

## ABSTRACT

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GAY AND LESBIAN ENGAGEMENTS WITH  
HISTORY IN BRITISH FICTION SINCE  
WORLD WAR II

Damion Ray Clark, Doctor of Philosophy, 2013

Directed By:                         Professor William A. Cohen, English

Contemporary British gay and lesbian authors engage with history through two distinct methods I call fixed moment/cultural critique and abstract moment/fantasy space. The fixed moment/cultural critique model focuses on a fixed historical moment, usually from the recent past. By focusing on this fixed moment, authors explicitly engage in critiques of the present that question society's homophobia and gay and lesbian people's participation in their own oppression. The abstract moment/fantasy space model uses moments from the distant past, often collapsing historical and narrative time and space to create a fantasy space for lesbians and gay men to reflect on their own cultures and identities and to create links with their literary and historical ancestries.

Mary Renault's *The Charioteer* (1953) and Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty* (2004), both demonstrate the vein of historical engagement in gay and lesbian British

fiction that builds a political argument challenging heterosexual cultural and political definitions of homosexuality and detailing the effects of such definitions on gay people. They do this while rooting this discussion in a specific near past iconic historical British moment: World War II for Renault, and the height of Margaret Thatcher's rule in the 1980s for Hollinghurst. The second vein of historical engagement is one that holds as its purpose gay and lesbian cultural fantasy. Neil Bartlett's *Ready to Catch Him Should He Fall* (1990) and *Who Was That Man?: A Present for Mr Oscar Wilde* (1988) and the Sarah Waters' *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) explore authorial engagement with the more distant past as a means of examining the present and creating possible futures. The past in these works is not one sharply defined locus; rather it is broadly defined periods that the authors seek to collapse with the present. In the Coda, I turn to the films of Derek Jarman and Isaac Julien, and the plays of Alexi Kaye Campbell and Jackie Kay to see how the fixed moment/cultural critique and abstract moment/fantasy space models apply to contemporary British art mediums outside of narrative fiction.

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GAY AND LESBIAN ENGAGEMENTS WITH HISTORY IN BRITISH FICTION  
SINCE WORLD WAR II

By

Damion Ray Clark

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Advisory Committee:  
Professor William A. Cohen, Chair  
Associate Professor Marilee Lindemann  
Professor Deborah Rosenfelt  
Associate Professor Jason Rudy  
Assistant Professor Christina Walter

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## Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to all those past and present, real and fictional, who helped me find my place in history.

## Acknowledgements

I owe debts of gratitude to so many people who, throughout the years, have provided me with encouragement, advice, and support. This dissertation would not have taken its current shape without them. Indeed, it might not have even been written, or completed.

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I would be remiss if I did not thank Dr. Marilee Lindemann. Not only did she provide me support as a graduate student by offering me a position working in the LGBT Studies Program office at UMD, but she also nurtured me as a teacher, a student, a budding administrator, and a queer academic. She welcomed me to

Maryland with open arms, gave me a home at the school, and gave me her friendship. She also served as a strong defender of my work through my doctoral examinations and my dissertation as a member of my committee. I'd hate to think of my life without her mentorship and love.

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Finally, I must thank my beloved Brendan Cooper. There were times when I thought I would break. There were times I needed a cheering. There were times I needed to be alone. There were times I needed to be held. His love for me in all my states of being and need is unwavering, and because of him, I know I can do anything. He "solves the magic."

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

*“The one duty we owe to history is to rewrite it”*  
– Oscar Wilde, *The Critic As Artist* (1891)

Contemporary lesbian and gay male cultures have a sordid history with history, one fraught with feelings of abandonment, isolation, erasure, and ostracization. We have searched for ourselves in ancient texts, dusty archives, and canonical literatures. Often we have found the results wanting. The late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have witnessed an explosion in literature with both historical and gay and lesbian themes. Indeed, literature that engages history on some level is a dominant thread that connects virtually every genre and sub-genre of contemporary British fiction. Given how widespread this historical engagement is, it might appear that British authors, in particular, are exploring the past in order to make sense of the present. I argue this is just what they do. British gay and lesbian authors engage with history through two distinct methods I call fixed moment/cultural critique and abstract moment/fantasy space. The fixed moment/cultural critique model focuses on a fixed historical moment, usually from the recent past, though not always. By focusing on this fixed moment, authors explicitly engage in critiques of the present that question society’s homophobia and gay and lesbian people’s participation in their own oppression. The abstract moment/fantasy space model uses moments from the distant past, often collapsing historical and narrative time and space to create a fantasy space for lesbians and gay men to reflect on their own cultures and identities and to create links with their literary and historical ancestries.

And while much has been written on contemporary American literature's move toward historical engagement, studies of contemporary British literature are only recently beginning to delve into this widespread literary move.<sup>1</sup> Critics of British fiction's historical engagement, like Richard Bradford and James English, focus largely on genre and on national memory in conversation with contemporary national identity, while critics of American fiction's historical engagement have tended to look into separate communities' reactions to historical memory and how it interacts with contemporary identity politics, in addition to national identity. British criticism has tended to not investigate individual communities' reactions to historical memory, focusing instead on national identity as a whole. Yet just because the criticism hasn't focused on it does not mean that minority communities have been silent in their reactions to historical memory. Alongside the rise in British historical fiction, British fiction has also seen a dramatic increase in gay and lesbian literature. This argument investigates the intersections of these two literary movements in British fiction in search of why gay and lesbian British authors are engaging so heavily with history and what the effects of that engagement are. Gay and lesbian literature—and by this I mean literature written by and about lesbians and gay men—has increased in production and in mainstream popularity. No longer the product of small niche publishing houses, lesbian and gay themed fiction today is published by large publishing groups and consistently finds itself nominated for and winning major

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<sup>1</sup> See Steven Seidman. "Identity and Politics in a 'Postmodern' Gay Culture: Some Historical and Conceptual Notes." *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*. Ed. Michael Warner. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993. 105-42. Lee Edelman. "Ever After: History, Negativity, and the Social." *SAQ: The South Atlantic Quarterly* 106 (2007): 469-76. Robert McRuer. *The Queer Renaissance: Contemporary American Literature and the Reinvention of Lesbian and Gay Identities*. New York: New York UP, 1997.

literary prizes. Critics of the contemporary British novel have also recently begun to explore this rise in popularity of gay and lesbian fictions. While both movements—historical engagement and gay and lesbian fiction—have been documented consistently in the major studies of contemporary British fiction,<sup>2</sup> a thorough analysis of lesbian and gay male literature’s interactions with British national history, lesbian and gay cultural histories, and literary histories has yet to take place.

Contemporary lesbian and gay fiction takes for granted that lesbian and gay men exist. It is much less concerned with queer critiques of identity than it is with critiques of the dominant culture and creating fantasy communities. Where the authors do not find a historical legacy, they create one through fantasy. Where authors find a historical moment that requires interrogation, they do so by inviting a lesbian or gay male character to live that moment. Where authors wish to affect cultural change, they use a galvanizing historical moment to demonstrate the need. Contemporary British lesbian and gay male authors collapse time, space, and literary styles to reflect our current condition, our hopes for the future, and our search for cultural/historical connection. They do not, I argue, solely engage past historical moments to prove lesbians and gays existed. This dissertation, therefore, is not about establishing a lesbian and gay literary canon, nor is it a project of recovery in which authors try to find gay men and lesbians lost to history and literature and re-center

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<sup>2</sup> Two major works on British Contemporary fiction are Richard Bradford. *The Novel Now: Contemporary British Fiction*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2007. and James F. English, ed. *A Concise Companion to Contemporary British Fiction*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2006.

them. Lillian Faderman, Claude Summers, and David Bergman, among other literary critics, and Rebecca Jennings, George Chauncey, Matt Cook, Matt Houlbrook, and H.G. Cocks, among other historians, have brilliantly and thankfully done this work, and my dissertation would not be possible without them.<sup>3</sup> This dissertation explores what lesbian and gay male writers do after the recovery work has been done. I examine the lesbian and gay male move from literary engagement with a specific historical moment to the creation of abstract gay and lesbian spaces that collapse time between the present and past to reveal possible havens for lesbian and gay families and systems to flourish outside of heterosexual norms. I show how lesbian and gay male novelists have taken an active role in creating lesbian and gay histories. History here is not something that happened, then, but something one makes. Contemporary British lesbian and gay fictions are no longer concerned with examining history as a telling of the past; rather, history is a product of the present and the future, something one can create, something over which one has power. This view of history as a product of a vertical timeline, meaning the future, past, and present can all happen simultaneously, allows lesbian and gay male authors agency in freeing gay and lesbian subjects and communities from being defined by heterosexist opposition and

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<sup>3</sup> Lillian Faderman. *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women From the Renaissance to the Present*. 1981. New York: Quality Paperback Book Club, 1994. Claude J. Summers. *Gay Fictions: Wilde to Stonewall: Studies in a Male Homosexual Literary Tradition*. New York: Continuum, 1990. David Bergman. *Gaiety Transfigured: Gay Self-Representation in American Literature*. Madison; U of Wisconsin P, 1991. Rebecca Jennings. *A Lesbian History of Britain: Love and Sex between Women since 1500*. Oxford: Greenwood, 2007. George Chauncey. *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940*. New York: Basic Books, 1994. Matt Cook, ed. *A Gay History of Britain: Love and Sex Between Men Since the Middle Ages*. Oxford: Greenwood, 2007. Matt Houlbrook. *Queer London: Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918-1957*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2005. H. G. Cocks. *Nameless Offences: Homosexual Desire in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2003.

cultural victimization. No longer is the history of lesbian and gay people entrusted to heterosexual outsiders; instead, through this historical/present/future engagement, it becomes the purview of lesbian and gay people. This is a sharp move away from early gay and lesbian fiction that focuses on the medicalization and repression and depression of gay men and lesbians rooted in heterosexual British culture's definitions. I am thinking here of E.M. Forster's *Maurice*, Radcliffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*, Anonymous' *A Room in Chelsea Square*, the novels of Ronald Firbank, and assorted gay and lesbian pulp novels of the 1950s and 1960s, among others.

My thesis is that contemporary British gay and lesbian writers engage with history not in an attempt to locate and recover the silenced lesbian or gay male subject, but as a creative act that seeks to cultivate cultural space for social change, interrogate contemporary lesbian and gay male support for oppressive power structures, invent historical fantasies where present constructions of gay and lesbian sexualities can "come out," or to create a narrative wormhole that collapses the notion of a linear lesbian and gay history in favor of one that always already exists in an eternal moment. My research was partly inspired by Linda Hutcheon's work in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*. Her analysis of "histriographic metafiction," which she labels as a genre in which "there are overt attempts to point to the past as already 'semiotized' or encoded, that is already inscribed in discourse and therefore 'always already' interpreted"<sup>4</sup> (96-97), provides an ideal theoretical foundation on which to analyze post-World War II British fiction. As contemporary British fiction engages history in myriad ways, it makes sense to read these works as having not only already

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<sup>4</sup> Linda Hutcheon. *A Poetics of Postmodernism*. London: Routledge, 1988.

interpreted the specific historical moments they reference, but also that these past moments are deeply coded into the personal and national cultural identities of the readers that there is no need to offer an explanation of the moment. The works I examine in this dissertation all reference a deeply and uniquely encoded set of pasts comprising a history in which the homosexual subject was created by heterosexual outsiders, or has been erased from the history entirely. They then move to examining gay and lesbian subjects as having a distinct history that is also separate from the history written for them by the mainstream culture. They have a history that the culture has erased, but they are re-writing. This is not a project of recovery, but uncovering. Writers of contemporary British gay and lesbian fictions have no choice but to engage this history, the history that made them, but they do so from a position of present and future lesbian and gay male identities and understandings, using these knowledges to rewrite their own narratives. Contemporary lesbian and gay fiction is metafiction. It knows itself through an already defined and already interpreted national, cultural, and literary history. Lyotard's definition and positioning of postmodern is particularly useful here. In my analysis of post-World War II British gay and lesbian fiction, I keep in mind his argument that the postmodern moment is the rupturing or unsettling event that makes way for the arrival of the modern: "a work can become modern only if it is first postmodern. Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant"<sup>5</sup> (79). For some authors in this argument—Mary Renault and Alan

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<sup>5</sup> Jean-François Lyotard. "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?" Trans. Regis Durand. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. By. Lyotard.

Hollinghurst—this moment is sharply defined by specific periods and specific political viewpoints. For others—Neil Bartlett and Sarah Waters—there is no defining rupturing moment; rather there is a continuation of birth and rebirth of cultural identities that erases the power of the majority to define the minority. Steven Seidman views postmodernism as addressing a multiplicity of intersections with an aim to create social spaces where multiple voices can speak. Unlike Lyotard, Seidman holds that postmodernism is less about rupture than it is about creation<sup>6</sup> (106). I lean toward a unification of these definitions, toward a gay and lesbian postmodernism best understood as unsettling the past to make way for the future. I am not looking at postmodern here as an ironic repurposing of the past in order to show the meaninglessness of the present, nor that the modern is the new present brought into being by a collapse of the rules and norms and language of the past. Instead, using Lyotard's argument that that postmodern and the modern are in a constant cycle of interruption and Seidman's argument that the postmodern is an act of creation, I argue for an always occurring postmodern moment that has, as its purpose, the procreative act of future production. I argue that each of the authors I analyze in this dissertation does this precisely. Each of them ruptures acknowledged understandings of the past in order to make way for the contemporary gay and lesbian subject, and by extension, to manifest a contemporary gay and lesbian culture.

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Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. *Theory and History of Literature*. Vol. 10. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984. 71-82.

<sup>6</sup> Steven Seidman. "Identity and Politics in a 'Postmodern' Gay Culture: Some Historical and Conceptual Notes." *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*. Ed. Michael Warner. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993. 105-42.

Rewriting the past in order to write the present and a possible future is a daunting task. The writers I discuss in this dissertation engage British literary history, national history, and gay and lesbian cultural history in all its forms. Each chapter in this dissertation examines how literary pasts and historical pasts come together in the process of gay and lesbian cultural becoming: the historical emergence of gay and lesbian agency. Lesbian and gay male engagements with British *literary* history are the most complex and the most varied. This dissertation examines two distinct veins of historical engagement. Chapter One: Gay Love and Social Change Developing Out of World War II: Mary Renault's *The Charioteer* and Chapter Two: Gay Flesh as the Battleground of Neocolonialism in Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty*, both demonstrate the vein of historical engagement in gay and lesbian British fiction that builds a political argument challenging heterosexual cultural and political definitions of homosexuality and detailing the effects of such definitions on gay people. They do this while rooting this discussion in a specific near past iconic historical British moment: World War II for Renault, and the height of Margaret Thatcher's rule in the 1980s for Hollinghurst. But these authors do not rely solely on historical past, they also engage with the literary past. Mary Renault employs the generic conventions of the World War I first person narratives as a means of humanizing and personalizing the gay male soldiers at the heart of *The Charioteer* (1953). Alan Hollinghurst stylistically models *The Line of Beauty* (2004) after Henry James's fiction and his use of aesthetics and irony to interrogate the hypocrisy of 1980s Thatcherite power brokers and the role gay men play in their own destruction. The second vein of historical engagement is one that holds as its purpose gay and lesbian cultural fantasy.

Chapter Three: Neil Bartlett and the Search for Gay Male Modes of Narrating History and Chapter Four: Impersonation as Retrospection: Sarah Waters and the Lesbian Remolding of the Victorian Novel, both explore authorial engagement with the more distant past as a means of examining the present and creating possible futures. The past in these works is not one sharply defined locus; rather it is broadly defined periods that the authors seek to collapse with the present. In this way, Neil Bartlett explores his own creation as a modern gay man in *Who Was That Man?: A Present for Mr Oscar Wilde* (1988) alongside *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, finding in Wilde's writings a memoir-like narrative of his own creation as a homosexual male one hundred years earlier. Collapsing gay male time and space in *Who Was That Man?* provides Bartlett with the model of his abstract fantasy work, *Ready To Catch Him Should He Fall* (1990), in which Bartlett crafts an archetypal gay male London that hovers between historical reality (the onset of AIDS, references to British gay male history) and cultural biomythography (the characters all have archetypal gay names, the action takes place in a mythic place called "The Bar").<sup>7</sup> Sarah Waters' neo-Victorian sex romp, *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), creates a historical fantasy space where contemporary lesbian sexuality and sexual identity can finally "come out" of

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<sup>7</sup> Judith Halberstam's *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. New York: New York UP, 2005, offers a very useful lens for examining such spaces. In it, Halberstam argues that queer time and queer space to "make clear how respectability, and notions of the normal on which it depends, may be upheld by a middle-class logic of reproductive temporality. And so, in Western cultures, we chart the emergence of the adult from the dangerous and unruly period of adolescence as a desired process of maturation; and we create longevity as the most desirable future" (4). Queer time and place upsets the notions of respectability and traditional forms of family. By providing locales that exist outside of specific heterosexual times and places, Bartlett and Waters explore this move to gay and lesbian cultural adulthood that can move past Western heterosexual definitions and expectations.

its period-enforced silence. Her work embodies the formal structure of the late-Victorian novel (the triple-decker), several of its sub-genres (picaresque, *Bildungsroman*, sensation fiction), and explicit references to Christina Rossetti, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Alfred Tennyson, Thomas Hardy, Oscar Wilde, and other writers, including often anonymous authors of Victorian pornographic literature. I move from the 1950s to the late-1980s and beyond in this argument, and this is a noticeable time gap. Renault was certainly a pioneer in gay historical engagement in post-war fiction. After her, however, with the move into the 1960s, the conversation in British literature around gay and lesbian issues moved away from prose fiction as the central vehicle for cultural discussion and toward theatre: the plays of Joe Orton, film, *Victim* (1961) and the early-mid 1980s films of Derek Jarman, and through popular music of the 1980s. I will touch on these more in the Coda. Neil Bartlett, himself rooted in the theatre, picks up the gay historical engagement work in British fiction. Finally, research into these differing literary histories and formal conventions form a part of each chapter. In part through literary engagement, lesbian and gay writers create their own literary worlds, and through them, reach a moment of self-creation. But in order to achieve this moment of self-creation, the gay and lesbian authors I explore here collapse literary time as well. By engaging with previous literary histories, these authors form a continuum of art and community. It is a act of self-creation, but it is also a procreative act in which the gay and lesbian literary children draw defined lines of communion and legacy with past writers. As writers of metafiction, contemporary lesbian and gay writers are able to communicate with readers through shared cultural knowledge. This applies not only

to the formal past literary references and structures these authors charter, but also to national and cultural histories.

Where writers like Renault and Hollinghurst work with very specific historical moments and events, Waters and Bartlett tackle larger periods of history, moving from the specific to the abstract. Through this dissertation, my methodology adapts to reflect these authors' different uses of history. In order to detail the specific historical moments of the 1950s and the 1980s, and in particular, what these periods of history were like for British gay men, I needed to delve into archival research of specific past moments to provide evidence for the historical and cultural situation with which writers like Renault and Hollinghurst are grappling.<sup>8</sup> With this archival material, I read *The Charioteer* against the media culture of homophobia and homoparanoia, represented by contemporary newspaper and tabloid clippings that dominated the immediate post-war period. Renault's work directly challenges this paranoia and counters it with a narrative of national service and sacrifice. The archival work I did in the Hall-Carpenter Archives also proves fruitful for analyzing Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty*. The 1940s provide an interesting cultural lens through which to view the 1980s, and Renault's work connects to Hollinghurst's through the archival record. In many ways, the Thatcherite government of the 1980s wished to return to the glorious post-war past when the country's identity was secure, and roles were defined. But as the archives and *The Charioteer* show, this was no golden age for gay men. I argue that Hollinghurst critiques gay male participation in a conservative neo-colonialism that seeks to destroy the homosexual through legislation

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<sup>8</sup> The Hall-Carpenter archives are housed at the London School of Economics and Political Science. The archives hold papers of LGBT political organizations, publications, news clippings, and ephemera.

and government inaction regarding the burgeoning AIDS epidemic. The papers of the Conservative Group for Homosexual Equality detail the methods behind gay culture's participation in the conservative party of the Margaret Thatcher era; they also detail the conservative party's resounding rejection of gay people and gay causes. Differing from the specific historical moments Renault and Hollinghurst engage, Sarah Waters' novel *Tipping the Velvet* embodies a larger historical engagement, one that spans a period of one hundred years of literary gay male culture, Victorian lesbian erasure, and the rise and popularity of an urban lesbian cultural identity in the 1990s. In analyzing Waters' work, I found her dissertation on gay and lesbian historical fiction and personal interviews to be most fruitful in my analysis of how she positions her own historical engagement. In it she lays out her own rationale and methodology for the historical engagement she would undertake in her own fiction. Neil Bartlett, through interviews and his own biomythography, *Who Was That Man?: A Present for Mr Oscar Wilde*, provides a critical foundation and an historical analysis of his own, which he employs in the creation of his novel, *Ready to Catch Him Should He Fall*. Bartlett, like Waters, engages history on a larger scale through a longer historical lens. Although coming out of a specific historical moment in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Bartlett first examines the connections between gay male identity in his own time and positions his identity against the "birth" of the modern gay male in the late nineteenth century. Ultimately, Bartlett collapses the linear history and time between the era of Oscar Wilde and his own, leading to his creation, in *Ready To Catch Him Should He Fall*, of an abstract and archetypal gay London in which gay culture seems already to be in existence, outside of specific time, yet completely of its time.

Bartlett's historical engagement is one of myth creation. From Alan Hollinghurst's very specific engagement with the mid- to late- 1980s to Neil Bartlett's timeless and abstract gay world rooted in the 1980s, gay and lesbian authors engage history through different lenses, but whether they critique a specific moment or engage a one hundred year period, their work focuses on self-created narrative histories.

Creation is key in my analysis of British gay and lesbian fictions since World War II. Rejecting the present move toward queer negativism, or the move away from queer (re)productivity, my project examines the ways in which lesbian and gay male writers participate in and create histories for themselves.<sup>9</sup> The texts I analyze critique the present while looking toward the future. In their different ways, Renault, Hollinghurst, Waters, and Bartlett each imagine gay and lesbian cultures as creative forces that give birth to their own historical narratives rather than passively accepting one created for them. Alan Sinfield, whose work has greatly contributed to my thinking on contemporary gay and lesbian fiction, writes, "If les/bi/gay people have some reason to take a long view of their situation, we also know that, in our current modes, we are a recent and ongoing creation. For we did not come out, in the wake of the Stonewall Riot of 1969, in the sense of emerging, already formed, as if from behind a curtain. Rather, we have been making our history and hence ourselves – though not, of course, in conditions of our own choosing" (*Gay and After* 1). I wish to focus here on his claim that we have been making our own history, our own selves, and extend this thought to the fiction I examine here. All of the key texts I discuss in this dissertation react to both parts of Sinfield's statement. They all acknowledge a

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<sup>9</sup> See Lee Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Durham: Duke UP, 2004.

lesbian or gay male history created, or purposefully not created, for them by the dominant, heterosexual power structures. But they also all attempt to break free from these historical creations in an effort to seize the power of gay and lesbian communal self-creation. They do so through repetitions, interruptions, and revisions in the historical and literary narratives that created the identities and cultures of gay and lesbian peoples up to the moment of engagement. Steven Connor, in “Postmodernism in Literature,” argues that this culture of interruption is a key aspect of postmodern fiction, its creation, and its reception:

it is a matter for the novel no longer of keeping the reader in step with it, or of protecting itself against interruption, but of synchronizing with what can be called a ‘culture of interruptions.’ In such a culture, in which time is out of step with itself, the past and the future being made present to us in simulation, and the present deferred and disrupted into other times, a general condition prevails of what I once called ‘contretemps’ – ‘counter-time’<sup>10</sup>. (77)

Applying Connor’s notion of counter-time to post-war gay British fiction is appropriate. These fictions embrace temporal interruption; in fact, they rely on it. The historical, cultural, and temporal interruptions in these fictions allow for a repositioning of the gay or lesbian subject from a place outside construction and passive reception to a place of power over self and community construction.

Past critical approaches to lesbian and gay fictions have relied on a focus of locating, claiming, or re-claiming a history for lesbian and gay people.<sup>11</sup> This work is

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<sup>10</sup> Steven Connor. “Postmodernism in Literature.” *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism*. Ed. Steven Connor. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004. 62-81.

<sup>11</sup> Chauncey, Duberman, and Vincinus address this in *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay & Lesbian Past*: “Moreover, the history of homosexuality has an importance that goes well beyond filling in missing gaps in our knowledge of the past. It has already demonstrated that personal sexual behavior is never simply a private matter, but is always shaped by and shapes the wider social and political milieux.... Just as the lives of lesbians and gay men are

foundational, vital, and ongoing. No analysis of lesbian or gay texts is possible without the critical project of recovery and discovery embodied by the work of Lillian Faderman, Gregory Woods, Reed Woodhouse, Martha Vicinus, George Chauncey, David Bergman, Rebecca Jennings, Emma Donoghue, and Vito Russo, among others<sup>12</sup>. One need only look at Vito Russo's research into gay and lesbian images in Hollywood cinema to see why this work matters.<sup>13</sup> Russo's historical analysis results in a rather depressing array of suicide, murder, sexless sissies, and monstrous matrons. Russo's project is especially important because of the argument it makes that, in this case, Hollywood tells the heterosexual power structure what to think of homosexuals, and tells homosexuals how to think of themselves. Films, novels, and other cultural texts have shaped the self-image of lesbians and gay men and often times, gay and lesbian people have had no voice in this construction of identity. Without Faderman's and Woods' work, in particular, we might not have discovered how present we have been, and how we have endeavored in the past to tell our own stories, to shape our own identities. In short, much of lesbian and gay male culture's obsession with history has been embodied by a project that seeks to find and rescue us, to say we were here, we have an historical legacy, we have cultural ancestors.

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enhanced by a knowledge of their history, so too will the field of history be enriched by a reclamation of the homosexual past" (13).

<sup>12</sup>. Reed Woodhouse. *Unlimited Embrace: A Cannon of Gay Fiction, 1945-1995*. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1998. Gregory Woods. *A History of Gay Literature: The Male Tradition*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1998. Martha Vicinus. "'They Wonder to Which Sex I Belong': The Historical Roots of the Modern Lesbian Identity." *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*. Ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin. New York: Routledge, 1993. 432-52. Emma Donoghue. *Passions Between Women: British Lesbian Culture 1668-1801*. New York: Harper Collins, 1993.

<sup>13</sup> Vito Russo. *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies*. New York: Harper and Row, 1987. Print.

