sense of belonging as a masculine lesbian. In this sense, the depiction of class in the novel functions as a way to determine the mannerisms, language, and gestures that Nancy must imitate in order to perform a certain kind of male or female identity, and the notion of theatricality is crucial for the discussion of authenticity in the character's performance. In the first part of the novel, the enacting of Nancy's sexual and gender identity takes place on theater stages, whereas her participation in urban life is limited to the role of the spectator whose eyes are frequently guided by Walter Bliss. It is the first misfortune that Nancy encounters, her breakup with Kitty, that marks the transition between the first and the second part of the novel, triggering an important shift in her agency as she walks out the Britannia Theatre's stage door in Hoxton, to step onto the streets of London as an actor and not as mere spectator. In this part, the interconnectedness of class and space are crucial in dictating Nancy's gender performance in the city, as she leaves her acting career on London stages to confront the challenges imposed by London's staged realities.

Garber writes that "when gender enters into such [social] codes, as, inevitably, it does, it is usually as a subset of class, status, rank or wealth",⁴⁴ suggesting that dress codes are consolidated according to gendered roles that are unavoidably established by class relations. Nancy's and Kitty's characterization for their stage performances are outlined by types, such as the guardsman, the sailor, and the gentleman, whose dress codes are imposed by their professions and class. Following the shifts in male impersonation acts in the late nineteenth century, in which the performance of masculinity was marked by feminine gestures, Kitty's and Nancy's performance on stage is comprised of them dressing up as men, but also of emphasizing that they are women playing a male role. The stage is a space that Nancy can dress outside the rigid Victorian dressing codes for women, as long as she can convey the image of femininity in male attire. Yet, where Nancy subverts these norms in terms of gender on stage, she does not so in terms of class, precisely because what makes these male figures recognizable to the public is the meaning of their social position: the gentleman, a well-off type who wears a hat and carries a cane; the sailor and the guardsmen, a more masculine type in garment, who usually stems from a working-class background.

Before Nancy takes to the streets of London, after her breakup with Kitty, she takes a bag full of costumes that she has worn on stage. As she realizes that it is extremely difficult to walk as a woman in London, she remembers that she does look a lot like a boy. Nancy is able to circulate in London as a man by taking advantage of her gentlemen's suits, male serge jackets, and guardsman attire. However, as I will elucidate in the following section, performing as a man on the streets of London entails the necessity of not being recognized as a woman. As Nancy is dressed in "a guardsman uniform, with a neat little cap"⁴⁵ near the Burlington Arcade, a gentleman approaches her and offers her money for sex. In this scene, her role as a guardsman determines her position as, at least apparently, a working-class rent-boy, whereas the

44 Garber, *Vested Interests*, p. 23.

45 Waters, *Tipping the Velvet*, p. 196.

man, who is described as a gentleman, is someone who is cruising in the area and finds the renter by chance. This episode takes place on Burlington Arcade, in West London, very near Piccadilly Circus, a place known as a cruising spot for gay men. In wearing her guardsman costume in this place, Nancy unknowingly puts herself in the cruising network of gay men, entering the realm of the recurring encounter of middle- and upper-class men with working-class boys on the streets of London.

Nancy's transition from spectator to actor in the city is vital for the development of the picaresque plot, particularly in the passage from the second to the third part of the novel, which is marked by Nancy's achievement of social belonging, as she encounters Florence and her lesbian/feminist friends in Bethnal Green. As I will show, the two first parts of the novel display a clear relation with theater performance, whereas the third part conveys a notion of wholeness and authenticity of self, as it were, in which performance is not necessary. This is because the working-class environment in East London provides a social space for the protagonist's full identification. East London appears as a part of the city that welcomes all marginalized subjects, a place in which the poor are happy and homophobia can be ignored. It is possible to argue that this part of the city functions as a utopian place, a place in which all of the protagonist's problems regarding her gender and sexual identity are resolved: the working-class norms are able to give naturalness to the protagonist's masculine lesbian selfhood.

Waters uses the stage to open up the discussion on gender performance, asserting the historical importance music hall acts – male impersonations in particular – had in the formation of cultural, gender, and the period's sexual identities. The figure of the cross-dresser appeared as an alternative to the strict binary femininity and masculinity models that circulated at the time. The s/he figure embodies the masculine and feminine, an amorphous body that oscillates between the figure of the woman and that of the man: it partly manifests desired male figures, represented through characters who are womanizers, and it partly displays female figures, who are delicate and sensual to the public's gazes. The s/he character performed by the male impersonator embodies the figure of the oyster the protagonist Nancy Astley claims to be in the very beginning of the novel: "the oyster, you see, is what you might call a real queer fish – now a he, now a she, as quite takes its fancy. A regular morphodite, in fact!"⁴⁶

Yet, while the oyster figure remains a character on stage, it demands caution in its performance on the streets of London. Here, Nancy must enact *either* a male *or* a female persona, repeating gestures, and mannerisms that her class environment imposes. The protagonist's ability to move in between male and female gives the novel a queerness that destabilizes heteronormative dichotomies of homo/heterosexuality and male/female to construe an imaginative possibility of a queer London that offers various stages for the enacting of temporary and contingent sexual and gender identities. Nevertheless, in depicting East London as a utopian space for lesbian identity, Waters restrains the possibilities of transgression encountered in the appropriation of space as a means to disrupt normative discourses, a process that is often restricted in reality but that can become a potential force of representation in literature.

46 *Ibid.*, p. 49.

Drawing on the relationship between literature and lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*), Kilian understands literature as a heterotopia, “an *other* place that, as Foucault argues, simultaneously represents, questions and subverts real places”.⁴⁷ In tracing Foucault’s definitions of this concept in various works, her discussion about literature as heterotopia proceeds from the French philosopher’s definition of heterotopias in *The Order of Things*, in which he relates the concept directly to language. Here, Foucault defines heterotopias as a “non-place of language”,⁴⁸ where naming becomes impossible and the holding together of language is scattered: “heterotopias are disturbing, probably because they undermine language [...] they desiccate speech, [...] they dissolve our myths and dissolve the lyricism in our sentences”.⁴⁹

It is in this power to displace language and subvert discourses that Kilian sees potential for literary heterotopias, stressing that many levels of spatial relations can be encountered in literature. On the one hand, she argues that literature, as heterotopia, functions as an “institutionalized place in arts, as another space”⁵⁰ that acts in relation with the spaces that shape our reality; on the other hand, Kilian points to the fact that literature is able to create its own worlds and realities that entail “a parallel network of spaces that enters a multilayered relationship with real spaces that exceeds its own referential”.⁵¹ For Kilian, to perceive literature as a Foucauldian heterotopia, as another space, involves looking into the differences between reality (lifeworld) and literature and the ways in which they relate, bearing in mind that the constructions of the lifeworld in literature is not construed materially, but linguistically, which allows the encounter between reality and literature to be composed through various orders of time-space frameworks.

Literature as heterotopia implies the notion of transgression, of going beyond the objects and limits that the lifeworld presents, even when the literary representation in question relies on historical accuracy and facts, given that the fictitious depiction of history opens up fruitful possibilities for critical reflection. In *Tipping the Velvet*, Waters uses this potential in literature as a means to create a fictional lesbian historiography in the nineteenth century, portraying London, at least in the first and second parts of the novel, as a heterotopia: a space constituted by various spaces that disrupt the boundaries of heteronormative social relations which rely on binary categories and shape the limits of bodily intelligibility in space. In doing so, queer spaces are produced according to Nancy’s queering of spaces that are supposedly heteronormative; these queer spaces are temporary, and they function according to her agency and to what is visible to the common passerby on the streets.

Queer spaces emerge in the novel as Nancy narrates her non-binary identity and how she is able to subvert strict gender norms that demand either a male or female presentation. However, in her narration about the reaction of regular passersby on the streets, we find out that the fluidity in her identity goes unnoticed: like the man who

47 Kilian, “Literarische Heterotopien”, p. 40. My translation.

48 Foucault, *The Order of Things*, p. xvii.

49 *Ibid.*, p. xviii.

50 Kilian, “Literarische Heterotopien”, p. 46. My translation.

51 *Ibid.* My translation.

picks her up at the Burlington Arcade, most people around her perceive her either as a woman or as a man. As Nancy enacts the part of a rent-boy in the West End, only Diana detects her performance of gender ambiguity, which is precisely what calls her attention: where Nancy thinks Diana perceives her as a boy, Diana suggests that it is her being a girl dressed as a boy that she finds attractive.⁵²

The perception of Nancy's shifting gender identity not only depends upon her performance, but also upon mobility and the gazes that she encounters. Moving is a key feature for queering space in the novel as it is through the protagonist's movement in the city that she is able to appropriate space and to perform different embodiments of masculinity and femininity. The protagonist's autodiegetic account makes sure to present how her own body materializes on the streets of London by narrating the impressions others have of herself, and also by conveying accounts of how she perceives her own body and selfhood. The queer spaces created in the two first parts of the novel do not function as an exclusive space for lesbians, but they are produced according to Nancy's agency in the city and to the conditions and limitations specific spaces impose; this goes beyond the notion of queer spaces as fixed spaces that enable the lives of homosexuals.

Queer spaces in East London, however, are defined by lesbian sexuality and identity. Although the East London represented by Waters is created according to geographical and historical accuracy, it is possible to argue that these spaces are utopic because homophobia is depicted as a less damaging form of violence, as it is portrayed in comparison with other difficulties that the working-class community must confront in their daily lives. As Nancy and Florence are walking back from the Boy in a Boat, the lesbian pub in Bethnal Green, Nancy asks her if there has ever been trouble "between women at the Boy and local people".⁵³ Florence replies that there are sometimes rows, like "some boys dressed a pig in a bonnet, and tipped it down the cellar stairs"⁵⁴ into the pub and there was a woman who broke her head in a fight over another girl. While the incident with the pig is clearly a homophobic attack against the pub, a friend of Florence, Annie, describes the act of violence as a quotidian scene in the East End: "there is such a mix round these parts, what with Jews and Lascars, Germans and Poles, socialists, anarchists, salvationists... The people are surprised at nothing".⁵⁵ Annie's explanation about the episodes at the pub suggests that nobody really pays attention to 'toms' because there are so many types that represent otherness, and most of these types are exemplified by immigrants. The women show indifference to the men's homophobic attitude, even as the groups of lesbians pass by two men, one of which gives "a mutter and a sneer" while the other "cup[s] his hand at the fork of his trousers, and shout[s] and laugh[s]",⁵⁶ as they see two of Florence's friends arm-in-arm.

52 Waters, *Tipping the Velvet*, pp. 233–234.

53 *Ibid.*, p. 424.

54 *Ibid.*

55 *Ibid.*

56 *Ibid.*, p. 425.

It is true that Waters aims to represent homophobia in East London by explicitly narrating the reactions of other passersby. However, Annie's comment about the ways in which East Londoners are supposedly used to 'unwanted' variety of people, such as immigrants, 'toms', and radical activists, implies that, though there are homophobic responses to their lifestyle, their non-normative sexuality is still tolerated. In the novel, Waters creates a contrast between the East and the West End that goes beyond material conditions and urban development. In the West End, homophobia is a terrifying presence, especially for Kitty, because it could ruin her career as a male impersonator. As Nancy and Kitty meet two female artists, whom Nancy identifies as lesbians, Kitty becomes extremely offended and refuses to recognize herself as a lesbian, claiming that "they're not like us, at all. They're *toms*"⁵⁷ and making sure to affirm that Nancy and Kitty's relationship is nothing like theirs. Kitty fears being associated with homosexuality and masculinity, which is what motivates the character to marry Walter Bliss. In West London, homophobia seems like an insurmountable obstacle for their relationship. In East London, however, homophobia is an issue that can be ignored because people have got nothing to lose there, particularly considering that they do not, in fact, own anything.

On the one hand, lesbian desire is not always welcomed, as I have shown, but is mostly tolerated along with the East End's cluster of 'otherness'; on the other hand, the sense of community and solidarity that emerges in Bethnal Green diminishes the effects of homophobia and of poverty, since lesbians like Florence and her friends have a wide network of support that helps them to fight the homophobic reactions that follow them, and they also engage with work that offers services to their most vulnerable neighbors. In this sense, Waters represents homophobia in the East End in tandem with the relations of solidarity that Florence, her friends, and neighbors maintain with each other. In doing so, she creates an East End that – in contrast to the other parts of the city that are depicted in the two first parts of the novel – provides a social environment that allows greater freedom on the streets.

As she begins her life with the Banners, Nancy says that she wants "to be ordinary", which was only possible because there is "no one's eye to charm".⁵⁸ Ordinarity, at this point, entails moving herself away from flirting and from demonstrating her feelings towards Florence. However, this soon changes as she discovers that Florence and her friends are also 'toms' and she feels that Bethnal Green is a safe environment for her sexual and gender identity. At first, Nancy has doubts about expressing her sexuality and presenting herself in male attire, but she overcomes this anxiety as soon as she begins a relationship with Florence, and she is welcomed into their friendship circle. She decides to cross-dress again during a walk in the Whitechapel, where she sees male clothing that interests her:

I went in – perhaps the tailor thought me shopping for my brother – and bought a pair of moleskin trousers, and a set of drawers and a shirt, and a pair of braces and some lace-up boots; then, back at Quilter Street, I knocked on the door of a girl who was

57 *Ibid.*, p. 131. Emphasis in original.

58 *Ibid.*, p. 380.

known for doing hair-cuts for a penny and said: 'Cut it off, cut it all off, quick, before I change my mind!' She scissored the curls away, and – toms, grow easily sentimental over their haircuts, but I remember this sensation very vividly – it was not like she was cutting hair, it was as if I had a pair of wings beneath my shoulder-blades, that the flesh had all grown over, and she was slicing free...⁵⁹

In this passage, Nancy describes cutting her hair as an act of freedom, as if she were liberating herself (the wings) from a body that was entrapping her 'true' self. This is only possible in East London because this is the space in which Waters creates a sense of community that does not feature in other parts of London, such as Diana's St. John's Wood, or the West End, where Nancy cannot be recognized as a lesbian because of her career in the theater and, as a renter, she must be careful not to get spotted by authorities, since homosexuality and prostitution were criminalized. Despite the sense of community and solidarity in East London, which is a significant factor in Nancy's feeling of freedom, Waters' association between the tolerance of diversity and of homosexuality suggests that, because East Londoners lack sufficient material conditions to live, they can endure the effects of homophobia in a way that middle-class characters, such as Kitty, cannot. Although Florence, her brother Ralph, and their friends work tirelessly and conduct many social services for their neighbors, they are depicted as 'happy' with the poverty to which they are submitted. Since these working-class people have neither reputation to preserve nor any respectability to prove, they are entitled to a kind of freedom that characters, such as Kitty and Diana Lethaby, cannot entirely have, at least not publicly, given that they have a social position to protect.

In the following section, I will discuss the role played by class in gender performance in the theatrical realm that Waters portrays in her novel. To do so, I will reflect on Judith Butler's theories about gender performance and performativity in identity and subjective formation, relating these reflections to the ways in which Waters constructs Nancy Astley as a character and her relation to her spatial surroundings. I will contend that while Butler and Waters provide meaningful reflections about the limitations of social binaries of male/female and homo/heterosexuality, their works do not dispute or denaturalize class relations or norms that are also reiterated in the process of subjectivation.

Staging Reality

Butler contends that gender is the first mark that confers legibility to the body, thereby arguing that it serves as a norm and operates as a form of regulation "whose regulatory force is made clear as a kind of productive power, the power to produce – demarcate, circulate, differentiate – the bodies it controls".⁶⁰ To an extent, she understands the body in the Foucauldian sense, as an investment of power, functioning both as a

59 *Ibid.*, pp. 404–405.

60 Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, p. 1.

receptor and as a form of dissemination of power. However, she extends Foucault's argument by contending that sex as a regulatory power is ideal, given that the apparent materiality it conveys is constructed by the constant reiteration of norms, which confer upon sex the ostensible consistency and coherence it presents. It is the forceful necessity of repeating norms that unveils the instability of gender as a category, for it is the reiteration of norms that warrant its apparent identity coherence.

Butler discusses the role played by gender in the Lacanian construction of subjectivity, and how the use of binary sex categories in psychoanalysis contributes to the pervasive notion of heterosexuality as a norm, by elucidating how the body attains materiality and legibility through gender and sexuality. In this fixed binary realm of identification possibilities, there is no space for the detachment of gender and sexuality, since it presumes that one can only identify with one of the sexes and desire the opposite one, thereby reinforcing heterosexuality as a norm. In light of Lacanian psychoanalysis, what prevails is exactly the presumption that the lesbian becomes masculine because she envies the penis or, as Lacan suggests, "is orientated on a disappointment".⁶¹

Nancy's life-journey in London illustrates the conflictive process of identification within this heteronormative structure. What is at stake for her is not only the difficulty of identifying either with the female or male sex, but also how to pursue recognition as an individual within urban space without being compelled to take up any of the limited female (heterosexual) roles that were available in Victorian London. Her struggle to place herself as a subject in the city is also related to the fact that she is unable to identify herself completely with any of the binary sex positions. If gender is the first mark that endows the individual legibility within social space, then identifying with neither of the two sex categories entirely – or perhaps identifying with both of them – implies a profound conflict between the inner and the outside worlds, where one is coerced to assume one sexed position, but does not feel at ease with it.

In Whitstable, Nancy is partially aware that she is different from other girls and that she has a more manly appearance. As she mentions her admiration for girls who work on stage, she admits that "they weren't like [her]", but rather "more like [her] sister: they had cherry lips, [...] bosoms that jutted", while she "was tall, and rather lean. [Her] chest was flat, [her] hair was dull, [her] eyes a drab and an uncertain blue".⁶² It is in the music hall that Nancy discovers her own desire to cross-dress and first understands that another model of femininity is possible, being able to experiment along those lines once she goes to London to work as Kitty's dresser and later as a music hall artist. In the theater, Nancy consciously understands imitation and repetition in the construction of gender. As their manager, Mr. Walter Bliss, prepares Kitty for her new act in East London theaters, he asks her and Nancy to go "about the city and *study the men!* [...] Catch their characters, their little habits, their mannerisms and gaits" in order to know them and to "copy them [and] make [the] audience know it in their turn".⁶³ The idea of studying men conveys the very notion

61 Lacan, *Écrits*, p. 290.

62 Waters, *Tipping the Velvet*, p. 7.

63 *Ibid.*, p. 83. Emphasis in original.

of gender performance as the reiteration of norms, gestures, and behavior in order to reproduce them in our own actions. In preparing Nancy for her character on stage with Kitty, Mrs. Dendy and Walter have difficulties in presenting her as a fictional male figure precisely because her masculine presentation is too genuine:

'She's too real,' [Mrs. Dendy] said at last, to Walter.

'Too real?'

'Too real. She looks like a boy. Which I know she is supposed to – but, if you follow me, she looks like a *real boy*. Her face and her figure and her bearing on her feet. And that ain't quite the idea now is it?'⁶⁴

Copying male behavior demands to explicitly show that the man on stage is fictional, that the act itself presents a girl *performing* a man, instead of a girl *being* a man. The drag performance in the theater only serves as entertainment if all elements of the spectacle assert a clear boundary between the actors and their characters. In this case, the audience must be aware “that what they are seeing constitutes parody, pastiche or gender transgression”,⁶⁵ otherwise they are bound to clearly perceive the actresses' sexual relationship and Nancy's masculinity. The stage appears as an opportunity to publicly live out a relationship that is socially considered immoral. Nancy and Kitty's performances become a secret way to act out their love, as Nancy comes to admit, “the two things – the act, our love – were not so very different. They had been born together – or, as I liked to think, the one had been born of the other, and was merely its public shape”.⁶⁶

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler contends that drag performances are subversive, for they deliberately undermine the essential notion ascribed to the body marked by sex and they denounce the fantasy of a stable gender identity.⁶⁷ She argues that drag draws attention to the very contingency of the ideal coherence between anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance, as the performer's anatomical sex does not necessarily correspond to the performed gender or even to the performer's own gender identity. In this sense, she asserts that drags overtly exposes the supposed naturalness of the sexed body, for “[i]n imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency”.⁶⁸

In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler delves further into the discussion about drag and gender performance by analyzing Jennie Livingston's film *Paris is Burning*. For Butler, Livingston's lesbian gaze captures the different kinship system in the balls, as those men “mother' one another, 'house' one another, 'rear' on another” in ways in which they can re-signify the social, affective, and discursive relations of the heterosexual family.⁶⁹ In her view, the film “documents neither an efficacious insurrection nor a

64 *Ibid.*, p. 118.

65 Neal, “(Neo-)Victorian Impersonators”, p. 60.

66 Waters, *Tipping the Velvet*, p. 127.

67 Butler, *Gender Trouble*, pp. 186–188.

68 *Ibid.*, p. 187. Emphasis in original.

69 *Idem*, *Bodies that Matter*, pp.136-137.

painful subordination, but an unstable coexistence of both”.⁷⁰ She contends that the attempt to present ‘realness’ in drag balls exposes the rules that regulate womanhood and femininity: these rules are produced by white heterosexual middle-class ideals and they create the fantasy and imaginary that the drag children aim to achieve. However, according to Butler, the repetition and mimicry of those rules can potentially create spaces of ambivalence and disidentification that will bring about the instability of these norms in the subject’s constitution.⁷¹

Butler considers the effects of racialized and class-based norms on the formation of gender identity, as she contemplates the ways ‘realness’ in drag contests is constructed. In Butler’s Lacanian reading of *Paris is Burning*, the rules that regulate and legitimate realness are based on race and class, and the film is able to expose “that the order of sexual difference is not prior to that of race and class in the constitution of the subject”.⁷² In the case of Venus Xtravaganza, who was brutally murdered during the filming of Livingston’s documentary, Butler argues that “gender is the vehicle for the phantasmatic transformation of that nexus of race and class, the site of its articulation”,⁷³ through which there is hope to escape poverty, homophobia and racist subjugation.⁷⁴

For Butler, the conditions for the film’s success in exposing the contingency of gender rely on the spectator’s perception of ambivalence in the repetition of norms: its effects depend on the movement between approximating to and, at the same time, exposing the norms, in which a slippage is necessary in order to produce ambivalence and, therefore, disidentification. If the spectator does not catch this slippage, and sees only “exotic fetish”, then this ambivalence is not possible and what is produced is the “commodification of heterosexual gender”.⁷⁵ In this sense, even when the film succeeds, what is produced is a self-reflexive shift *within* the subject, but it does not necessarily propel radical transformations in the social space they inhabit.

70 *Ibid.*, p. 137.

71 *Ibid.*, pp.128-131.

72 Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, p. 130

73 *Ibid.*, p. 130.

74 Bell hooks and Vivian Namaste convey opposing readings of the racial and class relations that are represented in Livingston’s documentary. For hooks, Livingston appropriates black culture to create a film that reinforces white dominance over black bodies, as it shows a parody of women based on the idealization of white, middle-class womanhood (hooks, “Is Paris Burning?”, p. 147). She contends that the fixation of being a ruling-class white woman “means [that] there is also the desire to act in partnership with the ruling-class white male” (*Ibid.*, p. 147). Viviane Namaste pursues an analysis of Livingston’s film that straightforwardly disagrees with Butler’s reading and discussions of drag performance, particularly concerning Venus Xtravaganza’s death. Namaste claims that Butler overlooks the social context involving transsexuals and transvestites, who are more likely to be exposed to violence due to their work as prostitutes, particularly regarding male to female transsexuals, disputing Butler’s understanding that it is Venus’s race that is mainly connected to her death (Namaste, “Undoing Theory”, pp. 17–18). Cf. hooks, “Is Paris Burning?”; and Namaste, “Undoing Theory: The ‘Transgender Question’ and the Epistemic Violence of Anglo-American Feminist Theory”.

75 *Ibid.*, p. 137.

In literature, the discursive construction of this ambivalence and self-reflexivity is crucial for the production of texts that attempt to question social norms and relations and that seek new ways to represent the limits of reality. It is in the space of ambivalence that the reader can potentially transgress the restrictions of the real and reflect on transformations and alternatives to reality. This does not mean, of course, that social changes are a direct consequence of questioning social norms, yet it does mean that literature and art in general have the potential to produce sites for the disruption of rules. This is precisely the potential of Waters' *Tipping the Velvet*, since the novel ultimately uses male impersonation and the theater to denaturalize gender norms and heteronormativity. However, as I will elucidate further, the novel's potential of disruption pertains only to the aspects related to gender and sexuality, given that the norms that determine class relations in the novel remain uncriticized and are conveyed in stereotyped and idealized images of middle-, upper-, and working-class cultures.

Male impersonation acts expose the instability of and denounce the naturalness of gender presentations in both the first and second parts of *Tipping the Velvet*. In these two first parts, we see Nancy's identity materializing in a diversity of contexts and we see her making use of performance to expand the limitations of her agency and to experience different ways to be intelligible. The theater is a significant place for Nancy to appropriate and it functions as a space for possibilities that conflate fantasy and reality and provides an ambiguous setting for the interaction between spectacle and spectator. In the theater portrayed by Waters, the boundaries between private/public and reality/fiction are blurred, and surveillance through the public's gazes becomes flawed because of the duality of performance and reality, for the stage and theatrical rehearsal obscure the reality of Kitty's and Nancy's sexual relationship and also Nancy's masculinity. As a theatrical performance, the actresses' act confers the illusion that what happens on stage remains a performance and not reality:

Making love to Kitty, and posing at her side in a shaft of limelight, before a thousand pair of eyes [...] – these things were not so very different. A double act is always twice the act the audience thinks it: beyond our songs, our steps, our bits of business with coins and canes and flowers, there was a private language [...]. This was a language not of the tongue but of the body, its vocabulary the pressure of a finger or a palm, the nudging of a hip, the holding or breaking of a gaze, that said, *You are too slow – you go too fast – not there, but there – that's good – that's better!* [...] But, that was our show: only the crowd never knew it. They looked on, and saw another turn entirely.⁷⁶

In associating the feeling of being on stage beside Kitty with her sexual desire, Nancy claims that the sexual relationship between them is somehow perceptible, but it is obliterated by the fantasy implied in the notion of the stage as a space for artistic performance. Their "private language" is veiled by their dancing, singing, and acting, which grasp and hold the public's gaze, distracting them from the (sub)act that simultaneously takes place within the main one. In the first part of the novel, queering the

76 Waters, *Tipping the Velvet*, pp. 127–128. Emphasis in original.

stage functions as a means to enact a private and sexual language that can only be understood by the two lovers by playing with the premise of theatrical performance; this entails the duality of reality and fiction, realness and performance. Nancy narrates the way that both she and Kitty appropriate the stage to publicly display their relationship, which enables the transformation of the stage into a *queer space* that depends on theatrical performance and on the male impersonation act itself to materialize, even if temporarily. It is this space that functions as a 'safe place' for Nancy's and Kitty's sexual relationship and gender identities. Yet, the condition for the acceptance of this public display of sexual affection relies on the assertion that their private language is not exposed publicly.

Once members of the audience threaten to understand this private language, Nancy and Kitty are compelled to confront the spectators' cruel and moralizing gazes. As they arrive late to perform at the Deacon's Music Hall in Islington, the girls face a hard crowd, who have anxiously waited for them. They begin their number and a drunken man, who is sleeping back in the stalls, angrily wakes up, interrupting their act. Nancy and Kitty manage to continue singing, but a row breaks out and the drunkard cries out, "they're nothing but a couple of – a couple of *toms!*"⁷⁷ What actually discloses their secret is not the drunken man's accusation, but Kitty's own reaction to it, as she stiffens, grows tense in the situation, and eventually leaves the stage. It is in this moment, when fantasy fades away and reality takes its place, that the veiled act emerges as a shameful truth; the gazes, which saw only pleasure, entertainment, and fiction on stage, can now only see a form of perverse, disgraceful, and immoral behavior: the secret language that the two girls had tried to keep private.

Waters' employment of the stage as a queer space that enables Nancy's and Kitty's sexual relationship, and Nancy's ambiguous gender identity, is devised in very similar ways to Butler's readings of drag performance in Livingstone's *Paris is Burning*. Apart from the stage as a space of sexual possibilities, male impersonation as a theatrical act is self-reflexive in the sense that it points to the cultural and historical aspects of gender norms. Nancy and Kitty studying the men implies them observing and learning what the dominant model of masculinity is among the men in the late-Victorian period in London. The types that they enact, such as the soldier, the guardsman, or the gentleman are models that are also based on class codes that define these stereotypical behaviors. While male impersonation in the novel offers the reader the possibility of reflecting on gender and sexuality as cultural and historical constructions, it does not have the same effect in terms of the class relations that are at stake in the novel. In the next section, I will discuss Waters' deployment of gender performance in the second part and third parts of the novel, arguing that in the third part, which is set in the East End, the notion of performance dissipates and creates the possibility of the emergence of a 'true self'. Moreover, I will contend that, in emphasizing the denaturalization of gender and sexuality, Waters uses class relations, particularly in the East End, to give coherence to Nancy's chameleon-like identity, which changes according to the environments in which she circulates.

77 *Ibid.*, p. 140.

The City as a Stage

In the first and second parts of *Tipping the Velvet*, Waters blurs the borders between stage and reality, leading us to reflect on the performative aspects of identity and subjectivity. The stage in the theater functions as a space in which it is possible to live an identity that is not tolerated in real life; the stages of life, however, constrain the very possibility of enacting narratives that do not correspond to heteronormative behavior. In both cases, space proves to be important in the presentation of identity, since it determines and shapes agency. Butler contemplates the relation between space and identity in her first article about performative acts and gender construction, published two years prior to *Gender Trouble*.⁷⁸ This association is articulated as she discusses Merleau-Ponty's notion of the body as a result of historical possibilities, in which he argues that the body is not formed by an interior essence, but rather by a material expression of appropriated and repeated historical possibilities.

The body, thus, acquires materiality through the meaning it conveys and Butler argues that the way this meaning is assumed "is fundamentally dramatic". By the term 'dramatic', she means "that the body is not a self-identical or merely matter but a continual and incessant *materializing* of possibilities".⁷⁹ In contending that the materialization of the body is continuous, Butler suggests that this process is also temporary and subject to transformations. In light of these reflections on the performative, the body functions both as a recipient and as an actor within historical possibilities, as it incorporates signs, language, and gestures from the outside to then reproduce them.⁸⁰

The intentionality in gender performance implied in this essay is partially related to the various references to theatrical lexicons that Butler employs to corroborate her argument. The very *appearance of substance*, she contends, is "a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief".⁸¹ The use of the words 'actors', 'audience', and 'perform' evoke intentionality, as it suggests that one could take up a gender role in the same way that an actor could perform a certain part in a fictional performance. Further on, Butler openly states the consciousness of the enactment, as she considers gender to be "a *corporeal style*, an 'act', as it were, which is both intentional and performative".⁸² In doing so, Butler suggests intentionality in the assumption of a gender role, implying that there is a possibility of *choice* within the "mundane social audience" and, furthermore, that the social environment is a stage *per se*, for it is in this space that performance takes place. In this formulation, the terms performance and performativity infer the same notion of repetition as a means to materialize the body and identity, a notion that Butler will revise later in *Bodies that Matters*.

78 Butler, "Performative Act and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory".

79 *Ibid.*, p. 521. Emphasis in original.

80 *Ibid.*, pp. 521–522.

81 *Ibid.*, p. 520.

82 *Ibid.*, pp. 521–522. Emphasis in original.

It is possible to read Waters' engagement with theatrical performance in light of Butler's discussions on gender performance by discussing the parallel between the stage in the theater and the city as a stage and by exploring the thin line that separates both. The stage in the novel is not restricted to the space of the theater, but is extended to the city of London, and to the scenery transformations that strongly determine the protagonist's identity. It is through social and cultural interactions, and through her position in a specific environment, that she is able to understand her own sense of selfhood and subjectivity. While the performance on stage demands a rehearsed act, which is determined by acting out a specific male type (e.g., a soldier, a gentleman, a guardsman, or a sailor), performance in the city demands forging naturalness to materialize a male gender identity. On stage, Nancy must make sure to show signs of femininity in her performance so that she is not perceived as an 'invert' or a masculine woman. Thus, the male types that she interprets are conveyed by repeating class norms and social norms that compose the meaning of those types, and also by producing feminine gestures in masculine attire. On the streets, however, the incorporation of class norms and the use of male clothing that constitute her male role must be enacted in a way that guarantees that she does not appear to be a woman in men's clothes.

In the same way that Nancy can express her sexuality and sexual desire for Kitty on stage under the veil of theatrical fiction, she can use the city as a stage to perform roles such as a rent boy, a young gentleman, a widow's charity case, or a woman; this can take the form of adopting different names according to her roles: Nan King, Neville King, and Nancy Astley. In fact, the protagonist often mentions that performance and real life do overlap, as she is fully aware that the role ascribed to her in the theater is not different from the ones assigned by various circumstances in the city. Nancy admits, for instance, that "as easily, and fatefully, as [she] had first begun [her] music-hall career – thus easily did [she] refine [her] new impersonations, and become a renter".⁸³ Both situations are very similar because they require gender roles that can be enacted and improved through observation and repetition. The only difference between them is that, in the performance in the theater, her male character must produce an impression of femininity in order to convey fantasy and parody (a girl *playing* a boy); in real life, her performance must express substance and wholeness in order to assert an engendered body whose sex is coherent to its gender (a male subject *being* a man).

It is in this transition from the music hall stage to London as a stage that Waters contemplates Butler's later reflections on gender performance. In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler modifies the argument that she had delivered previously, distancing herself from parallels with theatrical performances to claim that "[p]erformativity is neither free play nor theatrical" and that it "cannot be understood outside of a process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms", in which "repetition is not performed *by* a subject; this repetition is what enables a subject and constitutes the temporal condition for the subject".⁸⁴ Butler dismisses the theater analogy to assert the view that the act of performing gender is less an option than a *necessity* in

83 Waters, *Tipping the Velvet*, p. 202.

84 Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, p. 95. Emphasis in original.

order to warrant intelligibility within a social space. This reiteration of norms impels gender and sex coherence and, additionally, heterosexuality to yield the ideal of a stable identity.

Waters follows a similar course in *Tipping the Velvet*, as she reflects on male impersonations as a means to question authenticity in gender constitution and then shifts this discussion to the city, thereby contemplating the necessity of performing gender to warrant authenticity and substance to one's identity presentation. In the first part of the narrative, Nancy and Kitty's act denaturalizes gender stability and challenges normative femininity models in presenting women who enact masculine behavior. Nevertheless, their performance reproduces dominant masculine behavior that yields misogynist and heterosexist discourses: their male characters are usually soldiers, princes, or gentlemen, figures who are generally admired by men and desired by women. Performance here is, therefore, effective to the degree that it denounces naturalness in gender and that it publicly insinuates the girls' own sexual and gender identities, which are recognized by some girls in whom Nancy "recognised a certain – something' to which she 'could not put a name [...], only knew that it was there, and that it made their interest in [her] rather special".⁸⁵

On the streets, however, Nancy's male impersonation must be so perfect that counterfeit and original overlap, conveying the ideal of *realness* and *substance* that confer the body the temporal condition of an engendered subject. As a male renter, she must *be* a man in order to survive in the underground world of prostitution in the West End and also to protect herself on the streets, given that she is fully aware that she is "a solitary girl, in a city that favoured sweethearts and gentlemen; a girl in a city where girls walked only to be gazed at".⁸⁶ Gender performance in this part appears as a necessity to remain unrecognized as a female subject, and to be perceived as a male subject in order to change her own agency within the city. Although Nancy gains more mobility in the city once she can circulate as a man, she faces a different set of surveillance that takes place throughout the prostitution underworld, since, in this social space, she must keep herself visible only to those who will have interest in her sex work, never to authorities or regular passersby.

In fact, she admits that the only regret she has about being a male renter is the absence of an audience to watch her act. Nancy misses the public's gaze because there is nobody to watch how she deceives her clients, who think she is a man. Her pleasure in being a renter stems mainly from letting her male clients believe that she is the man they desire:

[...] though I was giving such marvellous performances, they had no audience. [...] I would long for just one eye – just one! – to be fixed upon our couplings: a bold and knowing eye that saw how well I played my part, how gulled and humbled was my foolish, trustful partner.

But that – considering the circumstances – seemed quite impossible.⁸⁷

85 Waters, *Tipping the Velvet*, p. 128.

86 *Ibid.*, p. 191.

87 *Ibid.*, p. 206.

It is interesting to notice the protagonist's relationship with different environments in London and her own awareness of which gazes are watching her and the consequences and effects they produce. Nancy's life as a renter empowers her agency, due to the given of masculine mobility, in contrast to her experience as a woman in the city in which she can only be seen as a heterosexual woman and is almost completely objectified. However, her social position as a male subject is limited by the lower and marginalized class status of male prostitution and, moreover, by the performance of male homosexuality that, as a criminalized sexuality, increases the vulnerability of her subject position. As a male renter, Nancy is able to enter a network of gazes and of sexual desire that was inaccessible to her as a woman. In so doing, she appropriates a space that would supposedly be a masculine space, and yet she turns it around as a personal revenge against dominant and hyper-sexualized masculinity. At the same time, there is an appropriation of male homosexuality that – despite its impossibility of an audience and the peril of being caught – is enacted as a way to enhance her independence in the city, since she comes to financially rely only upon her sex work.

Once again, the West End is depicted as an important location for Nancy's performance. In the first part of the novel, Nancy's accounts of the West End are given mostly from a position of a spectator guided by Walter. In their first tour in London, Walter takes Kitty and Nancy on a carriage ride and they pass the National Gallery, the Houses of Parliament, finally arriving at Leicester Square in the West End:

Mr. Bliss opened the carriage door, and led us to [the square's] centre. Here, with William Shakespeare on his marble pedestal at our backs, we gazed, all three of us, at the glorious façades of the Empire and the Alhambra – the former with its columns and its glinting cressets, its stained glass and its soft electric glow; the latter with its dome, its minarets and fountain.⁸⁸

In having Walter guide them, Nancy and Kitty gaze at the Shakespeare monument and at the West End theaters through his perspective. The passage stresses the idea that the three of them share a similar perspective, since it is Walter who introduces them to London and takes them to the places that he considers to be most exciting. In the second part, as Nancy becomes an actor in the city; her circulation in the West End depends upon her ability to master masculine spaces and make her way into the male prostitution world on the borders of Soho and the West End. The similarities between the world as an artist and the world as a renter are understood immediately. Geographically, Nancy claims that both worlds “have London as their proper country, the West End as their capital” and, in terms of performance, she understands that these two worlds present “a curious mix of magic and necessity, glamour and sweat”.⁸⁹ Performing on West End stages and on the streets of the West End is so similar because both hinge on rehearsal, hard work, and Nancy's capacity to satisfy her audience. In the theater, her audience are the spectators; on the streets, it is her clients, although most of them do not see it as a performance. Although both performances take place in the West End, what Nancy's experiences show is that the

88 *Ibid.*, p. 65.

89 *Ibid.*, p. 203.

same place can function as different social spaces, since it imposes different norms and different degrees of vulnerability according to the subject's position. In Waters' novel, there is a clear intersection between class, gender, and sexuality, in which the two latter categories represent more of a struggle in the protagonist's subjectivity and identity in the city, for it is her sexual and gender identities that yield conflicts with herself and that limit her agency. Nancy's vulnerability also depends on her class position, given that it is the class norms in a specific social space that empower or limit her agency in the city.

As she begins to live with the wealthy Diana Lethaby, for instance, Nancy admits that "it did not take [her] long to settle into [her] role there and find [herself] a new routine".⁹⁰ In St. John's Wood, a wealthy suburb in NorthWest London in the nineteenth century, Nancy's life is lazy, and she is spoiled with breakfast in bed every day, good food, and clothes in exchange for her sexual services. Nancy must play the role of two figures in the circle of wealthy philanthropists: Diana's sex toy and her ward. In the first role, Nancy remains confined at home, waiting to satisfy her mistress' desires and she is constantly exposed as a sexual object, given that she must entertain Diana's friends by performing different characters, such as Cinderella, Perseus, or Cupid, for instance. Like in the Cavendish Club, a fictitious upper-class lesbian club located near Piccadilly Circus, also in the West End, Nancy is shown off as a sex toy, which changes its function according to her owner's wishes. In the "public world, the ordinary world beyond the circle of Cavendish Sapphists, the world of shops and supper-rooms and drives in the park", the protagonist is introduced as Neville King, a boy who Diana has generously taken in as a charity case. In fact, Mrs. Lethaby has had several ladies trying to arrange their daughters with Neville; to these requests she would reply that "he's an Anglo-Catholic, ma'am [...] and destined for the Church. This is his final Season, before taking Holy Orders..."⁹¹

The performance of charity is so perfect that it cannot be read as such; Nancy's performance as a boy is so flawless "that a reading is no longer possible, or that a reading, an interpretation, appears to be a kind of transparent seeing, where what appears and what it means coincide".⁹² Waters explores the notion of performance and performativity, blurring the boundaries between the repetition of gender norms to denounce the contingency of gender in the construction of identity, and to stress the *necessity* of reiterating gender norms to pass as a stable subject. In the roles that Nancy takes up, she must observe the norms that make up that role and repeat them according to the environment in which she circulates.

Class plays an important role in her performances; as a renter, Nancy finds herself in an underworld of peril, since she can get caught for prostitution and for homosexual activities, but she also relies on prostitution to become financially independent. As Neville King, she must perform a religious and obedient ward in the affluent environment that Diana has prepared for her. She can easily perform various personas,

90 *Ibid.*, p. 263.

91 *Ibid.*, p. 279.

92 Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, p. 129.

being able to pass as both a man and a woman, and to effectively take part in various social environments. In this series of performances, there is no questioning of the norms that constitute class behavior and the ways in which it informs gender identity. In *Tipping the Velvet*, the protagonist's performance of gender and sexuality critiques the stability of gender norms and also the idea that Victorian women were passive and prone to domesticity. Nevertheless, Waters' criticism of gender and sexuality is conveyed at the cost of strict (and uncritical) class norms that present the villains as middle- or upper-class – as is the case with Diana Lethaby, Walter Bliss, or even Kitty Butler –; and the heroines as working-class characters, as we see with Nancy Astley herself and Florence Banner.

It is in East London that the protagonist's gender fluidity is seized and norms become fixed, thereby creating a sense of belonging that can only be achieved with the presumption of a stable and intelligible identity. The East London that Waters portrays is constructed by a pervasive sense of solidarity and freedom enjoyed by the poor inhabitants of Bethnal Green, implying that not having proper material conditions to live also offers the possibility of living in a society in which Victorian sexual and gender mores can be bypassed. As Beverley Skeggs puts it, "respectability is one of the most ubiquitous signifiers of class"⁹³ and it is "property of middle-class individuals defined against the masses".⁹⁴ She argues that respectability is a sign that determines class comes from the upper-class and goes down the social ladder and, even though the upper-class differentiates itself from the middle-class, the middle-class also seeks the means to assert distinctions between themselves and the working-class masses by establishing moral parameters of respectability, usually associated with family, religion, and social status.

In *Tipping the Velvet*, Waters' working-class characters are certainly portrayed as 'respectable' characters, but not in terms of the ideals of femininity, kinship, and domesticity that are attributed to members of the middle- and upper-classes. The women have rough jobs (e.g., Annie is a sanitary inspector), they work in factories or carry out domestic services for houses across the city. Although Waters changes the terms that define respectability, which are more related to community life, solidarity, and activism in the novel, working-class culture is displayed only as an identity category that defines the characters in that milieu, rather than being represented as a social relation. We can perceive the strict characterization of working-class personages in the novel in the sense that they are defined by the notion of goodness, kindness, solidarity, tolerance, and revolutionary thoughts, but they seldom interact with members from other social classes or those that reside elsewhere in West London. In changing the role of performance and urban mobility in the last part of the novel, Waters makes a clear-cut separation between East and West London, a separation that has been criticized by scholars, such as Judith Walkowitz.

According to Walkowitz, the class divide depicted by the separation of East and West London is more complex than "Victorian writers [...] had imaginatively con-

93 Skeggs, *Formations of Class and Gender Production*, p. 1.

94 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

structed to fix gender and class difference in the city”.⁹⁵ She argues that working-class women “were less conducive to fantasies of female autonomy and self-creation”⁹⁶ than their middle- and upper-class counterparts because of working women’s reduced material conditions. However, Walkowitz argues that there were still small groups of working-class women who organized themselves to do charity and social work. One example is the Hallelujah Lassies of the Salvation Army, a religious group who “stretched the boundaries of a working woman’s space and prerogatives within her community and impinged on the civic spaces of her class superiors”.⁹⁷ These women were not like the middle- and upper-class philanthropists, particularly because they lived in the slums to help the poor and did not just commute to do charity work. Though Walkowitz perceives this movement as “a new style of working-class woman, with a new relation to the family, to social destiny [and] to the city as a place of experience and adventure”, she admits that its direct relation to the Salvation Army “contained and channeled discontent into obedience to a highly authoritarian institution”.⁹⁸ Thus, despite their relative independence and autonomy in comparison with other working-class women, they were still morally and socially formed by an institution that sought to preach ‘respectable’ social values.

In Waters’ fictional representation of East London, it seems that she amplifies the role of working-class women in politics, social work, and activism as a means to address the under-representation of working-class culture in historical fiction. Nevertheless, in insisting on a representation that is more concerned with class as an identity category, Waters falls into what Munt considers to be a common characterization of working-class subjects in literature, in which “class designation tend to be *aesthetic*, to do so with way of life, appearance of language”.⁹⁹ In doing so, Waters depoliticizes class relations by representing class only as a specific way of life, related to certain activities and actions. While *Tipping the Velvet* denaturalizes norms of gender and sexuality through Waters’ use of male impersonation, class appears as a natural social division that determines certain ways of living and specific London neighborhoods. The Banners’ house “was set in one of the poorest, noisiest quarters of the city; had one dark room to do duty as bed-chamber [...] had windows that rattled and chimneys that smoked”.¹⁰⁰ Quilt Street is described as noisy, and Nancy has the impression that it “might as well be made of india rubber – there was such a passage of shouts and laughter and people and smells and dogs, from one house to its neighbours”.¹⁰¹ In the West End, Nancy appropriates the streets to perform her ambiguous gender identity and act out her lesbian identity, whereas in the East End there is not appropriation of space. Rather, the East End community in the novel

95 Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight*, p. 80.

96 *Ibid.*, p. 73.

97 *Ibid.*, p. 74.

98 *Ibid.*, p. 73.

99 Munt, *Cultural Studies and the Working Class*, p. 3. Emphasis in original.

100 Waters, *Tipping the Velvet*, p. 375.

101 *Ibid.*

displays a resigned portrayal of how working-class people live, a culture and lifestyle to which Nancy naturally adapts and which she assimilates as an authentic identity.

The transition from Nancy's comfortable, albeit exploited, life in St. John's Wood begins with Nancy's decision to sell her male clothes, the ones from her time as a West End actress, in order to buy a frock. This decision is crucial because it foreshadows the last part's main idea: Nancy's abandonment of performance to encounter an 'authentic self' in East London. She walks around the city to look for Florence Banner, whom she had met briefly in the second part of the novel, and she finds out that Florence lives in Bethnal Green.

Entering East London via the City Road and Old Street, Nancy narrates the uneven urban development of Victorian London, given that these streets were not "like Soho, where light streamed upon the pavements from a thousand flares and windows. For every ten paces of my journey that were illuminated by a pool of gas-light, there were a further twenty that were cast in gloom".¹⁰² Not only were the paths to Quilter Street in Bethnal Green darker and shabbier, but people also dressed differently: "men wore scarves instead of collars [...]; the girls wore dirty aprons, or no apron at all".¹⁰³ As opposed to St. John's Wood and the West End, the reader is taken into the slums of London. In contrast to the West End, by the 1880s East London had become the city's main location for industry and also for poor workers who lived in precarious urban conditions that led to serious epidemics such as cholera and typhus.¹⁰⁴ The combination of filth and the neglect of proper sanitary reform in the area seriously compromised the lives of workers, who depended mainly on work at industries and the docks and whose jobs were constantly at stake in times of recession, particularly in the last decades of the nineteenth century.¹⁰⁵

Waters' depiction of East London is conveyed in terms of life in urban poverty, solidarity among the area's inhabitants, and also by political fervor supporting workers, socialism, and feminism. The Banners' home is a meeting point for many of Florence's and Ralph's friends who are engaged with the local labor movement. While Florence works with unions, charities, and the Women's Cooperative Guild, Ralph serves at the secretary in the silk factory's guild. The atmosphere constructed in the Banner's Bethnal Green household is very similar to E. P. Thompson's historical account of the English working class from 1780 until 1832. In *The Making of the English Working Class*, Thompson elucidates the period in which a working-class consciousness was defined by and through the workers' culture, experience, and political battles. For Thompson, the working class in England played a pivotal role as a historical agent in the constitution of social welfare, as radical politics were ingrained in various spheres of working-class life, such as in cultural, social, and community networks.¹⁰⁶ In Quilter Street, Nancy finds herself "handing out cups of tea, rolling cigarettes, nursing babies while

102 *Ibid.*, pp. 344–345.

103 *Ibid.*, p. 345.

104 Marriott, *Beyond the Tower*, pp. 123–149.

105 *Ibid.*, pp. 211–212.

106 Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, pp. 401–418.

other people argued and laughed”,¹⁰⁷ talking about the Social Democratic Federation, the Independent Labour Party, and the Tories.

Waters’ account of East London reverberates Thompson’s views on class-consciousness, given that the Banners nurture autodidactic and intellectual culture, a communal practice that, according to Thompson, was often the case in working-class environments in the first half of the nineteenth century. Like the working-class described by Thompson, the Banners “formed a picture of the organisation of society, out of their own experience and with the help of their hard-won and erratic education, which was above all a political picture”.¹⁰⁸ Although the East London depicted in *Tipping the Velvet* is set at the end of the nineteenth century, Waters takes up Thompson’s account of an intellectualized and politicized working class to depict the ways in which early radical labor politics influenced trade unionism and socialist movements at the beginning of the century.

Nairn and Anderson point out that radicalism found among workers in late Victorian England was not necessarily the case. In spite of their appreciation and respect for Thompson’s work, Nairn and Anderson dispute some of Thompson’s arguments about radical labor politics. Nairn and Anderson argue that late Victorian working-class politics could not transform the workers’ movement into an actual political threat. Despite organized revolts throughout the nineteenth century, Nairn contends that extreme class-consciousness impeded direct conflicts between the bourgeoisie and the working class. He perceives workers’ culture and values as “positive”, but he argues that the impossibility of a real separation between classes turned class-consciousness into “a specific vehicle of assimilation, whereby bourgeois ideas and customs were refracted downwards into the working class”.¹⁰⁹ For Nairn, this assimilation resulted in a “caricature” of the bourgeoisie and hindered the formation of socialist and radical movements at the end of the century; this led to the trade union model of political organization that prevailed throughout most of the twentieth century and which Nairn considers a “moderate and timid form of corporate act”.¹¹⁰

Anderson argues, along similar lines, that apart from class-consciousness, the fact that British working-class radicalism took place in the beginning of the nineteenth century with Owenism, and later with Chartism, was an important factor for more moderate movements at the end of the nineteenth century. For Anderson, the movements were weakened and could not thrive into strong socialist movements, since there was “minimum availability of socialism as a structured ideology”¹¹¹ in the times of Owenism and Chartism. He recognizes these two movements as crucial for the

107 Waters, *Tipping the Velvet*, p. 378.

108 Thompson, *The Making of The Working Class*, p. 712.

109 Nairn, “The British Working Class”, p. 55.

110 *Ibid.*, p. 56.

111 Anderson, “Origins of the Present Crisis”, p. 33. Anderson compares the historical conditions for working-class movements in England to those found in Germany, Italy, and France, arguing that because these countries industrialized later, Marxist and Socialist theories were more mature and could be reflected within the workers’ movements. In England, he writes, “Marxism came too late: the *Communist Manifesto* was written just two months before the collapse of Chartism” (p. 34).

working-class, but he claims that, due to their brutal defeat and violent oppression, “the English working class movement went through a kind of prolonged catatonic withdrawal”, thereby becoming “the most numbed and docile” class.¹¹²

Waters’ depiction of East London leans towards Thompson’s heroic reflections about the British working class and their political force into bringing significant changes about in Britain. One example is Ralph Banner’s speech that he is supposed to give at the workers’ rally in Victoria Park, in East London. Ralph gets stage-fright and Nancy takes over his speech, since she knows it off by heart, having helped Ralph to memorize it:

Why Socialism? And you will find yourselves obliged to answer as we have. “Because Britain’s people,” you will say, “have laboured under the capitalist and the landlord system and grown only poorer and sicker and more miserable and afraid. Because it is not by charity and paltry reforms that we shall improve conditions for the weakest classes – not by taxes, not by electing one capitalist government over another, not even by abolishing the House of Lords! – but by turning over the land, and industry, to the people who work it. Because socialism is the only system for a fair society: a society in which the good things of the world are shared, not amongst the idlers of the world, but amongst the *workers*” – amongst yourselves: you who have made the rich man rich, and been kept, for your labours, only ill and half-starved!¹¹³

The rally in Victoria Park is depicted as a huge event and even Diana Lethaby and Kitty Butler attend it. Ralph’s speech, which Nancy performs, relates radical socialist politics that fosters the view that workers should take over state power. As I have explained previously, Nairn’s and Anderson’s viewpoints about workers’ politics at the end of the nineteenth century do not reverberate Waters’ portrayal of socialist revolution in the novel. Instead of invoking socialism, Nairn and Anderson have shown that trade unions and workers’ social movements were more interested in reforms that granted better labor and living conditions than an actual transformation of the capitalist system. Perhaps it is not particularly relevant to contemplate the historical accuracy conveyed in this part of the novel, since it is possible that Waters fictionalized nineteenth century working-class to provide a more positive representation of East-enders than is usually purported. However, it is important to discuss what Waters’ representations of the working class produce in terms of interdependencies between gender, class, and sexuality.

The novel’s positive representations of working-class life, displaying its respectability and progressive influence in London’s cultural life, is of great importance when considering the neglect or even invisibility of class as a topic for analysis in contemporary culture.¹¹⁴ It is clear that Waters devises class relations that are very appreciative of working-class culture in *Tipping the Velvet* by emphasizing relations of solidarity, affection, and community life that were in fact present among working-

112 *Ibid.*, p. 36.

113 Waters, *Tipping the Velvet*, p. 459. Emphasis in original.

114 Cf. Munt’s *Cultural Studies and the Working Class*, and Skeggs’ *Formations of Class and Gender and Self, Class and Culture*.

class neighborhoods in London from the nineteenth century onwards.¹¹⁵ However, there are pervasive moral standards that constitute the characters in East London as more politically engaged and critical than the West London characters, such as Kitty, Diana, and Walter. This is precisely the kind of representation that Munt criticizes in her book. She rightly elucidates that the point of representing working-class subjects and communities in arts and literature is to denaturalize, criticize, and defamiliarize class structures and relations, not to persist with stereotypes “that the only good worker is a revolutionary one”, or the one that suggests that there are “the good poor, who are industrious and know their place, rendered in such archetypes as the honest factory hand or ‘our Mam’, symbol of hearth and home”.¹¹⁶ In an attempt to provide positive images of working-class subjects, Waters constructs her characters around the examples designated by Munt. If the upper-class widow Diana is depicted as a villain because of her exploitation of women inside her home or the middle-class artist Kitty Butler is displayed as selfish because she chooses familial respectability over artistic independence, then Florence Banner and her friends are selfless, generous, revolutionary, and accepting of all kinds of ‘otherness’.

While Nancy Astley must appropriate space in order to queer space in the first and second parts of the novel, East London appears to be the ultimate queer space in the third part, since rules and norms are always bound to be disrupted due to the progressive aspect that the characters and their surroundings represent. Notions of kinship in Bethnal Green are, in fact, queer because they do not entirely subscribe to heteronormative forms of familial relations. For instance, Florence and Ralph may look like a straight couple to the naked eye, but they are actually siblings who take care of baby Cyril, who was actually Florence’s former partner’s baby. Despite all social disadvantages, Nancy discovers new possibilities of kinship and affect among East Londoners, especially among Florence’s circle of friends, who are mostly engaged in different forms of charity and activism.

What prevails in East London is the sense of solidarity and community, the ways neighbors help each other and how they are also very present in each other’s lives. It is this account of Bethnal Green that Young and Willmott give in their ethnographic research of the neighborhood in the 1950s. One of the findings relayed in their work is the fact that many of the families in the borough had already resided there for decades, sometimes even for two generations. Due to the inhabitants’ shared background and long residency period, the community’s relationships were not restricted to their families, but they were also extended to friends and acquaintances around the neighborhood, given that they normally knew their neighbors’ and relatives’ acquaintances relatively well.¹¹⁷

115 Cf. Young and Willmott’s *Family and Kinship in East London* and Paul Watt’s “‘It’s not for us’: Regeneration, the 2012 Olympic Games and Gentrification of East London”. Watt’s article relates the housing crisis in East London to the effects of the Olympic Games in the area. Although he does not necessarily analyze social relations among the area’s community, he does provide a valuable account of the ways in which East Londoners are organizing themselves in terms of resistance to regeneration and gentrification schemes.

116 Munt, *Cultural Studies and the Working Class*, p. 8.

117 Young and Willmott, *Family and Kinship in East London*, p. 113.

It is this kind of community that Waters construes in her novel, emphasizing the ways East Londoners' kinships were strengthened by the poor and miserable conditions in which they lived. Although Nancy is self-conscious about her dressing in a masculine way at first, this soon becomes trivial, given that "no one appeared to mind it [...] after all, it was a luxury to have any sort of clothes at all, and you regularly saw women in their husbands' jackets, and sometimes a man in a shawl".¹¹⁸ Nancy also has the chance to go to the East London version of the Cavendish Club, a pub called 'The Boy in the Boat'. The pub is attended only by 'toms', and Nancy is even recognized as the actress who played Nan King on music hall stages. When dressing to go to the pub for the first time, Nancy considers a pair of moleskins from her West End days, but realizes that "while they might have caused something of a sensation at the Cavendish Club", they might be "rather too bold for an East End audience",¹¹⁹ and decides on a skirt, a man's shirt, and a necktie. Nancy's choice of clothes displays her own identity as a lesbian who presents herself in between feminine and masculine identities, and who adapts her taste to a working-class public.

As Waters limits London to Bethnal Green and restricts Nancy's movement around the city, she also restricts the meanings of queer spaces to a specific lesbian identity. The protagonist's movement and necessity to appropriate spaces in the two first parts of the novel convey a notion of ambiguity and instability in the constitution of gender and sexual identities, thereby playing with the notions of performance and performativity. In the third part, however, Nancy's discovery of the possibility of enacting a 'true self' suggests that this environment allows her to cross-dress and to act out lesbian relationships, since homosexuality is more tolerated than in the other spaces in which she had circulated in the previous parts. While the protagonist's journeys across London constitute the notion of repeating language and gestures of a specific social class in order to embody a non-normative sexual and gender identity, the lack of mobility in the third part of the novel shows assimilation to a masculine lesbian identity as an authentic form of enacting same-sex desire.

As a picaro, Nancy mimics class norms in order to embody different gender and sexual identities, particularly in the two first parts of the novel. While her performance of these norms destabilizes the apparent coherence of gender and sexual identity, it also repeats class norms without denouncing them as constructs. In the last part of the novel, it is the working-class model of femininity that informs both her sexual and gender identity. Skeggs argues that working-class femininity is defined as the lack of middle- and upper-class femininity which denotes fragility, restraint, and passivity.¹²⁰ In contrast, working-class women are often "associated with the lower unruly order of bodily functions such as that of expulsion and leakage (reproduction) which signified lack of discipline and vulgarity".¹²¹ Nancy's identification with the working-class women around her can be related to their deviant behavior in terms of

118 Waters, *Tipping the Velvet*, p. 407.

119 *Ibid.*, p. 411.

120 Skeggs, *Formations of Class and Gender Production*, pp. 99–100.

121 *Ibid.*, p. 100.

clothing, autonomy, and homosexuality, since most of the working-class women who are presented are lesbians.

These women pertain to the 'unruly order' because they seem to be in charge of their own bodies and sexuality in ways in which Kitty and Diana are not. Though Diana is shown to have more freedom than Kitty, due to her status as a widow and the wealth left by her late husband, she only acts out same-sex desire at parties at home or at the 'Cavendish Club'. In East London, however, public displays of affection among lesbians are tolerated, as Florence and her friends have shown in simply ignoring the homophobic reactions to them on the streets. Class norms remain unquestioned throughout the novel and function exclusively as categories that stabilize identity, while gender and sexual identity are portrayed as ambivalent. In the third part of the novel, a stabilizing identity occurs by Nancy's encounter with the ideal combination of gender and sexual identities, which is constituted by the stereotype of working-class femininity and by the stereotype of the masculine lesbian.

The novel ends with the grand socialist event at Victoria Park, attended by all of the characters that Nancy has encountered along her journey, including the wealthy Diana Lethaby and the now married Kitty Butler. In this final scene, the protagonist realizes that she has "been repeating other people's speeches all [her] life" and now she can hardly find ways to express herself in her own words.¹²² Given the theatrical performance aspect of the novel, Nancy's awareness of her ability to perform and also the idea that she has stopped performing suggests that she has stabilized her identity in an environment that ultimately fulfills her.

In contrast to the first and second parts of the novel, which portray the necessity of queering London in order to survive it, Waters constructs a fixed and stereotyped space in East London that yields an ideal of stabilized identity represented by the working-class moral and political values, by women's autonomy and financial independence, and finally by lesbian sexuality. In so doing, Waters marks a clear delimitation between the city and the stage, as we notice in the last lines of the novel, in which Nancy has a panoramic view of the event at Victoria Park and describes it as someone who is on stage watching it: she sees "the crush of gay-faced people [...] the tents and stalls, the ribbons and flags and banners", and holds Florence's hand squeezing a daisy between their fingers to then kiss her. Under the light of a sunset, she looks across the field in the park and realizes that "from the speakers' tent there came a muffled cheer, and a rising ripple of applause".¹²³ The last lines show Nancy's consciousness of her role as a performer, who can finally speak her own lines; however, as Davies notes, she "recognizes that stepping outside of this system is not an option".¹²⁴ In drawing clear-cut boundaries between theater and the city, the end of *Tipping the Velvet* implies that Nancy is doomed to repeat norms that are imposed on her as a means of necessity, not as theatrical performance. Ambivalence is taken over by authenticity in this split between spaces, that of fiction and that of reality, since it does not seem that Nancy can produce slippage in her reiteration of norms. Thus,

122 Waters, *Tipping the Velvet*, p. 471.

123 *Ibid.*, p. 472.

124 Davies, *Gender and Ventriloquism in Victorian and Neo-Victorian Fiction*, p. 124.

what prevails is the notion of essentialist gender and sexual identities that can only come true under the premise of ideally constructed working-class freedom.

Chapter 3

Panopticism, Domesticity and the Imaginary of Prison in *Affinity*

Introduction

While the parallels between the theater and the city and the protagonist's power to perform different identities create a London in which queer spaces are produced through the protagonist's appropriation of spaces in *Tipping the Velvet*, in *Affinity* Waters represents London and Victorian sexual surveillance in prison. In *Tipping the Velvet*, surveillance takes place through the passersby's or spectators' gazes, which aim to control and regulate deviant sexual identities and whose gazes are not always effective, failing to detect 'deviant' behavior when this behavior appears to be the norm. In *Affinity*, however, surveillance over deviant behavior is less subtle and it is structured within the panoptical architecture of Millbank Prison and within the Victorian home.

The novel tells the stories of two Victorian women: Margaret Prior, a well-read upper-class spinster who has recently lost her father, with whom she kept activities as a researcher, and Selina Dawes, a working-class spiritualist who is in prison for fraud and assault. Margaret decides to take up visits to Millbank in order to listen to the prisoners' stories and to eventually write a book as part of her recovery from depression and suicide attempt. Waters constructs the narrative in diary entries written by Margaret and Selina: Margaret's diary relates the fictive present (24th September 1874–21st January 1875) and Selina's journal conveys accounts of the fictive past (2nd September 1872–3rd August 1873), prior to her conviction. While Margaret's writings relate anxieties, feelings, and the sufferings of a woman who finds herself mostly idle and trapped within Victorian domesticity, Selina's journal mostly conveys her daily routines as a séance medium who makes a living from communicating with spirits.

Literary criticism about *Affinity* has often related the author's choice of narrating in the form of diary entrances and the role played by the prison as a sexually liberating space, generally presenting the characters' same-sex desire and the panopticon as the

fulcrum of their analyses.¹ Moreover, these texts privilege Margaret's journal entries over Selina's, as critics tend to perform close readings of the former without paying close attention to the latter. Associating the image of the prison in the novel with the paintings of Escher and to Piranesi's *Carceri d'Invenzione*, Armitt and Gamble argue that Margaret's position as an upper-class researcher legitimates her position as an all-seeing eye at first (as the center of the panopticon), only to later be revealed as an object of surveillance; this occurs when we discover that she is also watched at home and at Millbank and, moreover, that her diary is being read by us, readers, and by Vigers, the maid.² Armitt and Gamble's readings of the panopticon are elucidated in tandem with notions of authorship and readership, for they contend that the narrative, in its diary form, "has an almost architectural quality",³ in which the reader and Vigers are placed at the center of the panopticon. In their view, both journals initially present equal value as documents, and we tend to fall into the trap of reading these passages as truths; this leads us to construe a false image of Selina, and also of Vigers, precisely because we tend to privilege Margaret's account over Selina's.⁴

Following similar lines of interpretation that focus on power relations between author and reader, Brindle points to the fact that Margaret is only deceived because her diary appears as a "facilitator of surveillance",⁵ since Vigers reads her diary and communicates the content to Selina, who is in prison. Neither Margaret nor the reader know, until the very last pages of the novel, that Vigers and Ruth, as Selina calls her, are the same character (Ruth Vigers), and that Ruth Vigers and Selina have plotted a scheme to steal Margaret's fortune. Brindle marks two differences between the diarists' writings: while Margaret's journal is structured under the premise of rationality, entailed by her activities as a researcher with her late father, Selina's diary "occupies the superstitious realm of a spiritual hinterland".⁶ Despite the clear dichotomy that her argument brings out – that of intellectual rationality as opposed to religious irrationality –, Brindle contends that these differences become increasingly superfluous, as "both [characters] are subjected to an authoritative gaze insisting upon punishment and reform, which reinforces their similarities".⁷ For Brindle, their diary accounts convey the same authorial value, since both women are submitted to strict disciplinary surveillance, albeit in different spaces. Brindle suggests that we, as

1 Cf. Armitt and Gamble, "The Haunted Geometries of Sarah Waters's *Affinity*"; Brindle, "Diary as Queer Malady: Deflecting the Gaze in Sarah Waters' *Affinity*"; Mitchell, *History and Cultural Memory in Neo-Victorian Fiction*; Pohl "Sexing the Labyrinth: Space and Sexuality in Sarah Waters' *Affinity*" in Mitchell (ed.) *Sarah Waters*; Braid, "Victorian Panopticon: Confined Spaces and Imprisonment in Chosen Neo-Victorian Novels" in Ciuk and Molek-Kozakowska (eds.) *Exploring Space*; Carroll, "Becoming my own ghost: spinsterhood, heterosexuality and Sarah Waters's *Affinity*" and Heilmann, "Doing It With Mirrors: Neo-Victorian Metatextual Magic in *Affinity*, *The Prestige* and *The Illusionist*".

2 Gamble and Armitt, "The Haunted Geometries of Sarah Waters's *Affinity*", pp. 143–144.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 152.

4 *Ibid.*, pp. 154–155.

5 Brindle, "Diary as Queer Malady: Deflecting the Gaze in Sarah Waters' *Affinity*", p. 74.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 72.

7 *Ibid.*

readers, take both journals as truths because Selina and Margaret are both submitted to forms of social oppression, even though both diaries are written in different periods and are constructed upon distinct epistemological grounds – that of Western scientific knowledge representing rationality and that of the occult representing the irrationality of belief.

Brindle's argument is misleading because it overlooks the content of Selina's own narrative about her life prior to her conviction. Thinking of Brindle's reading of the text, it seems relevant to ask the following questions: do these surveillance gazes have the same effect if enacted at home or if enacted in prison? If it is the case that Margaret's diary is written under the rhetoric of rationality because of her bibliographical references, class position, and education privilege, is it not possible that we, as readers, tend to fall into the deception of 'social respectability' because we seem to be reading the authentic feelings of a 'respectable' and intelligent woman? To say that their diaries have the same authorial value because both characters share a history of confinement implies looking into Margaret's diary to obtain a reading of Selina's life, underestimating the latter's agency and ability to narrate her own story. In this sense, Brindle suggests that, despite the incongruent value of their texts, both characters produce narratives with equal authorship value because both women are submitted to equal forces of disciplinary regulation. In my reading, I will dispute these arguments by contending that, although both characters do undergo rigid surveillance, the home and the prison do not provide the same conditions to deal with or confront disciplinary control. Furthermore, I will argue that Selina's and Margaret's class position and their different educational backgrounds directly affect the ways in which we, as readers, understand their diaries, thereby suggesting that they do not present equal authorial reliability as Brindle asserts.

It is true that the rationality in Margaret's diary is, to some extent, undermined by the accounts of her mental condition, since we know that she is recovering from a suicide attempt and that, many of the times that she writes in her diary, she is under the effect of chloral: "Mother came, half an hour ago, to bring me my dose. [...] And so I sat and let her pour the grains into the glass, and swallowed the mixture as she watched and nodded. Now I am too tired to write – but too restless, I think, to sleep just yet".⁸ Yet, in spite of Margaret's vulnerable emotional state of mind, we are able to find out more about her intellectual research about prisons. For instance, she writes about going to the British Library to read Henry Mayhew's and Elizabeth Fry's writings about prisons,⁹ and she occasionally comments on the ongoing developments of her research.

