Chapter 7
Out of the Metropolis
Homonormative History and the Country House in *The Stranger's Child*

Introduction

Alan Hollinghurst's *The Stranger Child* depicts gay life in the suburbs, quite unlike the author's previously described urban scene, often represented in areas such as Bloomsbury, Hyde Park, Soho, and East London, Kensington Gardens, and Notting Hill. What *The Stranger's Child* shares with *The Line of Beauty* is Hollinghurst's choice to write gay culture in wealthy homes. Following his focus on depicting homosexuality within the country house tradition, gay encounters take place in two country houses in *The Stranger's Child*: first, in Two Acres, an emergent upper-middle-class country house in Stanmore, suburban London, and later at Corley Court, an aristocratic Victorian house located in a suburban area of Northwest London. The two houses, Two Acres and Corley Court, are central to the plot's development, not only because they entail spaces that precede post-war gay urban culture, but also because of the ways that narratives about these houses and the people who live in them endure over time.

The novel is divided into five parts that convey accounts of gay life during a significant time span, from 1913 to 2008. As opposed to *The Swimming-Pool Library*, Hollinghurst does not depict gay urban culture through cruising, casual sex, and London clubs. The first three parts of the novel – which take place in 1913, 1926, and in 1967, respectively – are set in the suburbs, namely, in Two Acres, in Corley Court and Church Walk, all suburban areas of Greater London.[1] However, it is in the fourth and fifth parts of the novel, which take place in 1977 and 2008 respectively, that the plot is shifted to central London, marking the ways post-Stonewall gay life mostly took place in the metropolis.

1 In 1967 Corley Court becomes a boarding school and the protagonist Daphne lives with her daughter in Church Walk, where her 70th birthday party takes place.

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In *The Stranger's Child*, Hollinghurst shows how gay men wrote and formed English tradition and culture by leaving their marks in literary history. If *The Line of Beauty* concentrated on homosexuality within Thatcherite (Tory) political elite, then Hollinghurst's 2011 novel sheds light on same-sex desire among men in the construction of narratives about canonical literature and its producers. While my previous literary analyses concentrated on the gay urban culture that took place in gay venues and on the streets of London, as in *The Swimming-Pool Library*, and within domestic spaces, as in *The Line of Beauty*, my discussion of *The Stranger's Child* will focus on the space of literature in relation to the country house. The reason for this shift is associated with Hollinghurst's own changes in his work, which comes to locate gay culture within a wider historical and cultural perspective of English literature, as his novels display more elements regarding historiography and metafictionality and articulates them alongside gay history and literature. As the critic Theo Tait points out, *The Stranger's Child* is a work that refutes previous criticism of Hollinghurst's works, which claim that "he's not very interested in women; that there's too much sex; that his writing is too lush; that his characters are not likeable".[2]

In this novel, the few sex scenes that have been included are dull; the narrative is composed mostly by dialogues and, Hollinghurst introduces his first female protagonist: in 1913, she is sixteen-year-old Daphne Sawle, who becomes Daphne Valance in 1926 and who later becomes Daphne Ralph before, finally, becoming Daphne Jacobs. She is the center of the love triangle between her brother George Sawle and his friend, the poet Cecil Valance, who visits them at Two Acres and who writes the poem that is named after the house and that becomes a classic of War Poetry in English literature. Daphne is drawn to Cecil from the moment he arrives at Two Acres, and she takes every opportunity that she can to be near him.

As we learn from the very first pages of the book, Cecil's life and work are topics that are constantly revisited throughout the novel. In the first part, the omniscient narrator evinces how Cecil's presence at Two Acres is central to the development of the narrative, as his voice "seemed so quickly and decisively to take control of [the Sawles'] garden and their house [...] in its tone there was also something mocking and superior".[3] In the first chapter of the book, the narrator focalizes on Daphne's circulation in the house and on her visual perspective; nevertheless, it is Cecil's voice that dominates the narration. She sees Cecil and George standing together in the garden and she approaches them, knowing that they are not aware of her presence: "[s]he knew that Cecil was a guest and too grown-up to play a trick on, though George was surely in her power. But having the power, she couldn't think what to do with it".[4] Daphne is the one observing the two men, but it is the narrator that indicates the homoerotic affection between them by describing Cecil's hand on George's shoulder,

2 Tait, "The Stranger's Child by Alan Hollinghurst – Review" in *The Guardian*, 17 June 2011. Accessed in November 2016: https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/jun/17/strangers-child-alan-hollinghurst-review.

3 Hollinghurst, *The Stranger's Child*, p. 4.

4 *Ibid*.

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them laughing, and how "the curves of their two hats nudged and overlapped".[5] By contrast, the narrator's account of Daphne's perception of their affection is conveyed as a mundane distraction that triggers Daphne's idea to play a trick on them. The narrator, though omniscient, produces ambiguous versions of the same scene: one that leads to a homoerotic reading of Cecil's and George's relationship and the other which is perceived from the point of view of a naïve girl who plans to surprise her brother and his friend, to whom she also feels very much attracted.

Interestingly, once Cecil realizes that she is there, she loses her power as an observer and becomes the object of his desire, as Cecil gives her attention and flirts with her. Daphne is the center of the triangular relation discussed in the previous chapter, in which the woman functions as the object of desire that veils the possibility of homosexual desire among men. In this constellation, the woman appears as the object that determines both the social and sexual boundaries of desire between two male subjects.[6] Cecil's relationship with Daphne deflects his affair with George and the relationship between Cecil and Daphne becomes a historical truth when Cecil's poem 'Two Acres' is written in Daphne's autograph book, making George jealous in the process of creating the myth of Cecil as the great War Poet who was to marry Daphne Sawle, had he not died in the First World War.

The novel's central thematic scope is certainly, as many critics have noticed, collective and individual memory, life writing, the interpretation of historical events, and shifts concerning gay culture and identity in an English tradition.[7] Terentowicz-Fotyga reads the novel with a focus on the mythologization of the country house, arguing that the metafictional aspect of *The Stranger's Child* draws attention to "the country house as a place and the country house as a locus of ideas, dreams and values".[8] In doing so, she contends that Hollinghurst unravels the process of creating the myth of the country house as a signifying image of both England and Englishness.

The use of metafiction as a literary strategy to represent the country house indicates two important aspects of the novel, as Terentowicz-Fotyga suggests. The first is related to the form of the novel itself, whereby Hollinghurst's emphasis on the process of writing about a specific scene (the encounter in Two Acres in 1913) in different historical periods unveils the very fictionality of the novel as a literary form, exposing literary artifice as a means to represent reality and, thus, exploring the boundaries between reality and fiction. The second aspect pertains to the realm of disseminating the image of the country house as a fictionalized discourse that has gained force as

5 *Ibid.*

6 Cf. Chapter 1 in Sedgwick's *Between Men: British Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*.

7 Cf. Canning, "The Stranger's Child, by Alan Hollinghurst" in *The Independent*; Eeckhout, "English Architectural Landscape and Metonymy in Hollinghurst's The Stranger's Child"; Kunzru, "The Stranger's Child by Alan Hollinghurst" in *The Guardian*; Lynch, "Review: The Stranger's Child by Alan Hollinghust" in *The Independent*; Miller, "The Stranger's Child by Alan Hollinghurst: Review" in *The Telegraph*; Stokes, "Lunch with the FT: Alan Hollinghurst" in *The Financial Times*; Tayler, "The Rupert Trunk" in *London Review of Books*; Tait, "The Stranger's Child by Alan Hollinghurst – Review" in *The Guardian*; Terentowicz-Fotyga, *Dreams, Nightmares and Empty Signifiers*, pp. 199–218.

8 Terentowicz-Fotyga, *Dreams, Nightmares and Empty Signifiers*, p. 208.

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a social, historical, and cultural image that is intrinsic to the national imaginary and to English literature as a whole.[9]

Hollinghurst uses elements of Victorian realism, the country house novel, and historical fiction to question authority, authenticity, and truthfulness in the narration of facts and of reality by exploring the postmodernist tendency to problematize the gap between reality and fiction, and between historical and fictional discourses. The reader is always challenged in the interpretation of events, questioning their own readings of information that was presented previously, thereby establishing great uncertainty in coming to solid conclusions about the events that took place in the novel. As Terentowicz-Fotyga puts it, "rather than following lives we follow the process of their interpretations or, for that matter, misinterpretation", since there is no linear development of the plot, but rather a "hermeneutic circling".[10] This is due to the fact that we are given new interpretations of past events in each part, as well as new characters' points of view, who were not necessarily present in the first parts, but who also collect the information from interviews or research and offer their own analyses of those events.

Eeckhout elaborates on this aspect of the novel by focusing on the architectural framework Hollinghurst constructs in order to narrate the characters' lives. *The Stranger's Child*, he argues, "tells the story of English landscape transformations through the stories of a number of Englishmen whose lives […] derive a fair share of their meaning from the transformations registered in their surroundings" in a way that the characters' lives and their spatial surroundings become "inseparable and partly interchangeable".[11] Though somewhat exaggerated, Eeckhout's affirmation addresses the importance of architecture and landscapes, which function as "synecdochic Englishness"[12] in the sense that their fragmentary representation symbolizes the nation. Eeckhout goes further into the spatial reading of the novel by stating that Hollinghurst queers the country house tradition by undermining "the cultural norm of the biological family",[13] since homosexual relationships hinder the heteronormative lineage of kinship and heritage.

Similarly, Terentowicz-Fotyga claims that the "traditional storyline of marriage and primogeniture is promptly undercut by gay plots", as she insists on the argument that, because most of the male characters are involved in homosexual relationships, there is an inevitable rupture with heteronormative reproduction. I would like to challenge these arguments in my reading by arguing that the novel portrays a contrary motion: it shows that it is the increasing homonormativization of gay culture that upholds the idea of family kinship and heritage. In this sense, Hollinghurst does not necessarily queer the country house novel and its tradition, but actually exposes how this tradition has been used by gay men to publicly assert male homosexuality as a respectable

9 *Ibid.*, p. 173.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 216.