This historical and cultural project has been crucial in the development of lesbian and gay studies, and with the development of lesbian and gay identities. It is fascinating, therefore, that contemporary British gay and lesbian fictions have moved toward a different set of engagements, ones with different rules.

But before gay and lesbian writers could begin to fully challenge this outside construction and history of repression, critics had to work to discover how these systems of oppression have been working. Joseph Bristow, in his introduction to *Sexual Sameness*, argues that while lesbian and gay texts and narratives are different, and should be read with an acute awareness of difference, they both “share parallel histories within a sexually prohibitive dominant culture” (3).<sup>14</sup> He goes on to argue that

The work of lesbian and gay literary criticism, however, is not simply to reread canonical writings, and thereby come to an understanding of the historical, aesthetic, and political pressures under which homosexual representation has had to exist. It is equally, if not more so, engaged in the investigation of how and why modern sexualities have followed particular patterns, and how literary works – so frequently responsive to cultural transitions – mediate the making and breaking of these behaviours. (*Sexual Sameness* 7)

This dissertation examines how writers respond to the investigative discovery work Bristow calls for. Claude J. Summers, another pioneering critic of lesbian and gay male literary history, concentrates on literary works leading up to the Stonewall riots, before “the contemporary gay liberation movement” (15), and through this work, explores homo-cultural attitudes that led to the movement.<sup>15</sup> In his work, Summers

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<sup>14</sup> Joseph Bristow, ed. *Sexual Sameness: Textual Differences in Lesbian and Gay Writing*. London: Routledge, 1992. Print.

<sup>15</sup> Claude J. Summers. *Gay Fictions: Wilde to Stonewall: Studies in a Male Homosexual Literary Tradition*. New York: Continuum, 1990. Print.

examines how gay and lesbian literature, as a cultural artifact, can reveal the patterns that demonstrate how gay and lesbian people process behavioral policing – the sort of cultural mechanisms that, according to Bristow, writers and critics have a responsibility to investigate. But one must be careful here not to paint gay and lesbian cultures as one homogenous unit that shares a single sensibility or a single analytical focus. In this, I share Summers' concern, and my argument is careful to avoid over-generalizations. Summers writes, "There has been much speculation about a particularly homosexual sensibility, but it is highly doubtful that such a quality actually exists. Homosexuals are far too diverse to share a single sensibility, and the manifestations of homosexuality are too various to permit sweeping generalizations" (15). I would add to this that lesbian and gay male bodies of literature and engagements with history, while sharing some similarities, are quite different. Sarah Waters, for example, responds not only to literary and historical attempts at lesbian erasure, but also to the domination of gay male literary and cultural history.

I would be remiss not to acknowledge the enormous debt my thinking owes to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and her work in *Epistemology of the Closet* and *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. Her repositioning of the homo/hetero binary, placing it at the center of understanding Western culture, and her positing of the homosocial continuum that serves at once to underwrite and to challenge patriarchal power structures, dramatically altered the ways we read gay and lesbian characters in literature, and provides a pathway toward understanding the cultural, literary, and historical mechanisms in place which contemporary gay and

lesbian authors must both address and resist. Sedgwick, along with the work of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, radically altered the framework of how we read the constructions of gender and sexuality, and consequently influenced a new generation of lesbian and gay male writers like Waters, Hollinghurst, Jamie O'Neill, Colm Tóibín, and Jeanette Winterson<sup>16</sup>. These poststructuralist critics “move the analysis of homosexuality into the center of Western culture” (Seidman 131), and in doing so, free contemporary queer writers from the chains of accepting a narrative and a history that has often halted queer self-creation and narrative power.

In imagining contemporary gay and lesbian writers as freeing themselves from restricting histories, my work challenges the assumptions recently articulated in Heather Love's *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*. According to Love, “Contemporary queers find ourselves in the odd situation of ‘looking forward’ while we are ‘feeling backward’” (27).<sup>17</sup> In her book Love argues that queer texts from the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries “register these authors’ painful negotiation of the coming of the modern homosexual” (4). She further argues that this is a conditioned state of queer readers: “As queer readers we tend to see ourselves as reaching back toward isolated figures in the queer past in order to rescue or save them” (8). I would suggest that while Love's argument about *fin-de-siècle* gay and lesbian writers and contemporary queer readers is very compelling, British gay and lesbian authors writing after World War II, and especially those writing after

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<sup>16</sup> Michel Foucault. *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1: An Introduction*. 1978. Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage, 1990. Print. Judith Butler. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1999. Print.

<sup>17</sup> Heather Love. *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2007. Print.

The Wolfenden Report,<sup>18</sup> are more concerned with looking backward while shaping the present. It is not about rescue as much as it is about connection. Where my project dovetails with the work of Heather Love is that we both recognize the weight and power of queer nostalgia, and queer antagonism toward heteronormative nostalgia. Yet contemporary lesbian and gay writers are not as ambivalent about progress and modern creations of lesbian and gay cultures as their predecessors. Contemporary lesbian and gay writers welcome the engagement. Still, Love is right when she claims, “For groups constituted by historical injury, the challenge is to engage with the past without being destroyed by it” (1). There is a gay and lesbian fear of historical nostalgia for precisely the reasons Love articulates.<sup>19</sup> History has not been kind to lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, transgender people, benders, toms, mary-annes, Uranians, sodomites, or Sapphists. Looking backward hurts because it reintroduces pain and loss that the modern lesbian or gay man likes to think has been overcome. There is always the anxiety that the pain of oppression will resurface at any moment. And this culture of nostalgia anxiety fuels the historical engagement of contemporary lesbian and gay male authors. By taking control of homosexual historical narratives, gay and lesbian authors challenge the power of past historical constructions along with the pain and fear they nostalgically bring with them. This does not always work, and I am in no way suggesting that contemporary lesbian and gay fiction is overly

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<sup>18</sup> *The Wolfenden Report: Report of the Committee on Homosexual Offenses and Prostitution*. New York: Stein and Day, 1963.

<sup>19</sup> See also Philip Tew’s work, *The Contemporary British Novel*, in which he writes, “Recent negotiations of any ‘core identity’ perversely encourage both a sense of dislocation and loss, and a nostalgia for the illusory lost centre evoked” (151).

optimistic, or “Pollyannaish” in its examination of modern gay life.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, there are many examples of lesbian and gay pessimism in contemporary fiction. For every rosy and romantic outcome for Nan King in *Tipping the Velvet*, there is a dark and uncertain one for Nick Guest in *The Line of Beauty*. Lesbian and gay engagements with history examine, critique, and narrate gay and lesbian histories and stories for themselves, but this does not preclude the negative or the pessimistic. It does not, however, assume the negative. These engagements are creative in nature, which is in and of itself a positive force – one that looks to the future.

Critical analysis of contemporary British fiction, however, has yet to pay attention to the pattern of engagement between lesbian and gay fictions and fictions embodying the historical turn. I am careful here not to refer to fictions that engage history as historical novels, for not all are. Historical fiction is a specific sub-genre in which the stories are set in a distant historical past. In fact, I only examine one traditionally understood historical novel, a novel set in a period remote from one’s own: Waters’ *Tipping the Velvet*. The work of Hollinghurst, Renault, and Bartlett all takes place in an era with a close proximity to the time in which they are writing. Yet fiction that is historical in nature, or engages history at its center, dominates contemporary British fiction. Suzanne Keen agrees: “That recent British and Anglophone fiction has taken a historical turn has become an axiom of critical

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<sup>20</sup> Indeed, Michael D. Snediker’s work in *Queer Optimism: Lyric Personhood and Other Felicitous Persuasions* (U of Minnesota 2008), suggests queer optimism is much more complex and provides other ways to read queer positivity.

commentary on the contemporary British literary scene” (167).<sup>21</sup> However, she makes no real distinction between fiction that has “taken a historical turn” and “the historical novel, a subgenre of the English novel with a continuous presence since the eighteenth century” (167). Citing every major contemporary British author from Iris Murdoch, Jeanette Winterson, Ian McEwan, A.S. Byatt, and Kazuo Ishiguro to the catalyst for “new historical fiction,” Umberto Eco, Keen keeps her critical focus on the subgenre as a whole without examining its multiplicity of voices and differing engagements. Rod Mengham also notices this historical move: “It is one of the central paradoxes of contemporary British fiction that much of it – much of the best of it – is concerned with other times and other places” (1).<sup>22</sup> Gay and lesbian fiction that engages with history is also concerned with other times and places, but it has the unique goal of wrestling with past traumas and current political battles. Kathryn Bond Stockton, in her chapter on Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, from *Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame: Where “Black” meets “Queer,”*<sup>23</sup> argues that Morrison’s historical fiction works as a collection of “hyperlinks” to the traumatic past of slavery and the traumatic present of AIDS. It is not merely a historical fiction, but a fiction that grapples with specific histories. I turn here to Stockton’s work with American

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<sup>21</sup> Suzanne Keen. “The Historical Turn in British Fiction.” *A Concise Companion to Contemporary British Fiction*. Ed. James F. English. Oxford: Blackwell, 2006. 167-87.

<sup>22</sup> Rod Mengham. “General Introduction: Contemporary British Fiction.” *Contemporary British Fiction*. Ed. Richard J. Lane, Rod Mengham, and Philip Tew. Cambridge: Polity, 2003. 1-8. Print.

<sup>23</sup> Kathryn Bond Stockton. *Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame: Where ‘Black’ Meets ‘Queer’*. Durham: Duke UP, 2006.

literature because in it, she provides a model of examining historical engagement that is closest to the work that British gay and lesbian writers are using. In particular, her work examining the connection between trauma and “hyperlinks” to the past is useful in looking at the work of Hollinghurst and Bartlett, and later, in the Coda, the work of Derek Jarman. Richard Bradford argues that the British historical novel is nothing new, having flourished in the nineteenth century, and pays this dominant move toward the historical little attention. His book length study, *The Novel Now: Contemporary British Fiction*,<sup>24</sup> offers a small section on gay and lesbian fiction, but it is a short and cursory mention and all of his analysis really focuses on Hollinghurst at the exclusion of several other major British and Anglophone lesbian and gay writers like Winterson, Waters, O’Neill, and Tóibín. Steven Connor’s work, *The English Novel in History, 1950-1995*, comes closest to analyzing how contemporary British writers engage history in his account of the contemporary novel as one “that sees the novel not just as passively marked with the imprint of history, but also as one of the ways in which history is made, and remade” (1).<sup>25</sup> Connor’s argument, like mine, is that contemporary British fiction is reading the past in the present (140). Current fictions engaging with history are really exploring contemporary issues, not solely, or even necessarily, issues from the past.

Analysis of contemporary lesbian and gay British fiction also has yet to fully articulate the relationship between contemporary gay and lesbian writing and history.

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<sup>24</sup> Richard Bradford. *The Novel Now: Contemporary British Fiction*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2007. Print.

<sup>25</sup> Steven Connor, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004. Print.

In one of the few published books on the subject, *Gay and Lesbian Historical Fiction: Sexual Mystery and Post-Secular Narrative*, a book really more about gay and lesbian historical (loosely-defined) fiction as post-secular narratives, Norman Jones claims that “Depending on how one defines gay and lesbian, gay and lesbian historical fiction might be entirely fiction and no history” (2).<sup>26</sup> This claim, of course, recalls lesbian and gay historical erasure and contemporary queer conceptions of identity construction. He goes on to argue that “rather than further obscure an already murky past, historical fictions help illuminate gay and lesbian histories and the debates that question their very existence” (3). While I will concur with Jones that contemporary engagements with history encourage debates in gay and lesbian circles regarding the existence of such histories, I argue that these fictions are less concerned with illuminating lesbian and gay pasts than with engaging gay and lesbian presents and positing gay and lesbian futures. Dominic Head argues, in *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern British Fiction, 1950-2000*, that historical oppressions of lesbian and gay male writers have led to a radical split in how each group has been able to re/create contemporary fictions. He writes:

If there are elements of retreat in some of the more significant feminist texts, gay writing has had to negotiate a still more restrictive atmosphere, and without the kind of reinvigorating impetus that characterizes successive phases of feminist (and post-feminist) expression. The fact of repression, especially earlier in the period, enforced some notorious compromises. The representation of gay experience in the post-war novel has been both more self-contained and defensive than the treatment of lesbianism, for example.... The

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<sup>26</sup> Norman W. Jones. *Gay and Lesbian Historical Fiction: Sexual Mystery and Post-Secular Narrative*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. Print.

later self-containment often seems born of the need to strengthen the independent tradition of gay writing.<sup>27</sup> (113)

I argue, on the other hand, that while this split exists, it exists in reverse.

Contemporary British lesbian fiction has encountered much more difficulty in negotiating the restrictive atmosphere surrounding its creation, the phases of feminism and post-feminism notwithstanding. Post-war lesbian fiction has had to invent itself, almost from scratch, whereas gay male fiction, even by the end of World War II, was already more developed and with a clearer narrative legacy. Notable exceptions to this are Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), and Dorothy Strachey's *Olivia: A Novel* (1949). That this legacy was fraught with shame, alienation, and sorrow cannot be denied, but this does not preclude its established literary history, a history that lesbian writers often had to invent. That gay men were repressed in literary expression also cannot be denied, but at least they found literary space more often than British lesbians. Gay men were more visible due to the obsession with them of the popular press; this is one of the chief reasons that Mary Renault writes *The Charioteer* with gay male protagonists, even when so much of the novel is based on her own experiences and observations serving as a nurse during the war. This is also why Sarah Waters' intervention of bodied and sexual lesbianism in neo-Victorian fiction is so important; it is a contemporary fantasy that manifests an explicitly sexual lesbian subject where she surely existed, but was either repressed or virtually expunged from the historical and fictional narrative.

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<sup>27</sup> Dominic Head. *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern British Novel, 1950-2000*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002. Print.

Robert Caserio also touches on the connection between gay and lesbian fiction and fiction that encounters history. He writes about

a recent trend in gay and lesbian fiction that argues doubts about public progress once again. The trend involves looking backwards rather than forwards – back to late Victorian and modernist periods, not as sites of unqualified repression, but as eras of homosexual and bisexual heroism. Given such retrospection, gay hopes for actual public influence – in contrast to status in the realm of fiction – appear to have more of a past than a future. (223-24)<sup>28</sup>

Caserio is right about the trend of looking backward, and about lesbian and gay doubts about public progress – Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty* engages just such doubts – and Caserio is right about the frequent return to the turn of the last century to search for queer heroism; Bartlett finds just such a set of heroes in Boulton and Park and Oscar Wilde. I would argue against his assertion, however, that gay hopes for “actual public influence” have more of a past than a future. Renault's agenda is to raise awareness and effect a change in homophobic cultural attitudes. In queer fiction, there is no single direct route to the past or to the future. Lesbian and gay British fiction is undergoing a renaissance at the start of the twenty-first century. Robert McRuer explores the American gay, lesbian, and queer renaissance in great detail, arguing “that the renaissance of gay and lesbian creative work has not emerged alongside or above the renaissance of queer identities and political analyses; instead, the efflorescence of creative work is contingent on and, in turn, represents and fuels

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<sup>28</sup> Robert L. Caserio. “Queer Fiction: The Ambiguous Emergence of a Genre.” *A Concise Companion to Contemporary British Fiction*. Ed. James F. English. Oxford: Blackwell, 2006. 209-28. Print.

the proliferation of queer identities and political analyses” (4).<sup>29</sup> Applying McRuer’s analysis to the contemporary British fiction lesbian and gay male rebirth is apt and wholly fitting. It is not emerging in a vacuum; rather it thrives and fuels a cultural reassessment of lesbian and gay power to write their own histories and challenge the historical narratives of the heterosexual establishment.

In my first chapter, “Gay Love and Social Change Developing Out of World War II: Mary Renault’s *The Charioteer*,” I argue for Renault’s position alongside Gore Vidal’s *The City and The Pillar* (1948) and James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room* (1956), as one of the key post-war novelists challenging gay male repression and blatant heterosexual hostility by placing gay male characters and homosexuality at the center of her novel. *The Charioteer* (1959) openly challenged the prevailing homophobia of the 1950s, while at the same time offering a generation of lesbians and gay men the possibility of a love story with a happy ending. Renault’s novel, written after her immigration to South Africa, tells the story of Laurie Odell, a young serviceman wounded in the battle of Dunkirk, and his quest for a pure and idealized love while finding his place as a gay man in a war-torn England of 1940. David Sweetman, in his *Mary Renault: A Biography*, muses, “How a bookish, suburban girl became a key figure in the sexual revolution of the twentieth century is surely the most intriguing aspect of all” (xii).<sup>30</sup> As intriguing as it is, she does become a key figure in not only the sexual revolution, but also in the birth of the gay and lesbian

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<sup>29</sup> Robert McRuer. *The Queer Renaissance: Contemporary American Literature and the Reinvention of Lesbian and Gay Identities*. New York: New York UP, 1997. Print.

<sup>30</sup> David Sweetman. *Mary Renault: A Biography*. New York: Harcourt, 1993. Print.

civil rights movement. Mary Renault's pioneering work helped lead to the Wolfenden Commission's creation in 1954 and its subsequent recommendations in 1957 and implementation in 1967 that largely decriminalized homosexuality in Britain. By creating a novel with homosexual characters devoted to national service at its center, Renault presents a gay and lesbian engagement with the defining moment for contemporary British culture, World War II. World War II is considered historical for the purposes of this argument due to its position as the defining past historical moment that shaped British national identity in the 1950s. *The Charioteer* uses the war setting to upset the notion of sexuality as a choice and to challenge prevailing 1950s social and legal homophobia. With its broken and bombed backdrop, a nation figuratively and literally structured by war, Renault's novel positions gay sexuality and identity as a mirror image of national service, therefore simultaneously creating an alternate British narrative of World War II, based on a documentary narrative style pioneered during the Great War, which includes gays at the center, and provides a lesbian and gay male reading public with a love story that not only includes a place for them in this foundational event, but argues for greater cultural acceptance and respect.

Wrestling with another sharply defined moment of the recent past and dealing with a very hostile political environment, I turn in my second chapter, "Gay Flesh as the Battleground of Neocolonialism in Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty*," to Alan Hollinghurst's Man Booker-Prize winning novel, *The Line of Beauty* (2004). In my examination of this novel, I move from the 1940s to the 1980s in setting, and from the 1950s to the 2000s in writing. As novels working in the fixed

moment/cultural critique model, Renault and Hollinghurst are both working on issues of the recent past and how they are affecting the contemporary lives of gay men. The 1940s and 1980s are key moments for British national identity and key moments of extreme gay male oppression in England. Both novels are also looking at gay male investment in national service. This is not to suggest a vacuum in gay and lesbian literature during the 1960s and 1970s. Lesbian and gay male pulp fiction and drama tend to dominate that period. And Renault is really the twentieth century pioneer in gay and lesbian historical engagement in fiction. Other gay and lesbian British writers do not really catch up to her until the 1980s. Hollinghurst's novel, about a young middle-class gay white man and his pursuit of membership into the ruling elite of the conservative Thatcherite power center of the late 1980s, is an indictment not only of Margaret Thatcher's anti-gay policies, but also one of gay men, and their participation in a system that seeks to eradicate them. Hollinghurst uses the literary style of Henry James to invoke aesthetics in the novel, which prove to be a useful tool to detail the appearance of membership masking the reality of alienation. With *The Line of Beauty*, Hollinghurst argues that 1980s Thatcherite Conservatism is a continuation of imperialistic destruction of sexual and racial minorities and demonstrates how the powerful seduce white gay men as agents to achieve this goal, and how white gay men themselves are complicit in this project. They do not see the truth of how they are being used, nor that they will never be allowed real membership into the power structure. Although published in 2004, the action of *The Line of Beauty* takes place in the mid-to-late-1980s, and while Hollinghurst takes on the era's major setbacks for queer people (AIDS and "Clause 28"), his central focus is on the

inherently destructive power of Thatcher's Conservative ideology. Hollinghurst engages the historical moment in the mid-to-late 1980s when gay men, seemingly besieged on all fronts, had to struggle for survival against a government that would rather they did not, as evidenced through government inaction regarding the onslaught of AIDS and the homophobic attempt at cultural erasure that was "Clause 28." Yet it is important here to note that Hollinghurst does not just criticize Thatcher's Conservative ruling party; he examines, in detail, the role that gay men play supporting a culture that seeks the eradication of queer people. The novel argues that Nick has learned that he is not exempt. Hollinghurst's protagonist has discovered that his "imagined community" in which he can craft a place for himself in Thatcherite Conservatism was delusional. They used him to suit their own needs. Whereas Renault seeks to effect change in British society by making the argument for acceptance and understanding of gay people, Hollinghurst makes the case for gay people to be more self-aware and to interrogate the parts they play in their own oppression and their oppression of others.

Unlike Renault and Hollinghurst, Neil Bartlett is not engaging with one specific moment of the recent past; instead he is looking at a historical, cultural, and literary lineage, and in doing so seeks to create a safe space for gay male cultural development, rooted in history, but flourishing outside of heterosexual British society. In my third chapter, "Neil Bartlett and the Search for Gay Male Modes of Narrating History," I examine Bartlett's historical engagement with Oscar Wilde and one hundred years of gay male subculture. Through interviews and his own biomythography, *Who Was That Man?: A Present for Mr Oscar Wilde* (1988),

Bartlett provides a critical foundation and an historical analysis of his own, which he employs in the creation of his novel, *Ready to Catch Him Should He Fall* (1992). Bartlett, like Sarah Waters to come, engages history on a larger scale. Also like Waters, he creates a contemporary gay mythology. Although coming out of a specific historical moment in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Bartlett first examines the connections between gay male identity in his own time and positions it against the “birth” of the modern gay male in the late nineteenth century. Ultimately, Bartlett collapses the linear history and time between the era of Oscar Wilde and his own, leading to his creation, in *Ready To Catch Him Should He Fall*, of an abstract and archetypal gay London in which gay culture seems to already be in existence, outside of specific time, yet completely of its time. Bartlett’s work is largely and unjustly ignored in literary criticism. Most noted for his work as a playwright and theatre director, Bartlett has nevertheless crafted pioneering and iconic queer prose. This chapter explores each work’s unique narrative mode to position Bartlett as a vital architect of contemporary queer British literature. His work upsets forms, linear narratives, histories, time, fictions, and mythologies.

Also using historical, cultural, and literary past to explore contemporary issues, historical legacy and fantasy space is Sarah Waters. I move in my final chapter, “Impersonation as Retrospection: Sarah Waters and the Lesbian Remolding of the Victorian Novel,” to an analysis of a key text in the late-twentieth century popularization of the neo-Victorian novel, Sarah Waters’ *Tipping the Velvet* (1998). Waters’ fiction is more than the recovery-based literary response that most criticism seems to recognize, for she is not just searching for silenced lesbians in the late-

nineteenth century; she also, through retrospection, arrives at a historic past moment in which she can create a fantasy historical urban lesbian culture that bridges the late-nineteenth and late-twentieth centuries. In her own dissertation on lesbian and gay historical fiction, Waters argues that we can

remedy the long-standing neglect of contemporary lesbian and gay historical fiction, by looking to the genre not, as critics have tended to look, for historical *accuracy*, but in an exploration of its status and meanings as, precisely, historical *fantasy*. . . . suggesting that historical fiction might be most fruitfully read as a register of the homosexual-self-image, an index to the myths of origin with which gay communities represent and explain themselves.<sup>31</sup> (*Wolfskins and Togas* 242-43)

If Waters' argument for reading lesbian and gay historical fiction as "an index to the myths of origin with which gay communities represent and explain themselves" holds true, and I believe it does, then how are contemporary audiences to read *Tipping the Velvet*? By rewriting a period of lesbian erasure as an era of lesbian sexual coming-of-age, Waters rewrites the lesbian culture origin myths that start with Sappho, move into "romantic friendship," and stay there until the lesbian and gay liberation and second-wave feminist movements arise. In doing so, her work challenges mainstream notions of the sudden appearance and popularity of lesbian culture, or Western obsession with "lesbian chic" in the 1990s. Through her historical fantasy, Waters creates a thriving and fully realized lesbian urban subculture, one in which Waters reinserts lesbian characters, bodies, and voices back into history and back into a period of fiction in which "lesbian" characters were either hidden, erased, or silenced.

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<sup>31</sup> Sarah Ann Waters. "Wolfskins and Togas: Lesbian and Gay Historical Fictions, 1870 to the Present." Diss. U of London, 1995.

Jasbir K. Puar writes in *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, “The futures are much closer to us than any pasts we might want to return to or revisit” (xix).<sup>32</sup> Gay and lesbian people have often felt caught between these two moments, existing in a liminal space where their past and history and even identities have been controlled and created by others and future that remains unknown. Alan Sinfield writes, “historical forces and the power structures that they sustain determine the direction, not just for our societies, but ultimately of our selfhood” (3).<sup>33</sup> British gay and lesbian writers since World War II seek to claim that space as one in which lesbians and gay men have the power and the agency to narrate their own histories, create their own mythologies, challenge the present moment, and by engaging with the past, possibly create a future in which queer people maintain the power of self-creation.

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<sup>32</sup> Jasbir K. Puar. *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. Durham: Duke UP, 2007. Print.

<sup>33</sup> Alan Sinfield. *On Sexuality and Power*. New York: Columbia UP, 2004. Print.

## Chapter 2: Gay Love and Social Change Developing Out of World War II: Mary Renault's *The Charioteer*

Long serving, alongside Gore Vidal's *The City and The Pillar* (1948) and James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* (1956), as one of the key post-war novels with homosexuality at its center, Mary Renault's novel, *The Charioteer* (1953), openly challenged the prevailing homophobia of the 1950s while at the same time offering a generation of lesbians and gay men the possibility of a love story with a happy ending.<sup>34</sup> Not published in the United States until 1959 due to government hostility toward homosexuals and timid publishing houses, Renault's novel, written after her emigration to South Africa, tells the story of Laurie Odell, a young serviceman wounded in the battle of Dunkirk, and his quest for a pure and idealized love while finding his place as a gay man in a war-torn England of 1940. David Sweetman, in his *Mary Renault: A Biography*, muses, "How a bookish, suburban girl became a key figure in the sexual revolution of the twentieth century is surely the most intriguing aspect of all" (xii).