After taking a dose of chloral, Margaret waits for her mother to leave the room so that she can go back to writing in her diary. She writes about a comment made by Mr. Barclay, Priscilla's fiancé, in which he claims that women can only write 'journals of the heart'. Margaret then remembers her old diary, "which had so much of my own heart's blood in it", and affirms that the book she is currently writing – her current journal –

8 Waters, *Affinity*, p. 30.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 57. Waters refers to Mayhew's *The Criminal Prisons of London* (1862) and Fry's *Observations on the Visiting, Superintendance and Government of Female Prisoners* (1827).

will be a different one: this book “should not turn me back upon my own thoughts, but to serve, like the chloral, to keep the thoughts from coming at all”.¹⁰ Margaret wants to use her position as a researcher as a means to fight against depression and, in doing so, to use the act of writing to display her rational observations about Millbank Prison:

[...] it would do, it would do, were it not for the queer reminders Millbank has thrown at me to-day. For I have catalogued my visit, I have traced my path across the female gaol, as I have before; but the work has not soothed me – it has made my brain sharp as a hook, so that all my thoughts pass over they seem to catch at and set wriggling. [...] I think of all the women there, upon the dark wards of the prison; but where they should be silent, and still, they are restless and pacing their cells. They are looking for ropes to tie about their throats. They are sharpening knives to cut their flesh with.¹¹

Margaret evokes a methodology in scientific research of classification and documentation as she relates that she has organized her field notes, cataloguing, and describing her visit; this gives the reader the impression of a rational approach to her object of study. However, as she anticipates in the beginning of the passage, her experience at Millbank cannot be completely reasonable due to “queer reminders” that trigger the outbreak of disconcerting thoughts. Instead of scientific results, Margaret encounters images of suicide and despair, which show her failure to hang on to her reason and her reaction of projecting her own suicidal tendencies onto the women she visits. In reading Margaret’s diary, we encounter the double of rationality and irrationality, the former being present in her higher education and intellectual activities, and the latter being expressed in her mental instability and in the difficulties she encounters in controlling her own text. According to Armit and Gamble, it is not Margaret or Selina who control the text, but Ruth Vigers, someone who is able to manipulate both narratives. They argue that the fact that we know the spatial location of Margaret’s diary, locked up in a drawer in her room, marks the materiality of her text, thereby enhancing its authenticity, blinding our own perception of Selina and Ruth Vigers.¹²

In contrast to the materiality of Margaret’s diary, Armit and Gamble conclude that Selina’s journal is not as reliable, for we only have access to her voice and not her presence, as we know that the diary is not in her possession at Millbank and hence lacks a specific locus. For Armit and Gamble, we cannot have a true account of Selina as a character because her entries consist of “a curious mixture of personal anecdote and business-like records of séances [that] reveal little about her, since they are guarded and allusive in the extreme”.¹³ Indeed, we do not have much information about Selina’s feelings or about her reflections on the world. Instead, we have a diary that sometimes appears more to be a calendar, since she writes very little about her private life and more about her activities as a séance leader:

10 *Ibid.*, p. 70.

11 *Ibid.*, pp. 70–71.

12 Armit and Gamble, “The Haunted Geometries of Sarah Waters’ *Affinity*”, pp. 153–154.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 154.

6 November 1872

To Islington, to Mrs. Baker for her sister Jane Gough, that passed into spirit March '68, brain-fever. 2/-

To Kings Cross, to Mr. & Mrs. Martin, for their boy Alec lost from the side of a yacht – Found Great Truth in the Great Seas. 2/-

Here, Mrs. Brink, for her especial spirit. £ 1¹⁴

In this passage, not only do we notice a list of places to visit, and the supposed spirits that Selina is to receive, but also mentions of money, which can be read as the amount that she collects from Mrs. Brink. It is true that this excerpt does not mention anything about Selina as a person, yet her diary entries imply that this is a woman who must work to make a living, even if this consists in playing tricks on people who are grieving the death of loved ones. As is the case with Armitt and Gamble's and Brindle's readings of *Affinity*, Mitchell's analysis focuses on Margaret's diary, as she claims that Selina's diary is less trustworthy because it "may perform for Ruth rather than reveal Selina's interiority",¹⁵ considering that Selina says that she is sitting with Ruth in the last entry of her diary. For Mitchell, Ruth enacts a controlling presence in the novel by having access to Margaret's and Selina's diary. Mitchell, thus, sustains the view that Ruth's character is central because she is the one who collects all of the information about Margaret by reading her diary, given that she also exercises authorial control over Selina's journal by influencing what she writes and by reading everything that she writes.

In these readings, it seems that the main problem is that Selina's diary entries break with the pact between reader and diary, for it does not expose her true self, only how she is manipulated by others. Moreover, Selina's writings make us wonder if it is possible to trust her at all, since her accounts of talking to spirits are highly dubious and we can never fully understand what exactly the truth behind her relationship with the spirit Peter Quick is. The moments in which we do trust her are through Margaret's writings about Selina, which clearly show that she has fallen in love with her. Even though Selina's writings appear to be less trustworthy than Margaret's, I suggest that it is crucial to ask what the aspects that draw us to Margaret and distance us from Selina as authors are and in which ways the latter's position as a working-class woman and a prisoner influence her own credibility as a diarist.

Apart from considering the relation between prison, same-sex desire, and diary writing, as other critics have done, my reading of *Affinity* asserts that it is crucial to bring class relations in the book to the fore, and to leave lesbian sexuality as a secondary relation in the novel. In the pages that follow, I will discuss Waters' use of the Victorian Gothic and diary fiction with the act of narrating the prison to later reflect upon the constructions of the panopticon in relation to home confinement, questioning if the parallel between Victorian domesticity and prison incarceration can

14 Waters, *Affinity*, p. 94.

15 Mitchell, *History and Cultural Memory in Neo-Victorian Fiction*, p. 125.

actually be read under the same premises, since the conditions for these two distinct forms of confinements are entangled in power relations that are more determined by class position than by gender and sexuality. Margaret's diary entries, I will argue, create an impression of prison as a space of liberation, an image that is strongly biased by her class position and that creates a romanticized and naïve account of prison.

Diary Fiction, the Gothic Novel, and the Making of Class

In *Affinity*, Waters constructs her narrative around recurrent themes from the female Victorian Gothic, such as female imprisonment, repressed sexuality, the oppression of women, and the supernatural. As Davison explains, the Gothic as a literary genre was revived in the 1840s, during the Victorian period as a genre that is often combined with social realism.¹⁶ In this framework, upper-class values and domesticity become a target of ardent criticism, but under the lens of the supernatural and the uncanny. According to Davison, the employment of these Gothic tropes enhance the elements of realism in the novel, since the Gothic undermines the notion that “all aspects of our existence are identifiable and representable” and it puts in check “the idea that all aspects of our identity and institutions can withstand logical and moral scrutiny”.¹⁷ For Davison, the concern with individual psychology and the social criticism that is directed towards Victorian literature paves the way to frequently present the aspect of self-estrangement in female characters which acts as a stage that is “revealed to be the result of monster-making social institutions that necessitate unnatural self-repression”.¹⁸

The element of self-estrangement is crucial for the construction of both Margaret's and Selina's characters. In the former, this is linked to the repression of her sexuality and her difficulties to free herself from the traditional Victorian gender mores, and, in the latter, self-estrangement is perceived in her spiritualism and in her abusive relationship with the spirit Peter Quick. In both cases, Margaret and Selina feel the urge to give accounts of moments in which they lose themselves and, thus, the act of writing becomes a means to relate the psychological damage that they endure. Yet, these writings are produced under different circumstances and the texts that are created suggest different forms of social constraints. In Margaret's writings, we encounter the suffering of a well-educated woman and how her role as a woman is constricted in society. While it was her late father that enabled her activities as a researcher and supported her plans to spend time in Italy with her best friend and lover Helen, his death left her to her mother's conservative education, which did not allow her to proceed with her intellectual work. As well as losing out on the possibility of becoming a scholar, Margaret also loses her relationship with Helen, who decides to

16 Davison, “The Victorian Gothic and Gender” in Smith and Hughes (eds.) *The Victorian Gothic: an Edinburgh Companion*, p. 127.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 128.

18 *Ibid.*

marry Margaret's brother. It is Priscilla, Margaret's sister, who fulfills their mother's idealization of womanhood and marriage, while Margaret is treated as a deadweight that her mother must carry. After Priscilla marries, Margaret writes about the ways in which she is pitied by the gazes of friends and family, and compares her condition to that of her brother and sister:

When Stephen went to school when I was ten: they said that that would be a 'difficult time', because of course I was so clever, and would not understand why I must keep my governess. When he went to Cambridge it was the same; [...] When Pris turned out to be handsome they said that would be difficult, we must expect it to be difficult, because of course I was so plain. [...] they had said only, always that it was natural, it was to be expected that I should feel the sting of things like that; that older, unmarried sisters always did. [...] If I might only have a little liberty.¹⁹

Margaret's complaints address the fulcrum of Victorian domesticity: the ideal of the woman who is to marry and to have children. These expectations mark her position as an upper-class woman, a social position of the family that can also be identified in her brother who goes away for school and then goes to Cambridge to become a lawyer. She relates the realization of her dissatisfaction, at age ten, as she is made aware that her intelligence is to be kept at home and not encouraged elsewhere. The loss of her father is so devastating because he is the figure that nurtures her intellectuality and the possibility of transgressing home-confinement through knowledge. Margaret's diary, in this sense, represents this possibility; it is a way to register her fieldnotes about Millbank, and serves as a way to escape her reality. As she writes in her last note at the end of the novel, writing is something she must do: "I must write, while I still breathe",²⁰ making it clear that she cannot read what she has written before, explaining that she has burned her diary because she knows that is how Ruth Vigers and Selina managed to steal her fortune. Written in a formal register of English, Margaret's diary entries display her high education and convey a well-structured social critique of Victorian domesticity, blended with the sentimentality of the 'journal of the heart'.

In contrast to Margaret's well-constructed sentences and upper-class English, Selina's accounts of daily life are delivered in informal and oral English, showing signs that she writes quickly, as she often uses abbreviations and signs that do not convey any meanings to the reader. These aspects of her writing suggest that she has less time to write, given that she also works as a full-time *séance*, and that she is not very interested in form or expressing herself in writing. As Margaret recalls in her own diary entry, Selina tells her that she kept a journal before being convicted, in which she "wrote in it at night, in the darkness, and writing it would make her yawn and want to sleep".²¹ Writing for Selina is not a *necessity*, but a pastime to unwind from a day full of work. Unlike Margaret, she does not manifest writing as a means

19 *Ibid.*, p. 203.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 348.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 112.

of escape, rather as the production of unpretentious reports of her life, particularly regarding her work.

As a matter of fact, she also provides notes about her studies on spiritualism, such as the “*Common Questions and their Answers on the Matter of the Spheres* by The Spirit-Medium’s Friend” which suggests a kind of test with questions that must be answered. For instance, one of the questions inquires into how many spheres a spirit must go through once it departs from earth, to which Selina answers: “There are seven [spheres], & the highest of them is the home of LOVE that we call GOD!”²² As we can see, this can be read as the equivalent to Margaret’s studies, only that Selina is registering a study of the occult. While Margaret’s notes about Millbank and about her intentions to write the prison’s history are considered part of her intellectual practice, Selina’s notes about spiritualism, God, and religion are not even mentioned by critics, since it relays a kind of knowledge that is not scientific. It is possible to affirm that, to a certain extent, spiritualism and religion in the novel are depicted as forms of knowledge that are as relevant as history and social sciences. However, critics tend to overlook Selina’s accounts of her studies because of the lack of reliability that they entail, even though Margaret’s diary is also not completely trustworthy due to her overtly sentimental accounts and her emotional instability.

Many readings of the novel are skeptical towards Selina’s diary and her activities as a spiritualist, as Armitt and Gamble’s and Brindle’s texts suggest. Mitchell also offers a similar reading, arguing that “the equivocations and evasions in Selina’s diary are designed to conceal the truth about her reputed spiritualist powers” and that Selina herself is a fraud that uses her power “to explore her same-sex desire and, potentially, to defraud heiresses”.²³ Of course, we are certain that Selina does commit fraud and that she does use her spiritual powers to take advantage of other women. Nevertheless, the fact that she studies religion and that Margaret actually finds evidence of Selina’s importance in London’s spiritualist circles creates an ambivalence about her character. On the one hand, we know that she takes advantage of spiritualism to deceive and to make money off women who attend her circles; on the other hand, though, we know that this is the kind of work that provides her financial income. In the novel, spiritualism functions as a material means for Selina and Ruth and as an aesthetic and narrative device that puts the reader in a contradictory position: we want to believe the ghost story, but at the same time we constantly question the veracity of Selina’s séance circles.

As Bown et al. elucidate, the supernatural was not only related to the uncanny in the Victorian imagination, but also to the development of technology, for many of the novelties developed during the period, such as the telegraph and the telephone, produced both feelings of fear and of fascination. The supernatural was, therefore, a topic of discussion that surfaced in between the scientific and the occult, one that was often expressed in a tone of mockery in satires and parodies that were directed at the “foolishness of believers in supernatural phenomena”.²⁴ Spiritualists often resorted to

22 *Ibid.*, p. 73.

23 Mitchell, *History and Cultural Memory in Neo-Victorian Fiction*, p. 125.

24 Bown et al., *The Victorian Supernatural*, p. 1.

the use of scientific language to explain their theories about the world in order to refute the thought that the supernatural was a “superstition’ of the uneducated and ignorant” and to distinguish themselves as members of “the rationalism of educated opinion”.²⁵ What is crucial in Bown et al.’s cultural analyses about spiritualism in the nineteenth century is that the occult was an important way to reflect on social and political phenomena in the Victorian period, given that it often evoked the relationship between individual and society.

In *Affinity*, this relationship addresses issues of class and femininity. Using the parallel between the occult and social criticism, Lynch discusses the relationship between domestic service and their ghostly images in Victorian literature, namely in Elizabeth Braddon’s texts. She notices that the domestic servant and the ghost both play similar roles in Victorian ghost stories, since servants, like ghosts, live in the house but do not belong to it; instead, they engage themselves with ‘workings’ of the house. “Like the spectral spirit”, Lynch explains, “servants were outsiders in the home secretly looking in on the forbidden world of respectability”.²⁶ She argues that servants, who often stemmed from rural areas and lacked education, were perceived as “unstable outsiders persisting in outmoded belief systems stamped as superstitious”.²⁷ In this sense, Lynch suggests that, in spite of upper-class curiosity about the supernatural, the practice of the occult was closely related to working-class subjects and their ignorance of ‘rational’ knowledge.

In the novel, we perceive this kind of relationship in the love triangle between Margaret, Selina, and Ruth Vigers, since the latter characters are working-class women (Ruth is a servant) and both are involved with spiritualism. Margaret gains our trust because of her supposed rationality and respectability, since the occult appears in her writings as mere object of interest connected to Selina, rather than something that she has sought out herself. Selina, conversely, is discredited in many readings of the novel because she is perceived as ignorant and sly and as a character who tries to take advantage of affluent women and who desires Margaret’s fortune to possess a respectable life with Ruth. Finally, Ruth Vigers is taken to be the great villain of the novel, since she is the one who designs and executes the whole plan. Although she seems like a harmless character throughout the narrative, she is the most powerful one: she takes advantage of her invisibility as a servant, as well as Margaret’s upper-class curiosity towards the supernatural, to achieve the life that Margaret wanted, but which she did not have the strength to pursue, which is to live her life with another woman and to achieve independence from the Victorian home.

Waters’ narrative tricks go beyond the suspense created by the supernatural and the uncanny; they also touch upon issues of class. Ambiguity and doubt are produced through the portrayal of social class, given that *Affinity* suggests that spiritualist discourses propagated by a working woman, like Selina, cannot enter the normative realm of scientific knowledge, thereby making it impossible for her to defend herself.

25 *Ibid.*, pp. 7–8.

26 Lynch, “Spectral Politics: the Victorian ghost story and the domestic servant” in Bown et al. (eds.) *The Victorian Supernatural*, p. 67.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 68.

By contrast, Margaret has the disadvantage of intense surveillance at home, yet she has the privilege of education and wealth to free herself from the oppression of domesticity, even though she cannot do it on her own. Margaret's intellectuality leads us to believe her and to empathize with her sufferings, urging us to deem her as the great victim of the story, not actually as a victim of her own lack of agency. This also tricks us into thinking, at least upon our first reading, that it is Margaret's writings, not Selina's, that convey criticism of Victorian society, given that we sympathize with her narrative about domestic confinement and her 'goodness' in doing charity for poor women.

However, Selina's diary also yields episodes that criticize social norms and women's position in society, in this case, her accounts relate class oppression, as well as the dangers of domestic violence and sexual harassment. Before moving in with Mrs. Brink in Sydenham, Selina lives in a hotel in Holborn, in the suburbs of South London, where the owner Mr. Vincy harasses Selina and beats the maid, Betty. In November 1871, she writes:

An awful row tonight! I had Mrs Brink with me all afternoon, & so was late to the dinner-table. [...] Mr. Vincy seeing me slip in now however, said 'Well, Miss Dawes, I hope Betty had kept some meat back for you & not given it to the dog. We thought you might be grown too fine to eat with us.' [...] He passed me my plate, that had a bit of rabbit on it & a boiled potato. I said 'Well, it certainly would not be hard to find a better thing than Mrs. Vincy's dinners', at which everyone put down their forks & looked at me, & Betty laughed, & Mr. Vincy slapped her, & Mrs. Vincy began to call out 'O! O! I have never been so insulted, at my own table, by one of my own paying guests!²⁸

Instead of narrating how this scene makes her feel, Selina describes a series of events that leads to the fight. The description of the dining room suggests that the guests in the hotel all live together, Betty being the maid and Mr. and Mrs. Vincy being the owners of the hotel. Mr. Vincy, whose harassments Selina has already recounted in other passages, is clearly an abusive man to the women in the house,²⁹ even though Mrs. Vincy claims otherwise, as she accuses Selina of trying to seduce him.³⁰ From Selina's diary entries, we discover that she does not have the privilege of a stable home and, moreover, that she cannot count on anyone after her aunt passes away. The scene shows a hostile environment in a precarious home, themes that are also to be found elsewhere in the Victorian Gothic, as we have seen in the novels written by the Brontës. Margaret is explicitly watched at home and her family pressures her into getting better for the sake of her mental stability and, therefore, for the purposes of respectability; however, her accounts show that she can at least count on Helen, her best friend, who has married her brother Stephen. In spite of her possession of great fortune and education, it is Margaret who cannot free herself from Victorian mores, not necessarily the other way around.

28 Waters, *Affinity*, p. 104.

29 *Ibid.*, pp. 52–55.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 104.

Perhaps what makes Margaret's journal more attractive to the reader is the fact that it fulfills the requirements of truth and authenticity implied in the contract between reader and text. According to Abbot, in narrating a novel, the diary form functions as an artifice to convey reality, since it can be regarded as a document and holds the quality of "artless spontaneity".³¹ Abbot states that the value of sincerity in a diarist's writing pertains to the value of authenticity, considering that the basic principle consists of narrating a true story and, in so doing, revealing the diarist's character.³² In Margaret's diary, we can definitely grasp her character, given how often she narrates her insecurities, anxieties, unhappiness, and expectations. Conversely, Selina's journal does not expose her feelings; instead, it narrates actions taken from her perspective and often in vague description, giving us very little information about her own character: all we know about her is that she works hard as a *séance* in many parts of town, including at Mr. Vincy's hotel, and that she later moves to Mrs. Brink's home to serve her as a private spiritualist, supposedly receiving the spirit of her mistress's mother.

One instance of how their diaries present different values of authenticity and truthfulness is how they manifest their falling in love. Neither of them openly discloses that they are, in fact, falling in love; Margaret describes her encounters with Selina using utterly exaggerated words that infer her complete sentimental involvement with the prisoner. During her first visit to the prison, Margaret writes that she feels "a marvellous stillness" emanating from Selina's cell, a silence that is disrupted by a "sigh, a single sigh – it seemed to me, a *perfect* sigh, like a sigh in a story; and the sigh being such a complement to my own mood I found it worked upon me, in that setting, rather strangely".³³ As a perfect complement to her feelings, Selina's sigh seems to anticipate what she later tells Margaret about *affinity*: when "two halves of the same"³⁴ encounter and the souls have a special affinity with each other. This constant use of adjectives, long descriptions of feelings, and even moments of epiphany are absent from Selina's diary. When Selina meets Ruth Vigers for the first time, as Ruth and Mrs. Brink visit Selina in Holborn for a spiritualist session, Selina only relates their arrival to Mr. Vincy's hotel and their superfluous conversations.³⁵

Once Selina moves in with Mrs. Brink, for whom Ruth Vigers works as a servant, three weeks later, Selina's writings describe in the most minute level of detail her excitement in moving to a big house and her amazement with the objects that decorate it. Mrs. Brink shows her the room in which she will sleep, which she finds "so large" that she thought it to be "another parlour". She thinks about the ladies she has attended in the past and also of Mr. Vincy, "putting his fingers on me & waiting at my door".³⁶ The feelings that she relays are those that recall the past and the difficulties that she has had to overcome. The journal entry goes on to describe a great quantity

31 Abbot, *Diary as Fiction*, pp. 18–19.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 21.

33 Waters, *Affinity*, p. 26. Emphasis in original.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 210.

35 *Ibid.*, pp. 92–94.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 119.

of objects, to which she is not at all used: “great many cabinets & drawers [...] There is a vast closet, & this is filled with gowns, & has rows & rows of little shoes, & shelves with folded stockings & bags of lavender”.³⁷ Selina realizes that these things belonged to Mrs. Brink’s late mother, who had died 40 years earlier, and she concludes that she ought not touch those things, for she is afraid of the spirit suddenly appearing at the door.

Instead, she sees another woman at the door, Ruth Vigers, and Selina claims that her “heart went into [her] mouth” because Ruth came in “like a real lady’s maid, like a ghost”.³⁸ Selina’s heart leaping into her mouth can be read as a scare of suddenly seeing a ‘ghost’ standing at the door, but we can also read it as an expression of falling in love abruptly, particularly upon becoming aware of their love affair afterwards. As a servant, Ruth presents a ghost-like character that is able to float into Mrs. Brink’s secrets and take advantage of them, occupying a privileged position that epitomizes “the conjuncture of external, and by extension public, class status and internal, private matters”.³⁹ For Lynch, Victorian ghost stories use the tropes of the domestic sphere to discuss public issues of society, such as class and gender relations. Ruth’s character and her invisibility subvert the role played by domestic servants in society and at home: it is her invisibility as a servant in different private spheres that grants her the opportunities to overcome the precarious status afforded to the domestic servant. On the one hand, Ruth Vigers represents the ignorance of the poor and the blind devotion of a servant to her mistress, which mark the qualities of a ‘good’ servant and which define the submission of working-class subjects in the Victorian period; on the other hand, Ruth has access to all of the private information in Mrs. Brink’s home, and later in Margaret’s home too, that will allow her to break free from the subjugation of domestic service and enable a life with her lover, Selina, in Italy. Ruth is both the villain and the ghost who achieves victory by making the most of her invisible social position and of the underestimation of her intelligence: she enacts class revenge in its full potential.

In the development of Selina’s writings, we notice that she grows closer to Ruth Vigers, as the latter obediently follows Mrs. Brink’s orders to take personal care of Selina in order to preserve her powers for the dark circles. Selina never mentions that she is fond of Ruth, but we notice that Ruth becomes increasingly present in her writings. Selina writes about their conversations about Mrs. Brink and Ruth’s devotion to her, while the latter is “fastening my gown about me, looking at me in the glass. All my new gowns close at the back, & need her hand to fasten them”.⁴⁰ The closer they get, the more dependent Selina becomes upon Ruth, and it becomes clear that the latter exercises strong manipulative influence on the former.

In her first month in Sydenham, Selina tells Mrs. Brink that she does not want to receive money for her séance services, since she is already being rewarded by living in her house and by receiving so many gifts. As time passes, the scenes between Mrs.

37 *Ibid.*

38 *Ibid.*

39 Lynch, “Spectral Politics: the Victorian ghost story and the domestic servant”, p. 67.

40 Waters, *Affinity*, p. 155.

Brink and the spirit who is supposed to be her mother grow to be more sexually charged, as the spirit, which possesses Selina's body and allegedly makes her repeatedly kiss Mrs. Brink, utterly satisfies her mistress with the caresses.⁴¹ It is in this context, regarding Mrs. Brink's desires to be touched and kissed, that Peter Quick mysteriously appears as Selina's 'guide', the "control, that every medium waits for" and who has come "to demonstrate the truths about spiritualism".⁴² After this strange apparition, the dark circles at Mrs. Brink's always become full, for many of her friends and acquaintances visit in order to meet this new spirit. After several months, Selina starts charging three pounds for each client who comes to see Peter Quick, attending to them in the cabinet installed at Mrs. Brink's house. Selina makes more money with the circle because Peter Quick caresses the women and sexually provokes them. In fact, Walkowitz's historical descriptions of these dark circles convey a very similar situation that Waters portrays in her novel: "a medium, usually an attractive young girl, would be placed in a cabinet, bound and gagged, while a fanciful spirit would issue forth", and the medium – supposedly possessed by the spirit – would erotically interact with the guests. The encounters at Mrs. Brink's home are charged with "dramatic sexual displays and inversions [that] were accomplished at materializations".⁴³

Margaret's and Selina's distinctive writing styles denote their self-perception in the world in very different ways: the first relates the world in sentimental writing and the latter conjures the form of a daily chronicle, containing the narration of a series of events in chronological order without much reflection about them. Margaret's sentimental accounts mark the reflexive function of her diary writing: according to Abbot, this places the diarist's will for freedom at the center of the narrative, closing "the gap between the creative and the critical" and conveying "a drama of both writing and reading".⁴⁴ For Abbot, this kind of diary narration entails the sensation that the reader is reading the diary as the fictional character is writing it, meaning that the fictive present in the novel is created by us, as readers, simultaneously accompanying the character's writing of the diary. In conveying the fictive present, in which we read what Margaret has just written, her diary leads us to fall for the tricks of reading Selina first as an 'angel' and then as the 'devil', and also to become overly involved with Margaret's drama of home confinement and her depression. When Selina does mention her feelings, they are usually described in one word and they are often related to the uncanny practices of spiritualism. For instance, the novel's prologue consists of Selina's account about the dark circle at which Mrs. Brink dies:

I was never so frightened as I am now. They have left me sitting in the dark [...] They have put me in my own room, they have locked the door on me. [...] Now the house is full of voices, all saying my name. [Peter Quick] was too rough, & Madeleine too nervous. [...] the row brought Mrs. Brink, I heard her footsteps in the hall & then her voice, that was frightened. [...] I looked once for Peter then, but he had gone. There

41 *Ibid.*, p. 174.

42 *Ibid.*, p. 191.

43 Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight*, p. 176.

44 Abbot, *Diary as Fiction*, pp. 44–45.

was only the curtain, dark & shivering, & marked with a mark of silver from his hand. And after all, it is Mrs. Brink that has died, not Madeleine.⁴⁵

In Selina's writing, Waters is more interested in creating suspense and the atmosphere of a ghost story than in actually revealing her character. It is the mystery conveyed by dark spiritualist circles that concocts the uncertainty and casts doubt about Selina's character. What we see in this passage is the combination of elements that comprise the ghost story: darkness, imprisonment, strange voices, anxiety, fear, strangely moving objects followed by death. Although we only find out later that Selina is the author of that diary, our initial encounter with her writing is based upon wariness and suspicion, given that we still do not know that Peter Quick is a spirit and that Selina is blamed for Mrs. Brink's death and for Madeleine's assault. As we can see in this passage, Selina's narration of the events follows at a quick pace, relating a series of events retrospectively without reflections about them. These events culminate in Selina's arrest.

Selina's and Margaret's diary excerpts show how Victorian domesticity was actually an upper- and middle-class social and cultural more that came to be imposed upon working-class women throughout the nineteenth century. As Beverly Skeggs explains, Victorian domesticity is ingrained in the notion of femininity, which "is a sign that was made for and only fits the middle-class woman".⁴⁶ For Skeggs, moral standards that assert the role of a woman as a wife, mother, and caregiver are impositions that serve "bourgeois domestic standards" to pressure working-class women to enter the realm of idealized respectability.⁴⁷ She argues that respectability functions as a signifier for class relations, in which working-class populations very often appear as the source of danger, filth, and obscenity. Defined as a set of practices and representations that involve "appropriate and acceptable modes of behaviour, language and appearance", respectability is a signifier that is inherent to family values and morals that revolve around the opposing forces of domesticity and sexuality.⁴⁸ In other words, Skeggs notes how historical accounts show that class conflicts were discussed as matters of morality, instead of structural inequality, thereby sustaining the notion that the upper- and middle-classes should educate the lower-classes through familial regulation focused on the figure of the woman.

It is the moral regulation that is promoted by social workers, such as Elizabeth Fry, that Waters brings to the fore in *Affinity*. Margaret's visits to Millbank represent the work done by many philanthropists in the nineteenth century whose view aimed to 'rescue' deviant women by advising them about how to behave 'like a lady' and by teaching them activities that could place them in the right path for domestic life. By drawing the parallel between the Victorian home and prison, Waters appropriates the already established female Gothic thematic of confinement in order to stress its interconnections with gender, class, and sexuality. However, I would argue that this

45 Waters, *Affinity*, pp. 1–3.

46 Skeggs, "The Appearance of Class: challenges in gay space" in Munt (ed.) *Cultural Studies and the Working Class*, p. 133.

47 *Idem*, *Formations of Class and Gender*, p. 45.

48 *Ibid.*, p. 46–47.

parallel should not be read as if home and prison were spatial equivalents, even though the norms that shape these two spaces are based on the objective of disciplining women.

Instead, I argue that, in spite of their shared premise of control over women, home and prison confinements are produced by different disciplinary measures and circumstances that convey distinct consequences in the formation of the subject and, therefore, constitute distinct parameters for resistance: the difference in question relates first and foremost to class. Where Margaret's confinement is determined by traditional Victorian norms that impose domesticity upon women, Selina's imprisonment is sentenced by the law and is established as a crime. Although Margaret does not correspond to the model of femininity that is expected of her, something which her mother makes sure to remind her of, she has the financial and educational means to escape this condition of domestic incarceration. Yet, it is her state of depression that prevents her from leaving her mother's home, and it is her relationship with Selina that gives her strength to leave her family and the overwhelming control that her mother, sister-in-law, and brother all exert on her.

It is only when Selina tells her to secure the money for their supposed escape that Margaret asks her brother Stephen about the conditions of her inheriting the money that their father had left her. As it turns out, Margaret's inheritance is of a high value and her father did not constrain her access to it, as we find out as Stephen authorizes her withdrawal of the amount she wishes from her trust fund.⁴⁹ Selina, however, does not choose to be incarcerated and her agency is certainly not entirely constricted by traditional Victorian mores regarding marriage and domesticity. These forms of female social regulation are only imposed on her during her time at Millbank because moral reformation seems to be the priority of the prison system that she enters. The fact that she is a working-class woman certainly plays a role in her conviction and in the daily routine of her imprisonment. In the following section, I will elucidate the differences between prison and domestic confinement, shedding light on the different mechanisms of surveillance that Margaret experiences at home and that Selina undergoes at Millbank. In doing so, I will argue that, although there are similarities in the ways in which regulation and control are enacted, the prison and the domestic sphere cannot be regarded as equivalent means of disciplining a subject, as critics such as Braid, Llewellyn, and Pohl have suggested.⁵⁰

Narrating Prison

In her book about female prisoners, Elizabeth Fry writes about the necessity of upper- and middle-class women to be involved in charity by visiting the poor and helping to

49 Waters, *Affinity*, pp. 291–293.

50 Cf. Braid, "Victorian Panopticon: Confined Spaces and Imprisonment in Chosen Neo-Victorian Novels", in Ciuk and Molek-Kozakowska (eds.) *Exploring Space*; Llewellyn, "'Queer? I should say it is criminal!': Sarah Waters' *Affinity*"; Pohl, "Sexing the Labyrinth: Space and Sexuality in Sarah Waters' *Affinity*" in Mitchell (ed.) *Sarah Waters*.

save women prisoners “from a condition of depravity and wretchedness”, so that they can be reinstated in “happiness, as a useful and respected member of the community”.⁵¹ Fry was a social and prison reformer who believed that women should exceed their domestic functions as wives, mothers, and daughters to help the poor, especially poor women, to become respectable by complying with duties that included religion, education, and virtue. It is clear from her writings that she believes that women can only achieve “habits of cleanliness, order, and regular industry”⁵² if they comply with the prison’s orders of discipline that entail formal education, religion, and contact with the “pious and benevolent of THEIR OWN SEX!”⁵³ Women prisoners should, therefore, learn the norms of domesticity and family values from the women who represent the ‘true virtue’ of femininity. In defending this relationship, Fry contends that women prisoners should raise their intellectual and religious standards by learning to read and write, by attending the chapel regularly, and by acquiring good ability in sewing. In other words, they should replicate the upper- and middle-class habits of female respectability.

In Waters’ representation of Millbank, the female inmates must also learn these domestic activities, such as sewing and reading the Bible, as a means to improve themselves as individuals. Like Elizabeth Fry, Margaret is the lady visitor who must teach these “villainous women” proper manners. As Mr. Shillitoe, Millbank’s head officer explains, “we teach them prayers, we teach them modesty”.⁵⁴ Not only must the prisoners learn the qualities that make a respectable lady, but they must understand what differentiates them from a ‘proper’ woman. Mr. Shillitoe tells Margaret that the prisoners are “savages” and, despite the matrons’ efforts to ‘improve’ them, it is important that lady visitors also attend them; this is undertaken in order to “let them only know that she has left her comfortable life, solely to visit them, to take an interest in their mean histories. Let them see the miserable contrast between her speech, her manners, and their own poor ways” so they can “grow meek [...] grow softened and subdued”.⁵⁵ Margaret reproduces what she has heard from Mr. Shillitoe in her diary without any criticism about the ways those women are treated or even questioning the reasons why society thinks those women ill. As Skeggs has pointed out, it is crucial to demarcate the prisoners’ familial, religious, language, and habits as *distinct* from the ‘true lady’ as a means to assert and fortify the hierarchy between upper- and working-class women.

Waters renders the narration of prison through Margaret’s voice, showing that the ‘scientific’, and therefore reasonable, account of prison life is established by a narrator who has not actually experienced life behind bars, and yet she understands it as an equivalent experience to her domestic confinement. Nevertheless, it is through Selina’s voice that we get closer to the vulnerability of the inmates’ social position, both within and outside of prison. This criticism is not conveyed directly through

51 Fry, *Observations on the Visiting, Superintendence, and Government of Female Prisoners*, p. 4.

52 *Ibid.*, p. 20

53 *Ibid.*, p. 8. Emphasis in original.

54 Waters, *Affinity*, p. 11.

55 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

Selina's writings, but rather through Margaret's accounts of what Selina says about prison and society. When they meet for the first time, Margaret asks her what she thought about Millbank and Selina turns the question around: "What *would* you make of it, do you think?" Margaret replies that she thinks Millbank is a hard place, but if she were there, then she would know that she had done something wrong and she would take the opportunity of being incarcerated to make plans to better herself.⁵⁶

Margaret narrates this in her journal, even while remaining aware that Selina is skeptical and even hostile to her words, rendering Selina's opinion about Margaret's visits as follows: "You have come to Millbank to look on women more wretched than yourself, in the hope that it will make you well again. [...] Well, you may look at me, I am wretched enough. All the world may look at me, it is part of my punishment".⁵⁷ In turning Margaret's expectations of meekness around, Selina speaks her mind about the performance of charity work as a means to 'free' herself from her own angst with the traditional norms of domesticity and femininity that Margaret must endure. Selina tries to behave herself in order to avoid problems with the matrons, and continues the conversation with Margaret by telling her that she has spirit-friends who visit her, so she does not need lady visitors to comfort her. Margaret then makes a joke saying that she should not let the matrons find out about her spirit visitors, otherwise they would not think her being there was a 'real' punishment. It is in this moment that Selina bursts into a rage and tells Margaret a little bit of what it means to be in prison:

Not a punishment? [...] To have the matron's eyes [...] forever on you – closer, closer than wax! To be forever in need of water and soap. To forget words, common words, because your habits are so narrow you need only know a hundred hard phrases – *stone, soup, comb, Bible, needle, dark, prisoner, walk, stand still, look sharp, look sharp*. To lie sleepless – not as I should say *you* lie sleepless, in your bed with a fire by it, with your family and your – your servants, close about you. But to lie aching with cold – to hear a woman shrieking in a cell two floors below, because she has nightmares.⁵⁸

Selina's descriptions of life in prison mark the differences between prison and home confinement. Forgetting common words and having them replaced by words that indicate the authoritarian orders that come from officers suggest the effects of the prison in transforming the subject into the ideal identity of a prisoner. The prisoners must learn new vocabulary to indicate that they know *how* to behave. As a spiritualist, Selina's naming the word 'bible' points to the Christian imposition upon her; the word 'comb' can be read as the obligation to learn the values of taking care of her own beauty; 'needle' is what a respectable lady uses in the proper work of sewing; 'soup' is the meager condition of food in prison, and what the prisoners should be contented with eating. The narrowing of habits means leaving behind language, gesture, and knowledge of the 'unrespectable' woman as a means to enter the realm of 'respectability'.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 48–49. Emphasis in original.

Margaret does know that the environment of the prison is that of despair and madness and she describes it accordingly. However, instead of reflecting on the mechanisms and the purposes of this architecture and disciplinary authoritarianism, she merely associates it with her condition of confinement at home, implying that surveillance in prison is the same as the surveillance that she must endure at home. The question of respectability is not an aspect of great reflection for Margaret. She reproduces the conversations that she has with the authority of a researcher who is doing fieldwork in her diary, making notes of the routine in prison, the advice, and instructions that she has been given and making observations about Millbank's architecture. She pities the prisoners and wants to help them, but what prevails in her writings is how she feels when she visits the prison, not necessarily critical or social reflections on the mechanisms of the prison and its influence on the inmates' lives.

The Benthamite panopticon, as Foucault has prominently described it, consisted of an annular building that circumscribed the tower, at the center, which had a total view of the ring around it, given that the person in the center can watch all of the cells in the annular building, creating a mechanism that "arranges spatial unities that make it possible to see constantly and to recognize immediately", a mechanism in which "visibility is a trap".⁵⁹ In the early pages of the novel, Margaret is taken to the central tower from which she watches the inmates, who "looked small – they might have been dolls upon a clock, or beads on trailing threads".⁶⁰ In her eyes, the prisoners are just objects walking in circle; they are *her* objects of study who are later animated in her diary, for she notes that, after a while watching them, she can find a bit of 'humanity' in them; this humanity is later certified once she goes into the annular building to meet the prisoners.

Foucault argues that the Benthamite panoptic schema permeates society as a whole as a mechanism of surveillance and of disciplinary power, in which individuals are constantly watched, controlled, and classified by each other, by authorities, and by institutions.⁶¹ Acting upon utilitarian principles of efficiency, the Panopticon aims to "strengthen the social forces – to increase production, to develop the economy, spread education, raise the level of public morality".⁶² For Foucault, the disciplinary forces in society are omnipresent in various apparatuses and institutions, such as in schools, hospitals, family structures, and state authorities (e.g., police and military). In the novel, discipline is imposed on Margaret at home, as her mother pressures her into abandoning her activities as a researcher. In Selina's character, discipline is enforced by state authority in prison, as she must learn the proper manners of upper- and middle-class femininity to prove that she can live in society again.

Discipline, therefore, becomes a subtle mechanism of control, a kind of power that "arrests or regulates movements; it clears up confusion; it dissipates compact groupings of individuals wandering about the country in unpredictable ways".⁶³ Foucault

59 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 200.

60 Waters, *Affinity*, p. 13.

61 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, pp. 206–207.

62 *Ibid.*, p. 208.

63 *Ibid.*, p. 219.

contends that it is the disciplinary forces that are ingrained in society (the classification of individuals, the marking of normal and abnormal, and the principle of visibility) that enable the emergence of the prison as the legitimate form of penal punishment, having the destitution of liberty as its core principle.⁶⁴ It was in the nineteenth century that prisons acquired the function of depriving the individual of their liberty and also of transforming them through work, isolation, and education: “the prison must be the microcosm of a perfect society in which individuals are isolated in their moral existence”.⁶⁵

The panoptic Millbank Penitentiary in *Affinity* depicts this attempt to recreate society within prison walls. In fact, when Mr. Shillitoe shows Margaret the prison on her very first day, he explains: “you see, we are quite a little city here! Quite self-sustaining. We should do very well, I always think, under a siege”.⁶⁶ The prison functions as a way to create the ideal of femininity, construed by the norms of domesticity and sexual repression. It is no coincidence that Margaret recognizes herself in the prohibitions and norms that the prison imposes, as she notes in her diary that she is scared that someone will mistake her for a convict.⁶⁷ The prison affects Margaret in a contradictory way through its function to produce the ideal subject, whose guilt and punishment will make them follow the law. On the one hand, she recognizes herself as guilty for not complying herself to the norms that the prison imposes on the prisoners, given that she is not the ideal Victorian woman, for she is both an intellectual and someone who nurtures same-sex desire first with Helen and then with Selina; on the other hand, her condition as a well-educated, upper-class woman is what grants her the privilege of intellectual and moral authority and the appearance of respectability, which creates the delusion of agency, since she is the one who can walk in and out of prison whenever she wants and can occupy the central position of watching over the prisoners from the tower.

Margaret’s descriptions of London are limited to short trips to the British Museum and to Bloomsbury or to descriptions of her window view of the River Thames and the trees in Battersea. Her routine consists of spending time with her family, of eventual trips around the city, and of her visits to Millbank. After her first day as a lady visitor, Margaret writes that “it was impossible not to feel my own liberty and be grateful for it”.⁶⁸ However, after a few months visiting the prison, she compares the prisoners’ incarceration and constant surveillance to her own confinement. For instance, as she talks to Susan Pilling, who is in prison for thieving, she writes that both the prisoner and the matrons are watching her while she speaks. The feeling of having so many gazes upon her reminds Margaret of her mother “scolding me [...] saying I must talk more [...] ask the ladies after the health of their children; [...] or the work they had painted or sewn”.⁶⁹ Margaret’s confinement is more related to the moral demands of

64 *Ibid.*, p. 231.

65 *Ibid.*, p. 238.

66 Waters, *Affinity*, p. 9.

67 *Ibid.*

68 *Ibid.*, p. 29.

69 *Ibid.*, p. 21.

middle- and upper-class femininity than to spatial confinement and the surveillance of the prison. Even though she cannot enact all Victorian norms of femininity, she nevertheless functions as an authority of surveillance from whom the prisoners must learn these norms. This becomes clear once she reports her activities as a visitor to Mr. Shillitoe and, in so doing, she argues that she has been giving Selina privileges because she considers herself to be a guide to her moral improvement.⁷⁰

In contrast to Margaret's limited circulation throughout the city, Selina relates a life prior to her incarceration, in which she moves from one place to the next in London; she must visit clients in different neighborhoods, such as Farringdon, Islington, and King's Cross. We learn that she grew up in Bethnal Green with her aunt and that, after her aunt's death, she moved to Mr. and Mrs. Vincy's hotel in Holborn, and later to Mrs. Brink's in Sydenham. However, we should not confuse her mobility with freedom, as social surveillance outside of prison is imposed by unequal class relations: in Selina's accounts, we encounter the experiences of labor exploitation and of dysfunctional (and violent) homes. With Mrs. Brink, for instance, it does seem like the lady is taking care of her and this is, indeed, the impression that we have when reading Selina's accounts, as she emphasizes the comfort she is given at home. Yet, like the relationship between Diana Lethaby and Nancy Astley, Mrs. Brink treats her like a private toy of the Ouija board,⁷¹ especially after the apparition of the spirit Peter Quick, given that she invites friends over to see what Selina can do. Once she secures work at Mrs. Brink's, Selina's working hours are extensive and, although she has certain privileges compared to Ruth, she is also kept as a servant who serves her mistress with spiritualist sessions, and she receives a home to live in and expensive gifts in exchange.

In the following part of this chapter, I will argue that Selina's rupture with the norms that are imposed on her are enabled by the emancipation of herself from middle- and upper-class femininity by considering Selina's background before going to prison, and Margaret's account of Millbank; this is performed by using the queerness and exoticism of spiritualist discourses. Although we do know that her plan to escape prison is only possible because Ruth Vigers gives her information about Margaret, Selina's use of her knowledge about spiritualism is also crucial to achieving her freedom. As a ghost story, the novel discusses spiritualism and the supernatural as means to transcend gender power relations and to move beyond the boundaries of social norms. This is, in fact, Selina's explanation to Margaret about the possibility of dissipating social norms, including gender norms, created on earth, once one passes on to the spiritual sphere. Selina's knowledge about spiritualism, regardless of its veracity or intentions, suggests possibilities of resistance to those norms and even the possibility of emancipation from labor exploitation and from middle- and upper-class femininity.

70 *Ibid.*, p. 216.

71 The Ouija board was an instrument used by spiritualists to talk to spirits. It consisted of a board with numbers zero to nine and the alphabet, on which the spirit would guide the medium's hand to form sentences.

Spiritualism and the Transgression of Class and Gender Norms

In one of her visits to Millbank, Margaret tells Selina that her mother has demanded more attention from her since her sister married. She claims that Priscilla has “*evolved*, like one of your spirits”, while she has been left behind “more *unevolved* than ever”.⁷² Margaret writes in her diary that she is envious of Priscilla, who goes to Italy on her honeymoon, a place Margaret was supposed to have gone with Helen and her father. Selina tells her visitor that she has been brave in confronting the situation, but Margaret is aware of her limitations: “Brave! I said. Brave, to bear my own complaining self! When I would rather lose that self – but cannot, could not, was forbidden even that”.⁷³ The notions of evolving and “losing the self” in Margaret’s speech indicates how her identity and the norms that are imposed upon her entrap her ‘true’ self and thwart the possibility of working against the norms that oppress her. Margaret is rendered as a fallen woman, a mad woman whose reason is constantly undermined by medical diagnoses of mental illness through her inability to reproduce those norms and to present a stable and coherent identity that corresponds to the social expectations around her. It is her domestic and familial environments that constitute a prison that impose the duties of a respectable Victorian woman. She is too weak to ‘evolve’ beyond those norms, but she cannot present the ideal behavior of the respectable woman either. Selina’s reply conveys the idea of ‘spiritual evolving’ as the possibility to transgress these norms:

What do you have to envy, really? What has she done, that is so marvellous? You think she has *evolved* – but is it that? To have done what everyone does? She has only moved to more of the same. How clever is that? [...]

But people, I said, do not want cleverness – not in women, at least. I said, ‘Women are *bred* to do more of the same – that is their function. It is only ladies like me that throw the system out, make it stagger –’

She said then that, it was doing the same thing always that kept us ‘bound to the earth’; that we made to rise from it, but would never do that until we *changed*. As for *women* and *men*, she said – well, that was the first thing that must be cast off.⁷⁴

While Selina’s arguments point to an insistence on change, and the necessity of evolving as a means to free the self from the regulations that confine it, Margaret’s thoughts infer that a woman achieves nothing but social scandal through her inability to successfully reproduce the correct behavior. To “throw the system out” suggests going against specific norms as a means to produce transformations. In this system, she can only be perceived as mad or unfit for her social environment, not as a possible agent of resistance. Selina employs her knowledge of subversion through the supernatural to free herself from the class, gender, and sexuality sanctions that are enforced upon her, even though this subversion is enacted *for and against* the same class power

72 *Ibid.*, p. 208. Emphasis in original.

73 *Ibid.*, p. 209.

74 *Ibid.*

relations that constitute the norms. This becomes clear when her plan with Ruth Vigers succeeds and they flee to Italy, which is exactly what Margaret had planned to do with Helen and later with Selina. Going to Italy represents the very possibility to take up the role of the upper-class woman, but without the limitations of Victorian domesticity.

Walkowitz's comments about spiritualism in the nineteenth century endorse the idea that spiritualist practices were more common among women than men, as "the séance reversed the usual sexual hierarchy of knowledge and power" by placing the female medium as a figure highly capable of judgment and awareness.⁷⁵ Many of the séances and women who attended spiritualist sessions found a means to obtain refuge from, and support to confront, familial and marital problems in this practice. As Waters accurately portrays in *Affinity*, private séance sessions were highly charged with sexual behavior, since "trance conditions legitimized a wide range of 'bad behavior' on the part of women [...] allowing them to engage in a subtle subversion [...] of the 'separate sphere' construction of 'true womanhood'".⁷⁶ It is this subversion that attracts so many of Mrs. Brink's friends to the dark circles in her home, especially after the apparition of Peter Quick, the spirit who plays with the women in the circles.

The spirit is depicted both as a source of subversion and as a perpetrator of abuse. On the one hand, it is through Peter Quick that women act out their sexual desire; on the other hand, though, he completely crosses the line with the sexual behavior he enacts. As Selina's 'spirit guide', Peter Quick is playful with the gentlemen, taking their hats and telling them jokes, and he gets too close to women by kissing and touching them and paying them compliments by saying how beautiful they look. Selina writes in her diary that the ladies "like that & they laugh & answer 'o, you naughty thing!' They think kisses from Peter Quick don't count".⁷⁷

However, as time goes by, Peter Quick's apparitions and behavior become increasingly violent and abusive; he mistreats the women and even Selina herself. As a ghost, Peter Quick comes to haunt the dark circles as a ubiquitous form of patriarchal power, a power which Selina cannot control. Selina relates that, during a session, Peter Quick ties her wrists and legs to a chair and makes a lady check if the knots are well tied. The lady tells Peter that Selina is trembling and to this he replies that "[i]t is for her sake I do this" and whispers in Selina's ear: "It is for you I do this [...] I am all your power".⁷⁸ Indeed, he gains all of the power necessary to control all women, leaving some of them in a state of constant fear, as is the case for Miss Isherwood, who comes back to Mrs. Brink's home because she claims that Peter Quick has been haunting her.

Selina says Peter wants to use Miss Isherwood as a medium and convinces her to talk to him again so that she can develop her own powers as a séance. Peter Quick's first lesson is that the medium must act like a servant, as a "plastic instrument for

75 Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight*, p. 176.

76 *Ibid.*

77 Waters, *Affinity*, p. 218.

78 *Ibid.*, p. 232.

the spirits' own hands".⁷⁹ Like Selina, Miss Isherwood must let him use her for his own purposes and she makes Selina take off her gown, as she follows his instructions. Peter Quick claims that Miss Isherwood's flesh is not hot enough for the development to happen, so he advises her to take her own gown off and get closer to Selina to embrace her.⁸⁰ This passage clearly shows that Peter Quick functions as the male gaze and power in society, dominating and controlling for he does not allow women to carry out their own sexual wills: he uses their sexual desire for his own pleasure.

Conversely, Peter Quick also functions as Selina's way of seeking financial independence, given that it is with his sudden appearance that her fame as a séance leader thrives in London's spiritualist milieu. Moreover, he is also part of her initial plan with Ruth, as Selina writes in her last entry before the dark circle in which Mrs. Brink dies. In this passage, Selina and Ruth Vigers are sitting in bed discussing the development of another girl named Miss Silvester and Selina reports that Ruth "is thinking of Little Silvester's money, & what we might do with a share of money like that" and "thinking how handsome [Selina] will look, say in France and in Italy".⁸¹ Whether or not Peter Quick is a fraud plotted by Selina and Ruth remains ambiguous, but we do find out in this last passage that Ruth plays a crucial role in manipulating and concocting actions in their plans, since she is the one who apparently controls the ways in which Selina uses Peter Quick in her spiritualist sessions.

Can Peter Quick be the ghostly form of Ruth Vigers' domination? If he is, then it is possible to say that Vigers not only takes advantage of her invisibility as a servant, but also that she appropriates dominant masculinity to achieve freedom from the class exploitation that haunts her as a servant. In this constellation, Selina's role is not merely that of a victim, but also as an agent in those plots; we can perceive this in the ways in which she manipulates and seduces Margaret. In prison, Selina's spiritualist knowledge also functions as a means to persuade women to comply with her needs. Apart from Margaret, she also entices Mrs. Jelf, a matron at Millbank, by supposedly sending her messages from her dead son. Mrs. Jelf takes part in Selina's plan by giving her a matron's cloak and by walking out with her from the prison so that she can be free.

Most criticism regarding *Affinity* tends to overly emphasize Victorian domesticity as a space of confinement and the prison as a queer space that functions as a means for Margaret to enact her lesbian desire and free herself from Victorian domesticity; this is because Margaret's voice is so dominating in the novel.⁸² In doing so, these texts end up overlooking the role that class plays in the plot's development. Braid argues that the panoptic gaze in the novel is turned into "a lesbian gaze of desire",⁸³ claiming

79 *Ibid.*, p. 261.

80 *Ibid.*, pp. 261–262.

81 *Ibid.*, p. 352.

82 Cf. Braid, "Victorian Panopticon: Confined Spaces and Imprisonment in Chosen Neo-Victorian Novels" in Ciuk and Molek-Kozakowska (eds.) *Exploring Space*; Llewellyn, "Queer? I should say it is criminal!": Sarah Waters' *Affinity*"; Pohl, "Sexing the Labyrinth: Space and Sexuality in Sarah Waters' *Affinity*" in Mitchell (ed.) *Sarah Waters*.

83 Braid, "Victorian Panopticon: Confined Spaces and Imprisonment in Chosen Neo-Victorian Novels", p. 79.

that the prisoners at Millbank represent women's captivity in Victorian society, and suggesting that the role of an upper-class woman, such as Margaret, is the same as a working-class woman like Selina and so many other prisoners.

Llewellyn considers Margaret's character to be transgressive and criminal for not representing the traditional Victorian woman, since she does not have children, she is unmarried, and she is intellectualized. He reads her activities as a lady-visitor as "an outlet for lesbian sexuality", arguing that Margaret's upper-class position places her in the advantage of the voyeuristic gaze and this is a feature that enables her acting out her desire with Selina. In Llewellyn's reading of *Affinity*, spiritualism is the key to enter the world of same-sex desire among women, as he regards spiritualism as "a metaphorical cover for the underworld of lesbian sexuality".⁸⁴ It is in this sense that he suggests that Margaret is able to release her sexuality as she comes into contact with Selina.

Neither Llewellyn's nor Braid's readings consider the incongruent power ingrained in the novel's class relations; they consider class only as an identity category that composes Margaret's and Selina's characters and that does not necessarily interfere with the effects of confinement and incarceration in the characters' development. King is the only critic who addresses matters concerning class in *Affinity* in her work about Victorian women in contemporary literature, emphasizing the subversive function of spiritualism in Victorian gender relations and discussing the distinctions between upper- and lower-class female sexualities.

King argues that Margaret's visits to the prison work as a kind of therapy that, as Braid and Llewellyn have suggested previously, enables Margaret to act out her same-sex desire. However, she reflects on the role played by class in the characters' relationship, pointing out that it is the working-class prisoner who incites transformations within the upper-class visitor, not the other way around, as might be expected. Instead of Selina learning the manners of middle- and upper-class femininity that Margaret supposedly teaches her, it is Margaret who believes in Selina's spiritualist power and learns the values of transgressing norms from her. In fact, King sees potential for transgression in Selina's writings, arguing that the character's diary "subverts the convention that diaries provide insight into a character's truest and most secret thoughts and feelings".⁸⁵ For King, Selina is highly aware of the potential of transgression in her thoughts and, hence, she does not put them down on paper.

It is true that Waters' depiction of the prison cannot be limited to the institution itself but must, in the Foucauldian sense, be extended as a means of criticism of Victorian gender and sexual ideology writ large. Yet, even if we do consider the prison to be a metaphorical confinement, as a set of disciplinary norms that enact upon the soul and form subjects, the consequences of each kind of imprisonment cannot be read on equal grounds, even though there are certainly similarities between them. Outside of prison, Selina's life is restricted by her position as a servant and by frequent episodes of abuse, domestic violence, and exploitation. In contrast, Margaret's social position as a spinster and as a woman who has had same-sex relationships makes her

84 Llewellyn, "Queer? I should say it is criminal!": Sarah Waters' *Affinity*", p. 210.

85 King, *The Victorian Woman Question in Contemporary Literature*, p. 90.

vulnerable to medical violence that insists on placing her as a mad and dysfunctional person. They are both confined in the social norms that limit their roles as women, but it is important to emphasize that the class position that each of them occupies entails significant differences, particularly in terms of their possibilities of escape.

Being in possession of a fortune, as Margaret is, she could easily walk away from the home confinement and surveillance to which she has been submitted by pursuing her activities as an intellectual. Although Margaret mentions that she would like to write a book that is *not* a 'journal of the heart', she cannot achieve this because her writings, despite often criticizing the role played by women in Victorian society, do not function as a means to free herself; instead, they cause her to sink herself further into the depression of domesticity. Selina, however, has no possessions and strives to transform her life and to overcome obstacles through the use of spiritualism. The question of agency is crucial here as we notice that Selina's financial independence with her work as a medium provides the means for emancipation, whereas Margaret, with her wealth and education, cannot use her activities as a researcher to achieve a similar purpose. The book about the prison is never written and her fieldnotes become secondary in her diaries when compared to her constant complaints about being under surveillance at home. If prison offers the possibility to achieve emancipation for Margaret, she certainly does not take advantage of it. The prison cannot, by any stretch, be experienced as a possibility for improvement, reflection, or freedom for Selina and all of the other incarcerated inmates in Millbank. This is only available for women in Margaret's class position, particularly women who can walk in and out of the prison and return to a comfortable home.

The diary form that Waters chooses in her novel conveys the apparent truth and documentation of life behind bars in a Victorian panoptic prison, a documentation form that is endorsed by the social texts about prisons written by Elizabeth Fry and Henry Mayhew. Nevertheless, this documentary fiction is narrated by a character who walks in and out of prison whenever she wishes, instead of someone who actually must endure the daily count of prison time, the authoritarian impositions of the officers, and the social marginality directed towards convicts. It is, in fact, Margaret's privilege in the prison system that Waters represents, given that the character occupies the position of a watcher, an observer, who has the voyeuristic privilege of looking into but walking out of Millbank.

The matrons show Margaret the different wards during her first visit and she gets to peak into the cells through what the inmates call 'the eye', an iron flap that covers a small hole on the cell's door, which can only be opened from the outside. As she walks by Selina's cell, Margaret opens the inspection hole and sees Selina for the first time, a moment that is later described in her diary: "I was sure that I had seen her likeness, in a saint or an angel in a painting of Crivelli's".⁸⁶ As she scrutinizes Selina through the spying hole, she sees the Victorian "angel in the house", she sees fragility and virtuousness, she sees the ideal of the upper-class Victorian woman, the role that she is supposed to play at home, and which she cannot fulfill. Margaret's visits to Millbank can be read in parallel with the popular activity of slumming, as an

86 Waters, *Affinity*, p. 27.

entertaining adventure taken up by a bored and depressed spinster, by someone who can revive her humor by looking at women who seem more miserable than herself.

Margaret's writings suggest that there is a will to be sympathetic to the prisoners' lives and that there is a will to help (a will of charity), and she does see the prison as an unfair method of punishment. Nevertheless, she is unable to be critical of her own class position and truly believes that she and the inmates share the same social position in terms of confinement (i.e., the position of a 'Victorian woman'). In another diary entry, Margaret feels sorry for those "fifteen hundred men and women, all shut up and obliged to be silent and meek", and she wonders "how many of them lie in their cold cells, dreaming of china cups, and books and verses".⁸⁷ The assumption that those prisoners are thinking of books and of china cups displays her own incapability to understand the political, social, and economic forces that construct the prison as the ultimate space of punishment and control, and also the social disadvantages that has taken those women to prison: all of them are poor women who are convicted for abortions, for murdering their babies, for theft, for assault, and for aggressively responding to sexual abuse and harassment.

It is in this sense that I contend that the appropriation of the prison, or the queering of the prison, occurs as a way to disrupt dominant class relations between upper- and working-class women. Unlike other Sarah Waters novels, queering space in *Affinity* is not a way to resist heteronormative gazes and enact lesbian identity. Rather, it is a way to break free from suffocating and oppressive class domination *through* the use and enactment of spiritualism and same-sex desire. For Selina, being a lesbian is not perceived as a challenge, as something forbidden; it is rather natural, it is love, and it is what she calls *affinity*. For Margaret, conversely, this is described as one more prohibition, one more failure that she must confront, first with Helen and later with Selina.

87 *Ibid.*, p. 32.

Chapter 4

“Thank God for the war”

Urban Destruction and Queer Chronotopes in *The Night Watch*

Introduction

Waters' shift in writing about the nineteenth century to produce literature set in the 1940s displays an interesting development in her work, particularly in terms of the ways she uses history and of the ways she represents London. As the critic Katharina Boehm has elucidated, the significant transformations in Waters' work, once she begins writing about the twentieth century, relate to the possibility of researching historical archive.¹ In the production of her prominent neo-Victorian novels, Waters pursues the project of creating a fictional lesbian historiography in the Victorian period; this is achieved by taking as a premise the postmodernist concern of including narratives of subjects that have been traditionally excluded from normative historical accounts.² In an interview in *The Guardian* in 2006, Waters points to the differences in historical research, claiming that, in writing the Victorian period, she greatly relied on literary books that gave her the feeling of the period in the quality of “a stage set, already mythicized by its own extravagant fictions”.³ In turning to fiction as a historical resource, Waters suggests that her depiction of the Victorian Era is based, to a certain extent, on literary depictions and the literary genres of the period.

In writing fiction set in the first decades of the twentieth century, however, Waters begins to rely on archival material – photographs, documents, objects, and interviews from the period –, granting the fictional representation of history a materiality that is by and large imagined in her nineteenth century works. In Boehm's reading of *The Little Stranger* (2009) and *The Night Watch* (2006), she argues that these novels draw the reader's attention to the ways in which history “is sedimented in historical buildings

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- 1 Boehm, “Historiography and the Material Imagination in the Novels of Sarah Waters”, p. 242.
 - 2 This topic will be discussed further in Chapter 8, which will deal with Hutcheon's concept of ‘historiographic metafiction’.
 - 3 *Idem*, “Romance Among the Ruins” in *The Guardian* on 28 January 2006, available in <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2006/jan/28/fiction.sarahwaters>. Accessed on 25 January 2016.

and objects, as well as to the relationship between materiality and memory".⁴ This shift in Waters' literary production also leads to transformations in her modes of narration, particularly in *The Night Watch*. While the neo-Victorian novels present autodiegetic narrators that are developed according to the literary genres to which they refer (i.e., the picaresque novel and the *Bildungsroman* in *Tipping the Velvet*; the diary form in *Affinity* and the sensation novel in *Fingersmith*), Waters introduces a heterodiegetic narrator in *The Night Watch* who focalizes on the characters separately in order to convey various experiences from the war.⁵

Apart from changes in the depiction of history and in narration, Waters' *The Night Watch* presents a very specific representation of London in her body of work, displaying the 'Little Blitz' in 1944 as the narrative's main event. Waters' depiction of urban destruction is constructed alongside notions of potential disruptions of dominant social norms regarding class, gender, and sexuality during the war, which commentators such as Rose, Jennings, and Smith have pointed out.⁶ In this chapter, I aim to discuss how Waters' representations of urban destruction in London yield different queer chronotopes that disrupt the normative order of space and time. The novel's reverse chronology not only allows us to experience the lack of linearity triggered by post-war experience, as Stewart argues,⁷ but it also displays the process of reverse deconstruction: we begin the novel with the reconstruction of the city and of the characters themselves only to then learn *why* and *how* both London and the protagonists became dismantled, lost, and disorientated.

The novel's first part is set in 1947, after the war, where we learn about the consequences of urban destruction in the characters' lives; the second part shifts to 1944, during the war, when the characters' relations and their social positions in the war are clarified; lastly, the novel ends in 1941, in the part in which we learn the origins of the characters' relationships and are, thus, able to make sense of the outcome of their lives presented in the first part. In 1947, the apparent normality of post-war London is sustained by peace, the lack of danger, and the absence of air raids. Yet, what we notice during this period of the city's reconstruction is the impossibility for the characters to return to their 'normal' lives, considering their traumatic experience during the war. In 1944, four years into the war and one year before its end, we notice how the characters have established a routine in their lives among extraordinary circumstances that are marked by blackouts, air raids, and the possibility of death.

The tension between normal and extraordinary circumstances during the war is crucial in Waters' novel, particularly regarding the relationship between the subjects

4 Boehm, 'Historiography and the Material Imagination in the Novels of Sarah Waters', p. 243.

5 In *The Little Stranger* (2009), Waters maintains the autodiegetic narrator, but it is a male protagonist who is the narrator in this novel. Set in a Georgian mansion in rural Warwickshire after the Second World War, this is the only novel written by Waters that does not take place in London. In her latest novel, *The Paying Guests* (2014), Waters uses a heterodiegetic narrator to narrate a crime novel set in the 1920s in Camberwell, South-East London.

6 Cf. Jennings, *A Lesbian History of Britain*, pp. 135–141; Rose, *Which People's War?*, pp. 71–92; 107–150 and Smith, *Britain in the Second World War*, pp. 12–16.

7 Stewart, "The Second World War in Contemporary Women's Fiction: Revisiting the Home Front", p. 419.

and their spatial environment. While it seems impossible to live a normal life in 1947 because of the transformations that the characters underwent during the war, living a normal life in 1944 is what gives the characters some kind of stability in completely abnormal circumstances. In both instances, however, there is a mismatch between subject and space that enables the characters to appropriate space as a means to make their lives livable: in this process, appropriation is always enacted within the movement of stabilizing and destabilizing norms.

Much has been said about the reverse chronology of the novel. Alden reads the reverse chronology in tandem with Henry Green's temporal and narrative complexity in *Caught* (1943), arguing that Waters' refusal of linearity reverberates the fragmentary act of giving an account of war.⁸ Adding to the discussion about reverse chronology as a post-war narrating strategy, Stewart contends that the movement from effect to cause is linked to the narrative structure of the detective novel, since Waters constructs her narrative upon elements of suspense that will focus on *how* the protagonists will survive. In this sense, she argues that, like in the detective novel, past actions and events in *The Night Watch* are structured like "the forward-moving narrative of the investigation, so that the action progresses forward and backward simultaneously".⁹ It moves forward because we slowly gather more information about the characters' connections and wartime experiences and it moves backwards because, since we are reading their future before their past, we always refer back to the post-war period in order to make the necessary connections between 1944 and 1947.

Mitchell goes further into the reading about the novel's reverse chronology to argue that the "temporal oddness" is not only a structural and narrative device in the plot, but it also relates to the ways in which the characters live outside regular frameworks of time and also outside normative frameworks of society as a whole. She contends that Waters conjures a "queer temporality" in the novel, given that "the war is sufficiently disruptive of normative temporalities", as the characters can only live the present and have difficulties in planning the future.¹⁰ The lesbian characters, she argues, are outside heteronormative time because they do not live in the logics of reproductive and marriage linearity. This is especially the case for Kay Langrish, a woman in her mid-thirties who had worked as an ambulance driver during the war, while, in 1947, she lives as a lost ghost in the city, unable to hold on to her former job. One of Waters' few male protagonists, Duncan, also finds himself outside of heteronormative time due to his implicit homosexuality, his attachment to the past, and particularly because time in his life is marked by prison time.

Even the novel's heterosexual characters, Mitchell explains, are bound to live in queer forms of temporalities, since they also embody "non-normative ways of being".¹¹

8 Alden, "Possibility, Pleasure and Peril: *The Night Watch* as a Very Literary History", in Mitchell (ed.) *Sarah Waters*, p. 74.

9 Stewart, "The Second World War in Contemporary Women's Fiction: Revisiting the Home Front", p. 429.

10 Mitchell, "What does it feel like to be an anachronism?: Time in *The Night Watch*", in Mitchell (ed.) *Sarah Waters*, p. 86.

11 *Ibid.*

Viv, Duncan's sister, for instance, has a conflictive relationship with a married man, Reggie. Their encounters take place outside of regular familial or reproductive times, given that they can only meet in secret places, often outside of London. In 1944, Viv gets pregnant and they find a dentist who performs abortions in his clinic. The traumatic experiences of pregnancy, and later of abortion alongside Reggie's deliberate negligence, characterize their affair outside heteronormative time and, at the same time, shows that the 'sexual freedom' during wartime was limited to certain people and circumstances, as I will explain further throughout this chapter. In a time in which abortion was a crime, Viv finds her supposed freedom thwarted by strict reproductive legislation that allows men to walk away from pregnancies and puts women in serious risks; thus, while heterosexist norms enable Reggie to move on as if nothing happened, they place Viv as a cast-off character who must bear the consequences of an undesired pregnancy.

According to Mitchell, Waters' concern with time structures in *The Night Watch* deals "with the frustration of temporal progress and the abandonment of conventional temporal markers, with the subjective distortion and affective force of time versus tyranny of 'objective' and institutional time".¹² Crucial to her argument is that all of the novel's characters are submitted to a temporality that follows on from their non-normative subject positions and of the emotional situation in which they find themselves, thereby suggesting that there is always a tension between "objective' and institutional time" (e.g., reproductive, family, and industrial time) and their own subjective time.