11 Eeckhout, "English Architectural Landscape and Metonymy in Hollinghurst's The Stranger's Child", p. 2.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

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relationship because of its familial quality. Hollinghurst does, in fact, ironically subvert the grand narrative of the country house novel and of the grand Victorian novel by writing it with postmodernist elements of metafiction, narrative fragmentation, and an unreliable story line that yields more questions and doubts than certainties and truths. Nevertheless, *The Stranger's Child* brings out the misogyny and sexism of gay culture that go hand in hand with the perpetuation of heteronormativity.

This is clearly shown in the development of Hollinghurst's first female protagonist, Daphne. Many critics have celebrated her as a new aspect of Hollinghurst's literary trajectory, but few critics have taken up the task of actually analyzing her role as a female protagonist and, moreover, the ways in which her being a woman influences the courses of the narratives that are written not only about Cecil Valance, the poet, but also about English literary history. Canning claims that "the emphasis on the prominence of women here might be thought misleading"[14] because it is the relationships between men that determine and dominate the book, thereby leaving Daphne's marriages and relations only as a backdrop. Considering Daphne's secondary role, Lynch contends that even though she is the historical embodiment of all narratives regarding the Valance and Sawle families, "the principal excitement in the book is still gayness". For Lynch, the novel's "real hero is homosexuality, which is both transient and transgressive".[15]

Lynch's and Canning's readings separate Daphne's social role as a woman and the characters' homosexuality, dismissing how women, such as Daphne herself, have been exchanged as "property for the primary purpose of cementing the bonds of men with men".[16] Their critical analyses of the novel emphasize Hollinghurst's authorial reputation as a gay writer without reflecting on the many intersections that homosexuality has with other social relations that touch upon class, gender, and race. It is true that the book is about homosexuality and its "high-cultural tradition" and that it depicts "changing attitudes to gay people and to biographical disclosure",[17] as Tayler has observed. However, homosexuality in the novel inherently constitutes the limitations for Daphne's character, since she is developed within the function of proving other men's heterosexuality and as an object of desire in the poem written by Cecil.

I will argue that homosexuality is constructed under homonormative relations that speak first and foremost to sexism and misogyny. Following Mattilda's viewpoint that homonormativity is the mirroring of heteronormative culture that aims to access "straight privilege at any cost",[18] I suggest that homonormativity in *The Stranger's Child* is linked to the reduction of women's importance in the intellectual and literary realms

14 Canning, "The Stranger's Child, by Alan Hollinghurst" in *The Independent*. Accessed in November 2016: http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/the-strangers-child-by-alan-hollinghurst-2298468.html.

15 Lynch, "Review: The Stranger's Child by Alan Hollinghurst" in *The Irish Independent*, 25 June 2011. Accessed in November 2016: http://www.independent.ie/entertainment/books/review-the-strangers-child-by-alan-hollinghurst-26745833.html

16 Sedgwick, *In Between Men*, p. 26.

17 Tayler, "The Rupert Trunk", p. 9.

18 Ruiz, "The Violence of Assimilation: An Interview with Mattilda aka Matt Bernstein Sycamore", p. 237.

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of both culture and society; this will be elucidated in my analysis of Daphne's role as a female protagonist in the novel. In reinforcing women as objects of exchange and in depicting his protagonist as a woman who is incapable of achieving success in the intellectual and literary realms, I contend that Daphne epitomizes an outdated representation of female authorship. As I will show, although she does become an author, Daphne remains a powerless character that is constantly ridiculed and undermined by her male counterparts, who are able to earn their intellectual recognition within the literary sphere once their works are read and acknowledged by other male critics and authors.[19]

From literary muse to an object of exchange between men, Daphne is the great survivor in the novel, for she is the only one who lives up until 2008 to recount the families' histories, even though she is the one who is steadily depicted as an unreliable source of information about the Valances' and the Sawles' literary and life trajectories. In 1926, Lady Valance hosts a 'Cecil Weekend' at Corley to help Sebastian Stokes collect material for his biography about Cecil, and Daphne is harassed into repeating the content of letters exchanged with the poet during the Great War and her role of having inspired 'Two Acres'. Sebastian actually tries to dig into the past and question if the poem had not been written for George, but the family insists on Daphne's figure as an inspiring muse.

Although Daphne plays a central role when talking about Cecil, she is kept exclusively as an inanimate object who is fixed in the poem that was written in her autograph book. As a photographer from the *Sketch* magazine asks for a picture, it is clear whom he wants to make evident in the photo: Sebastian, Dudley Valance (Cecil's brother whom Daphne eventually marries), and Revel Ralph (a painter who becomes Daphne's second husband). In the photograph, "Daphne and the children [are arranged] as decorative extras".[20] In the subsequent years, this role is perpetuated throughout her marriages and in the pieces of writing that come out about her husbands. At some point, Daphne writes her own memoir entitled *The Short Gallery*, which is considered feeble by critics. Later in 1977, when she is interviewed by Paul Bryant, another man writing a biography about Cecil, Daphne comments on women's secondary role as authors and she recalls that she "was very much brought up in the understanding that the men all around [her] were the ones who were doing the important things. A lot of them wrote their own memoirs, or, you know, their lives are being written about now".[21]

Daphne's importance as an author and as a source of information is construed very ambiguously, given that some of the main strains of the novel are precisely, in Hollinghurst's words, "how much is unknowable, irresolvable" and "what happens to someone's story, their reputation, and the terribly – in both senses – partial way in

19 This topic will be taken up again in the chapter 8 of this book, in which I discuss the role of male and female literary traditions in gay and lesbian historical fiction.

20 Hollinghurst, *The Stranger's Child*, p. 144.

21 *Ibid.*, pp. 476–477.

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which they are remembered".[22] If the novel offers more doubts than truths, then we are left with the uncertainties about Daphne's authority precisely because other accounts, including the narrator's, obliterate her potential as an authorial voice. Critics, such as Lynch and Canning, accept her role as secondary because this is the place where the male characters and the narrator have put her and, in so doing, they seem to have fallen into Hollinghurst's trap of subscribing to a partial truth about the way that Daphne is depicted by the biographers: merely as a woman who had many husbands and many affairs.

In my reading, I want to explore the possibilities of Daphne as a protagonist by discussing her role as the embodiment of struggles undergone by female authors amidst the dominating force of male authorship in literature. As a book that tries to give account of the main shifts in gay history from 1913 until 2008, *The Stranger's Child* suggests that, while there have been significant shifts for gay subjects, women still encounter many obstacles as authors and their role is often subjugated to that of their male partners or peers. In my view, this becomes problematic because it overlooks the efforts of feminist literary scholars in incorporating female authors into literary history, in reclaiming a broader and more inclusive understanding of the literary canon and, moreover, in discussing how feminist theory has shifted literature as a whole.[23] Ironically, Hollinghurst has put aside his choice of narrators who tend to capture subjective perspectives, such as the autodiegetic narrator in *The Swimming-Pool Library* and the Jamesian center of consciousness in *The Line of Beauty*, to choose an omniscient narrator that is allegedly universal and who is, therefore, apparently neutral.

As I will elucidate in the following pages, the narrator forges a misleading neutrality in recounting events by focalizing equally, as it were, on each of the protagonists. In spite of their ostensible neutrality, what emerges is precisely the effects of a universality that can only privilege white, middle- or upper-class men, even when these men are homosexual. In this sense, I will argue that the mocking tone that Hollinghurst confers to the narration of a unique literary scene in different periods yields a critical effect: that there is no such thing as an objective interpretation or objective style of writing. They are always shifting according to historical frameworks and to subjective understanding and remembrances of events. Nevertheless, this critique of objectivity does not contemplate his representation of Daphne, even though we are able to detect the narrator's concealment of the protagonist's critical perspectives and agency at times.

The next part of this chapter will examine the uses of metafiction in Hollinghurst's discussion of historiography, which is related mainly to Cecil's life and work, to gay history, and also to literary history in the novel. As I will show, the use of metafiction points to the ways in which the narration of history is never objective and that interpretations of events shift according to specific historical and cultural contexts. In the

22 Stokes, "Lunch with FT: Alan Hollinghurst" in *Financial Times*, June 24, 2011. Accessed in November 2016: https://www.ft.com/content/a9229750-9cbe-11e0-bf57-00144feabdc0#axzz1mpy0Le2]

23 Cf. Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*; Felski, *Literature After Feminism*; Plain and Sellers, *A History of Feminist Literary Criticism*; Showalter, *A Literature of their Own*.

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third part of this chapter, I reflect on the role that homosexuality plays in the novel's biographical and historical accounts by arguing that it strengthens the bonds among the male characters, while it excludes women and leaves them to occupy secondary roles in the intellectual and authorial realms. Lastly, the fourth section will discuss the ways in which homonormativity in the novel is articulated through the notion of respectability in marriage and by perpetuating sexist and misogynist relationships towards the novel's female characters. In creating a parallel between the images of the country house, the space of literary tradition, and gay history, I will contend that these spaces enable gay men to thrive as respected authors, while they impair the success of the female characters in the novel, especially in Daphne Sawle's potential as an author.

Historiography and Metafictionality

In Terentowicz-Fotyga's reading, which focuses on the metafictional aspect in regard to the country house, she notes that, in the first part of the novel, the Valance's Corley Court is "construed as [a] largely imaginary space, a myth rather than actual reality; less of a place and more of a locus of dreams, ideas and aspirations".[24] Cecil's presence at Two Acres, George's admiration for the Valances' estate, and Daphne's curiosity about it give us an idea of a noble place that embodies aristocratic power and social prestige. When Daphne asks Cecil if they had 'jelly-mould domes', he proudly inquires, "'At Corley?' [...] 'As a matter of fact, we do'", pronouncing "the word 'Corley' as other men said 'England' or 'The King'".[25] Corley Court is often evoked as an emblem of greatness and triumph, closely related to the country house as a symbol of English cultural tradition and architectural prominence.