Renault was born Eileen Mary Challans on September 4, 1905. Her pioneering work helped lead to the Wolfenden Commission's creation in 1954 and its subsequent recommendations in 1957 and implementation in 1967 that largely

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<sup>34</sup> From *Mary Renault: A Biography* by David Sweetman: "Between her first historical novel and her death in 1983, the Western world underwent a revolution in thinking about human sexuality and an equally extraordinary revolution in sexual behaviour. During this period, Mary Renault's novels helped millions of people come to terms with their sexuality, people who had never 'come out' or protested in public, but who, without her work, would have considered themselves alone and unnatural. One of her greatest achievements was to give homosexuals a place in history while offering non-homosexuals a sympathetic world where heterosexuality was neither the only nor the dominant sexual type" (xii).

decriminalized homosexuality in Britain. By creating a novel with homosexual characters devoted to national service at its center, Renault presents a radical gay male engagement with the defining moment for contemporary British culture, World War II. *The Charioteer* uses the war setting to upset the notion of sexuality as a choice and to challenge prevailing 1950s social and legal homophobia. With its broken and bombed backdrop, a nation figuratively and literally structured by war, Renault's novel positions queer sexuality and identity as a mirror image of national service, therefore simultaneously creating an alternate British narrative of World War II based on a documentary narrative style pioneered by Henry Williamson's *The Patriot's Progress* (1930), A.D. Gristwood's *The Somme* and *The Coward* (1927), and Ford Maddox Ford's *Parade's End* (1928) during the Great War – that includes queers at the center, and a queer reading public with a love story that includes a place for them in this foundational event. While other authors discussed in this dissertation focus on collapsing time in their efforts to create queer historical space through literature, Renault's project serves as a precursor of sorts. Her work in *The Charioteer* foresees the post-World War II move toward lesbian and gay historical narratives, and encourages it by showing her gay male characters' need for such alternative spaces in a historical moment fraught with upheaval and destruction. The gay male characters in this novel are constantly searching for gay space, looking toward history to find it, finding it lacking, try to create their own, but lacking support and precedent, fail in their efforts. The best some of them seem to be able to do is claim to have been there during the war.

## Renault and Critical Reception

Criticism of Renault's work ranges from praise for her use of language and her deft handling of the "homosexual problem" to scathing critiques of her perceived gender identity and the non-literary bent of her novels. Her continued popularity coupled with her commitment to crafting historical fiction has led many critics to flatly dismiss her work as unworthy of literary study. And while some critics, namely Peter Wolfe, have recognized in Renault's work a layered complexity worthy of study, most literary critics give her only a passing mention. *The Charioteer* appears to be roundly dismissed. Some critics disregard it as lesser Renault due to the novel's almost fairy tale like happy ending for a gay male couple—a notion that I will challenge later in this chapter. Others ignore it completely because they perceive it as separate from her "real" work, historical fiction. I argue here that *The Charioteer*, while not wholly set in Ancient Greece, is a work of historical, not contemporary fiction, and additionally serves as a linking text that ties together her body of work. Bernard F. Dick, a friend of Renault's, argues in his work, *The Hellenism of Mary Renault*, that *The Charioteer* is a natural companion piece to *The Last of the Wine* (1956), Renault's first novel set in Ancient Greece. Dick goes further, citing *The Charioteer* as a bildungsroman, one in which *The Phaedrus* becomes the unifying symbol of the text... evoking a Hellenic past. But he argues that Renault made a misstep in setting the novel in 1940, an era in which she is not sympathetic to the social norms as she is with those of the distant past (31).<sup>35</sup> The novel is important but

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<sup>35</sup> Bernard F. Dick. *The Hellenism of Mary Renault*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1972.

minor Renault according to Dick; he calls it “Apprentice work” (31). Dick is also one of the first critics to claim a happy ending for Ralph and Laurie in *The Charioteer*, explaining, “The novel can only end with the union of Ralph and Laurie who complement each other in self-knowledge, which is far more important than experience balanced by innocence. Two men who have fought in battle and have scars to prove it are the real Platonic Lovers. Now Ralph and Laurie will be two soldiers who will grow old together” (36). Working off the story of the charioteer in *The Phaedrus*, Dick argues for an understanding of Ralph and Laurie as the two horses that, while different in temperament, find a way to come together as a whole embodiment of a pure love, one not based in innocence versus experience, but rather based in shared wounds and self-knowledge.

Hugh Kenner’s criticism of Renault’s work is much less kind. In his *New York Times Book Review* piece on Renault, dated February 10, 1974, Kenner reduces Renault from writer to “male impersonator.”<sup>36</sup> Almost catty in tone, Kenner goes on to dismiss virtually everything about *The Charioteer*: “she’s a male impersonator. In *The Charioteer*, which dates from 1959 [sic] and draws nothing from antiquity but its title, we can see the procedure at work with no strangeness of setting to lend it iridescence. Her persona is Laurie, whose bisexual name corresponds to the fact that a woman writer is imagining a young man named Laurence” (48). It is, of course, not true that Renault draws nothing from Antiquity but its title. The myth and themes of *The Phaedrus* run throughout the work. It is also a bit reductive to suggest that the

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<sup>36</sup> Hugh Kenner. “Mary Renault and Her Various Personae.” *New York Times Book Review*, February 10, 1974, 15.

protagonist of the novel is named Laurie as a sort of androgynous persona for the female author to play at being male. And Kenner's misuse of the term "bisexual" in place of androgynous or, indeed, transgendered, is willfully ignorant at best, and blatantly homophobic at worst. Laurie, short for Laurence, is much more an invocation of T.E. Lawrence, as Renault spells out later in the novel, tying together her project of combining World War I fiction in a World War II setting from a 1950s perspective, attempting to establish a gay male genealogy through British military service and historical bookends. Kenner continues his critique of *The Charioteer*, noting that what is "More interesting, we can see from *The Charioteer* how central to her historical fictions is the Ralph-figure, a cool omniscient public schoolboy's daydream" (48). Again, the criticism's tone is reductive at best, stating that Renault relies on this "Ralph-figure" in all her work, and that the character(s) are all based on this ideal schoolboy's daydream of a "real man."

But at least Kenner acknowledges that *The Charioteer* is an important text in Renault's collected works. Harold Bloom, in his introduction to the Mary Renault section of his *British Women Writers, 1900-1960: Volume Two*, includes all of her works but *The Charioteer*.<sup>37</sup> Claude J. Summers, a pioneer in LGBT literary studies, writes in *Gay Fictions: Wilde to Stonewall: Studies in a Male Homosexual Tradition*, "*The Charioteer* is not a great novel, but it is an important contribution to the literature of homosexuality in the 1950s, and both its limitations and its successes can

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<sup>37</sup> Harold Bloom, ed. *British Women Fiction Writers 1900-1960: Volume Two*. Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 1998. Print.

best be understood in terms of this context” (171).<sup>38</sup> Thus, Summers, rather than honoring the novel as a literary work on literary merits, thinks of it only as a cultural marker for homosexuals in the 1950s. Summers goes on to agree with other critics that *The Charioteer* it is not an historical novel. Carolyn G. Heibrun argues that Renault’s writing is emblematic of women writers of her time in that it reinforces and upholds patriarchal structures in her book, *Reinventing Womanhood*:

An extremely successful and popular woman novelist whose career perfectly demonstrates the woman writer’s deep need to affirm the patriarchal structure is Mary Renault. Like other women writers, but more openly, and to a wider audience, she reveals an author fascinated with male wholeness, unable to conceive of power as passing from males in fiction, as it has not passed in life.... But the history of her novels is, more profoundly, the history of a woman writer’s struggle to present ideal loves and destinies without the terrible burden of female dependence.<sup>39</sup> (74-75)

I would argue the contrary, that Renault’s focus on male homosexual characters in *The Charioteer* has nothing to do with being “fascinated with male wholeness, unable to conceive of power as passing from males in fiction,” and everything to do with her straightforward challenge to patriarchal systems of oppression. Renault’s work views heterosexual patriarchy as violent and damaging to gay men. In the novel she finds it particularly damaging to gay men because the system allows no space for them to exist. By focusing her narrative on gay male soldiers serving in World War II, Renault brazenly confronts 1950s systemic homophobia in a manner that is most direct and where the homophobia is most keenly directed.

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<sup>38</sup> Claude J. Summers. *Gay Fictions: Wilde to Stonewall: Studies in a Male Homosexual Literary Tradition*. New York: Continuum, 1990. Print.

<sup>39</sup> Carolyn G. Heilbrun. *Reinventing Womanhood*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1979. Print.

### A Narrative Time Machine: Literary Style and History

But why set a novel in 1940, during the height of World War II in England when one is directly challenging 1950s British homophobia? By the early 1950s, World War II was already a concrete era of the recent past. Furthermore, it was the defining era upon which England would build its modern identity. As much of a dividing line in time and culture as World War I, World War II changed how the British viewed themselves and altered how they would build their future national identity. Is a novel historical if it is published only 13 years after the time of the text? Julie Abraham argues that it is. In *Are Girls Necessary?: Lesbian Writing and Modern Histories*, Abraham writes that

*The Charioteer* is paradigmatic not only of its gay male protagonists and abundant classical allusions, but in its setting, England during World War II, in which the war provides a public frame for her fiction of personal life. *The Charioteer* was representative in that it was, in this sense, both her first gay novel and her first historical novel, and insofar as it is a historical novel, in that it is a war novel about the home front.<sup>40</sup> (66-7)

While there is a great amount of debate whether *The Charioteer* is the last of Renault's contemporary novels or the first of her historical novels, I argue that it is a historical text. This novel is about a journey backward, through historical memory, in an effort to move forward into identity. Renault shows this through her use of *The Phaedrus*, Laurie's constant journey into his own past, his body-damaging service in the war, and his quest for a place to exist. Abraham is right to note that *The*

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<sup>40</sup> Julie Abraham. *Are Girls Necessary?: Lesbian Writing and Modern Histories*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P. 2008. Print.

*Charioteer* is a war novel of the home front, for it challenges how gay people have to live their lives in a post war environment, and addresses the role that heterosexuals play in creating this new age of secrecy and hiding.

Renault achieves this multi-layered historical engagement employing a narrative device popularized during the Great War. World War I narratives, such as Henry Williamson's *The Patriot's Progress* (1930), A.D. Gristwood's *The Somme* and *The Coward* (1927), and Ford Maddox Ford's *Parade's End* (1928) rely heavily on a documentary realism that seeks to impart not the facts and figures of key battles, but rather to tell the stories that go untold. The news media of the time provided the reading public with great details of the war, but lacked the personal stories of the day-to-day lives of the men fighting in the trenches. World War I novels seek to rectify this by combining the two approaches. In her article, "Narrating the Facts of War: New Journalism in Herr's *Dispatches* and Documentary Realism in First World War Novels," Evelyn Cobley cogently states that

In documentary novels about the First World War factual assertions endowed the war account with the certainty of scientific evidence. Although these novels freely admit to inventing or transposing characters and events, they guarantee their truth value through the accurate reproduction of factual knowledge. In these novels the facts represent the stable ground on which the verisimilitude of fictional elements depend. (97)<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Evelyn Cobley. "Narrating the Facts of war: New Journalism in Herr's *Dispatches* and Documentary Realism in First World War Novels." *The Journal of Narrative Technique* 16.2 (1986): 97-116. Print.

Here we have fiction built on facts. The facts of the war and its key events provide a stable ground upon which to build a fictional narrative that does more than just tell a war story. Indeed, it tells alternate histories of the war. Cobley continues: “The primary motivation is therefore not to produce literature but to set the record straight by providing an alternative history which is scrupulously accurate in its depiction of everyday events” (98). Renault’s novel accomplishes the same feat, using a different war, and focusing on a current alternative history, the affect of British homophobia and how gay culture responds to it.

Using World War I documentary realism as her chosen literary style in *The Charioteer* allows Renault to tell multiple lost narratives of World War II. This is a sort of historical revisionism that ties her work in with that of Bartlett, Waters, and Hollinghurst. As Hollinghurst looks back to the 1980s, and then further back to the writing style of Henry James, and Waters looks to the Victorian novel in style and tone, and Bartlett’s initial retreat into the library to cruise for Wilde, so too does Renault journey back to a previous literary moment. Sarah Waters, herself, notes this in her *Wolfskins and Togas*: “Despite its classical subtext, *The Charioteer* is identifiably a novel of its time; indeed, it is in its very appeal to history that we can locate Renault’s ambivalent relationship with modern homosexual models” (217).<sup>42</sup>

Indeed, this is the function of documentary realism, “...the documentary impulse of First World War literature was primarily to recuperate lost events” (Cobley 99). Renault, serving with her partner Julie as a nurse in war hospitals on the

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<sup>42</sup> Sarah Ann Waters. “Wolfskins and Togas: Lesbian and Gay Historical Fictions, 1870 to the Present.” Diss. U of London, 1995.

southern coast of England during the height of the war, gets to tell the alternative histories of those hospitals, of those nurses, and of those wounded soldiers.<sup>43</sup> This is a moment in which Renault sees herself as well. Through Andrew, and through Laurie, Renault writes herself into these characters. She draws greatly on this experience to provide a textured environment and richly drawn supporting characters for her novel. Thus, instead of a simple news report that details the numbers of dead and wounded brought in from the battle at Dunkirk, Renault focuses the stories of the nurses receiving those wounded, the conditions of the hospitals, the suffering of the soldiers, the effects of the bombing and air raid sirens. Indeed, she tells the stories of the communities on the boundaries on the home front. Renault is telling her own alternative history in this text, and in more than one way. She was a nurse receiving wounded from Dunkirk, but she was also a lesbian, living and working with her partner in a non-urban community. But this story is not one that gets told in the press. These stories get silenced and go unheard. Cobley proclaims the need for such narratives:

The need for an alternative history is not difficult to justify; what is far more problematical is the way in which the war novel can best restore what has been excluded or silenced. For the First World War narrator this problem remains relatively uncomplicated. In First World War novels the narrator tended to assume that facts could speak for themselves so that his task was simply their objective transcription. His focus was mainly on the details of everyday routines, and his approach was predominately descriptive. (99)

The narrator of *The Charioteer* performs much in the same manner. He does not focus on numbers of wounded, numbers of dead, or how many nurses work in the

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<sup>43</sup> From *Mary Renault: A Biography* by David Sweetman. Mary and Julie Mullard were both nurses in WWII military hospitals, eventually landing in Bristol serving and preparing to receive wounded from Dunkirk. (88)

hospital—those facts and figures are already known and have been widely distributed. Instead, he details the day in and day out routines of hospital care, the messiness of recovery, the feelings of loss that make up the emotional facts of these characters. This is typical of the World War I narrator as well: “Convinced that the horrors of war were best conveyed through the presentation of unadorned facts, First World War narrators tried to create the illusion of an objective discourse and concealed all evidence of manipulation by a subjective consciousness” (Cobley 100). And this point by Cobley is perhaps the key to understanding World War I fiction, and, by extension, Mary Renault’s *The Charioteer*. Renault’s narrator honestly attempts to tell the story of a homosexual love triangle set amidst World War II without appearing to have a subjective agenda. Most of the time, this conceit works quite well, for what is more startling than a homosexual romance novel published in 1953 is just how matter of fact the narrative is. While a few of the characters can become occasionally preachy in their philosophy of homosexual life in 1940’s England, they are treated by the narrator as just having a particular character trait, and not as representing the novel’s pro-gay agenda. And yet, Renault does have a strongly pro-gay agenda in *The Charioteer*, one focused on humanizing gay men through honoring their service and explaining their “peculiarities” as effects of a homophobic nation. By constructing this narrative as a silenced history through a documentary narrative style, Renault accomplishes her goal without putting the reader off with a lecture on homosexuals’ rights.

It is, therefore, also not surprising that Renault’s protagonist, Laurie (Laurence), often calls to mind World War I hero and author T.E. Lawrence. There

are many similarities between these two men/characters. Both are educated at Oxford. Both enlist to serve their nation during wartime. Both struggle, upon their return to the home front, to find some sense of purpose outside of war and some way to lead an honest and open life. T.E. Lawrence was rumored to be homosexual, though he never admits to it; instead he proclaims himself a virgin with no interest in sex. Indeed, while his writing in *Seven Pillars* is often laced with homoeroticism and homosociality among soldiers, his focus on these relationships is always one that seeks “the openness and honesty of perfect love” (Lawrence 508).<sup>44</sup> This idealized and chaste love among men, one that does not involve a sexualized body, appeals to Laurie in *The Charioteer* as well. In fact, it is the basis of Laurie’s attraction to Andrew, a young Quaker conscientious objector serving as an orderly at the hospital in Birdstow where Laurie is recovering from his injuries. This setting is also the hospital where Renault served as a nurse during the war. Renault even invokes T.E. Lawrence in the novel. While at a party, a social gathering of homosexual men, Alec, the host, says of Ralph Lanyon to Laurie, “I’m afraid T.E. Lawrence has a rather sad passage about ‘complex men who know how sacrifice uplifts the redeemer and casts down the bought.’ He doesn’t use the word ‘complex’ flatteringly, and neither do I. Ralph’s tragedy is that he retained through everything a curious innocence about it” (141). This passage, a key one in the novel, ties together the “complex” love triangle at the center of the text. Like Lawrence, Laurie seeks a purity of spirit and a purity of service. This combination, he sees as the definition of ideal manhood. Thus he is

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<sup>44</sup> T. E. Lawrence. *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. 1935. New York: Anchor Books, 1991. Print.

torn between Ralph—a soldier he went to school with who was his first crush, is wounded from service in the war, and is openly and actively homosexual without performing effeminacy—and Andrew, a conscientious objector staying true to his beliefs who is as pure of body and heart as he is of spirit. Andrew is the embodiment of innocence as purity just as Ralph is the personification of experience as honesty. Laurie's dilemma is that he doesn't know how to choose between these two philosophically idealized objects of affection.

This series of binaries—innocence versus experience, idealized purity versus realistic honesty, homosexual love versus social expectations—is central to Renault's novel, and she uses the myth of the charioteer from Plato's dialogue *The Phaedrus* to anchor the narrative's structure. Laurie's search for the ideal first finds itself through Ralph Lanyon while they attend public school together. Ralph is Laurie's first crush, though Laurie has only an innocent understanding of it at the time. When Ralph is being kicked out of school, we are to understand the reason is homosexual behavior; Laurie is enraged and impassioned and tries to clear Ralph's name. Ralph, however, does have experience, to be read as knowledge and understanding, in these matters, and willingly leaves the school. Before he leaves, he hands the innocent and passionate Laurie his copy of *The Phaedrus*. This text Laurie will carry with him through war and near death. It typifies his quest for the ideal. Indeed, it serves as the basis for his attraction to Andrew. No matter where the two of them meet, Laurie can only see the ideal surrounding them. A key moment in the text that examines this will-to-idealize comes as Laurie relaxes in the garden of Mrs. Chivers, a local religious woman who allows Laurie to enjoy her garden. Just as she has handed him

a religious tract and left him, Andrew walks by and discovers him, “You *have* found yourself a private Eden, haven’t you?” (73). Indeed he has. Lying in the garden, Andrew takes his shirt off and innocently lies down too, settling into a discussion of hell, philosophy, and his moral decision to be a conscientious objector versus Laurie’s moral decision to fight. After telling Andrew that this difference doesn’t alter his feelings for the boy, and Andrew’s challenge of that choice, Laurie “saw how it is possible to idealize people for one’s own delight, while treading on their human weaknesses like dirt” (77). His idealization of Andrew as the embodiment of innocence and purity is not fair to Andrew. Andrew is not as innocent as he would appear, but Laurie refuses to allow him to be fully human; instead, he places the young Quaker on a pedestal high enough that Laurie will never be able to give into his fleshly temptation, thus preserving a falsely constructed hope for his own innocence. Caroline Zilboorg details this framework in her work, *The Masks of Mary Renault: A Literary Biography*. In this biography, Zilboorg writes, “Renault presents the metaphor of Plato’s charioteer as the framework for Laurie’s understanding of his moral choices” (111).<sup>45</sup> If he acts on his human sexual desires with Andrew, he will spoil the perceived innocence that attracts him to the young man. It is also in this scene where Laurie shares his copy of *The Phaedrus* with Andrew, the very copy that Ralph gave him at school and has been with him through war, regaling him with the myth of the charioteer. He says, in his conversation with Andrew, that Socrates

‘...likenes the soul to a charioteer, driving two winged horses harnessed abreast.’ ‘Yes, don’t stop.’ ‘Each of the gods has a pair of divine

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<sup>45</sup> Catherine Zilboorg, Caroline. *The Masks of Mary Renault*. Columbia: U of Missouri P, 2001. Print.

white horses, but the soul only has one. The other' (he smiled to himself; he always remembered this part best) 'is black and scruffy, with a thick neck, a flat face, hairy fetlocks, gray bloodshot eyes, and shaggy ears. He's hard of hearing, thick-skinned, and given to bolting whenever he sees something he wants. So the two beasts rarely see eye to eye, but the charioteer has to keep them on the road together. The god driving his well-matched grays is ahead setting the pace; he drives up to a track which encircles the heavens, and is carried around with eternity as it spins, like —' Andrew, interrupting, said, 'Like a great ring of pure and endless light.' (102-103)

In Laurie's mind, Andrew represents the pure, divine white horse, whose innocence has to be nurtured and protected in the company of the lusty and rough black horse. In his own thinking, by extension of Zilboorg's argument, Laurie is the charioteer, guiding and protecting the innocence of Andrew while reining in his own sexual desires. This configuration, however, is constantly changing, for while he may think Andrew is the white horse, he has in fact cast Andrew as the charioteer as well. As the charioteer, Andrew must control Laurie's physical impulses and protect his own perceived innocence, in order to maintain Laurie's attraction. Later in the novel, Ralph becomes the charioteer, trying to get Laurie, as the innocent white horse, to work with his own experience in the world of flesh and reality. Renault's integration of this portion of Plato's dialogue is thorough. Not only does she use it a driving thematic force, but she also uses the ancient Greek tale as a reflecting point of reference for modern British culture.

Historical in the sense that the novel takes place in a firmly defined past moment, and historical in that the organizing theme of the novel is taken from an ancient Greek philosophical text, *The Charioteer* also ties in ancient Greek culture to 1940 England with homosexuality positioned as chaste pederasty. Linking these two cultures, divided in time and space, through same-sex loving relationships serves to

allow Renault to champion the homosexual cause as natural and important. Combining this “chaste” love among men with military service provides her with historical space to justify and honor homosexual inclusion at the center of the culture. The history of the homosexual is physically and spiritually joined with the history of European war. By arguing that ancient Greeks made a place for homosexuality in their war-driven culture, she attempts to convince the 1950s reader that they can make a place for homosexuals in contemporary culture as well. Moreover, in *The Charioteer*, we see Renault transition to novels that focus solely on homosexuality in the ancient Greek past. And this makes a great deal of sense, given that her exploration of homosexual men’s call to service, and longing to be accepted as full citizens, harkens back to ancient Greek traditions that include pederasty as a crucial method of passing on patriotic male citizenship. This is in conflict with pacifism in the novel, however, because British culture in the 1940s and 50s has no accepted space for homosexuality in patriotic service, thus has no space for characters like Andrew who reject a system that has no space for him. It is a pivotal novel in her body of work, and her first work of historical fiction.

### **Issuing a Challenge: Contemporary British History and Engagement**

Setting the novel in 1940 during the height of Britain’s involvement in World War II provides Renault with a setting in which a homosexual subculture is allowed to flourish. While the secrecy and discretion of the closet are very much necessary during the war era—as homosexuality is still illegal at this time—the facts of the war, its effect on population movement, and its introduction of foreign troops onto British

soil, combine to remove some of the social taboos and structures that suppress homosexual communities (Cook 148-150). As such, while Renault's gay male characters are not publicly open with their sexuality, they have built communities for themselves, safe spaces, where they need not fear raids, blackmail, entrapment, and prosecution to the same degree that they would during previous eras, the 1890s and the 1950s being key decades of heightened persecution.<sup>46</sup> Simply put, the horrors and destruction and dislocation brought upon England during World War II forced the government and its citizens to focus on survival more than surveillance.

The war forced a population shift in England not seen since industrialization. With young men relocated from their homes, families, and communities, and to the urban population centers and foreign lands where they were not well known and where no one knew their families, they were more free to build new communities and to have sex with other men. The same held true for women, many of whom also migrated to serve in the war efforts. One can gain a glimpse into the gay male subculture of the 1940s in the novel *A Room in Chelsea Square* (1958), originally written in the 1940s and published anonymously but now attributed to Michael Nelson. Indeed, the gay male social circle in *The Charioteer* closely mirrors that of *A Room in Chelsea Square*—though it should be noted that *The Charioteer* was published five years earlier—in that the group of gay men involved are campy, lascivious, self-loathing, snide, and gossipy. Another account of gay male life in the 1940s comes from Quentin Crisp and his memoir, *The Naked Civil Servant* (1968).

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<sup>46</sup> From *A Gay History of Britain* by Matt Cook, "...sex between men still led to court martials, and these continued and increased during the war years – rising from 48 in 1939 to 324 in 1944/1945" (149). Still, the prosecution of homosexuality, in the courts and in the press of the 1950s, eclipses World War II era numbers.

Discussing the relative freedom of London in 1940, Crisp writes, “As soon as bombs started to fall, the city became like a paved double bed. Voices whispered suggestively as you walked along; hands reached out if you stood still and in dimly lit trains people carried on as they had once behaved only in taxis” (149).<sup>47</sup> Crisp attributes this to a combination of “gloom” and “skittishness;” the police were less strict because they were trying to survive, and the citizenry were more bold because they were surviving (149). More likely to meet with strangers on trains and in alleys, Crisp shuns the “cinemas” and obviously gay environments: “I had always shunned these homosexual playgrounds; less from purity than from vanity. I did not want a liaison in conditions which might tend to obliterate my individuality” (151). Crisp’s memoir also details the arrival of American troops and the impact this had on gay life in London during the war. Praising President Roosevelt for the influx of American servicemen—who, it should be noted, were also far away from their homes, families, and communities—he writes:

This brand-new army of (no) occupation flowed through the streets of London like cream on strawberries, like melted butter over green peas. Labeled “with love from Uncle Sam” and packaged in uniforms so tight that in them their owners could fight for nothing but their honor, these “bundles for Britain” leaned against the lamp posts of Shaftesbury Avenue.... Above it all was the liberality of their natures that was so marvelous. Never in the history of sex was so much offered to so many by so few. At the first gesture of acceptance from a stranger, words of love began to ooze from their lips, sexuality from their bodies, and pound notes from their pockets like juice from a peeled peach.... While the G.I.s were still around, I lived almost every moment that I spent out of doors in a state of exhilaration. (152-3)

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<sup>47</sup> Quentin Crisp. *The Naked Civil Servant*. 1968. New York: Penguin, 1997. Print.