By using the expressions 'family time' and 'industrial time', Mitchell references Harvey's discussions about time-space experiences in both modernity and late modernity. Harvey defines 'family time' as the time to have and raise children, as well as the time to transfer assets and knowledge from one generation to the next through the already established relations of kinship. 'Industrial time' is related to capitalism, to labor, and to the rhythms of technology in society. According to Harvey, family time works according to industrial time, given that the first functions as a means to attend and sustain the norms of the latter. In this normative framework of the experience of time, the notion of stability is granted through "cyclical and repetitive motions" that also entail the idea of progress.¹³ For Harvey, this stability is disrupted in situations of recession and of war, which put the sense of progress in check. In these cases, he contends that we seek stability and reassurance by holding onto cyclical time, something that could warrant the possibility that these extraordinary situations will come to an end.

For Mitchell, the novel's queer temporality is conveyed in its wartime setting, in its reverse chronology, and in its characters' subjective/affective time frames. In her reading, the novel's queer temporality undermines the notion of lesbianism as an infantile and 'backwards sexuality', prompting instead significant consequences in the characters' lives.¹⁴ The characters disrupt institutional temporality by rejecting

12 *Ibid.*, p. 95.

13 Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, p. 202.

14 Mitchell, "What does it feel like to be an anachronism?: Time in *The Night Watch*", p. 98.

the continuity of reproduction and by creating their own notions of keeping track of time, as we notice with Kay's character in the first pages of the novel. By watching her landlord's (Mr. Leonard) patients coming and going, "she really could tell the time by them: the woman with the crooked back, on Mondays at ten; the wounded soldier, on Thursdays at eleven".¹⁵ Kay's time, being secured with fixed income due to her upper-class background, cannot be measured by the time at work after the war, as is the case for her friend Mickey who works at a gas station; instead, it is measured by her watching others' temporal routines.

Throughout this chapter, I will reiterate Mitchell's notion of queer temporality, but I wish to reflect on this idea alongside the novel's spatial aspects which are not considered in her reading. It is true that time plays a crucial role in *The Night Watch*'s narrative structure, as Mitchell has thoughtfully elucidated, but it is also important to consider the novel's potential to create queer spatialities. As I will argue in the following pages, I consider how the destruction of London and the measures of control and regulation over the population during the war affect the characters in different ways: where the 'war effort' provides the female characters in the novel with the possibility of financial and personal autonomy, and more sexual freedom than they experienced previously, it completely takes away Duncan's freedom and it traps him into a very sensitive mental state. Apart from imposing non-normative time frameworks upon individuals, as Mitchell has pointed out, war also dramatically changes the spatial order of a specific territory and its population.

Neville Chamberlain's government expressed great preoccupation with urban areas in the beginning of the war, namely the most populous ones and the damages that German attacks might cause. London, of course, was known to be the main target. It was because of this territorial and spatial concern during the war that British governments, first Chamberlain's and later Winston Churchill's, adopted measures to regulate and control the population, knowing that "even more than in the Great War, the civilian would be as much in the front as the soldier in uniform".¹⁶

It was important to keep the population engaged with the war effort and, to do so, the government massively invested in propaganda and in surveys that could reflect people's public opinions during the war. This methodology of controlling the population was crucial to guaranteeing the country's functioning during wartime and to creating an overall ideology that there would be radical progress after the war, and that the country was united against their common enemy, the Germans. Waters' *The Night Watch* shows that these mechanisms of regulation and control were not completely effective. In the novel, she demonstrates how the characters' wartime experiences display unequal effects on their agency, autonomy, and freedom. In this sense, it is possible to argue that their wartime experiences were not only marked by non-normative temporalities, as Mitchell contends, but also by non-normative spatialities, in which the destruction of places and buildings also means a continuing process of destabilizing norms (destruction) to later re-establish them (reconstruction) in conventional ways.

15 Waters, *The Night Watch*, p. 3.

16 Thorpe, 'Britain', in Noakes (ed.) *The Civilian in War*, p. 21.

In my reading, I will argue that Waters depicts the relationship between individuals and space, whereby notions of space are conveyed in relation to wartime ideology and to notions of identity. Waters' depictions of spaces are always entangled with notions of temporality and often convey the idea that identities are constructed through and across space. For instance, Kay arrives in a house that has just been destroyed in 1944:

[...] broken window-glass mixed up with broken mirrors, crockery, chairs and tables, curtains, carpets, feathers from a cushion or a bed, great splinters of wood. [...] What amazed her, too, was the smallness of the piles of dirt and rubble to which even large buildings could be reduced. This house had had three intact floors to it, an hour before; the heap of debris its front had become was no more than six or seven feet high. She supposed that houses, after all – like the lives that were lived in them were mostly made of space. It was the spaces, in fact, which counted rather than the bricks.¹⁷

Although the description of the shattered house in the beginning looks like bits and pieces, these objects (mirrors, glass, crockery, chairs and tables, curtains, carpet) give us a notion of this destroyed site as an actual home. The description of this place that has been turned into rubble refers to past and present: the found objects symbolize the material construction of the house in the past, whereas their scattering represents the rubble that the house has become in the present. The last sentences, referring to the spatiality of lives, indicate that these lives are narrated through space, instead of being narrated *exclusively* through time: life is not a linear series of events narrated through temporality alone, but it is also constituted by and through space. It is the subject's relation to space and the way space will constrain or empower the individual's conditions of living that will shape and form their identity.

Space alone cannot be regarded as the physical and architectural representation of London in the novel; space must be coupled with the ideological framework of nationhood, which works under the premise of the 'People's War' rhetoric in wartime. As Calder's and Rose's studies elucidate, governmental measures of regulation, surveillance, and propaganda functioned as a way to create an ideology that attempted to keep the population engaged with the war efforts¹⁸ and, moreover, acted as an ideology that promised great transformations in England's social structures, especially in terms of gender, class, and race.¹⁹ Wartime ideology consisted in an overall ideal that the war was "being fought by and for a country imagined as a unified land of 'ordinary people'".²⁰ As Feigel notes, the myth of the Blitz, which "portrayed the Blitz as a scene of cheerful togetherness and courage",²¹ was also an attempt to produce an environment of normality in abnormal circumstances. In Feigel's words: "[w]hile

17 Waters, *The Night Watch*, p. 195.

18 Cf. Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz*, pp. 119–140.

19 Cf. Rose, *Which People's War?*, pp. 1–29.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

21 Feigel, *The Love-Charm of Bombs*, p. 5.

fighting in the First World War took place far away, the bombing of the Second World War was superimposed onto a relatively normal London life".²²

As I will show throughout this chapter, Waters reworks the myth of the Blitz by challenging the notion of a generalized union among citizens and by exploring the sexual freedom that women (lesbian and straight) experienced during the war. In using different focalizers throughout the narrative, she emphasizes individual stories that do not always overlap with the ideal sense of engagement with the war effort. Waters' construction of her characters, of London, and of wartime must be read beyond the scope of lesbian and gay sexual identities and apart from the pervasive idea of wartime sexual freedom. Rather, I will suggest that its reading should be extended to the effects of the war's ideology in the characters' lives and in their relationship with London. As I will further elucidate, the characters' appropriation of non-normative spatial and temporal circumstances imposed by the war *can* produce queer spaces and queer temporalities. However, sometimes they will yield normative time and spaces that reflect pre-war norms or, at times, they also entail notions of futurity that are ingrained within heteronormative marriage and kinship.

Queer Chronotopes

In order to explore the relation between temporal and spatial frameworks in the novel, it is relevant to discuss the pervasive clear-cut division between space and time. Drawing on discussions of Laclau and Jameson, Massey argues that time has always been placed as the positive side of the time-space binary, being connected to change, movement, history, dynamism, progress, science, order, and reason, whereas space has been put into the negative pole of the binary, often being related to stasis, aesthetics, reproduction and chaos.²³ According to Massey, it is crucial to think of the relation between time and space in an "irrefutable four-dimensionality (indeed n-dimensionality) of things", having in mind that "space is not static, nor time spaceless".²⁴ For Massey, it is crucial to understand that social relations are spatial, that they change throughout time and that these relations could take place in a very local level but also extend itself to the global.

It can be fruitful to look into Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope, in which the novel's temporality is considered more important than its spatiality, in light of Massey's notions of space-time. In doing so, we can reflect on the chronotope within Massey's premise that both time and space must be regarded in relation to the other, instead of having one category being prioritized over the other. If we consider space to be a product that undergoes endless transformations that are influenced by social relations, history, social norms, and the ways individuals can appropriate space, collectively or subjectively, then it is possible to argue that there is also movement and transformation in space that will materialize in different ways over time. While

22 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

23 Massey, *Space, Place and Gender*, pp. 256–257.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 264.

Bakhtin's discussions of the chronotope contend that time warrants the representability of the world in literature, Massey suggests that space can also be a dynamic means of representation of history, politics, and the social. In this case, I would argue that space is also a crucial element of narrative that cannot be regarded as isolated from the temporal or as a product of time in literary representations of the world: in literary chronotopes, it is essential to reflect upon the ways in which space and time shape each other.

Waters' *The Night Watch* definitely defies time as a primary representational element in its narrative, given that it becomes clear that space can also materialize time and can represent history. The destruction of London and the process of its reconstruction are pivotal to the development of events, and to the characters' queer relations between each other and with their environment. In 1947, for instance, Reggie picks Viv up at Waterloo to drive outside of London for one of their encounters. They cross the Strand, the City, and drive past the Whitechapel, in East London:

He speeded up. The streets grew clearer. Billboards appeared at the side of the road, advertising *Players, Please!* and *Wrigley's, 'Jiffy' Dyes* and *Vim*. She sat more loosely, watching the peeling back of the city – the blitzed Victorian high streets giving way to red Edwardian villas, the villas giving way to neat little houses like so many bowler-hatted clerks, the little houses becoming bungalows and prefabs. It was like hurtling backwards through time – except that the bungalows and prefabs turned into open green fields, and after that, she thought, if you narrowed your eyes and didn't look at things like telegraph poles or aeroplanes in the sky, you could have been in any time, or no time at all.²⁵

The spatial elements that describe their drive from Waterloo to the outskirts of London are the marks of time. First, it is the present that is indicated by the 1940s advertisement billboards, which are followed by a linear architectural history that begins in the Victorian period and ends with post-war prefabricated houses and bungalows in the East End. The description, with the image of a blitzed Victorian street that leads directly to an Edwardian villa, can be read as a spatial portrayal of the modernist ideal of breaking with the Victorian past. Once turned into little houses, the architectural aspect of buildings is then directly linked to the new clerk class, an affluent working- and middle-class that grew in the beginning of the twentieth century and that settled in London's suburban areas.²⁶ Lastly, the architecture changes into the prefabricated

25 Waters, *The Night Watch*, p. 62. Emphasis in original.

26 See chapter 4 in Stedman Jones' *Languages of Class* and Clapson's "Destruction and Dispersal: The Blitz and the 'Break-Up' of Working-Class London" in Clapson and Larkham (eds.) *The Blitz and its Legacy*, p. 100. Interestingly, Waters' most recent novel *The Paying Guests* (2014) depicts the inter-war period and the decline of the Victorian upper-classes and the rise of the 'clerk class'. Frances and her mother, Mrs. Wray, must start taking lodgers into their home in suburban Camberwell (South-East London) to complement their income, as both sons died in the Great War and the father of the family leaves a stack of debts after his death. Leonard and Lilian Barber, the couple who move in, belong to the clerk class, as Leonard works in the City and Lilian is a housewife, both originally from a working-class background.

houses and bungalows that characterize the post-war attempt to rapidly rebuild London and to provide housing for over a million people who lost their homes.²⁷

Although Waters' spatial construction of the cityscape chronologically suggests the idea of progress, Viv has the sensation of going back in time at high speed to arrive in open green fields, the countryside. Instead of the countryside being conveyed as a point of *origin*, a landscape of the past that can be read as tradition or even recall the lives of rural workers, the fields take her to a sensation of there being a void of time, especially when she closes her eyes and cannot see the objects that characterize the 1940s (i.e., telegraph poles and planes). Moving into space and driving past a linear history of London's architecture is what transforms Viv's temporal experience. Focalized on Viv's perceptions of the city in a moving car, the narrator captures the fusion of a multi-temporal space in the character's imagination, thereby creating a queer chronotope that disrupts notions of a linear historical time that will lead to progress, and that allows Viv's subjective sense of time to prevail over 'industrial' time.

In this passage, the linear presentation of London's architectural history functions as a means to disorientate Viv's sense of time; this can be interpreted in light of Sara Ahmed's discussions about phenomenology. In *Queer Phenomenology*, Ahmed approaches Husserl's and Merleau-Ponty's theories to reflect on the ways in which bodies and objects orientate themselves across space and time, and how our thoughts and selves are always directed, consciously or unconsciously, towards specific ways of living and being. The notion of orientation is pivotal in the development of her reflections, as she argues that orientations shape the ways in which we inhabit space and also "how we apprehend this world of shared inhabitation, as well 'who' or 'what' we direct our energy and attention toward".²⁸ In this sense, Ahmed takes up Butler's arguments about bodily repetition as a process of materializing the body to argue that gender, race, and sexuality are also ways to direct ourselves across space, as we tend to perform the acts that will warrant our identity stability and intelligibility. "The work of repetitions", Ahmed argues, "is not neutral work; it *orients the body in some ways rather than others*".²⁹ For instance, being heterosexual would be the 'natural' or 'right' direction to follow, whereas being queer would imply deviation from the 'straight' course of heterosexual reproduction and kinship.

Ahmed shows the importance of moments of disorientation and of redirection by considering notions of phenomenological orientations from a queer perspective, and she points to the importance of deviating from the apparent 'naturalness' of social relations and identity impositions. She contends that making "things queer is certainly to disturb the order of things", whereby the consequences of disturbance are unpredictable and unequal, "given that the world is already organized around certain forms of living – certain times, spaces and directions".³⁰ In the passage mentioned

27 Cowan, "The People's Peace: The Myth of Wartime Unity and Public Consent for Town Planning", in Clapson and Larkham (eds.) *The Blitz and its Legacy*, p. 74.

28 Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, p. 3.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 57. Emphasis in original.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 161.

above, Viv becomes disoriented by the linearity of space, which disrupts the ways she thinks about her relationship with Reggie. If the uncertainty of war and the destruction of the city seemed like a possibility of transformation and of freedom in 1944, something which enabled her relationship with Reggie, the reconstruction of London and the 'normality' of peacetime destabilizes Viv's decision to continue her affair in 1947. Viv's sensation of experiencing "no time at all" indicates the impossibility of staying with Reggie within the framework of 'familial' and 'reproductive' time; this makes her realize that there is no more room for her relationship with a married man in the time-space constellation of the post-war period.

The notion of disrupting the order of things can be especially fruitful in literature, as I have discussed concerning Kilian's conceptualization of literary heterotopias. In this sense, queer chronotopes can be regarded as a literary artifact that breaks with normative spatial and temporal relations. Like Kilian's literary heterotopias, queer chronotopes are construed in terms of the relationship between real and literary worlds and they enable the construction of different orders of space and time because they are linguistically constructed. However, it is important to stress that it is the relationship between time and space that is disrupted when dealing with queer chronotopes, having Massey's premise of time and space presenting equal importance as categories in mind. In Foucault's notions of heterotopias, the notion of time is read as a secondary aspect of space, which relates to how heterotopias are able to juxtapose multiple temporalities and "break with their traditional time".³¹ He cites cemeteries, museums, and libraries as examples of this kind of heterotopia, suggesting that this break with time is not necessarily a subversion of the norm.

Although Kilian's reading of Foucault's concept concentrates primarily on spatiality, she does emphasize that time should not be dismissed as a category. In this sense, it seems that the concept of literary heterotopia can be discussed along the lines of queer chronotopes, especially in the reading that Kilian proposes of heterotopias as necessary 'abnormal' spaces that can establish their own norms, and can even transgress the very norms that they produce.³² Following Ahmed's claim that the act of queering implies a disruption with the order of things and, hence, is also a gesture of *disorientation*, I want to suggest that queer chronotopes always infer a break with normative orders of time and space as a means to yield disorientation and chaos that might later be recollected in some kind of order that does not necessarily correspond to the normative.

The gesture of self-reflexivity can emerge as a reaction of disorientation from the process of the norm's re-orientation. Nevertheless, it is possible that, once chaos has been ordered into certain norms, these norms can surface again as a resilient version of the normative. Thus, the main difference between literary heterotopias and queer chronotopes lies in their potential for subversion. On the one hand, literary heterotopias refer to the elements of self-reflexivity and disruption that Kilian attributes to literature as a form of art that can subvert, denaturalize, and question social norms that are present in the lifeworld; queer chronotopes, on the other hand, operate on

31 Foucault, "Of Other Spaces", p. 26.

32 Kilian, "Literarische Heterotopien", p. 42.

heterotopic spaces in literature, in which a literary work can contain multi-layered and non-normative temporal and spatial orders that are contingent: they can be disrupted at several points in the narrative, only to be rearranged later according to dominating norms that have constituted those orders beforehand. In literary heterotopias, subversion is devised in the text as a whole, whereas, in queer chronotopes, we find spatial and temporal disorders that do not necessarily lead to the disruption of social norms within the literary text.

In *The Night Watch*, war is the disruptive factor of London's temporal and spatial orders, creating a series of queer chronotopes. That notwithstanding, they do not always produce subversion. In fact, Waters' novel begins with the post-war period to remind us that the war's aftermath did not correspond to the expectations of great social transformations in England. In 1947, the characters are stuck in the space-time that they inhabited during the war in 1944 and 1941, but are caught in the preceding period's moral concerns regarding gender, sexuality, and class that formed them. In the following section, I will discuss Waters' articulation of wartime ideology and its effects on the characters, showing how the disruption of space and time during the war (queer chronotopes) did not necessarily transform the post-war period's gender, sexuality, and class norms.

Wartime Ideology and Social Transformation

In a compelling book about the effects of populist and jingoist propaganda in Britain during the Second World War, Rose argues that governmental constructions of national identity and citizenship during the war yielded a feeling that a new Britain would arise in the post-war period. For Rose, the power of these discourses consisted in the ways in which they created hope and a desire for a new Britain that was to emerge, although "they did not delineate in very precise ways what this would entail and how it would be accomplished and who in particular would benefit from it".³³ She does recognize that there were many left-leaning and progressive political projects that gained visibility during the war, but they were never fully articulated in strong policies that extended into peacetime. What Rose emphasizes in her work is that the creation of hope, desire and, more importantly, of nationhood was crucial to keeping people engaged with the war effort.

According to Rose, the war imposed paradoxical senses about Britain's future upon the population. On the one hand, governmental propaganda endorsing the war effort and national unity conveyed the message that people should be selfless and succumb to 'war solidarity', especially at times in which Britain was under attack. Complying with these selfless acts would lead the population to the social transformation that was to come after the war. On the other hand, the war itself and, once again in the times of the Blitz in specific, created the sense of a "futureless present",³⁴ as Feigel describes it, since there was a constant feeling of imminent death and no certainties

33 Rose, *Which People's War?*, p. 25.

34 Feigel, *The Love-Charms of Bombs*, p. 4.

of a tomorrow. In resolutely promoting the idea that the war effort was necessary for the greater good, the government could ideologically inculcate a feeling of belonging and, moreover, that there was indeed something to be lived and fought for. As Thorpe puts it, morale consisted in “a belief in justice of and necessity for the war effort, reflected in a willingness to undertake and continue the fight until victory is won, even in the face of great hardship”.³⁵ In this statement, victory could be read beyond the war itself and could be reflected upon as the hope that great social transformations would ensue.

Waters’ choices of the years in which the novel is set (1947, 1944, and 1941) indicate a concern with depicting war morale, possibilities of social transformation, and the ways in which individuals reacted and experienced wartime ideology. In 1947, the characters’ lives are similar to how Feigel narrates post-war experience for the writers Elizabeth Bowen, Graham Greene, Henry Green, Rose Macaulay, and Hilde Spiel. Having spent their war years in London, all of the writers, like Waters’ characters, “were disappointed by London”, as the “post-war period seemed grey and slow” and time “was measured once again in years and decades rather than in days and weeks”.³⁶ What we notice in Waters’ depiction of 1947 is that, while time has gone back to its normative measurement, the characters are still living in a queer temporality; they exist in the same way that London is being rebuilt, and the characters are still experiencing the past’s spatial experience.

Duncan, for instance, is still caught up in the space of the prison, although he was eventually released from jail. Now working at a candle factory, he lives with Mr. Mundy, who is a retired prison officer with whom Duncan became acquainted when he was imprisoned. He has a strange relationship with Mr. Mundy, whom he calls by the name Uncle Horace when in public. In his routine outside of prison, Duncan obediently follows the norms of ‘industrial time’ by working at the factory and then going straight home under the premise of ‘family time’, since he tells his acquaintances that he takes care of his elderly Uncle Horace. Learned in prison, Duncan’s discipline of tracking time can also be perceived in Viv’s visits to his home: they have a regular and steady periodicity, given that she comes to visit Duncan at Mr. Mundy’s once a week, always after work on Tuesdays. Viv’s thoughts about Mr. Mundy’s home in White City are fretful, and it “gave her the creeps”; the house is fully decorated with dark furniture, jammed with odd objects and “exhausted photographs” of the Victorian past. Duncan, however, feels at home there, although “it was all dead, dead, dead”³⁷ in Viv’s eyes. Duncan leaves prison in the same year as the war ends and that Mr. Mundy retires, in 1945. Not knowing what to do with his life, and too ashamed to go back to his father’s house, Duncan chooses to move in with Mr. Mundy, keeping a tight relationship with the past and showing a categorical refusal to move on and to mature.

For Duncan, being stuck conveys his way of following the direction that going to prison set out for him. In refusing to move on with his life, he rejects the possibility

35 Thorpe, “Britain”, in Noakes (ed.) *The Civilian in War*, p. 15.

36 Feigel, *The Love-Charm of Bombs*, p. 291.

37 Waters, *The Night Watch*, p. 27.

of re-orientation and holds on to the punishment that had been given to him in 1941. As his former cell-mate Robert Fraser explains, it is a way “of punishing himself, for all that happened, years ago, all that he did and didn’t do”.³⁸ In 1947, we do not know why Duncan has spent time in jail, but his implicit same-sex desire towards Fraser and Mr. Mundy suggests that homosexuality could have been his crime. However, as we find out in the third part of the novel, Duncan’s crimes could also be a suicide attempt and an objection to serving in the war, since he and his best friend Alec wrote a letter against Britain’s participation in the war and decided to commit suicide to get around military conscription. What was supposed to be a heroic act resulted in a tragedy, since Alec did kill himself, while Duncan did not go through with it and ended up in prison. Although all crimes are suggested in the novel (homosexuality, attempts at suicide, and conscientious objection), we do not clearly know the crime Duncan for which was actually convicted.

It is Duncan’s working-class background as well as his traumatizing experience with Alec that differentiate him from Fraser, who achieves a much better social position in the post-war period. Fraser’s privilege of an upper-class education provides the means for him to become a journalist upon leaving prison, where he spent the war years for being a conscientious objector. As a journalist, he visits the candle factory in Shepherd’s Bush where he meets Duncan for the first time outside of prison. Once he sees Fraser, Duncan feels “plunged right back into the world of their old hall: the smells of it, the muddled, echoey sounds of it, the grinding misery and fear and boredom”.³⁹ It is Fraser who triggers the sensation of life behind bars, not Mr. Mundy. The latter, with his devotion to Christian Science⁴⁰ and his role of authority as an officer, seems to be a soothing presence for Duncan as an authoritative father figure that nurtures a queer relationship of closeted homoerotic desire.

It is with Mr. Mundy that Duncan maintains his metaphorical imprisonment, although he mostly does not feel that he is doing so. While Mr. Mundy gives Duncan a feeling of protection, as Duncan is with Fraser, he constantly feels like he is being watched, which indicates his fear of being recognized as a homosexual, keeping in mind, as we later find out, that there were sexual feelings between him and Fraser when they shared a cell. As Duncan accompanies Mr. Mundy to his appointment with Mr. Leonard, a Christian Science doctor, he watches Kay Langrish, and thinks to himself that she must be “one of those women [...] who’d charged about so happily during the war, and then got left over”.⁴¹ In emphasizing Duncan’s gaze towards Kay, the narrator asserts Duncan as the observer, and not as the person being watched, as it often happens when he thinks about leaving his life with Mr. Mundy.

Fraser and Duncan see more of each other in 1947 and the former even looks for Viv to express his concern about his friend. Duncan wants to meet Fraser more frequently, but the relationship with Mr. Mundy prevents him from breaking free from

38 *Ibid.*, p. 127.

39 *Ibid.*, p. 40.

40 Developed by Mary Baker Eddy in the nineteenth century, Christian Science consisted in a religion based in the beliefs that illness is an illusion.

41 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

the prison that he has built for himself. Fraser and Duncan are supposed to go on a date, but Fraser stands him up and leaves Duncan very disappointed. He thinks that if he were a different kind of boy, he would go after Fraser and that Mr. Mundy “could go to hell”. He wants to leave the house, but he does not want to use the front door, so he takes the back door instead:

[...] because he knows that Mr. Mundy’s bedroom overlooked the street, and he wanted to go more secretly. [...] even after having said to himself that Mr. Mundy, for all he cared, could go to hell! [...] he thought it would be horrible to look back and see Mr. Mundy at the window, watching him go.

So he went the back way, through to the kitchen and out, past the lavatory, to the end of the yard; and only when he got to the yard door did he remember that it was kept shut with a padlock. [...] he couldn’t bear to go back now, not even as far as the scullery drawer. He dragged over a couple of crates and clambered up them, like a thief, to the top of the wall; he dropped to the other side, landing heavily, hurting his foot, hopping about.

But the feeling, suddenly, of having a locked door behind him, was wonderful.⁴²

Despite his freedom, Duncan still feels that he must sneak out the back door, like a criminal, in order to fulfill his desire to see Fraser. This escape suggests Duncan’s attempt to break free from the perpetuation of the punishment that began in prison, and also to break free from his closeted sexuality. In confronting the obstacles of escape (finding a way to push himself up and then jumping over the gate), he also confronts his own fear of enacting his sexuality by going after Fraser, with whom he has already exchanged sexually charged caresses in prison during an air raid. This queer chronotope, which encompasses living in the present and escaping Mr. Mundy’s home, momentarily breaks with Duncan’s already established orientation of living in punishment (prison) and in the past (1944 and 1941), since it is the act of looking back at the locked padlock that prompts the attempt to move forward (to the future) and to renounce heterosexual norms.⁴³

Thinking of Ahmed’s discussions about queer phenomenology, we can argue that Duncan tries to disrupt his familiarity with the world, as Ahmed contends that familiarity is the way that the body feels more comfortable with following one direction, instead of another. If the familiar is, in Ahmed’s words, “an effect of inhabitation” that “is shaped by actions that reach out toward objects that are already within reach”,⁴⁴ then we can say that leaving Mr. Mundy’s house like a thief in the night presents the possibility of reaching out to another object (Fraser) and another way of living that allows for the enactment of his sexuality. Duncan is reluctant to go back to Streatham,

42 *Ibid.*, p. 164.

43 Mitchell also reads Duncan’s escape through the back door as an attempt to enter the possibilities of the future; however, her analysis focuses exclusively on the character’s queer temporality and on the ways in which he remains infantile. See “What does it feel to be an anachronism?”, pp. 91–92.

44 Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, p. 7.

where his father lives, fearing the neighbors' judgmental glances and encounters with Alec's parents. The release from prison, in 1945, cannot bring him back to the life that had been familiar to him previously. Rather, it is prison life that becomes the familiar, thereby conveying Ahmed's idea that bodies orientate themselves as a response to their experiences in the world.

In arriving at Fraser's home, Duncan watches him dozing in an armchair from outside the window and taps on the glass for him to open the window. As Duncan asks why he never came to see him, Fraser replies, to Duncan's disappointment, that he had been out with Viv in a pub. In going out with Viv, Fraser deflects the possibilities of having feelings for Duncan, reminding the latter that Fraser is "*the sort of person who gets madly pleased over little things, for a minute, and then forgets all about them*".⁴⁵ Not knowing how to react to Duncan's visit, Fraser asks him to come in "before a policeman or somebody spots us".⁴⁶

Fraser's concern is certainly reasonable, given that the metropolitan police's control over gay men was at its highest rates in the post-war period. According to Houlbrook, the number of arrests registered by the police tripled between 1942 and 1947, resulting in 637 cases in 1947.⁴⁷ He explains that the post-war period is considered a "witch hunt" against gay men for many historians and social commentators, since there was intense "concern at queer men's increasing visibility",⁴⁸ particularly in the West End. Although surveillance over male homosexuality diminished in the beginning of the war, because policemen had to concentrate on war duties, the blackouts and the Blitz caused anxiety about sexual disorder to such an extent that the metropolitan police had a special group known as the 'vice squad'. Functioning with a reduced number of policemen, the 'vice squads' were especially designated to control "sexual disorder", since "surveillance was [...] hindered by the peculiar conditions of the Blitz";⁴⁹ this, according to the Public Moral Council, "led to an increase in street importuning in the West End".⁵⁰ Thus, it is possible to notice that, in spite of the momentary sexual freedom that the raids created, there was a governmental concern with upholding sexual and gender morality.

In the post-war period, it became clear that the government and part of the population wished to maintain class, gender, racial, and sexual mores that had characterized the pre-war period. It is true that the Second World War brought problems of social inequality in Britain to the fore, as the Beveridge Report displayed when it was published in 1942. As Rose explains, if wartime ideology aimed to concoct a ubiquitous feeling of nationhood, it was clear that this nation was formed by "a people who saw themselves [...] differentiated by social class"⁵¹ and that changes had to be made after the war. Indeed, the post-war period was marked by the population's

45 Waters, *The Night Watch*, p. 46. Emphasis in original.

46 *Ibid.*, p. 168.

47 Houlbrook, *Queer London*, p. 34.

48 *Ibid.*, p. 35.

49 *Ibid.*, p. 34.

50 Qtd. in Houlbrook, *Queer London*, p. 34.

51 Rose, *Which People's War?*, p. 67.

expectations that the government would act on the Beveridge Report's recommendations, which revolved around social benefits for families and children, the creation of the National Health Service, and unemployment benefits.⁵² Though changes were actually made, and social insurance was created, social commentators, such as Rose and Smith, consider these changes to have been moderate and insufficient for the population.⁵³

In her representation of the war, Waters depicts how there was an expectation of a better future, although this could not be fully achieved. In 1944, Viv and Helen, the two working-class women in the novel, work at the Ministry of Food and at the Town Hall respectively and their conviviality with upper-class women shows that class differences are quite evident during the war effort. Viv has completed a secretary course in a college in Balham, and an instructor encourages her to apply for secretary jobs, claiming that a girl with her background now had equal opportunities as "a girl from a better sort of family". However, the instructor advises Viv to take elocution classes in order to be able to *perform* an upper-class accent, and not "use words like *dad* and *toilet* and horrors like that".⁵⁴ Viv then spends half an hour a week for three months repeating poetry by Walter de la Mare to an elderly actress in Kennington in order to sound like an upper-class girl.

Helen's class relations are intertwined with her love affairs with Julia and with Kay, who come from upper-class backgrounds. In 1944, Helen lives with Kay and they seem to be in a relationship that is falling apart, in which Kay performs the role of the devoted husband who works obsessively, is passionate and romantic, and who gives Helen expensive gifts to make up for her regular absence due to her job as an ambulance driver. Performing a wife who is bored with marital life, Helen meets Julia, Kay's ex-girlfriend, and they begin an affair. Like Kay, Julia enjoys impressing Helen with expensive gifts and surprises. Julia, who is a writer and a journalist, assists her father in surveying damaged and bombed buildings and houses in London and, due to her upper-class background, she has access to foreign ingredients and foods that were not commonly found in London during the war. As Julia invites Helen for lunch in a Victorian house, which Julia and her father are assessing, Julia brings rabbit sandwiches with garlic, a foreign taste that Helen recognizes but to which she is not quite accustomed. Julia tells her she has relatives in Chicago who send her family parcels of food, which displays her own privilege in the rationing system in Britain during the war.

Julia asks Helen if there are any relatives of hers living abroad who could do the same, but Helen tells her that her entire family lives in Worthing, where she grew up. In the course of their conversation, it becomes clear that there are class differences between them. The signs that indicate these differences relate to the meal that Julia prepares, which contains meat and garlic, which was imported from Italy. While food rationing was a necessary measure during the war, middle- and upper-class people had more access to food supplies from the black market because they could afford to pay

52 Calder, *The People's War*, p. 528.

53 Cf. Rose, *Which People's War?*, pp. 292–294 and Smith, *Britain in the Second World War*, pp. 19–21.

54 Waters, *The Night Watch*, p. 247.

for it.⁵⁵ Moreover, Waters describes class differences through Julia's family property owning and the different employment positions Julia and Helen occupy during and after the war. In 1944, Julia mentions that her family owned a house in Arundel, near Worthing, where Julia had spent many summers⁵⁶ and, during the war, she lived in her aunt's flat in London, so the flat is not requisitioned by the government.⁵⁷ After the war, Julia becomes a well-known writer of detective novels, while Helen gets a job at a dating agency where Viv works as well. During the war, Helen worked in an administrative position in the Town Hall. In contrast to Julia's father, who is an architect engaged with public surveys during the war; Helen's father is an optician, and her brother makes lenses for the RAF.⁵⁸

When Julia asks Helen about growing up in Worthing, Helen does not have much to say and just replies that her family is "very ordinary [...] They're not like Kay's", thinking that they were not like Julia's family either. Julia realizes that Helen looks embarrassed because of her working-class background and tells her that "nothing like that matters any more [...] Not these days. Not now that we all dress like scarecrows, and talk like Americans – or else, like chars".⁵⁹ Although she is trying to soothe Helen's embarrassment, Julia's analogies stem from pervasive wartime class ideals, as they suggest, firstly, that all people, including the more affluent ones, are embracing working-class manners in dressing like a 'scarecrow' or a cleaning lady. In speaking like Americans, there is also a reference to British tradition becoming destabilized by foreign presence and, in this case, America's presence consisted of many African Americans. Moreover, Julia's statement reinforces the notion that class no longer matters, an ideal that was greatly promoted by governmental propaganda, and that assumes that there is a national cross-class unity.

As Calder has elucidated, the 'People's War' rhetoric began to be propagated in the press, radio, and films after the defeat in the Dunkirk battle as a necessity to mitigate class and political confrontations in Britain, in which "we" and "us" meant very different social groups, separated by class in particular.⁶⁰ After all, the situation in Britain in the 1930s was quite precarious, given that the lower-classes lived in poverty due to high unemployment rates, low social benefits, and job insecurity. According to Rose, the rhetoric of 'equality of sacrifice', which required that people leave their old social antagonisms behind in order to do their bit in the war, actually augmented class conflicts in many ways.⁶¹ Firstly, it had become clear that the division of private and public shelters left lower-classes in more vulnerable conditions during air raids. This was also the case for food rationing, as we see in Julia's character, for the wealthy could circumvent rationing and had access to better meals, while the lower-classes had to content themselves with the diets imposed upon them by the government, which

55 Smith, *Britain in the Second World War*, pp. 9–10.

56 Waters, *The Night Watch*, p. 273.

57 *Ibid.*, p. 349.

58 *Ibid.*, p. 273.

59 *Ibid.*, pp. 272–273.

60 Calder, *The People's War*, p. 138.

61 Rose, *Which People's War?*, pp. 34–35.

were not calculated according to the occupations that people had, thereby affecting workers' performance in factories and manual jobs.

The Myth of the Blitz and the Limits of Sexual Freedom

In Waters' depictions of 1941 and 1944, she takes up the already established myth of the Blitz, which according to Calder, harnesses a nationalist sense of heroism, bravery, and loyalty to Britain.⁶² In the novel, it is possible to notice that the women characters engage with the war as a means to achieve emancipation, while the male characters show objection and refusal to participate in the war. This does not mean, however, that the women in the novel are completely resigned to the war effort and that they comply with the norms that ideally construct the woman's role during wartime, for they engage in non-normative sexual affairs that were not tolerated, even during the war. Although Waters shows how characters such as Kay, Mickey, Viv, and Helen gain autonomy during the war, she makes sure to explore the differences in their perceptions of the war in order to challenge the idea that the war yielded a feeling of national unity. In Duncan's, Fraser's, and Alec's characters, we see the open refusal to participate in the war, which subsequently undermines their loyalty to their nation and, moreover, their own image of manhood, since objectors were perceived as cowards and traitors.

In 1941, Alec is called up to serve the army in the war and leaves his home in the middle of an air raid to talk to Duncan. In an outburst of ideas about how to escape war service, Alec suggests that he and Duncan kill themselves as a heroic act against the war, thinking that it would be in the papers everywhere in Britain and that it could even stop the war itself. Written on the back of the recruitment letter, their suicide note states that they should take their own lives "*on behalf of the Youth of England, and in the name of Liberty, Honesty and Truth*". The date of their suicide, Alec claims, "will become like the ones we learned in school" that will be remembered in a hundred years' time.⁶³

Where the female characters experience the air raids in the city, either working or as a spectator, Fraser and Duncan must undergo the raids from their cells, while the prison officers go into the shelter. As conscientious objectors, they "are castigated as emasculated cowards".⁶⁴ As Rose has elucidated, conscientious objectors were frequently shamed in public and labeled through terms that "denot[ed] effeminacy and hint[ed] that their sexuality was suspect".⁶⁵ Isolated from war, Duncan and Fraser depict those who did not accept the national duty imposed on male subjects in Britain. In contrast to Duncan and Fraser, the female protagonists experience the war as an opportunity to enter a realm of social, political, and citizenship participation that they could not completely access previously. Although women already had the same formal political rights as men in Britain, they were still at a disadvantage in terms

62 Cf. Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz*.

63 Waters, *The Night Watch*, pp. 485–486. Emphasis in original.

64 Rose, *Which People's War?*, p. 180

65 *Ibid.*, p. 175.

of wage, social, and civil rights.⁶⁶ In 1941, under the National Service Act, women were officially called into duty on the home front to take up jobs in women's services, munitions factories, and civil defense.⁶⁷ It is under this public call for women that Viv decides to move to London to attend secretary college in Balham and she begins to work at the Ministry of Food as a typist.

The third part of the novel, set in 1941, begins with Viv's train journey to London, where she meets Reggie. Travelling from Taunton, where her sister is living to escape the air raids, Viv's journey to London is a significant one, as it suggests the shift from a traditional woman's role as a caregiver to that of an independent woman, who begins a love affair with a married soldier. When they meet, Reggie does not hide the fact that he is married and has children, and Viv cannot think "that the train was speeding him towards [his family]. They might have been dreams to her, or ghosts".⁶⁸ For Viv, the train's acceleration is the journey to the future; a future in which families are uncanny and somehow invisible. While in 1947 travelling by car with Reggie meant travelling backwards in time and to a notion of no time, in 1941 Viv's feelings are directed towards the future and the thrill of London during wartime.

It is in 1941 that the novel's women characters commence their lives in an alleged world of sexual freedom provided by blackouts, air raids, and a laxity of surveillance over women's sexual behavior. Kay's encounter with Helen is also meaningful, given that it takes place after an air raid during which Helen's home is completely destroyed. Kay is the one who finds Helen under beams and bricks, and she stays with her to calm her down until the doctor arrives. The scene is described in detail and the men who are working with Kay and Mickey are never the protagonists of the action. For Kay and Mickey, the men moved in "maddening slowness; for there was something queer [...] about the way the house had fallen".⁶⁹ The queerness about the "fallen house" relates both to the complete destruction of it and also to what is constructed afterwards. Waters narrates the scene by describing the house as ruins to subsequently recount that "[t]he wall was raised eerily upright for a moment"⁷⁰ by using ropes. As they excavate the rubble and dust, Kay begins a conversation with Helen: from the ruins of the house, their relationship emerges as a hopeful form of affection created among destruction. Like the 'fallen woman', the 'fallen house' is the allegorical site that allows for new models of femininity and sexuality to emerge, since it is under this fallen house that Kay and Helen fall in love.

Kay continues to talk to Helen, who tells her that she is very brave to work during the raids. Kay replies that it is easier to be "out in the fuss" than to listen about it at home. The doctor, who is also a woman, arrives and Kay asks Helen to keep it a secret "about it being easier to be out".⁷¹ In Kay's statements, coming out to take part in the war can be read as coming out as a lesbian, implying that it is better

66 *Ibid.*, p. 107.

67 Smith, *Britain in the Second World War*, p. 12.

68 Waters, *The Night Watch*, p. 474.

69 *Ibid.*, p. 498.

70 *Ibid.*

71 *Ibid.*, p. 500

to live the experience of homosexuality with other women than to hear about it and not to act it out. Following a thorough description of the raid's damage to Helen's house and in London, their conversation leads to the topic of love and the scene ends with Kay brushing the dust off from Helen's face, feeling her skin and caressing her jaw in an amorous way, "unable to believe that something so fresh and so unmarked could have emerged from so much chaos".⁷² What rises from the rubble and the city's destruction is their love and, moreover, a metropolitan lesbian culture that comes into being during the Second World War.

It is possible to read Helen's rise from the city's ashes as analogous to the development of lesbian bars and nightlife in twentieth century metropolitan spaces. While male homosexual culture can be traced back to the eighteenth century, lesbian subculture only came to be representative in metropolitan life in the 1920s and 1930s.⁷³ Lesbian bar and club culture became more vibrant during the Second World War, in London in particular, as many women were living away from home and were involved in professional occupations that provided an income. Apart from this, as Jennings explains, the war prompted shifts in the ways women enjoyed themselves in the city, as, for instance, they increasingly began to take part in nightlife without a male chaperone.⁷⁴ The Gateways Club in Chelsea was opened up in this period and it was considered to be one of the main lesbian venues in London up until the 1960s.

Jennings argues that the increase in pubs, bars, and clubs was crucial for "lesbian community building and identity formation",⁷⁵ and enabled lesbian visibility in a metropolitan setting in many ways. However, visibility also entailed public regulation of sexuality by the police, since, although surveillance was not as efficient as it had been in the pre-war years, the concern with women expressing their sexuality was still a matter of keeping morality under control during wartime. As Jennings points out, from the 1940s onwards police accounts described the presence of lesbian women in the West End among male homosexuals and prostitutes,⁷⁶ thereby placing them as sexually immoral and as an undesired presence in public space.

The myth created around the Blitz often portrays the notion of a ubiquitous sexual freedom in London during wartime because of the shifts in control and regulation over gender and sexuality and of women's more active participation in social and political spheres. As Jivani puts it, "the idea that death might be imminent [...] led to a devil-may-care attitude", in which people indulged in sexual adventures that they would probably not dare try in normal circumstances.⁷⁷ The environment of sexual freedom that Jivani conveys can be considered true to the extent that the risk of death did indeed trigger situations in which people felt free enough to unleash their most intimate sexual desires. However, this freedom was definitely not a general feeling, and non-normative sexualities or gender presentations were definitely not condoned

72 *Ibid.*, p. 503.

73 Jennings, *A Lesbian History of Britain*, p. 131.

74 *Ibid.*, p. 131.

75 *Ibid.*, p. 140.

76 *Idem*, *Tomboys and Bachelor Girls*, p. 111.

77 Jivani, *It's Not Unusual*, p. 55.

by authorities or even by more conventional citizens. On the one hand, the leniency in surveillance did provide more favorable circumstances for non-normative sexual relationships; on the other hand, Mass Observation reports displayed great concern over male homosexuality and women's sexual behavior due to the 'excessive' freedom that they enjoyed during the war.

In her representation of the 'Little Blitz' in 1944, Waters portrays the blackout and air raid to engage with the possibilities and limitations of the sexual freedom triggered by the bombings. After a long lull, from January until March 1944 Londoners experienced a total of thirteen major attacks stronger than the ones from the Blitz in 1940 and 1941.⁷⁸ Waters' accounts in the second part of the novel take place in February 1944, exactly when London suffered the worst attacks, in which nearly a thousand people lost their lives. Julia and Helen kiss for the first time in one of these raids, which displays Waters' interest in exploring the 'Little Blitz' both as a sexual and an aesthetic event. As soon as the blackout begins, they decide to go out for a walk around the city and, once they are spotted by a warden, Julia suggests that they look for a place to hide so that they can become invisible. Becoming invisible, in this scene, relates to them showing affection away from official surveillance and, instead of going to the Underground shelter, they walk towards quieter streets where they can be alone.

Suddenly, they feel the transformation of the city "for it could not be seen, so much as felt", given that there is a sense of "unnatural spaces".⁷⁹ They kiss in the darkness of the blackout and, as they do it, the sirens go off "like the bells of London", whose voices cry out "*Take cover! [...] Run and hide! Here comes the chopper to chop off your head!*".⁸⁰ In this moment, Julia and Helen are reminded that they are not alone and that they must look for a shelter. Slowly, other people materialize, they see a car that disappears into the darkness, and they hear voices, "men's voices, like the voices of ghosts from the blitz, floating about, echoing queerly".⁸¹ In their minds, the two firemen are nothing but ghosts, immaterial beings, who are dead like those who did not survive the raids. These male voices are reminders of a past, in which women could not feature as protagonists of war action. In the London in which Julia and Helen are walking, it is the voices of men that are remote and unheard, not those of women, and they are the women who are in charge of their own paths.

As a queer chronotope, the blackout followed by the sirens enables a temporal and spatial disruption with the city, as Julia and Helen become invisible and kiss during the blackout, without being seen by public surveillance. Their slow return to the realm of visibility happens with the ghostly male voices that timidly surface as haunting memories from the past, as male control over women, a dominant relation from which Julia and Helen can temporarily keep distance. However, once they encounter

78 Calder, *The People's War*, p. 555. These attacks were far more damaging because the Germans were now using bigger and more destructive bombs, which were called 'pilotless bombs' or V1s. See also Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz*, p. 41.

79 Waters, *The Night Watch*, p. 359.

80 *Ibid.*, p. 370. Emphasis in original.

81 *Ibid.*, p. 372.

the second warden, his male authority prevails at first, only to then be overcome by the hierarchical superiority of Julia's class position. The warden sees the two women wandering, and he immediately tells them to look for shelter. To his demand, Julia replies: "What does it look like we're trying to do? Where's the nearest shelter?" The man caught her tone – or what was more likely, Helen thought, took note of her accent – and his manner slightly changed".⁸²

The blackout enables the creation of a queer chronotope that destabilizes sexuality and gender norms, rendering invisibility and an environment free from masculine regulation, but it does not prompt the same effect on class relations. Julia's class privilege, expressed by her accent, is what makes the warden tone down his authoritative voice. The fact that the narrator focuses on Helen's perspective in this scene also marks her own class difference in relation to Julia, since the passage implies that, in Helen's thoughts, had she said something so bold to the officer, he would not have lowered his voice. Yet, Julia's superiority over the officer gives Helen the feeling of safety and protection, as she puts her arm in Julia's and they begin to walk to the underground station for shelter. Once they get there, Helen's sense of protection grows into a crisis of consciousness, as she realizes that they are visible again and that she must share Julia with other people in the shelter. Here, the explosions begin and they start running and laughing; they find another place to hide and see the warden that they had encountered earlier pass by without seeing them. Julia then says, "[n]ow we're invisible again".⁸³ In this passage, the construction of a queer chronotope provides the means for a literary heterotopia to emerge, in which Julia and Helen can walk around as a couple without being noticed by heteronormative gazes.

The use of the raids' blackouts as possibilities to destabilize gender and sexual norms also features in earlier literary texts set during the Second World War. As Alden has elucidated, Henry Green and Elizabeth Bowen are Waters' main intertextual references in *The Night Watch*. As well as the use of reverse chronology, Waters, like Green, takes up the blackout as "opportunities for illicit eroticism".⁸⁴ From Bowen, Waters employs the literary devices of contrasting light and darkness and also the ways in which Bowen represents the collapse of London as an opening of "possibilities in people's emotional lives".⁸⁵

Based in London during the war, Bowen and Green experienced the thrill and perils of the Blitz, having served as a warden for the Air Raid Protection (ARP) and as a fireman in the Auxiliary Fire Service respectively. Their luxurious excitement in wartime, Feigel explains, was facilitated by their class privileges. As writers from an affluent background, they were able to experience the blitz as moments of freedom and excitement "in part because they could switch off from the danger and enjoy the raids as aesthetic events",⁸⁶ as both Bowen and Green had access to private shelters and to more food than rationing permitted. Feigel argues that wartime Londoners

82 *Ibid.*

83 *Ibid.*, p. 374.

84 Alden, "Possibility, Pleasure and Peril" in Mitchell (ed.), *Sarah Waters*, p. 74.

85 *Ibid.*, p. 75.

86 Feigel, *The Love-Charm of Bombs*, p. 5.

felt “liberated by the atmosphere of unmarriedness”, having lived through the Blitz as an ultimate experience to fall in love, as the imminence of death “brought with it an intense consciousness of being alive that was conducive to sexual passion”.⁸⁷

Waters engages with this literary tradition of the Blitz as a series of moments that are erotically charged and that feed into the myth of the bombings as heroic, thrilling, and aesthetic events. However, they cannot be mistaken as simple accounts of sexual liberation, as it becomes clear in 1947 that sexual freedom hinged on the waning of moral surveillance: as soon as the war was over, it was expected that the population would comply with the norms of marriage and familial obligations. If the raids in 1941 and in 1944 propelled the beginning of new romantic relationships, such as Kay’s with Helen and later Helen’s with Julia, ‘normality’ imposed more conventional routines for the couples who survived the excitements of the Blitz in 1947. Helen and Julia, for instance, are stuck in a domestic life, in which Helen seems unhappy and utterly dependent upon Julia; Viv and Reggie’s relationship begins to fall apart, since the normative temporal and spatial frames of the post-war period do not conform to their secretive and illicit relationship. In her turn, Kay’s life is fastened to the memories of the war and of the excitement that she was able to enjoy as an ambulance driver and as Helen’s partner.

For Viv, the 1944 blackout does not provide an environment of invisibility, but that of exposure. On the night she and Reggie go to Mr. Imrie’s dental clinic for the abortion, the moon is so bright that they do not need a torch. London seems to her like a fictional set, as “everything looked depthless, the fronts of houses flat as scenery on a stage, the trees like trees of papier mâché touched up with glitter and silver paint. Nobody liked it. It made you feel vulnerable, exposed”.⁸⁸ In spite of the blackout, the moonlight gives her the sensation that she is under surveillance and, to some extent, that it jeopardizes her performance with Reggie as a married couple, Mr. and Mrs. Harrison. The sexual adventure for Viv and Reggie during the blackout is to perform a married couple, a performance that proves to be implausible in the circumstances of the Little Blitz. Viv is using a fake wedding ring that is too big for her finger, a ring that Reggie has bought her and that symbolically displays how their relationship does not fit the ideal of heterosexual marriage.

Not only are the city and the married couple fake, but so is the dentist who performs the abortion. Running a dental clinic during the day, Mr. Imrie asks Viv to hold a handkerchief to her mouth on her way out after the abortion in order to pretend that she has undergone dental treatment. The dentist explains that he is thinking of his neighbors, since “the war gives people such suspicious ideas”.⁸⁹ Viv’s experience of illegal abortion during the period of air raids is constructed upon a great mismatch between space and subject. It is the danger and fear of having an abortion in a dentist’s clinic that inhibits Viv’s performance as Reggie’s wife. This disparity continues after the abortion, as they go to a flat that Reggie has booked for Viv’s

87 *Ibid.*, p. 85.

88 Waters, *The Night Watch*, p. 386.

89 *Ibid.*, p. 395.

recovery, for their role as a couple cannot be staged in the oddity of the environments in which they circulate.

After Viv and Reggie leave the clinic, they go to the flat that he has rented in Belgravia. The place was “done up outlandishly. There was a tiger-skin rug on top of a carpet, and satin cushions on the bed. It was like someone’s idea of a film-star’s bedroom; or as though prostitutes or playboys lived there”.⁹⁰ While Viv is in the need of a warm bath and medical attendance in a proper hospital, she is stuck in an apartment that looks like either a filmset or a brothel. Everything in the apartment was devised for showing: there were pasteboard cigarettes, bottles of colored water, and even a pearly white telephone, which Reggie finds out does not work when he finally decides to call for a doctor.

The oddness of the space in which Viv resides during the recovery of the abortion forms a queer chronotope that yields a sensation of being completely out of place. The scene can be read in terms of the paradox of heteronormative rules: on the one hand, their heterosexual relationship is the norm, and it can supposedly be acted out in public with no further suspicion or moral judgment; on the other hand, the fact that Reggie is married to another woman that is not Viv makes their relationship illicit and immoral. Yet, it is Viv who is damaged most in this situation, since she is the one who can go to jail because of the abortion and can have her reputation compromised, both for rejecting motherhood and for having sexual relations with a married man. In the flat, Viv often thinks about a feeling of timelessness, as the pain grows and she feels more alone than ever, given that Reggie only thinks about how the situation might result in a scandal and about the extra costs that he might have to deal with. Increasingly neglecting Viv’s pain, Reggie decides to call the lady who let him the room. It is only when this woman arrives that Viv begins to calm down, since she takes care of her by laying her down and by putting towels between her legs to contain the bleeding. The landlady is also the one who insists that Reggie call an ambulance.

In spite of the queerness of the room and of the timelessness of Viv’s pain, what emerges in this episode is female solidarity. While the landlady helps Viv, and so do Kay and Mickey, albeit later, Reggie decides to take off and leave Viv in their care. As well as the landlady’s help by calling an ambulance, which is crucial for Viv’s survival, Kay and Mickey help Viv hide that she has had an illicit abortion. Kay and Mickey arrive in the ambulance to rescue Viv, who at that moment stops her performance as Mrs. Harrison, Reggie’s wife, in order to tell them her real name and to tell them that she is bleeding because she had got an abortion and is afraid of getting caught by the authorities; after all, abortion was illegal in the 1940s. Showing empathy towards Viv’s situation, Kay tells the nurse that ‘Mrs. Harrison’ has had a miscarriage after falling. In the ambulance, Kay damages Viv’s coat to support the story of a bad fall and slips her own ring into Viv’s hand, so that she can pretend it is her own. The ring fits perfectly, “it was like magic”,⁹¹ and the moment that Viv is carried into the hospital’s lobby, the warning siren goes off.

90 *Ibid.*, p. 398.

91 *Ibid.*, p. 416.

None of the spaces and objects match Viv's condition and state of mind in the beginning of the scene, as Viv is accompanied by Reggie: the ring Reggie gives her is too big; the abortion clinic is completely inappropriate and dangerous; and the apartment that Reggie rents looks like a strange motel room or brothel. Once the landlady appears to help Viv, followed by Kay and Mickey, Viv is able to settle into the situation with greater confidence and comfort: the landlady calls an ambulance; Kay and Mickey decide to help her out by saying that the abortion had been a miscarriage; and, like magic, Kay's ring fits her better than the one given by Reggie. In this scene, the potential of solidarity and bonding between women is what leads to Viv's settlement in a space-time that can give her comfort, safety, and proper medical treatment.

As we can see, the characters' experiences during the Little Blitz not only convey the possibilities of great sexual freedom, as it were, but also the limitations that this freedom entails. The proximity of death is a shared sentiment among all of the characters during the raids; however, they are not exclusively conveyed by the possibility of death by the bombings, as we can see in Viv's case, as her fear of death stems from the abortion. In their turn, Julia and Helen turn the possibility of death into the beginning of their relationship, which struggles to survive in the dullness of peacetime in 1947. For Duncan and Fraser, the raids are felt as a terrifying experience, since they need to stay put in their bunks until the explosions are over. Fraser's fear becomes a way to liberate his homoerotic feelings, and he begs Duncan to lie in bed with him. In doing so, their bodies enjoy the heat and protection they could not get elsewhere: "they settled back into an embrace [...] as if they weren't two boys, in a prison, in a city being blown and shot to bits; as if it were the most natural thing in the world".⁹²

In the novel, male homosexuality is always suggested but is never thoroughly enacted, as opposed to the explicit lesbian relationships. Shedding light on the lesbian experience is, of course, part of Waters' literary project and *The Night Watch* depicts a spatialized account of history that focuses on how the war and its social consequences relate to lesbian historiography. While Alden associates the novel's wartime contrasts of light and darkness with notions of women's and lesbian's cultural invisibility,⁹³ Boehm contends that *The Night Watch* "represents the ghostly atmosphere of London's war ruins as a space in which both coercive social norms and 'official' modes of defining and stabilizing historical knowledge are suspended".⁹⁴ The suspension of these norms allowed women to gain greater autonomy in society, an opportunity that was curtailed in many ways in the post-war period, as women had to content themselves with marriage, family, and underpaid jobs.

The portrayal of wartime ideology and urban destruction in tandem with the emergence of lesbian metropolitan culture and community cannot simply be read, as Cavalie argues, as the "rewriting [of] history from the point of view of lesbians and

92 *Ibid.*, pp. 440–441.

93 Cf. Alden, "Accompanied by Ghosts": The Changing Uses of the Past in Sarah Waters's Lesbian Fiction" in Jones and O'Callaghan (eds.) *Sarah Waters and Contemporary Feminisms*, pp. 72–73.

94 Boehm, "Historiography and Material Imagination in the Novels of Sarah Waters", p. 243.

gay men".⁹⁵ Rather, it shows how the 'People's War' rhetoric created the possibility of change in the relations of gender and sexuality, which that was never completely re-assured after the war. In this sense, Waters does not seek to re-write history, as Cavalié notes. Instead, her novel draws attention to the ways in which the 'People's War' narrative made promises of social transformations that were never thoroughly enacted in the post-war period.

As Rose explains, the Second World War opened up possibilities for broad feminist discussions, such as equal pay, equal opportunities in the war effort, in political decisions, and in equal compensation in case of injury by enemy action. Moreover, it raised questions about the women's role in society and, though many female members of Parliament voiced more moderate opinions about the emancipation of women, many feminist movements denounced women's participation in society exclusively through marriage and motherhood, bringing up discussions, in fact, about the role of class in 'femininity'.⁹⁶ In the novel, Waters portrays how the feeling of sexual freedom was only momentary and limited to certain spaces in the city; they were moments of pleasure that derived from the fear of death, but they definitely could not be read as general sexual liberation, as we find out with Viv's, Duncan's, and Kay's characters.

War, Identity and Queer Futures

Instead of reading Waters' novel as a historical account that focuses on gay and lesbian experience, it seems more productive to read it in light of Rose's discussions, which show how the governmental rhetoric of national unity actually emphasized that such unity never existed. She contends that, ironically, the cultural images and propaganda that claimed a collective identity of a nation yielded "the possibility for the kinds of conflicts that in the last third of the twentieth century came to be known as 'identity politics'".⁹⁷ What Rose's research emphasizes is that the more propaganda that was produced to conceive of a notion of nationhood, the more contestations came to the fore to claim that there were sectors of the British population that had rejected the war as a whole or could not *equally* take part in this national war effort, among them workers, people of color, women, and men, like Duncan and Fraser, who simply refused to participate. For Rose, such protests that claimed inequality paved the way to understanding identity politics, as they defied the pervasive ideal that all British citizens have equal participation in society.

In Waters' novel, the female characters are aware that, in 1944, their limited freedom is dated. "Thank God for the war", says Binkie, "[t]he thought of peace starting up again, I don't mind telling you, fills me with horror".⁹⁸ Binkie, an officer at the ARP, has an attachment to the war that is not that of sexual freedom, but of the possibility

95 Cavalié, "It's like gold leaf, and now it's rising, peeling away": Britishness and Exoticism in Sarah Waters' *The Night Watch*", p. 97.

96 Rose, *Which People's War?*, pp. 113–122.

97 *Ibid.*, pp. 7–8.

98 Waters, *The Night Watch*, p. 259.

to work at the station. In Binkie's experience, being a lesbian is quite depressing. At first, she thought girls were very exciting, "all that flying into rages over bits of nonsense; threatening to slash their wrists in lavatories at parties", while "men were like shadows, like paper puppets, like little boys!"⁹⁹ Feeling rather tired of this, Binkie says that she thinks about "finding some nice little chap to settle down with – some quiet little Liberal MP [...] it would be so restful".¹⁰⁰ Although this remark is rather ironic, the women, in this scene, show fear of the war's end because they know that they will not be able to hold on to the jobs they currently have. What is interesting here is that the three women, all of them queer, Mickey, Kay, and Binkie, look forward to the future in terms of marriage. Binkie's complaint is that, like Mickey, they will be left alone and will not be able to find someone to settle down with. As for Kay, being with Helen gives her the "deep, deep peace of the marital bed",¹⁰¹ which is what she has sought for a long time.

In this sense, I will dispute Mitchell's argument that the lesbian characters, Kay in particular, refuse to take part in a heterosexual futurity of familial time.¹⁰² Instead, I argue that the aspect of marriage is precisely the factor that gives them a perspective of futurity. This suggests that placing marriage as a primary prospect of kinship seems like the most feasible path to obtain sexual recognition, an issue that has been quite relevant in political debates in gay and lesbian movements in the late twentieth century. In 1944, Helen tells Kay that she wishes that the world was different and that they could be married. For Kay, this "was one of the tragedies of her life, that she couldn't be a man to Helen – make her a wife, give her children".¹⁰³ The only perspective that she foresees for their relationship is that of a nuclear family, in which Kay fulfills the male role and Helen, the role of a wife. In 1947, Kay is left to her anguish as a person who does not fit into the ideal of a feminine woman and who is adrift in London, without the job as an ambulance driver and without the lover to whom she was devoted. At the same time, Helen and Julia try to live as a married couple and, in doing so, also experience constraints of same-sex marriage: the necessity to pretend they are just friends to protect Julia's image as a writer, and the boredom of the marital bed, which implicitly leads Julia to an affair with a journalist named Ursula.

Rose comments that love and marriage were recurrent themes in wartime and post-war propaganda that aimed to direct the anxiety about possible transformations in gender roles and in sexuality. The idea was mainly that women should heroically perform their duties in the war efforts, but under the premise that they would remain feminine and continue to desire marriage and motherhood. As Rose puts it, "they should participate, yes, but not become transformed by that participation".¹⁰⁴ Women's duties during the war often led to contradictory and ambiguous ideals about the nature of their citizenship and of their war duties. For instance, it was preferable

99 *Ibid.*, p. 258.

100 *Ibid.*, p. 259.

101 *Ibid.*

102 Mitchell, "What does it feel like to be an anachronism?", pp. 97–98.

103 Waters, *The Night Watch*, p. 326.

104 Rose, *Which People's War?*, p. 123.

that women worked in office jobs or as nurses, rather than engaging with activities in demolition squads, fire guard, or rescue teams.¹⁰⁵ These duties, especially those that included night shifts, could put women at risk of being accused of sexual immorality or of them being labelled as ‘too masculine’, which could seriously compromise the judgment of ‘good citizenship’ and lead to the idea that they were acting *against* the war effort. Thus, regardless of her wartime occupation, a woman could not be a ‘good citizen’ if she was sexually ‘promiscuous’.¹⁰⁶ Rose, therefore, suggests that the ideal of nationhood could conceive neither of women who were sexually active, nor of men and women who nurtured same-sex relationships, given that these attitudes were immoral and went against the promise of Britain as a powerful and victorious nation.

Thinking of the notion of citizenship in relation to morality, as Rose suggests, we perceive that all of the protagonists in the novel cannot pertain to the national ideal of citizenship. In reading the novel, we are able to realize how, in spite of governmental propaganda, the war effort did prompt transformations of gender roles – however limited they were – that went against the ideal of femininity and heterosexuality. The lesbian characters go against the logics of heterosexuality as a norm, even though the characters dream of marriage as a future possibility; Kay and Mickey do not comply with traditional femininity, and could be ascribed to the butch identity that already circulated at the time and Kay’s relationship with Helen conveys the notion of the butch/femme relationship. Embodying the newly independent woman, Viv’s affair with a married man and her refusal of motherhood undermines the premise that all heterosexual women desire the roles of wife and mother. As for Duncan, apart from being a conscientious objector, his sensitivity, feminine features, and his homosexuality resist the ideal of 1940s masculinity as heroic and dominant.

In *The Night Watch*, Waters seems to be interested in showing the paradox of wartime ideology: on the one hand, it promised great social transformations after the war; on the other hand, it regulated the agency of minority subjects, such as women, so that they came to know that their relative autonomy and emancipation did not completely change their roles, which were constricted to domesticity and marriage. If governmental measures called for women to take part in the war effort, then it made sure that they had lower wages than men. In the novel, the female characters live the war as an opportunity to gain more agency and, to some extent, financial independence. However, after the war, these opportunities wane and they have difficulties enjoying the same kind of freedom they had during the war. For Duncan, the refusal to take part in the war becomes a damaging and traumatizing factor, since Alec’s suicide and his imprisonment compromise all of the opportunities he might have had otherwise as a man.

Waters’ representations of a blitzed London relay the destruction of the city under the contradictions produced by a unitary national rhetoric. Governmental propaganda promoted the idea of a new Britain that was to emerge from the rubble; this was a promise that would be possible under the premise of unity across class, race, and

105 Cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 108–109; 123–124.

106 *Ibid.*, p. 118.

gender – it was a unity, however, that could only be performed by appeasing antagonisms and not by warranting equality. Conversely, the circumstances of destruction, of imminent death, and the emergence of discussions about social inequality grounded historical conditions for (contingent) shifts in identity practices and in recognition, especially in terms of gender and sexuality. While the female characters seem to have critically reflected on their social positions as women and lesbians, Duncan's character is developed as someone who is incapable of reflectively engaging with his social environment. Duncan's agency is completely curtailed in the post-war period, as he lives with Mr. Mundy and completely depends upon his wage as a former prison agent.

Where the novel highlights the possibility of shifts in terms of gender and sexuality, it suggests that class relations were much less disrupted by London's massive destruction. Waters' portrayal of the war implies that it provided means for interclass relations and for class mobility (i.e., Viv's attendance in secretary college), especially in terms of the moderate social welfare measures adopted during and after the war, but they did not provide significant turnovers in those class antagonisms that have historically characterized British society. All of the novel's protagonists display personal transformations in 1947, but none of them have climbed the social ladder. Kay and Julia, who come from upper-class backgrounds, continue to benefit from their class positions; Kay is able to stop working and live off her family's money and Julia pursues a promising career as a writer. In contrast, Viv, and Helen, who come from working-class backgrounds, continue to work in underpaid jobs, as both of them take up secretary positions at a dating agency.

However, it is relevant to stress that, in this novel, Waters' depiction of class relations is much more complex than in *Tipping the Velvet*, as she explores how class inequality in London was a central factor in the way in which a citizen engaged with the war and its aftermath. While class mobility is not taken up as a subject in *The Night Watch*, it does become a more relevant topic in Waters' subsequent novel, *The Little Stranger*. Published in 2009, the novel tells the story of a decaying country house, Hundreds Hall, in the post-war period and it deals with the lack of opportunities for women and the possibility of class mobility after the war. While Carolyn Ayres lives in the estate and confronts her family's and their house's social and financial decay, Dr. Faraday, who stems from a working-class background, manages to become a doctor after the Second World War. Even though I will not be analyzing that novel in this book, I will mention it briefly in chapter 8, commenting on Waters' methodological approach to history in her 1940s novels and by contrasting the image of the country house in this novel with Hollinghurst's use of the estate in *The Stranger's Child*.

Alan Hollinghurst

Chapter 5

Neoliberal Ideology and the Homonormative City in *The Swimming-Pool Library*

Introduction

Set in 1983, *The Swimming-Pool Library* narrates the life of the upper-class William Beckwith in London and his sexual relationships with other men, who are usually either men of color or who come from working-class backgrounds. The reader encounters the life of a twenty-six-year-old gay man who lives off his family's money and who spends most of his time cruising at the Corinthian Club (the Corry) and in London gay clubs and pubs. It is in an unexpected encounter with Lord Charles Nantwich, in which Will saves the octogenarian's life in a public toilet, that the course of the protagonist's easygoing life changes, as Lord Nantwich gives Will his diaries and asks him to write his biography. As readers, we are presented with two pieces of fictional life writing: the first piece is Will's own autobiographical text, *The Swimming-Pool Library*, which recounts how he was invited to write Lord Nantwich's biography (but never did); the second regards some of Lord Nantwich's diary entries that narrate his early life at Oxford, in London in the 1920s, and as a colonial administrator in the Sudan and in Egypt.

Deploying an autodiegetic narrator, Hollinghurst makes use of the literary genre of life writing as a means to give an account of gay history and the ways in which it has been informed by British colonial relations and by neoliberalism. The novel portrays London as a homonormative space dominated almost exclusively by wealthy gay men who cruise the city in search of new sexual adventures, usually enacted with men who occupy subaltern positions. Gay life in London is depicted by private gay venues that are in the process of being stigmatized by the AIDS epidemic. Although the disease is never mentioned explicitly, Will's narration suggestively recounts how men's circulation in London was hindered by public hysteria concerning AIDS. In the novel's spatial configuration, Hollinghurst contrasts already gentrified gay spaces in Soho and in West London with the council estates and working-class neighborhoods in the East End and in South-East London. In doing so, he articulates spatial accounts

about three groups that were greatly oppressed by Thatcherite politics: homosexuals, working-class communities, and people of color.

As much of literary criticism about *The Swimming-Pool Library* has shown, Will's and Charles' accounts about their sexual adventures with non-white subjects convey different forms of social domination that are implicated in colonial and queer histories. In a Deleuzian reading, Brown and Sant argue that the novel brings together a history of homosexual desire with British colonial history in order "to illustrate the fetishization of the African male and the complicity of English male desire for the African (male) Other"¹ within the context of English imperialism. They emphasize how the narratives conveyed by both Charles and by Will reinforce binary positions of domination and dominated figured by "English colonizers and the African colonized, upper-class (homo)sexual nomadic predators and working-class youths".² Being on the dominating side of the binaries is one of the aspects that bind both of the characters' experiences.