The Sawles' fascination with Cecil goes beyond his reputation as a poet and as George's good friend from Cambridge. His presence at Two Acres also displays the Sawles' social prestige in the eyes of the aristocratic upper-class. As Terentowicz-Fotyga explains, "Cecil's commanding presence functions as a code for upper-class England" and his "centring role is the effect of his natural dominance and arresting personality as much as of his social status".[26] What we see in the first part with Cecil's character is the upper-class and aristocratic manners that operate as the ideological order that will dictate much of the Sawles' behavior, who try to "adapt to the expectations of their upper-class guest".[27] Not only does Freda Sawles, the matriarch of the family, arrange for Jonah, a fifteen-year-old servant, to attend only to Cecil, but the family also makes sure that they get to know Cecil's poems, which, according to Freda, only portray Corley.[28]

24 Terentowicz-Fotyga, *Dreams and Empty Signifiers*, p. 203.
25 Hollinghurst, *The Stranger's Child*, p. 20.
26 Terentowicz-Fotyga, *Dreams and Empty Signifiers*, p. 201.
27 *Ibid*.
28 Hollinghurst, *The Stranger's Child*, p. 7.

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From the narrator's perspective, we notice that the Sawles have only recently made their fortune, and that the key material sign is their home, Two Acres. On Cecil's first day there, as the family entertains him and sits at the table for dinner, Hubert, George's and Daphne's older brother, takes a seat at the head of the table, which makes George feel slightly ashamed for not having a father. This memory is subsequently narrated in terms of spatiality, which associates the lack of a patriarchal figure in the family to the smallness of Two Acres in relation to Corley Court and, consequently, to Cecil's imposing figure: "Perhaps it was just the memory of Corley, with its enormous oriental dining-room, that made the present party seem cramped and airless"; Cecil then "stooped as he entered the room in a possibly unconscious gesture to the cosiness of scale at 'Two Acres'".[29] The imaginary greatness of Corley, once contrasted with the Sawles' less grandiose estate, exceeds the established parameters of Two Acres in terms of social and architectural magnitude, thereby making Cecil too big for the house's modest dining room.

Although Corley Court is portrayed as an imposing image of power and social status, it is Two Acres that becomes eternalized in English culture in Cecil's poem that is homonymous to the house's name. It is only in the second part of the novel, set in 1926, that we know the repercussions of the poem's release and of Cecil's reputation as a poet, which were consolidated after his death in the First World War. Now at Corley Court, the Victorian house owned by the Valance family, we discover that Daphne has married Cecil's brother, Dudley, who is an aspiring writer and who envies his brother's reputation as an important poet in English literature. In this section of the novel, in which the Valances host the party at Corley for Sebastian Stokes to collect information for his book, the myths created around Corley start to be deconstructed, and we begin to doubt the facts that were presented in the first part. Dudley, for instance, describes Corley Court as "one of the ugliest houses in the South of England".[30]

What is crucial here is the idea that the characters' thoughts about the house, its decoration and architecture, change throughout time in much the same way that aesthetics, tendencies, and beauty standards shift. In 1926, the interior designer Eva Riley is responsible for a renovation that has already begun at Corley, which aims, as Dudley puts it, to "get rid of these Victorian absurdities".[31] The mood in this part of the novel is precisely the modernist ethos of rupture with the Victorian past and the will to enter a new era. Debates about Victorian fashion, aesthetics, and taste, usually defended by the matriarch Lady Valance, are contrasted with the tastes of the younger characters, who mostly lean towards the novelties of modernism. It becomes clear that the period after the Great War is an era of progress and of transformation. Cecil remains the center of a literary tradition in this milieu and, once discussions about Victorianism and Modernism are implied, he is often established as the emblem of tradition that will endure throughout time. As Daphne mocks George's obsession with the house from his first visit, he says that "Cecil liked [jelly-mould domes], and

29 *Ibid.*, p. 19.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 124.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 128.

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one didn't argue with Cecil".[32] Lady Valance also comments on the changes made to the house, asking herself and her guests what Cecil would have made of them, since "Cecil had a keen sense of tradition".[33]

According to Stokes, Hollinghurst claims that the novel "was meant to show how a single prewar scene is viewed at different historical turning points, the effect being of a lens zooming out of the past and into the present".[34] The event to be remembered is the poem in Daphne's autograph book and the question of the person for whom it was meant. Questions revolving around Cecil's sexuality and his poem are introduced as historical events that are critical for the writing of the English literary history that is depicted in the novel.

Tayler associates Cecil's literary trajectory with Rupert Brooke's, who became a well-known war poet after his death in 1915. Apart from his literary notoriety as a war poet, having been eagerly read by Winston Churchill, the similarities, as Tayler points out, also pertain to Brooke's sexuality which was commented upon in different biographies; the first one having praised him as a womanizer and another outed him as bisexual.[35] The collection of material and selection of information are definitely topics that are addressed in the novel as something inherent to the process of writing literary history and biographies. In 1926, Sebastian Stokes has difficulties in having George admit that it had been him who had "the satisfaction of having inspired, or occasioned, or anyway in some wise brought about perhaps his most famous poem". George dodges the question, asserting that the poem had been written for Daphne:

> [George] himself felt sick of the poem, though still wearily pleased by his connection with it; bored and embarrassed by its popularity, therefore amused by its having a secret, and sadly reassured by the fact that it could never be told. There were parts of it unpublished, unpublishable, that Cecil had read to him – now lost forever, probably.[36]

The poem itself is reproduced in fragments in the novel in a way that we can never read it in its entirety. What we do know is precisely that the poem has been edited over and again and we do not know which fragments are kept in the final version. In 1926, George thinks that it is implausible that his affair with Cecil is disclosed, and it is only later that this information can be included as a piece of knowledge that changes the poem's interpretations. It is in this sense that the event that is represented in the poem is open to readings that will depend on the historical context in which they are read, which evokes the idea that historical discourses also shift according to the period in which they are written. Similarly, this is the point made by Hayden White as he argues that historical discourse cannot be fixed precisely because it is subjected to interpretations that will vary according to shifts in historical, cultural,

32 *Ibid.*, p. 141.

33 *Ibid.*, 129.

34 Stokes, "Lunch with FT: Alan Hollinghurst" in *Financial Times*. Accessed in November 2016: https://www.ft.com/content/a9229750-9cbe-11e0-bf57-00144feabdc0#axzz1mpy0Le2J

35 Tayler, "The Rupert Trunk", in *London Review of Books*, vol. 33 n. 15 (July 2011), pp. 9–10, p. 9. It is worth remembering that George's collection of Cecil's letters also coins the poet as a womanizer (Cf. Hollinghurst, *The Stranger's Child*, p. 448).

36 Hollinghurst, *The Stranger's Child*, p. 159.

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and personal perspectives. For him, historical discourse is only possible under the presumption that there are events that are meaningful and, therefore, that are worth writing about,[37] considering that the premise for the existence of historical discourse is narrative itself.[38]

What is at stake in *The Stranger's Child* is literary history, the formation of canonical figures such as Cecil, and also the ways in which life writing plays a significant role in the consolidation of these narratives. If historical discourse produces "*interpretations* of whatever information about and knowledge of the past the historian commands",[39] then Hollinghurst exposes this process of writing by placing an emphasis on the many possible interpretations that can emerge with historical and cultural shifts. While George is reluctant to talk about his relationship with Cecil in 1926, at Daphne's 70th birthday party in 1967, he openly talks about him wanting to publish the poet's letters after Lady Valance's death, since she "had no idea of course of the sort of thing Cecil wrote in letters to his men friends. […] I think all sorts of stuff's going to come out".[40] George's comment to Peter Rowe, a schoolteacher who works at Corley in 1967,[41] anticipates that many authors would be outed in the future. It is no coincidence that this takes place in 1967, the year in which homosexuality was decriminalized. In fact, George talks about the bill that has not yet been approved, but which "could certainly change the atmosphere".[42]

It is in George's character that we detect the most shifts in the readings of the past. His maturity is displayed by the changes in his opinions, behavior, and taste, while Daphne's character remains superficial. Although Daphne is a well-read woman and she has the power of knowledge in terms of what happened at Two Acres, she does not enact these powers, as she is not sure what she is supposed to say. In 1926, her encounter with Sebastian Stokes confirms "her earlier sense of the process: you watched for a bit, and then you were part of it".[43] Daphne is a part of it as someone who had been present at Two Acres and who becomes an object to be narrated: she is a means of confirming the myth of Cecil's reputation of a Great War hero, masculine, straight, and a womanizer.

The question about Cecil's sexuality, whether the poem had been meant for George Sawle or for Daphne Sawle, whether Cecil desired men, whether he desired women, or whether he desired both, persists throughout the novel. The stories about Two Acres and Corley Court are given over and again through oral accounts, diary entrances, letters, and photographs. In 1926, as Sebastian Stokes tries to ask Daphne about her affair with Cecil, she is not really sure what to say because "[w]hat she felt then; and what she felt now; and what she felt now about what she felt then: it wasn't remotely easy to say", though she recalls that "Cecil's way of being in love with her

37 White, *Figural Realism – Studies in the Mimesis Effect*, p. 2.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

39 *Ibid.*. Emphasis in original.

40 Hollinghurst, *The Stranger's Child*, p. 319.

41 Corley has become a prestigious boarding school at this point in the narrative.

42 *Ibid.*, p. 320.

43 *Ibid.*, p. 182.

