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 interspersion of Charles' and Will's pieces of 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

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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 *Collége 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 legitimation 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 "chuckl[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.

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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.