Moreover, Brown and Sant contend that Charles and Will share a common enemy: "bourgeois puritanism". Embodied in the figure of Will's grandfather, Lord Dennis Beckwith, this puritanism acts as a threat to the "intergenerational gay lineage"³ formed by the affective relationships that are built over time, represented in the book by Will's relationships with various generations of gay men, such as Charles Nantwich, Will's Uncle Edmund, and with his six-year old nephew Rupert, who has shown an interest in the "cult of the gay, his innocent, optimistic absorption in the subject, delighted [Will] even while its origin and purpose were obscure".⁴ Having made the family's fortune by persecuting homosexuals in the 1950s, Lord Beckwith represents, according to Brown and Sant, the bourgeois puritanism that has hindered the continuity of a homosexual history that is intrinsic to aristocratic England, as Uncle Edmund and Charles testify.

From a postcolonial perspective, Cooper reads Hollinghurst's first novel through the interconnection between colonial objectifying gazes, fetishism, and photography. She argues that Will's and Charles' first-person accounts of their relationships with men of color produce snapshots that depict colonial and postcolonial men as "gay fetishes, magical, sexual objects feeding the fantasy life of white men; they are entwined, knotted and welded both to class and race, to Empire and the attractions of slumming".⁵ This kind of fetishism appears throughout the novel in various ways, such as in Robert Staines' photographs in the exhibition entitled *Martyrs*, which fetishize the bodies of men of color with whom Staines had sexual relations;⁶ in Will's relationship with the seventeen-year old Arthur Hope, who is black and working-class; in Charles' diary entries and his impressions of both the Sudan and Egypt.

1 Brown and Sant, "Race, Class, and the Homoerotics of the *Swimming-Pool Library*", p. 113.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 114.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 119.

4 Hollinghurst, *The Swimming-Pool Library*, p. 61.

5 Cooper, "Snapshots of Postcolonial Masculinities", p. 140.

6 Hollinghurst, *The Swimming-Pool Library*, pp. 229–230.

When Charles arrives in Nuba, in the Sudan, he describes the place's exoticism with remarks about men not wearing any clothes and by portraying a "pair of adolescent boys – very tall & elegant – sauntering along with their fingers intertwined, wearing scarves of red cotton tied round their upper arms".⁷ He writes about how the beauty of Sudanese men moves him, given that it is "so openly displayed that it seems a reproach to lust". This makes Charles feel angry and "something akin to remorse", once he thinks about "how this noble, graceful people has, until so recently, been stolen into slavery or mutilated into eunuchry".⁸ Apart from placing these men as the objects of his sexual desire and of his narration, Charles' description implies himself as a white benefactor who has come to save them from the traps of slavery and homophobia, introducing them to sexual pleasure.

Writing about homosocial desire between the two boys takes Nantwich back to his days as a public-school pupil at Winchester where he learned his first lessons about desire in the showers and with fellow schoolmates. His visual description of the two Sudanese boys holding hands not only indicates the exoticism in colonial sociality as it freezes the image for the purposes of Charles' own desires for young men of color, which takes him back to his own autobiographical story about his sexual experiences. For Cooper, the act of framing and capturing the racialized male object in a photograph through the colonizer's gaze fetishizes the image of colonized people. Moreover, she rightly observes that this fetishization pertains to "that tradition of black bodies as metaphors for white lusts, fears, hopes and disappointments", which is also found in Conrad's writings.⁹ In Nantwich's diaries, the photographs are created with language, thereby capturing not the exact moment, as the camera does, but a memory of the scene, giving it another meaning when it is juxtaposed with sexual memories from his childhood. The new meanings that emerge assimilate Oxford, public school (Winchester), and the colonies as spaces of sexual awakening and experimentation, in which Charles holds the position of domination in relation to his non-white counterparts.

The autobiographical form in *The Swimming-Pool Library* is devised as a means to expose subjective experiences of history. Conversely, as we will also see in *The Stranger's Child*, subjective accounts of history in Hollinghurst's novels suggest that authorial power is still limited to affluent, white men. What is crucial in Hollinghurst's use of autobiography is that he reworks both tradition and normative subjectivity to shed light on male homosexuality as a structural axis in the formation of English tradition, since homosexuality is narrated from the perspectives of privileged gay men. Will and Charles are members of the elite and their educational backgrounds, represented mainly by Winchester and Oxford, are institutions that entail political power, prestigious social status, and high financial income. While Charles has been directly involved with imperial governance, Will is implicated in a tradition of heritage, being able to relish the resources of an advantageous trust fund and to work only to fulfill his own pleasure. Paradoxically, as Will comes to find out later in the novel, his lifestyle

7 *Ibid.*, p. 108.

8 *Ibid.*

9 Cooper, "Snapshots of Postcolonial Masculinities", pp. 137; 144.

is only possible because his grandfather, Lord Beckwith, persecuted homosexual men in the 1950s; one of the men he prosecuted was Charles Nantwich.

Will and Charles share common ground in their traditional upbringing; however, they represent different generations, have distinct ambitions and, as gay men, have lived distinguished moments in London's gay culture and history. While Will's character epitomizes the 1980s neoliberal subject, who is individualist, hedonistic, and who enjoys the apparent freedom of gay life in the city, Charles' figure is that of a man who served his country, pursued a prestigious career and, therefore, must be cautious about revealing his homosexuality. Will's narrative is deviant because it affirmatively relates promiscuity and hedonism as a lifestyle that is inherent to gay culture. By contrast, Charles' autobiographical accounts are displayed as a way to re-visit the persecution of homosexuals in the 1950s, a crime for which he was arrested. In this sense, Hollinghurst's representation of homosexuality in the novel reminds us that, though criminalized and deviant, homosexuality has always been part of prestigious institutions in England, such as its imperialist administrations, its high-ranking schools, universities, and its aristocracy.

Gay identity also bears the consequences of not being able to take part in a heteronormative order and, conversely, it thrives on Charles' and Will's privileged social positions that function as the perpetuating forces of heteronormative tradition (i.e., white masculinity). In my reading, I want to delve further into the intersection between homosexuality and neoliberal ideology in the novel, arguing that Hollinghurst's narrative depicts the mechanisms of racial, gender, and class privileges in London during the Thatcher years as a means to evince the political and social limitations of gay culture and politics.

Moreover, I will discuss the ways in which Hollinghurst's first novel and its depiction of gay life in London re-work thematic and formal elements that feature in prominent novels in the English literary tradition. *The Swimming-Pool Library* resonates categorical elements of already established gay cultures represented in the works of Oscar Wilde, Ronald Firbank, E.M. Forster, and Christopher Isherwood. While Will's high self-esteem recalls Dorian Gray's egotism and narcissism, the novel's autobiographical form takes us back to Isherwood's *Berlin Novels*, in which he recounts cruising in Berlin among working-class boys. As for the colonial and postcolonial contexts of Hollinghurst's novel, they can certainly be associated with Forster's concern with the intersection between homosexuality and colonial history. For Lane, there is a categorical division between men and women in Forster's novels, in which men's bonds are sealed with the common display of misogyny. The result is sexual ambivalence in male interracial friendship, since it is misogyny that can overcome political and cultural differences, and, at the same time, imply same-sex desire among men.¹⁰

10 Lane, *The Ruling Passion*, p. 146. Lane argues that Forster's representations of same-sex desire between men were usually ambivalent, and were usually projected into another sphere. In *A Passage to India*, for instance, he contends that Forster transposes the question of homosexuality onto racial and colonial relations, epitomized in the novel by Aziz's and Fielding's interracial friendship. According to Lane, the encounter between the colonial subject and the white colonizer and between imperialist culture and colonial culture are articulated in parallel with the ways in which English society deals with homosexuality. Lane suggests that one of the aspects that

Although homosexuality is far from only being suggested in *The Swimming-Pool Library*, the novel asserts that “fantasies of national expansion and colonial splendor are inseparable from homosexuality”.¹¹ In tandem with his argument that same-sex desire between men ruptured notions of national unity in Britain, Lane reads Hollinghurst’s first novel as an epitome of Britain’s national identity crisis, since Charles and Will are involved with interracial relationships and, at the same time, these sexual encounters are always charged with racism. For Lane, notions of national identity and imperialism are developed in the narrative along the interspersed pieces of Charles’ and Will’s life writing, for they present texts that are produced in different historical periods, but that complement each other in terms of colonial and gay histories.

Will and Charles are sexually attracted to men of color, and where Charles lives the apex of his sexual life with other men in a colonial context, Will explores his in a postcolonial framework. Although these are distinct historical periods, the novel shows that the ways through which they relate to those men are still informed by racist conduct that results from Britain’s colonial history, and also from class differences which will be the main focus of my analysis of the novel. In the 1980s, Britain is no longer the capital of an Empire, and yet we still perceive Will’s dominating feeling of self-entitlement because of his whiteness and class; these same social privileges are on display as aspects that safeguarded Charles’ position as a colonial administrator, at least prior to his arrest in the 1950s.

For Cooper, the generational gap between Charles and Will functions as a means to contextualize “Will’s own attraction to black men, along with his desire for working-class boys”.¹² Similarly to Lane’s reading, Cooper perceives Hollinghurst’s first novel as a colonial genealogy that conflates Britain’s colonial and gay history, thereby problematizing the ways racism, classism, and the image of a white benefactor are reproduced. In a reparative reading of the novel, Lassen points out that *The Swimming-Pool Library* “laments the fact that homosexual dissidence has often failed to renounce its participation in those power structures it claims to subvert”.¹³ He argues that the novel must be read beyond the myth “of an alleged era of gay bliss” that preceded the AIDS crisis, and he coins it as an elegy that tries to deal with the loss of gay lives.¹⁴

In juxtaposing narratives that relate the periods before and after sexual liberation in the 1960s and 1970s, Hollinghurst’s novel, I will argue, suggests that the ideal that Will portrays of sexual freedom – in the sense of openly living a promiscuous lifestyle and not being emotionally or affectively attached to anyone – is a notion of freedom that contemplates individualist premises of sexual desire, not a notion of freedom that is reflected in sexual politics. In displaying a protagonist whose freedom is granted by his class, whiteness, and education, Hollinghurst shows that this image of ‘sexual

hinders Fielding’s and Aziz’s friendship is the possibility of them being read as homosexuals, not just their racial and cultural differences, as it is mostly assumed.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 231.

12 Cooper, “Snapshots of Postcolonial Masculinities”, p. 138.

13 Lassen, “Sheep Thrills: Pastoral Camp in the AIDS Elegies of Alan Hollinghurst” in James and Tew (eds.) *New Versions of the Pastoral: Post-Romantic, Modern and Contemporary Responses to the Tradition*, p. 221.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 219.

freedom' is not available to all people, but only to those who can afford to be part of a selected community of gay men. This becomes clear in the depictions of cruising in West London in contrast to the East and South-East parts of the city. As I will show in the sections that follow, neoliberal politics prospered under the promise of individual freedom and Hollinghurst certainly makes the point that this freedom is only achievable to a very small percentage of the population who enjoys the privileges of whiteness, wealth, and masculinity.

After telling Charles that he will not be able to write his biography, Will announces that all he could write, in fact, was "a book about why [he] couldn't write the book".¹⁵ For the critics Murphy and Johnson, this book is *The Swimming-Pool Library*.¹⁶ While Murphy argues that Will's inability to write relates to the traumatic experience of gay history in the twentieth century and to his grandfather's involvement in the persecution of homosexuals, Johnson contends that not writing the biography implicates Will's reluctance to deal with and to narrate histories that he himself cannot fully understand. Considering that *The Swimming-Pool Library* is indeed the book that Will writes instead of the biography, I contend that Will's narration of gay history is marked by his own privileged position within a system of neoliberal ideology, and that it cannot be retrieved from this context. In this sense, I agree with Murphy and Johnson to the extent that trauma and political alienation in the construction of Will's character play an important role in the way in which history is narrated. Nevertheless, I dispute their arguments in terms of their exemption of Will's obliviousness and cynicism in his role as narrator in order to justify the protagonist's lack of political agency and reflection.

I argue that Will's position as a privileged neoliberal subject is the main factor that sustains the narration of his own personal history in Thatcherite Britain and, as opposed to what Murphy and Johnson have asserted, Will's indifference to politics and social inequality cannot be regarded as a consequence of traumatic experience or of innocence towards his surroundings. As a subject born into wealth and white privileges, Will's aloofness and detachment is only possible because he is the subject who profits from neoliberalism. He is only negatively affected when the AIDS epidemic breaks out and when his sexual adventures in gay venues and villages are compromised. In putting forward Will's account of gay London as an autobiographical narrative, and in producing excerpts of Charles' own diary entries as historical documentation, Hollinghurst's novel emphasizes how identity politics and sexual politics are directly affected by a neoliberal government that promotes the commodification of daily life and curtails forms of collective autonomy and political organization that do not have profitable aspirations.

As a depoliticized account of gay life in London, Will's narrative concentrates on his own individual freedom: he can go anywhere that he wishes to go; he can get into any gay venue that he wishes to enter; and he thinks he can have sex with anyone he desires. His account shows the paradoxical position of gay culture in the

15 Hollinghurst, *The Swimming-Pool Library*, p. 281.

16 See Johnson, *Allan Hollinghurst and the Vitality of Influence*, p. 3; Murphy, "Past Irony: Trauma and the Historical Turn in *Fragments and The Swimming-Pool Library*", p. 59.

Thatcherite period: on the one hand, it is tolerated because it is profitable and it can be used as part of the ‘free market’ rhetoric and economy; on the other hand, it goes against Thatcherite conservatism that praised the heterosexual and nuclear family as essential parts of society, and against her government’s moralist viewpoints of sexuality, especially during the AIDS crisis, which culminated in the approval of Section 28.

Neoliberalism and Postmodernism

It is difficult to talk about the 1980s without briefly going through the rise and consolidation of neoliberalism in Britain. After the Second World War, Conservatives and the Labour Party compromised on a Keynesian socio-economic plan that aimed to deploy the state to achieve full employment, economic growth, and social welfare, including plans to reconstruct cities that were destroyed during the war.¹⁷ By the late 1960s, capital accumulation led to unemployment and inflation in Britain, creating a fiscal crisis and propelling the failure of post-war Keynesian policies. In the 1970s, the economic crisis deepened and the state, under James Callaghan’s (Labour) government, responded to the crisis with austerity measures that strengthened “state control and regulation of the economy through corporatist strategies”.¹⁸ In other words, state control was less concerned with policies that warranted society’s well-being and was more interested in rescuing the economy by ensuring corporation and financial profit.

The consolidation of neoliberalism took place in different ways around the globe, attending to distinguished local political, historical, and socio-economic circumstances.¹⁹ Although previous Labour governments had already adopted neoliberal policies during the 1970s, it was Margaret Thatcher who consolidated a neoliberal state in Britain, as she saw the necessity to abandon Keynesian policies and to embrace policies that encouraged free market and individual freedom. As Thatcher herself put it, “[e]conomics are the method, but the object is to change the soul”,²⁰ meaning that the idea of social transformation was to use the economy to promote competition and individual freedom not just in economic terms, but also in the ways in which individuals relate to one another. To do so, Thatcher saw the need to

17 Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, p. 10; Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, p. 79.

18 Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, p. 12; Wilson, “Thatcherism and Women: after seven years”, p. 200.

19 For instance, Harvey argues that the first attempt to form an actual neoliberal state happened on 11 September 1973 in Chile, when President Salvador Allende underwent a military coup supported by the U.S., which instituted a brutal dictatorship that lasted for seventeen years under Augusto Pinochet’s authoritarian regime. For Harvey, the coup was necessary to reprimand Allende’s sympathy towards socialism (p. 7). In the U.S., Harvey indicates that the fiscal crisis in New York was the point of departure to pave the way for a neoliberal state in the country. Due to the fiscal crisis, the local NY government opted to negotiate with bankers by offering them a bail out. Once this happened, the city fell into the hands of private investors and bankers, while the city’s government grew in its entrepreneurial goals and increasingly supported market competition and investment in political decisions and in city life (pp. 42–47).

20 Qtd. in Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, p. 23.

interfere with all forms of autonomous and local groups of political organization and her primary measures consisted in confronting trade unions; attacking all forms of local and municipal political organizations; dismantling the welfare state; privatizing public enterprises (i.e., social housing, the national coal industry); reducing taxes; and encouraging market initiative.²¹

For Harvey, political consent towards neoliberalism in Britain was ideologically constructed through media, corporations, universities, and schools by the pervasive assumption that neoliberalism was necessary to ensure individual freedom.²² In Britain, Harvey connects the consolidation of such discourses with the rise of pop culture and left-leaning student movements in the 1960s, which were concerned with “coming to terms with Britain’s entrenched class system as well as with its colonial heritage”.²³ In Harvey’s view, cultural industry in the 1960s alienated a great part of social movements, students in particular. In his understanding of the period, social movements became increasingly oriented by identity politics, which celebrated racial, class, sexual, and gender difference, and fought for changes that only favored specific groups, but never pushed for any significant social transformation of its own. It is true that it is in the late 1960s that identity politics gained force within social movements and that many of them (i.e., sectors of the feminist movements and also of the gay movement) overlooked class and racial relations by focusing exclusively on segmented civil rights. Nevertheless, I find it important to consider that the “postmodern turn”, as Harvey calls it, cannot be discussed only in terms of a political skepticism that is completely ineffective as a form of social criticism.

While Harvey perceives the rise of postmodernism in the late 1960s as a form of cultural and social alienation, commentators such as Linda Hutcheon contemplate it as a mode of criticism that permeates art from the 1960s onwards and that paradoxically operates against and according to the modernist premise of disruption and ideological transformation. It is this point that Hutcheon makes in *The Politics of Postmodernism* and *A Poetics of Postmodernism* by discussing postmodernist literature and architecture *in relation to* modernism, not as two oppositional movements. She argues that postmodernism must be regarded within its contradictions, such as its power “to install and reinforce as much as undermine and subvert the conventions and presuppositions it appears to challenge”.²⁴ Postmodernism does not seek to propose a complete break with the historical past by presenting an actual project of political action, as modernism had attempted to do in many respects. Rather, as Hutcheon explains, postmodernism works “to turn its inevitable ideological grounding into a site of de-naturalizing critique”.²⁵

In doing so, postmodernism affirms that it is impossible to escape the ideological framework in which knowledge, art and culture are produced, although it is crucial to expose and to challenge the mechanisms that sustain this ideological framework.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 23.

22 *Ibid.*, pp. 39–40.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 57.

24 Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, pp. 1–2.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

What is evinced in Hutcheon's discussions about postmodernism and historiography is that history is produced within hierarchies, institutions, and incongruent relations of power: it is the author who chooses narratives and modes of narration, and these choices will always be subjected to ideology. For Hutcheon, postmodernism marks an irrevocable turn to history as a means to "problematize the entire notion of historical knowledge",²⁶ undermining institutions and authorities that have fostered History, with a capital 'H', as universal truth.

Where Harvey understands postmodernism as the appalling expression of neoliberalism and its political and socio-economic discontents, Hutcheon rejects the assumption of postmodernism's position of merely remaining complicit with the effects of neoliberalism. In fact, she contends that the term 'postmodernism' should not be used as the equivalent of 'postmodernity'. In his seminal article "Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Capitalism", Jameson employs both terms as synonyms, and perceives postmodernism as a "complacent (yet delirious) camp-following celebration of this aesthetic new world (including its social and economic dimension, greeted with equal enthusiasm under the slogan of 'post-industrial' society)".²⁷ Since both Harvey and Jameson consider postmodernism as an aesthetic and cultural effect of late capitalism, their use of the term always links postmodernism to neoliberalism.

Hutcheon recognizes that the connection is evident, given that culture and aesthetics are always attuned to the socio-economic system. However, she differentiates both terms by coining postmodernity as a "social and philosophical period or 'condition'".²⁸ In Hutcheon's view, postmodernism is not "a systemic form of capitalism", but "the name given to cultural practices which acknowledge their inevitable implication in capitalism, without relinquishing the power or will to intervene critically in it".²⁹ In this sense, the differentiation that she suggests emphasizes the view that the notion of *critique* is equally relevant to that of *complicity*; this means that postmodernism is a cultural response that is intrinsic to postmodernity. While modernism promises a commitment to radical social change and a break with the historical past, postmodernism offers no such form of political action. For Hutcheon, postmodernism has neither the intention of being an *avant-garde* movement, nor does it propose radical change, which is precisely its political limitation. In working within the contradiction of critique and complicity, postmodernism can only function as a "fundamentally demystifying and critical"³⁰ force that recalls tradition and the historical past as a means to understand the present.

As opposed to Hutcheon's perception of postmodernism's critical potential, Jameson and Harvey find it inefficient and apolitical. Jameson perceives postmodernism as a "passive momentum" that "reinforces and intensifies"³¹ late capitalism (neoliberalism), producing an addiction to images that recreate the past with nostalgia. In

26 *Idem*, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, p. 46.

27 Jameson, "Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Capitalism", p. 85.

28 Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, p. 23.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 25.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 26.

31 Jameson, "Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Capitalism", p. 85.

doing so, he believes that the insistence on language and on discourse “abolishes any practical sense of the future and of the collective project”, replacing ideas of social transformation with “fantasies of sheer catastrophe and inexplicable cataclysm”.³² Although he also remains skeptical about the materiality of language and the subversive potential of discourse, Harvey recognizes that postmodernism has been successful in acknowledging pluralities, cultural differences, and multiple forms of ‘otherness’.³³ In his discussions about Foucault, for instance, Harvey claims that power relations and discourses are appealing for social movements that promote identity politics, such as feminist, gay, black, ethnic, and religious movements. However, Harvey contends that, in spite of their success in drawing attention to different subjectivities, they “have not generally had the effect of challenging capitalism”,³⁴ given that they do not tackle issues that derive from capitalist exploitation.

Harvey and Jameson endorse catastrophic and pessimistic understandings of postmodernism mainly because it does not produce a messianic promise of radical change. Hutcheon, conversely, recognizes postmodernism’s immanent character as a political limitation, but she does not dismiss its critical potential. Her discussion about postmodernism can be frustrating precisely because it brings out postmodernism’s contradictions and it leaves many questions unanswered, evincing some of the hopelessness that emerges due to the impossibility of proposing a step forward in history. Yet, she also characterizes postmodernism as a cultural moment that seeks to understand, reflect, and analyze more than it provides solutions about how to overcome present immanence. If modernism sought to break with Victorian bourgeois traditions, then postmodernism is a movement that finds it urgent to look back to tradition to question the historical past that led up to this point. The two movements, Hutcheon explains, share “their self-consciousness or their reliance, however ironic, on tradition”.³⁵

Postmodernism is articulated in *The Swimming-Pool Library*, on the one hand, as a potential criticism of tradition and of universal narratives and, on the other, as an association with neoliberalism. The novel emphasizes the perspective of a gay man who is himself privileged in terms of class, race, and education, and yet he is part of a social group that was harshly stigmatized during Thatcher’s government because of his sexuality and promiscuous lifestyle. Hollinghurst’s choice of a first-person narrator for the novel can be read as a way to debunk the idea that historical narratives should be impartial and objective, relying on postmodernist uses of history that questions authority, the role of grand narratives, and ideals of progress.

Concomitantly, Will’s narration is characterized by Harvey’s and Jameson’s association between neoliberalism, postmodernist culture, and political alienation. In portraying a London that is inhabited almost exclusively by gay men, *The Swimming-Pool Library* ironically recounts a romanticized version of gay life in the 1980s and, conversely, shows that Will’s promiscuous lifestyle is also, to a great extent, both artificial and exaggerated. As I will discuss further in this chapter, Hollinghurst deploys irony

32 *Ibid.*

33 Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, p. 113.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 46.

35 Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, p. 27.

in Will's narrative as a means to lend the novel self-reflexivity. While Hollinghurst's fictional autobiography does speak to a traditional form in the narration of homosexuality in literature, it also subverts it by giving it a caricatural and ironic portrayal of sexual freedom in London. The use of history in the novel, and in the use of neoliberal ideology in the Thatcherite period more specifically, indicates the ways in which free market, individualism and excess have informed gay culture in the 1980s.

Hollinghurst's novel articulates literary tradition and postmodernist literary devices, such as irony and self-reflexivity, to yield reflections about contemporary gay culture and identity. Tradition is definitely a categorical question in Hollinghurst's works, as he goes back to canonic modernist writers to reflect on the course of gay history. Ronald Firbank and E.M. Forster are portrayed as actual characters: Charles meets Firbank at a bar in Regent Street in 1925; Will's grandfather, Lord Beckwith, meets Forster in the 1940s at the premiere of Herman Melville's *Billy Budd*. Both authors are brought back in the 1980s in conversations about literature and about the act of reading itself.

Ironically, as Lord Beckwith recounts his encounter with Forster, he is with Will and his best friend, James, at the Royal Opera to watch *Billy Budd*. Will feels the urge to speak to James about the opera's implied homosexuality, but he cannot do it because the three of them are "trapped with this intensely British problem: the opera that was, but wasn't, gay".³⁶ Will decides to comment on the piece's "sex thing", saying that Claggart is "sort of coming out with it and not coming out with it at the same time".³⁷ Lord Beckwith immediately remembers that the comment is exactly the same one Forster had made when they watched the opera in the 1940s.

The Swimming-Pool Library has what Hutcheon calls "the documentary impulse of realism"³⁸ that is construed by the creation of a memoir that combines Charles' diary entries as historical documentation and Will's memoir about his life in London. The novel conflates high modernist literary tradition, stemming from Isherwood's influential autobiographical *Goodbye to Berlin*, and popular life writing, which points to the postmodernist literary tradition of bringing together 'mass culture' and 'high art'.³⁹ Hollinghurst's choice to narrate Will's story as an autobiographical account draws upon the genre's increasing popularity in both the 1970s and 1980s.⁴⁰ In creating a novel that presents a fictional autobiography, Hollinghurst explores the limits of history and fiction by, on the one hand, legitimating subjective experience as a historical experience and, on the other hand, by outlining the limits of this subjective experience. What we notice in Will's experience is that it becomes difficult to interpret his account of gay London as a universal and objective one, given its overtly exaggerated camp language and sexual descriptions.

36 Hollinghurst, *The Swimming-Pool Library*, p. 120.

37 *Ibid.*

38 Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, p. 28.

39 *Ibid.*, p. 27.

40 Cf. Dodd, "History or Fiction: Contemporary Autobiography's Claim"; Kadar, *Essays on Life Writing*, pp. 7–12.

Will's narration of cruising produces an image of an overtly sexualized, flamboyant, and masculine city, portraying it almost as a mocking advertisement of gay culture. Before going to the Corinthian Club, a gay gym located in Bloomsbury, Will decides to walk across Soho and watch a film in a cinema on Firth Street. Brutus Cinema is, in Will's words, "a kind of emblem of gay life".⁴¹ It is a porn movie theater located in the basement of a house, where rent-boys look for pick-ups and where gay men cruise. Will gives a detailed description of the place's decoration, a combination of Renaissance art and contemporary sex culture. At the entrance, there is a stencil of Michelangelo's David, "advertisements for clubs and cures"; walking into a smaller room, there are several porn magazines and displays of several sex toys: "cock-rings, face masks, chains and the whole gamut of dildos from pubertal pink fingers to mighty black jobs, two feet long and as thick as a fist".⁴² In combining elements of the Renaissance and pornographic culture, Hollinghurst hints at the postmodernist premise of high art and 'mass' culture to which I have referred previously.

The details create an ambiance of an 'authentic' gay venue, relating it as an underground locale that can only be discovered by gay men. Will's arrival in the Brutus is narrated with a mix of mundane elements, such as the Glaswegian attendant watching an ordinary show on TV while eating fish and chips, and the particularities of a promiscuous sex culture, represented by the decoration and by the sweaty smell of the place, "a stale, male odour tartishly overlaid with a cheap lemon-scented air-freshner like a taxi and dusted from time to time with a trace of Trouble for Men".⁴³ The use of synesthesia to depict the environment allows the reader to imagine going into the venue and to experience it like Will does; a literary device to which Will often recurs in his writing. As he anticipates in the beginning of his memoir, "[i]t was the year of Trouble for Men, a talc and aftershave lotion of peculiar suggestiveness that, without any noticeable advertising, had permeated the gay world in a matter of weeks".⁴⁴ 'Trouble for Men' comes up throughout the narrative almost as an advertisement that announces a particular mark of 1983 gay culture and also anticipates the target reader of the book.

As a potential life-writing success in the gay world, Will's autobiographical piece feeds into the glossy media coverage of Soho as "a universe driven by dynamic but feverish consumption [that is presented] as a popular version of bohemia".⁴⁵ In the 1980s, Mort explains, Soho was expanding as a commercial site, as advertising, media and public relations companies moved to the area, directly influencing its sex trade industry and geography. Mort argues that this shift contributed to Soho's increase in property value and gentrification, as the neighborhood's renowned bohemian, sex trade, and cosmopolitan identity became advertising trademarks that sold Soho as an 'urban experience' or as a 'life style'. For Mort, these transformations also affected gay culture in London.

41 Hollinghurst, *The Swimming-Pool Library*, p. 48.

42 *Ibid.*

43 *Ibid.*, p. 49.

44 *Ibid.*, p. 27.

45 Mort, *Cultures of Consumption*, p. 158.

In the 1980s, Britain experienced “a massive expansion of commercial knowledge about masculinity”⁴⁶ that explored the male body and male identities, and that did not converge with the image of the ‘head of the family’. The use of sexualized images of men was not done without tension, as many agencies feared that ads would display ambiguous masculinities that “suggested the positive pleasures of a homosocial lifestyle for younger men”.⁴⁷ While ads expressed greater freedom in displaying sexualized images of men and women, it was the fear of endorsing homosexuality as a positive lifestyle that was often considered a risky strategy. *The Swimming-Pool Library* can be read as an attempt to take up this alleged risk by creating a fictional autobiographical narrative that advertises a positive urban gay experience in London as a product that, like ‘Trouble for Men’, can be consumed. However, the glossy account is tuned down once the protagonist deals with urban inequalities that are represented in homophobic and class confrontations. Although Will’s narration is far from being politicized, he is certainly able to feel the effects of sexual conservatism in the 1980s. When this happens, ‘Trouble for Men’ becomes the scent of “a kind of foreboding, as an exotic species, menaced by brutal predators”.⁴⁸

Hollinghurst conflates cultural and historical aspects of gay culture in the 1980s, such as the process of gentrification in Soho and the stigmatization of homosexuality during the AIDS crisis, with the neoliberal mentality of exaggerated consumption and individual freedom. In so doing, he creates a narrative that reinforces the image of promiscuity ascribed to gay culture, as the protagonist is driven by cruising and casual sex. However, Hollinghurst’s novel also points to the limitations and conservatism imbued in this alleged sexual freedom, since Will’s freedom is only possible because of his wealth, his whiteness, and his masculinity. This privileged subject position in 1980s London allows him to promote his lifestyle and himself as an advertisement of a gay culture that claims itself as an authentic image of male homosexuality. Cruising and casual sex have certainly been significant aspects of gay culture as a resistance to monogamous and heteronormative behavior based on marriage and the nuclear family. Yet, the image constructed in *The Swimming-Pool Library* is the account of a gay man whose highly sexualized narratives depend on his social privileges.

In this sense, it is possible to read *The Swimming-Pool* as a postmodernist historical novel that is imbedded within the paradox of critical potential and complicity. Published in 1988, the novel is still remembered as Hollinghurst’s “sex-drenched first book”,⁴⁹ in which the explicit sex scenes became an emblem of a subversive gay culture after the decriminalization of homosexuality in 1967. Although the novel caused outrage when it was first published,⁵⁰ due to its exaggerated sexual accounts, it cannot be regarded in the same way in the twenty-first century. Looking back at the

46 *Ibid.*, p. 144.

47 *Ibid.*, p. 119.

48 Hollinghurst, *The Swimming-Pool Library*, p. 223.

49 Moss, “Alan Hollinghurst: Sex on the Brain” in *The Guardian*, 18 June 2011. Accessed in September 2017: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/jun/18/alan-hollinghurst-interview>.

50 Cf. Mitchell, “Alan Hollinghurst and Homosexual Identity” in Tew and Mengham (eds.) *British Fiction Today*, pp. 40–41.

novel from today's perspective, we can already detect features that point to the effects of the protagonist's complicity with his conservative and neoliberal environment. In the following section, I analyze Will's role as an autodiegetic narrator, arguing that his glossy account of gay London synthesizes the neoliberal subject and offers a version of gay history that is uniquely portrayed by a historical experience based on the subjective position of a wealthy, white, well-educated gay man.

The Narrator as a Privileged Neoliberal Subject

In focalizing on Will's perspective, the narrative suggests that free circulation in London's gay village in the 1980s is an experience that belongs mainly to privileged white men. What is supposed to be a 'realist' account of the city represents a very subjective narrative that constructs a London that is almost exclusively inhabited by gay men.⁵¹ The narrating voices, those of Will and Charles, relate historical periods in which gay men's sexual freedom is thwarted by law enforcement. In this sense, the novel subjectively narrates the privilege of free circulation being affected by homophobia and by socio-economic inequality. The London that is depicted displays signs of the city's increasing privatization and surveillance, as the characters' mobility is hindered either by their sexuality, their race, or by their social class.

If Harvey argues that postmodernism as a cultural movement has come to terms with Britain's class and colonial relations, in the sense that social class and race have come to be analyzed only as identity categories that determine specific 'ways of life', Hollinghurst's novel certainly shows otherwise. *The Swimming-Pool Library* conveys a narrative about socio-economic, gender, racial, and sexual inequalities, showing the ways in which gay identity and culture are also marked by conservatism and domination. The book's first scene clearly epitomizes this kind of relationship. Will takes the last train to go home and he sits across from two maintenance men from London Transport, who are about to begin their shifts. One of them, a black man in his thirties, particularly draws Will's attention since Will has been "getting a taste for black names, West Indian names; they were a kind of time-travel, the words people whispered to their pillows, doodled on their copy-book margins".⁵² His taste for black working-class men not only comes from his own relationship, at this point with Arthur Hope, but also from the class relations that are entangled with his watching and describing these working men, who exist as characters in the margins of notebooks and in the margins of society. In Will's account, these men are depicted as invisible labor, as those who enable his comfortable circulation in the city, and who guarantee the mechanical functioning of London:

51 The only female character in the novel is Will's sister, Phillipa, who is Rupert's mother. Her role as a character is pretty much restricted to that of motherhood, as she does not actually appear as someone who comments on the family's business; she only interacts with Will to talk about Rupert.

52 Hollinghurst, *The Swimming-Pool Library*, pp. 1–2.

I looked at them with a kind of swimming, drunken wonder, amazed at the thought of their inverted lives, of how their occupation depended on our travel, but could only be pursued, I saw it now, when we were not travelling. As we went home and sank into unconsciousness gangs of these men, with lamps and blow-lamps [...]. Such lonely, invisible work must bring on strange thoughts; the men who walked through every tunnel of the labyrinth, tapping rails, must feel such reassurance seeing the lights of others at last approaching, voices calling out their friendly, technical patter.⁵³

Will begins his account by emphasizing his position as the observer who *enables* the workingmen's labor activities, as he reinforces that their jobs depend on 'our' travel. The 'our' here asserts the division between 'we', the ones who enjoy the service, and 'these men' (them), the ones who work *for* 'us'. The fact that Will narrates his drunkenness from a night out in contrast to the maintenance men's night shift also ensures his position of privilege: Will is the one who watches and the one who writes about the invisibility of these men who are about to start work. In other words, Will is the one who gets to give these men visibility in the city. His drunkenness is blended with a dream-like narrative of the unconscious, in which Will and other fellow travelers go home to fantasize about these workingmen, making them the objects of their sexual desire and class domination.

Will's account portrays neoliberal social relations, thereby drawing our attention to how the economic domain becomes inherent to all relations among individuals, in which every social relation is determined by the rules of the free market. Foucault thoroughly makes this point in his lectures at the *Collège de France* about biopolitics and neoliberalism. In tracing a genealogy of liberalism in Europe and in the U.S., he argues that neoliberalism must be perceived as a set of ideas that endorse free market economy that becomes inherent to social relations, directly interfering with people's daily lives. Having been re-worked throughout the twentieth century, liberal thought had defended the view that the liberal doctrine should not be employed exclusively as economic theory, but also as "an art of government" or, as Foucault describes it, a "doctrine of government".⁵⁴ In the development of his thoughts about liberalism, Foucault highlights that the state has always played a crucial role in these discussions, which revolved around the extent to which the state could intervene in the economy.

For Foucault, the gradual transformation from liberal to neoliberal capitalism took place in the first half of the twentieth century. In this process, the main shift pertains to the role of the state: while in liberalism it is the state that dictates the rules of the market, in neoliberalism it is the market that dictates the rules of the state. In this sense, social relations also increasingly function according to the rules of the market, which aspires for profit and productivity. It is, in Foucault's words, "a formal game between inequalities" that must function as "an historical objective of governmental art".⁵⁵ What is crucial for Foucault's discussions is that neoliberalism goes beyond economic theory and reform; it has a history that goes back to the eighteenth century,

53 *Ibid.*, p. 1.

54 Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, p. 102.

55 *Ibid.*, p. 120.

and it advances into the twentieth century as a mindset, a lifestyle, and as an ideology that forms all relations of power.

In neoliberal governmentality, the principle of competition is strongly entangled with the ideal of individual freedom. This connection, as Harvey points out, becomes an important strategy in creating consent to neoliberal governments. The idea of freedom does not restrict itself to the liberty of choice in consumption, but it also deals with the possibility to *choose* “lifestyles, modes of expression, and a wide range of cultural practices”.⁵⁶ It is in this sense that Harvey argues that neoliberalism can be so appealing to the functioning of social movements that depend on identity politics to exist, given that they often express vindications for civil rights that warrant individual freedoms (e.g., gay marriage or equal pay) and alternative lifestyles, but they do not necessarily question the economic or ideological mechanisms that dictate those rights or norms. Hollinghurst’s novel also works within the paradox of individual freedom and social conservatism, implying that sexual freedom is only tolerated under the condition that socio-economic inequalities, which are byproducts of the logic of neoliberalism, are not disrupted and are able to perpetuate themselves.

Increasing profit and the social body’s productivity, Foucault explains, is the premise of biopolitics: in order to maximize the functioning of the population (and therefore the system), individuals must respond to governmentality, and this is where the law comes in. Like Foucault, Harvey considers law enforcement to be one of the main features of neoliberal governments. For Foucault, civil society is inevitably part of (neo)liberal governmentality because it needs to be properly managed by laws (norms) that enable and uphold governmental and economic rationality.⁵⁷ Civil society is, hence, a governmental technology that allows freedoms through prohibitions (laws) and that, at the same time, guarantees the proper functioning of the economy.

In Hollinghurst’s novel, Will’s and Charles’ accounts of gay history share similar aspects in terms of the law. Although homosexuality had already been decriminalized since 1967, law enforcement made sure to suppress it because of the hysterical homophobia disseminated during the AIDS crisis in the 1980s, as I will discuss in the next part of this chapter. Conversely, both Charles and Will look back at the time in which homosexuality was a crime with a feeling of nostalgia, as if juridical prohibition ascribed greater excitement and subversion to same-sex desire among men.

In Charles’ accounts of the first half of the twentieth century, we encounter a period in which homosexuality is criminalized. In spite of his years in prison because of his homosexuality, Charles tells Will that the past “was unbelievably sexy – much more than nowadays”, as gay life “was still kind of underground” and gay men “operated on a constantly shifting code”.⁵⁸ Charles says that he is not necessarily against gay liberation, but he believes that there has been a loss in gay culture with the increasing visibility of gay venues in London.

Will also conveys a nostalgic view of the past, as he reads Charles’ diary entries in 1943, during the Second World War. He imagines London’s destruction “as an era

56 Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, p. 42.

57 Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, p. 296.

58 Hollinghurst, *The Swimming-Pool Library*, p. 247.

of extraordinary opportunity [...] when the fellow-feeling of allies and soldiers could be creamed off in sex and romance”.⁵⁹ Their nostalgic perception of the past is a shallow reading of history that points to the conservatism of upper-class gay culture and identity, which interprets sexual oppression – imposed by law enforcement – as a social norm that favors urban thrills. While Charles’s justification of homosexual prohibition rests on the advantages of social invisibility, Will’s feeds into the myth of sexual freedom during the war to describe a nostalgic image of homosexual encounter in the Second World War. The ways in which they remember the past does not, in any way, provide reflections about their historical present. On the contrary, it creates an illusion that the pleasures of an underground lifestyle are diminished because it has become ordinary.

In associating the legalization of homosexuality with the end of an era of underground culture, it becomes clear that neither Charles nor Will reflect on sexual freedom as a way to disrupt the traditional standards of heteronormativity, based on familial and monogamous relations. What they suggest is that homophobic law and moral prohibition can be fruitful because they trigger the formation of ‘alternative’ worlds and urban scenes. Thus, homophobia appears as a form of moralism that directly interferes with their sex lives, yet it is not seen as a structural form of oppression in society. It is interesting to point out that Will’s fantasy about the past in the Second World War only emerges after he is confronted with several homophobic scenes that occur to him and to James, which I will analyze further in this section.

These incidents show him that, although homosexuality has been legal since 1967, homophobia is still a structural part of British society, given that it is enforced by authorities and remains a dominant social relation among individuals, particularly after the outbreak of the AIDS epidemic. It is only when Will *experiences* homophobic violence that he is able to reflect on it. However, his reflections can only express what this means to him, precisely because they are exclusively limited to an individual level, and they do not contextualize it as a social problem that has a historical past. The homophobic incidents in 1983 only yield a nostalgic perspective of the past, but they do not necessarily make him consider the problem as a structural and social one. Prior to the homophobic mishaps, Will narrates a London that seems to have achieved sexual freedom, as each walk in the city becomes an opportunity to cruise. Yet, it is clear that this sexual freedom is also a form of domination whereby he has the power to choose and to make a move towards his targets, who are usually men in subaltern positions.

As he is walking around Hyde Park, he recounts seeing an Arab boy, and he feels that he “must have him”. He realizes that the boy has noticed him, so he “felt a delicious *surplus* of lust and satisfaction at the idea of fucking him while another boy waited for [him] at home”.⁶⁰ Will’s vocabulary to describe his cruising activities entail a neoliberal relationship with other men, as he expresses his attraction to the boy by using the word ‘surplus’ to emphasize his overwhelming sexual desire and also sense of domination. Will exposes his own advantaged position in society: as a white, educated,

59 *Ibid.*, p. 224.

60 *Ibid.*, p. 6. My emphasis.

and upper-class gay man he has the privilege of *making profit*, even if it is within the realm of his sex life. He is extremely self-confident and uses his powerful position in his relationships with other men to take advantage of their more vulnerable position and to boost his self-esteem. Will's account portrays neoliberal social relations from the perspective of the privileged neoliberal subject himself. He is, in Foucault's words, the *homo oeconomicus*, the neoliberal subject who is an "entrepreneur of himself, being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of his earnings".⁶¹ Will's body is, therefore, a privileged site of productivity that can only profit from the relations with his non-white and working-class counterparts.

As a subject whose profitability is highly valuable, Will finds that writing a book about himself can be more appealing, given that the excessiveness of privilege not only promotes himself as a successful individual, but it also sells an image of gay life in London as a lifestyle that flaunts money, power, luxury, beauty, and sex. However, while Will constructs a glossy and sexual image of London, the course of his writing also points to the beginning of social disintegration. His introduction of himself marks his privileged social position and narcissism, yet it suggests the fantasy of a glorious past and the imminence of decay:

My life was in a strange way that summer, the last summer of its kind there was ever to be. I was riding high on sex and self-esteem – it was my time, my *belle époque* – but all the while with a faint flicker of calamity, like flames around a photograph, something seen out of the corner of the eye. I wasn't in work – oh, not a tale of hardship, or a victim of recession, not even, I hope, a part of a statistic. I had put myself out of work deliberately, or at least knowingly. I was beckoned on by having too much money, I belonged to that tiny proportion of the populace that indeed owns almost everything. I'd surrendered to the prospect of doing nothing, though it kept me busy enough.⁶²

Will's depiction of the last great summer implies the last summer before the outbreak of AIDS. The beginning of disintegration and death are visually construed with the image of a photograph slowly burning in its corner, vanishing with the beauty that Will previously builds up by the enhancement of his self-esteem and highly active sex life. What deteriorates beauty in this passage is not the common hardship of life and obstacles of daily labor routine and economic crisis. Rather, it is the risk of becoming a statistic, a fate Will hopes to avoid. In contrast to his belonging to the wealthiest and most powerful stratum of society, being part of a statistic that is socially stigmatized and violently oppressed puts him in a place of potential weakness and vulnerability. It is the latter position that Will fears, although he cannot reflect on this risk as a *social problem*, but only as a risk to his individual freedom.

The paradox of beauty and decay in the novel can be read as an aesthetic portrayal of neoliberal ideology that feeds into discourses of excess and freedom and creates promises of prosperity in an attempt to veil the inequalities it creates. On the one hand, we have Will's narrative that voices ostentation and triumph of "a new unfettered

61 Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, p. 226.

62 Hollinghurst, *The Swimming-Pool Library*, p. 3.

capitalism and its associated regimes of conspicuous consumption”;⁶³ on the other hand, we perceive the decrepitude of neoliberal ideology when Will describes his lovers’ lives and his circulation in working-class neighborhoods, which evinces the deterioration of council houses, the horrors of unemployment, and the dangers of white supremacy groups.

Hollinghurst’s depiction of gay culture within neoliberal ideology points to the contradictions that form gay politics, exposing historical conservatism in relationships among men, especially regarding race and class. Moreover, it poses the question regarding the *value* of bodies according to their productivity, considering Foucault’s argument about neoliberalism functioning as a socio-economic reason that aims to optimize all functioning of bodies. Thus, being vulnerable to death – as was the case for gay men throughout the 1980s – or being socially vulnerable in the sense of not being able to work – as was the case of millions of unemployed citizens in the same period – become two marks of unproductive, wasteful bodies; these are bodies that can no longer offer profit or serve as enterprises of themselves. In the novel, social confrontations regarding class, race, and sexuality become more prominent with the implicit outbreak of AIDS in the novel, metaphorically represented with a violent scene of Will being brutally assaulted by skinheads in South-East London. The scene is charged with racial, classist, and homophobic connotations, making explicit the idea that the financial splendor of the 1980s mostly worsened urban conflicts that already existed.

Will has not seen Arthur in a while and he becomes concerned that something has happened to him, so he goes to New Cross, where Arthur lives with his family. He describes a deteriorated council estate, in which prefabricated buildings “showed a systematic disregard for comfort and relief” with exposed pipes, stains, weeds, and grass growing from the slime on the windows.⁶⁴ Appalled by the horrors of poverty, Will finds himself “sweating with gratitude that [he] did not live under such a tyranny”.⁶⁵ His circulation around the estate buildings towards Arthur’s apartment is described with suspense and, as Will finally arrives in the Hope household, he hesitates about ringing the bell and thinks of himself in “the suburban sprawl, the tall windows of a Victorian school, gothic spires rising over housetops”.⁶⁶

His trip to this uncanny part of town is less about his actual concern with Arthur’s well-being than with his own sexual desire towards the young man: “I wanted to touch him, support him”, he writes, to “see again how attractive he was and know he still thought the world of me”.⁶⁷ As he finally rings the bell and nobody answers, Will imagines the unemployed Mr. Hope, Arthur’s father, taking an afternoon nap, a display of laziness that stigmatizes citizens who depend on social benefits. In an adrenaline burst, Will runs down the stairs and thinks that perhaps it would be better

63 Mort, *Cultures of Consumption*, p. 149.

64 Hollinghurst, *The Swimming-Pool Library*, p. 169.

65 *Ibid.*, p. 170.

66 *Ibid.*

67 *Ibid.*, p. 171.

to see Arthur in a club or a pub in central London, away from the horrors of working-class poverty.

Will's voyeuristic experiences in disenfranchised parts of London bring out the interplay of power relations between space and subject, and the interdependence between class, sexuality, gender, and whiteness in different spatial circumstances. While the clubs and pubs in central London, such as the Shaft and the Corinthian Club, provide the perfect environment for Will to hunt down his working-class lovers, the poorer neighborhoods in East and South-East London nevertheless put him in a position of risk. In these parts of town, he must overcome the threats of urban violence that are somewhat distant from his reality, in order to have access to his objects of desire. As Will is leaving Arthur's building, he encounters a group of skinheads, who call to his mind memories of a skinhead he had once picked up in Camden Town. Presuming that the New Cross skinheads would have the same interests, he tries to hit on one of them and, after provoking Will with homophobic insults, the group beats him until he falls unconscious.⁶⁸ This is a turning point in the novel, as it is in this moment that Will realizes that "[i]t was actually happening. It was actually happening to me".⁶⁹

Apart from being Will's moment of realization of homophobic violence, this moment in the novel is also crucial because it is the only actual physical confrontation between the upper- and working-classes, and between hetero and homosexuality. In other scenes, confrontations only happen in the realm of Charles' memories and in terms of Will's fantasies. This open confrontation unravels social conflicts that intersect class, race, and sexuality, involving two social groups that were largely repressed in Thatcher's government: the low-income population and homosexuals. The fact that the assault takes place in a council estate signals both the increasing income gaps between rich and poor areas in the city, and the strengthening of stigmatization of council estates as violent and dangerous parts of the city.⁷⁰ Moreover, it foreshadows the stigmatization that gay neighborhoods were about to face with the AIDS crisis, an anticipation that later materializes with Will's best friend's arrest outside the Coleherne, a renowned leather club in West London in the 1980s.⁷¹

Although English doctors had already diagnosed AIDS in several patients, it was in the summer of 1983 that the disease was publicly discussed in Britain at the first

68 Cf. Hollinghurst, *The Swimming-Pool Library*, pp. 172–175.

69 *Ibid.*, p. 174.

70 Cf. Hancock and Mooney, "'Welfare Ghettos' and the 'Broken Society': Territorial Stigmatization in Contemporary UK". The authors analyze excerpts from David Cameron's public discourses after the riots in 2011, discussing how they stigmatize working-class communities that receive social welfare – more specifically social housing –, associating them with idleness, sickness, and social dysfunction. Although Cameron's discourses were held in 2011, Hancock and Mooney trace a genealogy of narratives that stigmatize council estates and working-class communities back to the 1980s and 1990s. They argue that "the construction of place through territorial stigmatization obfuscates fundamental structural and functional differences underlying the uneven spatial distribution of poverty and disadvantage, and displaces questions of culpability away from the state and private sectors" (p. 53).

71 Cf. Hollinghurst, *The Swimming-Pool Library*, p. 221.

AIDS conference that took place in May. The conference, funded by the Health Education Council, hosted medical specialists from the UK and from the U.S., as well as members of the Gay Switchboard to raise awareness about the disease and to call for governmental action.⁷² There was wide hysterical and sensationalist repercussion about the disease in the early years of the 1980s, often referring to it as ‘the gay plague’. Apart from producing panic-stricken headlines that created an environment of fear and hysteria by selling the story that “sex kills you”, tabloids found “a chance to legitimize their homophobia” in the crisis.⁷³ The situation became increasingly complicated because, in addition to social panic, there was little information about the disease. As gay men were a high-risk group, there was enormous prejudice against their promiscuous lifestyle, which contributed to the pervasive stigmatization of gay men and neighborhoods.

Apart from this, Thatcher’s government took too long to recognize the danger of the disease turning into an epidemic, having chosen instead to ignore the problem. Many doctors, gay activists, and health professionals had been talking about the perils of a possible epidemic, as had been the case in the U.S.. In spite of this, a group of British doctors were rejected twice for research grants at the Medical Research Council, who only granted them funding for research in the summer of 1984.⁷⁴ In the meantime, doctors and patients attempted to maintain their optimism that only the minority of infected patients would die. Unfortunately, as we know, this was not the case. In an interview with Garfield, Dr. Ian Weller recalls that many patients tried to stick to the thought that “[death is] not going to happen to me”.⁷⁵ Going back to Will’s thought before he is assaulted by the skinheads, the realization that “this is happening to me” can be related back to several threats from which the protagonist had been hitherto shielded: homophobic violence, urban violence, and AIDS.

Threats and risks are far from being parts of Will’s daily life in his narcissistic and hedonist endeavors; they only exist in his fantasies. One example is when Arthur unexpectedly shows up to Will’s apartment saying that he has killed a man. Not knowing exactly what has happened, Will creates narratives of his own: amidst a family argument, Arthur would have grabbed a knife and cut this man’s throat. In Will’s imagination, this would have happened “in a ruinous house in the East End, bombed out in the Blitz and still standing”.⁷⁶ Again, his thoughts take him to the widely spread image of urban violence in East End’s council housings, which still remain, in his fantasy, Second World War urban ruins. For him, it is difficult to accept the reality of this murder, since there are no reports on the news or on the radio. Only Arthur could know about urban violence and murders from experience, since “violence against a black would rarely reach the national press, that radio silence could envelop the tragedies of the world from which he came. This silence also intensified [Will’s]

72 Garfield, *The End of Innocence*, pp. 36–37.

73 *Ibid.*, p. 41.

74 *Ibid.*, p. 51.

75 *Ibid.*

76 Hollinghurst, *The Swimming-Pool Library*, p. 32.

fear”.⁷⁷ As is the case with AIDS in the novel, violence against black men should not be addressed by the media explicitly.

It is the silence about the crime that makes Will realize that urban violence is restricted to other spatial boundaries, to places in London that do not interfere with his world unless he wants them to. Like AIDS and gay bashing, urban violence, from Will's perspective, triggers fear because it is strange to his experience and it prompts unease in his reflections about daily life. Will looks out the window of his apartment, near Hyde Park, waiting for something to happen, wondering if the police will show up. He scans the world outside like one “looks at a photograph with a glass to make out half-decipherable details”, and notices that the world's “mundanity was unaltered: it rained and dried, wind blew scraps of litter across, children walk dogs”.⁷⁸ In contrast to the scene of the assault, this passage displays Will's obliviousness to everything that does not involve him directly. His detachment from the world is so dominating that, in spite of fear, he is able to push the world's problems away with the thought that there is a gap between his self and the outside world: he is untouchable.

Will's detachment is safeguarded by his social privileges. If it is the case that, as Harvey argues, the process of neoliberalization was a means to restore power and wealth to the elites,⁷⁹ then Hollinghurst's novel certainly displays the effects of neoliberal ideology on an individual level, which is epitomized in Will's character. His autodiegetic narration expresses the excess of power and the constant desire for domination, both sexually and socially. In this sense, Hollinghurst's narrative depicts the neoliberal's subject performativity as such: it highlights the unconscious practices, language, and behavior of a neoliberal subject whose gender, class, and whiteness protect him from subjugation, but whose sexuality include him in a social group who is oppressed by Thatcherite government and its conservative measures towards the AIDS epidemic; these are measures that endorsed hysterical homophobia in the media and that hindered social and medical support to patients who had the disease or who were HIV positive.

Will's character can be read as the embodiment of a neoliberal subject because of his *individual* capacity to produce, to consume, and to be an entrepreneur of himself without relying on the state and its services. What is striking about both Harvey's and Foucault's reflections on neoliberalism is the fact that it can only serve those who already have the means to be the functioning, productive, and healthy bodies that consume, that comply with the norms, and that subserviently reproduce them. Thus, individuals who do not have the material means to produce and to consume, who cannot afford proper housing and food, are the ones who cannot rely exclusively on themselves as sources of labor and production. Will represents the privileged neoliberal subject who can count on himself and on his own resources to live and, since he comes from a wealthy family, he does not even have to work for a living, which turns his activity as a writer into a means of promoting himself and his 'lifestyle' as a label for wealth, freedom, and consumption. Conversely, the AIDS crisis and its corollary

77 *Ibid.*

78 *Ibid.*, p. 33.

79 Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, p. 16.

homophobic hysteria is what risks his position as a healthy and productive body: as a gay man, he comes to be automatically perceived as an individual who can both catch the virus and transmit it; he is a liability to the functioning of the system because he embodies the prospects of death and of depending on the public health service for a kind of treatment that, in 1983, was still very incipient and uncertain.

Neoliberalism and Self-Representation

Published in 1988, five years into the AIDS epidemic, *The Swimming-Pool Library* feeds into the image of hedonism and promiscuity as main features of gay culture to show the political limitations of sexual liberation. While it is true that gay venues and culture subvert, to a certain extent, sexual morality of heteronormative spaces, this subversion is not entirely enacted in Hollinghurst's novel precisely because of the class and racial domination that Will's narration imposes. Hence, the novel works in terms of the paradox of subversion and homonormativity. On the one hand, it subverts because it explicitly narrates homosexuality, cruising, and gay sex culture in London at a time in which Section 28 was still at work and gay bodies and spaces were still overtly stigmatized; on the other hand, what we see in Will's account is complete obliviousness to political life and the feeling that everything must remain the same, even when the protagonist himself must confront the reality of homophobia and social inequality.

Hollinghurst anticipates the shifts in gay and lesbian politics in the 1980s, from an agenda that aimed for social justice to an agenda that sought legal equality and assimilation almost exclusively. As Dean Spade explains, the lure of freedom and choice in neoliberalism obscures "systemic inequalities and turn[s] social movements toward goals of inclusion and incorporation and away from demands for redistribution and structural transformation".⁸⁰ In other words, Spade contends that, from the 1980s onwards, a great part of social movements have vindicated state recognition as a form of inclusion, instead of acting against social inequalities that the system perpetuates in terms of class, gender, and race (e.g., gay marriage and equal pay measures).

He argues that this is precisely the case in gay and lesbian movements, whose political goals promote the "class and race privilege of a small number of elite gay and lesbian professionals, while marginalizing or overtly excluding the needs and experiences of people of color, immigrants, people with disabilities, indigenous people, trans people and poor people".⁸¹ This shift, Spade suggests, also pertains to the mechanisms of the judiciary in neoliberalism, whereby the principle of 'law and order' is imperious and becomes the means to solve any social problem. For instance, Spade comments on how same-sex marriage became the solution for problems regarding immigration, state recognition for queer families and, in an American context, health care.⁸² Like Harvey and Foucault, Spade contends that the authority of law and neoliberalism go

80 Spade, *Normal Life*, p. 50.

81 *Ibid.*, p. 65.

82 *Ibid.*, p. 63.

hand in hand, given that the former guarantees the functioning of the latter; this is because neoliberalism, as a form of governmentality, functions through the means of prohibition and criminalization in order to strengthen authority over individuals.

Notions of prohibition and crime permeate the whole plot of *The Swimming-Pool Library*, and they are intrinsically related to homophobia in most instances. Will's assault in the council estate in New Cross and James' arrest in front of the Coleherne, in Earls Court, are the points of departure for Will's reflections about homophobia. While Will's incident is physically brutal and also interconnects with class relations, James' arrest concerns the case of a policeman's abuse of authority. What aggravates James' situation, from Will's point of view, is the fact that the policeman who arrests James is a Corinthian Club *habitué*, a gay man named Colin with whom Will has already slept. Colin pretends that he is coming on to James and, once they are in the car, he arrests him.⁸³

This trap, in fact, was a common strategy in the arrest of gay men, when homosexuality was still criminalized, as Houlbrook has elucidated.⁸⁴ In the narrative, James' arrest anticipates the episodes of Charles' persecution and imprisonment for homosexuality, which Will only narrates at the end of the novel. Like James, Charles has been lured by sex with a man (a policeman) in a lavatory when another policeman comes in to arrest him. His account of his arrest is not narrated in the pages of his journal, but in a separate document that Charles writes after getting out of prison. Will only receives these documents when he is already months into the reading of Charles' journals.

As Will finds out that it is his grandfather, Lord Beckwith, who is responsible for Charles' arrest, he is confused and angry, and he begins to reflect on the origins of his family's fortune. He is now able to understand his grandfather's "hygienic distance" from him and Will's "own wariness of him, and the exaggerated obligation [he] felt for the help he had been given".⁸⁵ However, he is definitely neither willing to give up his wealth privileges, nor to confront his family about the past. In a conversation with his brother-in-law, Gavin, Will asks if his sister Phillipa knows about their grandfather's past. Gavin's answer is that she probably does, but that she does not take it as seriously as Will does, since she knows that this happened in another time when the world was a different place.⁸⁶

Hollinghurst's novel, however, proves otherwise. If 1983 British legislation did not allow police arrests because of homosexuality, then it certainly did not prevent it from happening as a legitimization of hysterical homophobia during the AIDS crisis. The historical accounts of two generations of gay men, Will's and Charles', show similar mechanisms of oppression that are deployed in different historical contexts. The fact that homosexuality was already decriminalized in the 1980s does not dismiss its condition of deviation from the norm. Both situations, one having occurred in the

83 Hollinghurst, *The Swimming-Pool Library*, pp. 221–222.

84 Cf. Houlbrook, *Queer London*, pp. 25–31.

85 Hollinghurst, *The Swimming-Pool Library*, p. 263.

86 *Ibid.*, p. 264.

1950s and the other in the 1980s, indicate the similarities in terms of sexual conservatism, law enforcement, and homophobia. Up to the point of Will's assault and James' arrest, punishment for being gay seems like a far-fetched event in the decades after sexual liberation. Yet, these violent events make Will feel self-conscious about his sexuality, giving him "an urge to solidarity with my kind that I wasn't used to in our liberal times".⁸⁷ It is only when he sees his privileges of circulation in the city threatened that Will is able to feel empathy towards other gay men.

Although Will's attempt to solidarity can be read as a moment of political consciousness, as Murphy suggests, it cannot be removed from the novel's Thatcherite historical context. For Murphy, Will's discovery of his grandfather's participation in homosexual persecution and the homophobic incidents with him and James mark a transition in Will's character "from irony to a historical community"⁸⁸ that asserts the necessity of solidarity as a response to the AIDS crisis. As much as there is a shift in terms of Will's awareness of homophobia, which consequently thwarts his detached attitude towards his surroundings, it does not necessarily lead him to a consciousness about sexual politics. This moment in the novel marks a shift in Hollinghurst's use of irony as a literary device. I argue that irony is deployed in two ways in *The Swimming-Pool Library*: firstly, as a device to convey Will's detachment from his spatial surroundings and, secondly, as a literary strategy to evince the effects of neoliberalism on gay culture.

In the novel, ironic detachment can only be enacted by privileged subjects like Will himself, given that only these subjects can remove themselves from the social inequalities that surround them, while subaltern subjects cannot. Nevertheless, this form of detachment ceases as Will is assaulted by the skinheads in New Cross. This is a turning point in the novel because it represents a moment in which Will cannot keep aloof from his social environment and his privileges cannot protect him from urban and homophobic violence. Will's narration up to this point was invested in advertising gay life in London as an experience of sexual freedom and of social triumph, since he portrays his own life as a successful series of events that are based on wealth, promiscuity, and self-sufficiency.

As readers, we are put into an ambivalent position of skepticism and desire; this is precisely the effect created by Hollinghurst's deployment of irony. On the one hand, Will's autobiography lures us into this glossy and luxurious life of sex, money, power, and beauty; on the other hand, it creates doubts about the veracity and authenticity of this overwhelmingly ostentatious lifestyle. Either way, irony functions as a way to show that Will's life is exclusive and is definitely not available to all people. This mechanism of exclusion, as I have elucidated in the previous section, is very similar to the ways in which neoliberal ideology operates: it creates the idea that if we cannot achieve wealth, if we cannot consume, and if we cannot promote ourselves as productive and

87 *Ibid.*, p. 223.

88 Murphy, "Past Irony: Trauma and the Historical Turn in *Fragments and The Swimming-Pool Library*", p. 68.

healthy individuals, then we are the ones who are responsible for our failures, since we cannot obtain success or social ascension.⁸⁹

In the beginning of the novel, after flirting with a man at the Corry, Will explains his detachment: “Because I was so easily moved by people, I had learned to distance myself, just when I felt them taking hold: I made myself regard them, and even more myself, with a careless, almost cynical detachment”.⁹⁰ Irony in the novel is what sustains this kind of distance and cynicism, yielding distance between Will and ‘others’, including the reader. Once he becomes aware that he is a statistic that pertains to social problems (i.e., AIDS and homophobia), it becomes difficult to use irony to keep distance from the rest ‘of his kind’. In Will’s narrative, irony is a figure of speech that opens a double gap in the novel: on the one hand, irony is used to reinforce Will’s detachment to the world, as I have pointed out; on the other, it produces doubts about Will’s own account of himself, for the reader begins to question Will’s reliability as a narrator precisely because of his excessive narcissism and egotism.

According to Hutcheon, irony is a rhetorical trope that is always enacted through communication and that provokes unstable meanings. Irony “unavoidably involves touchy issues such as exclusion and inclusion, intervention and evasion”,⁹¹ and functions in “a wide range of political positions, legitimating or undercutting a wide variety of interests”.⁹² Hutcheon contends that irony always touches upon the political because it is always entangled within unequal power relations that vary according to the subject who makes an ironic utterance, and to the subject who interprets or fails to interpret the ironic utterance. What is crucial for Hutcheon’s discussion is that irony entails, for the interpreter, the co-existence and interaction between the said and un-said, “removing the semantic security of ‘one signifier: one signified’”.⁹³ In undermining the certainty of meaning, irony can create distrust and confusion in the eye of the interpreter; therefore, it is able to destabilize consolidated power relations.

It is along these lines that Colebrook discusses irony, arguing that it produces a distance between the ‘I’ and the ‘we’ as a means to encounter an external point of view that can question and debunk established norms. In distancing themselves from the ‘we’, the ironic self seeks and asks for other possibilities of identity. This movement of detachment provided by irony is provocative, yet it is “also hierarchical – setting itself

89 In an interview to *El País*, Ken Loach is very straightforward about neoliberal ideology: “[The State] creates the illusion that, if you’re poor, it’s your fault. [...] They create a bureaucratic system that punishes you for being poor. Humiliation is a key element in poverty. It steals your dignity and your self-esteem. And the State contributes to this humiliation [...]” (my translation). In the interview, Loach talks about neoliberalism in relation to his latest film *I, Daniel Blake* (2016), which addresses issues about the neoliberal state and its severe cuts to social welfare, especially after the economic crisis in 2008. Full interview: Guimón, “O Estado cria a ilusão de que se você é pobre, a culpa é sua” in *El País*, 5 January 2017: http://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2016/10/22/cultura/1477145409_049665.html (in Portuguese, accessed in June 2017).

90 Hollinghurst, *The Swimming-Pool Library*, p. 84.

91 Hutcheon, *Irony’s Edge*, p. 2.

92 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

93 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

above everyday life and opinion”.⁹⁴ Like Hutcheon, Colebrook suggests that irony is always ingrained in a system of hierarchies and power relations, whereby the ironic subject enjoys the privilege of not only distancing themselves from the norms, but also of questioning the origins and authority of these same norms.

Will's narrative implicates both Hutcheon's and Colebrook's discussions about irony. Irony is used both as a way to assert Will's position of dominance in terms of success, beauty, wealth, and hedonism and as a linguistic trope to augment the character's distance between himself and the others; it is a way to undermine his own account of himself by drawing attention to the exaggeration that is inherent to self-representation. While his narrative about a prosperous life gives the story an almost commercial character of a lifestyle that is to be consumed, we notice that the overly confident narration of himself produces doubts about his own success and self-confidence. Like propaganda, Will's writing sells a product as though it were attainable to all people in equal ways, thereby sustaining the neoliberal premise of self-entrepreneurship and meritocracy as means to achieve success. In other words, Will's narrative is sustained by the pervasive neoliberal ideal of competition and of individual freedom: those who are able to achieve success and liberty are the ones who deserve it by their own merit, no matter whether this merit is inherited, as it is in Will's case, or if it is accomplished by a person's own resources is completely indifferent in this system, since what actually counts is that you are able to succeed.

What becomes clear in Will's autobiography is that only people from his own class background can achieve success and freedom. It is from his best friend, James, that we obtain some kind of criticism about Will's "raids on the inarticulate", relating to his exploitative relationships with lovers that are "poorer & dimmer than himself".⁹⁵ Even though, James' opinion about Will's interclass and interracial relationships are also charged with a certain amount of envy, meaning that James repudiates Will's actions towards these men to some extent, yet he also desires it. In the beginning of the novel, Will writes about reading James' diary, in which he states that Will is "thoughtless" and that he is "becoming more and more brutal".⁹⁶

As a doctor, James' character functions as Will's responsible counterpart. Although James is also privileged and somewhat conservative, he neither has a highly active sexual life with various partners nor is he a narcissistic man. He is more concerned with his career and feels lonely, "appallingly tired [...] longing for someone poor, young and dim to hold me tight..."⁹⁷ It is through James that we come to doubt Will's excessive flaunting, for he is the one who gives an account of how difficult it is to have an affective relationship with Will. James' interaction with the protagonist can be read as a literary artifact that helps us to find the irony in Will's exaggerated account of gay life: he is a character that is less powerful and rather secondary; however, he is the only source that we have of any negative opinions about Will. If Will's self-representation

94 Colebrook, *Irony*, p. 120.

95 Hollinghurst, *The Swimming-Pool Library* p. 218.

96 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

97 *Ibid.*

stresses his dominance, his 'value' as an affluent, beautiful, and free gay man, then James' account of him shows how damaging he is to his friends and lovers.