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was alternately to berate her and berate himself: there wasn't much fun in it".[44] From Daphne's thoughts, conveyed by the narrator, we know that Cecil's romantic love had been mere performance, and she is aware of this, given that she knows that he enjoyed her absence, although his writings indicated otherwise. This becomes clear in one of the letters in which he proposes to Daphne, asking her to be his widow instead of becoming his wife.[45]

The use of the omniscient narrator in the novel diminishes Daphne's importance as a capable authorial voice by placing her at the service of her husbands and the intellectual men around her. Paul, who produces a biography about Cecil in 1977, writes about his conversation with Daphne in his diary:

> It turns out Mrs. J [Daphne] was married to Dudley Valance, C's [Cecil's] brother. But she also had big affair [sic] with Cecil V before WW1, said he was her first love, he was madly attractive but bad with women. I said what did she mean. She said, "He didn't really understand women, you know, but he was completely irresistible to them. Of course he was only 25 when he was killed".[46]

The narrator does not recount the moment in which Daphne says that Cecil "didn't really understand women", we only discover this when we read Paul's diary entry in 1967. In 1977 we find out, however, that Paul interprets Cecil's inability to understand women as the equivalent of him being gay and he is the one who writes a biography that outs Cecil as a gay poet. The compilation of information and the selection of facts can be seen in several layers: firstly, in terms of the interpretations of events and accounts; secondly, in regard to oral and written history, and the higher value posed on the latter; and thirdly, the circumstances and social positions that allow one to have authority not just to tell, but to actually write a story. In contrast to the male authors in the novel, Daphne is disadvantaged especially in regard to the second and third aspects, which are determined by the fact that men write mostly about her, and her testimonies are almost exclusively related in oral accounts, and by the fact that she is a woman who has various affairs with other men and is, therefore, depicted as being untrustworthy.

Hollinghurst's use of the omniscient narrator ironically distorts the traditional definition of 'omniscience' in extradiegetic narration. As Rimon-Kenan explains, omniscience is usually attributed to the narrator "being absent from the story and [having] higher authority" in the narrative.[47] The omniscient narrator is usually familiar with the characters' feelings, has knowledge about the past, the present, and the future and about events that happen in different places at different times. Although Hollinghurst's narrator seems to have plenty of information about the characters and their lives, he certainly controls how much we, as readers, can fully know by withholding information or by offering different interpretations at different points in the narrative. For instance, we know for a fact that, in the first part of the novel, which is

44 *Ibid.*

45 *Ibid.*, p. 183.

46 *Ibid.*, p. 266.

47 Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*, p. 98.

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set in 1913, there was a homosexual relationship between George and Cecil, and that Cecil and Daphne were flirting at Two Acres. However, in the second part, in 1926, we are given the impression that the narrator also withholds information, especially when recounting Daphne's life and her relationship with her husbands. One example is the way that her affair with the artist Revel Ralph, who becomes her second husband, is narrated.

In 1926, as the Valances are hosting guests for Sebastian's biography, the narrator recounts a strange reaction in Daphne's behavior once Dudley makes a joke using the word 'revel', which is homonymous with the artist's first name, Revel Ralph. At this point, we do not know that Daphne is having an affair with the artist, but the narrator suggests that she, for some obscure reason, does not want him there. She grows weary of hearing the name 'revel', showing a "momentary regret", as "she knew she had been right to tell Revel not to come".[48] The narrator focalizes on Daphne's character and withholds the information about her affair, while making it transparent that Daphne has her eyes on Eva Riley who, from her perspective, aims "to seduce a rich man [Dudley] right under his wife's nose".[49] For Daphne, Eva is coming on to Dudley, while the narrator seems to suggest that they are already having an affair.

The narrator lets us believe that there is a rivalry between Eva and Daphne because of Dudley. However, we later find out that Eva is actually interested in Daphne, for she tries to seduce her at the party at Corley on the evening of the reception for Sebastian.[50] At the end of part two, the narrator reveals that it is Revel and Daphne who are having an affair, as he describes Daphne and Revel secretly kissing after they put her children to bed.[51] While George's homosexuality and relationship with Cecil is narrated categorically, Daphne's affairs are often concealed in order to be disclosed as a hitherto unforeseen event. The narrator creates a misleading idea that Daphne's role is exclusively that of a puny woman by focusing on her insecurities, her naivety in her relationships and, moreover, in depicting Daphne as the object of exchange between gay men. In the first and second parts, Daphne's dialogues usually address Cecil's life, her role as a wife and mother, and her weakness in yielding her own reflections, memories, and interpretations of the years that passed.

In the first part of the novel, set in 1913, we get the impression of an omniscient narrator, a technique commonly employed in realist fiction, in which the "conflict of languages and voices is apparently resolved [...] through their subordination to the dominant 'voice' of the omniscient, godlike author".[52] In the second part, which is set in 1926, however, we begin to doubt this "godlike author" because the conflicts between the characters' interpretation of current and past events put in check the certainties that we have created from the events in the first part. Like the fragmentary reading of the poem, the reading of the novel "underlines the problematic relation between

48 Hollinghurst, *The Line of Beauty*, p. 123.

49 *Ibid.*

50 *Ibid.*, p. 215.

51 *Ibid.*, p. 225.

52 Waugh, *Metafiction: the Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, p. 5.

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the word and the world",[53] a problem that metafictional texts tend to address very critically.

Hutcheon contends that metafictional narratives recreate the interconnection between life and art on a new level, "on that of the imaginative process (of storytelling) instead of on that of the product (the story told)".[54] In doing so, the reader acquires a new role; in fact, according to Hutcheon, readers acquire a more challenging role, in which they must fully acknowledge that the world represented in the novel is indeed fictional. The metafictional text, therefore, "demands that [the reader] participate, that he engage himself intellectually, imaginatively, and affectively in its co-creation".[55] For Hutcheon, this is precisely where the paradox of a metafictional text lies: on the one hand, it addresses itself, which she dubs as the "narcissistic" aspect of the text, in the sense that it explicitly addresses the process of writing; on the other hand, she argues that the metafictional text is directed "outward, oriented toward the reader", given that the act of reading is usually presented as a thematic axis of the story and, moreover, that it is the reader who actively interprets and reflects on the text's production, acknowledging the artifice of fiction construed by language. Hence, the metafictional novel demands a higher consciousness from the reader in relation to the text and to the ways in which it is being constructed.

While Hutcheon places a great emphasis on the role played by the reader, Waugh contemplates the linguistic constructions of the metafictional text. She focuses on the self-consciousness of metafiction in exposing the very artifice of itself, since metafictional novels are usually written as "a fictional illusion (as in traditional realism) and the laying bare of that illusion".[56] Waugh's association of metafiction with realism draws upon a comparison between nineteenth-century realism and contemporary fiction. In the first, she explains, there is "a firm belief in a commonly experienced, objectively existing world history",[57] whereas in the latter there is a questioning of authority, of universal truths, and of the idea that fiction can mirror reality. Metafictional novels, therefore, evince the fact that the 'real world' cannot be represented objectively because of its quality of being linguistically constructed, thereby accentuating that the reality that is represented is "a series of constructions, artifices, impermanent structures".[58]

In the novel, Hollinghurst's use of metafiction functions as a narrative device that retrospectively addresses the difficulties of accuracy in recounting someone's life and in writing history, as well as the ways in which texts are interpreted differently over time. The act of writing and the act of reading are represented as two sides of the same coin. In placing an emphasis on the processes of *producing* the text and *interpreting* the text, he explores the loopholes in storytelling and story-reading as possibilities to create new narratives. This does not mean, however, as the critic Eeckhout has

53 Terentowicz-Fotyga, *Dreams and Empty Signifiers*, p. 213.

54 Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative: the Metafictional Paradox*, p. 3.

55 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

56 Waugh, *Metafiction: the Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, p. 6.

57 *Ibid.*, pp. 6–7.

58 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

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argued, that the new stories that emerge "cannot secure any historical past".[59] Rather, it suggests that a historical event, which is represented in the novel by Cecil's visit that leads to the composition of the poem 'Two Acres', can obtain various versions because its transposition into narratives implies the selection of facts, choices of form, content, and narrator. It is not the historical past that cannot be secured, but the notion that historical discourses, in this case more specifically concerning life writing, can faithfully reproduce the historical past. Moreover, the fact that these texts are looked back at from different historical contexts also allows questions to arise about issues that had been previously unknown or that had even been concealed.[60]

The main fact that is concealed and speculated upon is precisely that of Cecil's sexuality and his affective relationships with other men. Cecil is, in fact, remembered as a war poet, but the question about the addressee of the poem also plays a significant role in the writing and reading of it. In the first part, it plays a role in Cecil's writing of the poem, in which we do not partake, but can only access through excerpts. The narrator, nevertheless, makes sure to recreate the story about the production of the poem by describing Cecil's authoritative presence in the Sawles' household and his sexual interest in both George and in Daphne, thereby establishing Cecil's sexual desire as a core aspect in both the writing and the reading of the poem. As readers, we are challenged to evaluate and reflect upon the interpretations of the poem and upon the writing of Cecil's biographical stories, putting pieces of these stories together and trying to decide whether the accounts that are given are indeed reliable as historical accounts.

Homosexuality, Historiography, and the Literary Canon

Although *The Stranger's Child* presents gay history in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the notion that all individuals must be identified as either homosexual or heterosexual prevails as a categorical element throughout the narrative's development. The narrator tells the story by exploring the characters' awareness, ignorance,

59 Eeckhout, "English Architectural Landscapes and Metonymy in Hollinghurst's *The Stranger's Child*", p. 4.

60 This is precisely what Tayler comments on Hollinghurst's inspiration in Rupert Brooke's poetry and history to construct Cecil's character and literary trajectory. Like Lady Valance's efforts to maintain a 'respectable' image of her son and his body of work, Brooke's mother, Mary Brooke, was very protective of the ways in which her son was to be remembered. According to Tayler, she was extremely hostile to the letters published by Brooke's literary executor, Eddie Marsh, who devised a compilation of letters that addressed the poet's bisexuality and his relations with "'neo-pagan' girls and admiring Bloomsbury boys" (Tayler, "The Rupert Trunk"). After her death, she passed the task of literary execution to Geoffrey Keynes, a friend of Brooke's from Cambridge, who made sure to organize Brooke's letters in ways that asserted the poet's image as "resoundly heterosexual". After Marsh's death, however, the 'Rupert trunk' was found in his attic containing personal objects and also pamphlets entitled '*Sexual Ethics*'. With the consolidation of research practices in Gay and Queer Studies, researchers were able to re-organize letters that dealt with Brooke's sexual writings, materialized in a book entitled *The Neo-Pagans: Friendship and Love in the Rupert Brooke Circles* (1987) by Paul Delany.