Wartime was a boom time for brazen gay sexuality. Freedoms earned through relocation, dislocation, and preoccupation, however, were not to last. After the war ended, government prosecutions against individuals perceived to be homosexuals rose tremendously. Police surveillance and raids of “secret” gay “meeting places”—like public restrooms, cinemas, and parks—redoubled. The tabloid and national presses fueled public interest nearing obsession in these cases. It is this environment of hostility that led Renault to openly critique the culture’s persecution of homosexuality with *The Charioteer*. David Sweetman notes, “Mary had left Britain when homosexuals were still enjoying the relatively free atmosphere engendered by the wartime easing of many social taboos. As an avid reader of the British press, she knew of the recent revival of prosecutions for homosexuality and she had read about the Cold War hysteria in America which identified ‘perverts’ as subversives trying to undermine capitalist society” (139). Writing a novel based on her own experiences in World War II, and doing so from the distance of ten years and another continent, Renault issues a direct challenge to her home country’s prosecutory obsession with exploiting and eliminating homosexuality.

In his article “From the Closet to the Ghetto,” Michael Ratcliffe writes about the hostility toward queerness in England in the 1950s:

Today, gay novelists such as Alan Hollinghurst and Neil Bartlett describe the 1950s in Britain as one of the blackest times for homosexuals since the imprisonment and death of Oscar Wilde. There were hundreds of vicious arrests, sentences and suicides before and after the Montagu trial in 1954; and fear of blackmail was endemic.... But it was the wretchedness of these cases and the anger they caused

that brought forth the reforming Wolfenden report of 1957.<sup>48</sup> (*Prospect Magazine* 20 November 1996. Web)

The decade was so dark in England, in fact, that other than Renault's *The Charioteer*, there were only six other major publications of gay themed novels: Renault's own ancient Greek historical novels, *The Last of the Wine* (1956) and *The King Must Die* (1958), *A Room in Chelsea Square*, which was published anonymously so as to avoid publicity and recrimination for the author, Angus Wilson's *Hemlock and After* (1952), Rodney Garland's *The Heart In Exile* (1953), and Kenneth Martin's *Aubade* (1957). These later four novels, however, focused on the more sensational and taboo aspects of gay male life. Claude J. Summers describes the bleakness of the 1950s in England in *Gay Fictions: Wilde to Stonewall: Studies in a Male Homosexual Tradition*, and signals toward *The Charioteer's* period setting:

A consequence of the increased visibility of homosexuality in American and British society during and following World War II was that in the 1950s homosexuals were more aggressively and systematically attacked than at any previous time in modern Anglo-American history....

In England, the number of prosecutions for homosexual offences increased dramatically in the early 1950s. Indeed the widely publicized trials of several Members of Parliament, of newly knighted actor Sir John Gielgud, of the journalists Rupert Croft-Cooke and Peter Wildeblood, and especially of Lord Montagu of Beaulieu may have at least indirectly led to the appointment in 1954 of the Wolfenden Commission....

*The Charioteer* can best be understood as both a product of this context of anti-gay feeling and a response to it. (157-8)

Highly critical of Renault's work with this novel, Summers, nevertheless, pinpoints the relationship between increased visibility of, and relative freedoms experienced by,

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<sup>48</sup>Michael Ratcliffe. "From the Closet to the Ghetto." *Prospect Magazine*. 20 November 1996. Web. 5 January 2010.

homosexuals during World War II and the seemingly inevitable backlash of the 1950s. However critical he might be of the novel, Summers rightly includes Renault and her work in the discussion of events leading up to the appointment, results, and implementation of the Wolfenden report. It led to the decriminalization of private and consensual homosexual acts, but also solidified the medicalization, treatment, and pathology model of homosexuality.<sup>49</sup> And it is this relationship between homosexuality as sickness, therefore requiring compassion and treatment, and Renault's project to create a cultural space to celebrate gay love that Summers finds the most fault. He writes that Renault's model of male homosexuality is rooted in

guilt and self-doubt... which mirrors the homophobia of its day even as it offers a portrait of homosexual love as potentially elevated and dignified and presents gay protagonists who are notably free of stereotypical affectations. The novel reflects the decade's received ideas about homosexuality in its adoption of a medical model to explain its characters' gayness, in its depiction of the gay subculture as pathological, and in its conception of homosexuality as a personal failing. (26)

His praise for Renault and his critique of her "failure of vision" (157) are not uncommon in the body of work analyzing Renault and her contributions to gay male culture. The characters appear to conform to societal notions of pathology and sickness, yet they also stand out as non-stereotypical individuals "responding to universal human dilemmas and by her insistence on the preeminent value of self-knowledge" (Summers 26). But that may be enough to make the difference Renault seeks to make. Compassion based on perceived illness, for Renault, is better than no compassion at all. Indeed, she is responding to a radical sensationalization rooted in

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<sup>49</sup> *The Wolfenden Report: Report of the Committee on Homosexual Offenses and Prostitution*. New York: Stein and Day, 1963.

fear and hostility as evidenced by the myriad press reports and court cases of the period leading up to *The Charioteer's* publication in England.

Clippings from Britain's notorious tabloid paper, *News of the World*, a sex scandal obsessed newspaper first published in 1843 and still in operation, detail just how widespread such negative reporting was in the 1950s. Mirroring, sensationalizing, and feeding the criminal prosecutions of the time, hardly an issue went by in 1952-1953 without the paper having some blurb, article, or headline expressing an irate point-of-view about male homosexuality, usually linking it to pedophilia. With no fewer than forty-five separate articles and blurbs on the subject, over the course of 1952-1953, in which the paper published names and locations of men being arrested, charged, and/or prosecuted for homosexual conduct, particularly focusing on stories featuring vicars, scoutmasters, teachers, and doctors, *News of the World* fed into a cultural paranoia in which no single man could be trusted.<sup>50</sup> This was especially true of single men entrusted with the care of boys and young men. With headlines including: "The Door That Gave Warning," "Gaol For Man Who Worked As A Maid," "Parson Was Watched," "Youths Are Warned About Witnesses," "Minister Put On Probation," "Scoutmaster Is Sent For Trial," "Doctor Denies Stories About Visits to his Surgery," "Eight Schools Employed Him," "Clergymen For Trial In Naval Town," and "Police Peepholes In Turkish Baths," and all of them regarding "offences in respect to boys and men," *News of the World* painted a seedy and shadowy side to male homosexuality, one in which gay men were predators and were hiding everywhere. Renault, then, had quite the task to humanize

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<sup>50</sup> *News of the World* clippings come from the papers of the Campaign for Homosexual Equality's (CHE) papers, part of the Albany Trust collection found in the Hall-Carpenter Archives housed at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

such perceptions, and while it may be, to some extent, fair to question her use of the medical and psychological models of homosexuality, nevertheless she showed England a different and compassionate view of homosexual men.

For Renault, the foundation for humanizing homosexuals is rooted in justifying homosexuality as natural and in showing the positive and negative aspects of gay male life in Britain through a representation of a tight-knit community of men. She also, in passing, suggests that homosexuality is like war in that it is a means of population control (114). And while this “naturalness” here may be explained as being caused by an absent father or being a child of divorce, and thus a psychoanalytical “naturalness,” it does serve to present homosexuals as being in need of sympathy. And this seems to have worked, to a large degree. One reader of the novel was so moved that she felt compelled to write the author of her change in heart: “I had been reading about the John Gielgud case and in my mind I judged him harshly. After I read your book I felt I viewed that problem from a different angle. Now I feel great sympathy with those in that category who try to struggle against it” (Sweetman 148). Renault locates the genesis of Laurie’s homosexuality in the abandonment by his father and in his parents’ divorce. She does not go into great psychological detail here; rather she frequently alludes to it. The novel starts off with just such an allusion from the narrator, linking the two things: “After, when the passage of years had confused his memories of that night and overlaid them with later knowledge, what he remembered best was having known for the first time, the burden, prison and mystery of his own uniqueness” (Renault 13). The night in question is the night he awakens, as a boy, to find his father leaving him and his

mother. His father's exit is connected with his awakening to his own "uniqueness." Even Ralph acknowledges this connection, saying to Laurie, "I must say, Spud, you're remarkably well balanced for an offspring of divorce. Quite often being queer is the least of it" (181). In fact, most of the novel's connections between homosexuality and mental illness come from Ralph. Ralph, representing experience, ruggedness, knowledge, and manly service, holds a privileged vocal space in Renault's text. Indeed, he is, in many ways, the most likeable and idealized character in the book. In his discussion with Laurie about Hazell, his accuser and former lover who got him kicked out of school, he says:

"I was a fool whichever way you look at it. I must have known, really, of course; he was all a mess from cellar to attic. His sexual tendencies were just a minor symptom. He didn't like reality, and he didn't like doing anything for himself that he could get done for him." "The trouble is, how else are you to meet people you're sure about, if it's only to talk to? After all, it's the way you and I met again." "I don't forget that, Spud, believe me. No, of course we all have to use the network sometime. Don't let it use you, that's all. Ours isn't a horizontal society, it's a vertical one. Plato, Michelangelo, Sappho, Marlowe; Shakespeare, Leonardo, and Socrates, if you count the bisexuals—we can all quote the upper crust. But at the bottom—Spud, believe me, there isn't any bottom. Never forget it. You've no conception, you haven't any clue, how far down it goes." (178)

Gay men, as typified by Hazell and a host of other characters represented in Renault's imagined gay male network are emotional and psychological messes with a distinct lack of connection to "reality." The network is far reaching, with the historical and cultural greats at the top, and the unspoken sordidness of detached and crippled gay men at the bottom. Ralph has figured all of this out. He has vast experience in these networks. Laurie does not. Laurie's introduction to the gay male network, represented in the novel by Charles, Alec, Sandy, and Bunny, does nothing to

encourage Laurie in his search for gay male space. All of these men have their own problems. Sandy attempts suicide, Charles is flighty, Bunny is campy and vindictive, Alec cannot make a human connection that lasts—in fact, of the group, Ralph is the most stable, but his knowledge has, to some degree, jaded him. Peter Wolfe comments on this, writing: “The human problems dramatized in *The Charioteer* are almost uniquely homosexual; homosexual love is uniformly shown as less free, less mobile, and less durable than the ordinary sort” (103). And all of these men represent different aspect of these human problems. “The gathering is, therefore, an abstract of homosexual life in England. Laurie observes in all these people a blind eagerness to forsake privacy, decency, and responsibility” (Wolfe 114). This homosexual network and subculture, therefore, not only represents the problems associated with gay male life, but also the effects of the repressive homophobic culture that creates these problems. Divorce and population control are red herrings.

### **The Gay Male Network and Subculture: An Argument for Inclusion**

When Laurie first meets the group as a collective, he does so at a party that Charles invites him to with the promise of meeting Ralph once again. The party confuses, intrigues, amuses, and terrifies Laurie. Yet through his complex of emotions, he sees something very human in the partygoers. “Watching, Laurie was aware of some inward change in the group about him, a hopefulness, a wistfulness; they looked at the ritual as though it were an affirmation of something doubtfully promised, or insecurely held, a symbol of stability, of permanence and trust” (128). This represents a combination of Laurie’s innocence and Renault’s humanizing

thrust. Laurie, being pure of heart and innocent of experience, is allowed to see through to the heart of this group. Renault uses Laurie's perceptions to show the fragility and longing inherent in these men. Ralph, being the experienced man of the world, sees things a bit differently. He puts up with the excesses of the group, but he remains outside of them as well because he refuses to allow his sexual identity to define him. This concept of sexuality as identity is, for Ralph, the real problem for homosexuals and is the basis of the problem for larger cultural acceptance of homosexuality. He lectures Alec at the party: "'God,' said Ralph, 'what are any of us?' His blue eyes stared out with a kind of tired anger. 'It's not what one is, it's what one does with it.' 'Get your feet on the ground, my dear. People get sick of what they are. They get sick carrying it'"(131). And Laurie tends to agree, though his agreement is not really based in experience, rather it is more philosophical:

A momentary detachment came upon Laurie as he looked on. After some years of muddled thinking on the subject, he suddenly saw quite clearly what it was he had been running away from; why he had refused Sandy's first invitation, and what the trouble had been with Charles. It was also the trouble, he perceived, with nine-tenths of the people here tonight. They were specialists. They had not merely accepted their limitations, as Laurie was ready to accept his, loyal to his humanity if not to his sex, and bringing an extra humility to the hard study of human experience. They had identified themselves with their limitations; they were making a career of them. (132)

Ralph has associated in these circles and can see that while defining oneself through one's sexuality is limiting, Laurie's agreeing with him is rooted more in fear and inexperience. He doesn't want to be like these men at all. He wants to be, like Ralph, a whole person, not a "specialist." Ironically, both of these men are not whole. Ralph has lost a good deal of his hand in the war, and Laurie has lost full use of his leg.

They have had to make sacrifices to become who they are, yet so have all the other men. Summers rightly acknowledges these connections:

The picture it paints of the homosexual subculture is distinctly unpalatable, yet it also depicts almost all members of that subculture as loyal citizens effectively contributing to the national war effort. Even Bunny is engaged in work for the Navy and even Sandy Reid is capable of heroism, as illustrated by his brave and decisive action when the Bridstow hospital is bombed. There are reports of the deaths of gay servicemen and Ralph and Laurie have both been injured in military operations. The record of sacrifice and service compiled by Renault's gay characters is surely intended to respond to Cold War clamor to purge the U.S. and British armed forces of homosexuals. (165)

Indeed, Renault is not making a distinction here between the "deserving" and the "undeserving" gay man. Rather, she is making a distinction between the heterosexual British culture's perception of gay men as "undeserving" and the reality of large numbers of gay men during the war. Many, if not most, British gay men served the nation in some aspect during World War II, just as she and her partner Julie did. Surely service to the nation, Renault argues, justifies a more tolerant attitude.

She also presents, through Ralph, a philosophy of gay male survival rooted in subtlety and monogamy: "Ralph had said something: that the best way of being independent was to have all you needed at home. This easy and careless trust; not like Sandy; it was heartening to know that it did actually happen" (191). At the next gathering, the one in which Laurie finally meets Ralph's longtime companion, Bunny, Renault offers her critique of the legal and judicial system that only serves to reinforce secrecy and create more criminals. Renault's narrator comments: "they were all discussing a recent blackmail case. Sandy and Alec had met someone who knew the victim, and had all the details, which were sordid enough. Remembering

long discussions at Oxford, Laurie remarked that the present state of the law seemed to encourage that sort of thing; it was unenforceable, and merely created racketeers” (198-9). Alec agrees, adding that “You could add that it gives the relatively balanced type, who makes some effort to become an integrated personality, a quite false sense of solidarity with advanced psychopaths whom, if they weren’t all driven underground together, he wouldn’t even meet” (199). Secrecy begets blackmail begets racketeering begets new networks of bigger crime. This blackmail enforcement of “the closet” only serves to further alienate homosexuals from the larger society. A change in legal practices, Renault argues here, would fracture this connection to larger criminality.

Alec, not content to state this once, continues to present his case:

It’s a matter of what your self-respect’s worth to you, that’s all.... In the first place, I didn’t choose to be who I am, it was determined when I wasn’t in a position to exercise any choice and without my knowing what was happening. I’ve submitted to psychoanalysis; it cured my stutter for me.... But I don’t admit that I’m a social menace.... Anyway, here we are, heaven knows how many thousand of us, since there’s never been a census. I’m not prepared to accept a standard which puts the whole of my emotional life on the plane of immorality. I’ve never involved a normal person or a minor or anyone who wasn’t in a position to exercise a free choice. I’m not prepared to let myself be classified with dope-peddlers and prostitutes. Criminals are blackmailed. I’m not a criminal. I’m ready to go to some degree of trouble, if necessary, to make that point. (199)

Here, Renault firmly presents one of her main arguments, almost as though she were a solicitor arguing before the court. And in a way she is, she is arguing in the court of public opinion. Yet, Renault is crafty in presenting her case. If she were to present nothing but militant gay men protesting their normality, she realizes that she would alienate her reading audience—the very audience she needs to convince in order to

effect change. Alec wants to demand inclusion, but Ralph is more nuanced in his approach. Brilliantly, she presents the challenge to militant homosexuality through Ralph, a noble and deserving gay man. Ralph retorts to Alec's monologue: "They've learned to leave us in peace unless we make public exhibition of ourselves, but that's not enough, you start to expect a medal" (200). Furthering his point, he counters Alec's argument again when Alec brings up the ancient Greeks being tolerant of homosexuality. "All right... They were tolerant in Greece and it worked. But, Christ, there was something a bit different to tolerate. There was a standard; they showed the normal citizens something... In fact they took on the obligations of men in their friendships instead of looking for bluebirds in a fun-fair; and if they didn't, they bloody well weren't tolerated, and a good job too" (200). Ralph's rather conservative attitude toward homosexual public behavior allows the reader who needs convincing an in. Through Ralph, they can hear their own viewpoint while, at the same time, discover that they are agreeing with a homosexual. Ralph's retort, therefore, is less to present to gay men a path toward acceptance than it is an entry point for readers who are open to having their opinions about homosexuality challenged.

### **A New Narrative – Gay Love Among The Ruins?**

Renault's use of cultural stereotypes in her depictions of gay men is troubling to many critics. Yet what many of these critics neglect to investigate is the complex and often subtle way in which Renault queers these very stereotypes. Ruth Hoberman acknowledges this in her article, "Masquing the Phallus: Genital Ambiguity in Mary Renault's Historical Novels," writing, "For while Renault's work at times echoes in

troubling ways her culture's sexual stereotypes, it also works against them, depicting and celebrating sexual ambiguity" (278).<sup>51</sup> Some of the characters in the novel are effeminate gay men. And while characters like Ralph and Laurie find this problematic, the narrator does not. Indeed, the narrator treats these men as fully functioning people who contribute to society and the war effort. They are human, with human weaknesses, and they, like everyone else, seek love. It is important to note here, that if *The Charioteer* fits into any one "type" or genre of novel, it is first and foremost a novel about love, the lengths people will go to find it, to keep it, to insure its purity, and weigh the consequences of compromise. Laurie, rehabilitating in the hospital after being severely crippled in the war, writes his mother a letter, then he imagines rewriting it as a coming out letter: "Darling Mother, I have fallen in love. I now know something about myself which I have been suspecting for years, if I had had some honesty to admit it. I ought to be frightened and ashamed, but I am not. Since I can see no earthly hope for this attachment, I ought to be wretched, but I am not. I know now why I was born, why everything happened to me ever" (57). This imagined letter represents another strategy that Renault uses in her appeal for understanding: purity and honesty of love. In fact, the central quest in the novel is Laurie's quest for a pure love. Torn between his life-long love, devotion, and sexual desire for Ralph and his chaste, innocent, and protective love for Andrew, Laurie struggles to find his path to happiness and fulfillment.

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<sup>51</sup> Ruth Hoberman. "Masquing the Phallus: Genital Ambiguity in Mary Renault's Historical Novels." *Twentieth Century Literature: A Scholarly and Critical Journal* 42.2 (1996): 277-93. Print.

His love for Andrew and the purity that he represents is blinding to Laurie. Indeed, it is so pure that he often forgets that there is anything to hide. Lying in his hospital bed, longing for Andrew's company, Laurie is surprised by the flood of emotions that hit him whenever Andrew comes near: "'Andrew!' he whispered. He had forgotten that there was anything to hide. To return to the innocence of their love was like returning home. He reached for Andrew's hand as it might be for the hundredth time, as if everything had been accepted and spoken between them" (162). The trouble arises, however, when Laurie eventually realizes that he cannot love Andrew's innocence, protect it, and build a life with him. To do so would either mean that he would have to live a life that ignores his sexuality entirely or, by expressing it, destroy Andrew's innocence, thereby eliminating the very trait in Andrew that Laurie finds so intoxicating. Furthermore, Laurie's blind love for Andrew is dangerous. In believing it to be chaste and pure, he becomes forgetful and ignorant of how their relationship might appear to others. He realizes this, of course, over the course of the novel, but this realization is incremental. For a while, he entertains the idea that he will not have to conceal his love forever, that he has a choice in the matter, and that he can be open with his affection, and chaste in his sexuality, and it will all be all right: "Laurie was saying to himself that it would soon cease to seem important, this discovery he had made that, instead of accepting concealment as a permanent condition of his life, he had merely been enduring it" (164). But this is naïve on his part. His concept of Plato's ideal allows no room for realistic practice. This, he realizes through Ralph. Ralph has had longer to explore the ideas in *The Phaedrus*, and has had more experience in the realm of the body. In

fact, Ralph gives Laurie his first kiss. Arriving two-thirds of the way through the novel, Renault finally gives Laurie a chance to physically express his desires: “With a simplicity which this knowledge made to seem quite natural, he leaned over and kissed him. Even when he had done it he felt no reaction or self-reproach. It was as if it had happened before and they both remembered” (245). Again, this is a shrewd and calculated move on Renault’s part. If, as I have argued, the main objective of this novel is to issue an emotional and logical appeal for tolerance of homosexuals in England in the 1950s, then she has much groundwork to lay before she can allow her young lovers to consummate their relationship with a kiss, or more. Yet she also demonstrates, in her writing, a responsibility to gay people. She displays a responsibility to show their love as beautiful, and to provide them with a historical reference point that acknowledges their love exists. This novel, as stated earlier, provided an entire generation of gay men with a gay love story, a confirmation that they were not alone, and with a noble place in the defining cultural moment of the middle-twentieth century.

Laurie’s ability to manage the conundrum of his love of two very different men comes to a climactic head with back-to-back environmental shifts. First he is transferred to another hospital, one closer to Ralph and away from Andrew, which can better care for his rehabilitation. Without the constant physical reminder of Andrew’s presence, Laurie finds himself more drawn to Ralph and finds himself idealizing Andrew’s innocence even more. The second environmental relocation occurs with his mother’s wedding. With the occasion of her remarriage, Laurie inherits the family home. He travels to the house for the wedding to receive his

property, but Ralph shows up to the house as well. And set in his family home, on the occasion of a wedding, Laurie has his first sexual experience with Ralph. Renault does not detail this experience except to show Laurie waking up with Ralph afterward, musing: "It can be good to be given what you want; it can be better, in the end, never to have it proved to you that this was what you wanted" (290). This sexual awakening makes Laurie question his ability to hold onto his dual-loves. He is conflicted afterward, and feels compelled to run back to Andrew to reclaim his attachment to innocence. Of Ralph, the narrator notes: "He had asked for nothing, except to give everything. He had made no claims. He had offered all he had, as simple as a cigarette or a drink, for a palliative of present pain. He had been single-hearted; and he slept in peace. It was only Laurie who was awake" (290-1). The narrator is in a position to witness Ralph's purity of love and the fullness with which he offers it to Laurie. However, upon Ralph's waking, Laurie begins to express his second thoughts, as detailed in the following conversation:

His hunger for compensation, once indulged, had driven him to the insistent egoism of an unwanted child demanding reassurance. Not satisfied with the sufficient evidence of his senses, he had longed to prove that he wasn't receiving only kindness; he needed affirmation of power. At some stage of a broken midnight conversation he had said, 'I've often had a feeling that there's nowhere I really belong.' He had hardly known himself what he wanted; but Ralph had said, without a moment's hesitation, 'You belong with me. As long as we are both alive, this will always be your place before anyone else's. That's a promise.' His voice had been free of emotion, almost businesslike. He might have been speaking to his lawyer about his will. For a moment, it had sobered Laurie into self-knowledge; conquest is intoxicating, but a gift makes you think. (291)

Ralph, while not innocent of physical knowledge, is pure and devoted to providing a home to Laurie, so much so that he will compromise himself in order to give Laurie

the freedom that Laurie thinks he needs. Ralph doesn't really believe that Laurie's infatuation with Andrew will last, and so he is willing to give Ralph the chance to realize it for himself. He tells Laurie, "If you want to see this boy when he's got a free day, that's fair enough; you don't have to tell me about it. Unless you need someone to talk to. I can take it either way; for me it's worth it" (297). Rejecting this idea, Laurie responds, saying, "I suppose I love both of you too much. It would pull me in half. I couldn't live that way. And if I could myself, I couldn't do it to him" (297). Laurie is far too invested in the idea of honesty and purity to live two lives, one with Ralph and another with Andrew. In this moment, Renault shows homosexual men, through both Laurie and Andrew, to be moral citizens. To even entertain such an idea destroys any and all ability to recast himself as the master of his own desires, his own charioteer, able to guide the rough and the pure and make them work together. It is with this that Laurie realizes that Ralph, indeed, has him all figured out:

"You see, Spuddy, my dear," said Ralph, speaking with great kindness and with care that Laurie shouldn't be hurt, "you have a very sweet nature, really, and you let it ride you a bit sometimes. You say this boy has guts, but what you're trying to do for him is to keep him like a mid-Victorian virgin in a world of illusion where he doesn't know he's alive. He mustn't be told he's a passenger when human decency's fighting for survival, in case it upsets his religion. He mustn't be told he's a queer, in case he has to do a bit of hard thinking and make up his mind. He mustn't know you're in love with him, in case he feels he can't go on having his cake and eating it. If he amounts to anything, he won't really want to be let off being human. And if he does want it, then he isn't worth all this, Spud. I'm sorry, but there it is." (300)

Once again the voice of clarity, Ralph confronts Laurie by verbalizing, in the plainest terms, Laurie's unacknowledged agenda with Andrew, and further, he details why it

is doomed to fail. Once again, Renault's careful construction of Ralph Lanyon takes on another layer. After creating him to be the object of desire for the reader, the voice of cultural reason regarding homosexual behavior, the logical identifying character in the novel for readers who may hold a negative opinion of homosexuals, Renault uses him to make the case for the physical and sexual expression of homosexuality. If readers have been agreeing with Ralph throughout the book, they will now have to confront and consider his justification of gay sex. Hammering the point home, Renault uses Ralph, once again, to invoke the wisdom of the ancient Greeks. Citing Plato, Ralph tells Laurie, and by extension, the readers of the novel, that "If a city or an army could be made up only of lovers and their beloved, it would excel all others. For they would refrain from everything shameful, rivaling one another in honor; and men like these, fighting at each other's side, might well conquer the world. For the lover would rather be seen by anyone than by his beloved, flying or throwing away his arms; rather he would be ready a thousand times to die" (301). Cementing her linking of ancient Greece with modern England, in a war setting, Renault neatly ties the deserving homosexual to the noble warrior. If homosexuals are allowed to be more honest and open instead of being forced to lie and hide for fear of persecution, then not only would England be able to cultivate a "better" type of homosexual, but it would also benefit as a nation from the homoerotic and homosocial army of lovers that would, and do, defend it.