Colebrook's implication of irony, as an exchange that grants an ironic self-detachment and which triggers the possibility to disrupt norms, can be read in Will's attempt to distance himself from his surroundings as a means to differentiate himself from the 'we' and, at the same time, warrant his dominant position in his social environment. In doing so, his writing presents a character of himself that acts above norms and social conventions, even though these norms and conventions are exactly what give him the privilege to remove himself from their workings. However, it becomes clear that Will's detachment fails at times, as the skinhead assault in New Cross shows. Social detachment in the novel is only possible in central London, given that Will can only assert his dominating position in places in which he is recognized as such and not taken as an outsider, as happens when he circulates in East and South-East London.

As part of his research on Charles' life, Will goes to East London to visit one of Lord Nantwich's philanthropist projects, the Limehouse Boys' Club. He arrives to Limehouse earlier than expected so Will decides to take a walk in the neighborhood, and he spots a boy whom he wants to approach. In the passage, Will describes the thrills of cruising and of anonymous sex, stating that "it was strangers who by their very strangeness quickened my pulse and made me feel I was alive". This excitement, however, "was sharpened by the courted risk of rejection, misunderstanding, abuse".⁹⁸ While the beginning of Will's account indicates the strangeness of the area for him, it is the teenage boy, sitting on a table in St. Anne's churchyard, who engages him with the place. As he passes by, the boy asks him in a Cockney accent if he has got a lighter and starts a conversation, knowing that Will does not come from this part of the city.

Will approaches the teenager to touch his shoulder, and the boy immediately asks him how much money he has got. It soon becomes clear that the teenager is a rent boy and that his interest in Will is monetary; he is not actually interested in his body and beauty. In this moment, a gap opens up between the two characters, allowing the local working-class teenager to place himself in a position of domination. Will nods and "chuck[es] ironically" and realizes that the only way to circumvent the situation is "to behave like him", acting indifferent and contemptuous.⁹⁹ Thinking of irony in Colebrook's terms, in which the detachment of the ironic self can disrupt accepted norms, the encounter between Will and the teenager textually depicts this process. As the boy engages Will in conversation by asking for a lighter, the latter presupposes that he must "have" the teenager. Yet, once the teenager shows financial interest, instead of sexual interest, by showing himself in an indolent and ironic manner, Will's position is undermined. In an attempt to retrieve the social hierarchy that was initially presented, Will tries to imitate the boy's attitude, using irony to turn the tables. However, this proves unsuccessful and what we see is that irony and detachment only work in the

98 Hollinghurst, *The Swimming-Pool Library*, p. 132.

99 *Ibid.*, p. 134.

teenager's favor, oddly placing Will in a position of vulnerability. Once the boy leaves, mockingly saying goodbye, Will describes his utmost feeling of social affront:

I felt the boy's absolutely unfriendly eyes on me, and annoyance and humiliation, and [...] conflicting urges to dismiss him as rubbish and to run back and pay whatever he wanted. I saw myself pissing over him, jamming my cock down his throat, forcing my fingers up his ass [...]. I resented his ability to resist me, and that I had no power over someone so young.¹⁰⁰

Will's violent revenge, expressed by his fantasy of forcefully abusing and raping the teenage boy, displays the wrath triggered by a loss of power. The fact that the scene occurs in East London is highly relevant because, as is the case with the episode with the skinheads, it shows that in neighborhoods in which Will is the outsider, he is not able to enact a position of domination inherent to his social background. In these areas, Will is an outsider because he does not belong to that community, not because he *decides* to distance himself from his surroundings. If sexual desire functions as a bonding between him and a local, it is Will's evident social class – betrayed by his accent, clothes, and manners – that separates him from any other gay man in the area.

The protagonist's relationships with other men in the novel are always constituted by unequal social positions that generally refer to class and racial differences. Considering neoliberalism in Foucault's term, as a system that exceeds economic theory and that is understood as a way of life and of governmentality, *The Swimming-Pool Library* brings to light the ways in which individuals reproduce the foundations of inequality and individual freedom in their social relations. In doing so, the novel evinces notions of the entrepreneurship of the self, which is promoted through the genre of autobiographical writing in which sexual freedom is described as an object of consumption, be it in public schools, at Oxford, in colonies, or on the streets of London. What is described, both in Will's and Charles' accounts, is an openness about gay life that could not be entirely exposed in many aspects of their personal lives. The fact that Charles asks Will to write his biography displays the view that he feels that this is indeed a contribution to gay history, given that it promotes the idea that the 1980s' alleged sexual freedom could only have been made possible with the history established by a preceding generation. The diary entries that Will selects for his own book, *The Swimming-Pool Library*, narrate a time of gay life from the 1920s until the beginning of the 1940s during the Second World War in London, depicting gay clubs and pubs where Charles frequents with friends, and where he gets to meet Ronald Firbank.

Charles describes his school years at Winchester as "the epitome of pleasure". He recalls them while living in the Sudan and writes that most of his friends, who also engaged in "the occupational depravity" at school, have either died in the Great War or "are running the country & the empire, examples of righteousness, & each of them knowing they have done these unspeakable things".¹⁰¹ He supposes that homosexual experience "is a part of the tacit lore of manhood, like going with whores or getting

100 *Ibid.*

101 *Ibid.*, p. 113.

drunk, which are not incompatible with respectability and power".¹⁰² Like the tradition inherent to an education at Winchester and at Oxford, Charles' writings relate Oxford and public schools as traditional spaces for homosexual experience, sexual awakening, and the making of powerful men. In asserting homosexuality as part of a man's formative years, Charles' narrative infers that deviant sex (e.g., sodomy and prostitution) is necessary to legitimate heterosexuality and marriage as the core of sexual respectability.

Charles' narration of his time in prison, however, is not produced as diary entries, but instead as a memoir of the period that was written after he was released. He compares prison with school at Winchester, stating that the only difference lay in the fact that "schoolboys were bound to struggle for supremacy, and in doing so to align themselves with authority, becoming educated and socially orthodox at once". In contrast, he argues that what binds the inmates' lives in prison is their "unorthodoxy", as they "were all social outcasts".¹⁰³ While elite schools, such as Oxford and Winchester, teach boys to become men who seek power and respectability, prison unites men who break the law and live in the margins of society. Charles explains that class differences are far from being erased in prison, and this of course grants him privileges. Nevertheless, what he characterizes as an equal stand for all men is that in prison "a layer of social pretence had been removed" and there was no need to pretend that "one was not a lover of men".¹⁰⁴

It is interesting to note Hollinghurst's use of educational institutions, prison, and London as spatial devices to discuss surveillance, discipline, and regulations of bodies. In juxtaposing Will's and Charles' narratives, we are able to learn how these spaces and their social meanings have been devised for the purposes of normativization. Foucault's notions of biopolitics are central to understanding that, despite the different historical contexts, the means to regulate bodies is still similar to those found in the nineteenth century: schools, prisons, and the law are the technologies that remain pivotal in creating norms, and they adapt to the historical circumstances in which they are employed. Interestingly, in his lectures about neoliberalism, Foucault goes back to the concept of biopolitics to show how the control and regulation of bodies have been implemented in the contemporary form of neoliberal governments. For Foucault, the neoliberal subject, the *homo oeconomicus*, "is someone who accepts reality"¹⁰⁵ in the sense that the subject is compliant with norms and is submissively managed by the government.

Hollinghurst's protagonist Will Beckwith shows how his complicity with the norms, in spite of his sexuality, have led him to be entitled to social domination. In fact, the novel represents the interconnections between privileged educational and leisure spaces with spaces of law, culture, and imperial administration, coining them as sites that have enabled and cultivated homosexuality in many ways, from the practice of sodomy to the creation of an intergenerational gay culture between men.

102 *Ibid.*

103 *Ibid.*, p. 253.

104 *Ibid.*

105 Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, p. 269.

Homosexuality, therefore, becomes the norm in Hollinghurst's novel, a norm that consolidates the characters' (male) bonds at various levels. These male bonds potentialize the power of affluent, white gay men in interclass or interracial relationships, while they also forge relationships of dependency with the working-class gay men of color, such as Will's relationship with Arthur, or Charles' ambiguous and explicit relationships with servants and men that he met in prison. The opportunities given by Charles and Will, however, are far from the promotion of autonomy among the less privileged characters: the gay men in subaltern positions receive material and, at times, even emotional aid, but are doomed to rely upon their patron's money and charity.

Will's and Charles' writings about their lives and their sexual affairs with other men only serve their advantage and are certainly not used to discuss overarching rights that concern gender, sexual, class, and racial privileges. Rather, they can be understood under the Thatcherite premise expressed by her famous quote: "there's no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families."¹⁰⁶ This is precisely the idea that Will conveys in his book, as he presents to the reader how egotism and wealth inherited from powerful family kinship are able to grant him a life of ostensible joy and success. The exaggerated camp language of his sexual encounters and his cruising adventures in London epitomize the culture of neoliberal ostentation and excess.

As an entrepreneur of himself, it is possible to say that Will writes his book as a way to sell his lifestyle and to commercialize gay urban life as ultimate sexual freedom. Yet, in doing so, he also exposes the fallacy of gay politics among the upper-classes. What begins as a narcissistic account of a highly sexual and dominating alpha male backfires into Will's own failure to engage with relationships based on mutual affection, love, friendship, and support. This becomes clear in the final chapter when Will walks in on Phil (a working-class lover) and Bill Hawkins (Charles' former black working-class lover) in bed together, epitomizing the encounter of the two men who are supposedly dependent on Will and Charles respectively.¹⁰⁷ Will's discovery proves to him that his sex toys have lives of their own and that they also perceive *him* as an ephemeral sexual object.

106 Accessed in *The Guardian* on 2 July 2016: <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/apr/08/margaret-thatcher-quotes>. The quote was originally published in *Women's Own* in 1987.

107 Hollinghurst, *The Swimming-Pool Library*, p. 276.

Chapter 6

Thatcherism, Domesticity and the Production of Homonormative Spaces in *The Line of Beauty*

Introduction

While we have an autobiographical account about the 'last summer of freedom' before the outbreak of AIDS and the ongoing effects of neoliberal ideology in London in *The Swimming-Pool Library*, in *The Line of Beauty* we find an explicit narration of the AIDS epidemic and of the city's Thatcherite politics and ideology. The first part of the novel is set in the summer of 1983, recounting the Tory's landslide victory in the elections; the second part, which takes place in 1986, shows the heyday of Thatcherite government and the already explicit AIDS epidemics and hysterical homophobia triggered by it; lastly, the third part is set in 1987, and it represents the collapse of Thatcher's government with high unemployment rates, the economic crisis, and a series of political scandals in the Conservative Party, epitomized especially by Gerald Fedden, a Tory MP for Barwick and the head of the Fedden family.

Like *The Swimming-Pool Library*, *The Line of Beauty* suggests a promising summer in 1983, not only in terms of sexual prospects for London's newly arrived Nick Guest, but in relation to the possibility of social ascension. Having finished his bachelor's degree at Oxford with Toby Fedden, the protagonist Nick Guest is invited to live at the Feddens' mansion in Kensington Gardens to begin his PhD on Henry James at UCL. Unlike what we saw in *The Swimming-Pool Library*, in the first part of the novel, set in 1983, we already have hints that imply the spreading of AIDS among gay men, although this does not seem to directly interfere with Nick's privileges within the Conservative Feddens' mansion.

Where Hollinghurst's first novel explored London as an overtly sexualized city that offered innumerable sexual encounters for gay men, in *The Line of Beauty*, published in 2004, London is represented mainly by domestic spaces, more specifically by wealthy mansions and country houses. While Will Beckwith flaunts his fortune and sex appeal with men, Nick Guest is more modest and less affluent and this makes him strive to belong to the wealthy Fedden family. What Will and Nick share is their adoration for

beauty, although Nick nurtures a great fascination for *beautiful* art, *beautiful* houses, *beautiful* furniture, instead of only directing his desire towards beautiful men.

As his name suggests, Nick Guest is primarily a 'guest' at the Feddens' residence in Kensington Gardens. Nick pays a symbolic amount of rent in exchange for the family's hospitality and he is responsible for taking care of the unstable Catherine Fedden, who suffers from maniac-depressive crises, and it is suggested that she attempted to harm herself. The Feddens epitomize a standard upper-class, dysfunctional family of the 1980s that conflates new wealth, represented by Gerald's family, and traditional aristocratic financial and social power on Rachel's side. Although Gerald's late father had been "very much a law man", his stepfather, Jack Partridge, had been "a practical man", who built motorways and went bankrupt right after getting his knighthood; this, however, "was a subject which might seem to tarnish his stepson by association".¹ As a Tory MP who is fiercely devoted to Margaret Thatcher, Gerald has been elected in Barwick, coincidentally the town where Nick comes from. It is not clear why the Feddens decide to let the young graduate in, but it would not be baseless to speculate that lodging a middle-class young man from his constituency could play well with Gerald's political image. After all, the invitation to move into the mansion comes right after the 1983 Tory landslide victory, and since Barwick is Nick's home constituency, "the arrangement was jovially hailed as having the logic of poetry, or fate".²

In spite of his sexuality, which is kept a taboo at the Feddens', Nick represents the figure of a middle-class young man whose education at a grammar school, and later at Oxford, enables his ability to climb the social ladder. Although he does not show any interest in a political future whatsoever, Nick nurtures "a fascination with social position and wealth", which is associated with "reverence for aesthetic beauty and sublime culture".³ In fact, as Terentowicz-Fotyga argues, the appeal of wealth, social status, high culture, and aestheticism is spatially embodied in the country house, as the novel is set in three houses that speak to the literary tradition of the country house novel: the Fedden mansion in Kensington Gardens; Hawkeswood, the Victorian country house in Middlesex that belongs to Rachel's brother, Lord Kessler; and his country house in France.

Located in the affluent area of Kensington Gardens, the Feddens' residence does not convey the traditional manorial landscape of the country house. However, Terentowicz-Fotyga explains that, as a stately home, the mansion yields a "sense of spacious luxury, moneyed opulence, exclusivity, refined style and hierarchical order"⁴ that is similar to the trope articulated in the country house. In this spatial hierarchy, Nick lodges in a small room in the attic, as Rachel makes sure to recount aloud in a conversation with her mother-in-law, Lady Partridge, who "had scented [Nick's] fantasy of belonging, of secret fraternity with her beautiful grandson, and set to eradicate it with

1 Hollinghurst, *The Line of Beauty*, p. 142.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

3 Terentowicz-Fotyga, *Dreams, Nightmares and Empty Signifiers*, p. 71.

4 *Ibid.*

a quick territorial instinct”.⁵ Nick feels that he is the family’s “lost middle-child”,⁶ and when he arrives at the Feddens’ mansion he feels “almost [...] in possession”.⁷ Since Rachel and Gerald are away in France, Nick feels that he is in charge, since he is the one at home taking care of Catherine.

Nick takes advantage of Rachel’s and Gerald’s absence to explore the house amidst the (many) servants, such as the housekeeper who comes in the morning to cook him and Catherine all meals, and Mr. Duke, the handyman who makes all sort of repairs in the house and has affectionately earned the reverence ‘His Grace’ by the family:

[Nick] loved coming home to Kensington Park Gardens in the early evening, when the wide treeless street was raked by the sun, and the two white terraces stared at each other with the glazed tolerance of rich neighbours. He loved letting himself in at the three-locked green front door, and locking it again behind him, and feeling the still security of the house as he looked into the red-walled dining room, or climbed the stairs to the double drawing room, and up again past the half-open doors of the white bedrooms. The first flight of stairs, fanning out into the hall, was made of stone; the upper flights had the confidential creak of oak. [...] [T]he pictures, the porcelain, the curvy French furniture so different from what he’d been brought up with. [...] Above the drawing-room fireplace there was a painting by Guardi, a capriccio of Venice in a gilt rococo frame; on the facing wall there were two large gilt-framed mirrors. Like his hero Henry James, Nick felt that he could ‘stand a great deal of gilt’.⁸

This passage already anticipates some of the novel’s thematic, aesthetic, and stylistic elements. Firstly, as mentioned previously, Nick’s fascination with wealth, as the narrator describes the neighboring mansions staring at each other, ready to overlook at least certain moral flaws as long as they do not interfere with the neighborhood’s self-righteous principles. The second aspect refers to the locked doors and the many walls that “alienate the surrounding urban reality of those who do not belong”.⁹ Nick’s circulation in the house functions as a guiding tour in an environment of wealth and privilege that is consolidated in British society, like the stone and the oak that compose the house’s flights of stairs. Standing “a great deal of gilt” not only infers the protagonist’s fascination and longing for wealth, as it also points to his ‘guilt’ in the process of mourning. In not being able to publicly mourn the friends he loses throughout the AIDS epidemic, namely Leo and Wani, guilt is also part of what constitutes melancholy in the novel.

The “curvy French furniture” and the “gilt rococo frame” that outlines the Guardi painting evoke the line of beauty that gives the novel its title. Theorized by William Hogarth in the eighteenth century, the line of beauty is “a waving line, being composed of two curves” that confers the art object movement and “leads the eye in a pleasing

5 Hollinghurst, *The Line of Beauty*, p. 78.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

8 *Ibid.*, pp. 5–6.

9 Terentowicz-Fotyga, *Dreams, Nightmares and Empty Signifiers*, p. 72.

manner along the continuity of its variety".¹⁰ The line is especially found in rococo and baroque art, which in the passage is represented by the furniture, the frame, and the painting itself, since Francesco Guardi was a prominent rococo painter in Venice. Hannah interprets Hollinghurst's impulse to play with the aesthetic composition of the line of beauty as "a motif for the novel's ambivalent tracing of the destructive yet uplifting appeal of wealth, taste and 'decorative' consumption".¹¹

As Nick's PhD topic proclaims, Henry James is the novel's main source of intertextuality, not only in aesthetic terms, but also in the use of narrative techniques and re-workings of textual excerpts taken from the author's works. The second part of the novel, entitled "To whom do you beautifully belong?" stems from James' play *High Bid* (1907), which deals with the ownership of a country house. As a matter of fact, the description of the Feddens' mansion is very similar to the scenographic setting described in the first act of James' play: "[...] *the fine old stone staircase or oak staircase descending, in full view of the audience, as from a gallery*".¹² Terentowicz-Fotyga relates the American widow, Mrs. Gracedew, in James' play with Hollinghurst's protagonist, given that both of them feel in possession of what they do not own precisely because of their adoration of beauty.¹³ Mrs. Gracedew teaches 'Taste' as a school subject in the U.S. and seems to know more about the house's objects, furniture, tapestry, and rooms than the house's legal owner, the bankrupt aristocrat Captain Yule, and the capitalist who took over his debts, Mr. Prodmore.

Hollinghurst's intertextual use of Jamesian style and aesthetics has been widely discussed in literary criticism about *The Line of Beauty*, and it will be one focal point in my analysis. While most criticism regarding Henry James in Hollinghurst's novel concentrates on the relationship between aestheticism, neoliberalism, and homosexuality, my reading will consider the role of Hollinghurst's re-working of the Jamesian center of consciousness. Hannah, for instance, associates the novel's Jamesian style with the 1980s' exaggerated consumerism and argues that it also functions as a means to create moments of concealment and revelation that are closely related to Nick's homosexuality. As an aesthete, Nick occupies the position of "the refined observer" who is welcomed "in the heteronormative house of capitalist acquisition so long as the evidence of his sexuality is reduced to pure aesthetic taste [and the] bodily signs of his gayness remain private, invisible".¹⁴ Thus, Hollinghurst's novel evinces gay subjects' status of 'guest' in England, very well represented by the heteronormative Fedden household which tolerates Nick's homosexuality as long as it does not interfere with Gerald's political image. For Hannah, the employment of the Jamesian technique of repression and exposure goes hand in hand "with the concealments and exposures forced upon the homosexual subject in 1980s Britain",¹⁵ as the novel clearly shows

10 Hogarth, *The Analysis of Beauty*, p. 94.

11 Hannah, "The Public Life, The Private Stage: Henry James in Recent Fiction", p. 89.

12 James, *High Bid*, p. 1. Last accessed in November 2016 at <http://www.henryjames.org.uk/highbid/home.htm>. Emphasis in original.

13 Terentowicz-Fotyga, *Dreams, Nightmares and Empty Signifiers*, p. 68.

14 Hannah, "The Public Life, The Private Stage: Henry James in Recent Fiction", p. 85.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 86.

how public spaces are bound to exist under the scrutiny of heteronormative surveillance.

It is no coincidence that Nick is scapegoated by the Feddens at the end of the novel and is asked to leave their home. As Gerald's political career falls to pieces after a corruption scandal and an affair with his secretary, tabloids take advantage of the turmoil to add fuel to the fire by publishing a photo of Nick and Wani Ouradi, the son of a Tory Lebanese multimillionaire who has AIDS. Despite the scandals involving Gerald's name, as well as the already established crisis of the Thatcher government in 1987, it is Nick who is blamed for the family's public humiliation. It is at the end of the novel that we perceive "the fragility of the aesthete's detachment"¹⁶ that Nick seems to pursue throughout the novel, which the critic Andrew Eastham associates with irony. Eastham argues that, like Henry James, Hollinghurst's portrayal of Aestheticism is deeply rooted in irony "as an aesthetic idea, as a mode of performance and as an emerging relationship with arts and politics".¹⁷ For Eastham, irony in the novel functions as an artifact that conveys the idea of the autonomy and distinction of art. What he calls 'inoperative irony' "suggests icy indifference, duplicity and detachment"¹⁸ and is present in some of James' aesthete characters such as Gilbert Osmond in *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) and Gabriel Nash in *The Tragic Muse* (1891).

In Hollinghurst's novel, Eastham regards the workings of the aesthete's point of view as both defining and limiting, since, on the one hand, Nick's position of detachment often functions as a means to criticize the conservative environment in which he circulates and, on the other hand, because he aspires to belong to this exclusionary and traditional circle. Although Nick is highly enchanted by the world of the Feddens, he tries to keep himself ironically detached, partly because of "an aspiration to a typically fin de siècle position of aesthetic spectatorship, and partly to conceal his gay identity".¹⁹ This strategy works until the last part of the novel, "The End of the Street", which is set in 1987 and in which a series of Jamesian unmaskings occur,²⁰ such as the Feddens scapegoating Nick for Gerald's scandals. Eastham contends that the inoperative irony that Nick attempts to sustain throughout the novel functions as a critique of Conservative culture, even though he recognizes it as extremely "vulnerable to [Conservatism's] violent powers of containment and exclusion".²¹ In other words, it is true that Nick's detachment from the world around him operates as a way to criticize political conservatism and homophobia. However, in doing whatever he can to belong to this specific social circle, Nick's ironic detachment fails once the practices of social oppression and segregation are inflected upon him: this takes place as he is outed in the press as a gay man who has a relationship with Wani, who has AIDS.

16 *Ibid.*

17 Eastham, "Inoperative Ironies: Jamesian Aestheticism and Post-Modern Culture in Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty*", p. 509.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 511.

19 *Ibid.*, pp. 511–512.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 523.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 524.

Eastham points out two problems in the novel regarding irony and aestheticism in the 1980s. The first is concerned with the aesthete's relationship with aristocracy, given that he claims a position of detachment only to end up performing attitudes very similar to the object from which he seeks independency. This is precisely the case with Nick's character in the novel. While he desires to belong to a social class that is not his own and exhibits his aesthetic taste and education as tokens to entry this social and political realm, he also shows contempt towards upper-class and aristocratic behavior and self-entitlement. The second problem that Eastham comments on is the aesthete's location within the contradictions of postmodernism, as he displays complete detachment from the appreciation of contemporary culture, but he cannot find himself liberated from capital, consumption, and the commodification of culture.²² In his self-perception, Nick thinks that he deserves to belong to the elite because he has the taste, education, and intellectual means to be one of them. However, as it becomes clearer in the second part of the novel, Nick's aesthetic taste is deeply influenced by postmodernist and neoliberal culture, as we see in the increasing exaggeration in his cocaine habit, in his relationship with money, and in his appreciation of 'high culture' and its *pastiche* versions, as is the case with Nick and Wani's idea to film James' *The Spoils of Poynton*.

What we see in both Hannah's and Eastham's Jamesian readings of the novel is the ways in which Victorian culture is very much present in the 1980s, not just as a reminiscence of the past, but as an ideological *Zeitgeist* that was revived to boost nationalism by evoking the imperialist past. As Hall and Jacques have rightly put it, Thatcherism aimed to go beyond winning elections, its project was "to reverse the whole postwar [social democratic] drift of British society [...] and to force-march the society, vigorously into the past".²³ In asserting the rules of a 'free market' as a primary force in governmental decisions, Hall and Jacques assert that Thatcherism consolidated "'Victorian' social values – patriarchalism, racism and imperialist nostalgia".²⁴ If Hollinghurst's novel captures concerns with "[b]eauty and ugliness, desire, avarice, and mortality" as essential aspects of the 1980s so well, it is something he certainly owes to Henry James, Rivkin argues, with respect to "the vision that he relies on [...] to make [that] legible".²⁵ Hollinghurst's choice of Henry James as the main source for intertextual dialogue cannot just be read as a stylistic one. Rather, it can be read in terms of a preoccupation with Thatcherism's socio-economic effects, the power of the elites in the 1980s, and the obsession with traditional British values in the heydays of Thatcherism.

In the following section of this chapter, I will discuss Hollinghurst's employment of the Jamesian narrator in his novel, arguing that Nick's function as a center of consciousness shifts in the first, second, and third parts of the novel. While in the first part, the narrator displays the ways in which Nick's conservative and wealthy social

22 *Ibid.*

23 Hall and Jacques, *The Politics of Thatcherism*, p. 11.

24 *Ibid.*

25 Rivkin, "Writing the 1980s with Henry James: David Leavitt's *A Place I've Never Been* and Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty*", p. 291.

environment forms him as a subject who aims to belong to this elite, the protagonist develops into a role of interclass mediator and of confidant in the second part. In the third part, however, Nick's role as a center of consciousness wanes and his position of observer turns into that of an observed character, whose homosexuality and relationship with an HIV-positive man is one of the focuses of media scandal. In the chapter's third section, I will elucidate Hollinghurst's depiction of the domestic sphere in the novel by associating it with neoliberal and Thatcherite ideology in terms of sexual and gender politics. Lastly, the fourth section will deal with the novel's deliberate narration of the AIDS crisis in London by addressing the direct consequences hysterical homophobia and governmental negligence had in the city's gay culture.

Tradition, Ideology, and the Jamesian Narrator

Hollinghurst makes use of national symbols of English culture throughout the novel, such as the country house, the Jamesian thematic scope about Englishness, class and aesthetic taste, and the University of Oxford, for instance, to create a narrative that reflects upon the intricacies of traditional spaces and institutions that form subjects who feel entitled to certain privileges. These institutions and their norms can be related to the ways in which ideology inflects individuals and constitutes their own subjective positions in society, as Althusser elucidates in his renowned essay about ideology and subjectivity. He argues that a system of production and the state can only uphold their functioning through social relations among individuals, which will reproduce the mechanisms of the state apparatus.²⁶ In capitalist societies, he explains, ideology is reproduced within families, schools, trade unions, religion, and politics, for instance. In these institutions, individuals learn language, manners, and rules that will dictate their position in society and, in so doing, they will inculcate and naturalize their roles in the system of production.²⁷

For Althusser, ideology interpellates individuals and the recognition of this interpellation entails the transformation of individuals into subjects. It is ideology that binds individuals in society, since it creates a reality in which subjects are bound to perform and to repeat relations of exploitation and domination that are culturally and socially constructed as a means to warrant the perpetuation of the system itself. As I will elucidate in the pages that follow, it is possible to read these moments of interpellation and subject formation in Nick's role as a center of consciousness, particularly in the first part of the novel, in which the privileged and conservative environments in which Nick circulates allow him to enter a world of wealth and beauty to which he does not belong by birth, but which he is able to access through the incorporation and repetition of manners, gestures, and norms that establish these spaces' social prestige. Althusser's reflections on the relationship between subject and ideology make the case for the ways in which institutions function as means to impose ideology upon

26 Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses", pp. 104; 115.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 118.

individuals and how individuals are ingrained in the ideological reproduction of these institutions.

In contrast to *The Swimming-Pool Library*, in which we are given an account of an already formed neoliberal subject and his life of privileges, *The Line of Beauty* shows an extradiegetic narrator who portrays moments of ideological inflection upon the protagonist, Nick Guest. The first part of the novel, entitled “The Love-Chord” is set in 1983 and depicts Nick’s efforts to belong to that elite environment by mimicking the gestures, manners, and language of the people who surround him. I will argue that we can read the effects of ideology on Nick through Hollinghurst’s use of the Jamesian center of consciousness, a character who functions as a “central intelligence [...] whose personal vision wholly controls the story; or [appears] in the subsidiary role of choric commentator, *raisonneur*, or confidant, intermittently present in the action”.²⁸ While in the first part of the novel Nick’s role as a center of consciousness functions as a means to capture his efforts to become a member of the elite, in the second part, this role shifts to that of a confidant, a pretentious insider who can negotiate class differences and whose knowledge of family secrets provides a false sense of belonging. In the third part, there is a further change in the role of the narrator as Nick’s function as a center of consciousness diminishes, for he becomes an object of observation and of judgmental evaluation by other characters.

Like other Jamesian centers of consciousness, Nick’s character presents a “reflective nature, sensitivity to impressions, analytical turn of mind, speculative propensities, and, above all, insatiable curiosity and capacity for appreciation”.²⁹ In the first part, Nick’s adaptation to his new life involves learning and repeating class mannerisms and habits as a means to perform them with a certain naturalness in the future. On their way to Hawkeswood, for instance, Rachel Fedden makes vague remarks about the house, and Nick observes her way of talking. He is sitting in the backseat of the car with the Italian housemaid Elena, and he is fascinated by Rachel’s comments: “Nick loved the upper-class economy of her talk, her way of saying nothing, except by hinted shades of agreement and disagreement; he longed to master it himself”.³⁰ Slowly, Nick adopts Rachel’s language, as well as her frequently used comment that characterizes an object or situation as “vulgar and unsafe”. In the following passage, we can read a moment of ideological interpellation that describes transformations in Nick’s self, as he is trying to perform another social class. As they are leaving the Feddens’ mansion, Gerald is irritated because of traffic due to the Notting Hill carnival:

Everywhere there were groups of policemen, to whom [Gerald] nodded and raised his hand authoritatively from the wheel. Nick sitting in the back with Elena, felt foolish and conceited at once. [...] He imagined [Leo] cruising the carnival, and yearned to belong there in the way Leo did. [...] In a side street a team of young black men with high yellow wings and tails like birds of paradise were preparing for the parade. ‘It’s

28 Segal, *The Lucid Reflector*, p. xi.

29 *Ibid.*, p. xii.

30 Hollinghurst, *The Line of Beauty*, p. 47

marvelous what they do,' said Rachel. [...] Nick found himself in fact at one of those unforeseen moments of inner transition, when an old prejudice dissolves into a new desire.³¹

From inside the car, Nick asserts his position, at least publicly, of not belonging to the carnival. However, his position in the back seat with the maid also suggests his own subaltern status in relation to the Feddens. Nick looks outside and thinks of how he wants to belong to the same world as his Caribbean working-class boyfriend, Leo Charles. It is only when Rachel makes her vague and exaggerated remark that "it's marvelous what they do" that the narrator accounts for the transformation of Nick's self. From wishing to belong to the Carnival with Leo, he becomes annoyed with the music outside; from his original prejudice against 'rich snobs', he becomes certain that *performing* and *belonging* to Gerald and Rachel's class is what he really desires.

Therefore, I would argue that Nick's role as a center of consciousness represents the individual aspect of the entrepreneurship culture that is promoted by neoliberal ideology and, subsequently, by Thatcherite ideology. As I have discussed in the first section of this chapter, neoliberalism and Thatcherism promoted notions of free market and of meritocracy whereby individual ambitions overrule social attempts to produce equal opportunities.³² In Nick's delusional understanding, his aesthetic taste and education can potentially grant him a free pass to England's high society. In the first part of the novel, we see the making of a subject of the elite or, at best, the possibility of performing that subject. Apart from his efforts to imitate the upper-class, Nick's potential entrance into this social environment is also yielded by his capacity to withhold information. In the first part, this takes place with the secret he keeps from Rachel and Gerald concerning Catherine's self-harm by cutting herself. In the second part, when he has already established his 'love-chord', he gains more power when he finds out about Gerald's affair with his secretary.

Bersani points out that what one sees and what one knows in the Jamesian novel are crucial aspects in the outline of power relations, as "they diagram the specific mechanism of power when its exercise is limited to verbal exchanges".³³ Whether they are carried out in the form of dialogues or in the narrator's account, the economy of information in the Jamesian novel will determine a character's position of power. Hollinghurst definitely devises distribution of power along these lines, having Nick as an ambitious and yet volatile source of it. Taking care of Catherine is presented as a condition for his ingress into the Feddens' household, a burden that Toby tells him about when they are still at college. Toby's telling Nick about Catherine is "a mark of trust", which discloses "Catherine's ups and downs [as] part of Nick's mythology

31 *Ibid.*, p. 45.

32 Cf. Corner and Harvey, *Enterprise and Heritage*, p. 7. In their introduction, Corner and Harvey quote an interview in the *Daily Express*, published in July 1982, in which Thatcher asserts that Britain needs more "self-starters" and "princes of industry", reinforcing the idea that it is only individual effort that is required to succeed, a principle that, according to Corner and Harvey, "grates against the egalitarian tradition which proposes collective provision for general human advancement".

33 Bersani, "The Subject of Power", p. 10.

of the house".³⁴ Catherine's mental illness is described as intrinsic to the residence's architecture, and the trust that Toby places on Nick foreshadows his role as Catherine's confidant and guardian, thereby giving him responsibility over her mental health.

As Eimers elucidates, experience in Henry James' novels is defined by the encounters the characters have with objects and events, in which "the details a character has been trained to notice or to ignore contribute to the way that object or event affects her consciousness".³⁵ Hence, perception is pivotal for "altering habits of attention and in turn, consciousness",³⁶ meaning that a character develops and transforms according to the accumulation of visual experience. This is how Hollinghurst traces Nick's development throughout the novel: constructing the first part as a collection of new experiences that Nick must learn to master; the second part as Nick's ostensible realization that he does indeed master these experiences and can actually act upon them; and the third as the disclosure of these experiences as pure delusion.

The second part of the novel starts with Nick and Wani in the 'men only' part of what seems to be Hampstead Heath, displaying that Nick is now an insider in London's gay culture and also that he and Wani are in a relationship. The insecurities that the narrator extracts from Nick's behavior in the first part, such as his preoccupation in belonging and his ability to conceal his sexuality where necessary, are partially overcome. In contrast to his relationship with Leo, in which Nick is the inexperienced one, the relationship with Wani places him in the position of teaching. Although both boyfriends are men of color, Wani enjoys the privilege of wealth and it is his money that can, at least to some extent, safeguard Nick's position in their upper-class environment.

They spend most of their time at Ogee, Wani's film production agency, a nineteenth century house located in Kensington. The Victorian house has been converted into a ground-floor flat, and above on the upper floors there is another flat "that was full of eclectic features, lime-wood pediments, coloured glass, surprising apertures, the Gothic bedroom had an Egyptian bathroom". Nick finds the decoration and disposition of the flats rather pretentious, "but inhabited it with his old wistful keenness, as he did the Feddens' house, as a fantasy of prosperity that he could share, and as the habitat of a man he was in love with". He feels comfortable with the world that Wani is giving him, it "was a system of minimized stress, of guaranteed flattery",³⁷ which does not demand much from him. In contrast to the Feddens' home, in which his privileges are limited to his position as a guest, at Wani's firm, where Nick also works, he can share the financial privileges as a partner. "Of course the house was vulgar", he reflects, "as almost everything postmodern was, but he found himself taking a surprising pleasure in it".³⁸

34 Hollinghurst, *The Line of Beauty*, p. 6.

35 Eimers, *The Continuum of Consciousness: Aesthetic Experience and Visual Art in Henry James's Novels*, p. 3.

36 *Ibid.*, pp. 3–4.

37 Hollinghurst, *The Line of Beauty*, p. 199.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 200.

Nick's fluent use of Rachel's idiomatic phrases ("vulgar") expresses his mastering of the upper-class language that can make it *look like* he is one of them. In the second part, Nick is no longer allured by luxurious objects, works of art, or expensive furniture, but he actually has the power to criticize them and point out their inadequate aesthetics, as is the case with Wani's flat. Set in 1986, the second part epitomizes the heydays of the financial market during Thatcher's government, showing actions exceeding all limits: Wani's flat is an overwhelming juxtaposition of styles and materials; Nick and Wani's cocaine drives are insatiable; Catherine's mental health deteriorates, and she becomes more vulnerable; Gerald's power and ambitions grow according to his value in Thatcher's cabinet; the AIDS epidemic breaks out and deaths are often encountered. While Nick's connection to the world outside the upper-class is maintained by his relationship with Leo in the first part, his interaction with lower-classes in the second part are restricted to economic exchanges of service and sex, such as Nick's encounter with a Jamaican dealer in Ladbroke Grove to buy cocaine.³⁹

As a center of consciousness, Nick's role develops into a mediator between classes, who holds all benefits of the upper-classes but who can still have empathy towards working- and middle-classes. At a dinner party at the Feddens', "Nick had noticed already the flickers of discomfort and mimes of broadmindedness as [a black waitress] moved through the room and gave every one what they wanted". She fills Bertrand Ouradi's, Wani's father, glass with Chablis and he calls her a "bloody idiot" because he wants mineral water. It is through Nick's perspective that we see the conflict between the upper- and the working-classes. As Bertrand humiliates the waitress, she "recoiled for just a second at the smart of his tone, at the slap-down of service, and then apologized with steely insincerity". Nick then tries to appease the situation by saying that they could get him water, and Bertrand holds a "contemptuous blink" towards her: "She held her dignity for a moment longer, while Nick's smile pleaded with her not to mind and with him to relent." Unsatisfied with Nick's reaction, Bertrand seeks to "excite a similar outrage" in him by showing him that "he himself was afraid of no one".⁴⁰

Bertrand Ouradi's way of asserting his social position as an up-and-coming elite of color is enacted by the humiliation of a black worker, whose precarious position of serving is deeply subjugated by the guests' indifference. To publicly degrade a waitress in front of the Conservative elite is also to publicly show that he complies and supports mistreating and repressing working-class subjects, even if they are subjects of color like himself, thereby evincing class, educational, and cultural differences within groups of racialized minorities. After all, it is Mr. Ouradi's multimillionaire supermarket chain and his frequent donations to the Conservative party that gives him a free pass in this environment. Nick, conversely, has a much more vulnerable position and, although he apparently has the Feddens' trust, he knows what it feels like to be looked down upon because of his social class and of his sexuality. In the same way that public humiliation of servants functions as a bond between Bertrand and his upper-class counterparts, it is the feeling of oppression and subjugation that create a bond between Nick and

39 Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 231.

40 *Ibid.*, p. 250.

the waitress. Yet, this passage also emphasizes the contradictions and cynicism in Nick's behavior: on the one hand, he feels that he belongs to this social class because of aesthetic taste, education, masculinity, and whiteness; on the other hand, it shows that he is aware of the forms of class conflicts expressed in daily gestures, although he is not necessarily willing to engage in conflict because of them.

As a center of consciousness, Nick's character displays elements of social detachment, which guarantees his position as an observer, but also as a person who can circulate in-between social hierarchies. Like his role as a mediator between Bertrand Ouradi and the waitress, Nick's interaction with the Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher is enabled by his ambiguous social position. At Gerald's and Rachel's 25th Anniversary party, at which the Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher is in attendance, the narrator describes the event through Nick's circulation in the house. He observes the waiters preparing food and drinks in the kitchen, he joins Toby for a line of cocaine, he flirts with Tristão, a young Portuguese waiter who is working at the party and, at a distance, he watches the guests enjoying themselves in the drawing room: Nick sees Gerald shaking hands with Ronald Reagan, looks around for men who are interesting to him sexually, and watches some of the guests greeting the Prime Minister.

While the Feddens and their guests treat Margaret Thatcher with great reverence, making sure they keep a certain distance to assert deference to her higher political position, Nick is the character who can move closer to the Prime Minister because of his social detachment from that environment and, also, because of his role as a center of consciousness. After describing the party through Nick's spatial perspective of an observer, the narrator focalizes on the protagonist to minutely illustrate his approximation to Thatcher. The narrator relates Nick sitting near her and performing a theatrical pose "half-kneeling, on the sofa's edge, like someone proposing in a play" to assume a narrative position in which we, the readers, are brought face to face with the Prime Minister:

He gazed delightedly at the Prime Minister's face, at her whole head, beaked and crowned, which he saw was a fine if improbable fusion of the Vorticist and the Baroque. She smiled back with a certain animal quickness, a bright blue challenge. There was the soft glare of the flash – twice – three times – a gleaming sense of occasion, the gleam floating in the eye as a blot of shadow, his heart running fast with no particular need of courage as he grinned and said, 'Prime Minister, would you like to dance?'

'You know, I'd like that *very much*', said the PM, in her chest tones, the contralto of conviction. Around her the men sniggered and recoiled at an audacity that had been beyond them. Nick heard the whole episode already accruing its commentary, its history, as he went out with her among twitches of surprise [...]. He himself smiled down at an angle, ignoring them all, intimately held in what the PM was saying and the brilliant boldness of his replies.⁴¹

As Duff and Johnson have noticed, Thatcher's caricature in this passage resembles her puppet character in *The Spitting Image*, whereby the puppet presents a queer body

41 *Ibid.*, pp. 383–384.

whose masculine clothes and gestures are contrasted with feminine make up, hair, and voice.⁴² Duff argues that Hollinghurst's portrayal of Thatcher not only speaks to her free-market and neoliberal policies, but also to the ways in which "her free-floating gendered identity troubled traditionally male gendered roles".⁴³ The flashes of the camera register the moment in which Nick, taking advantage of his detachment, makes all other men in the room envious for having got closer to the Iron Lady than any of them had dared.

It is Nick who notices, before asking her to dance, the way the men at the party fawn over the Prime Minister, a scene which he describes as "heterosexual queenery".⁴⁴ While his status as an aesthete affords him a distance from his surroundings, a distance that is reinforced by his position as a center of consciousness, the other characters' actions and gestures are under meticulous surveillance, since most of them have an interest in partaking in Thatcher's government or have ambitions in the realm of politics. If the young men at the party aspire prominent positions in the Conservative Party, the older men, such as Gerald himself, are concerned with making a good impression on Thatcher in order to be in the highest ranks of her government. In their turn, the women who are not part of the political realm must show their utmost respect to the Prime Minister in order to encourage their husbands' political success. In contrast to Nick's character, who has no interest whatsoever in pursuing a career in politics, all of the other characters' vested interests hamper their approximation to Thatcher.

It is Nick's character who can transition among the different social classes and be part of the hetero and homosexual groups of the party, thereby creating a dispute with Gerald himself, in fact, who becomes extremely envious of Nick's approach. In contrast to Nick's dislocation in the upper- and aristocratic classes and his struggle to become part of these groups in the first part of the novel, in the second part Nick's sense of belonging, his apparent successful detachment, and the secrets that he holds are the features that sustain his role as center of consciousness. In the third part, however, Hollinghurst's employment of the Jamesian center of consciousness is less refined, as the narrator is more explicit in his accounts and does not devise Nick exclusively as a source of reflections or transformations. In the third part, the narrator is more omniscient than in the other parts, keeping a wider distance from Nick to recount the disintegration of beauty and of Thatcherite politics. Entitled "The End of the Street", the last part begins with the 1987 elections and anticipates the downfall of the Thatcher government with the escalation of the financial crisis and the rise in unemployment. Apart from these factors, the novel associates Thatcher's political collapse with Gerald's corruption and sex scandals and also with the AIDS crisis, since disintegration and decay are also conveyed through Leo and Wani dying of AIDS, evincing the tragic consequences of the epidemic by the controversial deaths of two men of color.

42 Duff, *Contemporary British Literature and Urban Space: After Thatcher*, p. 131; Johnson, *Alan Hollinghurst and the Vitality of Influence*, p. 115.

43 Duff, *Contemporary British Literature and Urban Space: After Thatcher*, p. 151.

44 Hollinghurst, *The Line of Beauty*, p. 382.

The first page of the third part begins with Nick voting, and the narrator provides the character's opinion about the elections: "[v]oting always gave him a heightened sense of irresponsibility. [...] His pencil twitched above the Labour and Alliance candidates, and then he made his cross very frowningly for the Green man. He knew the Conservatives were bound to get back in".⁴⁵ It is interesting to notice that Nick does not vote for the Tories, although he has continuous contact with them and apparently does not object to their political stances and opinions. Instead, he chooses to vote for the candidate that he thinks has no chances of winning the elections, which points to Nick's own cynicism concerning political participation.

In the third part, the narrator gives us less information about Nick's consciousness, although he is still a leading intelligence in the novel. This shift in narration can be directly linked to Nick's finding out that Leo has died of AIDS and in relation to his increasing fear of taking an HIV test. After meeting Rosemary, Leo's sister, and her girlfriend, Nick looks around the flat where Wani's film production agency operates; "in the remorseless glare of the news, [...] the flat looked even more tawdry and pretentious".⁴⁶ The news of Leo's death makes him think of the time he has with Wani and, as if the expensive objects, furniture, and decoration in the flat were more important than his current partner; Nick directs his anger and fear of loss towards objects and Wani's lack of taste:

The pelmets and mirrors, the spotlights and blinds, seemed rich in criticism. It was what you did if you had millions but no particular taste: you made your private space like a swanky hotel; just as such hotels flattered their customers by being vulgar simulacra of lavish private homes.⁴⁷

Nick's criticism of the flat's kitsch decoration and of Wani's excessive showing-off places the latter's death as a secondary aspect in their relationship. His outrage with the details in the environment indicates the problem he has with the necessity of flaunting wealth, but not being able to see the essence of art or even to understand aesthetic taste, as Nick does. Moreover, it points to the spectacularization of the private within the analogy of hotel rooms functioning as a 'vulgar' spectacle of the domestic. Nick tries writing a letter to Leo's mother and "saw himself, in six months' time perhaps, sitting down to write a similar letter to the denizens of Lowndes Square",⁴⁸ where the Ouradis live. He wants to tell Catherine about Leo, but she is too passed out from the high dosage of lithium that her psychiatrist has prescribed. He even considers talking to Gerald about it, but quickly rejects the idea, since "he knew he wouldn't get his attention, it was the wrong moment, the wrong week, and actually the wrong death".⁴⁹ It is the wrong death because Leo is a working-class, black, and gay man, exactly the citizen who is completely disavowed by both Thatcher's policies and ideology.

45 *Ibid.*, p. 394.

46 *Ibid.*, p. 409.

47 *Ibid.*

48 *Ibid.*, p. 411.

49 *Ibid.*, p. 414.

Nick's role as a center of consciousness weakens and becomes restricted in the process of acknowledging the possibility of death and the unlikeliness of the future, given that his critical input and clever perceptions about his conservative environment are impaired by the losses that he must endure; it is also because he becomes a target of public surveillance, as Gerald's scandals are turned into a media spectacle. If in the first and second parts it is Nick's capacity of distinguishing subtle details in gestures, relationships, and conversations that grants him power as a critical all-seeing eye, in the third part he becomes fully aware that these gazes have been analyzing him the entire time. As he arrives at the Feddens' in Kensington Gardens in the first part of the novel, Nick's arrogance and desire to belong slowly efface the fact that he is, in fact, an 'enemy within', someone from a lower class, with a deviant sexuality, whose trust is only valuable if it can be used according to the family's interests. Later, in 1987, as Nick arrives at the Feddens' mansion, there are dozens of journalists at the door who take photos of him, even though they do not actually know who he is. These pictures are later used to expose Nick and Wani's relationship, as the press finds out that the Feddens' guest is gay and is dating the son of a Tory multimillionaire, someone who is also dying of AIDS.

As I will show in the following section of this chapter, Nick's role as a center of consciousness and his circulation in different homes and in the city suggest problematic separations of public (domestic) and private (city) spheres. The emphasis on domestic spheres is strongly associated with the political realm of the Tories and with neoliberalism in the novel, as well as with the clear-cut division between the roles played by women and men. While the domestic spaces in the novel are represented as spaces that display male political power, as has been shown with Thatcher's appearance at the Feddens' 25th anniversary, they are also depicted as spaces of female subordination and objectification. As Wendy Brown has rightly explained, neoliberalism has intensified female subordination in society by reinforcing their position as caregivers at home, schools, communities, and neighborhoods, and by having them "occupy their old place as unacknowledged props and supplements to masculinist liberal subjects".⁵⁰ This is precisely the role of women in Hollinghurst's portrayal of domestic spheres as a space that enables political power and social ascension.

In *The Line of Beauty*, the construction of domesticity is deeply imbued with Thatcherite neoliberal ideology and policies that allow men to thrive in socio-economic and political power and women to remain in the position of 'props' who have the function of supporting their husbands. For Brown, neoliberal principles of government, which are based in the dismantling of social welfare, privatization of public goods, and the encouragement of the self-sufficient individual who does not depend on anyone but himself, aggravate women's position in society. This is due to the fact that, since individuals cannot count on anyone apart from themselves and their families, women become the site of responsibility in providing care and affective support for their families.⁵¹ In this sense, Brown contends that, while the *homo oeconomicus* is the human capital, who is completely autonomous and independent

50 Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, p. 105.

51 Cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 104–107.

from the state and who is the entrepreneur of himself, the woman, in aligning herself with this principle, comes to be the *femina domestica*: they are the caregivers who “disproportionately remain the invisible infrastructure for all developing, mature and worn-out human capital – children, adults, disabled and elderly”.⁵²

In the employment of the Jamesian center of consciousness, Hollinghurst explores the division between private and public by, on the one hand, offering panoramic accounts of the environments in which Nick circulates and, on the other hand, by focusing on Nick’s consciousness, reflections, and his role as a figure of mediation. Considering Bersani’s argument that literature should “be read as a display of power”, as an “instructive model of that play of complicity and resistance which characterizes the innumerable local confrontations of power in human life”,⁵³ the narrator in *The Line of Beauty* outlines such confrontations by evincing relationship between the individual and his environment, which are at times conflictive, and by bringing out mechanisms that promote inclusion and exclusion. In doing so, the narrator has a central function in mapping out the relations of power that are at stake, which are certainly based on historical relations acted out during 1980s Britain. It is through the narrator’s focalization on Nick’s consciousness and reflections that we can access the relations of power in the novel and its workings on a subject, displaying the Janus-faced aspects of wealth, power, and beauty.

The Public Stage of Domesticity

In the first part of the novel, wealth is construed according to an aesthetic layer of beauty, which makes up a gilt of gold that disintegrates and degenerates throughout the narrative. The narrator stabilizes beauty as a natural by-product of wealth. This beauty, however, is deconstructed and it becomes possible to perceive its obscure essence that pertains to the habits of excess and greed over time. After the crisis in which Catherine tries to harm herself, she talks to Nick about the feeling of depression by comparing it to a Daimler that stopped on the other side of the street to drop off a wealthy man:

‘It’s when everything goes black and glittering.’ [...] The yellow of the early street lights was reflected in its roof, and as it pulled away reflections streamed and glittered in its dark curved sides and windows.

‘It sounds almost beautiful.’

‘It is beautiful in a sense. But that isn’t the point.’

Nick felt he had been given an explanation which he was too stupid, or unimaginative, to follow. [...]

52 *Ibid.*, p. 105.

53 Bersani, “The Subject of Power”, p. 6.

'Well, it's poisonous, you see. It's glittering but it's deadly at the same time. It doesn't want you to survive it. [...]'⁵⁴

Catherine's description of her mental illness departs from an aestheticized portrayal of an expensive car. The image that she creates is that of something beautiful and valuable, but that is closely associated with death, depression, and to a poisonous essence that is intrinsic to beauty. Catherine's character is developed as an emotionally fragile, at times frivolous, young woman and it is exactly her inclination to madness that conveys a distorted idea that she is untrustworthy and unreliable. Instead, her opinions and comments are generally very accurate and clever, especially when they are directed at the family's *status quo* and their conservatism. Being the black sheep, Catherine tends to date men from lower social classes who somehow defy the family's traditional environment. In the Feddens' household, her relationship with Nick is telling of their vulnerable positions, although she holds the power of wealth and heritage to protect her, while Nick depends exclusively on his attempt to belong to a wealthy family and social circle.

Catherine is the victim of a silent violence that comes directly from her family. As we see at the end of the novel, she is completely sedated by the increasing amount of lithium that she takes. Nick is the one who notices the brutal differences in Catherine's behavior, finding it difficult to maintain a close relationship, since "[i]t was hard work living with someone so helpless and negative, and much worse if you'd known them critical and funny".⁵⁵ Similarly to the way in which Nick's relationship with the Feddens' deteriorates in the last part because of his sexuality, so does Catherine's capacity of perception and the state of her mental health.

The last part of the novel can be read in tandem with the downfall of the Thatcherite government, since there was a collapse in the financial market, a high rate of unemployment, and high inflation in 1987, which compromised Thatcher's political leadership. In the narrative, this breakdown is not only represented in terms of Gerald's political scandals and of the aesthetic deterioration of beauty, but also in terms of Catherine's fragile mental health and by both Nick's and Wani's exposure to public humiliation in the press. These allegories, expressed by psychological breakdown and by hysterical homophobia, can be interpreted in relation to the consequences triggered by Thatcher's dismantling of the welfare state and to her infamous negligence of the AIDS epidemic in the UK. Hollinghurst's portrayal of the effects of Thatcherism on a personal and individual level is devised in parallel with representations of domesticity, as Hollinghurst emphasizes the violence within the familial sphere and how the state shows double standards in dealing with families and homes from different social and ethnic backgrounds.

The representations of working, middle- and upper-class segments of the 1980s, their spatial and aesthetic separations, epitomize the relationship that these groups maintain with urban space in the 1980s. Leo's and Wani's families are the counterpoints for immigration double standards, in which Leo's family is kept in the subal-

54 Hollinghurst, *The Line of Beauty*, p. 17.

55 *Ibid.*, p. 412.

tern position of the working-class, the 'bad immigrant', as it were, who struggles to survive in London. The Ouradis, conversely, correspond to the image of 'successful' immigration that unites the dogma of entrepreneurship and wealth in a way that their ethnicity becomes obfuscated by their money. As Duff has rightly noted, Wani is able to "become part of the Conservative upper-classes in a way that Nick never can"⁵⁶ due to his family's wealth and their close support for the Conservative Party. In 1987, when the Tories are struggling with an economic crisis, high unemployment, and Gerald's corruption and personal scandals, it is Wani's father who makes a 500-thousand-pound donation to the party.⁵⁷ This is obviously not the first donation from the Ouradis, but this is the first time in the book in which the amount of money donated is made explicit.

In Hollinghurst's novel, describing the characters' homes in detail could be read as a means of portraying the material and cultural capital of each group and the ways in which Thatcherite neoliberal politics interfere with their lives. If the Ouradis', the Feddens', and Lord Kessler's homes recount affluence and a high volume of consumption, then the Charles' and the Guests' lifestyles are represented in modesty and subservience. They eat dinner at 5:45 pm at the Charles', which for Nick seems like "some absurd social reflex, the useful shock of class difference, a childish worry perhaps [...] all combined in a mood of interesting alienation".⁵⁸ He feels alienated within his position at the Charles', and at the same time he feels that he belongs to another social class that lives in Kensington Gardens. In a visit to Barwick for Gerald's campaign in 1986, Nick takes him to his parents' house for a drink, feeling "ashamed of the smallness of the drinks", and observing the ways in which "[h]is parents looked at Gerald proudly but nervously. They were so small and neat, almost childlike, and Gerald was so glowing and sprawling and larger than local life".⁵⁹ In Nick's interaction with members from middle- and working-classes, he begins to feel superior, especially in the second part when his role as center of consciousness functions as an interclass mediator.

The novel's domestic spatial divisions are not only related to clear-cut divisions of social class and ethnicity, but also to the realms of gender and sexuality. We notice that men are fundamental characters for these upper-class homes, as they often use their domestic realms to stage their public interests, which are very much attuned to politics. For instance, Catherine gives the perfect description of Toby's birthday party at Hawkeswood, calling it a "party-conference",⁶⁰ since Gerald invites ministers and politicians to celebrate with his family. Hollinghurst's depiction of this party, set in the first part of the novel, recalls a series of Victorian cultural stereotypes regarding gender and sexuality that are adapted to fit 1980s politics. At the party, the narrator describes men and women socializing separately, the men being associated with political ascension and the women as objects who uphold their husband's respectability as

56 Duff, *Contemporary British Literature and Urban Space: After Thatcher*, p. 134.

57 Hollinghurst, *The Line of Beauty*, p. 477.

58 *Ibid.*, p. 157.

59 *Ibid.*, p. 277.

60 *Ibid.*, p. 59.

'family men', in addition to asserting the men's heterosexuality in the public sphere. Paul Tompkins, one of Nick's and Toby's contemporaries at Oxford who aspires to a career in politics, compares the women's beauty to the Tories' landslide victory in the 1983 elections: for Paul, in the same way that women overlooked their husband's flaws and exhibited themselves prettier than before, the Conservative Party managed to exceed the negative expectations towards Thatcher's first government (1979–1983); if there had been doubts in "the first time round [they] have now been completely discounted".⁶¹ His explanation leads to a direct relationship between Tory men in power, their potential irresponsibility and, conversely, their success: "The men did something naughty, and got away with it, and not only did they get away with it but they've been asked to do it again, with a huge majority. That's so much the mood in Whitehall – the economy's in ruins, no one's got a job, and they just don't care, it's bliss."⁶²

Like Rachel's apparent acceptance of Gerald's affair, there is a general consent to the population's decrease of welfare and a complete dismissal of unemployment. The narrator does not recount the will and power of those women, but he does bring out just how many of the men in that specific environment think of their female friends, colleagues, or companions by reducing them to passive, uncritical, and beautiful female objects that serve as accessories to their husbands. The country house, as Terentowicz-Fotyga explains, is a commonly used setting for representation of social manners, for "it represents a traditional structure of relations organized hierarchically and according to strict rules of social conduct".⁶³ The social hierarchy is clearly outlined at Toby's 'party-conference', which takes place in Lord Kessler's country house Hawkeswood, separating servants from guests, women from men and, latently, hetero from homosexuals.

Apart from being depicted as ornaments for the men, the women at Toby's party also function as objects that deflect the possibility of homosexuality among them. Where women must perform submissiveness and passive beauty, the men must do whatever they can to assert their heterosexuality. Paul and Nick are misleadingly described as the only gay men at the party and, at this point, we are led to think that Wani is actually straight, since he has just got engaged to Martine. In his turn, Toby is presented as an unattainable sexual object and, since the narrator focalizes on Nick and on his interaction with Paul, we are given the impression that there is a possibility that Toby is also gay. As if reminded by the possibility of being directly linked with Nick's homosexuality, Paul wants to ensure that he does not "become Nick's partner for the night on the strength of that chance connection" of being gay. He makes sure to hop on "the great heterosexual express pulling out from the platform", which is led by the exclusive Home Secretary and constituted mainly of Oxford graduates.⁶⁴ At Hawkeswood, homosexuality is only narrated in the backstage of the party, in Paul's flirting with Tristão, the Portuguese waiter, or by Nick's fantasies with Leo, and by speculations about Lord Kessler's sexuality. At the party, the sexual topography hinges

61 *Ibid.*, p. 62.

62 *Ibid.*

63 Terentowicz-Fotyga, *Dreams, Nightmares and Empty Signifiers*, p. 38.

64 Hollinghurst, *The Line of Beauty*, p. 65.

upon the gay characters' ability to conceal their sexuality whenever necessary, and to disclose it when there is potential to find sex partners. In this constellation, women are portrayed as objects with whom the men only interact whenever extremely necessary:

The boys, most of them Nick's Oxford contemporaries, all in their black and white, glanced across at politicians and people on the telly, and caught a glimpse of themselves as high-achieving adults too – they had that canny glint of self-discovery that comes with putting on a disguise. They didn't mingle unnecessarily with the girls. It was almost as if the High Victorian codes of the house, with its smoking room and bachelor's wing, still guided and restrained them. But the girls, in a shimmer of velvet and silk, and brilliantly made up, like smaller children who had raided their mothers' dressing tables, had new power and authority too. As the sunlight lowered it grew more searching and theatrical, and cast intriguing shadows.⁶⁵

Apart from the spatial separation between girls and boys in this passage, the notion of disguise that is constructed conveys the young men's idea of self-importance and their projection of a successful future. Moreover, it can also be read as the straight mask they must put on in order to network with their peers. Wani's fiancée, Martine, and Toby's girlfriend and daughter of the MP Maurice Tipper, Sophie Tipper, are all presented as beautiful artifices that deflect the possibility of Wani's and Toby's homosexuality. Paul knows about Nick's crush on Toby and advises him to wait because "they're all tarts, these boys, they've all got a price", so if Nick can find Toby at two in the morning, "when he's had a bottle of brandy", Nick will "be able to do what [he] want[s] with him".⁶⁶ The boys' policy of only interacting with the girls in case of necessity suggests that they are in control of their relationship with them, not the other way around.

The narrator mocks the 'High Victorian codes' that dictate the rules of behavior by pointing out the ways in which they contradictorily constrict and enable the male guests' participation in the party, particularly in masculine spaces, such as the smoking room. In an attempt to grant the girls a small dose of power and agency, the narrator ironically describes them according to their beauty, prompted by their clothes, and their childlike manners as some kind of powerful achievement. The image of young women, who look like children and raid their mothers' make up and beauty items, infers a violent appropriation of their mothers' social (and secondary) position. However, their fantasy of replacing their mothers' roles as instrumental decoration – while the boys aim to achieve higher positions in politics or finance – is somehow attributed to attaining new roles of power and authority.

Hollinghurst's representations of women in the novel, with the exception of Thatcher, bring out the power of men and the privilege that they enjoy in society, placing women in positions of disadvantage. It also questions the premise that a woman in power consequently represents women's rights and feminist politics. As feminist commentators have argued, Thatcherism had great impacts on women's

65 *Ibid.*, p. 64.

66 *Ibid.*

lives, especially among low-income women.⁶⁷ Gardiner notes that the recession and unemployment in the late 1970s and early 1980s had specific effects on the detriment of women, who were often forced into part-time jobs or temporary work, making them more vulnerable in relation to men.⁶⁸ With high rates of unemployment, she explains, women were frequently left to accept their roles as homemakers, distancing themselves from the range of opportunities that emerged in the post-war period and in the 1960s Women's Liberation Movement.⁶⁹

It is clear that most of the upper-class female characters in Hollinghurst's novel are not the main victims of Thatcherism, as they do not depend on any kind of social welfare, and they enjoy the privilege of class, whiteness, and education. As Wilson notes, a woman's social vulnerability under Thatcherite government was enhanced by her (lower) class position, given that Thatcher did not have clear intentions to subordinate women.⁷⁰ Nevertheless, this did not mean that the continuation of conservative politics did not affect women from middle- and upper-classes. According to Wilson, middle- and upper-class women improved their social positions in comparison with working-class women; however, they did not improve their positions in relation to other men in the same class group.⁷¹ While Leo's mother, Mrs. Charles, and his sister Rosemary are presented as hard-working women who struggle to make a living, Rachel and Catherine are women who have high educational levels, but who are kept in the domestic sphere: Rachel as the 'angel in the house' and Catherine as the 'madwoman in the attic'.

It is interesting to notice, however, that it is Catherine who drops a bombshell on her family by exposing Gerald's affair, as she leaks the information to an ex-boyfriend who is a press photographer. In having limited access to the public sphere of politics, and being constantly undermined in the domestic sphere, Catherine has her personal revenge by blowing off Gerald's image as a 'family man' with her own personal access to private information. Gerald's lover, Penny, is the only woman who transitions in the public sphere, at the cost of being depicted as cold and treacherous due to her political ambitions. By contrast, the upper-class men in the novel, who are also insidious and conniving, have the power to transform the domestic (private) sphere into a political (public) stage, in which only heterosexual and sexist behavior is permitted. In this framework, the homosexual men, such as Nick, Wani, and Paul, must all learn to master the public sphere, within domesticity and outside on the streets, in order to conceal their homosexuality whenever it is disadvantageous. After all, the concealment of homosexuality is the price to pay to have a free pass on the prestigious political stage.

67 Cf. Gardiner, "Women, Recession and the Tories" and Segal, "The Heat in the Kitchen" in Hall and Jacques (eds.) *The Politics of Thatcherism*, pp. 188–206 and pp. 207–215; and Wilson "Thatcherism and Women: After Seven Years", pp. 199–235.

68 Gardiner, "Women, Recession and the Tories", in Hall and Jacques (eds.) *The Politics of Thatcherism*, pp. 190–191.

69 *Ibid.*, p. 195.

70 Wilson, "Thatcherism and Women: After Seven Years", p. 223.

71 *Ibid.*, p. 210.

AIDS, Homophobia, and the Politics of Urban Privatization

One of the shared forms of prejudice found throughout *The Line of Beauty* is a thorough portrayal of endemic homophobia that is omnipresent in all of the households mentioned above: from the Charles' council-house flat, going through the Guests' home in Barwick to the Feddens' Kensington Gardens mansion, homophobia is a key oppression that the homosexual characters must confront. As Sedgwick accurately explains, homophobia "is tightly knit into the texture of family, gender, age, class and race relations. Our society could not cease to be homophobic and have its economic and political structures remain unchanged".⁷² Hollinghurst's construction of domestic spheres point to an increasing individualization of communal life in the city, prompted by a growing privatization of London during the Thatcherite period and, particularly, the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s which compromised both gay culture and nightlife in the city. Though there have been several initiatives in favor of gay men,⁷³ Hollinghurst does not account for AIDS activism and supporting movements, but instead focuses on completely depoliticized gay men.

The combination of Jamesian aesthetics and literature with 1980s culture and politics is telling of how homophobic and sexist relations persist throughout time, in spite of cultural shifts marked by the various generations of the feminist movement and by the rise of gay movements in the 1960s and 1970s. This is not to say, of course, that homophobia and sexism are the same as they used to be in the nineteenth century. Rather, Hollinghurst's novel shows that these oppressive relations have taken on new modes of enactment that are historically defined by Thatcherism, its moral conservatism, and AIDS. This juxtaposition of Victorian mores and contemporary sexual moralism can be noticed in Hollinghurst's contextualization of sexual politics in the 1980s within the realm of Thatcherite politics, and also in Hollinghurst's employment of traditional literary techniques, retrieved from Jamesian and Victorian literature primarily.

One aspect of literary representations of homosexuality and homosocial bonds between men is articulated in the strategy of revealing and concealing as part of what Sedgwick characterizes as the "epistemology of the closet", an oppressive regime that consists in a complex interplay between knowledge and ignorance, secrets and silences, public and private, and speakable and unspeakable.⁷⁴ The second element that often appears in the analyses of homosocial bonds, including homosexuality, is the figure of the triangle, generally composed of two men and a woman, whereby the woman functions as an object of exchange and as property.⁷⁵

72 Sedgwick, *Between Men: British Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, p. 3.

73 Cf. Cook, "London, AIDS and the 1980s" in Avery and Graham (eds.) *Sex, Time and Place*; Crimp, "Mourning and Militancy"; Chapter 9 "Protest" in Garfield, *The End of Innocence*.

74 Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet*, pp. 72–5.

75 *Idem*, *Between Men: British Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, pp. 25–27. See also *The Epistemology of the Closet*, pp. 27–36 and chapter 4, in which Sedgwick reads James' *The Beast in the Jungle*.

Hollinghurst devises both elements in the narrative, displaying the various consequences of the regime of the closet in the gay characters' lives, and creating several triangular relationships that are not strictly sexual, but also cemented by desire: Rachel-Gerald-Penny; Nick-Wani-Martine; Gerald-Rachel-Norman Kent (Penny's father, who is also Rachel's friend and her boyfriend before marrying Gerald); Norman Kent-Penny-Gerald; Sophie-Toby-Nick; Nick-Thatcher-Gerald. Thatcher is the only exception among the women characters who is not presented as an object of exchange, although she is definitely an object of desire. As Bertrand Ouradi puts it, all men are "in love with her. She has blue eyes, and she hypnotizes them".⁷⁶

Thatcher's character is alluring because, on the one hand, as Duff explains, Hollinghurst overtly sexualizes the Prime Minister and reduces "her interaction with the men around her to furtive glances across the dance floor";⁷⁷ on the other hand, her character's grandiosity and grotesqueness, as displayed in her visit to the Feddens, metaphorically represents how her ideological project went beyond the period in which she was in power. As we know, the effects of Thatcherism can be felt up to the present day, since it inaugurated a rupture with the welfare state that has only worsened with successive governments (Labour and Tory). The men in the novel are seduced by her image because they are greatly seduced by her power and, if her character resembles an image of monstrosity, then it is certainly attuned to excess, greed, and individualization that were consolidated throughout and after her government. The focus on the family and on individual care, along with welfare cuts and privatization, established a sense "that we must look after *ourselves* and be self-sufficient – we should only look after our own and their properties".⁷⁸

During Thatcher's government, there was significant lobby concerned with sexual mores, homosexuality, sexual education in schools, pornography, and the sex industry. Durham explains that questions of sexual morality were not of great concern in the 1979 campaign, due to high unemployment, recession, and the strikes that Britain was facing.⁷⁹ For Durham, the campaign instead focused on the economic crisis, on showing an 'alternative' for the post-war politics of social welfare, and on the promotion of an 'entrepreneur culture'. He makes a direct link between the 1960s 'permissive society' and its socio-economic context, claiming that "[t]he liberalisation of the sixties had rested on what had seemed to be economic success",⁸⁰ and once the economy started to decline with high inflation and unemployment, conservative sexual discourses gained force in the public sphere.