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and knowledge of Cecil's sexuality, which is often ambiguous. In spite of its opacity, it is this question that persists throughout all of the novel's personal and social relationships, leaving Cecil's sexuality as an issue that *must* be resolved. In this sense, the novel is written within the paradox of exposing Cecil's sexual relationships with other men, which is often spread as rumors in writings about his life and work, and of concealing these homosexual relations as a means to uphold his image as a war poet and war hero.

In the first part, we, the readers, know that Cecil and George have a sexual relationship, but the narrator does not explicitly tell us who else knows about it at Two Acres. He describes how Daphne sees homosocial affection between them, and that Freda notices that it is Cecil who leads George around the house, not the other way around. Yet, it is Jonah, the servant, who finds a poem in the bin while cleaning the room, and who directly associates it with an image of Cecil and George laying in the hammock and a sexual relationship between them:

> Within that ~~thronging~~ singing woodland round
> Two blessed acres of English ground,
> And ~~leading~~ roaming by its outmost edge
> Beneath a darkling ~~cypress myrtle~~ privet hedge
> With hazel-clusters hung above
> We'll walk the ~~secret long dark~~ wild dark path of
> love
> Whose secrets none shall ever hear
> Twixt ~~set of sun~~ late last rook and Chaunticleer
> Love as vital as the spring
> And secret as – XXX (something!)
> Hearty, lusty, true and bold,
> Yet shy to have its honour told –[61]

The version of the poem that we read is an edited version that had been thrown away and we do not know if this is actually a part of 'Two Acres'. The reading about the secrecy and the love that is not named is wholly constructed within the concealment/disclosure binary that constitutes homosexuality as a deviant sexuality. Since the novel also deals with reactions to Victorianism in the twentieth century, the course of gay history in the novel is also written as a consolidation of how discourses in the nineteenth century coined the ways in which we understand sexuality in the twentieth century. Sedgwick explains that it is in the twentieth century that "sexuality has been made expressive of the essence of both identity and knowledge, [which] may represent the most intimate violence as possible",[62] as sexual desire becomes limited to fixed categories and is enacted under homophobia. Hollinghurst's novel shows how increasingly relevant the category of sexuality becomes in the subsequent decades, and how its significant influence on literary history, first (in 1926 and in 1967) as the

61 Hollinghurst, *The Stranger's Child*, p. 52. Emphasis in original.

62 Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet*, p. 26.

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mark of deviant and immoral behavior and later (in the late 1970s and in the 1980s) as a label that defines Cecil as part of a 'gay literary canon'.

In 1926, we discover that Freda Sawle has known about George and Cecil for a while, given that the narrator focalizes on her to disclose her thoughts about the poet and his relationship with her children. Freda finds herself wandering around the house and thinking how imposing Corley Court feels, "even in the sanctuary of her room the dark panelling and the Gothic fireplace induced a feeling of entrapment, a fear that something impossible was about to be asked of her". She fears Sebastian's questions and comes close to crying "with her confused relieved unhappy sense of not having said […] any of the things she could have said, and had known in her heart, that she wouldn't".[63] We then find out that she has read Cecil's letters to George and confronted the latter about their relationship. Instead of telling Sebastian about it or even giving him the letters that once belonged to George, she entertains Sebastian with superficial anecdotes about Cecil's visit in Two Acres, leaving out her true thoughts about the poet.

This is the first part in the novel in which we have a negative impression about Cecil. Since Dudley is considerably abusive and his comments about his brother are always charged with envy, they become rather unreliable. Freda's thoughts, conversely, reasonably allude to Cecil's dangerous power of seduction, which hurt Daphne in particular. She resents "the bloody, bloody poem, which she wished had never been written".[64] She feels that Cecil's letters to Daphne had been completely over the line, "they were horrible posturing letters in which he seemed to be blaming the poor child for something or other that was really his own failing".[65] Freda seems to be the first person to notice how the myths constructed around Cecil's image are harmful to Daphne, given that she, from a very young age, had become stuck in a role that strengthens Cecil's image as a member of the literary canon and war poet, but weakens her own agency as a woman.

Not only does the novel address the difficulties in writing biographies and literary history, but it discusses elements in the formation of canonical figures throughout history. Kolbas explains that, by the mid-twentieth century, notions of canonical literature became strongly marked by the nation-state, nationalism, and its constitutive formation of cultural identity. He writes:

> [Nationality] has permeated the content and function of education at every level, especially in the humanities, where the study of literature is usually placed. To that extent, the transformation of literary canons in modernity has been profoundly influenced by the prescribed values and priorities of the state, where the inculcation of abstract aesthetic ideals has given way to fostering a sense of shared identity by appeal to national history and distinct cultural heritage.[66]

63 Hollinghurst, *The Stranger's Child*, p. 185.

64 *Ibid.*, p. 186.

65 *Ibid.*, p. 186–187.

66 Kolbas, *Critical Theory and the Literary Canon*, p. 21.

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If, as has been argued earlier in this chapter, homosexuality had been vehemently dismissed from discourses of British cultural and national identity until the second half of the twentieth-century, then the inclusion of homosexuality as a relevant aspect of canonical literature can only be considered once homosexuality becomes decriminalized. As George recalls in his interview with Sebastian, Cecil is remembered as a war hero "when Churchill quoted those lines from 'Two Acres' in *The Times*".[67] At this point in the novel, 1926, the idea of a gay war poet is inacceptable and publicizing it as part of a national discourse would have been a scandal. Nevertheless, Sebastian Stokes insists on trying to get some information about Cecil's sexuality in all of his interviews. With George, he directly asks if the poem had been written for him or not; with Daphne, he asks about the ways Cecil's letters praised her absence, instead of her presence. She is uncomfortable with Sebastian's questions, and she thinks that she "had to come up with something more appropriate; something that she felt wearily had already been written, and that she had merely to find and repeat".[68] Like her mother, Freda, Daphne prefers to recount feeble stories about Cecil's visit to Two Acres, concealing the insecurities that she had been left with once he went to war as a means to preserve his public image.

Daphne is 70 years old in the third part, set in 1967, and it is perhaps her age that allows her to tell the stories that she could never write. As she talks to the young bank clerk, Paul Bryant, she tells him that she once ran off to a small town with her children, Corinna and Wilfred, because of Dudley's violent temper. Paul "couldn't say at first if it was real or theatrical, truly sophisticated or simply embarrassing"[69] putting in check the veracity of Daphne's story, which is also questioned by Corinna, who claims that her mother's story is untrue given that Daphne could not drive. Regardless of the veracity of her story, she is immediately dismissed as a reliable source of information or as a reliable narrator. What is crucial here is that Daphne's story, as a memory from the past, is not considered legitimate because of the lack of facts to support it and because there is no written proof of it, although Dudley's abusive temper is common knowledge among the members of the family. Her account is, therefore, lost amidst the conversation, showing that her story can only be valid if she confirms the myths that circulate about the Sawles and Valance families. Once her story defies or undermines the authority constructed around the men's intellectuality and public image, it is automatically delegitimized as a possible truth.

As well as the tension between reality and the representation of reality, Hollinghurst also explores the limits between oral and written history, suggesting that authorial power can only be obtained by the written word. Hayden White defines history as "a certain kind of relationship to the past mediated by a distinctive kind of written discourse",[70] placing an emphasis on language in its written form. White's notion of historiography and historical discourse claims that translating the interpretation of historical facts into the written word actually produces the

67 Hollinghurst, *The Stranger's Child*, p. 162.

68 *Ibid.*, p. 184.

69 *Ibid.*, p. 260.

70 White, *Figural Realism – Studies in the Mimesis Effect*, p. 1.

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historiographical text.[71] According to White, the use of literary theory in the study of historical discourses and historiography evinces the ways in which language is manipulated to produce certain effects, artifices, and aesthetics that will linguistically construe the text. Nevertheless, he does not address the question of orality in the process of constructing historical discourse, implicitly stressing the written word as more valuable than oral accounts.

The Stranger's Child introduces this question because we know that the characters often lie or reinvent their accounts to uphold already established discourses that revolve around Cecil's work and biography. On the one hand, oral interviews confirm what has already been established as truth, but the silences in these interviews indicate that other questions, Cecil's homosexuality for instance, cannot be answered; on the other hand, there are oral accounts, such as Daphne's story about Dudley, that are erased and forgotten because they do not relate to topics that are relevant to Cecil's public image. Daphne is, therefore, only used as a means to sustain that image, never to create her own. It is only in 1979, as she publishes her memoir *The Short Gallery*, a parody of Dudley's autobiography *The Long Gallery* published in 1922, that she is able to immortalize her words publicly and to give her own versions of the stories.

We have access to one excerpt from Daphne's book but only because Paul Bryant is reading it for his own biography about Cecil. In this excerpt, Daphne minutely describes her last evening with Cecil as "the chance to be together, under the magic cloak of our own strong feelings, out of the noise of war […] Our talk, meanwhile, was of simple and happy things".[72] She writes a detailed account about their last encounter, about their last meal, their walk in the Embankment, in St. Martins-in-the-Field, where she last sees him. Daphne reproduces Cecil's controlling voice in her chance to speak, in her own book and in her own memories. When reading her memoir, Paul doubts her accounts about Cecil, precisely because he considers them to be too detailed.[73] Since, as the character Rob claims in 2008, "outing gay writers was all the rage [in the 1970s]",[74] Paul's reading of Daphne's memoir is strictly directed towards finding definite proof of Cecil's homosexuality. As Daphne's memoir provides too many details about her date with Cecil, Paul is lured by the omissions she performs in her writing, which in his interpretation is a significant hint that the story told does not correspond to what actually happened in that encounter.