## Conclusion

Of the very few critics who have closely examined this novel, none seem to be very satisfied with Renault's project. Summers finds it borderline homophobic due to Renault's giving narrative voice to the cultural homophobia she is addressing. Yet he willfully overlooks her open and direct challenges to it. And Stephen Adams, in his study, *The Homosexual as Hero in Contemporary Fiction*, finds the novel to be entertaining but little more than a trifle, a fantasy. He writes of *The Charioteer*:

As fantasy, this is reasonably entertaining: we savour the drawn-out pursuit of the sexy Andrew and are chastised for our lasciviousness by continuing proof of Laurie's wholesome intentions; we shudder with him at the dilemma of having to choose between two delectable men, between innocence and experience, as it were; we worry that, unless he stops dithering, both will elude him. More seriously, though, the novel overworks its attempt to show these as clean, responsible, *manly* loves, living up to their classical ideals, particularly when this is achieved at the expense of a clique of local "queens," the type that "give homosexuality a bad name."<sup>52</sup> (138-9)

Some criticize Renault for taking on a male persona and for writing about men instead of women. Yet none of the critics writing about this novel seem to read it with the complexity it demands, nor with an eye for the delicacy with which Renault engages the very homophobic society she is writing to. It is as if critics want her to be writing with the force, purpose, and militancy of a post-Wolfenden report, post-Stonewall era. She is not writing from such a place of freedom or privilege. Instead she is bold in just how direct she is with her engagement. She does not provide the fantasy-like happy ending that Adams would suggest. Yes, Laurie ends up being with Ralph. But is this a happy end? Laurie loses Andrew when Andrew finds out about

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<sup>52</sup> Stephen Adams. *The Homosexual as Hero in Contemporary Fiction*. London: Vision, 1980. Print.

Laurie's relationship with Ralph. Upon learning this, Andrew runs away, heart-broken, back to bombed out London. Following him there, Laurie is all too easily convinced by Andrew's brother to leave and never try to contact him again. One gets a sense that Andrew realized just how in love he was with Laurie, and that, had Laurie pressed the matter, they might have had a chance—albeit, one that would demand Laurie alter his philosophical need for Andrew to be physically innocent. Instead, he compromises his philosophical ethic anyway, and creates a life with Ralph. Laurie is revealed to be the white horse all along, but one who can only be reined in with experience and knowledge.

Using the documentary narrative style of World War I fiction, Renault creates a novel with homosexual characters devoted to national service in World War II at its center, thus presenting a radically gay engagement with the defining moment for contemporary British culture. *The Charioteer* uses the war setting to upset the notion of sexuality as a choice and to challenge prevailing 1950s social and legal homophobia, thereby creating an alternative British narrative of World War II that includes gay men at the center, and providing a gay reading public with a love story that includes a place for them in this foundational event.

## Chapter 3: Gay Male Flesh as the Battleground of

### Neocolonialism in Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty*

Alan Hollinghurst's Man Booker-Prize winning novel, *The Line of Beauty* (2004), is ostensibly the story of a gay man's coming-of-age during Margaret Thatcher's second term as Prime Minister and the onset of AIDS. Yet it is also a biting indictment of Thatcherite politics, gay male culture's complicity in its own destruction, and the role that neocolonialism has in keeping sexual and racial Others from power. Far from being just an exercise in Jamesian aesthetics, as many critics have suggested, *The Line of Beauty*, instead, uses Jamesian irony to examine the violent hypocrisy inherent in Britain's 1980s Conservative movement. Whereas Hollinghurst's first novel, *The Swimming-Pool Library* (1988), details the hedonism of aristocratic gay life in the early '80s and the role that upper-class gay men play in colonial oppression, Nick Guest, the protagonist of *The Line of Beauty*, is a middle-class, somewhat closeted gay man trying to pass in the world of Conservative power while also trying to find entry into the gay male culture of London. He fails at both. Instead of finding acceptance in the Thatcherite power structure, he is ultimately rejected because of his gay identity. Instead of finding entry into London's gay male subculture, he fails because of his willingness to employ the dominant culture's neocolonial tactics of oppression. Thus his efforts at passing, in both worlds, end in alienation and destruction. Inspired by the work of Stuart Hall, I argue in this chapter that acts of "passing" reinforce outsider status, as characters engaged in "passing" are ultimately ostracized from the very communities they strive to inhabit. While rooted

in a critical tradition that focuses mostly on race, my use of passing here is less about race than it is about socioeconomic status and sexuality. Further, the ruling-party's goal for these transgressions is eradication. Firmly falling in fixed moment/cultural critique mode of British gay contemporary fiction, with *The Line of Beauty*, Hollinghurst recasts 1980s Thatcherite Conservatism as a continuation of imperialistic destruction of the sexual and racial Other and demonstrates how the powerful seduce white gay men as agents to achieve this goal. Interestingly, Hollinghurst neither endorses nor condemns Nick Guest's participation in this Conservative power system. In fact, he is sympathetic to Guest's need to belong, in spite of the collateral damage Nick causes. This is most reminiscent of Mary Renault's work in *The Charioteer*. Once again, a gay or lesbian author tackles questions of identity and inclusion of gay men in national service set against a backdrop of a defining moment in British national history. In *The Charioteer*, Renault addresses issues of gay acceptance through military service in World War II; in *The Line of Beauty*, Hollinghurst examines issues of gay political and class inclusion during the height of Thatcher's England of the 1980s.

Although published in 2004, the action of *The Line of Beauty* takes place in the mid-to-late-1980s, and while Hollinghurst takes on the era's major setbacks for gay people (AIDS and "Clause 28"),<sup>53</sup> his major focus is on the inherently destructive

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<sup>53</sup> "Clause 28" or "Section 28" was an amendment to the United Kingdom's *Local Government Act*, and was enacted in 1988. It stated that "a local authority shall not (a) intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality (b) promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship." *Local Government Act 1988*, section 28. 18 November 2008. <[http://www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts1988/Ukpga\\_19880009\\_en\\_5.htm](http://www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts1988/Ukpga_19880009_en_5.htm)>.

power of Margaret Thatcher's Conservative ideology. This ideology harms everyone, but Thatcherism is most damaging to those living outside of its rigid class, racial, and cultural barriers. Moreover, it is deadly to anyone attempting to live both inside and outside of its parameters. Stuart Hall describes how Thatcherism eradicates the Other while, simultaneously, enlisting the heterosexual, white, working-class in this project through a sense of "imagined community," yet still managing to keep them economically oppressed. Hall writes:

What Thatcherism as an ideology does is to address the fears, the anxieties, and the lost identities, of a people. It invites us to think about politics in images. It is addressed to our collective fantasies, to Britain as an imagined community, to the social imaginary. Mrs. Thatcher has totally dominated that idiom, while the left forlornly tries to drag the conversation round to "our policies."<sup>54</sup> ("Gramsci and Us" 19)

Thus, while the Left was attempting to wrestle with the intellectual aspects of policies, Thatcher's Right focused on creating a national imagined community<sup>55</sup> that was under attack, using fear of the Other to enact its conservative policies.

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<sup>54</sup> Hall, Stuart. "Gramsci and Us." *Marxism Today* June 1987. 16-21. Print.

<sup>55</sup> Benedict Anderson. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 1991. Anderson writes that "imagined communities" exist because most people in a nation-state will never meet each other face-to-face. Imagined communities allow for the idea of commonality and unity as a nation based on mass-held ideas/ideals about what members of that nation want, value, privilege. He writes, "regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings" (224). Interestingly, Anderson also writes that this only really became possible after "print-capitalism." Thus widespread distribution of printed materials helps facilitate and maintain these imagined communities. Hollinghurst is, therefore, attempting to confront British imagined community through the very medium through which it is perpetuated. He is also creating space for homosexual men in this imagined community by giving voice, while, at the same time, critiquing that same participation suggesting it is never really available and always leads to destruction.

Thatcherism, Hall argues, “was not an inevitable outcome, but a particular response by the Right to global changes in capitalism and culture” (Proctor 99).<sup>56</sup> It is this “imagined community” that is the key to the undoing of the three major gay characters in *The Line of Beauty*: Nick, Leo, and Wani. For Nick Guest, the double-lure of the wealth and power of the Conservative upper-class mixed with the desire to inhabit a sexual space within gay culture, while remaining closeted and middle-class, proves to be a combination of identities with a center that cannot hold.

### **Jamesian Irony: Literary Style in *The Line of Beauty***

“Like his hero Henry James, Nick felt that he could ‘stand a great deal of guilt.’” (5). From the outset of *The Line of Beauty*, Hollinghurst is keen to position Nick Guest, and the novel itself, in Jamesian fashion. Not only is James a “hero” of Nick’s, but he is also the subject of Nick’s post-graduate thesis. Hollinghurst takes this hero worship further by crafting Nick as a Jamesian character, a sort of blend of *The Ambassadors*’ (1903) Chad Newsome and Lambert Strether. Yet in this case, Nick ventures to 1980s London to find himself changed by the Conservative upper-class social circle he has been adopted into. Juxtaposed with James’s Strether discovering a European, cosmopolitan changed Chad in fin-de siècle Paris, Hollinghurst invokes a host of literary allusions bursting with a postmodern ironic twist. Invoking Jamesian style and irony, specifically including themes of *The Ambassadors*, Hollinghurst, like Renault, Waters, and Bartlett, engages with both literary history and British history to create space for gay men in the literary and historical imagined community that is England. But unlike some of the other authors I

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<sup>56</sup> James Proctor. *Stuart Hall*. London: Routledge, 2004.

examine in this dissertation, Hollinghurst is collapsing time and space less for the purpose of manifesting mythological connections than to unveil existing patterns of gay participation in imperial power systems that are rooted in the power structure's created myths of inclusion for gay men and lesbians. Their myth of inclusion is merely a tool to lure certain homosexuals into "joining" the power elite, only to use them to police other gays and lesbians. Hollinghurst's work uncovers the illusion and reveals it for what it is: entrapment. Andrew Eastham, in his essay, "Inoperative Ironies: Jamesian Aestheticism and Post-modern Culture in Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty*," argues "that Hollinghurst facilitates his representation of Aestheticism in the 1980s by a continual focus on the concept of irony—as an aesthetic idea, as a mode of performance and as the basis for an emerging relationship between art and politics" (509).<sup>57</sup> Eastham's work on Jamesian Aestheticism is careful and astute, fleshing out a complex matrix of literary styles, artistic movements, and eras of excess. Setting up his definition of nineteenth-century Aestheticism as "Living by irony, maintaining a posture of detachment and indifference, the Aesthete would project his independence from use value, ethics and social life" (509-10), Eastham establishes what he sees as the foundation of Hollinghurst's allusion to James: namely that Nick as a studied nineteenth-century aesthete cannot be independent from "use value, ethics and social life" in Thatcherite London. Eastham notes of 1980s London,

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<sup>57</sup> Andrew Eastham. "Inoperative Ironies: Jamesian Aestheticism and Post-modern Culture in Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty*." *Textual Practice* 20(3): 2006. 509-27. Print.

This was perhaps the moment when the dimensions of our contemporary cultural politics were defined, in two important senses: first, in the development of an identity politics which would instigate new models of art's capacity for insurgence, frequently more concerned with performance than the literary or artistic object, and second, the dominance of an ironic consumerism that increasingly overturned cultural hierarchies. (510)

I am most interested here with Eastham's idea of ironic aesthetic performance and the emerging importance of identity politics. Nick Guest's identity as an aesthete is academic at best. He comes from a lower-middle-class family, and, while knowledgeable about art and literature, Nick's performance as a studied aesthete comes across as false when placed in upper-class environments. And far from being independent of use value, Nick's place in the Fedden family is that of caretaker rather than adopted son. His burgeoning identity as a gay man also puts into question his ability to separate himself from questions of the Conservative Party ethics, which define his newly found "family." Therefore, Nick's failure to pass as one of the family stems from his inability to maintain independent distance from his ethical and social life as a gay man in a culture that demands, indeed relies upon, appearances of national and heteronormative hegemony. Instead of remaining intellectual in his choices and performance of identity, Nick's emotional and cultural responses as a gay man eventually undermine his position in the dominant wealthy Conservative social circle of which he so longs to be a member.

In his analysis of Hollinghurst's first novel, *The Swimming-Pool Library*, in "Queer Fiction: The Ambiguous Emergence of a Genre," Robert L. Caserio writes, "With all seriousness Hollinghurst's narrative takes homosexuality and politics as metaphors for each other. The story of their identity is not pretty: it is a historical as

well as a political tale, whereby late twentieth-century homosexuality in Britain remains anchored to the British imperial past”<sup>58</sup> (217). The same can be written of *The Line of Beauty*, in many ways a companion novel to *The Swimming-Pool Library*. The difference is in the inclusion of homosexual class differences in relation to British imperialism. In *The Swimming-Pool Library*, the two main characters are late twentieth-century homosexual men who are also members of the social and economic upper classes with direct links to racial and class-based enforcement of British imperial power. The three gay men in *The Line of Beauty* are either racial others or working-class others and, therefore, cannot be fully entrusted with power. Instead they are used by the ruling-class to eradicate each other. Indeed, this may be the impetus for Hollinghurst’s recasting of the Thatcherite historical moment—a recasting that reveals the ruling-party’s systematic destruction of Others in an effort to reestablish a disintegrated national identity. *The Line of Beauty* is both an exposure and a critique of Thatcherite politics, as well as minorities’ active participation in a system that seeks to erase them. In many ways, this novel is one of cultural translations. Gilane Tawadros cites Hall in “The Revolution Stripped Bare,”

the world is littered by modernities.... It is littered by artists, practicing artists who do not regard modernism as the secure possession of the West, never regarded it as such but always regarded it as a language which was both open to them but which they would have to transform.... The history now has to be re-written as a set of cultural translations rather than as a movement which can be located securely within a culture, within a history, within a space, within a set

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<sup>58</sup> Robert L. Caserio. “Queer Fiction: The Ambiguous Emergence of a Genre.” *A Concise Companion to Contemporary British Fiction*. Ed. James F. English. Oxford: Blackwell, 2006. 209-28. Print.

of political and cultural relations.<sup>59</sup> (66) (Stuart Hall in “Museums of Modern Art and the End of History” 1999)

While Hall is referring specifically to Caribbean writers re-writing history against Western culture, his argument holds a key to answering the question of why Hollinghurst chooses this particular period to write about and this specific style to write in. As a gay man writing a novel that centers on a troubling and terrifying time for gay people in England, he has to re-write the history of the mid-to-late 1980s to position gay people’s political, cultural, and life struggle at the center of a cultural narrative that sought to eradicate such histories through legislation like Clause 28. He uses the style of James and themes of Evelyn Waugh’s *Brideshead Revisited* (1945) because he is Western—he is British—and this is the literary tradition, the cultural heritage, available to him. Furthermore, it is part of Britain’s literary heritage, and by using it, Hollinghurst re-writes gay history as central to the history of the nation. In fact, each Hollinghurst novel takes on a different literary ancestor’s style. *The Swimming-Pool Library* is written in the style of Firbank, *The Folding Star* in the style of Brontë, and *The Spell* evokes Austen. The full body of his work as novelist and as literary editor at the *Times Literary Supplement* positions Hollinghurst as writer both fully knowledgeable about British literary tradition and as one of its contemporary architects.

Perhaps it is precisely because of his position within the literary establishment that contemporary reviews and interviews either play down the sexual explicitness or the political critique in the novel. In some cases, reviewers played down both. For the

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<sup>59</sup> Gilane Tawadros. “The Revolution stripped Bare...” *NKA: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 22/23 (2008): 60-79.

gay and liberal press, there was too much investment in a “gay” novel winning the Man Booker Prize to shine a bright light on the novel’s internal critique of gay men. The conservative press opted to focus much more on the sexuality of the novel than its politics. In his review of *The Line of Beauty* for the *London Review of Books* in 2004, Thomas Jones argues that the Feddens, and, by extension, the ruling Conservative power structure of Thatcherite Britain, use Nick and other gay men they “let in” as a vehicle to appreciate the beauty and excess of their decadence. Jones writes,

Nick holds an uncertain position in the world he moves in: he is there because the others want him to be; he isn’t wealthy enough to survive on his own. What he has to offer is a refined aesthetic sense, the ability to appreciate in elegant sentences the beautiful things that the people around him are able to buy. He doesn’t make beautiful things himself, but he does, by the way that he sees them, make things beautiful – both for the other characters and for the reader.<sup>60</sup>

Yet he also takes this further. Since Nick’s purpose is to appreciate and celebrate the “beauty” of 1980s wealth and excess, he is also easily expendable, “gay and lacking in means, Nick makes a perfect scapegoat when things turn sour.” Jones’ review, therefore focuses on how, in Hollinghurst’s novel, the Conservative society and Thatcherite government seduce gay men for their own purposes, and then easily eliminates them, using them as scapegoats for their own failures. In his review for *The Social Affairs Unit*, David Womersley, a professor of English Literature at the University of Oxford, argues that Hollinghurst’s novel details how the policies of Margaret Thatcher are destructive to gay people: “The scenes of gay sex are not the subject of lyrical idealisation, and the potential for exploitation, degradation and self-

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<sup>60</sup> Jones, Thomas. "Welly-Whanging." Rev. of *The Line of Beauty*, by Alan Hollinghurst. *London Review of Books* 26.9 (2004): 25-26. Web. 22 Sep. 2013

loss in homosexual relationships comes ever more sharply into focus. Foreground and background, instead of contrasting, begin to merge. Nick's growing confidence in homosexuality is as much an experiment as were the policies of Mrs Thatcher, and both will end in tears."<sup>61</sup> He goes on to conclude by musing on the ogee, the line of beauty from which the novel takes its name, "Exhilaration and aftermath: this cruellest of double curves applies equally to the innovative sexuality and the innovative politics of the eighties." The journey then, of both Nick as a gay man coming of sexual age, and of Thatcher's conservative government through the 1980s, reflects the crushing aftermath of both experiments. Instead of arguing that the novel is one focused solely on aesthetics, or gay identity, or politics, Womersley sees all three intertwined and reflecting each other. The decline of gay sexual liberation in the face of AIDS reflects the fall of Thatcherite Conservatism due to excess. Dolan Cummings, however, in his review of the novel for *Culture Wars* in 2004, disagrees with any political reading of the novel. Cummings argues of *The Line of Beauty*, that

it simply doesn't share the political ambition of something like *Angels in America*. The author's swipes at Thatcherism are largely, well, aesthetic. Indeed, Nick's gayness itself is more aesthetic than political: for him the line of beauty (an idea taken from Hogarth) is found in the double curve of a man's lower back and bottom. And it is Nick's aesthetic sensibility that drives Hollinghurst's prose. The descriptions of sex are generally too graphic to be pornographic, and if at times they even seem banal, this is a reminder of the latent tendency in aestheticism to prefer the mundane to the meaningful. Meaning is vulgar.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> David Womersley. Rev. of *The Line of Beauty*, by Alan Hollinghurst. *The Social Affairs Unit*. 5 May 2005. Web. 18 Aug. 2013.

<sup>62</sup> Dolan Cummings. Rev. of *The Line of Beauty*, by Alan Hollinghurst. *Culture Wars*. Feb. 2004. Web. 6 Sept. 2013.

For Cummings, the novel, its engagement with history, gay sex, gay identity, and politics are all aesthetic. Hollinghurst has, according to Cummings, written a novel that deeply explores the surface of appearance.

All the while, Hollinghurst, in interviews, plays rather coy, refusing to fully embrace the gay point of view or any political critique. Most telling is Stephen Moss' interview with Hollinghurst in *The Guardian*. In it, Hollinghurst says, “[I] only chafe at the 'gay writer' tag if it's thought to be what is most or only interesting about what I'm writing.... I want it to be part of the foundation of the books, which are actually about all sorts of other things as well—history, class, culture. There's all sorts of stuff going on. It's not just, as you would think if you read the headlines in the newspapers, about gay sex.”<sup>63</sup> This comment is intriguing due to what it reveals and conceals. On the one hand, Hollinghurst does not want to be limited by the tags of gay writer or gay novel; he does not want gay sex to be the defining aspect of his fiction. On the other hand, he alludes to how complex gay identity is in *The Line of Beauty*, by compounding it with history, class, and culture. This, I argue, is exactly what he does, and in doing so, shows how alluring membership into the privileged history, class, and culture can be to gay men, who have often been excluded due to one or more of the above-listed identifying factors when coupled with their sexuality. This also serves as a simultaneous critique, albeit one filled with sympathy and understanding, of gay men's participation in systems which openly seek to oppress their sexual identity. The truth is that for Hollinghurst, the relationship between power, truth, and aesthetics is muddy. He is not judging gay men for participating in

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<sup>63</sup> Stephen Moss. “I Don't Make Moral Judgments.” *The Guardian*. 20 Oct. 2004. Web. 30 Aug. 2013.

a system that wants to eliminate them, nor is he wholly indicting the system for its hypocrisy. His portrait of the era is one in which no one is clean, and readers can make their own judgments. He continues in the Moss interview by saying, "I don't make moral judgments... I prefer to let things reverberate with their own ironies and implications. That was one of the interests of writing this book from the inside and not just writing something that broadly satirized or bashed up the 80s. To tell it from the point of view of someone who was very seduced by it. " Yet as the interview concludes, Moss concedes that Hollinghurst's novel is firmly rooted in gay historical engagement: "*The Line of Beauty* brings to an end this sequence of books in which he has consciously explored gay identity and its fight for recognition." Emily Bern's 2004 interview with Hollinghurst, in *The Telegraph*, is similarly revealing. Bern writes, "Hollinghurst says his decision to set the novel in the 1980s was prompted by an abiding memory of how 'ghastly' the period was. 'I remember the feeling of deep discomfort at living through it,' he says. 'I feel an undiminished sense of unhappiness and indignation about that period and it took me a long time to find a way of writing about it.'"<sup>64</sup> Hollinghurst's statement about the fixed historical moment about which he is writing is illuminating. He feels a sense of "indignation" about the "ghastly" period, and the way he found to write about it was through an aesthetic lens that blended Jamesian irony with Hogarth's ogee. These aesthetic allusions, coupled with the fact that there is no real hero in the novel, point to what I argue is Hollinghurst's critique of both the age and gay men's participation in it. No one comes out of the 1980s, or of the novel, with clean hands. In the last line of Bern's interview,

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<sup>64</sup> Emily Bern. "Most of All I Like Bad Behaviour." *The Telegraph*. 26 Oct. 2004. Web. 15 Sept. 2013.

Hollinghurst notes, "The problem with nice people is that they're frightfully boring to write about. What I've always been interested in is moral weakness. And, most of all, bad behaviour." Moral weakness and bad behavior abound in *The Line of Beauty*.

### **Neocolonialism from a Queer Point-of-View**

*The Line of Beauty* takes a queer view of British neocolonial practices. And though he places gay men at the center of these practices in *The Swimming-Pool Library*, he alters their position in *The Line of Beauty*. With the onset of Thatcherism and AIDS in the 1980s, coupled with the clarity of almost twenty years' difference between the two novels, Hollinghurst revises his previous narrative to place gay men merely as colonial subjects coerced into enforcing neocolonial power with promises of acceptance and privilege. Alan Sinfield writes in *On Sexuality and Power*, "The alleged inadequacies of colonial subjects position them as the inferiors that witness to European superiority. Fiction indicates that colonial Europeans spent a good part of their time producing self-justifying stories about the relationships between the natives and themselves" (163).<sup>65</sup> *The Line of Beauty* works against this history of European superiority and history of fictional self-justification. No longer content to be witness, Hollinghurst takes Nick Guest on a journey that reveals, in this case, Thatcherite power culture to be far from superior. Indeed, Hollinghurst reveals it as a fragile entity built upon hypocrisy, deceit, and lies and seeking to reestablish a lost national identity through neocolonialism. James Proctor provides an example in his book, *Stuart Hall*, writing that

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<sup>65</sup> Alan Sinfield. *On Sexuality and Power*. New York: Columbia UP, 2004. Print.

In terms of the Falklands War, for example, the populist appeal to a national revival was harnessed through a play on Britain's fears about its increasingly marginal status following the collapse of empire and the lost centrality of Englishness. Alternatively when Thatcherism took a tough, authoritarian stance on homosexuality following the AIDS epidemic of the late 1980s, it did so through a populist appeal to traditional family values. (101)

Here, neocolonialism is distinctly tied to heteronormativity. The loss of empire paired the colonial subjects moving "home" to England and transforming English culture led to a resurgence in the 1980s of neocolonialism that sought to reestablish a stable English national identity. Proctor goes on to write,

Hall is not arguing that we have moved from a time of stable, unified identities to unstable plural ones but, rather, that identities have become *increasingly* unsettled; a fact that helps explain why Thatcherism's contradictory authoritarian populism succeeded where the traditional Left, with its faith in unified collective identities, had not. (109)

Thus began Thatcher's Conservative party agenda that included the Falklands war on one front and Clause 28 on another. Clause 28 sought to reestablish "family values"—read heteronormative "family values"—by making gay people scapegoats for disintegrating "cultural values." Matt Cook concisely explains the situation in "From Gay Reform to Gaydar, 1967-2006":

In a period of recession and unemployment, gay and lesbian threats to the family and morality were convenient diversions and were strategically deployed to justify the dissolution of Greater London Council and other city-wide authorities in 1986. The move stripped bodies like the London Lesbian and Gay Center, Hall Carpenter oral history project and Lesbian and Gay Switchboard of some of their funding and impeded the development of city-wide strategies for HIV prevention and support. The government played the family and morality ticket strongly in its 1987 election campaign, and after Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's third successive election victory, she used her conference speech of that year to 'question those who claim a right to be gay'. The government followed up this rhetoric with legislative action, inserting the infamous Clause 28 into the 1988

Local Government Act. The clause ruled that: A local authority shall not (a) intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality; (b) promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship.<sup>66</sup> (204-5)

It is no mistake that Hollinghurst's novel concludes with the aftermath of the 1987 elections, for this is not a novel of hope. Rather, this work is an indictment of Thatcherite homophobia and homonationalism<sup>67</sup> and gay participation in the very system that seeks to discredit and destroy them. While Jasbir Puar writes of homonationalism in uniquely American contexts, her explanation that "this brand of homosexuality operates as a regulatory script not only of normative gayness, queerness, or homosexuality, but also of the racial and national norms that reinforce these sexual subjects" (2), equally applies to the British 1980s that Hollinghurst writes about in this novel. By bringing select homosexuals into the fold, the nation defangs them and uses them to police each other. Nick Guest is one of these defanged homosexuals. Nick is by no means a heroic character. And while he makes

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<sup>66</sup> Matt Cook, ed. *A Gay History of Britain: Love and Sex Between Men Since the Middle Ages*. Oxford: Greenwood, 2007. Print.