The political pressure exercised by moral lobby in parliament culminated, according to Durham, in Clause 28 in 1987, which "sought to prevent councils from the 'promotion' of homosexuality or promoting the teaching of its 'acceptability' as a 'pre-

76 Hollinghurst, *The Line of Beauty*, p. 221.

77 Duff, *Contemporary British Literature and Urban Space: After Thatcher*, p. 127.

78 Segal, "The Heat in the Kitchen" in Hall and Jacques (eds.) *The Politics of Thatcherism*, p. 209. Emphasis in original.

79 Durham, *Sex and Politics: The Family and Morality in the Thatcher Years*, p. 14.

80 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

tended family relationship”.⁸¹ In May 1988, Clause 28 became Section 28. While Clause 28 discouraged schools from talking about homosexuality or AIDS in class in 1987, Watney points out that Section 28 was the juridical enactment of the recommendations made by the Department of Education in 1987.⁸² As a law, the measure affected educational and cultural programs in particular that were state-funded and which were committed to social and community activities for AIDS prevention and in support of gays and lesbians.⁸³ Apart from endorsing hysterical homophobia, the law reinforced homophobic violence, often acted out by the police. Watney notes, for instance, that the number of cases of homophobic prosecution in the UK increased considerably, going from 857 in 1985 to 2,022 in 1989.⁸⁴

Although *The Line of Beauty* does not explicitly portray police violence against gay men, as it happens in *The Swimming-Pool Library*, it does indicate two shifts in London that directly influenced gay culture: first, the privatization of the city due to the Right to Buy⁸⁵ and the unequivocal support of real estate speculation; second, Thatcher’s negligence towards the AIDS epidemics and her avowal of hysterical homophobia. Massey has rightly noted that “[i]t was on the basis of finance that London reinvented itself from the 1980s on”, enabling the emergence of “a remoulded social stratum of the super-rich”.⁸⁶ It was under Thatcher’s neoliberal government that London’s financial center thrived in its measures of deregulation and privatization, which had direct effects on the city as a whole with its spiraling social inequality and poverty.

Not only do these shifts contribute to the rise in property value in London, thereby also affecting Soho and its gay venues, but it also paved the way for the selling of council houses, which deprived many people of having stable homes and incremented greater stigmatization of social housing.⁸⁷ The moralist lobby in Thatcher’s government is another aspect that had direct effects on Soho gay culture. As Mort elucidates, the neighborhood experienced various transformations because of the entrepreneurial culture that was installed in the 1980s, culminating in the Local Government Miscellaneous Provisions Act in 1982, which allowed local authorities to control the sex trade in Soho.⁸⁸ The conflation of an efficient moral lobby in Parliament with the rise of property value, hysterical homophobia during the AIDS epidemic, and then Section 28 in 1988 transformed Soho and its diversified gay culture. According to Andersson, these factors were decisive for gay life in London, as new venues opened in other parts of the city, such as Vauxhall in South London and Hoxton in East London, as

81 *Ibid.*, p. 116.

82 Watney, *Imagine Hope: AIDS and Gay Identity*, p. 39.

83 *Ibid.*, p. 38; p. 139.

84 *Ibid.*, p. 39.

85 While the program aimed to sell council flats to the tenants that lived in them, Corner and Harvey contend that the main beneficiaries of the program were hardly the working-class tenants who lived in the flats, but the more affluent buyers who could afford a down payment. The program, they suggest, was an incentive to real estate speculation more than a social program for the working-classes in actuality (cf. Corner and Harvey, *Enterprise and Heritage*, p. 4).

86 Massey, *World City*, p. ix.

87 *Ibid.*, p. 67.

88 Mort, *Cultures of Consumption*, pp. 151–153.

alternative meeting places to the “hygiene aesthetics”⁸⁹ that emerged during the AIDS crisis in Soho.

In *The Line of Beauty*, the alternatives to Soho’s stigmatized gay scene are almost exclusively transposed to domestic spheres, to mansions and country houses in particular, suggesting a general crisis in London’s gay venues because of the epidemic. In focusing on a white and affluent group of gay men, Hollinghurst makes a point about the ways in which gay culture is a forming axis to conservative sectors of English society, but he does not account for the dozens of dissidents from a gay culture who have participated in organizations, prevention campaigns, and who have resisted the conservative measures that were being voted on in parliament. What we see in *The Line of Beauty* is a privileged group of gay men who have been shielded from both marginalization and violence. In spite of their homosexuality, these men have access to education, health, housing, and the city itself, unlike most people in 1980s London.

There is a separation between the outside world, narrated by Nick’s encounters with Leo’s social milieu, and the world of the Feddens, which exists within private domestic spheres, as we follow Nick’s circulation in the first part. Terentowicz-Fotyga argues that Nick lives a double life between “the polite world of the Feddens and the transgressive reality of the London gay scene”,⁹⁰ in which the latter has no influence over the former. This separation suggests a clear-cut separation between private and public in the novel, which I would argue does not exist. In the first part of the novel, Nick is completely unfamiliar with London’s gay scene, and he does not explore it, given that he has only heard of popular places like the Shaftesbury, a gay pub, from his friend Paul Tompkins. Although Nick has already made his homosexuality a public aspect of his life at Oxford, he does not have much sexual experience and he constantly falls in love with supposedly straight men like Toby. It is Leo who introduces him to gay life in London, but we never see them going to a gay club or pub. In fact, their first date takes place in a shabby pub in the working-class area of Notting Hill, an area that Leo himself thinks is dangerous.⁹¹ There are no signs of them exploring London’s gay scene. Instead, we see them exploring parks and the Feddens’ private gardens to have sex.

“Nick guessed Leo’s other dates would have met him in a gay pub, but he had flunked that further challenge”,⁹² so he decides to invite Leo to go back home with him. Since he feels that he cannot introduce him properly, because he is black, working-class, and gay, Nick takes him to the communal gardens shared with the Feddens’ neighbors. They find a hidden spot on the lawn and they have sex; Nick “loved the scandalous idea of what he was doing more perhaps than the actual sensations and the dull very private smell”.⁹³ After sex, Leo pees on the lawn and Nick waits when he sees a man approaching. It is the neighbor, Geoffrey Titchfield. He passes by and rapidly returns to tell them that the garden is private and only available for keyholders.

89 Andersson, “East End Localism and Urban Decay: Shoreditch’s Re-Emerging Gay Scene”, p. 55.

90 Terentowicz-Fotyga, *Dreams, Nightmares and Empty Signifiers*, p. 64.

91 Hollinghurst, *The Line of Beauty*, p. 28.

92 *Ibid.*, p. 32.

93 *Ibid.*, p. 39.

Geoffrey “avoided looking at Leo, who was obviously the cause of this edgy exchange”.⁹⁴ Geoffrey’s attitude completely changes, and he becomes utterly polite after Nick tells the neighbor that he lives with the Feddens.

Nick and Leo’s communal gardens scene epitomizes the ways in which private and public are intertwined in London’s geography. Although the garden is a private space available only to the inhabitants who live in the houses that surround it, it cannot be regarded as a private space with no public function. The private garden also functions as an exclusive public space, which should supposedly be used within the moral codes of that restricted area, given that it is a space that is shared by the neighbors and their guests, at least to a certain extent. In using the garden for sex, Nick expands the use of his domestic space onto a public one and, conversely, he explores the liminal aspect of this space in the same way that he would by cruising in any other London park. However, what grabs the neighbor’s attention as he is passing by is not the possibility of sexual exposure in the garden, but the fact that there is a black man using that garden.

In focalizing on Nick, the narrator contrasts Nick’s and Leo’s illicit use of that ‘semi-private’ space – since they have sex and risk getting caught – with the ordinary usage of it, represented by the neighbor’s sudden appearance. In much the same way that working-class, immigrant, and homosexual populations are, according to Duff, stigmatized as “a different type of citizen, in a way always a guest”⁹⁵ within Thatcherite politics, so too are they perceived in these communal gardens. While it seems that the neighbor does not notice that Nick and Leo are gay, the fact that Leo is black is what gives him away as an unwanted subject in that space. Conversely, the neighbor welcomes Nick to use the garden because he lives with the Feddens and, therefore, deserves the respect of the neighboring houses, since Gerald Fedden is “just the Tory we need. A splendid neighbour”.⁹⁶

Hollinghurst’s focus on gay identity in domestic spheres implicates the return of homosexuality into the closet, as it were, in a time that governmental neglect of AIDS and media coverage of the disease avowed public expressions of homophobia. In the second part of the novel, as Nick spends most of his time with Wani, they explore other spaces in the city, such as a sauna where they go cruising.⁹⁷ This is the only gay space that is depicted, given that other spaces, such as gay pubs and clubs, are mentioned only briefly, but are never thoroughly described. While in the first part, AIDS is only implied in the form of broad symptoms, such as Leo’s friend’s “chesty thing” probably caused by “[t]oo much outdoor sex”⁹⁸; in the second part, it is Catherine who explicitly brings it up as a subject and associates it with both homosexuality and promiscuity.

Rachel gives the family the news that Catherine’s godfather, the actor Pat Grayson, has died while the Feddens are on holiday in Lord Kessler’s mansion in France. Since Pat is gay, and this is not mentioned by the family, Nick feels “the AIDS question rear

94 *Ibid.*, p. 41.

95 Duff, *Contemporary British Literature and Urban Space: After Thatcher*, p. 132.

96 Hollinghurst, *The Line of Beauty*, p. 42.

97 Cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 181–190

98 *Ibid.*, p. 101.

up, sudden and indeflectable, and somehow his responsibility, as the only recognized gay man present. Still there was a communal effort by the rest of the family to veil the matter".⁹⁹ In order to avoid the subject, Rachel completes her news by adding that Pat had caught "some extraordinary bug in the Far East last year. No one knew what it was. It's thought to be some incredibly rare thing. It's just frightfully bad luck".¹⁰⁰ In a burst of rage, Catherine shouts, "He had AIDS! He had anonymous sex", displaying her stereotyped "view of gay sex [which] was both tragic and cartoonlike".¹⁰¹

While Rachel's way of breaking the news evokes Thatcherite negligence towards the epidemic by diminishing its danger as a "bug" from a foreign land, Catherine's remark alludes to a stigmatized image of gay men as promiscuous, hinting at anonymous sex as the ultimate practice for catching the virus. Rachel's comment suggests that a brief mentioning of the disease could automatically acknowledge it as a social problem and somehow publicly condone Pat's homosexuality. To name Pat's illness would also implicitly corroborate the well-known fact that gay men were disproportionately more infected than heterosexual men and, moreover, it would acknowledge the death of so many gay men as lives that are indeed grievable. As we know, gay men's bodies were turned into a site of physical vulnerability or, as Butler notes, as "a community subjected to violence, exposed to its possibility if not its realization".¹⁰² For Rachel, it seems convenient to refer to the cause of Pat's death as a disease rooted in the racialized Other, far away in the East, not as an illness spread among 'her own people'.

Her racist and homophobic remarks foreclose any possibility to reflect on AIDS as a public health issue, as an illness that conferred great vulnerability to homosexual bodies; it is a disease that was dealt with "as a pretext for almost any amount of prejudice, scapegoating, and even celebration [of gay men dying]".¹⁰³ Catherine's outburst, conversely, avows the gay lives that have been lost, but under the moral scrutiny that condemns non-normative sexual practices. As Crimp has elucidated, the process of mourning also regarded the loss of "a culture of sexual possibility: back rooms, tea rooms, bookstores, movie houses, and baths; [...] Sex was everywhere for us and everything we wanted to venture".¹⁰⁴ Crimp draws attention to a spatial aspect of melancholy in the sense that the social opprobrium of gay culture and spaces preclude their public mourning both of the loss of loved ones as well as the loss of a culture that was liberated in certain spaces. Crimp suggests that the AIDS epidemic had controversial effects on gay culture, given that some gay men displayed "abject repudiation of their sexual pasts", even though "the widespread adoption of safe sex practices vouche[d] for [their] ability to work through it"¹⁰⁵.

He draws his argument from Freud's renowned conceptualization of melancholy as the incapability to mourn, in which the person presents "a profoundly painful

99 *Ibid.*, p. 332.

100 *Ibid.*, p. 334.

101 *Ibid.*, p. 335.

102 Butler, *Precarious Life: the Power of Mourning and Violence*, p. 20.

103 Watney, *Imagine Hope: AIDS and Gay Identity*, p. 137.

104 Crimp, "Mourning and Militancy", p. 11.

105 *Ibid.*

dejection [...] a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that [...] culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment".¹⁰⁶ For Freud, the melancholic's ego is shown "as worthless", as the person feels "incapable of any achievement and morally despicable".¹⁰⁷ In exhibiting shame or regret towards their non-normative gay culture, Crimp contends that melancholy for many gay men appeared as an introjection of the "moralizing self-abasement"¹⁰⁸ that was so widely spread in the media and public discourse in general. In the last part of the novel, when AIDS is openly exposed in Wani's weakened health and in Leo's death, Nick displays self-abasement, a lack of willingness, and self-doubt. If in the previous years his conviviality with the Tories had given him a sense of omnipotence, in 1987 this feeling is undermined by his confrontation with AIDS and with the Feddens' and the press's homophobic violence towards him.

Interestingly, Nick's processing of Leo's death is narrated in tandem with the media coverage of the 1987 elections. He tries to imagine himself telling someone about Leo's death and he cannot do it. Instead, he sits down to watch the news, which is announcing another Tory landslide. Nick decides to have whisky instead of a line of coke, as the former "showed more respect for the night, and seemed ready to mediate, for three or four hours, between the demands of grief and current affairs".¹⁰⁹ While Nick sinks into his sadness and grief, Rachel celebrates her husband's and his party's victory. Not being in the same mood as the household, he wants to go out into the gardens, but it is too cold. It is the balcony's view of the gardens that allows him to process Leo's death by remembering the first time he had taken him there, and how he had taken so many other men afterwards: "[s]omething basic and unsocial about it, no giving them a drink or a shower".¹¹⁰ In the impossibility to publicly mourn his former partner, Nick recalls all of the places he had been with him as a private homage to Leo. He remembers a night at the Shaftesbury in which he thinks he had seen Leo,¹¹¹ he walks along Knightsbridge through Albert Gate thinking of the times they had met after Leo left work.¹¹² In this walk, he passes the Clerkenwell Building, Wani's property, which Nick would inherit after his death.

Haschemi Yekani also relates Hollinghurst's representation of melancholy in tandem with spatiality, arguing that he "constructs and aestheticizes these places as belonging to a gay culture of the 1980s that is no more".¹¹³ In writing the novel retrospectively, she explains, Hollinghurst uses "gay melancholy" as "an explicit aesthetic strategy to excavate lost gay lives that have been disavowed by the normative gender

106 Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia", in Fiorini et al. (eds.) *On Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia"*, p. 20.

107 *Ibid.*, p. 22.

108 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

109 Hollinghurst, *The Line of Beauty*, p. 416.

110 *Ibid.*, 422.

111 Cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 423–424.

112 Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 446.

113 Haschemi Yekani, "Gay Melancholy. Lost Spaces in Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty*", in Tönnies and Buschmann (eds.) *Spatial Representations of British Identities*, p. 222.

order”.¹¹⁴ The aesthetic employment of melancholy in the novel functions as a means to re-appropriate the process of mourning by recognizing the gay lives and spaces that have been lost to the AIDS epidemic.¹¹⁵ However, Haschemi Yekani claims that Hollinghurst’s deployment of gay melancholy “risks evoking a nostalgic and at times conservative image of gay culture that privileges a distinctly white perspective”,¹¹⁶ since death and illness are embodied in Wani’s and Leo’s characters in the novel.

Wani, who is depicted as an irresponsible playboy in the first parts of the novel due to his class privilege, becomes a gay man who was commonly represented in the media at the time: his “face, gaunt and blotched had taken on new possibilities of expression – the repertoire of someone not only older but quite different, someone passed unknown in the street, was unexpectedly his”. From Nick’s perspective and thoughts about him, Wani probably would not recognize himself in the mirror anymore; he might have seen himself as “this unbearable stranger mugging back at him. Clearly he couldn’t be held responsible for the latest ironies and startlements of his face, though there were moments when he seemed to exploit them”.¹¹⁷ Hollinghurst’s description of Wani’s deteriorating body is carried out alongside the decline of beauty in the novel, which is associated with wealth and social status. In the heydays of Nick’s life with the Feddens, Nick describes Wani as “the most beautiful man [he’d] ever met”.¹¹⁸ In 1987, however, Wani’s body is publicly perceived with “fear and displeasure, as if [his] presence was no longer good for business”.¹¹⁹

Wani’s disease is not only depicted as physical vulnerability, but also as a body that loses financial value. Thinking of Foucault’s notion of the neoliberal subject as an entrepreneur of himself, once his body decays, it can no longer be used as a body that is productive, profitable, and self-sufficient. Though Wani is still shielded by his family’s fortune, being able to access treatment more easily than working-class gay men, his body, also a racialized body, begins to be seen as destructive and contagious. The projection of death, debilitation, and danger onto black bodies, both Leo’s and Wani’s, is a problematic aspect of the novel, something that has been elucidated by Flannery and by Haschemi Yekani. Flannery writes that “both Nick and Hollinghurst’s novel owe their futurity to the sacrifice of a black man”.¹²⁰ Haschemi Yekani goes further into this analysis by arguing that “the ‘sacrifice’ of both Leo and Wani repeats a form of disavowal that has a distinctly racialized aspect”,¹²¹ which she directly associates with Britain’s colonial past. In perpetuating the futurity of white men and the death

114 *Ibid.*

115 *Ibid.*, p. 230.

116 *Ibid.*

117 Hollinghurst, *The Line of Beauty*, p. 432.

118 *Ibid.*, p. 348.

119 *Ibid.*, p. 431.

120 Flannery, “The Powers of Apostrophes and the Boundaries of Mourning: Henry James, Alan Hollinghurst and Toby Litt”, p. 302.

121 Haschemi Yekani, “Gay Melancholy. Lost Spaces in Alan Hollinghurst’s *The Line of Beauty*”, in Tönnies and Buschmann (eds.) *Spatial Representations of British Identities*, p. 229.

of black bodies, Hollinghurst portrays “a loss that centres somewhat too negligently on a specific aestheticized conception of racialised difference as erotic spectacle”.¹²²

As is the case with *The Swimming-Pool Library*, *The Line of Beauty* emphasizes the viewpoint of privileged, white gay men, in which the choice of narrator is central to the novel’s critical effects, as well as to its limitations. On the one hand, it is Nick’s character that offers the reader critical and ironic comments about his traditional environment; on the other hand, this criticism is only made visible in Nick’s thoughts and not necessarily in his actions, which mostly reproduce the conservative behavior of the social environment in which he circulates. If there are risks in giving voice to white, education, and class privileges, as Haschemi Yekani suggests, then it seems that Hollinghurst confronts them precisely to show that representations of privileged gay identities in a British context have been formed according to cultural, historical, and literary traditions that are indeed elitist, racist, and sexist; this is a topic that I will discuss further in Chapter 8. These traditions are deeply ingrained in institutional and conservative spaces, such as the country house, Oxford, public schools, and the British parliament, spaces that have historically legitimated white, male, upper-class, and heterosexual privileges. While Hollinghurst’s novel certainly gestures towards mourning the homosexual lives that were lost to the epidemic, it seems to suggest that the lives of gay men of color are still excluded from that public mourning process.

122 *Ibid.*, p. 230.

Chapter 7

Out of the Metropolis

Homonormative History and the Country House in *The Stranger's Child*

Introduction

Alan Hollinghurst's *The Stranger's Child* depicts gay life in the suburbs, quite unlike the author's previously described urban scene, often represented in areas such as Bloomsbury, Hyde Park, Soho, and East London, Kensington Gardens, and Notting Hill. What *The Stranger's Child* shares with *The Line of Beauty* is Hollinghurst's choice to write gay culture in wealthy homes. Following his focus on depicting homosexuality within the country house tradition, gay encounters take place in two country houses in *The Stranger's Child*: first, in Two Acres, an emergent upper-middle-class country house in Stanmore, suburban London, and later at Corley Court, an aristocratic Victorian house located in a suburban area of Northwest London. The two houses, Two Acres and Corley Court, are central to the plot's development, not only because they entail spaces that precede post-war gay urban culture, but also because of the ways that narratives about these houses and the people who live in them endure over time.

The novel is divided into five parts that convey accounts of gay life during a significant time span, from 1913 to 2008. As opposed to *The Swimming-Pool Library*, Hollinghurst does not depict gay urban culture through cruising, casual sex, and London clubs. The first three parts of the novel – which take place in 1913, 1926, and in 1967, respectively – are set in the suburbs, namely, in Two Acres, in Corley Court and Church Walk, all suburban areas of Greater London.¹ However, it is in the fourth and fifth parts of the novel, which take place in 1977 and 2008 respectively, that the plot is shifted to central London, marking the ways post-Stonewall gay life mostly took place in the metropolis.

1 In 1967 Corley Court becomes a boarding school and the protagonist Daphne lives with her daughter in Church Walk, where her 70th birthday party takes place.

In *The Stranger's Child*, Hollinghurst shows how gay men wrote and formed English tradition and culture by leaving their marks in literary history. If *The Line of Beauty* concentrated on homosexuality within Thatcherite (Tory) political elite, then Hollinghurst's 2011 novel sheds light on same-sex desire among men in the construction of narratives about canonical literature and its producers. While my previous literary analyses concentrated on the gay urban culture that took place in gay venues and on the streets of London, as in *The Swimming-Pool Library*, and within domestic spaces, as in *The Line of Beauty*, my discussion of *The Stranger's Child* will focus on the space of literature in relation to the country house. The reason for this shift is associated with Hollinghurst's own changes in his work, which comes to locate gay culture within a wider historical and cultural perspective of English literature, as his novels display more elements regarding historiography and metafictionality and articulates them alongside gay history and literature. As the critic Theo Tait points out, *The Stranger's Child* is a work that refutes previous criticism of Hollinghurst's works, which claim that "he's not very interested in women; that there's too much sex; that his writing is too lush; that his characters are not likeable".²

In this novel, the few sex scenes that have been included are dull; the narrative is composed mostly by dialogues and, Hollinghurst introduces his first female protagonist: in 1913, she is sixteen-year-old Daphne Sawle, who becomes Daphne Valance in 1926 and who later becomes Daphne Ralph before, finally, becoming Daphne Jacobs. She is the center of the love triangle between her brother George Sawle and his friend, the poet Cecil Valance, who visits them at Two Acres and who writes the poem that is named after the house and that becomes a classic of War Poetry in English literature. Daphne is drawn to Cecil from the moment he arrives at Two Acres, and she takes every opportunity that she can to be near him.

As we learn from the very first pages of the book, Cecil's life and work are topics that are constantly revisited throughout the novel. In the first part, the omniscient narrator evinces how Cecil's presence at Two Acres is central to the development of the narrative, as his voice "seemed so quickly and decisively to take control of [the Sawles'] garden and their house [...] in its tone there was also something mocking and superior".³ In the first chapter of the book, the narrator focalizes on Daphne's circulation in the house and on her visual perspective; nevertheless, it is Cecil's voice that dominates the narration. She sees Cecil and George standing together in the garden and she approaches them, knowing that they are not aware of her presence: "[s]he knew that Cecil was a guest and too grown-up to play a trick on, though George was surely in her power. But having the power, she couldn't think what to do with it".⁴ Daphne is the one observing the two men, but it is the narrator that indicates the homoerotic affection between them by describing Cecil's hand on George's shoulder,

2 Tait, "The Stranger's Child by Alan Hollinghurst – Review" in *The Guardian*, 17 June 2011. Accessed in November 2016: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/jun/17/strangers-child-alan-hollinghurst-review>.

3 Hollinghurst, *The Stranger's Child*, p. 4.

4 *Ibid.*

them laughing, and how “the curves of their two hats nudged and overlapped”.⁵ By contrast, the narrator’s account of Daphne’s perception of their affection is conveyed as a mundane distraction that triggers Daphne’s idea to play a trick on them. The narrator, though omniscient, produces ambiguous versions of the same scene: one that leads to a homoerotic reading of Cecil’s and George’s relationship and the other which is perceived from the point of view of a naïve girl who plans to surprise her brother and his friend, to whom she also feels very much attracted.

Interestingly, once Cecil realizes that she is there, she loses her power as an observer and becomes the object of his desire, as Cecil gives her attention and flirts with her. Daphne is the center of the triangular relation discussed in the previous chapter, in which the woman functions as the object of desire that veils the possibility of homosexual desire among men. In this constellation, the woman appears as the object that determines both the social and sexual boundaries of desire between two male subjects.⁶ Cecil’s relationship with Daphne deflects his affair with George and the relationship between Cecil and Daphne becomes a historical truth when Cecil’s poem ‘Two Acres’ is written in Daphne’s autograph book, making George jealous in the process of creating the myth of Cecil as the great War Poet who was to marry Daphne Sawle, had he not died in the First World War.

The novel’s central thematic scope is certainly, as many critics have noticed, collective and individual memory, life writing, the interpretation of historical events, and shifts concerning gay culture and identity in an English tradition.⁷ Terentowicz-Fotyga reads the novel with a focus on the mythologization of the country house, arguing that the metafictional aspect of *The Stranger’s Child* draws attention to “the country house as a place and the country house as a locus of ideas, dreams and values”.⁸ In doing so, she contends that Hollinghurst unravels the process of creating the myth of the country house as a signifying image of both England and Englishness.

The use of metafiction as a literary strategy to represent the country house indicates two important aspects of the novel, as Terentowicz-Fotyga suggests. The first is related to the form of the novel itself, whereby Hollinghurst’s emphasis on the process of writing about a specific scene (the encounter in Two Acres in 1913) in different historical periods unveils the very fictionality of the novel as a literary form, exposing literary artifice as a means to represent reality and, thus, exploring the boundaries between reality and fiction. The second aspect pertains to the realm of disseminating the image of the country house as a fictionalized discourse that has gained force as

5 *Ibid.*

6 Cf. Chapter 1 in Sedgwick’s *Between Men: British Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*.

7 Cf. Canning, “The Stranger’s Child, by Alan Hollinghurst” in *The Independent*; Eeckhout, “English Architectural Landscape and Metonymy in Hollinghurst’s *The Stranger’s Child*”; Kunzru, “The Stranger’s Child by Alan Hollinghurst” in *The Guardian*; Lynch, “Review: The Stranger’s Child by Alan Hollinghurst” in *The Independent*; Miller, “The Stranger’s Child by Alan Hollinghurst: Review” in *The Telegraph*; Stokes, “Lunch with the FT: Alan Hollinghurst” in *The Financial Times*; Tayler, “The Rupert Trunk” in *London Review of Books*; Tait, “The Stranger’s Child by Alan Hollinghurst – Review” in *The Guardian*; Terentowicz-Fotyga, *Dreams, Nightmares and Empty Signifiers*, pp. 199–218.

8 Terentowicz-Fotyga, *Dreams, Nightmares and Empty Signifiers*, p. 208.

a social, historical, and cultural image that is intrinsic to the national imaginary and to English literature as a whole.⁹

Hollinghurst uses elements of Victorian realism, the country house novel, and historical fiction to question authority, authenticity, and truthfulness in the narration of facts and of reality by exploring the postmodernist tendency to problematize the gap between reality and fiction, and between historical and fictional discourses. The reader is always challenged in the interpretation of events, questioning their own readings of information that was presented previously, thereby establishing great uncertainty in coming to solid conclusions about the events that took place in the novel. As Terentowicz-Fotyga puts it, “rather than following lives we follow the process of their interpretations or, for that matter, misinterpretation”, since there is no linear development of the plot, but rather a “hermeneutic circling”.¹⁰ This is due to the fact that we are given new interpretations of past events in each part, as well as new characters’ points of view, who were not necessarily present in the first parts, but who also collect the information from interviews or research and offer their own analyses of those events.

Eeckhout elaborates on this aspect of the novel by focusing on the architectural framework Hollinghurst constructs in order to narrate the characters’ lives. *The Stranger’s Child*, he argues, “tells the story of English landscape transformations through the stories of a number of Englishmen whose lives [...] derive a fair share of their meaning from the transformations registered in their surroundings” in a way that the characters’ lives and their spatial surroundings become “inseparable and partly interchangeable”.¹¹ Though somewhat exaggerated, Eeckhout’s affirmation addresses the importance of architecture and landscapes, which function as “synecdochic Englishness”¹² in the sense that their fragmentary representation symbolizes the nation. Eeckhout goes further into the spatial reading of the novel by stating that Hollinghurst queers the country house tradition by undermining “the cultural norm of the biological family”,¹³ since homosexual relationships hinder the heteronormative lineage of kinship and heritage.

Similarly, Terentowicz-Fotyga claims that the “traditional storyline of marriage and primogeniture is promptly undercut by gay plots”, as she insists on the argument that, because most of the male characters are involved in homosexual relationships, there is an inevitable rupture with heteronormative reproduction. I would like to challenge these arguments in my reading by arguing that the novel portrays a contrary motion: it shows that it is the increasing homonormativization of gay culture that upholds the idea of family kinship and heritage. In this sense, Hollinghurst does not necessarily queer the country house novel and its tradition, but actually exposes how this tradition has been used by gay men to publicly assert male homosexuality as a respectable

9 *Ibid.*, p. 173.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 216.

11 Eeckhout, “English Architectural Landscape and Metonymy in Hollinghurst’s *The Stranger’s Child*”, p. 2.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

relationship because of its familial quality. Hollinghurst does, in fact, ironically subvert the grand narrative of the country house novel and of the grand Victorian novel by writing it with postmodernist elements of metafiction, narrative fragmentation, and an unreliable story line that yields more questions and doubts than certainties and truths. Nevertheless, *The Stranger's Child* brings out the misogyny and sexism of gay culture that go hand in hand with the perpetuation of heteronormativity.

This is clearly shown in the development of Hollinghurst's first female protagonist, Daphne. Many critics have celebrated her as a new aspect of Hollinghurst's literary trajectory, but few critics have taken up the task of actually analyzing her role as a female protagonist and, moreover, the ways in which her being a woman influences the courses of the narratives that are written not only about Cecil Valance, the poet, but also about English literary history. Canning claims that "the emphasis on the prominence of women here might be thought misleading"¹⁴ because it is the relationships between men that determine and dominate the book, thereby leaving Daphne's marriages and relations only as a backdrop. Considering Daphne's secondary role, Lynch contends that even though she is the historical embodiment of all narratives regarding the Valance and Sawle families, "the principal excitement in the book is still gayness". For Lynch, the novel's "real hero is homosexuality, which is both transient and transgressive".¹⁵

Lynch's and Canning's readings separate Daphne's social role as a woman and the characters' homosexuality, dismissing how women, such as Daphne herself, have been exchanged as "property for the primary purpose of cementing the bonds of men with men".¹⁶ Their critical analyses of the novel emphasize Hollinghurst's authorial reputation as a gay writer without reflecting on the many intersections that homosexuality has with other social relations that touch upon class, gender, and race. It is true that the book is about homosexuality and its "high-cultural tradition" and that it depicts "changing attitudes to gay people and to biographical disclosure",¹⁷ as Tayler has observed. However, homosexuality in the novel inherently constitutes the limitations for Daphne's character, since she is developed within the function of proving other men's heterosexuality and as an object of desire in the poem written by Cecil.

I will argue that homosexuality is constructed under homonormative relations that speak first and foremost to sexism and misogyny. Following Mattilda's viewpoint that homonormativity is the mirroring of heteronormative culture that aims to access "straight privilege at any cost",¹⁸ I suggest that homonormativity in *The Stranger's Child* is linked to the reduction of women's importance in the intellectual and literary realms

14 Canning, "The Stranger's Child, by Alan Hollinghurst" in *The Independent*. Accessed in November 2016: <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/the-strangers-child-by-alan-hollinghurst-2298468.html>.

15 Lynch, "Review: The Stranger's Child by Alan Hollinghurst" in *The Irish Independent*, 25 June 2011. Accessed in November 2016: <http://www.independent.ie/entertainment/books/review-the-strangers-child-by-alan-hollinghurst-26745833.html>

16 Sedgwick, *In Between Men*, p. 26.

17 Tayler, "The Rupert Trunk", p. 9.

18 Ruiz, "The Violence of Assimilation: An Interview with Mattilda aka Matt Bernstein Sycamore", p. 237.

of both culture and society; this will be elucidated in my analysis of Daphne's role as a female protagonist in the novel. In reinforcing women as objects of exchange and in depicting his protagonist as a woman who is incapable of achieving success in the intellectual and literary realms, I contend that Daphne epitomizes an outdated representation of female authorship. As I will show, although she does become an author, Daphne remains a powerless character that is constantly ridiculed and undermined by her male counterparts, who are able to earn their intellectual recognition within the literary sphere once their works are read and acknowledged by other male critics and authors.¹⁹

From literary muse to an object of exchange between men, Daphne is the great survivor in the novel, for she is the only one who lives up until 2008 to recount the families' histories, even though she is the one who is steadily depicted as an unreliable source of information about the Valances' and the Sawles' literary and life trajectories. In 1926, Lady Valance hosts a 'Cecil Weekend' at Corley to help Sebastian Stokes collect material for his biography about Cecil, and Daphne is harassed into repeating the content of letters exchanged with the poet during the Great War and her role of having inspired 'Two Acres'. Sebastian actually tries to dig into the past and question if the poem had not been written for George, but the family insists on Daphne's figure as an inspiring muse.

Although Daphne plays a central role when talking about Cecil, she is kept exclusively as an inanimate object who is fixed in the poem that was written in her autograph book. As a photographer from the *Sketch* magazine asks for a picture, it is clear whom he wants to make evident in the photo: Sebastian, Dudley Valance (Cecil's brother whom Daphne eventually marries), and Revel Ralph (a painter who becomes Daphne's second husband). In the photograph, "Daphne and the children [are arranged] as decorative extras".²⁰ In the subsequent years, this role is perpetuated throughout her marriages and in the pieces of writing that come out about her husbands. At some point, Daphne writes her own memoir entitled *The Short Gallery*, which is considered feeble by critics. Later in 1977, when she is interviewed by Paul Bryant, another man writing a biography about Cecil, Daphne comments on women's secondary role as authors and she recalls that she "was very much brought up in the understanding that the men all around [her] were the ones who were doing the important things. A lot of them wrote their own memoirs, or, you know, their lives are being written about now".²¹

Daphne's importance as an author and as a source of information is construed very ambiguously, given that some of the main strains of the novel are precisely, in Hollinghurst's words, "how much is unknowable, irresolvable" and "what happens to someone's story, their reputation, and the terribly – in both senses – partial way in

19 This topic will be taken up again in the chapter 8 of this book, in which I discuss the role of male and female literary traditions in gay and lesbian historical fiction.

20 Hollinghurst, *The Stranger's Child*, p. 144.

21 *Ibid.*, pp. 476–477.

which they are remembered".²² If the novel offers more doubts than truths, then we are left with the uncertainties about Daphne's authority precisely because other accounts, including the narrator's, obliterate her potential as an authorial voice. Critics, such as Lynch and Canning, accept her role as secondary because this is the place where the male characters and the narrator have put her and, in so doing, they seem to have fallen into Hollinghurst's trap of subscribing to a partial truth about the way that Daphne is depicted by the biographers: merely as a woman who had many husbands and many affairs.

In my reading, I want to explore the possibilities of Daphne as a protagonist by discussing her role as the embodiment of struggles undergone by female authors amidst the dominating force of male authorship in literature. As a book that tries to give account of the main shifts in gay history from 1913 until 2008, *The Stranger's Child* suggests that, while there have been significant shifts for gay subjects, women still encounter many obstacles as authors and their role is often subjugated to that of their male partners or peers. In my view, this becomes problematic because it overlooks the efforts of feminist literary scholars in incorporating female authors into literary history, in reclaiming a broader and more inclusive understanding of the literary canon and, moreover, in discussing how feminist theory has shifted literature as a whole.²³ Ironically, Hollinghurst has put aside his choice of narrators who tend to capture subjective perspectives, such as the autodiegetic narrator in *The Swimming-Pool Library* and the Jamesian center of consciousness in *The Line of Beauty*, to choose an omniscient narrator that is allegedly universal and who is, therefore, apparently neutral.

As I will elucidate in the following pages, the narrator forges a misleading neutrality in recounting events by focalizing equally, as it were, on each of the protagonists. In spite of their ostensible neutrality, what emerges is precisely the effects of a universality that can only privilege white, middle- or upper-class men, even when these men are homosexual. In this sense, I will argue that the mocking tone that Hollinghurst confers to the narration of a unique literary scene in different periods yields a critical effect: that there is no such thing as an objective interpretation or objective style of writing. They are always shifting according to historical frameworks and to subjective understanding and remembrances of events. Nevertheless, this critique of objectivity does not contemplate his representation of Daphne, even though we are able to detect the narrator's concealment of the protagonist's critical perspectives and agency at times.

The next part of this chapter will examine the uses of metafiction in Hollinghurst's discussion of historiography, which is related mainly to Cecil's life and work, to gay history, and also to literary history in the novel. As I will show, the use of metafiction points to the ways in which the narration of history is never objective and that interpretations of events shift according to specific historical and cultural contexts. In the

22 Stokes, "Lunch with FT: Alan Hollinghurst" in *Financial Times*, June 24, 2011. Accessed in November 2016: <https://www.ft.com/content/a9229750-9cbe-11e0-bf57-00144feabdco#axzz1mpyoLe2>

23 Cf. Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*; Felski, *Literature After Feminism*; Plain and Sellers, *A History of Feminist Literary Criticism*; Showalter, *A Literature of their Own*.

third part of this chapter, I reflect on the role that homosexuality plays in the novel's biographical and historical accounts by arguing that it strengthens the bonds among the male characters, while it excludes women and leaves them to occupy secondary roles in the intellectual and authorial realms. Lastly, the fourth section will discuss the ways in which homonormativity in the novel is articulated through the notion of respectability in marriage and by perpetuating sexist and misogynist relationships towards the novel's female characters. In creating a parallel between the images of the country house, the space of literary tradition, and gay history, I will contend that these spaces enable gay men to thrive as respected authors, while they impair the success of the female characters in the novel, especially in Daphne Sawle's potential as an author.

Historiography and Metafictionality

In Terentowicz-Fotyga's reading, which focuses on the metafictional aspect in regard to the country house, she notes that, in the first part of the novel, the Valance's Corley Court is "construed as [a] largely imaginary space, a myth rather than actual reality; less of a place and more of a locus of dreams, ideas and aspirations".²⁴ Cecil's presence at Two Acres, George's admiration for the Valances' estate, and Daphne's curiosity about it give us an idea of a noble place that embodies aristocratic power and social prestige. When Daphne asks Cecil if they had 'jelly-mould domes', he proudly inquires, "At Corley? [...] As a matter of fact, we do", pronouncing "the word 'Corley' as other men said 'England' or 'The King'".²⁵ Corley Court is often evoked as an emblem of greatness and triumph, closely related to the country house as a symbol of English cultural tradition and architectural prominence.

The Sawles' fascination with Cecil goes beyond his reputation as a poet and as George's good friend from Cambridge. His presence at Two Acres also displays the Sawles' social prestige in the eyes of the aristocratic upper-class. As Terentowicz-Fotyga explains, "Cecil's commanding presence functions as a code for upper-class England" and his "centring role is the effect of his natural dominance and arresting personality as much as of his social status".²⁶ What we see in the first part with Cecil's character is the upper-class and aristocratic manners that operate as the ideological order that will dictate much of the Sawles' behavior, who try to "adapt to the expectations of their upper-class guest".²⁷ Not only does Freda Sawles, the matriarch of the family, arrange for Jonah, a fifteen-year-old servant, to attend only to Cecil, but the family also makes sure that they get to know Cecil's poems, which, according to Freda, only portray Corley.²⁸

24 Terentowicz-Fotyga, *Dreams and Empty Signifiers*, p. 203.

25 Hollinghurst, *The Stranger's Child*, p. 20.

26 Terentowicz-Fotyga, *Dreams and Empty Signifiers*, p. 201.

27 *Ibid.*

28 Hollinghurst, *The Stranger's Child*, p. 7.

From the narrator's perspective, we notice that the Sawles have only recently made their fortune, and that the key material sign is their home, Two Acres. On Cecil's first day there, as the family entertains him and sits at the table for dinner, Hubert, George's and Daphne's older brother, takes a seat at the head of the table, which makes George feel slightly ashamed for not having a father. This memory is subsequently narrated in terms of spatiality, which associates the lack of a patriarchal figure in the family to the smallness of Two Acres in relation to Corley Court and, consequently, to Cecil's imposing figure: "Perhaps it was just the memory of Corley, with its enormous oriental dining-room, that made the present party seem cramped and airless"; Cecil then "stooped as he entered the room in a possibly unconscious gesture to the cosiness of scale at "Two Acres".²⁹ The imaginary greatness of Corley, once contrasted with the Sawles' less grandiose estate, exceeds the established parameters of Two Acres in terms of social and architectural magnitude, thereby making Cecil too big for the house's modest dining room.

Although Corley Court is portrayed as an imposing image of power and social status, it is Two Acres that becomes eternalized in English culture in Cecil's poem that is homonymous to the house's name. It is only in the second part of the novel, set in 1926, that we know the repercussions of the poem's release and of Cecil's reputation as a poet, which were consolidated after his death in the First World War. Now at Corley Court, the Victorian house owned by the Valance family, we discover that Daphne has married Cecil's brother, Dudley, who is an aspiring writer and who envies his brother's reputation as an important poet in English literature. In this section of the novel, in which the Valances host the party at Corley for Sebastian Stokes to collect information for his book, the myths created around Corley start to be deconstructed, and we begin to doubt the facts that were presented in the first part. Dudley, for instance, describes Corley Court as "one of the ugliest houses in the South of England".³⁰

What is crucial here is the idea that the characters' thoughts about the house, its decoration and architecture, change throughout time in much the same way that aesthetics, tendencies, and beauty standards shift. In 1926, the interior designer Eva Riley is responsible for a renovation that has already begun at Corley, which aims, as Dudley puts it, to "get rid of these Victorian absurdities".³¹ The mood in this part of the novel is precisely the modernist ethos of rupture with the Victorian past and the will to enter a new era. Debates about Victorian fashion, aesthetics, and taste, usually defended by the matriarch Lady Valance, are contrasted with the tastes of the younger characters, who mostly lean towards the novelties of modernism. It becomes clear that the period after the Great War is an era of progress and of transformation. Cecil remains the center of a literary tradition in this milieu and, once discussions about Victorianism and Modernism are implied, he is often established as the emblem of tradition that will endure throughout time. As Daphne mocks George's obsession with the house from his first visit, he says that "Cecil liked [jelly-mould domes], and

29 *Ibid.*, p. 19.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 124.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 128.

one didn't argue with Cecil".³² Lady Valance also comments on the changes made to the house, asking herself and her guests what Cecil would have made of them, since "Cecil had a keen sense of tradition".³³

According to Stokes, Hollinghurst claims that the novel "was meant to show how a single prewar scene is viewed at different historical turning points, the effect being of a lens zooming out of the past and into the present".³⁴ The event to be remembered is the poem in Daphne's autograph book and the question of the person for whom it was meant. Questions revolving around Cecil's sexuality and his poem are introduced as historical events that are critical for the writing of the English literary history that is depicted in the novel.

Taylor associates Cecil's literary trajectory with Rupert Brooke's, who became a well-known war poet after his death in 1915. Apart from his literary notoriety as a war poet, having been eagerly read by Winston Churchill, the similarities, as Taylor points out, also pertain to Brooke's sexuality which was commented upon in different biographies; the first one having praised him as a womanizer and another outed him as bisexual.³⁵ The collection of material and selection of information are definitely topics that are addressed in the novel as something inherent to the process of writing literary history and biographies. In 1926, Sebastian Stokes has difficulties in having George admit that it had been him who had "the satisfaction of having inspired, or occasioned, or anyway in some wise brought about perhaps his most famous poem". George dodges the question, asserting that the poem had been written for Daphne:

[George] himself felt sick of the poem, though still wearily pleased by his connection with it; bored and embarrassed by its popularity, therefore amused by its having a secret, and sadly reassured by the fact that it could never be told. There were parts of it unpublished, unpublishable, that Cecil had read to him – now lost forever, probably.³⁶

The poem itself is reproduced in fragments in the novel in a way that we can never read it in its entirety. What we do know is precisely that the poem has been edited over and again and we do not know which fragments are kept in the final version. In 1926, George thinks that it is implausible that his affair with Cecil is disclosed, and it is only later that this information can be included as a piece of knowledge that changes the poem's interpretations. It is in this sense that the event that is represented in the poem is open to readings that will depend on the historical context in which they are read, which evokes the idea that historical discourses also shift according to the period in which they are written. Similarly, this is the point made by Hayden White as he argues that historical discourse cannot be fixed precisely because it is subjected to interpretations that will vary according to shifts in historical, cultural,

32 *Ibid.*, p. 141.

33 *Ibid.*, 129.

34 Stokes, "Lunch with FT: Alan Hollinghurst" in *Financial Times*. Accessed in November 2016: <http://www.ft.com/content/a9229750-9cbe-11e0-bf57-00144feabdco#axzz1mpyoLe2>

35 Taylor, "The Rupert Trunk", in *London Review of Books*, vol. 33 n. 15 (July 2011), pp. 9–10, p. 9. It is worth remembering that George's collection of Cecil's letters also coins the poet as a womanizer (Cf. Hollinghurst, *The Stranger's Child*, p. 448).

36 Hollinghurst, *The Stranger's Child*, p. 159.

and personal perspectives. For him, historical discourse is only possible under the presumption that there are events that are meaningful and, therefore, that are worth writing about,³⁷ considering that the premise for the existence of historical discourse is narrative itself.³⁸

What is at stake in *The Stranger's Child* is literary history, the formation of canonical figures such as Cecil, and also the ways in which life writing plays a significant role in the consolidation of these narratives. If historical discourse produces “interpretations of whatever information about and knowledge of the past the historian commands”,³⁹ then Hollinghurst exposes this process of writing by placing an emphasis on the many possible interpretations that can emerge with historical and cultural shifts. While George is reluctant to talk about his relationship with Cecil in 1926, at Daphne’s 70th birthday party in 1967, he openly talks about him wanting to publish the poet’s letters after Lady Valance’s death, since she “had no idea of course of the sort of thing Cecil wrote in letters to his men friends. [...] I think all sorts of stuff’s going to come out”.⁴⁰ George’s comment to Peter Rowe, a schoolteacher who works at Corley in 1967,⁴¹ anticipates that many authors would be outed in the future. It is no coincidence that this takes place in 1967, the year in which homosexuality was decriminalized. In fact, George talks about the bill that has not yet been approved, but which “could certainly change the atmosphere”.⁴²

It is in George’s character that we detect the most shifts in the readings of the past. His maturity is displayed by the changes in his opinions, behavior, and taste, while Daphne’s character remains superficial. Although Daphne is a well-read woman and she has the power of knowledge in terms of what happened at Two Acres, she does not enact these powers, as she is not sure what she is supposed to say. In 1926, her encounter with Sebastian Stokes confirms “her earlier sense of the process: you watched for a bit, and then you were part of it”.⁴³ Daphne is a part of it as someone who had been present at Two Acres and who becomes an object to be narrated: she is a means of confirming the myth of Cecil’s reputation of a Great War hero, masculine, straight, and a womanizer.

The question about Cecil’s sexuality, whether the poem had been meant for George Sawle or for Daphne Sawle, whether Cecil desired men, whether he desired women, or whether he desired both, persists throughout the novel. The stories about Two Acres and Corley Court are given over and again through oral accounts, diary entrances, letters, and photographs. In 1926, as Sebastian Stokes tries to ask Daphne about her affair with Cecil, she is not really sure what to say because “[w]hat she felt then; and what she felt now; and what she felt now about what she felt then: it wasn’t remotely easy to say”, though she recalls that “Cecil’s way of being in love with her

37 White, *Figural Realism – Studies in the Mimesis Effect*, p. 2.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

39 *Ibid.*. Emphasis in original.

40 Hollinghurst, *The Stranger's Child*, p. 319.

41 Corley has become a prestigious boarding school at this point in the narrative.

42 *Ibid.*, p. 320.

43 *Ibid.*, p. 182.

was alternately to berate her and berate himself: there wasn't much fun in it".⁴⁴ From Daphne's thoughts, conveyed by the narrator, we know that Cecil's romantic love had been mere performance, and she is aware of this, given that she knows that he enjoyed her absence, although his writings indicated otherwise. This becomes clear in one of the letters in which he proposes to Daphne, asking her to be his widow instead of becoming his wife.⁴⁵

The use of the omniscient narrator in the novel diminishes Daphne's importance as a capable authorial voice by placing her at the service of her husbands and the intellectual men around her. Paul, who produces a biography about Cecil in 1977, writes about his conversation with Daphne in his diary:

It turns out Mrs. J [Daphne] was married to Dudley Valance, C's [Cecil's] brother. But she also had big affair [sic] with Cecil V before WW1, said he was her first love, he was madly attractive but bad with women. I said what did she mean. She said, "He didn't really understand women, you know, but he was completely irresistible to them. Of course he was only 25 when he was killed".⁴⁶

The narrator does not recount the moment in which Daphne says that Cecil "didn't really understand women", we only discover this when we read Paul's diary entry in 1967. In 1977 we find out, however, that Paul interprets Cecil's inability to understand women as the equivalent of him being gay and he is the one who writes a biography that outs Cecil as a gay poet. The compilation of information and the selection of facts can be seen in several layers: firstly, in terms of the interpretations of events and accounts; secondly, in regard to oral and written history, and the higher value posed on the latter; and thirdly, the circumstances and social positions that allow one to have authority not just to tell, but to actually write a story. In contrast to the male authors in the novel, Daphne is disadvantaged especially in regard to the second and third aspects, which are determined by the fact that men write mostly about her, and her testimonies are almost exclusively related in oral accounts, and by the fact that she is a woman who has various affairs with other men and is, therefore, depicted as being untrustworthy.

Hollinghurst's use of the omniscient narrator ironically distorts the traditional definition of 'omniscience' in extradiegetic narration. As Rimmon-Kenan explains, omniscience is usually attributed to the narrator "being absent from the story and [having] higher authority" in the narrative.⁴⁷ The omniscient narrator is usually familiar with the characters' feelings, has knowledge about the past, the present, and the future and about events that happen in different places at different times. Although Hollinghurst's narrator seems to have plenty of information about the characters and their lives, he certainly controls how much we, as readers, can fully know by withholding information or by offering different interpretations at different points in the narrative. For instance, we know for a fact that, in the first part of the novel, which is

44 *Ibid.*

45 *Ibid.*, p. 183.

46 *Ibid.*, p. 266.

47 Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*, p. 98.

set in 1913, there was a homosexual relationship between George and Cecil, and that Cecil and Daphne were flirting at Two Acres. However, in the second part, in 1926, we are given the impression that the narrator also withholds information, especially when recounting Daphne's life and her relationship with her husbands. One example is the way that her affair with the artist Revel Ralph, who becomes her second husband, is narrated.

In 1926, as the Valances are hosting guests for Sebastian's biography, the narrator recounts a strange reaction in Daphne's behavior once Dudley makes a joke using the word 'revel', which is homonymous with the artist's first name, Revel Ralph. At this point, we do not know that Daphne is having an affair with the artist, but the narrator suggests that she, for some obscure reason, does not want him there. She grows weary of hearing the name 'revel', showing a "momentary regret", as "she knew she had been right to tell Revel not to come".⁴⁸ The narrator focalizes on Daphne's character and withholds the information about her affair, while making it transparent that Daphne has her eyes on Eva Riley who, from her perspective, aims "to seduce a rich man [Dudley] right under his wife's nose".⁴⁹ For Daphne, Eva is coming on to Dudley, while the narrator seems to suggest that they are already having an affair.

The narrator lets us believe that there is a rivalry between Eva and Daphne because of Dudley. However, we later find out that Eva is actually interested in Daphne, for she tries to seduce her at the party at Corley on the evening of the reception for Sebastian.⁵⁰ At the end of part two, the narrator reveals that it is Revel and Daphne who are having an affair, as he describes Daphne and Revel secretly kissing after they put her children to bed.⁵¹ While George's homosexuality and relationship with Cecil is narrated categorically, Daphne's affairs are often concealed in order to be disclosed as a hitherto unforeseen event. The narrator creates a misleading idea that Daphne's role is exclusively that of a puny woman by focusing on her insecurities, her naivety in her relationships and, moreover, in depicting Daphne as the object of exchange between gay men. In the first and second parts, Daphne's dialogues usually address Cecil's life, her role as a wife and mother, and her weakness in yielding her own reflections, memories, and interpretations of the years that passed.

In the first part of the novel, set in 1913, we get the impression of an omniscient narrator, a technique commonly employed in realist fiction, in which the "conflict of languages and voices is apparently resolved [...] through their subordination to the dominant 'voice' of the omniscient, godlike author".⁵² In the second part, which is set in 1926, however, we begin to doubt this "godlike author" because the conflicts between the characters' interpretation of current and past events put in check the certainties that we have created from the events in the first part. Like the fragmentary reading of the poem, the reading of the novel "underlines the problematic relation between

48 Hollinghurst, *The Line of Beauty*, p. 123.

49 *Ibid.*

50 *Ibid.*, p. 215.

51 *Ibid.*, p. 225.

52 Waugh, *Metafiction: the Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, p. 5.

the word and the world”,⁵³ a problem that metafictional texts tend to address very critically.

Hutcheon contends that metafictional narratives recreate the interconnection between life and art on a new level, “on that of the imaginative process (of storytelling) instead of on that of the product (the story told)”.⁵⁴ In doing so, the reader acquires a new role; in fact, according to Hutcheon, readers acquire a more challenging role, in which they must fully acknowledge that the world represented in the novel is indeed fictional. The metafictional text, therefore, “demands that [the reader] participate, that he engage himself intellectually, imaginatively, and affectively in its co-creation”.⁵⁵ For Hutcheon, this is precisely where the paradox of a metafictional text lies: on the one hand, it addresses itself, which she dubs as the “narcissistic” aspect of the text, in the sense that it explicitly addresses the process of writing; on the other hand, she argues that the metafictional text is directed “outward, oriented toward the reader”, given that the act of reading is usually presented as a thematic axis of the story and, moreover, that it is the reader who actively interprets and reflects on the text’s production, acknowledging the artifice of fiction construed by language. Hence, the metafictional novel demands a higher consciousness from the reader in relation to the text and to the ways in which it is being constructed.

While Hutcheon places a great emphasis on the role played by the reader, Waugh contemplates the linguistic constructions of the metafictional text. She focuses on the self-consciousness of metafiction in exposing the very artifice of itself, since metafictional novels are usually written as “a fictional illusion (as in traditional realism) and the laying bare of that illusion”.⁵⁶ Waugh’s association of metafiction with realism draws upon a comparison between nineteenth-century realism and contemporary fiction. In the first, she explains, there is “a firm belief in a commonly experienced, objectively existing world history”,⁵⁷ whereas in the latter there is a questioning of authority, of universal truths, and of the idea that fiction can mirror reality. Metafictional novels, therefore, evince the fact that the ‘real world’ cannot be represented objectively because of its quality of being linguistically constructed, thereby accentuating that the reality that is represented is “a series of constructions, artifices, impermanent structures”.⁵⁸

In the novel, Hollinghurst’s use of metafiction functions as a narrative device that retrospectively addresses the difficulties of accuracy in recounting someone’s life and in writing history, as well as the ways in which texts are interpreted differently over time. The act of writing and the act of reading are represented as two sides of the same coin. In placing an emphasis on the processes of *producing* the text and *interpreting* the text, he explores the loopholes in storytelling and story-reading as possibilities to create new narratives. This does not mean, however, as the critic Eeckhout has

53 Terentowicz-Fotyga, *Dreams and Empty Signifiers*, p. 213.

54 Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative: the Metafictional Paradox*, p. 3.

55 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

56 Waugh, *Metafiction: the Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, p. 6.

57 *Ibid.*, pp. 6–7.

58 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

argued, that the new stories that emerge “cannot secure any historical past”.⁵⁹ Rather, it suggests that a historical event, which is represented in the novel by Cecil’s visit that leads to the composition of the poem ‘Two Acres’, can obtain various versions because its transposition into narratives implies the selection of facts, choices of form, content, and narrator. It is not the historical past that cannot be secured, but the notion that historical discourses, in this case more specifically concerning life writing, can faithfully reproduce the historical past. Moreover, the fact that these texts are looked back at from different historical contexts also allows questions to arise about issues that had been previously unknown or that had even been concealed.⁶⁰

The main fact that is concealed and speculated upon is precisely that of Cecil’s sexuality and his affective relationships with other men. Cecil is, in fact, remembered as a war poet, but the question about the addressee of the poem also plays a significant role in the writing and reading of it. In the first part, it plays a role in Cecil’s writing of the poem, in which we do not partake, but can only access through excerpts. The narrator, nevertheless, makes sure to recreate the story about the production of the poem by describing Cecil’s authoritative presence in the Sawles’ household and his sexual interest in both George and in Daphne, thereby establishing Cecil’s sexual desire as a core aspect in both the writing and the reading of the poem. As readers, we are challenged to evaluate and reflect upon the interpretations of the poem and upon the writing of Cecil’s biographical stories, putting pieces of these stories together and trying to decide whether the accounts that are given are indeed reliable as historical accounts.

Homosexuality, Historiography, and the Literary Canon

Although *The Stranger’s Child* presents gay history in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the notion that all individuals must be identified as either homosexual or heterosexual prevails as a categorical element throughout the narrative’s development. The narrator tells the story by exploring the characters’ awareness, ignorance,

59 Eeckhout, “English Architectural Landscapes and Metonymy in Hollinghurst’s *The Stranger’s Child*”, p. 4.

60 This is precisely what Tayler comments on Hollinghurst’s inspiration in Rupert Brooke’s poetry and history to construct Cecil’s character and literary trajectory. Like Lady Valance’s efforts to maintain a ‘respectable’ image of her son and his body of work, Brooke’s mother, Mary Brooke, was very protective of the ways in which her son was to be remembered. According to Tayler, she was extremely hostile to the letters published by Brooke’s literary executor, Eddie Marsh, who devised a compilation of letters that addressed the poet’s bisexuality and his relations with “‘neo-pagan’ girls and admiring Bloomsbury boys” (Tayler, “The Rupert Trunk”). After her death, she passed the task of literary execution to Geoffrey Keynes, a friend of Brooke’s from Cambridge, who made sure to organize Brooke’s letters in ways that asserted the poet’s image as “resoundly heterosexual”. After Marsh’s death, however, the ‘Rupert trunk’ was found in his attic containing personal objects and also pamphlets entitled ‘*Sexual Ethics*’. With the consolidation of research practices in Gay and Queer Studies, researchers were able to re-organize letters that dealt with Brooke’s sexual writings, materialized in a book entitled *The Neo-Pagans: Friendship and Love in the Rupert Brooke Circles* (1987) by Paul Delany.

and knowledge of Cecil's sexuality, which is often ambiguous. In spite of its opacity, it is this question that persists throughout all of the novel's personal and social relationships, leaving Cecil's sexuality as an issue that *must* be resolved. In this sense, the novel is written within the paradox of exposing Cecil's sexual relationships with other men, which is often spread as rumors in writings about his life and work, and of concealing these homosexual relations as a means to uphold his image as a war poet and war hero.

In the first part, we, the readers, know that Cecil and George have a sexual relationship, but the narrator does not explicitly tell us who else knows about it at Two Acres. He describes how Daphne sees homosocial affection between them, and that Freda notices that it is Cecil who leads George around the house, not the other way around. Yet, it is Jonah, the servant, who finds a poem in the bin while cleaning the room, and who directly associates it with an image of Cecil and George laying in the hammock and a sexual relationship between them:

Within that ~~thronging~~ singing woodland round
 Two blessed acres of English ground,
 And ~~leading~~ roaming by its outmost edge
 Beneath a darkling ~~eypress~~ myrtle privet hedge
 With hazel-clusters hung above
 We'll walk the ~~secret-long-dark~~ wild dark path of
 love
 Whose secrets none shall ever hear
 Twixt ~~set-of-sun~~ late last rook and Chaunticleer
 Love as vital as the spring
 And secret as – XXX (something!)
 Hearty, lusty, true and bold,
 Yet shy to have its honour told –⁶¹

The version of the poem that we read is an edited version that had been thrown away and we do not know if this is actually a part of 'Two Acres'. The reading about the secrecy and the love that is not named is wholly constructed within the concealment/disclosure binary that constitutes homosexuality as a deviant sexuality. Since the novel also deals with reactions to Victorianism in the twentieth century, the course of gay history in the novel is also written as a consolidation of how discourses in the nineteenth century coined the ways in which we understand sexuality in the twentieth century. Sedgwick explains that it is in the twentieth century that "sexuality has been made expressive of the essence of both identity and knowledge, [which] may represent the most intimate violence as possible",⁶² as sexual desire becomes limited to fixed categories and is enacted under homophobia. Hollinghurst's novel shows how increasingly relevant the category of sexuality becomes in the subsequent decades, and how its significant influence on literary history, first (in 1926 and in 1967) as the

61 Hollinghurst, *The Stranger's Child*, p. 52. Emphasis in original.

62 Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet*, p. 26.

mark of deviant and immoral behavior and later (in the late 1970s and in the 1980s) as a label that defines Cecil as part of a 'gay literary canon'.

In 1926, we discover that Freda Sawle has known about George and Cecil for a while, given that the narrator focalizes on her to disclose her thoughts about the poet and his relationship with her children. Freda finds herself wandering around the house and thinking how imposing Corley Court feels, "even in the sanctuary of her room the dark panelling and the Gothic fireplace induced a feeling of entrapment, a fear that something impossible was about to be asked of her". She fears Sebastian's questions and comes close to crying "with her confused relieved unhappy sense of not having said [...] any of the things she could have said, and had known in her heart, that she wouldn't".⁶³ We then find out that she has read Cecil's letters to George and confronted the latter about their relationship. Instead of telling Sebastian about it or even giving him the letters that once belonged to George, she entertains Sebastian with superficial anecdotes about Cecil's visit in Two Acres, leaving out her true thoughts about the poet.

This is the first part in the novel in which we have a negative impression about Cecil. Since Dudley is considerably abusive and his comments about his brother are always charged with envy, they become rather unreliable. Freda's thoughts, conversely, reasonably allude to Cecil's dangerous power of seduction, which hurt Daphne in particular. She resents "the bloody, bloody poem, which she wished had never been written".⁶⁴ She feels that Cecil's letters to Daphne had been completely over the line, "they were horrible posturing letters in which he seemed to be blaming the poor child for something or other that was really his own failing".⁶⁵ Freda seems to be the first person to notice how the myths constructed around Cecil's image are harmful to Daphne, given that she, from a very young age, had become stuck in a role that strengthens Cecil's image as a member of the literary canon and war poet, but weakens her own agency as a woman.

Not only does the novel address the difficulties in writing biographies and literary history, but it discusses elements in the formation of canonical figures throughout history. Kolbas explains that, by the mid-twentieth century, notions of canonical literature became strongly marked by the nation-state, nationalism, and its constitutive formation of cultural identity. He writes:

[Nationality] has permeated the content and function of education at every level, especially in the humanities, where the study of literature is usually placed. To that extent, the transformation of literary canons in modernity has been profoundly influenced by the prescribed values and priorities of the state, where the inculcation of abstract aesthetic ideals has given way to fostering a sense of shared identity by appeal to national history and distinct cultural heritage.⁶⁶

63 Hollinghurst, *The Stranger's Child*, p. 185.

64 *Ibid.*, p. 186.

65 *Ibid.*, p. 186–187.

66 Kolbas, *Critical Theory and the Literary Canon*, p. 21.

If, as has been argued earlier in this chapter, homosexuality had been vehemently dismissed from discourses of British cultural and national identity until the second half of the twentieth-century, then the inclusion of homosexuality as a relevant aspect of canonical literature can only be considered once homosexuality becomes decriminalized. As George recalls in his interview with Sebastian, Cecil is remembered as a war hero “when Churchill quoted those lines from ‘Two Acres’ in *The Times*”.⁶⁷ At this point in the novel, 1926, the idea of a gay war poet is unacceptable and publicizing it as part of a national discourse would have been a scandal. Nevertheless, Sebastian Stokes insists on trying to get some information about Cecil’s sexuality in all of his interviews. With George, he directly asks if the poem had been written for him or not; with Daphne, he asks about the ways Cecil’s letters praised her absence, instead of her presence. She is uncomfortable with Sebastian’s questions, and she thinks that she “had to come up with something more appropriate; something that she felt wearily had already been written, and that she had merely to find and repeat”.⁶⁸ Like her mother, Freda, Daphne prefers to recount feeble stories about Cecil’s visit to Two Acres, concealing the insecurities that she had been left with once he went to war as a means to preserve his public image.

Daphne is 70 years old in the third part, set in 1967, and it is perhaps her age that allows her to tell the stories that she could never write. As she talks to the young bank clerk, Paul Bryant, she tells him that she once ran off to a small town with her children, Corinna and Wilfred, because of Dudley’s violent temper. Paul “couldn’t say at first if it was real or theatrical, truly sophisticated or simply embarrassing”⁶⁹ putting in check the veracity of Daphne’s story, which is also questioned by Corinna, who claims that her mother’s story is untrue given that Daphne could not drive. Regardless of the veracity of her story, she is immediately dismissed as a reliable source of information or as a reliable narrator. What is crucial here is that Daphne’s story, as a memory from the past, is not considered legitimate because of the lack of facts to support it and because there is no written proof of it, although Dudley’s abusive temper is common knowledge among the members of the family. Her account is, therefore, lost amidst the conversation, showing that her story can only be valid if she confirms the myths that circulate about the Sawles and Valance families. Once her story defies or undermines the authority constructed around the men’s intellectuality and public image, it is automatically delegitimized as a possible truth.

As well as the tension between reality and the representation of reality, Hollinghurst also explores the limits between oral and written history, suggesting that authorial power can only be obtained by the written word. Hayden White defines history as “a certain kind of relationship to the past mediated by a distinctive kind of written discourse”,⁷⁰ placing an emphasis on language in its written form. White’s notion of historiography and historical discourse claims that translating the interpretation of historical facts into the written word actually produces the

67 Hollinghurst, *The Stranger’s Child*, p. 162.

68 *Ibid.*, p. 184.

69 *Ibid.*, p. 260.

70 White, *Figural Realism – Studies in the Mimesis Effect*, p. 1.

historiographical text.⁷¹ According to White, the use of literary theory in the study of historical discourses and historiography evinces the ways in which language is manipulated to produce certain effects, artifices, and aesthetics that will linguistically construe the text. Nevertheless, he does not address the question of orality in the process of constructing historical discourse, implicitly stressing the written word as more valuable than oral accounts.

The Stranger's Child introduces this question because we know that the characters often lie or reinvent their accounts to uphold already established discourses that revolve around Cecil's work and biography. On the one hand, oral interviews confirm what has already been established as truth, but the silences in these interviews indicate that other questions, Cecil's homosexuality for instance, cannot be answered; on the other hand, there are oral accounts, such as Daphne's story about Dudley, that are erased and forgotten because they do not relate to topics that are relevant to Cecil's public image. Daphne is, therefore, only used as a means to sustain that image, never to create her own. It is only in 1979, as she publishes her memoir *The Short Gallery*, a parody of Dudley's autobiography *The Long Gallery* published in 1922, that she is able to immortalize her words publicly and to give her own versions of the stories.

We have access to one excerpt from Daphne's book but only because Paul Bryant is reading it for his own biography about Cecil. In this excerpt, Daphne minutely describes her last evening with Cecil as "the chance to be together, under the magic cloak of our own strong feelings, out of the noise of war [...] Our talk, meanwhile, was of simple and happy things".⁷² She writes a detailed account about their last encounter, about their last meal, their walk in the Embankment, in St. Martins-in-the-Field, where she last sees him. Daphne reproduces Cecil's controlling voice in her chance to speak, in her own book and in her own memories. When reading her memoir, Paul doubts her accounts about Cecil, precisely because he considers them to be too detailed.⁷³ Since, as the character Rob claims in 2008, "outing gay writers was all the rage [in the 1970s]",⁷⁴ Paul's reading of Daphne's memoir is strictly directed towards finding definite proof of Cecil's homosexuality. As Daphne's memoir provides too many details about her date with Cecil, Paul is lured by the omissions she performs in her writing, which in his interpretation is a significant hint that the story told does not correspond to what actually happened in that encounter.

It is Paul's book, we later find out, that completes the task of outing Cecil as a gay poet, publicly unveiling his relationships with several men and also revealing other family secrets: for instance, that Daphne's eldest daughter Corinna is actually Cecil's daughter, a piece of information that Paul had obtained in an interview in 1977 with a very confused George Sawle who is 85 years old at that point.⁷⁵ Paul's book is published in tandem with the trend in gay and lesbian studies at the time, which often focused on the author's homosexuality to coin their works as "minority canons,

71 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

72 Hollinghurst, *The Stranger's Child*, p. 468.

73 *Ibid.*

74 *Ibid.*, p. 525.

75 *Ibid.*, p. 455.

as a literature of oppression and resistance and survival and heroic making".⁷⁶ While it is necessary to uphold narratives that sustain Cecil's heterosexuality as a means to endorse his image as a canonical poet in both 1926 and in 1967, which is established in relation to his participation in and his poems about the Great War, by the late 1970s, the advent of 'outing gay poets' and the emergence of Gay and Lesbian studies as a discipline allows Paul Bryant to re-create Cecil's role in literature by coining him as part of a 'gay literary canon'.