It is Paul's book, we later find out, that completes the task of outing Cecil as a gay poet, publicly unveiling his relationships with several men and also revealing other family secrets: for instance, that Daphne's eldest daughter Corinna is actually Cecil's daughter, a piece of information that Paul had obtained in an interview in 1977 with a very confused George Sawle who is 85 years old at that point.[75] Paul's book is published in tandem with the trend in gay and lesbian studies at the time, which often focused on the author's homosexuality to coin their works as "minority canons,

71 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

72 Hollinghurst, *The Stranger's Child*, p. 468.

73 *Ibid.*

74 *Ibid.*, p. 525.

75 *Ibid.*, p. 455.

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as a literature of oppression and resistance and survival and heroic making".[76] While it is necessary to uphold narratives that sustain Cecil's heterosexuality as a means to endorse his image as a canonical poet in both 1926 and in 1967, which is established in relation to his participation in and his poems about the Great War, by the late 1970s, the advent of 'outing gay poets' and the emergence of Gay and Lesbian studies as a discipline allows Paul Bryant to re-create Cecil's role in literature by coining him as part of a 'gay literary canon'.

In the decades that precede Paul's biography, which exposes Cecil's homosexuality, Cecil's poetry is read as a master canon that conveys notions of Englishness, nationalism, and war heroism; we know this because it is 'Two Acres' that Churchill cites one year before the First World War breaks out: "The greyhound in its courses, / The hawk above the hill" [...] "Move not surely to their end/ Than England to the kill".[77] In this passage, the pastoral landscape is highlighted as a powerful image of England, a place in which England will overcome its enemies. This fragment of 'Two Acres' is recalled during Sebastian Stokes' interview with George Sawle in 1926. In this occasion, George points out that this specific extract has turned "the poem 'Two Acres' into a war poem of – in [his] view – a somewhat depressing kind".[78] What becomes clear throughout the novel is that the poem, which we cannot read in its complete form, is interpreted in different ways throughout history: prior to the outbreak of the Great War, it was read as a love poem to Daphne, in spite of the rumors about Cecil's sexual relationship with George; in 1926, eight years after the end of the First World War, the poem is understood as a war poem, which has been endorsed by Churchill's reading of it; later, in the late 1970s, Paul publicly asserts George as the addressee of the poem, coining Cecil as a member of a 'gay literary canon'.

The focus in *The Stranger's Child* is not necessarily on homophobia, but on how homosexuality comes to be such an important analytical category in literary studies with the historical shifts that imply the decriminalization of homosexuality, the rise of the gay movement in the post-Stonewall period, and the emergence of gay, lesbian, and queer studies. Nevertheless, Hollinghurst's representation of gay history as a linear and progressive timeline can be misleading because it implies a teleological effect, in which, after all of the struggles, there is suddenly a widely accepted recognition of homosexuality as a 'normal' sexuality and that homophobia has somehow been overcome in the process. The only way to read against this interpretation is to draw attention to Daphne's character, who remains secondary because she is a woman and cannot partake in the privileges of homosocial relations among men. While the circumstances for homosexual men, who are also upper- or middle-class, well-educated and white in this novel, have improved with the historical transformations in terms of gay rights, women are perpetuated as objects of exchange and as accessories in literary history. Hence, what we notice is that male homosexuality and homosociality still uphold misogyny and sexism as a means to guarantee male privilege.

76 Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, p. 51.

77 Hollinghurst, *The Stranger's Child*, p. 163.

78 *Ibid.*

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The novel narrates the obsession with the ways in which sexuality structures English literary tradition and culture. It is the obsession with Cecil's sexuality that functions as the narrative's main thread. On the one hand, we can read this as Hollinghurst's literary project of shedding light on homosexuality as formative axis of English culture; on the other hand, we can read the insistence on Cecil's sexuality as a historical literary narrative that yields a conventional account of gay history because of its teleological structure and the imposing narrator voice of white, upper-class masculinity. It is true that Hollinghurst "brings out the homosexual tradition in English culture out of the shadows",[79] as Kunzru explains. However, he does so at the cost of casting a shadow over feminist possibilities of authorship, given that he places Daphne and other female characters in positions of silence and submission, reinforcing the role of women as objects of exchange between men, which consolidates masculine bonds and power.

Homonormativity, Respectability and the Continuum of Misogyny and Sexism

If *The Stranger's Child* is a response to criticisms that had been levelled against Hollinghurst, particularly concerning the exaggeration of sex and the lack of women characters,[80] I would argue that Hollinghurst's response consists in an account that seeks to normalize and dignify gay life through the delusional myth of heterosexist morality. In doing so, he produces a narrative that creates a hierarchy in which sexual identity prevails over sexual acts and sexual pleasure, and in which the male voice overthrows any possibility of feminist accounts. In an attempt to create an overarching history of gay men, Hollinghurst portrays his female characters in the position that feminists have vehemently contested: with a gin and tonic in one hand and a cigarette in the other, Daphne is portrayed as a troubled contemporary version of 'the angel in the house'. Despite the narrator's accounts of her awareness of the people and situations around her, Daphne's character functions as a deflector of the possibility of homosexuality among the men that surround her: after Dudley Valance, she marries the artist Revel Ralph who also has homosexual relationships; Daphne has a son who is supposedly Revel's, although Paul Bryant's controversial biography claims that the child's father is actually the artist Mark Gibbons.[81] In Hollinghurst's novel, the cost of normalizing homosexuality throughout history is to displace the shaming and stigmatization directed to gay men into the already established shaming of women's bodies and sexuality.

In this sense, it seems that the novel's homonormativity is neatly tied to sexism, misogyny, and to white masculinity. As I have elucidated, Sedgwick has made clear

79 Kunzru, "The Stranger's Child, Alan Hollinghurst – review" in *The Guardian*, June 25, 2011. accessed in December 2016 in https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/jun/25/strangers-child-alan-hollinghurst-kunzru.

80 Tait, "The Stranger's Child by Alan Hollinghurst – Review" in *The Guardian*, 17 June, 2011. Last accessed in June 2017: https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/jun/17/strangers-child-alan-hollinghurst-review

81 Hollinghurst, *The Stranger's Child*, p. 460.

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the role of women serving as objects of exchange to prove men's heterosexuality and, in the novel, not only Daphne but also Madeleine, George's wife, play this role. Although she is a renowned History professor, she is depicted as 'George's wife' and the narrator makes sure to bring out the qualities that are culturally connected to 'unnatural' aspects of womanhood, such as her lack of aptitude for motherhood and her lack of interest in family matters. Madeleine's character has a similar function to Daphne's in terms of deflecting the possibility of George's homosexuality. However, unlike Daphne, Madeleine has a career and does not fit into the traditional roles of motherhood and marriage. In 1926, the narrator emphasizes the doubt about whether or not she knows about Cecil and George. They talk about Cecil's effigy at Corley and George looks at Madeleine and then at the sculpture; he thinks about the ways in which Cecil "seemed somehow to have turned into a piece of evidence, ambiguous but irreducible, lying between [him and his wife]".[82] Freda observes them and notices how George and Madeleine "looked much more like colleagues than like a couple",[83] and Paul Bryant draws attention to her "square mannish face"[84] at Daphne's birthday party in 1967.

More significantly, Madeleine's interaction with her nephew Wilfrid, who is a child in 1926, reveals her lack of maternal instincts, as she displays difficulties in communicating and playing with him. She is described as severe and unable to say "anything nice", giving him "her pretend smile, staring at him over her glasses".[85] Madeleine tries to play house with Wilfrid, but she is very impatient after having been left alone with him, and in turn he gets increasingly irritated with her for her inability to play "the game, which his aunt had failed to understand, [which] really depended on the person pretending to be someone else. Otherwise you came to the end of it, and a feeling of boredom and dissatisfaction descended almost at once".[86] The notion of playing somebody else, though here depicted as a child's game, is the core of the adults' sociability, given that they must always try to prove a certain public image. In fact, Madeleine is doing her best to show her husband's family that she is capable of motherhood in this scene and, therefore, that she can be a 'good' woman and a 'good' wife, like Daphne is. In placing an emphasis on Madeleine's fake and artificial performance of the 'ideal' woman, the narrator leaves her intellectual ability and her position as a professor in a trivial position, since the achievement that is praised by the narrator is her marriage to George.

It is interesting to notice that Madeleine's masculinity is construed by her not being feminine in the sense that she lacks characteristics that culturally belong to femininity and womanhood: Madeleine does not have children and does not want them; she is highly intellectual and has successfully published history books (which are not mentioned, with the exception of the one that she writes with George); she does not seem to care much for family life in the ways in which other women in

82 *Ibid.*, p. 167.
83 *Ibid.*, p. 189.
84 *Ibid.*, p. 315.
85 *Ibid.*, p. 232.
86 *Ibid.*, p. 236.

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the novel do; her physical image as a "strong-jawed woman"[87] does not conflate with the delicacy with which women are usually described. As Paul tries to talk to George about the Sexual Offences Act in 1967, the narrator recounts that George gives "a tiny suggestion that prominent and public though [the act] was it had better not be mentioned in front of his wife",[88] implying that this is a sensitive issue for Madeleine.

The fact is that, although the narrator is omniscient, he neither reveals Madeleine's thoughts about her husband's environment, nor does he offer information about the kind of marriage that they have. Is it just a cover up because of their careers? If so, is Madeleine a lesbian or possibly bisexual? Could George be bisexual too? Madeleine does seem like a woman ahead of her time, would she really be uncomfortable talking about the 1967 Sexual Offenses Act? We do not know. We do not know because, in conveying a universal and powerful narrating voice, the narrator adopts a position that is very similar to the roles played by the novel's biographers and literary executors. He paradoxically creates an authoritative account that demands fixed and stable categories to define the characters' gender and sexuality, and yet he ironically gives pieces of information that undermine these categories and suggest that they cannot be sufficient to determine the characters' relationships, desires, and identities.