<sup>67</sup> See Jasbir K. Puar. *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. Duke UP: Durham, 2007.

"National recognition and inclusion, here signaled as the annexation of homosexual jargon, is contingent upon the segregation and disqualification of racial and sexual others from the national imaginary. At work in this dynamic is a form of sexual exceptionalism—the emergence of national homosexuality, what I term 'homonationalism'—that corresponds with the coming out of the exceptionalism of American empire. Further, this brand of homosexuality operates as a regulatory script not only of normative gayness, queerness, or homosexuality, but also of the racial and national norms that reinforce these sexual subjects.... The fleeting sanctioning of a national homosexual subject is possible, not only through the proliferation of sexual-racial subjects who invariably fall out of its narrow terms of acceptability, as others have argued, but more significantly, through the simultaneous engendering and disavowal of *populations* of sexual-racial others who need not apply." (2)

choices at the close of the novel that signal the end of the Conservative ruling-system and his participation in it, it may, in fact, be too late. AIDS has already taken Leo and Wani was rapidly dying. It is unclear if Nick, himself, will survive this plague.

### **Nick Enters—The Conservative “Family”**

In his *Gay and After*, Sinfield argues, “The emergence of metropolitan gay identities has coincided with and depended on a weakening of family ties” (7). Perhaps no quote better establishes Nick Guest’s place in the Fedden household, for Nick’s metropolitan gay identity does, in fact, coincide with the breakdown of the Fedden clan as a representation of Conservative family values. Ironically, he is brought into the family as an adopted son, adopted brother, and family caretaker. Yet it is his growing independence as a gay man that reveals the cracks in the family structure. Nick enters the Fedden house upon invitation in 1983, as a close friend of Toby, the Feddens’ son, with whom Nick attends university. The Feddens welcome him in, provide him with his own room—albeit a room in the attic—and assign him the task of watching after “the Cat,” or Catherine, the Feddens’ mentally ill and willful daughter. What attracts Nick to the Fedden household is a combination of his sexual infatuation with Toby and his upwardly mobile infatuation with Gerald Fedden, the family patriarch and newly elected Conservative MP. Upon closer inspection, it is clear that Nick is really attracted to the Fedden’s effortless performances of entitlement and power. Nick notes of his early days in the home, “Sometimes Toby would have come back, and there would be loud music in the drawing room; or he was in his father’s study at the back of the house making international phone calls and having a gin-and-tonic—all this done not in defiance of

his parents but in rightful imitation of their own freedoms in the place” (5). Nick longs for this sense of rightful power. As a well-educated child of the middle-class, Nick knows of cultural power and heterosexual, white, upper-class entitlement; however, his knowledge is merely intellectual. Living with the Feddens allows him, in his mind, the privilege of acting out this fantasy. We see an example of this fantasy in action with Nick’s role as caretaker of Catherine:

It was Catherine’s house but it was Nick who was in charge. She camped nervously in the place, as though she and not Nick was the lodger. She was puzzled by his love of its pompous spaces, and mocked his knowledgeable attachment to the paintings and furniture. ‘You’re such a snob,’ she said, with a provoking laugh; coming from the family he was thought to be snobbish about, this was a bit of a facer. ‘I’m not really,’ said Nick, as if a small admission was the best kind of denial, ‘I just love beautiful things.’ (6)

A couple of things are clear in this passage. First, Nick’s performance as an authority in the household is wholly based on his love for aesthetic beauty and his academic knowledge of the artifacts of privilege. Second, Catherine, while initially thrown off balance by Nick’s performance, has authentic power, and is quick to reassert it. Eastham notes that “Nick is clearly enthralled by the Feddens’ world, but he attempts to cultivate a position of ironic detachment, partly through an aspiration to a typically fin de siècle position of aesthetic spectatorship, and partly to conceal his gay identity” (511-12).<sup>68</sup> This blend of faux detachment, aesthetic voyeurism, and identity concealment is quite a dangerous mixture. Catherine, through her description of her mental illness, warns Nick of the inherent dangers and the attractiveness of this

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<sup>68</sup> Andrew Eastham. “Inoperative Ironies: Jamesian Aestheticism and Post-modern Culture in Alan Hollinghurst’s *The Line of Beauty*.” *Textual Practice* 20(3): 2006. 509-27. Print.

family's brand of cultural power and his longing to be a member of it: "Well, it's poisonous, you see. It's glittering but it's deadly at the same time. It doesn't want you to survive it. That's what it makes you realize.' .... 'It's the whole world just as it is... everything exactly the same. And it's totally negative. You can't survive it'" (15). Hollinghurst uses Catherine, among several other characters, to reveal the "poisonous" nature of Thatcherite power.

Another early warning for Nick comes by the way of the family's reaction to the Hector Maltby scandal.

"You heard about Maltby, of course," said Toby. Immediately Nick felt the air in the room begin to tingle, as if at the onset of an allergic reaction. Hector Maltby, a junior minister in the Foreign Office, had been caught with a rent boy in his Jaguar at Jack Straw's Castle, and had rapidly resigned from his post and, it seemed, from his marriage. The story had been all over the papers last week, and it was silly of Nick to feel as self-conscious as he suddenly did, blushing as if he'd been caught in a Jaguar himself. It was often like this when the homosexual subject came up, and even in the Feddens' tolerant kitchen he stiffened in apprehension about what might carelessly be said—some indirect insult to swallow, a joke to be weakly smiled at. (22)

Gerald replies to this conversation, "No, no, he had to go. There was really no alternative" (23). Here it is made clear by the Fedden men that, while they may "tolerate" Nick's homosexuality, they never really wish to be reminded of it. Nor do they make exceptions for one of their own when he is caught with his pants down. Homosexuality for the Conservative power structure, as represented through the Fedden men, is something that must be kept hidden in order to be tolerated. Sinfield argues that "The more affluent among les/bi/gay people may be able to evade many of the effects of social disruption" (*Gay and After* 198). However, in *The Line of Beauty*, that is simply never the case, for while Nick only performs affluence, not one

of the queer people in the novel, affluent or not, are able to evade these effects. Sinfield also argues that queer “entanglement in heterosexism does have advantages. It allows us to know what people say when they think we aren’t around. And at least we can’t be told to go back where we came from, as happens to racial minorities in Britain. Conversely though, it makes us the perfect subversive implants, the quintessential enemy within” (*Gay and After* 31). Here I find both agreement and a point of departure with Sinfield’s argument. It is quite true in Hollinghurst’s novel that queer people, in this case Nick, do make for the perfect enemy within, but, as evidenced above with the Maltby scandal, they can easily be told to go back where they came from. Nick himself discovers this at the close of the novel.

### **A Queer Place in the Conservative Movement?**

This novel begs the question: can gay people find a sense of belonging in Thatcher’s party? The answer is a resounding no. At the first Party dinner that Nick attends in the Fedden home, he meets Barry Groom who, even before an introduction to Nick, tells him, “Never speculate with more than twelve per cent of your capital” (127). An odd introduction to be sure; however, it is also a revealing one. As long as the topic of conversation stays clear of any that might be considered outside of Party ideology, Nick will be safe. It is a warning to Nick more than investment advice. After all, Nick has no capital with which to invest, financial or cultural. Groom’s abrupt advice is more of an announcement of caution against deviation. Groom is virulently homophobic in the novel, and although he is wary of Nick’s presence in the Fedden home, he is understanding of Nick’s purpose according to the Fedden family.

Nick, as a gay man, is here to draw the focus away from the deviance of the family. Groom's warning is meant to keep Nick from broadcasting his own deviance. He needs to be the "good gay" not the perverse gay. His acceptance, as a gay man in a conservative household is conditional. He must be "useful." Jasbir K. Puar discusses the process and effects of queer normativization in *Terrorist Assemblages*:

*Homonationalism in Queer Times*:

The contemporary emergence of homosexual, gay, and queer subjects – normativized through their deviance (as it becomes surveilled, managed, studied) rather than despite it—is integral to the interplay of perversion and normativity necessary to sustain in full gear the management of life.... The emergence and sanctioning of queer subjecthood is a historical shift condoned only through a parallel process of demarcation from populations targeted for segregation, disposal, or death, a reintensification of racialization through queerness. (xii)

While Puar's argument is very specifically about American imperialism, it works well when paired with Hollinghurst's historical re-casting of Thatcherite England and its attempted eradication of the homosexual subject. On one hand, the gay man, here Nick, is necessary to power structure, here represented by the Feddens, in order to pull the focus off of their own perversities. Yet on the other hand, this "queer subjecthood" comes at a cost, one that Nick might escape, but like Leo and Wani, as racial gay male Others, he will not.

Further evidence of there being no place for gay people in the Thatcherite system can be found in the papers of the Conservative Group for Homosexual Equality (CGHE).<sup>69</sup> The organization tried for nearly two decades to find a home

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<sup>69</sup> The Conservative Group for Homosexual Equality (CGHE), later the Tory Campaign for Homosexual Equality existed from 1977 to 1993. Their papers can be

within the Conservative party, and was never successful. It tried to distribute a newsletter, *Open Mind*, to Party members in Parliament, yet according to the group's minutes for 31 October 1989, "12. Open Mind. 'It was suggested that a new format be used as it would appear that many M.P.s immediately bin upon receipt.'" It attempted to sway Tory MPs on LGBT issues like Clause 28, but according to *Blue Triangle: Newsletter of the Conservative Group For Homosexual Equality*, No 62, Nov./Dec. 1988:

Re: interview with Brian Walden on London Weekend Television on 9<sup>th</sup> November Nigel Lawson on subject of section 28... as reported in Capital Gay. "Walden then asked Lawson whether legislation like Section 28, which targets only one group, was not comparable with Nineteenth Century anti-Catholic or anti-Jewish legislation, in that it stirs up feelings against one particular group. Lawson replied: 'I don't think that either Catholics or Jews would particularly welcome being equated with homosexuals...' .... The Chancellor supported his statement with the homophobic rejoinder: 'I know but people who are homosexual, I think it is unfortunate for them that they are. I don't think it is a happy condition and I think it is unfortunate and I don't think we'd want to have it promoted or proselytized' .... "The last time a senior government minister attacked lesbians and gay men was at the Conservative Party conference last year when the Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher criticized teachers for supposedly 'teaching the inalienable right to be gay.'" ("Lawson loses touch with reality" 1)

It appears that, despite the organizations' numerous attempts at communication and belonging with the Party, the Party line was decidedly homophobic. Regarding Tory homophobia, CGHE's *Blue Triangle* newsletter, No 46, April 1986, addresses whether or not the group should support homophobic candidates:

A big 'Thankyou' [sic] to those of you who responded to last issue's article on whether to support homophobic candidates. A selection of replies is published in this issue. Your views are quite clear, explain to 'unfavorable' candidates the error of their ways but get out there and

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found in the Hall-Carpenter Archives housed at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

support them in the election – canvassing, delivering, transport and above all VOTE CONSERVATIVE. (1)

Yet despite the profound evidence that their chosen Party wanted nothing to do with them, they persisted in their efforts to keep open the lines of communication. Very revealing is a point from a letter to CGHE from Tim Brixton, MP (Gravesend). As quoted in *The Blue Triangle*, Issue No 1, 28 August 1981, Brixton lays the blame on the other side, "... more damage is being done to your cause by the left and their exploitation of this matter than perhaps even you realize" (2). MP Brixton's argument that the real problem for homosexual equality is the "Left" and "their exploits" reaffirms CGHE's own belief that if they could just show the Tory Party how "normal" they are, they would succeed. Gay men who were loud, flamboyant activists were damaging normalization efforts. To blend into the Party, one must act like one belongs in the Party.

Hollinghurst creates many such opportunities for Nick to "blend" into the Party. One such event is an actual party that is purported to be a joint celebration of his and Toby's birthdays. In actuality, it is only really for Toby. Housed at the family home of Rachel Fedden's brother, Lord Kessler, Haweswood, the event "almost frightened Nick with its social grandeur, with what it would confer on him and demand from him" (41). Once at the party, Nick discovers it teeming with wealth and power. And Hollinghurst brilliantly stages many opportunities for Nick to be tested and tempted by his overt and covert desires for place, privilege, power, and his nascent homosexual explorations.

It is at this party that Nick meets Lord Kessler who, Hollinghurst suggests, yet never confirms, is a homosexual himself. Nick even picks up on this. In their

conversation about Henry James and style, Nick nearly breaks open the unspoken topic: “‘Ah,’ said Lord Kessler intelligently: ‘style as an obstacle.’ Nick smiled. ‘Exactly... Or perhaps style that hides things and reveals things at the same time’” (50). It is also here that Nick reconnects with Wani Ouradi, the son of a wealthy Lebanese entrepreneur, who has just announced his engagement. Nick and Wani know each other from university, and Nick knows that Wani is also homosexual. “He could picture a happy alternative future for himself and Wani—who was sweet-natured, very rich, and beautiful as a John the Baptist painted for a boy-loving Pope” (59). Yet the thing that becomes most clear to Nick at this party, is that he does not belong. Hollinghurst’s narrator comments of Nick that “He felt restless and forgotten, peripheral to an event which, he remembered, had once been thought of as his party too. His loneliness bewildered him for a minute, in the bleak perspective of the bachelor’s corridor: a sense close to panic that he didn’t belong in this house with these people” (68). In fact, this is the key event that sets Nick forth on his journey deeper into the gay world of London.

### **“Prime Minister, would you like to Dance?”**

At the next large Fedden family party, Nick takes his quest to participate in the Conservative power structure to the next level. The Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, has come to the party, and, without an ounce of self-consciousness, Nick walks in and joins her circle. Hollinghurst’s narrator comments that Nick “gazed delightedly at the Prime Minister’s face, at her whole head, beaked and crowned, which he saw was a fine and improbable fusion of the Vorticist and the Baroque. She

smiled back with a certain animal quickness, a bright blue challenge” (335).

Hollinghurst paints Thatcher here as a sharp-witted and fully aware leader who recognizes the transgressive spirit of an outsider in Nick. His gaze is one of objectification, and she recognizes it as such. She sees it as a challenge. But what is this challenge? Surrounded by supporters and yes men, Thatcher, in the novel, sees Nick as a toy, a diversion. Her return gaze is catlike in intensity and in reflexes, suggesting that she will not be easily toyed with. It is in this moment that Nick, audaciously, asks the Prime Minister to dance. She says, “You know, I’d like that *very much*” (335). As the men who had been hovering around her “recoiled at an audacity that had been beyond them,” Nick and the Prime Minister begin their dance. The dance is not innocent, however, as Nick transforms the dance into a power play symbolic of gay men’s desire to enter the system and transform it from within. What starts as a nice dance that has everyone smiling with admiration and jealousy, quickly changes when the DJ plays The Rolling Stones’ “Get Off of My Cloud.” With its aggressively sexual rhythms and hyper aggressive lyrics, Nick takes this opportunity to challenge the Prime Minister directly. He begins to dance “rather sexily” with Mrs. Thatcher (336). Surprisingly, the Prime Minister seems to be holding her own, showing young Nick that she will not be so easily overtaken. Further, when the dance is interrupted, it is not the Prime Minister who backs down, rather it is Gerald who puts an end to the “dance” (336). With this intervention, Hollinghurst makes an intriguing argument. It is not necessarily the party’s leader, the Prime Minister, who is not letting gay men into the system, but her supporters who fear the changes they will bring with them that keep them out. The Prime Minister uses Nick to portray

herself as current, young, vital. But her supporters, in this scene represented by Gerald Fedden, see only the sexualization of the movement. They only see the alteration that the gay man brings with him, and how easily he can transform the agenda. With this effort at inclusion rebuffed, Nick tries to enter system through money, power, and the world of gay sex.

### **Nick Enters—The Gay “Greenwood”**

Nick Guest has several moments of entry into the gay world of London. His first is through the personal ads, which is where he finds Leo. His second is in a perverse “greenwood,” the keyholder’s garden outside of the Fedden Residence. His third, a social entrance, is in Pete’s antique shop. In all of these locations, Hollinghurst’s protagonist has difficulty in reading the established codes of gay life. Far from his studied knowledge of aesthetics and power, the gay world of London in the 1980s is a complete mystery, and one in which Nick must work without established bodies of knowledge. Emma Liggins argues that this is symptomatic of Hollinghurst’s work in her essay, “Alan Hollinghurst and Metropolitan Gay Identities”:

Despite their advertising of the pleasures of the scene and the sexual highs it can lead to, Hollinghurst’s novels tend to stress its exclusivity in their portrayal of less than confident men who have difficulty in reading its codes. If an identity effectively constitutes ‘an exclusion as well as an inclusion’, some gay men will feel shut out from a vision of homosexuality built on promiscuity and clubbing finding themselves ‘somewhat to one side of metropolitan identities’ (Sinfield 1998, 7).<sup>70</sup> (166)

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<sup>70</sup> Emma Liggins. “Alan Hollinghurst and Metropolitan Gay Identities.” *Posting the Male: Masculinities in Post-War and Contemporary British Literature*. Ed. Daniel Lea and Berthold Schoene. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003. 159-70.

Nick is one such man. However, through his exploration and “studies” of London’s gay male subculture, mixed with his rejection of Thatcherite power systems, he eventually finds his way through this inclusion/ exclusion binary. But first he must decode the differences between Jamesian irony and the irony of gay culture. “In Nick’s still limited experience there are clearly some modes of irony which work within urban gay culture and some which do not” (Eastham 515). The place where he first begins to explore this difference is in Pete’s antique shop. Pete, Leo’s ailing ex-lover, is in many ways a master of the gay male subculture, its ironies, and its language. Nick is nervous as he enters the shop, not only because Pete is Leo’s ex, but also because “He was very sensitive to anything that might be said. As so often he felt he had the wrong kind of irony, the wrong knowledge, for gay life” (94). As Pete begins to unfold his sharp gay wit, Nick over-performs out of anxiety surrounding the former coupledom of Leo and Peter, as well as Pete’s mastery of the “code”: “Nick laughed eagerly, though it was a kind of camp slapstick he didn’t naturally find funny, and it was surprisingly painful to be given a glimpse of their past together” (94). Fascinatingly, this is quite similar to Nick’s reactions to moments where he is attempting and failing to pass in Conservative circles. Nick’s anxiety leads to transparent over-performance, followed by a period of keen study and introspection. Ever the intellectual voyeur, Nick “processes” Pete, musing that “he seemed to come forward from an era of sexual defiance and fighting alliances and to cast a dismissive eye over a little chit like Nick, who had never fought for anything. Or so Nick explained his own sense of discomfort, the recurring vague snobbery and

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timidity with which he peered into the world of actually existing gayness” (95). It is interesting that Nick receives the same sort of dismissive eye from Elena, the Feddens’ housekeeper, Barry Groom, Catherine Fedden, and to some degree, Lord Kessler. Any time Nick is attempting to pass, to perform an identity that is not authentic to him, it is greeted with skepticism and mistrust. Pete lures Nick into rhetorical traps in which he cannot correctly answer, he can only reveal more information about himself. Pete tells Leo and Nick, “‘It’s at a fucking standstill here. It’s going backwards. Another four years of Madam and we’ll all be on the street.’ Pete coughed again and flapped away Leo’s attempt to take the cigarette off him. ‘So how long have you been in London, Nick?’” (97). Pete, as a more militant queer who has AIDS and a failing business, jumps right into a critique of Prime Minister Thatcher which he pairs with a seemingly innocent question for Nick. Nick wisely sidesteps the political discussion, one in which, as someone still very much infatuated with all things Fedden, including the Prime Minister, he would surely not answer correctly. But he falls into Pete’s web by announcing that he is new to the scene. Pete replies quickly that Leo should take him to the Volunteer, Shaftesbury, the Lift...“if he’s a bit of a chocoholic” (97). Pete embarrasses Nick with his sub-cultural knowledge and his acknowledgement of Nick’s sexual tastes. As they leave the store, Nick experiences a rush of awareness: “As they dawdled through the crowd Nick saw himself rushing ahead through neglected years of his moral education. This was what it was like!” (100). But this newfound awareness is quickly put into check by Leo who challenges Nick on the problems inherent in his living a double-life, stating “‘At least with old Pete we had his place, but where are me and you ever

going to go?’ Could this be his only objection, the only obstacle...? ‘I know, we’re homeless,’ Nick said. ‘Homeless love,’ said Leo...” (104). Until Nick can make a choice to stop trying to pass in two worlds, he will remain “homeless.”

### Nick and Leo

James N. Brown and Patricia M. Sant argue in “Race, Class, and the Homoerotics of *The Swimming-Pool Library*” that “*The Swimming-Pool Library* interweaves a history of English homosexual desire with a concurrent history of exploitation of black bodies to illustrate the fetishization of the African male and the complicity of English male desire for the African (male) Other with the (ongoing) project of English imperialism” (113).<sup>71</sup> The question, therefore, is since *The Swimming-Pool Library* and *The Line of Beauty* are, in many ways companion novels, does this same argument hold true in *The Line of Beauty*? Maybe. I have already argued that Nick longs to be a member of the British ruling-class. Perhaps then, his attraction in the novel to men of color, both of whom, while differing in class position, are children born of immigrants who eventually succumb to AIDS, is rooted in his desire to join the ruling class through sexual domination of subjugated racial others. Yet it is not so clear in this novel that Nick has a direct hand in their cultural oppression. Leo is Nick’s first lover, and his attempt to incorporate Leo into his world at the Fedden house fails miserably. In fact, it proves to be the couple’s last tryst. If anything, Leo calls repeated attention to the incompatibility of Nick’s

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<sup>71</sup> James N. Brown and Patricia M. Sant. “Race, Class, and the Homoerotics of *The Swimming-Pool Library*.” *Postcolonial and Queer Theories: Intersections and Essays*. Ed. John Hawley. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2001. 113-27. Print.

attempt to bridge these two worlds and that his attempts at passing in both are doomed to fail. Nick even attempts to keep his two worlds quite separate upon his initial meeting with Leo, stating of the Feddens, ““God, I don’t come from that sort of background. No, I just live there. It belongs to Toby’s parents. I’ve just got a tiny room up in the attic.’ Nick was rather surprised to hear himself throwing his whole fantasy of belonging there out the window” (28). And yet, in order to find common ground with Leo, other than mere sexual attraction, Nick relies on his class difference to bridge the racial divide. Much in the same way that Puar argues about homonationalism, Nick has so internalized the Thatcherite constructs of his gay subjecthood that he unconsciously keeps that part of his life separate and distinct. To others he readily claims to be a member of the household. In his efforts to pass in all circles, he is quick to disclaim any true affiliation with any other group other than the one he is in at the moment. However, there is never any complete escape from either world. In this instance, “A Tory MP would shadow their meeting like an unwelcome chaperone...” (29), just as his gay identity shadows him in Conservative circles. This is the main reason he doesn’t take Leo into the Fedden house for their first sexual encounter, for to do so would be to shatter the fragile illusion that he and the Feddens had worked to create—that he belonged there with them. “Nick winced and waited—the truth was he didn’t dare, he just couldn’t do that to Rachel and Gerald, it was vulgar and unsafe, the consequences unspooled ahead of him, their happy routines of chortling agreement would wither forever” (31). Instead he decides on perhaps an equally vulgar location, but one that is much more perverse, the keyholder’s garden. Nick acknowledges this perversion of acceptability, musing

“Little Nick Guest from Barwick, Don and Dot Guest’s boy, fucking a stranger in a Notting Hill garden at night. Leo was right, it was so bad, and it was so much the best thing he’s ever done” (36). The thrill of the moment, however, is rapidly challenged by an actual keyholder who is suspicious of their right to be there:

“The tall man walked past them, hesitated, and turned.  
‘You do know its keyholders only.’  
‘I’m sorry?’ . . . .  
‘Only this is a private garden.’  
‘Oh yes—we’re keyholders,’ the phrase subsuming Leo, who made a little grunt, not of lust this time but of indignant confirmation. . . .  
‘Ah fine. . . .’ The man gave a squinting half-smile. ‘I didn’t think I’d seen you before.’ He avoided looking at Leo, who was obviously the cause of this edgy exchange—and that for Nick was another of the commonplace revelations of the evening, of being out with a black man.” (37)

This confrontation marks the most defined moment Nick has yet to experience that the two worlds he seeks to live in will not ultimately be compatible. Perhaps this is his earliest realization, however fleeting, that he will have to choose one or the other. Leo, on the other hand, knows this all too well. The fact that Leo breaks off with Nick after the one night that Nick finally feels brave enough and transgressive enough to bring Leo into the house is indicative of Leo’s knowledge, for it is the moment in which Leo realizes that Nick is not yet in a place where he can make the choice to live fully as he is, rather than perpetuating incomplete dual identities. The narrator describes this moment of clarity:

He felt breathless pride at having Leo here. . . . It was the first time he had seen Leo naked, and the first time he had seen the masking shadow of his face, lazily watchful, easily cynical, clever and obtuse by turns, melt into naked feeling. Leo breathed through his mouth, and his look was a wince of lust and also, it seemed to Nick, of self-accusation—that he had been so slow, so vain, so blind. (155)

Nick will insist on bridging these worlds. Leo does not have enough time left to watch it fail.

### **Nick and Wani**

“Class is not secondary”(146) Sinfield argues in *On Sexuality and Power*. This is an important note not only when examining Nick’s position in the Fedden household, but also when delving into Nick’s relationship with Wani Ouradi. The relationship with Wani is both Nick’s ultimate attempt to bridge the two worlds in which he is attempting to pass and the final realization that it cannot work. Eastham claims that “Nick finds his ideal object in Wani Ouradi, the son of a Lebanese immigrant multi-millionaire who has already inherited the spoils of Thatcherism and performs his wealth with an unconscious dandyism. His beauty and indifference fulfill Nick’s aristocratic aesthetic ideal...” (515). And while this is true, Eastham could go further by stating that Wani’s performance reveals the harsh reality of the very spoils of Thatcherism he so perfectly represents. And that even he is unaware of the complexity of that perfection. With Wani’s influence, “Nick cultivates a snobbery which reflects aristocratic privilege, yet in the context of the particular trials of gay life in the Thatcherite 1980s the aesthetic dimension could be said to offer a necessary space of autonomy” (523), Eastham continues. Yet this argument neglects to address the lack of autonomy Wani really has, and that Nick discovers to be false.