In the decades that precede Paul's biography, which exposes Cecil's homosexuality, Cecil's poetry is read as a master canon that conveys notions of Englishness, nationalism, and war heroism; we know this because it is 'Two Acres' that Churchill cites one year before the First World War breaks out: "The greyhound in its courses, / The hawk above the hill" [...] "Move not surely to their end/ Than England to the kill".⁷⁷ In this passage, the pastoral landscape is highlighted as a powerful image of England, a place in which England will overcome its enemies. This fragment of 'Two Acres' is recalled during Sebastian Stokes' interview with George Sawle in 1926. In this occasion, George points out that this specific extract has turned "the poem 'Two Acres' into a war poem of – in [his] view – a somewhat depressing kind".⁷⁸ What becomes clear throughout the novel is that the poem, which we cannot read in its complete form, is interpreted in different ways throughout history: prior to the outbreak of the Great War, it was read as a love poem to Daphne, in spite of the rumors about Cecil's sexual relationship with George; in 1926, eight years after the end of the First World War, the poem is understood as a war poem, which has been endorsed by Churchill's reading of it; later, in the late 1970s, Paul publicly asserts George as the addressee of the poem, coining Cecil as a member of a 'gay literary canon'.

The focus in *The Stranger's Child* is not necessarily on homophobia, but on how homosexuality comes to be such an important analytical category in literary studies with the historical shifts that imply the decriminalization of homosexuality, the rise of the gay movement in the post-Stonewall period, and the emergence of gay, lesbian, and queer studies. Nevertheless, Hollinghurst's representation of gay history as a linear and progressive timeline can be misleading because it implies a teleological effect, in which, after all of the struggles, there is suddenly a widely accepted recognition of homosexuality as a 'normal' sexuality and that homophobia has somehow been overcome in the process. The only way to read against this interpretation is to draw attention to Daphne's character, who remains secondary because she is a woman and cannot partake in the privileges of homosocial relations among men. While the circumstances for homosexual men, who are also upper- or middle-class, well-educated and white in this novel, have improved with the historical transformations in terms of gay rights, women are perpetuated as objects of exchange and as accessories in literary history. Hence, what we notice is that male homosexuality and homosociality still uphold misogyny and sexism as a means to guarantee male privilege.

76 Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, p. 51.

77 Hollinghurst, *The Stranger's Child*, p. 163.

78 *Ibid.*

The novel narrates the obsession with the ways in which sexuality structures English literary tradition and culture. It is the obsession with Cecil's sexuality that functions as the narrative's main thread. On the one hand, we can read this as Hollinghurst's literary project of shedding light on homosexuality as formative axis of English culture; on the other hand, we can read the insistence on Cecil's sexuality as a historical literary narrative that yields a conventional account of gay history because of its teleological structure and the imposing narrator voice of white, upper-class masculinity. It is true that Hollinghurst "brings out the homosexual tradition in English culture out of the shadows",⁷⁹ as Kunzru explains. However, he does so at the cost of casting a shadow over feminist possibilities of authorship, given that he places Daphne and other female characters in positions of silence and submission, reinforcing the role of women as objects of exchange between men, which consolidates masculine bonds and power.

Homonormativity, Respectability and the Continuum of Misogyny and Sexism

If *The Stranger's Child* is a response to criticisms that had been levelled against Hollinghurst, particularly concerning the exaggeration of sex and the lack of women characters,⁸⁰ I would argue that Hollinghurst's response consists in an account that seeks to normalize and dignify gay life through the delusional myth of heterosexual morality. In doing so, he produces a narrative that creates a hierarchy in which sexual identity prevails over sexual acts and sexual pleasure, and in which the male voice overthrows any possibility of feminist accounts. In an attempt to create an overarching history of gay men, Hollinghurst portrays his female characters in the position that feminists have vehemently contested: with a gin and tonic in one hand and a cigarette in the other, Daphne is portrayed as a troubled contemporary version of 'the angel in the house'. Despite the narrator's accounts of her awareness of the people and situations around her, Daphne's character functions as a deflector of the possibility of homosexuality among the men that surround her: after Dudley Valance, she marries the artist Revel Ralph who also has homosexual relationships; Daphne has a son who is supposedly Revel's, although Paul Bryant's controversial biography claims that the child's father is actually the artist Mark Gibbons.⁸¹ In Hollinghurst's novel, the cost of normalizing homosexuality throughout history is to displace the shaming and stigmatization directed to gay men into the already established shaming of women's bodies and sexuality.

In this sense, it seems that the novel's homonormativity is neatly tied to sexism, misogyny, and to white masculinity. As I have elucidated, Sedgwick has made clear

79 Kunzru, "The Stranger's Child, Alan Hollinghurst – review" in *The Guardian*, June 25, 2011. accessed in December 2016 in <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/jun/25/strangers-child-alan-hollinghurst-kunzru>.

80 Tait, "The Stranger's Child by Alan Hollinghurst – Review" in *The Guardian*, 17 June, 2011. Last accessed in June 2017: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/jun/17/strangers-child-alan-hollinghurst-review>

81 Hollinghurst, *The Stranger's Child*, p. 460.

the role of women serving as objects of exchange to prove men's heterosexuality and, in the novel, not only Daphne but also Madeleine, George's wife, play this role. Although she is a renowned History professor, she is depicted as 'George's wife' and the narrator makes sure to bring out the qualities that are culturally connected to 'unnatural' aspects of womanhood, such as her lack of aptitude for motherhood and her lack of interest in family matters. Madeleine's character has a similar function to Daphne's in terms of deflecting the possibility of George's homosexuality. However, unlike Daphne, Madeleine has a career and does not fit into the traditional roles of motherhood and marriage. In 1926, the narrator emphasizes the doubt about whether or not she knows about Cecil and George. They talk about Cecil's effigy at Corley and George looks at Madeleine and then at the sculpture; he thinks about the ways in which Cecil "seemed somehow to have turned into a piece of evidence, ambiguous but irreducible, lying between [him and his wife]".⁸² Freda observes them and notices how George and Madeleine "looked much more like colleagues than like a couple",⁸³ and Paul Bryant draws attention to her "square mannish face"⁸⁴ at Daphne's birthday party in 1967.

More significantly, Madeleine's interaction with her nephew Wilfrid, who is a child in 1926, reveals her lack of maternal instincts, as she displays difficulties in communicating and playing with him. She is described as severe and unable to say "anything nice", giving him "her pretend smile, staring at him over her glasses".⁸⁵ Madeleine tries to play house with Wilfrid, but she is very impatient after having been left alone with him, and in turn he gets increasingly irritated with her for her inability to play "the game, which his aunt had failed to understand, [which] really depended on the person pretending to be someone else. Otherwise you came to the end of it, and a feeling of boredom and dissatisfaction descended almost at once".⁸⁶ The notion of playing somebody else, though here depicted as a child's game, is the core of the adults' sociability, given that they must always try to prove a certain public image. In fact, Madeleine is doing her best to show her husband's family that she is capable of motherhood in this scene and, therefore, that she can be a 'good' woman and a 'good' wife, like Daphne is. In placing an emphasis on Madeleine's fake and artificial performance of the 'ideal' woman, the narrator leaves her intellectual ability and her position as a professor in a trivial position, since the achievement that is praised by the narrator is her marriage to George.

It is interesting to notice that Madeleine's masculinity is construed by her not being feminine in the sense that she lacks characteristics that culturally belong to femininity and womanhood: Madeleine does not have children and does not want them; she is highly intellectual and has successfully published history books (which are not mentioned, with the exception of the one that she writes with George); she does not seem to care much for family life in the ways in which other women in

82 *Ibid.*, p. 167.

83 *Ibid.*, p. 189.

84 *Ibid.*, p. 315.

85 *Ibid.*, p. 232.

86 *Ibid.*, p. 236.

the novel do; her physical image as a “strong-jawed woman”⁸⁷ does not conflate with the delicacy with which women are usually described. As Paul tries to talk to George about the Sexual Offences Act in 1967, the narrator recounts that George gives “a tiny suggestion that prominent and public though [the act] was it had better not be mentioned in front of his wife”,⁸⁸ implying that this is a sensitive issue for Madeleine.

The fact is that, although the narrator is omniscient, he neither reveals Madeleine’s thoughts about her husband’s environment, nor does he offer information about the kind of marriage that they have. Is it just a cover up because of their careers? If so, is Madeleine a lesbian or possibly bisexual? Could George be bisexual too? Madeleine does seem like a woman ahead of her time, would she really be uncomfortable talking about the 1967 Sexual Offences Act? We do not know. We do not know because, in conveying a universal and powerful narrating voice, the narrator adopts a position that is very similar to the roles played by the novel’s biographers and literary executors. He paradoxically creates an authoritative account that demands fixed and stable categories to define the characters’ gender and sexuality, and yet he ironically gives pieces of information that undermine these categories and suggest that they cannot be sufficient to determine the characters’ relationships, desires, and identities.

Revel Ralph, Daphne’s second husband, is also an ambiguous character whom the narrator first tries to depict as feminine, and therefore as gay, but whose sexual identity is definitely not as clear as the narrator portrays. In the second part, in 1926, the narrator begins by focalizing on Daphne’s anxiety about Revel’s coming to the party, and we know that she is somehow nervous about his presence. As he arrives:

Daphne felt the magnetic disturbance of his presence just behind her, at the corner of her eye as she led [Revel and the children] up the steps and passed through the white gate under the arch. You were wonderfully safe of course with a man like Revel; but then the safety itself had something elastic about it. There were George and Madeleine – so odd that they’d set straight off on a walk. Perhaps just so as to be doing something, since Madeleine was unable to relax; or possibly to put off seeing Dudley for as long as they decently could.⁸⁹

Daphne feels Revel’s presence in the same way as she had felt Cecil’s, as a dominating presence. This is related by the narrator as a sensation that yields protection; however, once the feeling is described as ‘elastic’, we know that it is not fixed and that it is subject to transformations and to variations. The description of the scene proceeds by pointing George and Madeleine as the odd ones out, since they are the ones who are not interacting with the party at Corley and simply decide to remove themselves from it. The sequence of events comprises ideas of Revel’s presence emanating an omnipresent white masculinity in its most traditional sense. This is a masculinity that is connected with “maleness and to power and domination”, extending itself “outward into patriarchy and inward into the family”.⁹⁰ The image of Revel walking

87 *Ibid.*, p. 305.

88 *Ibid.*, p. 320.

89 *Ibid.*, p. 138.

90 Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, p. 2.

with Daphne and her children in Corley, resembling the fatherly figure that Dudley does not enact, contrasts with both George's and Madeleine's strangeness as a couple and with Dudley's infamous truculence and inconvenience.

Revel's almost exaggerated personification of traditional white masculinity is later undermined in a conversation between Eva Riley and Daphne, as the former mentions that Revel has a "quite feminine touch – more feminine, probably, than me!"⁹¹ In the same night that Eva tries to make a pass at Daphne, who rejects her, the narrator explicitly accounts for Daphne's affair with Revel:

The of course unmentioned fact, that it was men that Revel liked to kiss, made it the more flattering, though perhaps more unreal. [...] [Daphne] wondered now if he had ever kissed a woman before. She supposed when men [kissed each other] it was a pretty rough business; she didn't quite like to think about it. She knew she must encourage Revel, without making him feel at all inadequate or in need of encouragement. He was younger than her but he was a man. In some strange romantic way, to please him, she wished she could be a man herself.⁹²

In this passage, it is Daphne who tries to reject the possibility of Revel's homosexuality, at the same time fantasizing about him kissing other men, which makes her want to be a man. Her role in this scene is ambiguous because it conversely suggests, on the one hand, her attempt to make him feel at ease with his own sexuality, meaning that she wants to praise him and not necessarily herself; on the other hand, her wish to please him also unveils a desire that belongs to her and that gives her pleasure: the idea of being a man. While the narrator's initial description of Revel conveys an image of a 'family man', as it were, the development of the narrative unravels different facets of the same man, whose femininity does not fit into traditional white and heterosexual masculinity, whose sexual desire is directed towards both women and men. This ambiguity in Revel's character can be read in a conversation that he has with George about the duality between Victorianism and Modernism, as Revel asserts his categorical opinion that "there's room in the world for more than one kind of beauty".⁹³ In other words, Revel's character and assumptions imply that it is not necessary or effective to divide the world in binaries, from which one must choose only one side. Rather, it is the wide possibilities of desire and beauty that calls out his attention and interest.

Perhaps it is interesting to look into Daphne's character through her relationship with Revel, precisely because he represents the uncertainties and ambiguities that are unexplored by the narrator as a means to leave certain questions unresolved. What we see throughout the plot is a tension between all authors, including the narrator himself. If all biographers and literary executors try hard to put characters into fixed categories that exist in the binary of hetero or homosexuality, then the narrator exercises a metafictional function to give us information that demonstrates that these

91 Hollinghurst, *The Stranger's Child*, p. 175.

92 *Ibid.*, p. 225.

93 *Ibid.*, p. 141.

categories are insufficient to narrate the characters' complex affective and sexual relations. Paradoxically, the narrator does exactly the same thing that the authors in the novel do: he prefers to dismiss uncertainties by only briefly mentioning small controversial details and by emphasizing the necessity of creating social categories, names, and identities to give an apparent order of events and the appearance of transparency and intelligibility to all affective and sexual relationships.

In looking into the novel's uncertainties and ambiguities, Daphne, for instance, can be imagined beyond the role of exchange in proving other men's heterosexuality. In 1913, she is jealous of Cecil and George in the same way that she is jealous of George and Revel in 1926, as "their heads and shoulders could be seen as they moved slowly away among the hedges".⁹⁴ Like the hats that unite Cecil's and George's bodies in the first part, Daphne sees a similar union of homosocial desire between George and Revel in 1926. Although the narrator makes sure to suggest that Daphne's jealousy is directed to her brother's relationships with the men she desires, we can also read her jealousy towards their affective relationship, the male bonds in which the women in the novel cannot partake and, moreover, the bonds that they do not create between themselves.

Reading Daphne's jealousy as directed towards the men's male bonds draws attention to a conservative viewpoint that perceives the creation of bonds between women as a reaction to the bonds created among men, as if women were to reproduce the latter in order to obtain power. Halberstam strongly criticizes this perspective, arguing that it puts women in an endless position of victimhood and of complete subservience to male power. In this model, he elucidates, woman "is the name for those subjects within patriarchy who have no access to male power and who are regulated and confined by patriarchal structures".⁹⁵ In asserting that it is men who hold complete power in patriarchal structures, this model is doomed to ignore "the ways in which gender relations are scrambled where and when gender variance comes into play".⁹⁶ Hence, this could be regarded as one of the most violent forms of white masculinity, precisely because it dismisses any possibility of women obtaining power, autonomy, and agency, apart from perpetuating homophobic and heterosexist relations, and foreclosing possibilities of non-normative gender, sexual identities, and female bonding.

This is, in fact, the social environment with which we are presented in *The Stranger's Child*. Thinking of Terentowicz-Fotyga's description of literary representations of the country house as a space that brings out the social hierarchies presented in society,⁹⁷ the country houses in the novel evince male bonds that completely exclude women from any position of power. Thus, it is possible to read Corley Court and Two Acres as gay spaces that exist outside metropolitan gay culture and, moreover, as spaces that perpetuate masculine domination within literary tradition, since the novel's women authors are constantly overlooked as intellectual peers and are overtly asserted as objects.

94 *Ibid.*, p. 177.

95 Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, p. 17.

96 *Ibid.*

97 Cf. Terentowicz-Fotyga, *Dreams, Nightmares and Empty Signifiers*, p. 71.

The country houses and the characters that circulate in them are extremely important because they show a historical development of control over sexuality within traditional spaces, such as schools and family homes, and also in their role as gay spaces, since it is in these estates that the main characters enact homosexuality, at least until the third part of the novel. While cities have often been affirmed as the birthplace of gay culture, Hollinghurst's novel suggests a beginning of gay culture outside of London, namely in the country house and at Cambridge, where Cecil and George studied. Hollinghurst creates a gay history that starts with the pastoral landscape, depicting its decline in the turn of the century, to later become a boarding school for boys in the 1960s. It is only in the late 1970s and in 2008 that the histories of the gay men in the novel are shifted to London. In fact, in 2008, Paul Bryant visits Two Acres in Greater London and he finds out that the estate has been divided into flats, "like almost every house in London",⁹⁸ suggesting the decline of the families and also the decay of the image of the country house itself.

As a boarding school, we encounter, as Foucault claims, how the overarching "control over sexuality becomes inscribed in architecture" as a means to pursue a "struggle against homosexuality and masturbation".⁹⁹ The regulation of behavior in the school is quite similar to that enacted at Corley as a residence, the house is considered "perfect for a boarding-school – secluded, labyrinthine, faintly menacing, with its own tree-lined park now mown and marked out in pitches", and although no one "could want to live in such a place [...] as an institution of learning it was pretty much ideal".¹⁰⁰ The labyrinthine architecture and the school's isolation recalls the image of a prison, in which the boys are disciplined and regulated, regarding their sexual behavior in particular. In fact, Peter Rowe, the history teacher who begins researching the house's history and subsequently the Valance's history, is in charge of reading pornographic material to decide whether they are appropriate for the pupils.¹⁰¹ He has a debate with the headmaster and staff about offering sexual education at school, something which causes discomfort and outrage in most of them, as they argue that the Governors do not find it "desirable" and "the parents don't want it".¹⁰²

In 1977, the narrative shifts to Bedford Square, in central London, where Paul Bryant runs into Daphne on the street, ten years after her 70th birthday at Corley. Paul is revising earlier books that were published about Cecil's work, Dudley's autobiography, as well as the collected letters, which were organized by George, in order to write a new biography about Cecil. While the biographies and literary criticism about Cecil's work and life had been written by authors who somehow had direct personal connections with the poet or his family earlier in the novel, the former bank clerk Paul Bryant is the one to take up the task of writing about Cecil in 1977, for he is suspicious of what has already been published. His first step is to interview Jonah,

98 Hollinghurst, *The Stranger's Child*, p. 386.

99 Foucault, "The Eye of Power" in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings*, p. 150.

100 Hollinghurst, *The Stranger's Child*, p. 269.

101 Cf. p. 297.

102 *Ibid.*, p. 298.

the servant who attended Cecil at Two Acres; he then tries to get in contact with Dudley, who now lives in Spain and he eventually manages to interview Daphne in her deteriorated home, in the outskirts of London where she lives with her son Wilfrid. In her home, Daphne is portrayed as a decaying character living in the middle of junk and lost objects.

As he interviews her, Paul asks why she had decided to write about all the people around her in her memoir, instead of writing about herself. She replies that she had been surrounded by “a lot of people more talented and interesting than [herself]”.¹⁰³ In the subsequent chapter in the novel, however, the narrator focalizes on Daphne to disclose her own piece of mind about the interviews, showing that she is extremely irritated with the questions:

People had been amazed by what she'd dredged up for her book, but much of it, as she'd nearly admitted to Paul Bryant, was – not fiction, which one really mustn't do about actual people, but a sort of poetical reconstruction. [...] Her first problem, in doing her book, had been to recall what anyone said; in fact she had made up all the conversations, based (if one was strictly truthful) on odd words the person almost certainly had said, and within about five, or at the outside ten, years of the incident recorded.¹⁰⁴

In this passage, Daphne reflects on the criticism that she has received of her memoir, *The Short Gallery*, given that many critics, friends, and family members had claimed that they had not actually said something she had written or had remembered past events differently. The “poetical reconstruction” addresses the problems and limitations of life writing and of narrative itself, making it clear that her book, as a piece of writing, is a non-fictional representation of facts; this does not mean, of course, that they convey the reality of the facts. Her awareness of the problems with writing are taken as a problem of truthfulness and authenticity, whereas her male counterparts can get away with the recreation of facts as historical truths, given that they are legitimated as authors due to their masculinity, education, and social position. The narratives produced by the male authors about Cecil's literary work and life become outdated or discredited not because of these authors' lack of authenticity or credibility, as happens with Daphne. Rather, the narrator relates all of these accounts as relevant pieces of research, and the changing perceptions of Cecil's life and work hinge more on historical shifts (such as the First World War, the decriminalization of homosexuality, and the rise of Gay and Lesbian studies) than on their reliability as authors.

Daphne's authorial position in the novel deals with the obstacles confronted by women writers throughout history in asserting their own room, to use Woolf's term, as authors, demanding a ‘room of one's own’ in which women could write without the stigma of being considered inferior to men. As we know, Woolf's essay has been prominently debated and has been considered a seminal work in feminist literary criticism. Daphne's character can easily relate to Woolf's concerns, not only in the sense of finding one's own room as an author, but also in the ways in which she has

103 *Ibid.*, p. 476.

104 *Ibid.*, p. 497.

been the object of narratives written by so many men but struggles to write her own. If Woolf considers it a relief that “women do not write books about men”,¹⁰⁵ writing a book about the intellectual men around her is the only response Daphne could find to release herself, at least partially, from the position of an object, even though she sustains myths that have been consolidated about them.

In the novel, homonormative spaces are constructed by traditional national symbols, such as that of the country house and public schools, but they also refer to a metaphorical space of authorship in literature. It is significant that Paul runs into Daphne in Bedford Square, in the area where the renowned Bloomsbury circle lived, worked, and promoted innumerable encounters. Throughout the narrative it becomes clear that Daphne did take active part in intellectual circles and probably led a much more interesting life than the narrator accounts for. As Paul spots her on the street, he starts a conversation about London and asks her if she misses it, since she now lives in the outskirts of the city. Daphne says London is for young people, that she had loved it fifty years earlier.

Paul, who has been living in the city for three years, recalls how “[i]n some absurd way her account in her book of living in Chelsea with Revel Ralph had coloured his own sense of what London life might offer: freedom, adventure, success”.¹⁰⁶ It is exactly this part of the narrative that is completely left out, as we only know that Daphne has an affair with Revel in 1926, but the next part already begins in 1967, giving us no record of these forty-one years. All we do know is that Revel died in the Second World War and that Daphne had a son with him, who is Jenny Ralph’s father. The novel’s omissions and large temporal gaps are indicators of the author-narrator’s selection of information and they point to the ways in which he chooses to recount the lives of the male characters by praising their intellectual and authorial achievements. By contrast, Daphne’s character is narrated only in terms of her participation in the construction of literary and biographical histories of Corley, artists, and the intellectuals around her, never as an active intellectual or author.

As a product of her conservative social environment, Daphne is a woman who does not resist the sexism around her, at least in the way that the narrator portrays her. However, we do perceive various attempts to assert her authorship, even though they are always dismissed. It is possible to reflect on her underrated position as an author in light of the male bonds that surround her. In placing an emphasis on the personal connections among the talented men, the narrator forecloses possibilities of female bonds in the novel. Thus, Daphne’s jealousy towards George can be interpreted as a jealousy towards (male) homosocial bonds that enable the rise of alliance and strengthen the professional relationships in an exclusive and elitist intellectual milieu. Becoming a man, in this sense, is not necessarily an embodiment to pleasure her sexual partner, but a way for her to have access to a network that provides the means to be a legitimate author.

Masculinity, in the novel, is restricted to a very traditional and conservative notion of male bonding that can only exclude and belittle women. It informs all spaces,

105 Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, p. 35.

106 Hollinghurst, *The Stranger’s Child*, p. 374.

social relations, and modes of writing in the narrative, including the narrator's authorial voice. It is in the narrator's description of minor details and controversies that we are reminded of the characters' non-normative sexual desires, which the narrator insists on stabilizing within fixed categories. Madeleine's supposed masculinity and Daphne's wish to be man are conveyed as "pathological signs of misidentification and maladjustment, as a longing to be and to have power that is always out of reach".¹⁰⁷ However, it is the stories that have not been told and the information that is withheld that open the prospect for the reader to interpret the female characters beyond their sexist environments, and to make sense of Cecil's sexuality beyond the hetero/homosexual categories.

The Stranger's Child presents a double movement in its narration of gay history, as it creates, at times, an overt realist account of gay history, which is thoroughly undermined by Hollinghurst's deployment of metafiction. Homonormativity in this historical account relates, as I have explained, to sexism, misogyny and to conventional white upper/middle-class masculinity that is enacted by most of the male characters in the novel. Yet it also reverberates notions of respectability and normality that have become inherent to mainstream gay and lesbian politics in the 1980s and 1990s. As queer activist Mattilda (aka Matt Bernstein Sycamore) puts it, "*homonormative* offers us the potential to see the violence that occurs when gays show unquestionable loyalty for many of the things that [...] are routinely challenged even within mainstream straight dominant cultures",¹⁰⁸ such as consumerism, racism, misogyny, sexism, imperialism and militarism.

For Mattilda, gay and lesbian movements in a Western context have been struggling to be part of a dominant culture, reproducing all of the oppressions and violence that conjured it into existence in the first place. Mattilda designates the obsession "with accessing straight privilege at any cost"¹⁰⁹ as the "violence of assimilation", strongly criticizing 'normality' and respectability as an overall goal. Similarly, Warner, in *The Trouble with Normal*, criticizes the depoliticized and desexualized turn in gay and lesbian movements in the 1990s. He claims that these movements have failed "to recognize that there is a politics of sexual shame"¹¹⁰ and have reinforced respectability and dignity as the equivalent to normality.¹¹¹ Moreover, Warner criticizes how identity

107 Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, p. 9. It is important to stress that Halberstam's study about female masculinity does not include heterosexual women, although he recognizes that it "menaces gender conformity in its own way" (p. 28). I find his discussions relevant to think about the female characters in the novel because Halberstam's notions of masculinity put in check discourses about dominant masculinity and its almost 'natural' link to the male body and to male power, as he argues that it is possible to think about masculinity within a queer framework of resistance to both sexism and homophobia.

108 Interview with Ruiz, "The Violence of Assimilation: An Interview with Mattilda aka Matt Bernstein Sycamore", p. 238.

109 *Ibid.*, p. 237.

110 Warner, *The Trouble with Normal*, p. 109.

111 *Ibid.*, pp. 52; 78.

politics is acted out under the premise that “sexual orientation is fundamental to one’s personality and is not mere sexual behavior”.¹¹²

This idea is central to Hollinghurst’s novel, as the narrator and the characters, especially the ones who are somehow involved with Cecil’s work and biography, employ their narratives to strictly define sexual behavior within the categories of hetero or homosexuality. While the characters’ actions and behavior often convey sexual identities that are ambiguous, and more informed by desire than by categories, the narrator himself adjusts their practices into strict identity categories, and the characters who pursue life writing or literary criticism do likewise. Hollinghurst’s employment of metafiction can be interpreted as a means to produce doubts about the rigid taxonomies that are represented and to show that reality is always distorted when it is construed linguistically, as the act of writing is always an act of selecting information and of translating the world into language.

Nevertheless, in interpreting and depicting reality, it becomes clear that the narrator and the authors are grounded in traditional taxonomies of sexuality, homonormative practices of homosexuality, and sexist norms of authorship. On the one hand, metafiction is crucial to Hollinghurst’s representation of historiography and literary history, as he evinces the contradictions and limitations in the act of manipulating language; on the other hand, the linearity in the account of events, the limited agency of the female characters, and the teleological account of gay history jeopardizes the critical effects of metafiction, in order to attest normality, respectability, dignity, and morality as inherent aspects of gay culture.

The last section of the novel, in 2008, begins with Peter Rowe’s funeral at which some of the characters reunite. Desmond, Peter’s ex-partner and one of the few black people present, gives a speech celebrating Peter’s activism in the gay movement, mentioning the Sexual Offences Act in 1967, and stressing the victory achieved with same-sex civil partnership, which was “a great development not just for them but for civil life in general. This was met by a few seconds of firm applause, and flustered but generally supportive looks among those who didn’t clap”.¹¹³ At the end of his speech, Desmond reads one of Cecil’s poems, since he is now recognized as a renowned Great Gay poet. In focusing on the important historical marks of gay history that lead to gay marriage, Desmond’s speech stresses them as achievements that confer respectability and normality on homosexuality. Assimilation to dominant heterosexist culture is, therefore, celebrated under the rhetoric of normalization and of an idealized standard of sexual relationship, which is matrimony.

In choosing London suburbs and country houses as the main settings for his novel, Hollinghurst brings out domesticity, assimilation, heterosexism, and misogyny as key elements of contemporary gay identity and culture. From docile homes to boarding schools, from the countryside to metropolitan life, *The Stranger’s Child* suggests that gay history can only come out as a respectable history under the rules of matrimony and domesticity. In this set of norms, women remain powerless objects to be exchanged and to be written about. Even Jenny Ralph, Daphne’s granddaughter, who represents

112 *Ibid.*, p. 29.

113 Hollinghurst, *The Stranger’s Child*, p. 535.

a third generation of women, falls into a secondary role, despite her Oxford degree in French and her successful career as an academic. Peter Rowe's funeral can be seen as a ritual that publicly mourns gay life, attempting to resolve melancholy in Hollinghurst's previous novels. However, it can also be read as the death of a gay culture as non-normative sexual behavior that can resist heteronormativity at least in its refusal of reproducing the nuclear family, marriage, and monogamy, and in its opposition to respectability as a means to achieve 'normality'.

Chapter 8

London and the Spatialization of Queer Histories

The Historical Novel and Historiographic Metafiction

The relationship between realism and historical fiction has been discussed to a significant degree in literary theory. In his seminal book, *The Historical Novel*, Georg Lukács sees in the historical novel a means to narrate history with fidelity, but also as a means to yield the emotional reactions that we think individuals might have had in the past, having as a premise that, with a temporal distance from the past, it is possible to retrieve the exact feelings and experiences of that time by portraying fictional and real historical figures. He asserts Sir Walter Scott as the great example of historical fiction because Scott represents the past with “great historical objectivity”¹ in the sense that his characters act within the circumstances of real historical struggles and events, and they are constructed according to complex psychological features. For Lukács, what is at stake in the writing of historical novels is not simply the narration of historical events, but the use of characters to show the relationship that historical figures had with those events. He contends that it is crucial that the author faithfully construct historical reality in ways in which we, as readers, can, “re-experience the social and human motives which led men to think, feel and act just as they did in historical reality”.²

He contends that the historical novel must inherently be written in the form of traditional realism in order to construe the ‘real’, which can render historical facts and historical characters with truthfulness, and yet add emotional and psychological elements to the characters to grant the novel dramatic effects. It is precisely because the historical novel produces historical fidelity and, at the same time, can trigger emotional identifications between reader and characters that Lukács suggests that historical fiction can function as a way to popularize historical narratives to the great public, making them available to those who do not have access to the studies of history.

1 Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, p. 34.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 42.

Like Lukács, Fleishman provides a discussion about historical fiction by evincing the genre's national character and by defending the use of realism to grant verisimilitude to the historical reality that is represented. Drawing on Lukács' work, he asserts the emergence of the historical novel "as the outcome of the age of nationalism, industrialization, and revolution", in which "European peoples came to consciousness of and vigorously asserted their historical continuity and identity".³ Fleishman does not believe in the mirroring effect of history, since he recognizes that the historical novelist's work depends on interpretations of history, historical documents, and archives. However, Fleishman asserts that, in spite of historical fiction's being based on imaginative and fictive elements, it still conveys historical truth in the sense that it is always based on real historical figures and events. In other words, Fleishman and Lukács share the belief that History, with a capital 'H', conveys truthful and faithful accounts of human endeavors and the development of nation-states. However, their arguments diverge in the deployment of history in literature: where Lukács sees an *authentic* account of history that evinces historical characters' emotions in historical fiction, Fleishman contends that the historical novel produces the author's imaginative *re-creation* of the past by using his own interpretations, which are not necessarily faithful to reality.

For Fleishman, the historian composes historical narratives by analyzing documents, whereas "the historical novelist has a claim to historical truth, on the strength of his habitual exercise of imaginative sympathy, his personalization of history so that it becomes not a mere movement of forces or sequence of events but the thoughts and feelings of men".⁴ He contends that it is insufficient to write a historical novel that is only based on historical contexts; the historical novel, in Fleishman's view, as in Lukács', must present at least one historical figure: "[w]hen life is seen in the context of history, we have a novel; when the novel's characters live in the same world with historical persons, we have a historical novel".⁵

Both Lukács and Fleishman believe that characters in historical novels correspond to a universal subject that is formed by a distinct historical period, whose feelings, livelihood, and understanding of his environment can be represented for the reader in the present. Considering that the universal is largely associated with privileged gendered and racial positions,⁶ Lukács' and Fleishman's discussions of the historical novel imply that historical experience is centered in the authorial and social position of white, middle- or upper-class men. From a postmodernist perspective, Ruth Hoberman notes that the relationship that Lukács and Fleishman defend between characters and their engagement with historical events can only be undertaken by "figures who

3 Fleishman, *The English Historical Novel*, p. 17.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

6 See Butler's discussion on universality in "Contingent Foundations" in Benhabib et al. *Feminist Contentions*. Here, Butler argues that universality has only recently "been exposed for its own highly ethnocentric biases", which is based on Western cultural and political hegemony (p. 40). For Butler, universality is always exclusionary and will hinder the participation of subjects who have been historically marginalized.

are free to roam, meet people and hold power”.⁷ As we know, women have historically been in disadvantage of accessing mobility, power, authorship, and leadership, having had to engage with political struggles in order to access these privileges. In arguing for a historical account that can represent a universal experience, Hoberman contends that Lukács and Fleishman efface “the particularities of female experiences”, which results in “a reinscription of women’s absence from history”.⁸ The same can be said about further marginalized subjects in terms of class, race, and sexuality.

Like Hoberman, Hutcheon perceives literature as a fruitful means to bring to light the past of “ex-centric” subjects, to use Hutcheon’s term, to include women, queer, racial, and ethnic minorities in historiography. Hutcheon argues that feminist historical methodology, which consists in exposing women’s exclusion in historical accounts as well as in producing narratives that emphasize the role played by women in history, has had a great impact on postmodernist historiography. Feminist historians have increasingly stressed the ways in which women were marginalized from historical accounts under the premise that they were not important actors in the course of history. It is under this perspective that Hutcheon devises the concept of ‘historiographic metafiction’, which “self-consciously reminds us that, while events did occur in the real empirical past, we name and constitute those events as historical facts by selection and narrative positioning”.⁹

White and Hutcheon place great importance on the act of narration of history, which highly depends upon the selection of information, authorial interpretations of historical events, and the use of narrativity to represent history. For White, historical and literary discourses share a common ground regarding language and narration, since both need language in order to transform a series of events into a story.¹⁰ While Lukács and Fleishman separate the roles of literary accounts and historical accounts, and assert the historical novel as an emotional account of history, White and Hutcheon are very much aware of the discursive aspects of historiography, for they argue that both historical and literary narratives can only produce *representations* of history, which ultimately rely on language. In challenging the clear-cut separation between history and literature, Hutcheon draws attention to narration in the construction of history, and to the potential of historical knowledge in fiction. In doing so, she points to the self-reflexivity that historiographic metafiction could potentially raise, as the term itself infers the “theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs”.¹¹

Hutcheon disputes three main points in Lukács’ debate about historical novels in her conceptualization of historiographic metafiction: the first consists in the difficulties in proving truthfulness and accuracy in each and every detail in historical novels; the second regards our access and understanding of texts about the historical past (both historical and fictional); and the third refers to Lukács’ and Fleishman’s

7 Hoberman, “Multiplying the Past: Gender and Narrative in Bryher’s ‘Gate to the Sea’”, p. 356.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 357.

9 Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, p. 97.

10 White, *Figural Realism: Studies in the Mimesis Effect*, pp. 6–7.

11 Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, p. 5.

argument about the need to have at least one historical figure in a novel in order to characterize it as historical fiction. In her critique regarding the aspect of accuracy and truthfulness, Hutcheon contends that historiographic metafiction “plays upon the truth and lies of historical record”¹² by exposing the fact that official historical records can also contain errors and elide information about historical events.

This leads us to her second point, which considers how postmodernist fiction employs historical data and historical details. While Lukács claims that historical novels can mirror the historical past, Hutcheon defends that historiographic metafiction self-consciously recognizes “the paradox of the *reality* of the past [and] its *textualized accessibility* to us today”¹³ by questioning the authority of official documents and data. In her third comment about Lukács’ theory, Hutcheon disputes the arguments about the premise of having historical characters to validate the historical in fiction. Where Lukács sees the presentation of ‘real’ historical characters or ‘types’ as a primary feature of the historical novel, Hutcheon urges the inclusion of “peripheral figures” as protagonists of historiographic metafiction. For Hutcheon, historiographic metafiction does not require the presentation of a real historical figure because its emphasis lies on the process of writing history, rather than using one real historical persona as a character in order to give authenticity and truthfulness to a historical novel. In stressing the process of writing history, Hutcheon’s concept of historiographic metafiction seeks to highlight the overlapping elements between fiction and history, mainly concerning narrativity, authorship, documentation, and the selection of information, instead of illustrating authenticity through a real historical character and their relationship to historical events.

Hutcheon’s concept must be regarded according to her notions of metafiction, elucidated in the last chapter, which she defines as “fiction about fiction – that is, fiction that includes within itself a commentary on its own narrative and/or linguistic identity”.¹⁴ In its historiographic form, metafiction functions as a strategy to openly indicate the fictional world “as a constructed one, but also as a world of public experience”.¹⁵ For Hutcheon, ‘public experience’ is narrated by discourses that are conveyed in the historical archives, documents, and testimonies that articulate historical events. In representing these events, historiographic metafiction denaturalizes the representation of history itself, critically engaging with the historical past in an attempt to understand the limitations of historical narratives.

From a similar perspective, Boccardi draws attention to the metafictional aspect of historical fiction. In contrast to Hutcheon, Boccardi does not see metafiction as a postmodernist phenomenon that gained force in the 1960s. Rather, she argues that “the historical novel [is] inherently metafictional and as such [it is] not only ideally receptive to postmodernism’s positions on narrative, representation and knowledge but also supremely equipped to probe their validity”.¹⁶ In Boccardi’s view, all historical

12 *Ibid.*, p. 114

13 *Ibid.* Emphasis in original.

14 *Idem*, *Narcissistic Narrative: the Metafictional Paradox*, p. 1.

15 *Idem*, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, p. 34.

16 Boccardi, *The Contemporary British Novel*, p. 6.

novels are self-referential, even the ones that were written in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In exploring the lines between fiction and historiography, she explains, writers such as Walter Scott also relied on historical research, the selection of information, and self-reflexivity to compose their historical novels.¹⁷ Boccardi disputes Hutcheon's argument by claiming self-reflexivity as a characteristic that has defined the historical novel from its early origins, suggesting that these strategies of narration, based on the interpretation and selection of historical data from the past to employ them in the writing of fiction, have been adapted to postmodernist paradigms in historiography.

I agree with Boccardi's argument insofar as to say that there are several similarities in terms of self-referentiality, in the sense that the historical novel has always existed according to the premise of revisiting the past as a means to understand the present. However, it is important to stress that the use of realism in early nineteenth century is quite different from its deployment in postmodernist historical novels, given that the latter is always self-conscious about its representational limits, whereas the former was written under the premise that what is represented actually mirrors historical reality. In this sense, Hutcheon's emphasis on the process of writing history (and not on the final object that represents history) is precisely the aspect that opens up possibilities for self-reflexivity and (oftentimes revisionist) approaches to the historical past as an attempt to include marginalized histories and their 'ex-centric' subjects. It is therefore relevant to remember that self-referentiality, in the sense of looking into the historical narratives of the past to re-present them, does not necessarily imply self-reflexivity, as Hutcheon claims.

Historiographic metafiction ultimately praises the ideals of plurality and multiple voices of narration, and the postmodernist questioning of authority and authenticity. Furthermore, it makes evident the tensions between history and fiction by reflecting on the silences that positivist History has yielded in its universalizing accounts. In her doctoral thesis, Waters elucidates the ways in which gay and lesbian novels have employed historical references to homosexuality in literature as a means to contest dominant discourses about same-sex desire among men and women: "[...] in history of homosexual representation certain historical narratives and icons recur again and again; but in each cultural moment, they are reconstructed rather differently".¹⁸ These historical narratives, she argues, reclaim homosexual self-representation by revisiting the past to retrieve elements that have culturally and socially informed homosexual identity, at times reinforcing stereotypes but often providing self-reflexive images of homosexuality.

Waters finds Hutcheon's concept of historiographic metafiction to be a useful critical instrument in reading gay and lesbian historical narratives, both those written in the nineteenth and early twentieth century as well as in contemporary literature. She contends that, though a postmodernist form, historiographic metafiction has long been deployed by some authors of gay and lesbian historical fiction whose works

17 *Ibid.*, p. 18.

18 Waters, *Wolfskins and Togas*, p. 8.

engage with “plundering and selective rewriting of historical narrative” and with exposing “the provisionality of (historical) representation, lay[ing] bare its implication in dominant – heterosexual – social structures which are in turn revealed to be far from stable”.¹⁹ She argues that gay and lesbian historical novels, both contemporary and those from the nineteenth century, appropriated official medical, criminal, and psychoanalytical discourses about homosexuality to narrate gays and lesbians’ own self-images.²⁰ Literature is, therefore, presented as a textual means to gain a voice and to allow for the propagation of homosexual histories that do not necessarily converge with conventional accounts of the history of homosexuality.

Waters and Hollinghurst both contemplate historiographic metafiction in their novels and they point to the ways in which homosexuality has been overlooked in dominant accounts about London’s history. However, it is relevant to stress that self-reflexivity in their works is carried out in different ways. In Waters’ neo-Victorian fiction, for instance, there is a clear goal to provide a piece of a fictional lesbian historiography that addresses lesbian invisibility in the nineteenth century. In her 1940s fiction, historiographic metafiction is employed to re-work the myth of sexual freedom during the war and, in *The Night Watch*, to challenge ‘the myth of the Blitz’ by showing that, though women and sexual minorities did obtain more freedom during the war, they were still excluded from the national ideal of citizenship in many ways. In his turn, Hollinghurst is more interested in explicitly addressing homosexual promiscuity and experimentation as constitutive parts of elitist, traditional, and conservative parts of English society, present in well-established institutions such as the Oxbridge circles, the Parliament, and in the English literary canon. Moreover, in setting two of his novels during the Thatcherite period, Hollinghurst addresses the effects of neoliberalism in gay culture by shedding light on the ways in which privileged gay men reproduce forms of oppression based on race, class, and gender. While in Waters’ works, especially in the neo-Victorian novels, historiographic metafiction is deployed as a means to re-vise traditional historical narratives, Hollinghurst’s use of historiographic metafiction is devised to show an overt conservative and oppressive side of male homosexual culture that is often dismissed.

There have been some disputes about whether or not Waters’ works pertain to the subgenre of historiographic metafiction, especially in regard to her neo-Victorian novels.²¹ Yates, for instance, argues that Waters’ *Tipping the Velvet* is a re-visionist historical novel, instead of a historiographic metafiction, because it “is playful rather than radically confrontational”.²² Yates’ comment about the novel’s ‘playfulness’ concerns the fact that *Tipping the Velvet* is based on Chris Hunt’s *Street Lavender*, published in 1986.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 249.

20 Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

21 Cf. Alden, “Accompanied by Ghosts’: The Changing Uses of the Past in Sarah Waters’s Lesbian Fiction” in Jones and O’Callaghan (eds.) *Sarah Waters and Contemporary Feminisms*, pp. 61–65; Mitchell, *History and Cultural Memory in Neo-Victorian Fiction*, pp. 117–121; de Groot, “Something New and a Bit Startling’: Sarah Waters and the Historical Novel” in Mitchell (ed.) *Sarah Waters*, pp. 60–61; Yates, “‘But it’s only a novel, Dorian’: Neo-Victorian Fiction and the Process of Re-Vision”, pp. 192–199.

22 Yates, “‘But it’s only a novel, Dorian’: Neo-Victorian Fiction and the Process of Re-Vision”, p. 191.

For Yates, Waters' intertextual reference to Hunt's novel is merely an adaptation that replaces the original's gay protagonist with a queer cross-dressing one.²³ Moreover, Yates does not see self-reflexive potential in Waters' representation of male impersonation, street prostitution, gender, and sexual relations in the novel, instead suggesting that *Tipping the Velvet*'s "delight in anachronism"²⁴ conveys contemporary Victorian revival and does not necessarily criticize or challenge historical representations of the late-Victorian period.

The re-visionary character of Waters' novel, in Yates' view, only relates to the author's concern in depicting lesbian history in fiction by revising traditional notions of the *flâneur* and by presenting lesbian spaces in London that "are not generally the subject of nineteenth century canonical novels".²⁵ Yates' discussion of 're-visionary fiction' draws from Peter Widdowson's definition of the concept, which characterizes it as novels that "write back to' – indeed rewrite – canonic [sic] texts from the past".²⁶ Although she recognizes that Hunt's text is not canonical, Yates' debate about intertextuality in Waters' novel is only associated with *Street Lavender*, as she suggests that *Tipping the Velvet* is only based on the 1986 text, completely overlooking Waters' further intertextual references associated with the picaresque novels, with the male impersonation acts in music halls and with the Dickensian tradition of the contrasts between light and darkness and wealth and poverty in different areas in London.

Waters has openly recognized Hunt's novel as an influence in writing *Tipping the Velvet*.²⁷ In the same interview, though, she also mentions other writers who inspired the creation of the novel, such as Renée Vivien and Natalie Barney, who wrote at the turn of the nineteenth century, and Ellen Galford and Isabel Miller, who were engaged with contemporary lesbian fiction. In her discussion about intertextuality in the novel, Yates neither cites these texts, nor does she consider the literary tradition of the picaresque and the cultural phenomenon of the male impersonation acts, something which Waters appropriates in order to depict a fictional account of what lesbian culture could have been in the period.

As Hutcheon has explained, intertextuality is a central feature of historiographic metafiction that articulates a double effect "in its inscribing of both historical and literary intertexts".²⁸ In other words, Hutcheon maintains that the intertexts that comprise a work of historiographic metafiction not only stem from literature, but also from historical discourses. Yates' discussions of intertextuality and re-visionary fiction is limited because it does not take into consideration Hutcheon's definition of intertextuality, and it also overlooks the complexities of Waters' historical representation in *Tipping the Velvet* and the ways in which it deliberately addresses lesbian invisibility in traditional historical accounts. As I have shown in my reading of *Tipping the Velvet*, Waters' articulation of the picaresque novel and male impersonation works

23 Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 194.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 191.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 189.

26 Widdowson, "Writing Back: Re-visionary Contemporary Fiction", p. 491.

27 Cf. Armitt, "Interview with Sarah Waters", p. 121.

28 Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, p. 128.

alongside Butlers' contemporary notions of gender performance, which is not merely used as a backdrop for the plot, but as a means to produce a fictional historical narrative about lesbian and cross-dressing cultures in London within the trope of the picaresque tradition.

In a reading of *Affinity* and *Fingersmith*, Mitchell also challenges the argument that these novels can be considered historiographic metafiction, arguing that both texts lack the elements of irony and parody that are pivotal to Hutcheon's conceptualization of the form.²⁹ Like in Yates' article, the problem with Mitchell's argument is that it does not reflect on Hutcheon's very specific definitions of irony and parody in her theoretical discussions. As elucidated in chapter 5, Hutcheon contends that irony operates in "an economy of exchange", in which "there is always a power imbalance"³⁰ in the act of communication. Hutcheon points out that irony is not always infused with humor, but is rather a rhetorical trope that destabilizes meanings of enunciations, which can then go onto subvert already consolidated power relations.³¹

Parody and irony are often discussed in tandem with each other in Hutcheon's work about historiographic metafiction, thereby implying the ways in which parody can often carry an ironic comment. Hutcheon emphasizes that the notion of parody consists in the "repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signalling of difference at the very heart of similarity", and "not the ridiculing imitation" of texts.³² Additionally, Hutcheon contends that parody "offer[s] a perspective on the present and the past which allows an artist to speak to a discourse from *within* it".³³ It is precisely these notions of parody that Waters conveys in *Tipping the Velvet* and *Affinity*, given that she goes back to literary traditions of the picaresque novel and the Victorian gothic, respectively, to create novels that, on the one hand, imitate these genres and, on the other hand, produce different meanings for them, since she writes these texts consciously showing that they are contemporary re-constructions of those literary genres. Waters' presentation of these genres is concerned with denaturalizing our understandings of gender and sexuality by stressing, as Alden points out, "the provisional nature of any enactment of gender [and sexuality], in any period".³⁴ Conversely, in re-working these literary traditions in a contemporary context, Waters reminds us that our present-day comprehension of gender and sexuality inevitably evokes Victorian conventions that were based on clear-cut gender divisions and homosexuality as a deviant form of sexuality.

Jerome de Groot contemplates this issue of present and past by focusing on Waters' usage of the word 'queer', as he argues that it "explicitly broker[s] a relationship

29 Mitchell, *History and Cultural Memory in Neo-Victorian Fiction*, pp. 117–118.

30 Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge*, p. 91.

31 Cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 2; 12.

32 *Idem*, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, p. 26. Emphasis in original.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 35. Emphasis in original.

34 Alden, "Accompanied by Ghosts: The Changing Uses of the Past in Sarah Waters's Lesbian Fiction" in Jones and O'Callaghan (eds.) *Sarah Waters and Contemporary Feminisms*, p. 66.

between the historically authentic and the contemporary”.³⁵ Throughout *Tipping the Velvet* and *Affinity*, ‘queer’ is used both to mean oddness and sexual dissidence, bringing out the word’s nineteenth century definition (the ‘historically authentic’) and its contemporary usage, which points to the different meaning of the exact same word. For instance, Nancy comments on the ways in which her life had changed after she met Kitty: “[i]t had been ordinary before she came; now it was full of *queer* electric spaces that she left ringing with music or glowing with light”.³⁶ In this sentence, ‘queer’ means both odd and sexual, bringing to the fore the meanings that pertain to the nineteenth and to the late-twentieth and the first decades of the twenty-first centuries.

In *Affinity*, however, the predominant meaning of the word is that of strangeness,³⁷ though there are also passages in which the employment of ‘queer’ suggests sexual connotations. The passage in which Margaret writes that “Priscilla said she did think it rather *queer* that, if Pa’s ghost should walk anywhere, it should be in the tweeny’s attic”;³⁸ this usage of the word implies the meaning of ‘queer’ as oddness. One instance in which we find the word ‘queer’ in its sexual connotation is in a scene in which Selina places her hand on Margaret’s breast, who, in her turn, moves “as if [Selina’s] fingers had some charge to them. She had found [...] the *queerest* chance – she had found [...] my locket; and now she began to trace its outline with her fingertips”.³⁹ Here, ‘queer’ is not used as a term that contemplates sexual deviancy, but it clearly suggests sexual desire between Selina and Margaret, which is figured within the framework of the supernatural and spiritualism in the novel.

The arguments raised by Yates and Mitchell about Waters’ novels not bearing the characteristics that define Hutcheon’s concept of historiographic metafiction overlook Hutcheon’s explanations of pivotal concepts such as intertextuality, parody, and irony. Waters works with all of these devices in her novels, for she engages with intertexts from literature and history, she uses parody as a means to critically articulate past and present in her narratives, and she employs irony as a device that subverts conventional relations of gender, sexuality and, in *Affinity*, of class.

In *The Night Watch*, Waters’ deployment of these devices is more concerned with debunking the myth of sexual freedom during the war and the myth of national unity during the Blitz by devising a narrator that focalizes on individual experiences in the Second World War. Alden notes that, in this novel specifically, Waters uses historiographic metafiction “to signal the incompleteness of what we know”, since “she turns to the literary and historical archives to rewrite lesbian fiction of the time in a way that testifies to the reality she finds in the historical record, but which would

35 de Groot, “‘Something New and a Bit Startling’: Sarah Waters and the Historical Novel” in Mitchell (ed.) *Sarah Waters*, p. 62. He points out that the word ‘queer’ is used 43 times in *Tipping the Velvet*, while it is repeated 40 times in *Affinity* (p. 63).

36 Waters, *Tipping the Velvet*, p. 38. My emphasis.

37 Cf. Carroll, “Rethinking generational history: Queer histories of sexuality in neo-Victorian Feminist Fiction”, p. 143.

38 Waters, *Affinity*, p. 57. My emphasis.

39 *Ibid.*, p. 88. My emphasis.

not have been publishable at the time".⁴⁰ In doing so, Alden explains, Waters narrates the often suppressed experience of women, most of them lesbians and some gay men, which she re-constructs by researching historical archive and testimonies, instead of formulating an imagined story that recounts lesbian experience, as she had done in the neo-Victorian novels.

Although Hollinghurst's novels have not yet been regarded as historiographic metafiction, I also designate them as belonging to this subgenre in my study because of his use of intertextuality, parody, and irony as a means to write historical novels. However, as I will elucidate in the following section, the ways in which Hollinghurst's works devise these literary devices distinguish themselves from Waters'. In *The Swimming-Pool Library*, for instance, intertextuality is used in tandem with the autobiographical genre and with neoliberalism; irony is the novel's main trope, which guarantees Will's detachment from his surroundings and gives the account about gay culture in London an exaggerated and overtly sexualizing aesthetic. The novel's parodic stance can be regarded in Hutcheon's term, in which it operates as a means to convey ironic difference and to articulate past and present, in the sense that Will's autobiographical narrative is composed alongside excerpts of Charles' diaries. As I have pointed out in chapter 5, Will's and Charles' texts about their lives in London both indicate the similarities and differences in the distinct historical periods which they experienced in the city, Charles having lived in London in the beginning of the twentieth century and Will enjoying the apex of his youth in the 1980s.

In *The Line of Beauty*, I have shown that intertextuality is closely related to Henry James' works and to the Jamesian center of consciousness, which are constructed according to Thatcherite politics and ideology. In featuring aestheticism within the 1980s neoliberal framework, as Hannah contends,⁴¹ it is possible to argue that Hollinghurst parodies the figure of the aesthete, found in Nick's character, by contextualizing the love for beauty with the 1980s culture of excess, individualism, and avarice. As I have elucidated in my reading of the novel in chapter 6, Hollinghurst's portrayal of the aesthete is constituted through irony, associating art with Thatcherite politics and, to some extent, endorsing Nick's detachment to his surroundings.⁴²

In *The Stranger's Child*, irony, intertextuality, and parody are employed in the construction of the country house as an imaginary, historical, and cultural signifier and they are, as my reading of the novel has shown, articulated thoroughly through Hollinghurst's use of metafiction. In emphasizing how much of history is elided and how historical narratives change over time, *The Stranger's Child* displays an ironic and parodic use of the omniscient narrator. As I have argued in my reading of the novel in chapter 7, the space of authorship and of literary tradition are depicted in parallel with the spatial trope of the country house, narrating gay history in fragmented temporal frameworks that show how gay identity and culture have been assimilated

40 Alden, "Accompanied by Ghosts: The Changing Uses of the Past in Sarah Waters's Lesbian Fiction" in Jones and O'Callaghan (eds.) *Sarah Waters and Contemporary Feminisms*, p. 72.

41 Cf. Hannah, "The Public Life, The Private Stage: Henry James in Recent Fiction", p. 89

42 Cf. Eastham, "Inoperative Ironies: Jamesian Aestheticism and Post-Modern Culture in Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty*", pp. 509–510.

by English literature and culture. However, Hollinghurst's novel suggests that these spaces, of authorship and of the country house, are only available for the male characters, while the female characters, namely the protagonist Daphne Sawle, remain powerless and insignificant in the social hierarchies determined by these spaces. In this sense, historiographic metafiction in *The Stranger's Child* operates as a means to evince the ways in which historical accounts always produce exclusion, even when narration is purported to be both objective and neutral.

In this section, I have attempted to elucidate key concepts about the historical novel to discuss the complexities of Hutcheon's theories on historiographic metafiction and to explain how this form is devised in the novels that I have analyzed in the previous chapters. In the following section, I examine how the aspect of gender marks the differences in Waters' and Hollinghurst's deployment of historiographic metafiction by considering their usage of intertextuality particularly in relation to literary history.

Historiography, Intertextuality, and Literary History

As historiographic metafiction, Waters' and Hollinghurst's works put forward similar literary strategies, such as the use of intertextuality that associate literature and history, parody, irony, and also the construction of characters that are intimately related to their novels' spatial configuration. However, the Londons and histories of homosexuality that they convey are very different, specifically because of gender: Hollinghurst's London is inhabited almost exclusively by gay men, whereas Waters' is a London dominated largely by lesbians. Both authors rely on distinct literary and historical frameworks and sources when writing historical fictions that narrate gay and lesbian histories in England. Hollinghurst looks back into established male literary canons and at a gay history that is marked by juridical prohibition and persecution. As women have had their position widely relegated throughout history, literature, and culture in general, Waters seeks to write a history of lesbians in the nineteenth century that has been overlooked, as well as to reinforce a female literary tradition that has only recently been established by feminist literary criticism in the second half of the twentieth century.

There are also dissonances in the ways in which they perform historical research for their novels, since Hollinghurst seems to draw the historical aspects in his texts from his own memories and experience in the 1980s, in tandem with "vast accretions of influences from the literary and artistic past".⁴³ Waters, however, engages with intense historical research from archival sources in the writing of her 1940s novels, *The Night Watch* and *The Little Stranger*, and also from fictional texts, particularly in her neo-Victorian novels, showing that "her novels are not only acts of writing but also the responses to and results of acts of reading".⁴⁴

43 Johnson, *Alan Hollinghurst and the Vitality of Influence*, p. 3.

44 Llewellyn, "Breaking the Mould? Sarah Waters and the Politics of Genre" in Heilmann and Llewellyn (eds.) *Metafiction and Metahistory in Contemporary Women's Writing*, pp. 195–210; p. 195.

At first glance, Waters' and Hollinghurst's turn to literature to write historical fiction may seem to be an identical strategy that defines their writing of historiographic metafiction. However, it is important to stress that their approaches to intertextuality are strongly embedded in the historical differences between literature produced by women and by men, since the cultural and historical acknowledgement of works written by male authors in a canonical tradition have been more evident than the works by female writers. Waters' and Hollinghurst's uses of intertextuality evoke both literary texts and history, as well as historical discourses about events such as the Victorian Era, the Second World War, and Thatcherism. Thus, we can argue that their intertextual employment of history and literature can be analyzed in light of Hutcheon's understanding of intertextuality which, in her words, "offers a sense of the presence of the past, but a past that can be known only from its texts, its traces – be they literary or historical".⁴⁵ She argues that historiographic metafiction contemplates the notion of history as a narration of events that is only available to us in textual forms. The ways in which Waters and Hollinghurst use literature and history as intertexts hinge on the differences ascribed to the production of female and male literary traditions and, as I will elucidate later in this section, on their representations of different historical periods.

Feminist literary criticism has pursued significant research and publishing that have cemented a tradition of women's writing that remained either secluded or was considered secondary in the eyes of a predominant masculine criticism for centuries. Works produced by scholars such as Elaine Showalter, Kate Millet, and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar,⁴⁶ as well as the foundation of publishers that focused exclusively on women (i.e., Virago, the Women's Press, and Pandora in the UK) paved the way for the promotion of women writers in the second half of the twentieth century. As Gilbert and Gubar have prominently elucidated, women authors in the nineteenth century have suffered from the 'anxiety of authorship', instead of the Bloomian patriarchal premise of male 'anxiety of influence'. Where Bloom postulates that male authors fear that their body of work could not exceed that of their predecessors or successors in literary history, Gilbert and Gubar claim that, for women authors, the real issue is "a radical fear that she cannot create, that because she can never become a 'precursor' the act of writing will isolate or destroy her".⁴⁷

Although it is true that women have overcome their 'anxiety of authorship' and have established themselves as significant actors in literary history and writing, the ways in which women have been depicted in nineteenth century literature is still a prominent theme in contemporary literary texts. Waters' re-workings of the late-Victorian period, for instance, challenge the images of 'angel' and 'monster' that Gilbert and Gubar have frequently found in their analyses of nineteenth century literature. In giving her characters agency and autonomy, Waters portrays women who struggle against domesticity and passivity. Even Margaret in *Affinity*, who commits suicide

45 Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, p. 125.

46 Cf. Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*; Millet, *Sexual Politics* and Gilbert and Gubar, *The Mad Woman in the Attic*.

47 Gilbert and Gubar, *The Mad Woman in the Attic*, p. 49.

in the end, attempts to fight against her condition of domestic imprisonment by engaging with intellectual activities in research and writing.

Remembering her father, Margaret reminisces about his idea of historiography, which evokes Hutcheon's and White's ideas about history and narrativity: "Pa used to say that any piece of history might be made into a tale: it was only a question of deciding where the tale began, and where it ended".⁴⁸ She is aware that the histories that her father conjured were not the same as the ones she wished to write about the women at Millbank Prison. For her late father, these tales "were rather easy to sift like that, to divide up and classify – the great lives, the great works, each one of them neat and gleaming and complete, like metal letters in a box of type".⁴⁹ While the histories her father wrote are described in terms of great achievements and classification, which recall male endeavors in history that have been recognized as such, Margaret begins her story about Millbank prison by recounting her own experience of visiting it. In replacing the omniscient form of historical narration with a diary form, Waters suggests that history can also be conveyed by memory and historical experience, evoking the frequently quoted feminist premise that 'the personal is also political'. The first pages of Margaret's diary show her own anxiety about being unable to reproduce her father's objective writing, and yet she engages with her own style of historiography which prioritizes subjective experience at Millbank over and against the necessity to access textual archives about the prison.

In contrast to Waters' assertion of women as authors who can fully contribute to historiography and literature in their own terms, Hollinghurst's construction of Daphne in *The Stranger's Child* infers Gilbert and Gubar's 'anxiety of authorship' as the protagonist struggles to become part of the realm of authorship and can never attain the success of the male protagonists in the novel. While all of the male authors in the novel work to surpass the success of their predecessors, and leave their contribution about Cecil's works and biography, Daphne attempts to find a place to fit as someone who *can* contribute to history, but who remains in a position of disadvantage in relation to her male counterparts. At the end of the novel, in the 1980s, Daphne is seen as a forgotten object inside a house that is full of junk, representing the scraps of women's history that could have been written, and which remained hidden and discarded until the biographer Paul Bryant finds her.⁵⁰ It could be that Hollinghurst's development of Daphne's character evinces the privileges that male writers and intellectuals still maintain until today. However, as I have argued in my reading of the novel, this view provides an anachronistic take on women's authorship, since we know that women's writing became an important issue in literary criticism from the 1970s onwards.

It was in this period that the role of women in history gains importance in historiography. As Eagleton notes, "[w]omen's literary history is seen as 'subterranean' or an 'undercurrent'. In both the titles and introductions to numerous texts [in the

48 Waters, *Affinity*, p. 1.

49 *Ibid.*

50 Cf. Hollinghurst, *The Stranger's Child*, pp. 470–471.

1970s], a vocabulary of ‘silence’, ‘absence’ and ‘hiding’ vies with one of ‘revelation’, ‘uncovering’, ‘discovery’.”⁵¹ If Daphne’s character somehow portrays the deficit in prestige and power for women writers, then Hollinghurst certainly constructs her as a woman who did not partake in the feminist struggles of the 1970s and neither has she been favored by it. In Hollinghurst’s work, what is at stake is unravelling the notion of a gay tradition *within* a heteronormative tradition of canonical literature and art. This, of course, can be found in the very criticisms of his work, such as Johnson’s *Alan Hollinghurst and the Vitality of Influence*. Hollinghurst’s intertextual dialogues speak to an already established male tradition of influence, in the Bloomian sense, in which he tries to assert male homosexuality as a pillar of this tradition that for so long tried to coin it as a deviant practice that took place in its margins.

Although Waters also uses intertextual references from male authors, such as Wilkie Collins in *Affinity* and Charles Dickens in both *Tipping the Velvet* and *Fingersmith*, she largely provides re-workings of popular and middle-brow literary genres, as is the case with her intertextual references of Elizabeth Bowen in *The Night Watch* and her use of the Victorian Gothic in *Affinity*. Unlike Waters’ interest in popular fiction, Hollinghurst refers to already established authors, such as Henry James, E.M. Forster, Rupert Brooke, Ronald Firbank, Oscar Wilde, and Christopher Isherwood. He revisits commonly depicted relationships in these writers’ literary works that range from the Wildean narcissistic Dorian Gray to Jamesian aestheticism and devotion to beauty, going through interracial and (post)colonial relationships in Forster’s novels and pederastic ones in Firbank’s, to inter-class relationships between upper- and working-class men prominently figured in Isherwood’s *Berlin Novels*. By providing intertextual dialogues exclusively with canonical literature, Hollinghurst places these literary traditions within specific contexts, locations, and historical periods, which mainly focus on the 1980s and the 2000s. In doing so, he claims “a tradition in which one homosexual generation precisely *schools* the next”,⁵² as Waters elucidates in her reading of *fin de siècle* gay authors, such as John Addington Symonds and Oscar Wilde.

Johnson, however, perceives it differently. He defines ‘literary influence’ as a way to “speak of the flowing material from the past into (‘influ-’) the present, not of the present struggling with or reorganizing the past”.⁵³ For Johnson, what is imperative in Hollinghurst’s work is to look into the ‘vitality’ of images and texts from the past in the present, not asking them how they have influenced subsequent generations or how these generations have responded to them, but eliminating a “normative timeline of progression” and the “biological timeline” that implicates that “a writerly son was begat by a writerly father”.⁵⁴ The problem with Johnson’s argument, however, is that he does not question the conditions and norms that warrant a specific work to *influence* those that are still being made. This is indeed a question of influence: what are the works that live throughout history and that influence the present? Who are the artists or

51 Eagleton, “Literary Representations of Women” in Plain and Sellers (eds.) *A History of Feminist Literary Criticism*, pp. 106–107.

52 Waters, *Wolfskins and Togas*, p. 41. Emphasis in original.

53 Johnson, *Alan Hollinghurst and the Vitality of Influence*, p. 5.

54 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

authors who create them? Johnson's readings of Hollinghurst's novels suggest that only white men can afford this privilege, as his readings of the author's novels relate Derek Jarman and Philip Glass's influence on *The Swimming-Pool Library*; Thomas Mann's and Benjamin Britten's on *The Folding Star*; the architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright in *The Spell* and Henry James' and Aubrey Beardsley's impact on *The Line of Beauty*.

It is impossible to dissociate Hollinghurst's novels from the canonical presence of his predecessors, as his intertextual references predominantly allude to the works of male artists who are greatly consecrated in various artistic realms, such as architecture, visual arts, music and, primarily, literature. The dialogue with 'homophile' canons is also a means to write gay history by emphasizing how earlier models of male friendship and homosexuality are still present in contemporary gay culture and identity, thereby creating what Sedgwick calls 'minority canons'. Sedgwick is very critical about the formation of a minority canon that bases itself on the author's sexuality, since "it seems to falter in important ways in the implicit analysis it offers of the mechanisms of homophobia and of same-sex desire".⁵⁵ For Sedgwick, the problem with creating minor gay canons is that it isolates them as authors whose sexuality defines their work and, moreover, that it separates them into a label of 'gay literature' as if they had no relationship whatsoever with the 'great literary canon'. In this sense, she proposes that it makes more sense to look into the ways in which homophobia, homosocial desire, and homosexuality are represented in the master canon, under the premise that these topics have indeed been present in Western literature throughout its history. Hollinghurst's use of canonical intertextual references does not aim to create a 'minority canon', but rather insists on asserting gay writers as constitutive parts of the 'master canon'. Moreover, I believe that Hollinghurst's engagement with literary canonical tradition implicates the relevance that is still attributed to 'The Master Canon' and, therefore, asserts that his own work can be a part of this tradition.

Adapted to the historical and cultural frameworks of the late twentieth century, Hollinghurst's deployment of literary and cultural traditions subverts, to some extent, the dichotomous assumption that places straight culture as conservative and gay culture as progressive, given that he evinces the fractures and highly conventional behavior of gay men. It asserts the fact that has been historically and culturally denied: that the repression of male homosexuality, in its juridical, medical, and social forms, did not prevent it from greatly informing the most traditional (and conservative) sectors of English society. As Mitchell notes, Hollinghurst's works go back to Foucault's notions about the classification of sexuality that eventually leads to the intelligibility of homosexuality as the deviant form of sexual practice in many ways. In openly exposing gay sex, cruising, and promiscuity as key elements of a 'gay life-style', Hollinghurst enacts "a positive and defiant appropriation of the homosexual narrative and identity" by depicting a gay subculture that "sits in an uneasy relation with the (heterosexual) culture at large: *subculture* can signify both *subversion* and *subordination*".⁵⁶ In fact, I would go further in her argument by stating that Hollinghurst's portrayal of gay subcultures

55 Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, p. 51.

56 Mitchell, "Alan Hollinghurst and Homosexual Identity" in Titch and Mengham (eds.) *British Fiction Today*, pp. 42–43. Emphasis in original.

speaks more to a subordination to heteronormative imposing norms regarding class, race, and gender than to an actual subversion of it.

While it is true that *The Swimming-Pool Library* and *The Line of Beauty* caused outrage in the conservative media, because of their overtly sexual and promiscuous content, more than thirty years after Hollinghurst's first novel, it is possible to look into his highly sexual, hedonistic, and individualist gay protagonists as products of neoliberal impact on sexual politics. If *The Swimming-Pool Library*'s Soho gay scene was seen as a focus of resistance throughout the twentieth century, as a subculture that subverts, then reading the novel in the third decade of the twenty-first century allows us to already detect homonormative features in Will Beckwith's relationship to both the gay spaces in which he circulates and in the relationships he maintains with other men, especially men of color and working-class men.