Revel Ralph, Daphne's second husband, is also an ambiguous character whom the narrator first tries to depict as feminine, and therefore as gay, but whose sexual identity is definitely not as clear as the narrator portrays. In the second part, in 1926, the narrator begins by focalizing on Daphne's anxiety about Revel's coming to the party, and we know that she is somehow nervous about his presence. As he arrives:

> Daphne felt the magnetic disturbance of his presence just behind her, at the corner of her eye as she led [Revel and the children] up the steps and passed through the white gate under the arch. You were wonderfully safe of course with a man like Revel; but then the safety itself had something elastic about it. There were George and Madeleine – so odd that they'd set straight off on a walk. Perhaps just so as to be doing something, since Madeleine was unable to relax; or possibly to put off seeing Dudley for as long as they decently could.[89]

Daphne feels Revel's presence in the same way as she had felt Cecil's, as a dominating presence. This is related by the narrator as a sensation that yields protection; however, once the feeling is described as 'elastic', we know that it is not fixed and that it is subject to transformations and to variations. The description of the scene proceeds by pointing George and Madeleine as the odd ones out, since they are the ones who are not interacting with the party at Corley and simply decide to remove themselves from it. The sequence of events comprises ideas of Revel's presence emanating an omnipresent white masculinity in its most traditional sense. This is a masculinity that is connected with "maleness and to power and domination", extending itself "outward into patriarchy and inward into the family".[90] The image of Revel walking

87 *Ibid.*, p. 305.

88 *Ibid.*, p. 320.

89 *Ibid.*, p. 138.

90 Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, p. 2.

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with Daphne and her children in Corley, resembling the fatherly figure that Dudley does not enact, contrasts with both George's and Madeleine's strangeness as a couple and with Dudley's infamous truculence and inconvenience.

Revel's almost exaggerated personification of traditional white masculinity is later undermined in a conversation between Eva Riley and Daphne, as the former mentions that Revel has a "quite feminine touch – more feminine, probably, than me!"[91] In the same night that Eva tries to make a pass at Daphne, who rejects her, the narrator explicitly accounts for Daphne's affair with Revel:

> The of course unmentioned fact, that it was men that Revel liked to kiss, made it the more flattering, though perhaps more unreal. […] [Daphne] wondered now if he had ever kissed a woman before. She supposed when men kissed each other it was a pretty rough business; she didn't quite like to think about it. She knew she must encourage Revel, without making him feel at all inadequate or in need of encouragement. He was younger than her but he was a man. In some strange romantic way, to please him, she wished she could be a man herself.[92]

In this passage, it is Daphne who tries to reject the possibility of Revel's homosexuality, at the same time fantasizing about him kissing other men, which makes her want to be a man. Her role in this scene is ambiguous because it conversely suggests, on the one hand, her attempt to make him feel at ease with his own sexuality, meaning that she wants to praise him and not necessarily herself; on the other hand, her wish to please him also unveils a desire that belongs to her and that gives her pleasure: the idea of being a man. While the narrator's initial description of Revel conveys an image of a 'family man', as it were, the development of the narrative unravels different facets of the same man, whose femininity does not fit into traditional white and heterosexual masculinity, whose sexual desire is directed towards both women and men. This ambiguity in Revel's character can be read in a conversation that he has with George about the duality between Victorianism and Modernism, as Revel asserts his categorical opinion that "there's room in the world for more than one kind of beauty".[93] In other words, Revel's character and assumptions imply that it is not necessary or effective to divide the world in binaries, from which one must choose only one side. Rather, it is the wide possibilities of desire and beauty that calls out his attention and interest.

Perhaps it is interesting to look into Daphne's character through her relationship with Revel, precisely because he represents the uncertainties and ambiguities that are unexplored by the narrator as a means to leave certain questions unresolved. What we see throughout the plot is a tension between all authors, including the narrator himself. If all biographers and literary executors try hard to put characters into fixed categories that exist in the binary of hetero or homosexuality, then the narrator exercises a metafictional function to give us information that demonstrates that these

91 Hollinghurst, *The Stranger's Child*, p. 175.

92 *Ibid.*, p. 225.

93 *Ibid.*, p. 141.

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categories are insufficient to narrate the characters' complex affective and sexual relations. Paradoxically, the narrator does exactly the same thing that the authors in the novel do: he prefers to dismiss uncertainties by only briefly mentioning small controversial details and by emphasizing the necessity of creating social categories, names, and identities to give an apparent order of events and the appearance of transparence and intelligibility to all affective and sexual relationships.

In looking into the novel's uncertainties and ambiguities, Daphne, for instance, can be imagined beyond the role of exchange in proving other men's heterosexuality. In 1913, she is jealous of Cecil and George in the same way that she is jealous of George and Revel in 1926, as "their heads and shoulders could be seen as they moved slowly away among the hedges".[94] Like the hats that unite Cecil's and George's bodies in the first part, Daphne sees a similar union of homosocial desire between George and Revel in 1926. Although the narrator makes sure to suggest that Daphne's jealousy is directed to her brother's relationships with the men she desires, we can also read her jealousy towards their affective relationship, the male bonds in which the women in the novel cannot partake and, moreover, the bonds that they do not create between themselves.

Reading Daphne's jealousy as directed towards the men's male bonds draws attention to a conservative viewpoint that perceives the creation of bonds between women as a reaction to the bonds created among men, as if women were to reproduce the latter in order to obtain power. Halberstam strongly criticizes this perspective, arguing that it puts women in an endless position of victimhood and of complete subservience to male power. In this model, he elucidates, woman "is the name for those subjects within patriarchy who have no access to male power and who are regulated and confined by patriarchal structures".[95] In asserting that it is men who hold complete power in patriarchal structures, this model is doomed to ignore "the ways in which gender relations are scrambled where and when gender variance comes into play".[96] Hence, this could be regarded as one of the most violent forms of white masculinity, precisely because it dismisses any possibility of women obtaining power, autonomy, and agency, apart from perpetuating homophobic and heterosexist relations, and foreclosing possibilities of non-normative gender, sexual identities, and female bonding.

This is, in fact, the social environment with which we are presented in *The Stranger's Child*. Thinking of Terentowicz-Fotyga's description of literary representations of the country house as a space that brings out the social hierarchies presented in society,[97] the country houses in the novel evince male bonds that completely exclude women from any position of power. Thus, it is possible to read Corley Court and Two Acres as gay spaces that exist outside metropolitan gay culture and, moreover, as spaces that perpetuate masculine domination within literary tradition, since the novel's women authors are constantly overlooked as intellectual peers and are overtly asserted as objects.

94 *Ibid.*, p. 177.

95 Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, p. 17.

96 *Ibid.*

97 Cf. Terentowicz-Fotyga, *Dreams, Nightmares and Empty Signifiers*, p. 71.

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The country houses and the characters that circulate in them are extremely important because they show a historical development of control over sexuality within traditional spaces, such as schools and family homes, and also in their role as gay spaces, since it is in these estates that the main characters enact homosexuality, at least until the third part of the novel. While cities have often been affirmed as the birthplace of gay culture, Hollinghurst's novel suggests a beginning of gay culture outside of London, namely in the country house and at Cambridge, where Cecil and George studied. Hollinghurst creates a gay history that starts with the pastoral landscape, depicting its decline in the turn of the century, to later become a boarding school for boys in the 1960s. It is only in the late 1970s and in 2008 that the histories of the gay men in the novel are shifted to London. In fact, in 2008, Paul Bryant visits Two Acres in Greater London and he finds out that the estate has been divided into flats, "like almost every house in London",[98] suggesting the decline of the families and also the decay of the image of the country house itself.

As a boarding school, we encounter, as Foucault claims, how the overarching "control over sexuality becomes inscribed in architecture" as a means to pursue a "struggle against homosexuality and masturbation".[99] The regulation of behavior in the school is quite similar to that enacted at Corley as a residence, the house is considered "perfect for a boarding-school – secluded, labyrinthine, faintly menacing, with its own tree-lined park now mown and marked out in pitches", and although no one "could want to live in such a place […] as an institution of learning it was pretty much ideal".[100] The labyrinthine architecture and the school's isolation recalls the image of a prison, in which the boys are disciplined and regulated, regarding their sexual behavior in particular. In fact, Peter Rowe, the history teacher who begins researching the house's history and subsequently the Valance's history, is in charge of reading pornographic material to decide whether they are appropriate for the pupils.[101] He has a debate with the headmaster and staff about offering sexual education at school, something which causes discomfort and outrage in most of them, as they argue that the Governors do not find it "desirable" and "the parents don't want it".[102]

In 1977, the narrative shifts to Bedford Square, in central London, where Paul Bryant runs into Daphne on the street, ten years after her 70th birthday at Corley. Paul is revising earlier books that were published about Cecil's work, Dudley's autobiography, as well as the collected letters, which were organized by George, in order to write a new biography about Cecil. While the biographies and literary criticism about Cecil's work and life had been written by authors who somehow had direct personal connections with the poet or his family earlier in the novel, the former bank clerk Paul Bryant is the one to take up the task of writing about Cecil in 1977, for he is suspicious of what has already been published. His first step is to interview Jonah,

98 Hollinghurst, *The Stranger's Child*, p. 386.

99 Foucault, "The Eye of Power" in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings*, p. 150.

100 Hollinghurst, *The Stranger's Child*, p. 269.

101 Cf. p. 297.

102 *Ibid.*, p. 298.

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the servant who attended Cecil at Two Acres; he then tries to get in contact with Dudley, who now lives in Spain and he eventually manages to interview Daphne in her deteriorated home, in the outskirts of London where she lives with her son Wilfrid. In her home, Daphne is portrayed as a decaying character living in the middle of junk and lost objects.