Just as Leo introduced Nick to the world of gay London, so too does Nick introduce Wani to possibilities of slumming in Hampstead Heath. “Nick went ahead on the path and held the gate open for Wani, so that for several seconds the outside world had a view of naked flesh before the gate, with its ‘Men Only’ sign, swung shut

behind them”(159). A private and exclusive world for gay men on the prowl, the environment and the culture of the Heath caters to both Nick’s desire for exclusivity and Wani’s desire for perverse consumption. “‘Mm, very primitive,’ Wani said, as if the place confirmed a suspicion he had about Nick. Nick said, ‘I know,’ and grinned—it was just what he loved about it” (159). The reaction is just the one Nick longs for, that he be equated with raw and primitive and, frankly, common sexuality. He knows that this is the way for him to captivate Wani’s attention. Wani, however, has different ideas. He decides to pick up “Ricky,” a stranger at the Heath who holds the promise of anonymous sex and accessible drugs. Wani notes of “Ricky,” with relish, “He’s very common” (166). This scene reduces Nick to chauffeur and observer, rather than object of desire and participant. And with that, Nick is once again reduced by the wealthy and powerful to employee and hanger-on. In Wani’s car, named WHO 6, Nick “had often been the passenger in WHO 6, but he had only driven it once before, by himself, a short hop from the river back to Kensington that became a whole glittering evening of darting about, the Brompton Road, Queen’s Gate, along by the Park, round and round, and with a curious feeling (with the roof down and the coldish air blustering in) of passing for Wani, of being WHO, that glamorous enigma” (169). And once again, the idea that he is passing as one of the elite leads him to disown the reality of his servitude. But this delusion is short lived, as is everything with Wani, as soon as the trio enters Wani’s offices:

Nick coming close behind, unpleasantly jealous of the other two. It was like the tension of a first date, but with an extra player who was also a competitor and critic. He was squeamish at the thought of Wani’s little predilections being exposed, and angry because he was the one who had been trusted with the secret of them.... He took down the leather-bound Poems and Plays of Addison and got out the hidden

gram of coke – all that was left of last week’s quarter-ounce. He knelt down by the glass coffee table to deal with it, polishing a clean spot. The new issue of Harper’s was open to “Jennifer’s Diary,” and he peered at the picture of Mr. Antoine Ouradi and Miss Martine Ducros at the Duchess of Flintshire’s May ball. The pale inverted reflection of two men kissing floated on the glass beside the photographed couple. If this was one of Wani’s films—not the ones he wanted to make but the ones he liked to watch—Nick would have to join them in a moment. Sometimes there was an unaccountably boring scene where one man knelt and sucked the dicks of the other two in turn, or even tried to get them both in his mouth, and Nick could see Wani needing to do that. He chopped and drew out the fine white fuses of pleasure and watched Ricky tug at the buckle of his lover’s belt. (172-73)

As with the Feddens, Nick is the keeper of secrets with Wani. As a racial minority of the upper classes in Thatcher’s England, Wani cannot be free and open with his “predilections.” He knows how the game is played, and he plays it quite well. So long as he remains engaged to be married, he can do as he wishes. Wani’s father, Bertrand, says as much, “Wani is in all things his own master” (200). Unlike Nick, who longs to pass in two opposing worlds while bringing them together in a sort of resolution that will allow him the freedom he seeks, Wani strives diligently to keep them separated. Later, at a Conservative party at the Fedden house, Wani tells Nick, who is bringing out the cocaine from its hiding place, “‘Darling, no one even knows I’ve got anything to hide.’ He passed Wani the packet and smiled reproachfully. ‘It’s just like our wonderful secret love affair’” (222). To which Nick replies, with his trademarked naïve notions of upper-class reality,

“I wish we didn’t have to carry on like this, I feel I’ve got to tell someone, I wish we could tell people.”  
“If you tell one person you’ve told everybody,” Wani said. “You might as well take out a full-page ad in the Telegraph.”  
“Well, I know you’re very important, of course...”  
“You don’t think we’d be at a party like this if people knew what we did, do you?”...

“I’ve never pretended not to be gay, it’s you that’s doing that, my dear. This is 1986. Things have changed.”  
“Yes. All the poofs are dropping like flies.” (223-4)

While it is true that Nick has not been pretending to be heterosexual, he has been diligent about not making this aspect of his identity his defining persona. In every way but denying his gay identity, as with his class background, Nick has adapted his identity in Conservative, heterosexual circles, in an effort to pass as someone who belongs with them. This all begins to unravel, however, when AIDS begins to impact Nick’s life directly.

### **Nick’s Queer Choice**

When AIDS starts to hit home in Nick’s awareness, he becomes increasingly disenchanted with the world of the Feddens and the power-structure they represent. David Alderson, in his essay “Desire as Nostalgia: the Novels of Alan Hollinghurst,” argues that “The reason that this mood of disenchantment has become so integral to Hollinghurst’s aesthetic is surely that gay identity has taken on peculiarly modern forms at odds with that English tradition which is such an important influence on this novel....” (36)<sup>72</sup> Indeed it has. For Nick, the inhumanity with which Thatcherite culture views AIDS and homosexuality serves as a defining awareness that brings him to a realization that he has no place with them, and, further, that he will never have a place in their world. Hollinghurst has alluded to AIDS a few times already in

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<sup>72</sup> David Alderson. “Desire as Nostalgia: The Novels of Alan Hollinghurst.” *Territories of Desire in Queer Culture: Refiguring Contemporary Boundaries*. Ed. David Alderson and Linda Anderson. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2000. 29-48. Print.

the novel: Pete's illness, Leo's relationship to Pete and his disappearance, and the mention of a missing regular at the Heath. However, with the death of Catherine's godfather, Pat, it becomes the dominant theme of the rest of the novel. Rachel breaks the news to her daughter,

"It's godfather Pat. I'm afraid he died this morning."  
"Oh, I'm so sorry," said Nick, moved by her [Catherine's] instant distress more than by the news itself, and feeling the AIDS question rear up, suddenly and undeflectable, and somehow his responsibility, as the only recognized gay man present. Still there was a communal effort by the rest of the family to veil the matter. (290)

Catherine replies to the unspoken nature of his death, and in her usual impetuous manner, shocks her family and their visitors, Sally and Sir Maurice Tipper: "He had AIDS!" "He was gay... he liked anonymous sex... he liked... Oh, it's pathetic!... I mean surely the least we can do is tell the truth about him?" (292). Single-handedly, Catherine shatters Nick's ability to remain the silent subject in the room. The following scene with Sally and Sir Maurice Tipper, Wani, Nick, and the Feddens provides the clear moment of separation for Nick and his illusions of passing:

There would be the social strain of coming out to such people in such a place, and with the wider matter of AIDS concerning them all, more or less. He said, 'I think I heard you say your mother had a long final illness.'

'That was utterly different,' Sir Maurice put in curtly.

'It was a blessed relief,' said Sally, 'when she finally went.'

'She hadn't brought it on herself,' said Sir Maurice.

'No, that's true,' Sally sighed. 'I mean, they're going to have to learn, aren't they, the... homosexuals.'

'It's a hard way to have to learn,' said Nick, 'but yes, we are learning to be safe.'.... 'You know, there are very simple things that need to be done. For instance, people have got to use protection... you know, when they're... when they're humping.'.... 'there are other things one can do. I mean there's oral sex, which may be dangerous, but is certainly less so.'

.... Sir Maurice looked at him sharply and said, 'I'm afraid what you're saying fills me with a physical revulsion... I just don't see why

anyone's remotely surprised. This whole thing had got completely out of hand. They had it coming to them.' .... 'I'm not ashamed of what I think,' said Sir Maurice.....

'No, well nor am I, as a matter of fact,' said Nick.

'What do you think, Wani,' said Sally, 'as a younger person, you know, on the other side of the picture?'

Wani had been watching Nick with mischievous patience. 'I suppose Nick must be right, you know... everyone's going to have to be more careful. There's really no excuse for getting the thing now.'

.... 'That is just awfully sad,' said Sally. 'I'm probably just old-fashioned on these things, but actually I was brought up to believe in no sex before marriage.'

'My own view entirely,' said Sir Maurice...

Nick, tingling with ironies and astonishment, said merely, 'But if we're never going to get married....' (295-97)

And with that, Nick's ability to pass in the Thatcherite world has begun to crack. The family's trust in his silence begins to erode. He has become suspect. Hollinghurst deftly captures the vehemence of Thatcherite reactions to queers and to AIDS through Sir Maurice. Reporting in the newsletters of Body Positive<sup>73</sup>, a British HIV/AIDS organization still in operation, could well have served as a script for Sir Maurice's above reaction, as evidenced by this clipping, written by Jonathan Grimshaw, from 25 August 1987:

The relationship between large sections of the media and the public depends on the manipulation of sensation, particularly moral sensation. AIDS has been interpreted as a moral contamination afflicting people who have behaved 'Immorally' or 'deviantly'. People with HIV and AIDS have been told that they are responsible for this disease, they have only themselves to blame, they 'deserve' it. People with HIV are not immune to those messages. They undermine self-esteem and self-confidence at a time when those qualities are most needed if one is to come to terms with the psychological and social implications of discovering that one is infected. (3)

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<sup>73</sup> Body Positive's papers are housed in the Hall-Carpenter Archives at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

And in this excerpt from the *Wolverhampton Express and Star*, “Shoot All Gays, Says Councillor,” dated 17 December 1986, and found in the papers of CGHE:<sup>74</sup>

This afternoon Bill Brownhill was unrepentant about his astonishing attack on Britain’s gay community.

Councillor Brownhill, leader of South Staffordshire Council, said: “I should shoot them all.”

His outburst last night came after councillors were shown a film about the killer disease, won the backing of Labour leader Jack Greenaway.

Councillor Brownhill said: “Those bunch of queers that legalize filth in homosexuality have a lot to answer for and I hope they are proud of what they have done.

“The film said how to try to avoid Aids, but it did not specifically say stop being queer. It is disgusting and diabolical.”

“As a cure I would put 90 per cent of queers in the ruddy gas chamber.”

“Are we going to keep letting these queers trade their filth up and down the country? We must find a way of stopping these gays going round.”

“It seems to me these are the people who are spreading this disease more than anyone else, yet we are making heroes of some of these people and some are even being knighted.”

My argument here is that through allusions in his novel to government inaction, the legislation of Clause 28, and the collusion of gay men attempting to pass in the Conservative Party, Hollinghurst indicts all of the above as co-conspirators in the silence and deaths brought on by AIDS in England.

### **Wani’s Failure**

On the subject of biopolitics, Jasbir K. Puar argues,

Impelled not only by this folding of queerness and other sexual national subjects into the biopolitical management of life, but by the simultaneous folding out of life, out towards death of queerly racialized ‘terrorist populations,’ biopolitics delineates not only which queers live and which queers die—a variable and contestable demarcation—but also *how* queers live and die. (xii)

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid. Conservative Group for Homosexual Equality.

Leo will die surrounded by his family, Wani will die still protecting his secrets and his performance of heterosexuality. Both are gay men of color. Hollinghurst, here, seems to be making an argument about race and sexuality trumping money and power when it comes to survival within the Conservative power structure. Wani is rich, and his father has cultural power, but, because of his race, and his family's national origin, he is a colonial subject nevertheless. As such, his otherness trumps his wealth. He cannot fully be allowed in to the system. Leo is also a colonial subject, albeit one without money or power. Hollinghurst argues in this connection that both men are the same. That money does not matter as much to the Conservative party as race and sexuality do. It appears questionable whether Nick will survive, but Hollinghurst leaves open the possibility. As Wani meets with Nick for one last time, he reveals many truths to Nick in an open and giving manner.

“You should really move out of the Feddens’. Get a place of your own.”

“I know,” said Nick, “it is rather dotty. But we muddle along somehow.... I’m not at all sure they could manage without me.”

“One never knows...” said Wani.....

“I was thinking of leaving you the Clerkenwell building.”....

After a couple of breaths, Nick said, “Let’s not talk about you leaving things.”.... Wani grinned at him coldly for a second. Until now he had only had the story of Wani being ill; he had taken the news about with him and brought off the somber but thrilling effect, once or twice, of saying, “I’m afraid he’s dying.” Or “He nearly died.” It had been his own drama, in which he’d felt, as well as the horror and pity of it, the thump of a kind of self-importance. Now sitting beside him and being offered buildings, he felt humbled and surprisingly angry.

“What would I do with the Clerkenwell building?” said Nick sulkily.

“You’d own it,” said Wani. “It’ll have thirty thousand square feet of office space. You can get someone to manage it for you and you can live on the rent for the rest of your life.”.... For Nick it was very strange to find it attached to an office block near Smithfield Market. Wani knew he hated the design of the building; there was a sharp tease in the gift, even a kind of lesson.

“By the way, I should warn you that Gerald seems to be in a bit of trouble” (382-84)

Wani clearly warns Nick about the danger of his continued involvement with the Feddens. Gerald is in trouble. They can easily do without you. You will need a place to live. You will need an income. I will provide you with these things. On some level this seems to be sinking in to Nick’s consciousness. Yet on another, he remains wrapped up in his final illusions. “He hadn’t told Wani, but he was having another HIV test in the afternoon: it was another solemn thing, and even more frightening than it need have been for not being talked about”(424). Maybe he can make it work. Maybe everything will be fine. Except, with the Feddens, as Wani foretold, everything falls apart.

### **Conclusion**

The one gay character in the novel that appears to do well is Polly Tompkins. Nick notes that Polly is gay early in the novel. A minor character, he does not resurface until the end of the novel when he wins election in 1987. Polly Tompkins hides his gayness and is a white member of the ruling class. As Nick and Catherine watch the elections on television, Nick sees Polly “Standing in the middle of the stage, fat and hot in a double-breasted suit” (363). The narrator notes that Polly could have passed for forty-five; he seemed camouflaged in his own elected future” (363). Nick goes on to observe that Paul Frederick Gervase Tompkins, Conservative, was only married last month, and calls him “the nightmare queen of the Worcester MCR” (364). Gerald, however, is not so fortunate. He falls to a scandal involving Sir Maurice Tipper and a shady financial takeover coupled with an affair with his secretary, Penny. Catherine, ever the truth-teller, breaks the affair story to the press

along with the story of Nick's gay sex romps involving Wani. Nick, however, becomes the scapegoat of the family. Elena tells him that the house now exists on a, "Street of Shame" (389). The headlines scream "'Peer's Playboy Son Has AIDS'". That was the subheading. 'Gay Sex Link to Minister's House'" (409). Even the press is placing Nick's scandal with Wani at the center, rather than Gerald's own failings. Rachel blames Nick for Catherine's problems and the news. In her thinking, Catherine would have never talked to the press if Nick hadn't gone with her to discover the affair. But the patriarch has the final word in all things. And his "reasoning," while baffling, is certainly enlightening. Gerald says to Nick,

"I mean, we've always been very kind to you, actually, I think, haven't we? Made you a part of our life – in the widest sense. You've made the acquaintance of many remarkable people through being a friend of ours. Going up to the very highest levels."

"Yes, certainly." Nick took a deep breath. "That's partly why I'm so dreadfully sorry about everything that's happened..."

"I mean, didn't it strike you as rather odd, a bit queer, attaching yourself to a family like this?"

Nick thought it was unusual—that was the beauty of it, or had been, but he said, "I'm only the lodger. It was Toby who suggested I live with you." He took a risk and added, "You could just as well say that the family attached itself to me."

Gerald said, "I've been giving it some thought. It's the sort of thing you read about, it's an old homo trick. You can't have a real family, so you attach yourself to someone else's. And I suppose after a while you just couldn't bear it, you must have been very envious I think of everything we have, and coming from your background too perhaps... and you've wreaked some pretty awful revenge on us as a result. And actually, you know..." he raised his hands, "all we asked for was loyalty."

The strange, the marvelous thing was that at no point did Gerald say what he considered Nick to have actually done. It seemed as natural as day to him to dress up the pet lamb as the scapegoat....

"Do you honestly imagine that your affairs can be talked about in the same way as mine? I mean—I ask you again, who are you? What the fuck are you doing here?"

"Well, you'll be devastated to hear that I'm moving out of the house today. I just dropped by to tell you." And Gerald, furiously

pretending not to have heard, said, "I want you out of the house today." (419-21)

And so Gerald and the Family turn on Nick, casting him out as though he were never a part of the family after all. Of course, he never was. By attempting to pass in their world while trying to find a way to bridge his attempt at passing in the gay world, Nick fails. "All we asked for was loyalty," Gerald tells him. Being gay, and wanting to be out of the closet with it, Nick could not ultimately offer the brand of loyalty Gerald refers to. But as Penny tells him, "That's how the world works, Nick. Gerald can't lose. You've got to understand that" (434-5). Gerald's scandal will blow over, this is how the ruling party stays in power, by scapegoating Others. Eastham argues that

Nick leaves the Feddens' house and contemplates the possibility of his own diagnosis as HIV positive. This is perhaps the first moment in the novel in which Nick stands in free space, no longer a guest to the culture of Conservatism, and in this sense it is arguably the first moment in the novel where the aesthetic dimension is experienced as a democratic freedom. (524)

And while he is right to note that Nick stand in free space, he neglects to mention that this space is most likely temporary. Hollinghurst is ambivalent about Nick's future, or even the possibility that he has one. It is possible that white gay homonormative people have a chance at survival within the system. But it will not be in Thatcher's Conservative system, according to this novel. The Conservative system of Margaret Thatcher is dying much like many in the gay male community in England during the late 1980s. Hollinghurst goes into explicit detail on how the Conservatives will use Nick as a scapegoat to distract from their own corruption and excess. And as he argues in his interview with Emily Bern in *The Telegraph*, Hollinghurst is not

interested in Nick being a hero. What fascinates him is Nick's "bad behaviour,"<sup>75</sup> his complicity in the destructive Conservative project, a project that in its ending, might include his ending as well. Perhaps Julie Rivkin is closer to the truth. She argues in "Writing the Gay '80s with Henry James: David Leavitt's *A Place I've Never Been* and Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty*" that,

Nick will realize that his own life offers no exemption to the conditions that have determined the deaths around him. He comes to believe—and this belief is not contradicted—that he will share the fate of his lovers, that his AIDS test will, like theirs, be positive. The market may recover—it always bounces back, Wani once observed—but these lost young men of the '80s will not return. The novel ends with Nick imagining forward to a world that will go on without him...<sup>76</sup> (291)

I agree that Nick has learned that he is not exempt. Hollinghurst's protagonist has discovered that his "imagined community" in which he can craft a place for himself in Thatcherite Conservatism was delusional. They used him to suit their own needs.

In many ways, Alan Hollinghurst's engagement with history is one that attempts to remain objective and non-judgmental. He has channeled the aesthetic styles of Henry James and William Hogarth to analyze not necessarily the way things were, but how they appeared to be during the turbulent 1980s in England. Like Mary Renault, Hollinghurst locates an iconic period of English post-war history, one, in fact, that seeks to return to the "values" and national identity of the same period Renault herself was critiquing, and challenges contemporary culture to analyze itself.

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<sup>75</sup> Emily Bern. "Most of All I Like Bad Behaviour." *The Telegraph*. 26 Oct. 2004. Web. 15 Sept. 2013.

<sup>76</sup> Julie Rivkin. "Writing the Gay '80s with Henry James: David Leavitt's *A Place I've Never Been* and Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty*." *The Henry James Review* 26.3 (2005): 282-292. Print.

Written during a period that sees great advancements for lesbians and gay men, Hollinghurst's novel asks us to look past the aesthetic appearances of inclusion and acceptance. By telling the story of a young man coming of sexual age during the height of AIDS and Margaret Thatcher's governmental oppression of gay people, Hollinghurst is not interested, like Renault, in advocating for gay men to be accepted in British society. He is also not overly critical of gay men's participation in the dominant culture. He neither longs for an idealized past or fantasy space in which gay men were free of normative structures like Bartlett, nor an idealized future in which gay men are fully equal. He only asks that we look at the costs, the compromises, our participation in a larger system that may, or may not be damaging to ourselves and others.

## Chapter 4: Neil Bartlett and the Search for Gay Male Modes of Narrating History

You leave in the morning  
With everything you own  
In a little black case...

- Bronski Beat "Smalltown Boy" (1984)

I will be your father figure (Oh, baby)  
Put your tiny hand in mine (I'd love to)  
I will be your preacher teacher (Be your daddy)  
Anything you have in mind

- George Michael "Father Figure" (1987)

He knows so much about these things  
He knows so much about these things

- The Smiths "This Charming Man" (1983)

Contemporary gay male culture has created a special and centralized place in its history for the coming out narrative. So central is this journey of self-discovery, identity-proclamation, and navigation of a new cultural membership in fact that it forms the basis of most gay themed films and books since the 1980s. It is no wonder then that Neil Bartlett explores his own coming out narrative through a detailed examination of gay male cultural history. Not content with merely navigating contemporary gay male culture, Bartlett enters into conversation with one hundred years of British gay male culture, and, in the process, lays out a critical foundation and a historical analysis that he will use in later work in *Who Was That Man?: A Present for Mr. Oscar Wilde* (1988). This prose work, part memoir, part historical

archaeology, is comprised of many literary forms which combine to form a sort of “biomythography”<sup>77</sup> in which Bartlett interrogates his own construction as a contemporary gay man by placing himself in relationship with Oscar Wilde and his works. In his novel, *Ready to Catch Him Should He Fall* (1992), Bartlett, like Sarah Waters, creates a contemporary gay mythology. Unlike Waters, however, Bartlett’s mythology is abstract rather than pinpointed in a specific time and place. Although coming out of a specific gay historical moment in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Bartlett’s work first examines the connections between gay male identity in his own time and positions it against the “birth” of the modern gay male in the late nineteenth century. Ultimately, Bartlett collapses the linear history and time between the era of Oscar Wilde and his own, leading to his creation, in *Ready To Catch Him Should He Fall*, of an abstract and archetypal gay “London” in which gay culture seems to always have been in existence, outside of specific time, yet completely of its time. Bartlett’s historical engagement is one of myth creation.

Bartlett’s work has been largely unexamined in literary criticism. Most noted for his work as a playwright and theatre director, Bartlett has, nevertheless, crafted pioneering and iconic queer prose. In addition to *Who Was That Man?: A Present for Mr. Oscar Wilde* and *Ready to Catch Him Should He Fall*, Bartlett has authored *Mr. Clive & Mr. Page* (1996) and *Skin Lane* (2007). It is critical to note that all of

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<sup>77</sup> Audre Lorde coined the term “Biomythography” in *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name - A Biomythography*. “has the elements of biography and history of myth. In other words, it’s fiction built from many sources. This is one way of expanding our vision.” (*Black Women Writers at Work* edited by Claudia Tate). Lorde, Audre. *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name - A Biomythography*. Freedom,CA: Crossing Press, 1982.

Bartlett's prose works engage with history in meaningful ways. Indeed, whether writing an historical novel or a memoir or a fictive archetypal abstract, all Bartlett's prose works seek to uncover and then collapse queer times and spaces. This chapter will keep its focus on Bartlett's two earliest prose works, and examine them in relationship with each other as theoretical foundation text followed by its manifestation in fiction as praxis. Once Bartlett collapses the time and space of 100 years of gay male culture, he explicates the queer procreation methods used in gay male cultures to keep the culture alive and thriving and sacred. His search for his gay male ancestors of the 1890s uncovers many artifacts, but doesn't really allow him to know them by proxy. He is able to forge a series of mythic relationships with the past, but they never manifest into reality. Sarah Waters writes in "Wolfskins and Togas: Lesbian and Gay Historical Fictions, 1870 to the Present" that "Neil Bartlett's *Who was That Man?: A Present for Mr Oscar Wilde* (1988)—testifies to the impossibility of gay culture's ever really 'knowing' or 'finding' its ancestors, even while indulging the fantasy in which historian and historical subject are brought together in sexual collusion" (253).<sup>78</sup> The sexual collusion here is key to Bartlett's work, for it is through acts of cruising and sex and ritual that gay men find their place in the subculture that protects and nurtures them. In many ways, both texts are focused on uncovering these rituals, exploring where they came from, how we practice them today, and why they are so important. Alan Sinfield, the foremost scholar of Bartlett's work, notes in "'The Moment of Submission': Neil Bartlett in

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<sup>78</sup> Sarah Ann Waters. "Wolfskins and Togas: Lesbian and Gay Historical Fictions, 1870 to the Present." Diss. U of London, 1995.

Conversation”, that “Bartlett’s writing in the mid- to late-1980s was almost archeological—telling us things we didn’t know about our tradition, cutting them in with our lives today” (211).<sup>79</sup> He also notes the timing of this subcultural archeology, writing, “At a time when AIDS was exposing the limits of liberal tolerance, addressing ‘men like us’ seemed an important act of subcultural affirmation” (211). The writing and publishing of *Who Was That Man?* during the height of the British AIDS crisis was certainly an important act of affirmation, but it was more than that as well. It serves as a testament to the longevity and permanence of a gay male subculture/mythology/legacy that will continue to exist in bars, and cottages, and libraries, and streets, and alleys, so long as someone cruises it, makes love to it, and passes it down to the next generation. At a time when gay men were dying by the thousands, this is an act of love, of remembrance, and of resistance.

Bartlett recalls in this conversation:

The thing I remember most about that time is an unbelievable kind of daily hatred. You couldn’t walk down the street or open a newspaper without flinching, because there would be some new graffiti about AIDS ... as a headline in the best selling newspaper. That’s the time when I did those theatre pieces, and also the body of the work on the novel *Ready to Catch Him Should He Fall*. People that I loved were falling and I had to be ready to catch them; and the disasters of the past which I was attempting to rescue and recuperate were running parallel with disasters in the future. That’s a very specific time and a very specific body of work and it has, thank God, an ending point.<sup>80</sup> (212-13)

Bartlett makes a point to focus on time in this passage. By recovering/discovering the past and imagining/foreseeing a future, Bartlett is able to address the present with

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<sup>79</sup> Alan Sinfield. “‘The Moment of Submission’: Neil Bartlett in Conversation.” *Modern Drama* 39.1 (1996): 211-21.