For Mitchell, the conflation of nineteenth century gay identity, largely informed by Oscar Wilde's persona⁵⁷ and late twentieth-century gay male sexuality, is articulated through the link between "capitalism and sex [which] is, arguably, commodified through the practice of cruising".⁵⁸ Mitchell argues that Hollinghurst creates a sexualized version of the nineteenth century aesthete, who had previously been only effeminate, to represent "the apotheosis of masculinity, and to [indicate] the progressive 'masculinization' of homosexual culture since the 1970s".⁵⁹ Although she specifically talks about Will Beckwith in this passage, I believe that this can be said about all of Hollinghurst's protagonists, whose masculinity depends on a hyper-sexualized gay self-image and also on the objectification of the women around them.

White masculinity in Hollinghurst's novels, however, must also be regarded alongside the privileged world that these gay men create for themselves, especially in their interclass and interracial relationships, as well as in their relations with women. Where cross-class relationships have been considered to be a means of comradeship between men and a manifestation of social change,⁶⁰ there is a constant mark of social hierarchy that is maintained by white privilege, upper-class sexual exploitation, and lower-class apparent subservience in Hollinghurst's protagonists' relationships. In *The Swimming-Pool Library*, it is sex and cruising that modestly subvert these norms, at least briefly. One instance includes Will's sexual encounter with an Argentinian man named Gabriel. As he shows Will a gigantic dildo that he plans to get inside of him, Will panics and wishes to leave. Gabriel gets angry and acts like he has been hurt: "I could whip you [...] for what you did to my country in the war". Will then leaves, arguing that Gabriel has been taking "the sex and politics metaphor a bit too seriously".⁶¹

57 Cf. Chapter 1 in Sinfield's *The Wildean Century*, in which he elucidates the influence of the Oscar Wilde trials on the cultural and social perception of male homosexuality in Britain. He writes: "it is hard to regard Wilde as other than the apogee of gay experience and expression, because that is the position we have accorded him in our cultures" (p. 2).

58 Mitchell, "Alan Hollinghurst and Homosexual Identity", p. 47.

59 *Ibid.*

60 Cf. Cook, "Queer Conflicts: Love, Sex and War, 1914–1967" in Cook (ed.), *A Gay History of Britain*, p. 161.

61 Hollinghurst, *The Swimming-Pool Library*, p. 275.

In this scene, he uses sex to criticize British military and imperialist supremacy by trying to make Will feel the consequences of the Falklands war.

While Hollinghurst's novels convey ambivalence regarding stances in sexual politics, in which it becomes difficult to detect whether or not there is criticism in the conservative milieus which he represents, in Waters' novels there are explicit strategies to critically engage with history and to assert the participation of lesbian women in history. These two literary approaches differentiate themselves because Hollinghurst upholds a willful re-working of a canonical 'homophile' literary tradition, whereas Waters aims to *create* a tradition of lesbian historiography and literature that has never really been considered historical by normative accounts. In fact, this has been an important point that Doan and Waters have made in their article about lesbian historical fiction, in which they write that, where "one [male] generation passes its masculine privileges on to the next [...] [t]he suppression or absence of lesbian activity from the historical record [...] has limited the constituency across which a lesbian genealogy might be traced".⁶² They argue that the unequal amount of information available, both in historical documents and archives as well as in literary texts, has hindered "women to imagine themselves as participants in an unbroken tradition of same-sex love".⁶³

It is precisely these absences that inspired Waters' early works, particularly the neo-Victorian novels, which not only fill "in the gaps, refocusing attention to the previously marginalized", but that also "work backwards and forwards, commenting upon contemporary lesbian identity and the workings of sexuality in modernity".⁶⁴ As Jones and O'Callaghan contend, Waters is very much aware of the marginalized status that women have had in both history and historiography, since she is well-read on feminist literary history, having herself been strongly influenced by the Women Liberation Movement in Britain in the 1970s.⁶⁵ Jones and O'Callaghan's collection of essays confirm the trajectory that Waters' public persona and her writing suggest: that her engagement with literature cannot be dissociated from her political stances within feminist politics and practices.

Alden sees a development in Waters' fiction that indicates "a shift from a queer, radical and playful mode in the early work [the neo-Victorian novels], through to a more traditionally feminist approach to testifying to lost lesbian experience in *The Night Watch*".⁶⁶ Alden detects a difference in Waters' use of historiographic metafiction, which is linked to discussions about lesbian historiography and to Waters' methodology in the early work that involves "playfully reinventing and appropriating history".⁶⁷

62 Doan and Waters, "Making up lost time: Contemporary lesbian writing and the invention of history" in Alderson and Anderson (eds.) *Territories of Desire in Queer Culture: Refiguring the Contemporary Boundaries*, pp. 12–13.

63 *Ibid.*, p. 13.

64 de Groot, "Something New and a Bit Starling': Sarah Waters and the Historical Novel" in Mitchell (ed.) *Sarah Waters*, p. 62.

65 Cf. chapter 1 in Jones and O'Callaghan (eds.) *Sarah Waters and Contemporary Feminisms*.

66 Alden, "Accompanied by Ghosts: The Changing Uses of the Past in Sarah Waters's Lesbian Fiction" in Jones and O'Callaghan (eds.) *Sarah Waters and Contemporary Feminisms*, p. 61.

67 *Ibid.*, p. 72.

She perceives Waters' deployment of historiographic metafiction in the neo-Victorian novels as "a way of resolving the conflicts between the two schools of thought on lesbian history, continuism, and alterity".⁶⁸ For Alden, Waters' works confirm the historical research advanced by Freccero and Fradenberg that attests to the existence of same-sex desire among women in the past, although they do not necessarily correspond to the same models of female homosexuality that exist today.⁶⁹

For Alden, Waters' neo-Victorian novels do not aim to provide *truth* about the historical past of lesbian women. Rather, they are self-reflexive texts that articulate reflections about contemporary lesbian identity by making "explicit the provisional nature of any enactment of gender, in any period, and simultaneously [...] the performative, provisional nature of historical fiction more generally".⁷⁰ Victorian culture is imaginatively performed to challenge the assumption of women's sexual passivity and acceptance of domesticity in the neo-Victorian novels. In accruing contemporary notions of lesbian sexuality to the nineteenth century, Waters re-creates versions of the Victorian past that include lesbians and that assert female agency to make the argument that gender and sexuality are, in many ways, constituted by historical conditions. Her novels thus re-enact Victorian London and its culture by including reflections about our contemporary understandings of gender and sexual identity, trying to imagine what a lesbian past might have looked like during the nineteenth century.

For instance, Waters employs notions of Butlerian performance and performativity, which are parts of contemporary discussions of gender, sexuality, identity, and subjectivity, as a means to evince that what we understand about gender and sexual identities is always provisional and depend upon the historical periods that are at stake. This is particularly the case with Waters' neo-Victorian novels, in which representations of history and historiography largely hinge on notions of performance and performativity, as I have shown in my analysis of *Tipping the Velvet* in chapter 2. In *Affinity* and in *Fingersmith* performance is also crucial for the development of the plots, specifically regarding the twists and artifices that demand the reader's full engagement with the text. If in *Affinity* it is the performance of spiritualism in séance circles that grants Selina and Ruth their respective freedom, in *Fingersmith* Maud Lilly is the character who seduces the reader with her performance of naivety and innocence, which grants her an escape from her uncle's exploitation and from domestic incarceration. In both novels, the characters' performance is crucial for the readers' engagement with the text, as we are often misled by the narrators' accounts and missing pieces of the plot, which sometimes direct our sympathies towards the villains, as it happens with Ruth Viger's involvement in Selina's plot and Maud Lilly's plans with Gentleman and Mrs. Sucksby.

Waters' early work appropriates well-established Victorian literary genres, such as the sensation novel, the *Bildungsroman*, the picaresque novel, social realism, and the

68 *Ibid.*, p. 65.

69 Cf. Fradenberg and Freccero, *Premodern Sexualities*, pp. xvii–xx.

70 Alden, "Accompanied by Ghosts: The Changing Uses of the Past in Sarah Waters's Lesbian Fiction", in Jones and O'Callaghan (eds.) *Sarah Waters and Contemporary Feminisms*, p. 66.

ghost story, in order to include lesbian protagonists. In a move to create a lesbian-feminist literary tradition, Waters sees the necessity to introduce protagonists who convey different possibilities of being a lesbian in specific social and historical contexts. This is, in fact, the point made by O'Callaghan in her article about female masculinity in Waters' novels. She argues that "Waters rejects the denigration of butch women by celebrating erotic variants of female masculinity and its connectivity to forms of lesbian desire and lesbian subjectivity", thereby valuing female masculinity instead of turning to "dominant views by mainstream feminists and (some) lesbian-feminists alike, who view masculine women as traitors for capitulating to masculine stereotypes and rejecting their own femininity".⁷¹ In this sense, Waters also uses metafiction to review the histories that have already been written about lesbian women and to address the contentions that have emerged throughout the process of writing these histories in both the neo-Victorian novels and in the 1940s works.

In the neo-Victorian novels, metafiction works as a strategy to point out the absences in historiography and to raise questions about cultural and historical visibility, given that Waters self-consciously employs literature to yield reflections about lesbian invisibility in public discourse. In these works, the present and the past co-exist precisely because contemporary gender, queer, and feminist theories are used as tools to reflect upon and to re-write history, drawing attention to the ways in which historiography depends on language and narration to convey an account of the past. As de Groot maintains, historical novels are a "re-enactment, a recreation, a performance of pastness",⁷² whose goal lies mainly in undermining dominant discourses about history and historiography.

Once Waters moves her historical research to the 1940s, the performance of the past cannot be exclusively imagined, but it must be depicted in dialogue with historical archive and the testimonials of those who survived the Second World War. Alden contends that Waters' use of metafiction in *The Night Watch* functions as a means "to deepen the reader's emotional connection with the characters and situations depicted",⁷³ as opposed to her earlier construction of the past as a way to recover possible histories of lesbian women. Waters' directing her research to documents, memories, and testimonies about the Second World War implies the use of official historical records to create a novel that presents interpretations of that same archival material, thereby providing a self-reflexive account of the myth of the Blitz. Thus, I will delve further into Alden's argument about the creation of emotional responses between reader and text to add that Waters' accounts of the Second World War and its aftermath – both in *The Night Watch* and in *The Little Stranger*, where the plot begins in the post-war period – inflect criticism about the ideal of national unity and progress.

71 O'Callaghan, "Grisley 'L' business': Re-valuing Female Masculinity and Butch Subjectivity in *Tipping the Velvet* and *The Night Watch*" in Jones and O'Callaghan (eds.) *Sarah Waters and Contemporary Feminisms*, p. 196.

72 de Groot, "Something New and a Bit Startling': Sarah Waters and the Historical Novel" in Mitchell (ed.) *Sarah Waters*, p. 57.

73 Alden, "Accompanied by Ghosts': The Changing Uses of the Past in Sarah Waters's Lesbian Fiction" in Jones and O'Callaghan (eds.) *Sarah Waters and Contemporary Feminisms*, p. 62.

What these novels show is that, in spite of women's engagement with the war and of the apparent sexual freedom during the period, women and sexual minorities were not granted the freedom of choice that had been promised to them.

This is particularly evident in both Kay Langrish's and Caroline Ayres' characters. As I have discussed in my reading of *The Night Watch*, Kay is a 'ghostly' presence in the novel because her female masculinity does not fit into the post-war project for women. A similar belief is depicted in *The Little Stranger*, which is set in a country house during the post-war period and in which the spinster Caroline Ayres struggles with the social environment around her, which expects her to get married and to be more feminine. Waters' portrayal of the Second World War and the post-war period cannot simply be regarded as a nostalgic representation of the past, as Cavalíé has argued in her reading of *The Night Watch*. She claims that the novel turns "history into an object of consumption, and paradoxically enough, comfort for the contemporary reader",⁷⁴ and she affirms that Waters chooses to efface the traumatic consequences of the war to recount a nostalgic past of normality during the Blitz.

As I have shown in my reading, the novel neither creates a nostalgic past, nor does it diminish the critical consequences of traumatic events such as the Second World War. Rather, *The Night Watch* works as an intertextual narrative that speaks to other seminal texts, such as Elizabeth Bowen's and Graham Greene's works, by critically appropriating the myth of the Blitz and its literary representations to bring out aspects about gender and the period's sexual politics. It is true that Waters feeds into the Blitz as a literary and historical narrative; however, in producing a narrative that is composed by several focalizers, Waters undermines the pervasive idea of national unity by showing that, though all characters were somehow involved with the war (even Duncan, who refuses to take part in it), they definitely had very different experiences during that period. In starting the novel in 1947, after the war, we encounter a melancholic world of loss, in which the denial of public participation of women, who were now expected to go back to their domestic activities or to take up underpaid jobs, proves that national unity during the war had, in fact, been a narrative deployed as a means of control and governance.

As Rose has compellingly elucidated throughout her work, Churchill's government and its use of propaganda were crucial to the development of discourses about national identity, which served populist ends and were effective to the extent that they "either subsum[ed] or deni[ed] the significance of other identities".⁷⁵ In *The Night Watch*, Waters has produced a historiography of the period that explores the fractions in national unity and that exposes the points in which they are dissonant. Where the women in the novel perceive urban destruction as an opportunity for emancipation and for political agency, Duncan, as a conscientious objector, experiences the war as a period of physical and mental incarceration, since his individual freedom is severely restricted. While Julia's post-war life is successful, given that she becomes an established writer of detective novels, Helen's is marked by loneliness and by the

74 Cavalíé, "'It's like gold leaf, and now it's rising, peeling away': Britishness and Exoticism in Sarah Waters' *The Night Watch*", p. 85.

75 Rose, *Which People's War?*, p. 9.

everyday life in a job at a dating agency, a job for which she does not care. In their stories, it is class that grants Julia privileges of greater opportunities in the post-war period, whereas Helen's less advantageous education leaves her with less rewarding jobs. Waters appropriates the myth of the Blitz to dismantle its formative assumption of equality and sense of belonging. In shedding light on the gender, sexual, and class differences that mark the characters' trajectories in the narrative, Waters recounts historical events that have been obscured by the overwhelming presence of the myth about the war serving as a revolutionary breakthrough for marginalized subjects.

Waters and Hollinghurst both employ similar literary strategies in writing historiographic metafiction. However, as I have elucidated in this section, the differences that are inherent to men's and women's participation in literary, social, and cultural history play a great role in the ways in which they re-work and represent history. While Hollinghurst's works reclaim gay men's participation as part of the 'center' of culture, rather than as something marginal to it, Waters' novels specifically address lesbian and female invisibility in these realms. These differences also influence the ways in which they depict London, its history and sexual geography. In the following section, I want to postulate that Hollinghurst's and Waters' historical narratives about homosexuality must be examined in tandem with London's sexual and gender geographies in specific historical periods. If, as Hodgkins argues, the successful reception of historical fiction relies on "the recreation of imagined otherness, measured especially through the detail of everyday life (food, clothes, pastimes, preoccupations), and also through [...] accuracy and verifiability of the content",⁷⁶ then I would argue that the construction of London plays a very central role in the case of these historical novelists, in their acclaimed critical reception, and in their discussions about gay and lesbian history.

Urban Mobility

In her discussion about gay and lesbian historical novels, Waters asserts that the historical novel "tells us less about the past than about the circumstances of its own production – [it] reveals, if nothing else, the historiographical priorities of its author, or its author's culture."⁷⁷ In the context of contemporary debates about gender and sexuality, Waters' and Hollinghurst's novels contemplate an affirmative presence of gays and lesbians in England's history, featuring London as a place that has both informed gay and lesbian culture and as a place that has been greatly influenced by queer practices. However, as I have shown, male and female same-sex desire played distinct roles in history and in London's sexual geographies, which also contributes to the differences encountered in gay and lesbian historiographies.

76 Hodgkin, "The Witch, the Puritan and the Prophet: Historical Novels and Seventeenth-Century History" in Heilman and Llewellyn (eds.) *Metafiction and Metahistory in Contemporary Women's Writing*, p. 15.

77 Waters, *Wolfskins and Togas*, p. 8.

While Hollinghurst's novels have turned to canonical literature and art to highlight the intersections between an increasingly gentrified gay subculture and conservative (heteronormative) tradition time and again, Waters has worked to make lesbian urban culture visible, since "[m]uch of lesbian subcultural life took place in spaces and spheres that have been largely invisible to historians".⁷⁸ Houlbrook also addresses the invisibility of lesbian spaces in London in his work, arguing that one of the reasons for lesbian invisibility is the fact that women's circulation in public spaces was restricted. Another reason that he attributes to the lack of documentation of lesbian spaces is the fact that women have always had smaller wages in comparison to men, which "lessen[ed] their ability to access commercial venues or private residential space".⁷⁹ Access to these spaces facilitated the encounter of gay men in many ways, as we know from spaces such as molly houses in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and queer subcultures in the West End in the late Victorian period and in the early twentieth century.⁸⁰

The invisibility of lesbian culture in London is also linked to their invisibility within the law, given that female sexual deviance was commonly dealt with in terms of prostitution.⁸¹ Studies about lesbian history and the discussions about lesbian historiography have enabled research about spaces that were frequented by lesbian women in the second half of the twentieth century.⁸² Gardiner's research about the Gateways club, which collected oral histories from lesbians who attended the venue, is an important source of lesbian sociability in the post-war period.⁸³ Munt has also pursued significant work about lesbians and space by conceptualizing a lesbian *flâneur* who appropriates the gaze of urban space, which had been historically entitled to white men, in order to assert images of urban mobility as a central characteristic that affirms "lesbians *as women* inhabiting the urban environment".⁸⁴

Waters and Hollinghurst articulate notions of urban mobility and the *flâneur* that are strongly shaped by historical frameworks regarding men and women in the city

78 Gowning, "History" in Medhurst and Munt (eds.) *Lesbian and Gay Studies: a Critical Introduction*, p. 61.

79 Houlbrook, *Queer London*, p. 10.

80 Cf. Chapters 2 and 3 in Houlbrook's *Queer London; Cook's London and the Culture of Homosexuality, 1885–1914*; Cocks' "Secrets, Crimes and Diseases, 1800–1914" in Cook (ed.) *A Gay History of Britain*, pp. 103–144.

81 Cf. Houlbrook, *Queer London*, p. 10 and Jennings, *Tomboys and Bachelor Girls*, pp. 7; 111.

82 Cf. Gardiner, *From the Closet to the Screen: Women at the Gateways Club, 1945–1985*; Jennings, *Tomboys and Bachelor Girls*; Munt, *Heroic Desire: Lesbian Identity and Cultural Space*; Nestle, "Restriction and Reclamation: Lesbian Bars and Beaches of the 1950s", in Ingram, Bouthillette and Retter *Queers in Space*, pp. 61–68; Rothenberg, "And She Told Two Friends: Lesbians Creating Urban Social Space" in Bell and Valentine (eds.) *Mapping Desire*, pp. 165–181; Valentine, "(Re)negotiating the 'Heterosexual Street': Lesbians Production of Space" in Duncan (ed.) *BodySpace*, pp. 145–153; Wolfe, "Invisible Women in Invisible Places: The production of Social Space in Lesbian Bars" in Ingram, Bouthillette and Retter *Queers in Space*, pp. 301–324.

83 Cf. Gardiner, *From the Closet to the Screen: Women at the Gateways Club, 1945–1985* and chapter 4 in Jennings' *Tomboys and Bachelor Girls*.

84 Munt, "The Lesbian *Flâneur*" in Bell and Valentine (eds.) *Mapping Desire*, p. 120. Emphasis in original.

and, subsequently, how they relate to the specificities of male and female homosexuality. In this sense, the same geographical location in London acquires distinct signifiers that depend upon the characters' subject position in a specific moment of London's history of sexuality and their shaping of the city's sexual geography. West London, Soho, and the West End, for instance, feature in many of their novels, displaying their importance for gay and lesbian histories of London and the areas' ongoing shifts. While the nineteenth century West End portrayed in *Tipping the Velvet* is Nancy Astley's stage for exploring an underground gay scene, Will Beckwith's 1980s experience of the same area is very sexualized, but as a consolidated 'gay village' that is in the process of becoming gentrified.

For Nancy, walking the streets of the West End as a boy provides a means to enter the world of cruising and renting, something which she could not partake in as a girl. Being approached by a man in the Burlington Arcade,⁸⁵ for instance, shows Waters' specificity in depicting London's sexual geographies. The Burlington Arcade is located in the West End, near Jermyn Street and Regent Street, places that were popular as both commercial and cruising sites. In the late Victorian period, Jermyn Street was well known for its Turkish baths and as "a particularly male area of London, that caters for men's pleasures".⁸⁶ Commenting on the intersections between this street's commercial and sexual aspects, Turner explains that "those moments of reflection that appear in a shop window" are moments that characterize Jermyn Street as a "particularly significant street in the queer map of the West End" that "has been continually reimagined and appropriated queerly".⁸⁷

Though Nancy is not looking at a window display in Jermyn Street, she is very close by, partaking in the same idle and quotidian activity of window-shopping when a gentleman, who is interested in sex, approaches her. From exploring the West End's theatrical scene in the first part of the novel, Waters depicts the underground scene in the West End by appropriating images that are present in historical archives of male homosexuality. In doing so, she reflects on this scene, alongside cross-dressing culture in the area, as a means to imagine how a lesbian subject might have experienced these places in that context. As a place known for the conflation of sexual deviance and the theatrical and artistic scenes in the nineteenth century, Waters represents the West End as a cruising ground, as a queer space for cross-dressing culture, and as a potential site for a lesbian encounter.

If Nancy falls into the underground cruising scene in the West End by chance, Will Beckwith is very conscious of the sexual dynamics in the same area in the 1980s and makes the most of it, as long as he is the one who occupies a dominating position. Whether it is in Hyde Park, in the West End, or in Soho, Will's accounts of moving through the city are always extremely sexualized, making a simple journey in the tube "sexy and strange, like a gigantic game of chance".⁸⁸ Comparing Hollinghurst's first novel with Waters' debut novel, the first was published in 1988 and the latter in 1998, it

85 Cf. Waters, *Tipping the Velvet*, pp. 196–197.

86 Turner, *Backward Glances*, p. 78.

87 *Ibid.*

88 Hollinghurst, *The Swimming-Pool Library*, p. 47.

is possible to argue that the protagonists' strategies of walking, cruising, and sexually exploring the city rely on gendered practices of homosexuality and their histories.

The different uses of the West End and its sexual culture in Waters' and Hollinghurst's works also relates to the historical periods that they represent. Where Waters' nineteenth century depiction of the West End is deeply rooted in the sexual subculture of the area, which was linked to male homosexuality, cross-dressing, and prostitution,⁸⁹ Hollinghurst's portrayal of the same area in the 1980s is largely informed by the consumer culture that, according to Mort, began in the post-war period. Mort explains that in the 1950s, "the West End shops announced the advent of material abundance, sex, food and leisure [which] were promoted as the capital's major attractions".⁹⁰ By the 1980s, Soho, for instance, had become known for "a specific type of urban experience",⁹¹ which was attuned to its sex industry, growing commercial infrastructure, and bohemian lifestyle. As I have discussed in my reading of *The Swimming-Pool Library*, this is the image of Soho and its neighboring areas that Will construes in his autobiographical account of the city, given that he promotes his circulation in the West End as a cruising ground from which he must always profit. Will's walking in the 1980s West End, seeking casual sex and enjoying the area's sex industry is, as I have shown, deeply linked to Thatcherite neoliberal culture and ideology. If it is true, as Edwards argues, that the "sexual pick-up system is deeply set in a series of modern developments, including capitalism", then Will's highly commodified narration of his sexual encounters suggests "a reflection of the internalisation of industrial, capitalist values of efficiency and productivity [...] defined in terms of primarily male sexual activity".⁹² Will's gay identity and the relations that he maintains with other men indicate, as Mitchell puts it, "the apotheosis of masculinity"⁹³ that is strengthened by his privileges of whiteness, class, and education.

While Waters represents the West End in *Tipping the Velvet* as a space that allows the protagonist to engage with an ambiguous gender identity and with her homosexuality, both on the streets and in the theater, Hollinghurst depicts the West End as a place that sustains Will's consumerist and overtly masculine sex drive, which is addressed mainly to working-class men and men of color. In Eeckhout's words, Hollinghurst presents his male protagonists "unapologetically as gay men who [are] not inclined to reflect upon [...] their sexual identities, and who [show] little interest in extending their sexual activities into a politically radical, norm-breaking social project".⁹⁴ Published in a time in which the AIDS crisis was still at its peak, *The Swimming-Pool Library* was considered outrageous because it proudly touched upon

89 Cf. Cocks, *Nameless Offences*, pp. 94–105; Cook, *London and the Culture of Homosexuality, 1885–1914*, pp. 17–41.

90 Mort, *Capital Affairs*, p. 6.

91 *Idem*, *Cultures of Consumption*, p. 158.

92 Edwards, *Erotics and Politics*, p. 92.

93 Mitchell, "Alan Hollinghurst and Homosexual Identity" in Tew and Mengham (eds.) *British Fiction Today*, p. 47.

94 Eeckhout, "Alan Hollinghurst's Fictional Ways of Queering London" in Avery and Graham (eds.) *Sex, Time and Place: Queer Histories of London c. 1850 to the Present*, p. 203.

promiscuity and casual sex, which are certainly elements that pertain to gay culture and which the mainstream media and conservative sectors of society condemn very vehemently. Hollinghurst defied hysterical, homophobic and moralist viewpoints that had been so commonly disseminated by the media and public discourse in general by exposing promiscuity among gay men as a lifestyle of which many gay men are proud, and in describing the spaces that have been lost with the epidemic. Nevertheless, Hollinghurst's depiction of sexual hedonism does not portray promiscuity as the ultimate resistance to heteronormative puritanism. Rather, it points to the contradictions of gay liberation, in which sexual norms are ruptured, and yet other related forms of domination and oppression, especially those concerning class and race, are maintained.

In *The Swimming-Pool Library* cruising as a form of flânerie, in which gazes express sexual attraction, only works in West and Central London where Will flaunts his social privileges and where the gay scene has already consolidated many sexual meeting points for gay men. In the East End, as I have pointed out, the tables turn as Will attempts to cruise the streets, just as he did in Hyde Park or in Soho. Depicted as a site of poverty and social exclusion, Hollinghurst's construction of East London epitomizes the lives of those who had long been forgotten by social welfare. By contrast, Waters' depiction of East London in the nineteenth century recreates working-class communities that are charged with the potential for political transformation. O'Callaghan associates Waters' East London with the figure of the New Woman, arguing that Florence's social group of lesbians "represent various incarnations of the New Woman as butch and femme subjects; they are a mixed class-based community of lesbians who embrace an assortment of gendered and sexual aesthetics, employment, and economic circumstances".⁹⁵ It is interesting to note that Waters attempts to depict an East End that, in spite of its poverty, is politically active and displays a large sense of community life. However, in not articulating social conflicts between the East End and Central and West London, Waters falls into stereotypical images of working-class life and of marginalized neighborhoods as sites of tolerance and progress, overlooking the complexities involving urban inequalities, in which the relationships between affluent and poor neighborhoods are always uneasy. As I have discussed in my reading of *Tipping the Velvet*, Waters uncritically uses class as an identity category that marks the characters' poverty as a lifestyle, instead of reflecting on class as a social relation, as she does in the later novels *Affinity* and *The Night Watch*.

For Hollinghurst, East London is presented as a place in which Will's privileges do not guarantee a higher hierarchical position; therefore, this serves as a contrast to Soho and the cruising spots in West and Central London. It is the protagonist's social class that hinders his appropriation of the East End for queering purposes and this, in turn, puts him in a position of danger and vulnerability. In Waters' depiction of East London, however, we notice a part of the city that functions as a queer space that enhances the potential of lesbian and feminist encounters and, moreover, that

95 O'Callaghan, "Crisley 'L' business': Re-valuing Female Masculinity and Butch Subjectivity in *Tipping the Velvet* and *The Night Watch*" in Jones and O'Callaghan (eds.) *Sarah Waters and Contemporary Feminisms*, p. 202.

grants the protagonist a feeling of belonging and of freedom to perform her non-binary gender identity. My main criticism of Waters' first novel is that her vision of a lesbian queer space in the late nineteenth century can only work by effacing class conflicts. If the scene in Victoria Park is supposed to depict the great variety of women and men fighting for equality, in which women and feminism are given great political, historical, and cultural visibility, then this is only possible precisely because conflictive issues involving class and race, which permeate the histories of workers' and feminist movements in Britain, are elided.⁹⁶

Queer Domesticities

While Waters' novels portray a series of traditional spaces in London and in literature to re-write them as feminist spaces which enable lesbian desire, political agency, and historical and cultural visibility, Hollinghurst's novels take up the "greater awareness of male homosexual transgression"⁹⁷ in the city in order to draw attention to its inextricable connections to the most traditional tenets of British history and culture. Hollinghurst's characters do not need to appropriate space, having in mind that the circulation and participation of men in the public sphere is a historical given. Rather, what is at stake is precisely the negotiation between private and public spaces and how they articulate their sexual identities in each of these spheres. In novels such as *The Swimming-Pool Library* and *The Spell*, which is set in the 2000s, privileged white gay men enjoy their freedoms in private and public spheres, as if the former were a continuation of the latter. In other novels, such as *The Line of Beauty* and *The Stranger's Child*, notions of private and public spheres become more complex, especially because Hollinghurst's articulation of the domestic and urban spheres often overlap and become confounded, providing spatial frameworks in which characters must know how to draw the line between homosocial and homosexual relations as a means to safeguard their public images.

The domestic sphere figures as a significant trope in both Hollinghurst's and Waters' novels. In *Tipping the Velvet* and in *Affinity*, traditional notions of female domesticity are undermined by the protagonists' urges to escape and live beyond the boundaries of private seclusion, while the domestic sphere is mostly depicted as a space that enables lesbian desire in *The Night Watch*. In Hollinghurst's works, the domestic appears as a homonormative space that metaphorically stands for the domestication of gay culture in neoliberal times, and also as a public and political space in which white male privilege and bonding prevail as determining factors in maintaining the protagonists'

96 Gilroy discusses racism and race at length in *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*, insightfully analyzing racial and national discourses both in Conservative, Labour, and left-wing movements. In *Beyond the Pale*, Ware elucidates how race has been the most visible fracture in British feminist movements by presenting a series of essays that address the invisibility of race throughout feminist history in Britain.

97 Cook, *Queer Domesticities: Homosexuality and Home Life in Twentieth-Century London*, p. 7.

dominating positions in the realms of politics and literature. As Matt Cook has elucidated, “home has become a key symbol and material indicator of queer alienation, belonging, difference and ‘normalization’”.⁹⁸ As I have shown, most of the homes that Hollinghurst represents indicate affluent status and social prestige, as is the case with the Feddens’ mansion in Kensington Gardens in *The Line of Beauty* or Corley Court and Two Acres in *The Stranger’s Child*. Nevertheless, Hollinghurst also counters these representations of wealth with working-class homes, such as Leo Charles’ flat in *The Line of Beauty*, and with extreme marginalization and poverty, as shown in the council estates in the East End in *The Swimming-Pool Library*.

The descriptions of different domestic spheres in *The Line of Beauty*, for instance, give the reader information about the characters’ social class and their access to culture and beauty, evinced by Hollinghurst’s accounts of aesthetic taste in each household and the ways in which the characters utilize different spaces in the house. The emphasis placed on the domestic sphere indicates London’s increasing privatization and segregation, especially concerning more vulnerable communities, such as the working-class and gay communities. The differences described in these homes – from Lord Kessler’s Victorian country house in Middlesex to Leo’s small council-flat, where he lives with his mother and sister – convey the Thatcherite maximum of individualism, in which “there’s no such thing as society”,⁹⁹ but only individuals and their families.

Alongside Thatcherite government, AIDS plays a crucial role in the domestic geography of *The Line of Beauty*. Cook notes that “AIDS and HIV meant changes to the ways many men lived out their home lives, as well as adjustments in welfare and housing policy”.¹⁰⁰ His study about domestic life during the epidemic relays that many gay men became homeless or were evicted from their homes because they either had AIDS or were HIV positive. As the epidemic spread across the UK, in London in particular, which was the city with most cases according to Cook,¹⁰¹ there were significant shifts in the capital’s sexual geographies:

The lines between gay and straight and the ways these divisions mapped onto the urban landscape were thus reappraised in the context of the early years of the epidemic. The homophobic insistence on separation and exclusion by some paradoxically redoubled an insistence by many gay and lesbian Londoners on a visible presence.¹⁰²

Where homophobic reactions to gay spaces were violent and oppressive, there was also, as Cook points out, much resistance by gay and lesbian movements. An important resistance took place in the 1970s and early 1980s, as members of the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) squatted in houses in Brixton and actively protested against the privatization of housing, private property, the nuclear family, and monogamy.¹⁰³

98 *Idem*, “Queer Domesticities” in Briganti and Mezei (eds.) *The Domestic Space Reader*, p. 174.

99 Qtd. in “Margaret Thatcher: a life in quotes” in *The Guardian*, 8 April 2013, accessed in July, 2017 in <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/apr/08/margaret-thatcher-quotes>

100 Cook, *Queer Domesticities: Homosexuality and Home Life in Twentieth-Century London*, p. 191.

101 *Idem*, “London, AIDS and the 1980s” in Avery and Graham (eds.) *Sex, Time and Place*, pp. 50–51.

102 *Ibid.*, p. 58.

103 *Idem*, *Queer Domesticities*, pp. 193–197.

These sites of resistance, however, are not Hollinghurst's focus in *The Line of Beauty*, as he portrays the lives of men whose class, whiteness, education, and political position keep them aloof from any kind of political resistance. Although Wani and his family are non-white characters, their wealth and financial involvement with the Tories elide their immigration background and allow them to take part in a privileged circle that does not demand engagement with movements of resistance. What we note in Hollinghurst's protagonists, such as Nick Guest and Will Beckwith, is that they epitomize the depoliticization of gay politics in neoliberal times. Although both are targets of homophobic violence, as Nick is thrown out of the Feddens' home and as Will is beaten up by the skinheads, neither of them reflect on these incidents as consequences of homophobic hysteria and conservative sexual politics.

Hollinghurst does not show gay resistance in London in the 1980s; however, it is interesting to note how some elements in *The Swimming-Pool Library's* and in *The Line of Beauty's* sexual geographies resemble the mapping of AIDS in the 1980s. Cook explains that more than 70 percent of the AIDS victims in the UK were located in the four health authority areas in London, namely in the North-West Thames region. This locality includes three of the neighborhoods featured in *The Swimming-Pool Library* and in *The Line of Beauty*: Earls Court is where the Coleherne is located and where James is arrested in *The Swimming-Pool Library*; Notting Hill and Ladbroke Grove are two of the neighborhoods that feature in *The Line of Beauty*. Located in the North-West of the Thames, all of these neighborhoods, Cook writes, were "areas which had been associated subculturally and more broadly with queer life in the city [throughout the 1980s]".¹⁰⁴ As Cook explains, the AIDS epidemic transformed London's geography of gay culture, given that queer spaces often came to be dangerous for gay men because of the overwhelming homophobic discourses that were propagated by the media and government.¹⁰⁵ This is precisely the case in *The Swimming-Pool Library*, as the Coleherne in Earls Court, which is supposedly a safe space for James to cruise, becomes a space of danger that is depicted by James being arrested by Colin, the gay policeman who also frequents the leather bar and the Corinthian Club.

Although Hollinghurst does not explicitly mention the AIDS epidemic in *The Swimming-Pool Library*, the location of James' arrest can be read as a spatial indicator of the urban transformations that had been triggered by hysterical homophobia during the AIDS crisis. In *The Line of Beauty*, in which AIDS is addressed openly, Notting Hill and Ladbroke Grove are represented in terms of domesticity, suggesting that the epidemic directly hindered gay men's circulation and participation in the public sphere. Nick walks between Ladbroke Grove and Notting Hill twice throughout the novel, and there are allusions to AIDS in neither of them. Instead, these trajectories describe the unequal material conditions between the two neighboring areas: on his first walk, Nick comes back from Leo's house in Brent and walks down through Ladbroke Grove, "longing for the other end, his own end, the safety and aloofness of white stucco and private gardens"¹⁰⁶; on the second walk, he finds himself in Ladbroke Grove and he

104 *Idem*, "London, AIDS and the 1980s", p. 51.

105 *Ibid.*, p. 50.

106 Hollinghurst, *The Line of Beauty*, p. 165.

goes there to use the public phone to call his dealer to buy more cocaine for him and Wani.¹⁰⁷ The contrast between Ladbroke Grove and Notting Hill is also shown by Hollinghurst's depiction of the Notting Hill Carnival, as Nick, the maid Elena, and the Feddens drive through the festival completely aloof from its status as a public event that represents the Caribbean community in the area. While Ladbroke Grove is depicted as a space of material disadvantage, to which Nick clearly does not belong, Notting Hill is described in terms of privileges and of private property. Nick's circulation in Ladbroke Grove is only transitional in the sense that he walks through the area to see Leo or to meet his cocaine dealer. In the novel, Notting Hill is mainly represented through the Feddens' residence in Kensington Park Gardens, in which Nick aims to create bonds that might bestow him a social status into which he had not been born.

Whether it is in Notting Hill, in Soho or in the outskirts of London, we can read Hollinghurst's deployment of gay culture and domesticity as corollary effects of both the AIDS epidemic and Thatcherite neoliberal politics. As Duncan explains, the increasing privatization and commercialization of public spaces have compromised "the vitality of public sphere as a political site and [have] diminishe[d] the ability of marginalized groups to claim a share in power".¹⁰⁸ In *The Line of Beauty*, Hollinghurst depicts the consolidation of a hysterical homophobic culture and of an individualist and entrepreneurial culture throughout the 1980s by portraying depoliticized gay men who have no connections to the forms of resistance that were taking place in other areas of the city, such as in Brixton. In his novel, it is the private sphere that is politicized, but only in terms of the conservative and neoliberal ideologies that informed Thatcherite governance. The politics that prevails in *The Line of Beauty's* wealthy homes is that of individual privilege, meritocracy, and social *arrivisme*, which refuse to either embrace or welcome marginalized groups.

In depicting political and historical activities within wealthy homes, such as in the Feddens' or the Sawles', Hollinghurst shows how the private is also used as public; that the domestic can also be deployed as political and, finally, that secluding non-normative sexualities to the private sphere does not mean that they will not also actively partake in the public sphere. Like Paul 'Polly' Tompkins in *The Line of Beauty* or the Great War hero Cecil in *The Stranger's Child*, all other gay male characters must negotiate their homosexuality in the domestic sphere according to norms that regulate the public. At the same time, their privileged social and subject positions alienate them from their urban surroundings, turning the public sphere, which is supposedly political, into a depoliticized and apathetic space.

While Hollinghurst's representations of domesticity relates to neoliberalism, Thatcherism, and the AIDS epidemic, especially in *The Line of Beauty* and in *The Swimming-Pool Library*, Waters' portrayal of the domestic sphere is a response to the ideal of Victorian domesticity and to recurrent images of women's confinement in nineteenth century literary tradition. In the neo-Victorian novels, Hughes-Edwards

107 *Ibid.*, p. 230.

108 Duncan, "Renegotiating and Sexuality in Public and Private Spaces" in Duncan (ed.) *BodySpace: Destabilizing Geographies of Gender and Sexuality*, p. 128.

contends that “all [...] women are in prison, either physically or psychologically”,¹⁰⁹ since they must somehow break free from the traditional norms that surround them in order to obtain agency within the city. While Nancy seeks a breakthrough by pursuing her career as an actress, Selina and Ruth both use spiritualism to get Selina to escape prison and to enable their escape from middle- and upper-class femininity.

While Hollinghurst's domestic tropes are deeply rooted in neoliberal frameworks, in the domestication of gay culture and in the effects of AIDS on queer spaces in *The Line of Beauty* and in *The Swimming-Pool Library*, the shift to the representation of domestic spheres in the realm of country houses, as it happens in *The Stranger's Child*, is attuned to the “ubiquity of the country house in English history, culture and literature”.¹¹⁰ As I have elucidated in my reading of this novel in chapter 7, the deployment of the country house in *The Stranger's Child* displays Hollinghurst's interest in homosexuality's influence on the English literary tradition and canon. The trope of the country house also appears in one of Waters' novel, *The Little Stranger*, published in 2009. However, in Waters' novel, she is less interested in stating that her protagonist, Caroline Ayres, is part of a tradition, but is instead concerned, as Terentowicz-Fotyga points out, with showing “the last moments of manorial glory [that] are juxtaposed with radical, social and political transformation”, since it was in the 1950s that England inaugurated “an era of demolitions of stately homes and the most dramatic decline of the country houses”.¹¹¹

In the novel, Waters locates the ghost story in the decaying eighteenth-century country house, named Hundreds Hall. The Ayres family symbolizes the disintegration of the landowning class, which according to Terentowicz-Fotyga takes place between the 1830s and the 1930s and which is strengthened in the post-war period with rationing and the short supply in building material, which made it difficult to maintain the estates.¹¹² Like the decline of the Ayres' social and political status in the novel, the decaying Hundreds Hall symbolizes “a material sign of the ending of a particular social, economic and political system that supported [the country house's] existence”.¹¹³ Set in the period after the Second World War, the Ayres' family is shown to be respected by the inhabitants of their village in Warwickshire, but they have no material condition by which to maintain the estate. This is because the family's main breadwinner, the elder brother Roderick, suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder because of his service in the Second World War.

Instead of using the country house as a means to endorse the significance of women in literary tradition, Waters' decaying estate suggests that the assertion and perpetuation of tradition, represented by Hundreds Hall, does not fit the new models of femininity of the 1940s which seek autonomy and independency. Caroline, who

109 Hugues-Edwards, “‘Better a prison... than a mad house!’: Incarceration and the Neo-Victorian Fictions of Sarah Waters” in Jones and O'Callaghan (eds.) *Sarah Waters and Contemporary Feminisms*, p. 133.

110 Terentowicz-Fotyga, *Dreams, Nightmares and Empty Signifiers*, p. 9.

111 *Ibid.*, p. 115.

112 *Ibid.*, pp. 22–24.

113 *Ibid.*

is overworked with her job of maintaining the house, wishes to sell the estate and does not wish to get married, something that her mother desires for her. As Wisker has noted, *The Little Stranger* can be read as a Gothic narrative that deals with the difficulties that women encountered when attempting to free themselves from the limiting perspectives of both marriage and motherhood. For Wisker, the connection between the uncanny and women writing in the novel revolves around the necessity to write the histories of these women and to address their marginalized status in society:

Women write ghost stories perhaps because of the histories of hidden and silenced lives, the denials and the guilt, the repressions and the marginalisation, the domestic incarceration and the lack and loss of identity and power, which have traditionally accompanied the roles of women, differently played out in different times and places.¹¹⁴

Although the novel is also based on the country-house plot, Wisker argues that Waters uses the “strategies of the literary Gothic to critique the constraining narratives placed around three women”:¹¹⁵ this is conveyed through the spinster Caroline Ayres; her mother, Mrs. Ayres; and the servant, Betty. The ghost that haunts the house is Caroline’s sister, Susan, who died at age seven, a death from which Mrs. Ayres has never recovered. *The Little Stranger* is the only novel in which Waters deploys a male narrator, Dr. Faraday, a neighbor who is interested in Hundreds Hall and who tries to marry Caroline in order to inherit it. Not only does Faraday represent the narrative’s manipulative male dominating voice, as he also epitomizes the possibilities of class (upward) mobility in the post-war period, since he stems from a working-class family (his mother worked at Hundreds Hall in its golden age) and managed to go to medical school. Interestingly, Dr. Faraday is the only character who shows an interest in Hundreds Hall and, as Terentowicz-Fotyga contends, the decaying state of the country house is depicted in parallel with his social ascent.¹¹⁶ The narrator’s interest in being part of the Hundreds Hall tradition, even if it is in its deteriorating condition, and Caroline’s refusal to be part of it, point to the gender differences in their relationship with traditional norms. Dr. Faraday’s upward social mobility suggests his desire to partake in an upper-class tradition of landowning and marriage, whereas Caroline’s rejection of marriage and of continuing to live in the estate suggests that her desire for autonomy does not fit into this tradition of property ownership and marriage.

In reading *The Little Stranger* through the strategies employed in the feminist Gothic, Wisker hints at some pivotal purposes in Waters’ works: “to upset expected norms, undercut, destabilise, explore and problematise convention, complacency and established narratives”.¹¹⁷ These are precisely Waters’ main goals in her literary project and she uses historical fiction to question the roles played by women, and

114 Wisker, “The Feminist Gothic in *The Little Stranger*: Troubling Narratives of Continuity and Change” in Jones and O’Callaghan (eds.) *Sarah Waters and Contemporary Feminisms*, p. 103.

115 *Ibid.*, p. 97.

116 Cf. Terentowicz-Fotyga, *Dreams, Nightmares and Empty Signifiers*, pp. 115–116.

117 Wisker, “The Feminist Gothic in *The Little Stranger*: Troubling Narratives of Continuity and Change”, p. 101.

more importantly, lesbian women, throughout history. Characters such as Caroline in *The Little Stranger* and Kay Langrish in *The Night Watch* depict the restricted roles for women who had actively engaged with the war effort and who, after the war, wished to take up social positions that went beyond “the security of women’s ‘place’ – the home – and the narratives in which women find themselves constructed and constrained”.¹¹⁸

Both characters are described as having masculine features: Kay has short brown hair, which she combs neatly with grease, and wears “a shirt with a soft white collar” and “men’s shoes”.¹¹⁹ Caroline, in her turn, is described by Dr. Faraday as “plain [...] wearing boyish flat sandals and a badly fitting pale summer dress [...] her face was long with an angular jaw, her profile flattish”.¹²⁰ Caroline and Kay are both portrayed as figures who are anachronistic to their time, as women who remained back in their war activities – Caroline was a nurse during the war and Kay was an ambulance driver – and who never managed to return to the roles that they intended to occupy after the war, which is a role that is constricted by domesticity and marriage. They reject domesticity for different reasons, and Caroline seems to be stuck in her family’s haunted past (and also, in many ways, stuck in Faraday’s manipulative narration, as Wisker has shown),¹²¹ whereas Kay is stranded in her memories of the war and in her relationship with Helen. Their domestic environments after the war display their own stagnating roles: Kay lives in a bedroom with blank walls, with no personal objects or decoration, in which she sleeps or suffers from insomnia; Caroline lives in a house that is falling apart alongside her family’s ailing social prestige and financial condition.

While Waters’ 1940s novels mostly provide the domestic sphere as an inadequate space for women, whereby women are figures who no longer fit into the domestic boundaries of home, domesticity is mostly associated with danger and imprisonment in her neo-Victorian novels. As I pointed out in the chapter 3, *Affinity* problematically suggests that domesticity could be a more perverse form of incarceration than prison. In *Fingersmith*, the plot about domesticity and incarceration becomes even more complex. Waters re-creates the sensation novel by adding elements of contemporary queer and feminist theories regarding performance, kinship, and pornography.

Mr. Ibbs’ and Mrs. Sucksby’s family kinship, for instance, is constituted by illegal activities, instead of the bloodline and heterosexual standards that usually establish family kinship. As a poor family living in Lant Street in South-East London, they rely on illegal activities for a living: childrearing is one of their businesses, in which Mrs. Sucksby sells babies for adoption; Mr. Ibbs specializes in producing fake coins. As Alden has noted, though there is no allusion to gender performance, as there is in *Tipping the Velvet*, all characters are trying to pass as something that they are not in

118 *Ibid.*, p. 103.

119 Waters, *The Night Watch*, p. 5.

120 *Idem*, *The Little Stranger*, p. 9.

121 Wisker, “The Feminist Gothic in *The Little Stranger*: Troubling Narratives of Continuity and Change”, pp. 100–101.

Fingersmith:¹²² a gentleman passes as a well-to-do pornography collector as he visits Briar; Maud passes as a naïve country-girl to complete Gentleman's plan to steal Sue Trinder's fortune; and Sue must perform class manners to forge experience as a lady's maid in Briar. Maud's uncle, Mr. Lilly, runs a pornography business in Briar, and takes in his niece to copy pornographic stories and to read them aloud to men who come from London. At the end of the novel, pornography comes to be produced in the countryside, undermining the notion of sexual purity and morality in rural areas, and the city as a place for vicious habits.¹²³ The domestic spheres are depicted in the novel in parallel with horrific scenes in a mental asylum to which Sue is committed as part of a plot to steal a great amount of money that she is set to inherit once she turns eighteen years old.

In Waters' neo-Victorian novels, only Nancy finds a home with Florence in Bethnal Green in the sense postulated by Iris Young, who contends that "home' can have a political meaning as a site of dignity and resistance".¹²⁴ Although the third part of Waters' novel is problematic in terms of working-class representation, as I have shown, it is in Bethnal Green that Nancy finds the support and strength necessary to engage with political struggles regarding feminism and socialist politics. Like Nancy, other characters in Waters' fiction, such as Julia, Helen, and even Kay, given that she lived with Helen during the war, construct their homes as a possibility to act out their sexuality and to provide affective means to endure the impossibility of living out their relationships in public. This takes place in contrast to, and possibly in spite of, the heterosexual norms of monogamy, marriage, and domesticity that also modulate their relationships within the domestic sphere.

In their homes, they attempt to live outside of the public sphere's homophobic and sexist constraints and, at times, they reproduce the heterosexual norms found in the model of the traditional nuclear family: in *The Night Watch*, Julia and Helen try to have a 'normal' life as a couple, but must be careful that the neighbors do not notice that they are partners;¹²⁵ Kay performs the role of a male provider taking care of her wife,

122 Cf. Alden, "Accompanied by Ghosts': The Changing Uses of the Past in Sarah Waters's Lesbian Fiction", p. 71.

123 For critical work about Waters' approach to pornography in *Fingersmith*, see Muller, "Sexual f(r)ictions: Pornography in neo-Victorian women fictions" in Cooper and Short (eds.) *The Female Figure in Contemporary Historical Fiction*, pp. 115–133; O'Callaghan, "'The Grossest Rakes of Fiction': Reassessing Gender, Sex and Pornography in Sarah Waters' *Fingersmith*", pp. 560–575; Palmer "She began to show the words she had written, one by one': Lesbian Reading and Writing Practices in the Fiction of Sarah Waters", pp. 69–86. While Muller and Palmer both situate Waters' approach to pornography within the controversial debate about pornography in feminist theories from the 1980s, arguing that Waters appropriates pornography to re-write it actively as a lesbian and feminist text that allows for the expression of both female sexuality and desire, O'Callaghan contends that Waters depicts the debate about pornography by re-working it in terms of the sensational novel. For O'Callaghan, Waters' employment of pornography in the novel could be perceived as a way to undermine heterosexist and patriarchal discourses about lesbianism in pornographic culture.

124 Young, "House and Home: feminist variations on a Theme" in Briganti and Mezei (eds.) *The Domestic Space Reader*, p. 192.

125 Cf. Waters, *The Night Watch*, pp. 46–51.

as Kay and Helen live together during the war.¹²⁶ While there is socialist and feminist resistance in Florence's home, Nancy's role in the domestic sphere is similar to that of a homemaker, given that she cooks, cleans, and takes care of baby Cyril, who is Florence's former partner's baby. As is the case with Waters' first novel, the lesbian domestic lives displayed in *The Night Watch* work along the paradox of resistance and assimilation. Helen lives with Julia; she stays at home and is constantly worried about where Julia is, recalling a pattern of heterosexual monogamy and jealousy;¹²⁷ and Kay's attitudes at home with Helen reproduce patriarchal behavior of male protection and of a central source of financial income.

While Waters' characters either want to escape domestic confinement or re-create the domestic sphere as a site that accommodates and enables lesbian relationships, Hollinghurst's male characters want to use the domestic to reinforce the privileges that they already have in the public sphere, which are closely tied to masculinity, education, race, and class. Waters' and Hollinghurst's representations of the domestic sphere complicate clear-cut divisions between private and public, showing that the characters often act, in the private sphere, "with the public in mind – even if what they had and did [at home] was never observed by anyone else".¹²⁸ By contrast, as is the case with Nancy's discovery of the lesbian pub in Bethnal Green and Will's cruising routine at Hyde Park, many public spaces function as a kind of home "in terms, [...] of retreat, relaxation, and intimacy".¹²⁹ Waters' and Hollinghurst's depictions of private and public implicate the ways in which the political (public) also informs the personal (private), pointing to the fact that what we call 'home' in the twentieth century is strongly constituted by discourses regarding gender, class, and racial relations.

126 *Ibid.*, pp. 259–263.

127 *Ibid.*, pp. 141–145.

128 Cook, *Queer Domesticities*, p. 9.

129 *Ibid.*

Final Words

My readings of Waters' and Hollinghurst's novels have shown that their representations of queer spaces in London are informed by both the specificities of gay and lesbian histories in the city and by the gender differences that relate to the circulation of women and men in urban space. London appears as a site of sexual possibilities in their works, in which there are two opposing forces at play: on the one hand, there is the homophobic and heterosexist legislation that sought to regulate deviant sexualities and women's bodies; on the other hand, their characters are able to appropriate regulated and conservative spaces and can create spaces in which they can act out their homosexual desire and identities.

This appropriation of space not only depends on the characters' power to confront homophobia, but also in the ways in which class, gender, and race can enable or restrict their agency in the city. In Waters' neo-Victorian novels, being a woman demands the ability to constantly subvert gender and sexual mores and to overcome obstacles that are frequently imposed by social violence at home or on the streets. In *Tipping the Velvet*, Nancy Astley is able to surmount Diana Lethaby's abuse and exploitation; in *Affinity*, Selina Dawes frees herself from the constricting lessons of Victorian femininity in prison and escapes with her lover, Ruth Vigers; Maud Lilly and Sue Trinder in *Fingersmith* break free from their families' conniving schemes, Maud having become a writer of pornographic stories and Sue taking hold of the will left by her real mother. The only female character in Waters' neo-Victorian novels that has a tragic ending is Margaret Prior, who ends her life because she fails to free herself from the oppressions of Victorian domesticity. Her tragedy can be read as a corollary effect of her class position: while her upper-class upbringing gives her the opportunity to engage with intellectual activities that were almost exclusively encouraged by her father, her father's death also takes away Margaret's chance to leave home and to pursue an intellectual career in Italy. Thus, it is possible to look at her father's figure as both enabling and curtailing, since he is the one who gives her the power to obtain agency by studying and researching, but his death paves the way for Margaret's downfall, suggesting that her agency and intellectual independence relied on him as a paternal figure.

My examinations of Waters' neo-Victorian novels have also shown that class relations became more complex with every new book she wrote. In *Tipping the Velvet*, as I have explained, class is uncritically represented as a fixed identity category that is based on upper-, middle-, and working-class stereotypes. Although it is true that Waters portrays a positive image of a working-class community, by bringing out relations of solidarity and political consciousness, this image also falls back on the stereotype that Sally Munt has criticized, which associates the "good worker" with the image of the "revolutionary".¹ Apart from the anachronism that I have pointed out in terms of working-class organization and politics at the end of the nineteenth century, the main problem with Waters' depiction of class in *Tipping the Velvet* is that she does not perceive it as a social relation, only as an aestheticized and fetishized stereotype which describes upper- and middle-classes as the 'villains' (e.g., Walter Bliss, Kitty Butler, and Diana Lethaby) and the working-class characters as heroes (e.g., Nancy Astley, Florence Banner, and Ralph Banner).

In *Affinity*, class acquires an element of complexity, as Waters interconnects class relations (and not just identity) with notions of the ideal Victorian femininity. The fact that most critics have overlooked class relations and have mostly drawn attention to the queer elements in the novel points to the ways in which class has often been a dismissed or underrated social relation in queer theory. In this book in particular, Waters creates elaborate upper- and working-class protagonists and, as readers, we are 'tricked' into trusting Margaret's diary more than Selina's because she offers us more intimate and personal information about herself and because her intellectual knowledge lends her more credibility than Selina's supernatural accounts of séance circles. Thus, we fail to notice the importance of Ruth Viger's character as a servant, who, as I have noted, are often portrayed in the Victorian Gothic as 'ghosts' who inhabit the house, and yet do not belong to it.² As I have pointed out in my reading of *Affinity*, it is spiritualism that queers spaces, especially the prison, since it is Selina's and Ruth's involvement with the supernatural, whether it is a scheme or not, that grants them their freedom.

Class continues to be an important element in the construction of the characters and of the spaces in which they circulate in Waters' 1940s novels. In *The Night Watch*, interclass relations, such as that between Kay and Helen and later Julia and Helen, evince the privileges of the upper- and middle-classes both during and after the war. Moreover, class and gender differences in the novel also indicate how subjective positions mark the unequal conditions that determine the characters' engagement with the war effort and their lives in the post-war period. Duncan and Fraser, who refuse to take part in the war, are marginalized and isolated in prison. After the war, Duncan's mental and social statuses are seriously damaged, as he becomes stuck in his own prison with Mr. Mundy and is unable to recuperate his agency. Fraser, conversely, has the chance to thrive as a journalist in the post-war period, which invokes his own class privileges, given that he stems from an upper-class background. I have also

1 Cf. Munt, *Cultural Studies and the Working Class*, p. 8

2 Cf. Lynch, "Spectral Politics: the Victorian ghost story and the domestic servant" in Bown et al. (eds.) *The Victorian Supernatural*, p. 68.

claimed in chapters 4 and 8 that class differences have shaped the lives of the female characters in the novel by arguing that Kay, in spite of her depression and melancholy, is able to live off her family's money, and Julia engages with an exciting career as a writer. By contrast, Helen and Viv work at a dating agency and seem discontented with their jobs.

The interdependency between class and gender also plays an important role in the construction of the country house plot and in the characters' outcomes in *The Little Stranger*. As I have elucidated in chapter 8, Caroline Ayres's refusal to get married to Dr. Faraday, and to continue to live at Hundreds Hall, displays the character's lack of interest in being a part of a tradition that has only excluded women. It is only Dr. Faraday, who epitomizes class ascension and a male dominating voice, that is interested in the estate and in acquiring the social status of a decaying landowning class. At the end of the novel, Caroline's suicide after her mother's death suggests the impossibility of partaking in a tradition that is increasingly deteriorating, even though her social environment insists on the idea that marriage and social status are still crucial to obtaining social respectability. In his turn, Dr. Faraday spends years of his life visiting the abandoned house, trying to find the ghost that Caroline saw on the day that she died. It is possible to read his failure to find the ghost as the impossibility of him acknowledging the social constraints that Caroline underwent as a woman. Dr. Faraday is the character who profits from the upward social mobility that the post-war period offered, and he wishes to access the tradition into which he was not born. However, he cannot look beyond his own social position to recognize that women could not gain the same access to the post-war social advancements, even if they were upper-class women such as Caroline.

Waters' depiction of the interwar years in *The Paying Guests*, published in 2014, also relays the unequal condition of men and women in 1922 and, moreover, depicts the perpetuation of domesticity in the period. The domestic sphere is once more a central trope in Waters' work, as the novel is set in a middle-class home in Camberwell, London. The novel's protagonist and heroine, the spinster Frances Wray, lives with her mother in a genteel home that became unaffordable after the death of her brothers, who died on the battlefield, and of her father, who died of a heart attack during the war. Due to the financial difficulties, Frances and Mrs. Wray decide to rent out bedrooms in the house, and they take in the recently married couple Lilian and Leonard Barber, who belong to the recently established 'clerk class'. In this novel, Waters explores the crime and thriller plots, since Frances and Lilian murder Leonard, who systematically abuses Lilian.

In *The Paying Guests*, domesticity, class mobility, lesbian desire, and feminist resilience are reworked, but in the context of the interwar years. Frances is constantly overworked and unhappy as a spinster who is responsible for taking care of the house. She had experienced a limited amount of freedom, both before and during the war, having had a romantic relationship with her friend Christina and even participating in the suffragette movement in London. However, Frances is forced to go back home in order to help her mother to make ends meet, as she is left alone and in serious debt, which Mr. Wray left behind after his death. Like Caroline Ayres and Kay Langrish, Frances misses the war, although she was opposed to it. She misses it because during

the war, she had plans “to change the world” and “put things right”, since “[o]ne looked ahead to the end of the War and felt that nothing could ever be the same”.³ Indeed, the war brought changes to Frances’ life, since her father had died only a few months prior to its end and Frances had to abandon her plans to move in with Christina in order to take care of her mother and their house.

While the Wrays’ financial decay is depicted in terms of a deteriorating house and of its broken objects, which they cannot afford to replace, the Barbers represent an upward class mobility, since they come from a working-class background and move to Camberwell after Leonard gets a promotion. The domestic sphere in this novel intertwines domestic violence, outdated Victorian morality, lesbian desire, and feminist alliances. While Leonard epitomizes the patriarchal, abusive, and sexist figure in the novel, who obtains social ascension by working in the financial market, Mrs. Wray appears as a Victorian mother who consistently controls Frances’ relationships with other women, having previously learned about her lesbian affair with Christina. Conversely, Frances and Lilian, who engage in a romantic affair, build up a strong friendship based on trust, companionship, and love. It is the strength of their alliance that avoids any suspicion about the crime they have committed, given that they invent a story about Leonard having been beaten up on the streets and stick to it until the very end, despite the obvious danger of getting caught.

While Waters’ feminist alliances (such as Nancy’s and Florence’s, Selina’s and Ruth’s, Kay’s and Viv’s, and Frances’ and Lilian’s) enable women to overcome the oppressions from their social environments, Hollinghurst’s male bonds only function as a means to strengthen their privileges. Moreover, it is relevant to stress that these male bonds are only effective when they are formed between men that come from the same social class. Will’s interclass and interracial relationships are volatile and based on domination and, at times, sexual exploitation; Nick’s relationship with Leo does not last because the latter cannot be part of his elitist social environment, even though Nick does not belong to that environment himself. With Wani, Nick seems to have a stronger affective relation, as Wani even leaves Nick a building in his will and Nick tries to be by his side until his death. However, once the scandal about their relationship breaks out, they are forced to stay apart from each other because of the Ouradi’s public relationship with the Tory circle.

In *The Stranger’s Child*, interclass relationships between men become less relevant than in Hollinghurst’s previous novels, since the male bonds in this novel are almost strictly devised to hinder women’s participation within the realm of both authorship and literary tradition. As I have argued in my reading of the novel in chapter 7, the women, particularly Daphne Sawle, are relegated to the role of objects who deflect the men’s homosexuality and who take care of Cecil Valance’s literary legacy. Although Madeleine Sawle is an intellectual and history professor at Cambridge, her character is conveyed as awkward because she does not fit into the traditional roles of motherhood and of nurture; this is an issue that defines most of the novel’s female characters.

While conservatism is mainly promoted in terms of sexism and in the representation of fixed sexual identities in *The Stranger’s Child*, in Hollinghurst’s earlier novels it is

3 Waters, *The Paying Guests*, p. 85.

classist and racist behavior that evinces the reactionary feature of the gay characters. In both *The Swimming-Pool Library* and in *The Line of Beauty*, interclass and interracial relations between men are elaborated to emphasize the privileged position of white upper-class men. In his debut novel, Hollinghurst focuses his narration of London on the perspective of Will Beckwith, which in my reading I associate with the presentation of the neoliberal subject. In not relying on any kind of social welfare, and in his ability to afford a luxurious life without having to work, Will's social position in a neoliberal society entails the possibility of only profiting from his social and personal relations with men of color and working-class men. Yet, as I have shown, this kind of profit cannot be obtained in working-class neighborhoods, in which his privileges become targets of class conflicts and his sexual advances towards other men are violently rejected. While in East London the teenage boy is only interested in his money in exchange for sex, in New Cross, Will's class is seen as an enemy presence and his homosexuality is perceived as a sign of weakness and effeminacy. These factors trigger the skinheads' rage and violence towards him.

In *The Line of Beauty*, Nick's role as a center of consciousness evinces the class differences between him, a member of the middle-class, and the majority of the characters in the novel, who stem from an upper-class or an aristocratic background. As I have argued in my reading of the novel in chapter 6, Nick can only be welcomed into the Feddens' household and into the Tory circle if his homosexuality is not exposed. Once Nick's relationship with Wani is disclosed to the press, he is immediately thrown out of their mansion. Since neoliberalism demands good health from the population to enhance their productivity, the public exposure of the protagonist's homosexuality and his relationship with a man who has AIDS automatically places him as an abject body that has no value in society. As soon as Nick loses his value to the Fedden family, he is marginalized and the "Love-Chord", which is the title of the first part of the novel set in 1983, is broken. In 1983 and in 1986, homosexuality is tolerated because it is culturally and financially profitable, as we have seen with Nick's escalating cocaine and sex drives.

Similar interclass and interracial relations are represented in *The Spell*, Hollinghurst's third novel, in which gay men of color and working-class men are described merely as sexual objects. Set in 1995, the novel recounts the post-Thatcherite period by showing how her neoliberal project lived on in a subsequent Tory government, now in the hands of John Major. The novel narrates the stories of four men: Robin, a gay architect in his 40s, who has a son, Danny, who is in his 20s and who is also gay. Robin is mourning his partner who died of AIDS by engaging in a relationship with Justin, also a young gay man. On a trip to Dorset, Justin brings along his ex-partner, Alex, also a gay man in his 40s who works at the Foreign Office and who starts a relationship with Danny, Robin's son. Robin's and Danny's father-son relationship is far from a traditional one, given that Robin is described as a fellow gay friend and hardly displays parental concern with Danny, who struggles to find a career and spends his time cruising and partying in London clubs or in their country house in Dorset. The novel strangely combines the queer spaces of *The Swimming-Pool Library*, in *The Line of Beauty*, and *The Stranger's Child*, since the characters circulate in gay

venues in London, fall into intense ecstasy drives instead of cocaine, and they also make occasional visits to Robin's Dorset country house.

In *The Spell*, class and race are also combined to bring out the social hierarchies that exist in the queer spaces that are presented. While Alex and Danny are high on ecstasy and partying at a gay club in Soho, Alex kisses a black man on the cheek, the closest he has ever got to a black man: “[h]e had never done more than shake hands with a black man, or tackle one perhaps in a school rigger game – he sighed at how black he was, and ran his fingers in slow arcs up and down the small of his back”.⁴ Later, as Danny throws a gay birthday party at his father's country house in Dorset, Robin asks Gary, a black man, to leave the house for no reason. He asserts that it is not Gary's fault that he asks him to leave, but he claims that he “just [doesn't] want [him] in his house”.⁵ Feeling self-conscious about his action, Robin reflects on how unreasonable his action was, and he wishes “the guy wasn't black, and so obviously nice enough. He thought he had the characterless niceness you'd expect from someone who pleased strangers for a living”.⁶ For Robin, Gary's niceness and pleasantness cannot overcome the fact that he is black and, hence, he feels that it should be made clear that Gary is not welcome in his house.

While classist and racist behaviors are systematically enacted in both *The Swimming-Pool Library* and in *The Line of Beauty*, they are not as straightforward as they appear in *The Spell*. This novel can be read as the apotheosis of homonormative gay culture in the sense that all characters' actions are overtly hedonistic and individualistic, and this also applies to the characters' deliberate expression of racism and classism. The constant partying and ecstasy drives suggest a sense of freedom and of pleasure that are disrupted by the categorical racism and classism of the characters and by Robin's mourning of his partner, which functions as a reminder that the feelings of liberty and power are only artificial effects purported by the drug. Robin is reluctant to try ecstasy, but when he finally does, he feels “something inexpressibly vivid”.⁷ The effect is soon cut off as he kisses a man and feels “the ghost presence of his [former] lover's cold kiss [...] some oblique and painful reminder, the drug's jumped connections”.⁸ The novel conjures a tragic-comic effect, which is conveyed by the juxtaposition of moments of intense pleasure and freedom with moments of mourning and exasperation, which end up defining most of the novel's gay spaces and characters. It is only in *The Stranger's Child* that public mourning of gay men is enacted, given that the characters meet at Peter Rowe's funeral in 2008. As I have argued in chapter 7, this scene can be read as the possibility of openly mourning the death of gay men, but it can also invoke the death of a gay culture that has limitedly subverted heteronormativity with its promiscuity and rejection of monogamous relationships, which is the gay scene as depicted in *The Swimming-Pool Library*, *The Spell*, and *The Line of Beauty*.

4 Hollinghurst, *The Spell*, p. 86.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 127.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 128.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 134.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 135.

While Waters' representations of lesbian history, relationships, and spaces point to the prospect of resisting male domination and tradition, Hollinghurst's construction of gay spaces, culture, and relationships indicate a kind of hopelessness in acts of resistance. This can be attributed to the fact that his representations of history bring out sexist, classist, and racist aspects that also form gay culture. Although he recognizes the conservatism found in traditional institutions, such as the Oxbridge circles, the parliament, and the country house, and the influence they have had on gay history, he adamantly insists on gay men's participation in these institutions and traditions. In doing so, his works raise the question of whether or not it is possible for a gay subculture that is mostly formed by white, upper- and middle-class men to break with the traditions that have formed them as privileged male subjects.

Waters' novels, conversely, imply that it makes no sense for women, lesbian women in particular, to long for belonging and approval from these institutions, since they have been historically rejected and effaced from tradition. Waters does not dismiss tradition, but instead engages with it directly by bringing out the exclusions that it has inflicted upon 'ex-centric' subjects. It is in this sense that her novels affirmatively represent women in history and in London: while they stress active female participation in the city, and articulate them with literary and historical traditions, they also remind us of how women were effaced from both traditional historiography and culture. In emphasizing the role played by women in history and in literature, Waters' works suggest that it is possible to critically engage with tradition, as long as we recognize its limitations. Thus, while Hollinghurst's works hint at a dead end for gay culture, because of their categorical participation in reproducing tradition, Waters' novels convey the necessity to persist with social criticism and the need to consistently re-visit the past to pursue critical reflections on historiography and on the limitations of social resistance that were enacted. This cannot be done without feminism.

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