As he interviews her, Paul asks why she had decided to write about all the people around her in her memoir, instead of writing about herself. She replies that she had been surrounded by "a lot of people more talented and interesting than [herself]".[103] In the subsequent chapter in the novel, however, the narrator focalizes on Daphne to disclose her own piece of mind about the interviews, showing that she is extremely irritated with the questions:

> People had been amazed by what she'd dredged up for her book, but much of it, as she'd nearly admitted to Paul Bryant, was – not fiction, which one really mustn't do about actual people, but a sort of poetical reconstruction. […] Her first problem, in doing her book, had been to recall what anyone said; in fact she had made up all the conversations, based (if one was strictly truthful) on odd words the person almost certainly had said, and within about five, or at the outside ten, years of the incident recorded.[104]

In this passage, Daphne reflects on the criticism that she has received of her memoir, *The Short Gallery*, given that many critics, friends, and family members had claimed that they had not actually said something she had written or had remembered past events differently. The "poetical reconstruction" addresses the problems and limitations of life writing and of narrative itself, making it clear that her book, as a piece of writing, is a non-fictional representation of facts; this does not mean, of course, that they convey the reality of the facts. Her awareness of the problems with writing are taken as a problem of truthfulness and authenticity, whereas her male counterparts can get away with the recreation of facts as historical truths, given that they are legitimated as authors due to their masculinity, education, and social position. The narratives produced by the male authors about Cecil's literary work and life become outdated or discredited not because of these authors' lack of authenticity or credibility, as happens with Daphne. Rather, the narrator relates all of these accounts as relevant pieces of research, and the changing perceptions of Cecil's life and work hinge more on historical shifts (such as the First World War, the decriminalization of homosexuality, and the rise of Gay and Lesbian studies) than on their reliability as authors.

Daphne's authorial position in the novel deals with the obstacles confronted by women writers throughout history in asserting their own room, to use Woolf's term, as authors, demanding a 'room of one's own' in which women could write without the stigma of being considered inferior to men. As we know, Woolf's essay has been prominently debated and has been considered a seminal work in feminist literary criticism. Daphne's character can easily relate to Woolf's concerns, not only in the sense of finding one's own room as an author, but also in the ways in which she has

103 *Ibid.*, p. 476.

104 *Ibid.*, p. 497.

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been the object of narratives written by so many men but struggles to write her own. If Woolf considers it a relief that "women do not write books about men",[105] writing a book about the intellectual men around her is the only response Daphne could find to release herself, at least partially, from the position of an object, even though she sustains myths that have been consolidated about them.

In the novel, homonormative spaces are constructed by traditional national symbols, such as that of the country house and public schools, but they also refer to a metaphorical space of authorship in literature. It is significant that Paul runs into Daphne in Bedford Square, in the area where the renowned Bloomsbury circle lived, worked, and promoted innumerable encounters. Throughout the narrative it becomes clear that Daphne did take active part in intellectual circles and probably led a much more interesting life than the narrator accounts for. As Paul spots her on the street, he starts a conversation about London and asks her if she misses it, since she now lives in the outskirts of the city. Daphne says London is for young people, that she had loved it fifty years earlier.

Paul, who has been living in the city for three years, recalls how "[i]n some absurd way her account in her book of living in Chelsea with Revel Ralph had coloured his own sense of what London life might offer: freedom, adventure, success".[106] It is exactly this part of the narrative that is completely left out, as we only know that Daphne has an affair with Revel in 1926, but the next part already begins in 1967, giving us no record of these forty-one years. All we do know is that Revel died in the Second World War and that Daphne had a son with him, who is Jenny Ralph's father. The novel's omissions and large temporal gaps are indicators of the author-narrator's selection of information and they point to the ways in which he chooses to recount the lives of the male characters by praising their intellectual and authorial achievements. By contrast, Daphne's character is narrated only in terms of her participation in the construction of literary and biographical histories of Corley, artists, and the intellectuals around her, never as an active intellectual or author.

As a product of her conservative social environment, Daphne is a woman who does not resist the sexism around her, at least in the way that the narrator portrays her. However, we do perceive various attempts to assert her authorship, even though they are always dismissed. It is possible to reflect on her underrated position as an author in light of the male bonds that surround her. In placing an emphasis on the personal connections among the talented men, the narrator forecloses possibilities of female bonds in the novel. Thus, Daphne's jealousy towards George can be interpreted as a jealousy towards (male) homosocial bonds that enable the rise of alliance and strengthen the professional relationships in an exclusive and elitist intellectual milieu. Becoming a man, in this sense, is not necessarily an embodiment to pleasure her sexual partner, but a way for her to have access to a network that provides the means to be a legitimate author.

Masculinity, in the novel, is restricted to a very traditional and conservative notion of male bonding that can only exclude and belittle women. It informs all spaces,

105 Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, p. 35.

106 Hollinghurst, *The Stranger's Child*, p. 374.

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social relations, and modes of writing in the narrative, including the narrator's authorial voice. It is in the narrator's description of minor details and controversies that we are reminded of the characters' non-normative sexual desires, which the narrator insists on stabilizing within fixed categories. Madeleine's supposed masculinity and Daphne's wish to be man are conveyed as "pathological signs of misidentification and maladjustment, as a longing to be and to have power that is always out of reach".[107] However, it is the stories that have not been told and the information that is withheld that open the prospect for the reader to interpret the female characters beyond their sexist environments, and to make sense of Cecil's sexuality beyond the hetero/homosexual categories.

The Stranger's Child presents a double movement in its narration of gay history, as it creates, at times, an overt realist account of gay history, which is thoroughly undermined by Hollinghurst's deployment of metafiction. Homonormativity in this historical account relates, as I have explained, to sexism, misogyny and to conventional white upper/middle-class masculinity that is enacted by most of the male characters in the novel. Yet it also reverberates notions of respectability and normality that have become inherent to mainstream gay and lesbian politics in the 1980s and 1990s. As queer activist Mattilda (aka Matt Berstein Sycamore) puts it, "*homonormative* offers us the potential to see the violence that occurs when gays show unquestionable loyalty for many of the things that [...] are routinely challenged even within mainstream straight dominant cultures",[108] such as consumerism, racism, misogyny, sexism, imperialism and militarism.

For Mattilda, gay and lesbian movements in a Western context have been struggling to be part of a dominant culture, reproducing all of the oppressions and violence that conjured it into existence in the first place. Mattilda designates the obsession "with accessing straight privilege at any cost"[109] as the "violence of assimilation", strongly criticizing 'normality' and respectability as an overall goal. Similarly, Warner, in *The Trouble with Normal*, criticizes the depoliticized and desexualized turn in gay and lesbian movements in the 1990s. He claims that these movements have failed "to recognize that there is a politics of sexual shame"[110] and have reinforced respectability and dignity as the equivalent to normality.[111] Moreover, Warner criticizes how identity

107 Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, p. 9. It is important to stress that Halberstam's study about female masculinity does not include heterosexual women, although he recognizes that it "menaces gender conformity in its own way" (p. 28). I find his discussions relevant to think about the female characters in the novel because Halberstam's notions of masculinity put in check discourses about dominant masculinity and its almost 'natural' link to the male body and to male power, as he argues that it is possible to think about masculinity within a queer framework of resistance to both sexism and homophobia.

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

109 *Ibid.*, p. 237.

110 Warner, *The Trouble with Normal*, p. 109.

111 *Ibid.*, pp. 52; 78.

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politics is acted out under the premise that "sexual orientation is fundamental to one's personality and is not mere sexual behavior".[112]

This idea is central to Hollinghurst's novel, as the narrator and the characters, especially the ones who are somehow involved with Cecil's work and biography, employ their narratives to strictly define sexual behavior within the categories of hetero or homosexuality. While the characters' actions and behavior often convey sexual identities that are ambiguous, and more informed by desire than by categories, the narrator himself adjusts their practices into strict identity categories, and the characters who pursue life writing or literary criticism do likewise. Hollinghurst's employment of metafiction can be interpreted as a means to produce doubts about the rigid taxonomies that are represented and to show that reality is always distorted when it is construed linguistically, as the act of writing is always an act of selecting information and of translating the world into language.

Nevertheless, in interpreting and depicting reality, it becomes clear that the narrator and the authors are grounded in traditional taxonomies of sexuality, homonormative practices of homosexuality, and sexist norms of authorship. On the one hand, metafiction is crucial to Hollinghurst's representation of historiography and literary history, as he evinces the contradictions and limitations in the act of manipulating language; on the other hand, the linearity in the account of events, the limited agency of the female characters, and the teleological account of gay history jeopardizes the critical effects of metafiction, in order to attest normality, respectability, dignity, and morality as inherent aspects of gay culture.

The last section of the novel, in 2008, begins with Peter Rowe's funeral at which some of the characters reunite. Desmond, Peter's ex-partner and one of the few black people present, gives a speech celebrating Peter's activism in the gay movement, mentioning the Sexual Offences Act in 1967, and stressing the victory achieved with same-sex civil partnership, which was "a great development not just for them but for civil life in general. This was met by a few seconds of firm applause, and flustered but generally supportive looks among those who didn't clap".[113] At the end of his speech, Desmond reads one of Cecil's poems, since he is now recognized as a renowned Great Gay poet. In focusing on the important historical marks of gay history that lead to gay marriage, Desmond's speech stresses them as achievements that confer respectability and normality on homosexuality. Assimilation to dominant heterosexist culture is, therefore, celebrated under the rhetoric of normalization and of an idealized standard of sexual relationship, which is matrimony.

In choosing London suburbs and country houses as the main settings for his novel, Hollinghurst brings out domesticity, assimilation, heterosexism, and misogyny as key elements of contemporary gay identity and culture. From docile homes to boarding schools, from the countryside to metropolitan life, *The Stranger's Child* suggests that gay history can only come out as a respectable history under the rules of matrimony and domesticity. In this set of norms, women remain powerless objects to be exchanged and to be written about. Even Jenny Ralph, Daphne's granddaughter, who represents

112 *Ibid.*, p. 29.

113 Hollinghurst, *The Stranger's Child*, p. 535.

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a third generation of women, falls into a secondary role, despite her Oxford degree in French and her successful career as an academic. Peter Rowe's funeral can be seen as a ritual that publicly mourns gay life, attempting to resolve melancholy in Hollinghurst's previous novels. However, it can also be read as the death of a gay culture as non-normative sexual behavior that can resist heteronormativity at least in its refusal of reproducing the nuclear family, marriage, and monogamy, and in its opposition to respectability as a means to achieve 'normality'.

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