<sup>80</sup> Alan Sinfield. “‘The Moment of Submission’: Neil Bartlett in Conversation.”

both detachment, as with his manifestation of alternate presents, and immediacy as a revolutionary proclaiming truth to power alongside such pioneering British queer culture warriors as Derek Jarman, Isaac Julien, and Jimmy Somerville. Alan Sinfield, writing on *Who Was That Man*, observes: “By making his own concerns explicit, alongside this extensive contextual stuff, Bartlett set up the central debate about gay men: do we have a historically continuous subculture, or has it all been reborn, in the wake of the Stonewall Riots in New York in 1969 and the flourishing of Gay Liberation politics in England?<sup>81</sup>” I would heartily agree with Sinfield here, but add that Bartlett’s work, as a product of asking these questions, posits a map for halting the erasure of gay male subculture by political, cultural, and medical means, by creating a core mythology that exists in a time and space that cannot be destroyed by anti-gay politics, disease, or ignorance. He shows us how we tell our stories, how we pass on our knowledge, and how we will continue to survive. This is in comparison to Hollinghurst, who examines a specific time and place in which gay men are destroyed by anti-gay politics and disease to show gay men how they participate in their own destruction. Renault is also concerned with how we pass on our stories through connection to past cultures, and how these past cultures can help gay men overcome societal ignorance. Waters is concerned with creating fantasy space in which lesbians can create their own identities outside of the world of social consumption.

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<sup>81</sup> Alan Sinfield. “Alan Sinfield on Who Was That Man by Neil Bartlett.” *Serpent’s Tail.com*. 24 November 2006. Web. 28 March 2010.

## Coming Out: The Search Begins

*Who Was That Man?: A Present for Mr Oscar Wilde* began as a two-fold exercise for Bartlett. The first reason was to write a book that really speaks to what the coming out process is really like in mid-eighties London. He writes in the Introduction to the book, “I wrote this book in London in 1985 and 1986, and I suppose that’s what it’s about. I wanted to write a book about what it feels like, because I think that’s what people always want to know, really, what does it feel like...” (xix). He focuses here on feeling rather than on a series of actions, because to relate a coming out narrative as a series of steps really speaks little to the internal struggle, the fear of rejection and alienation, the anxiety of targeted hostility, and the sense of ultimate freedom all wrapped up in the emotional and psychological aspects of coming out as a gay man.<sup>82</sup> He recognizes that this emotional feeling aspect is what people (who are not gay) really want to know. The second reason was to explore his own coming out and living life as an openly gay man as a series of narratives. What he discovers along the way is that these series of narratives extend back in time and place to people, events, and stories that pre-date him by at least one hundred years. He breaks down the journey of gay men’s identity narratives as having three ways in which to tell the stories. Each aspect of storytelling is different and vital. One could argue that each narrative reflects a step in the coming out process. Bartlett observes: “There are three ways of putting together a man’s story. Each way of telling is a sort of detective story, and it is also a fairy story, because it has a happy ending. Or, at least it has an ending, which in itself makes us happy. This is odd, because we ought to know that our story is not yet finished” (23). While each way is

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<sup>82</sup> Or coming out as a lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered person.

both a detective story and a fairy tale, Bartlett hints at coming out stories as having a happy ending, but also hints that the communal gay coming out story is nowhere near its end. He alerts the reader, here, to his philosophy that coming out is a personal, communal, and historical narrative. As such, it is important to note that while we have not yet seen its final ending, there is also an historical past to the narrative which must be uncovered and explored as a vital part of the historical and communal stories, but also of the personal story.

The three ways of telling the story of coming out each present different methodologies, different outcomes, and different foci. “The first way of telling the story is the commonest, the one at which we have all had the most practice.... It is the coming-out story, the one in which you or I tell of a long personal struggle which ends with the statement, ‘I am gay’” (23). This narrative is really action based. It has a fixed beginning, “I first noticed I was gay when....” It has key moments in the journey, which must be touched upon: defined chapters, if you will. These include first sexual experience, internal struggle to make peace with sexuality outside of the cultural norm, tentative first steps at coming out to others, and external responses, all of which lead ultimately to the final declaration to the person(s) one is coming out to, “I’m Gay.” This is a personal, individual, and isolated narrative, which places the gay man as the subject, and the quest for an authentic self as the plot. It is necessarily self-centered. The second way this story is told is to examine the narrative not in a personal way but in a collective one. It is the story of “us” as a people with a common shared past. Bartlett argues:

The second way is usually taken in installments, since it assumes that the story being told is a very, very long one. The hero now is not 'I' but 'we', and the story is the history of 'homosexuality'. After all the characteristic difficulties of infancy, childhood and adolescence (leading, in the late nineteenth century, to a meeting with the police and a grueling but formative session with a doctor or analyst), this narrative finally shows us coming out, collectively, as the 'adult gay men' of the late twentieth century. This second way of telling the story is closely based on the first. (23-4)

The communal coming out Bartlett posits is rooted in shared cultural histories with identifiable markers along the way that, while it reflects the individual coming out process as a series of steps, it differs notably in that it personifies the history of a people and a culture as opposed to a single person's experience that takes place in one marked time period. Yet Bartlett argues that this communal coming out is critical in gay men's identity formation as "adults," or a culture that has matured into adulthood. Adulthood, whether as an individual, or a community, suggests responsibility, accountability, respect, and self-assuredness. And for a community to see itself as "adult" means that it sees itself as worthy of that respect and stable in its identity. It is a critical point of departure for Bartlett that he recognizes the need for this "second way" of telling the story — of coming out. It does not negate the first, rather it operates simultaneously on a different, but parallel timeline. We can already see where Bartlett is beginning to separate and collapse historical time and space. He starts this even in detailing the different sorts of coming out narratives. Additionally, he does not stop with two narrative timelines of gay male existence.

There is a third way, which combines the first two and results in yet another new timeline. Bartlett writes:

The third way combines the historical methods of the second with the individual subject of the first. The hero in this case is a single, usually 'great' homosexual. His fame rests in part on being hidden (either through his own efforts or through those of others), on being in need of revelation. His life and times are scrutinized, and reveal to the reader the secret of his story; that his homosexuality was in some way basic to his life and work. Layers of clues, suggestions and distortions (letters, works of art, symptoms) are stripped away until we arrive at the truth. (24)

In this narrative, the hero, a great homosexual, is rescued from his obscured and distorted past through the academic and cultural decoding of contemporary gay men. It is simultaneously the narrative of that historical gay man, linked through his work to a contemporary gay male identity, which ultimately reveals the essentialness of his homosexuality to his great work. We have identified and decoded the identity and work of many of these men today: Alexander the Great, Leonardo da Vinci, Walt Whitman, E.M. Forster, and Oscar Wilde, to name just a few. Scholars, artists, poets, and historians have worked very hard to uncover the link between homosexuality and the works of these great men. Mary Renault wrote several books exploring the connection between Alexander the Great's sexuality and his conquest of the world. Allen Ginsberg wrote several poems placing himself in direct conversation with the queerness of Whitman. And several academics have painstakingly drawn the links between Forster and Wilde's sexuality and their literature. Why is this narrative such an important story to tell? Why is contemporary gay male culture so invested in this historical and cultural rescue project?

The answer may be that in the rescue, there is power. If contemporary gay male culture can rescue its elders and demonstrate the vitalness of their homosexuality to the iconic works they produced, then they can work on creating a

new “ending” in the three differing coming out stories. The new ending suggests that the dominant culture has always been wrong in its persecution of homosexuality, that homosexuals are a vital part of human culture, and that the individual gay man’s coming out is a celebratory event that opens to new possibilities, rather than serving as the closing point in an arduous journey. Bartlett breaks the three stories down thusly, “The first telling of the story ends with the ‘I’ assuming a coherent contemporary identity; the second with ‘we’ arriving at a contemporary culture; the third with ‘him’ truly deciphered, and enshrined as a major or minor character in the second story and patron saint or role model for the first. All three of these stories are biographies” (24). All three tellings of the story end with the subject finding a secure and stable contemporary identity that is rooted in an established and celebrated culture. All three are also intertwined, and ultimately, inseparable. The “I” needs his “him” to serve as his guide toward a positive secure sense of self. To locate the “him,” the “I” must discover, or be taught, the second narrative. This is the way the “I” can see himself as a member of ancestry with a shared history, as a member of a “family” of sorts. The “I” story cannot result in a coherent contemporary identity without the “we” story. It is no wonder then, that Bartlett’s work explores these connections in such detail. *Who Was That Man?: A Present for Mr Oscar Wilde* is his biography built on the “we” and the “him” stories. In it, Oscar Wilde is his father, elder, guide, teacher, and lover, and because of Wilde’s fatherly patronage, Bartlett is able to locate an ending for his own story that does not end in “I’m Gay,” but as a strong contemporary gay man prepared to fight and survive the homophobia of the 1980s in London with a sense of family, and a sense of place.

## Cruising the Past: Out of the Streets and Into the Libraries!

The story of how we find each other, and thereby find ourselves as gay men is a complex one. How, for example, does a young gay boy learn that there are others like him? How does he learn about the cultural history of gay men without an intergenerational guide to educate him? This information, in the 1970s and 1980s when Bartlett was coming of age, was not readily available. The Internet has certainly made this a much easier search, but not necessarily a harmless one. Without a guide, there are many traps. Bartlett argues in *Who Was That Man?: A Present for Mr Oscar Wilde* and in *Ready to Catch Him Should He Fall* that the real journey toward self-discovery and cultural discovery for any gay man must be rooted in intergenerational mentoring. Mark W. Turner writes briefly about *Ready to Catch Him Should He Fall* in his book, *Backward Glances: Cruising the Queer Streets of New York and London*, “Bartlett’s novel suggests that a shared, collective cultural memory is crucial for understanding the continuity of communities, not least for queer people so often marginalized in mainstream accounts of urban life” (82).<sup>83</sup> But accessing that community is difficult when one doesn’t know where to look. Bartlett and Turner both suggest that finding each other, our community, and our shared history is rooted in the act of cruising. Cruising here is working in multiple ways. It is intended to invoke the traditional definition of wandering around and looking without apparent purpose, but also the exchange of glances and physical signals gay men use in identifying each other, looking for sexual partners, and looking for information.

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<sup>83</sup> Mark W. Turner. *Backward Glances: Cruising the Queer Streets of New York and London*. London: Reakton, 2003.

Before chat rooms, websites, and the plethora of information provided by the Internet, young gay men could not sit in their rooms and find others like them to meet, ask questions of, get a first kiss, have a first sexual encounter, discover the communal past. Turner argues about cruising in his book, “Cruising is not presented here as a ‘theory’ that is explicitly articulated by anyone in particular, rather as one way of conceptualizing the man on the streets that exploits the ambivalences and uncertainties inherent in the city and in depictions of the city” (7). What I like about Turner’s presentation of cruising is that it includes space for all aspects of the act previously discussed. Cruising is an act of classification and identification rooted in uncertainty. In fact, much of the gay male subculture has historically been rooted in cruising. Matt Houlbrook details the history of cruising in modern London, and argues that it is central to contemporary gay men’s creation of identity. He writes, “if many men found fleeting moments of pleasure in doorways or parks, others entered a vibrant queer world in which accumulated interactions between men sustained unique histories, folklore, and landmarks” (64).<sup>84</sup> Cruising, for Houlbrook, creates the queer world in which gay men can exchange more than bodily fluids, they can also exchange history and knowledge. Like Bartlett, Joseph Bristow places Wilde, as icon, at the start of the contemporary gay male subculture. He writes, “although Wilde stood at the beginning of a political struggle that has for over a hundred years witnessed the slow but sure development of a metropolitan gay subculture that enjoys a thriving and expanding commercial scene, the historical distance between his life

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<sup>84</sup> Matt Houlbrook. *Queer London: Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918-1957*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2005. Print.

and ours is immense” (49).<sup>85</sup> The closing of that historical distance is where much of Bartlett’s journey is concerned. How does one collapse a distance of over a hundred years? Bartlett in *Who Was That Man?: A Present for Mr Oscar Wilde* finds that he can collapse it through what Mark Turner calls “Backwards Glances,”<sup>86</sup> or cruising. In his case, he is cruising for ancestry, for information, for a father figure. If, as Alan Sinfield writes in *On Sexuality and Power*, “The most ambitious investigation of the thesis that the modern homosexual derives from the late nineteenth century” (91)<sup>87</sup>, then Bartlett, or any gay man looking for his cultural ancestry, must look to Wilde as the origin of the modern gay man. Wilde’s persona as a dandy, as effeminate, as an aesthetic marks him as gay, according to contemporary culture’s assignation of these traits as gay. It is interesting that Sinfield argues that Bartlett repositions the late 1970s and early 1980s “clone,” a cultivated look in gay male cultures of the time rooted in a hyper masculinity and virility, against a history of effeminacy. It is interesting because, if Bartlett is trying to tell his “I” story by collapsing the “we” story rooted in the “him” story, then why not try to identify the “I” as like the “him” rather than in opposition to it? If Wilde is the archetypal effeminate gay man, and the “clone” is the archetypal masculine gay man, what draws these apparently opposing gender-marked identities together? The answer is that they are both consciously self-

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<sup>85</sup> Joseph Bristow. *Effeminate England: Homoerotic Writing After 1885*. New York: Columbia UP, 1995. Print.

<sup>86</sup> See Mark W. Turner. *Backward Glances: Cruising the Queer Streets of New York and London*.

<sup>87</sup> Alan Sinfield. *On Sexuality and Power*. New York: Columbia UP, 2004. Print.

created poses. Both are rooted in the same aestheticism. Both also allow for cultural identification, and both allow for certain markers that enable effective cruising. What is the moustache and the hanky code if not contemporary carnation and velvet jacket?

But how did we get here from there? Bartlett recognizes that these markers, clothing, language, and codes are vital for gay cultural creation. If the gay men of the past had not created enclaves in the city, or codes to recognize each other, then Bartlett, or any other contemporary gay man, would not know, through rumors and whispers, where to go to meet others like him, or how to recognize others like you, when you get there. Bartlett speaks to this in *Who Was That Man?: A Present for Mr Oscar Wilde*.

I think that we do have to speak to one another, in our own language. It matters that the patterns of my life were set by men who came before me. It matters that much of the sexual geography of this city was established a hundred years ago, not five years ago when I moved here. Every boy is looking to find his way around, looking for someone, because you arrive knowing nothing. You fall in love with people you never even talk to; that's a common experience. Men you never really touch or understand can lead you into a different part of the city. So I've 'fallen in love' with men I could never actually meet. I'm not embarrassed to say it, to say that I've fallen in love with some of those men from the past. (xxii)

The patterns of contemporary gay life were established by men from the past. When a boy arrives there, he looks for others to usher him in, to guide him through the rituals, to teach him the language. He can learn these even without direct linguistic interaction. He can observe them through acts of cruising. In doing so, in recognizing himself in others, he can fall in love with them, and with himself. Since Bartlett is drawn into the parts of London established by men from the past, through backward glances, through cruising, he can fall in love with them too. The fact that

he is cruising men from another time is almost irrelevant. He is starting to lay the foundation here for the collapsing of time and space he will fully explore in *Ready to Catch Him Should He Fall*.

But this exchange, this mutual recognition is fraught with danger and terror for young gay men coming out. You may think you recognize another gay man. You may catch him by the eye, but what if you are wrong? Bartlett begins his search for his gay ancestry in the stacks of the library. Through his literary exploration, he discovers an Oscar Wilde he had not previously recognized. The Wilde he knew as a boy was a great comic writer, full of his celebrated wit. But as he read deeper into Wilde's works, a reading rooted in his own young gay male anxieties, he discovers a new Wilde. Bartlett writes, "Do you ever catch the eye of another man and he looks scared? When I started all this, I thought Wilde was a comic writer, but now I know better. All of his characters are in terror of being discovered" (93). Without a safe space, or a self-protective culture, and Wilde certainly did not have these, the possibility of being discovered as gay by those who are not gay is one filled with terror. This is just as true today as it was for Bartlett and for Wilde. The first tentative steps in coming out are a delicate dance. The young gay man must reveal and conceal himself. He must reveal himself in a way that can also conceal his true identity. For the culture has already reinforced in young gay men that "The crime or sin of homosexuality must never be named. It must be kept a dirty secret, even if it is a widely shared one. This imperative can produce the strangest concealments of the awful truth" (94). So a young gay man must learn the codes of the "love that dare not speak its name." Wilde does this with aplomb in his writings. And Bartlett, in his

historical and cultural education at the library, learns why this is the case and has always been the case for gay men since the 1800s. He writes, “Homosexuality cannot be spoken. More precisely, homosexuality cannot be allowed to speak for itself. In 1895, the year that Oscar was found guilty, it was threatening to do just that. Homosexual men were not only talking to one another in private, elaborating images and fantasies and constructing their own enclosed culture, they were also ‘doing it in public’” (95). Bartlett discovers in his self-education of the stories of “we” and “him,” that there is a code, and that gay men were using the code in front of everyone. The code originates in private as a unique language which outsiders cannot decipher, but moves into the public sphere. “Bunburying” from Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest* is a prime example of this. To audiences at the time, bunburying is an act that allows a man to pursue his pleasure without impunity. To gay men, it spoke directly to their acts of concealment, to their forbidden physical connections, and to their hidden true identities.

Bartlett does not only discover Wilde’s hidden side (the recovery narrative embodied in the “him” story), but he also discovers scrapbooks of old news clippings about homosexual men. In these scrapbooks, he does not find concrete answers, but he does find evidence that gay men are always being monitored, and that even secret locales and codes cannot always make it safe. Bartlett ponders these scrapbooks, noting:

These scrapbooks draw no conclusions. They only bear witness to the need to collect and keep and compare notes. They amass evidence, reminding us that it is never true that we are silent, or safe, or that our speech is safe from those who would silence or forget us. The scrapbook is the true form of our history, since it records what we

remember, and embodies in its omissions both how we remember and how we forget our lives. We are always held between ignorance and exposure. (98-99)

Key here is that while the scrapbook is vital in its recording of certain aspects of gay male culture, notably its criminality and punishment, its omissions are also critical. There are certain things that young gay men cannot find in libraries or scrapbooks. The hidden and coded messages, and the mass media records of violence and penalization really work to reinforce secrecy and hiding. It does nothing to reveal possible happy outcomes, a sense of strength in community, or a sense of family for Bartlett. This is the story of “we” told by others (scrapbook) and the story of “him” read by Bartlett. But he has yet to discover how these two stories contribute to the self-narrative. What they show is that gay men are visible, for good or for bad, and that visibility means that gay men can be seen.

Moving this knowledge into part of the “I” story, for Bartlett, relies on his personal reactions and the sharing of those reactions. He declares,

The next time some man asks me what it feels like, I’ll bind all these fragments together and lend them to him for a night, and then ask him if he felt the same way reading them as I did. All I can do is lay them out, preserve them as a witness. I always thought that we were invisible, that our invisibility was a fact; now I lay down my pieces of evidence one by one, in defiance of all those who are ignorant of our culture. I will inscribe above them a quotation from the beginning of Wilde’s own summary of the evidence of his career, the composition made from memory in the cell at Reading, *De Profundis*: I went as far as I could possibly go. (100)

It is very easy for a young gay boy to think he is the only one, and it can be staggeringly powerful to learn that he is not alone. He can see there are others. And while the lives of young gay men may be filled with the darkness Bartlett observes in his research, they are also filled with existence. And that fact, alone, is a powerful

testament to strength and survival. The other thing he learns, particularly from the writings of Oscar Wilde, is that for the gay male subculture, there is no real truth of identity; rather, there is only construction of identity, a conscious construction of identity. Bartlett argues that

There is no intrinsic value to homosexuality. There is no ‘real’ us, we can only ever have an unnatural identity, which is why we are all forgers. We create a life, not out of lies, but out of more or less conscious choices; adaptations, imitations and plain theft of styles, names, social, and sexual roles, bodies. The high camp of Sebastian Melmoth’s life is a true model for us, not because we are all devastated upper class queens, or want to be, but because we too must compose ourselves. (169-70)

Wilde himself is the icon for this model. He takes the name of Sebastian Melmoth during his exile. Wilde constructed himself many times over. It is important to note here that Bartlett does not say that this process of identity construction is based in lies. Rather, it is rooted in conscious acts of self-creation. Forgeries, yes, and based on the language and styles and identities of others, but no less our own for that, and no less meaningful to the culture. In fact it is where most of the gay male subculture finds its identifying traits. Camp, slang, styles, and sexual identities all combine to create culturally specific modes of communication.

In literature, there is no better example for this than Oscar Wilde. He embeds his texts with codes and self-created identities, slang, and style. It is natural that Bartlett would look first to Wilde for his access into the “We” narrative. Bartlett notes, “So I re-read the Complete Works, looking for my ancestors. To a young man alone in a library, all of Wilde’s texts can begin to conspire, to imagine rather than record his life. He was constantly imagining his own life under the guise of fiction”

(198). This imagination proves fruitful for Bartlett in this work and in *Ready to Catch Him Should He Fall*. Both texts are firmly rooted in the imaginary. In this book, Bartlett imagines a personal sexual, intellectual, and artistic relationship with Wilde as an artist and a lover. Wilde becomes an archetype and icon. His humanity is subversive in that it is in a constant state of creation and re-creation. But Wilde is not the only figure he discovers in the library. Like Alice down the rabbit hole, Bartlett also discovers John Addington Symonds, E. M. Forster, and the *Phaedrus*, the dialogue by Plato, among others. In this discovery, he observes the interconnectedness of Wilde with Whitman and Symonds and Forster, and Oxford and Cambridge, and Plato. He begins to construct an historical and literary ancestry rooted in a sort of artistic daisy chain. Here, in this library, Bartlett has discovered the essence of the “we” story: that gay men do have a common identity, a common history, and a common language. He notes, “I still feel, obscurely, that we are all the same, that we have a common identity, common interests. I have found that it is when we are most like each other, when we enter an economy based on the exchange of shared signs, that we have found our greatest strength” (207). These shared signs are handed down from previous generations. The gay male subculture solidified by Wilde and his ilk in the late-nineteenth century has continued, in many ways unchanged, into Bartlett’s present of the late 1980s.

Wilde, as iconic father, serves to make one further point to young Bartlett. Wilde was searching for and creating the same narratives as Bartlett is doing in the 1980s. In an entry from Bartlett’s diary, dated 14 October 1986, cited in *Who Was That Man?: A Present for Mr Oscar Wilde*, Bartlett writes,

... the real theory being proposed in “The Portrait of Mr. W.H.” does not concern the origin of Shakespeare’s sonnets at all. The theory that Wilde is proposing is about our origins as homosexual men. At the very moment at which, historically, we begin to exist, he created a biography of a homosexual man in which the fake and the true are quite indistinguishable. He proposed that our present is continually being written by our history; that the individual voice can hardly be separated from the historic text, which it repeats and adapts. If that is true, then we must choose our words with as much invention as care. (209)

Here, Bartlett discovers that Wilde, in “The Portrait of Mr. W.H.,” is involved in the same task that he finds himself: how to discover the literary and historical links to an imagined gay male past. For Wilde, his icon was William Shakespeare who, Wilde supposes, in his sonnets, dedicated them to a young male actor who played female roles. This sets up a dialogue for Wilde, rooted in the ancient Greek dialogues of Plato, that posits our present and future are being constantly written by the past. Gay men need to know the past, and to discover the direct links to that past, in order to understand and create the present. He further argues that we cannot separate ourselves from that history. Our very identities are rooted in it. Further, Bartlett’s understanding of Wilde hinges on the interplay between the true and the fake. Both are vital aspects of identity creation, and both must be chosen quite carefully. Most interesting for Bartlett is that Wilde undergoes this search for the gay male past at precisely the moment when the homosexual man comes into being. Here, Bartlett is referencing the argument that the homosexual comes into being with the Wilde trials

and with psychology in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Before this moment, gay sex was an act, not an identity, according to the law and the society.<sup>88</sup>

### **History + Present = Future?: Discovering the Contemporary Gay Male Position**

Agreeing with Michel Foucault, Alan Sinfield suggests that much of the contemporary gay male identity, or at least its remaining gendered stereotypes, derive from the trials of Oscar Wilde. In *On Sexuality and Power*, Sinfield, argues,

The Wilde trials, I and others have suggested were crucial in establishing the stereotype of the queer man which dominated until gay liberation in the 1970s. At the trials, the entire, vaguely disconcerting nexus of effeminacy, leisure, idleness, immorality, luxury, insouciance, decadence, and aestheticism, which Wilde was perceived, variously, as instantiating, was transformed into a brilliantly precise image. (138)

To understand where the stereotype of the effeminate and decadent gay man comes from, we need to examine the transcripts of Wilde's three trials and the news reports of them. This is the moment when effeminacy began to be equated with sinister hidden underworlds inhabited by respected members of society. It was the beginning of a real witch hunt. Because of the press, and its salacious reporting of Wilde's performance in the courtroom along with the detailed evidence that basked in the "filth," Wilde's image began to change from the amusing dandy to the predatory effeminate pervert. Of course, Wilde was not the only one. Nor was his the only publicized case. There was the case of Boulton and Park, for example, two cross-dressing gay men charged with sodomy, but later acquitted. But acquittal or not, the scandalousness of them appearing in women's clothes at theatres and on public streets

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<sup>88</sup> See Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1: An Introduction* (1978). "The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species" (6).

was enough to help solidify the effeminate pervert stereotypes. Still it did more than that as well; it also let the public know that there was a gay male subculture in London. Sinfield writes, “As *Teleny* and the story of Fanny and Stella suggest, there was a queer subculture, and Wilde, because of his class position (I will argue), was better placed to discover it than many men” (*The Wilde Century* 18).<sup>89</sup> Wilde, according to Sinfield, because of his fame and money, was in a position to participate in the subculture with some impunity, because he could buy his way in and, most likely, out. Sinfield’s book, *The Wilde Century*, is a well researched and powerfully argued text that critiques the place Wilde holds in contemporary gay male culture. Yes, Sinfield says, we should celebrate Wilde, for he invented, or participated in the invention, of much of gay male culture. Sinfield writes,

Cultural construction is both enabling and restricting. Of course we should celebrate ‘Oscar Wilde’: he has authorized a good deal of gay culture as we know it. At the same time, he has been a means through which we have been held trapped in a particular set of assumptions—by a homophobic wider culture, and by ourselves.<sup>90</sup> (176-7)

But this gay male subcultural identity, for Sinfield, has served to force gay men, and gay male culture, into a fixed set of expectations and identities. He argues that by critiquing Wilde’s place as the icon, as the “Him” story, we can begin to move past the rigid set of identity norms and cultural expectations that have existed for one hundred years. So gay male culture needs to know and investigate its past in order to dismantle fixed identities and begin to develop new ones. Bartlett, I argue, would disagree. Bartlett argues for a core place for Wilde in the ancestry and history of gay

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<sup>89</sup> Alan Sinfield. *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde and the Queer Moment*. New York: Columbia UP, 1994. Print.

<sup>90</sup> Alan Sinfield. *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde and the Queer Moment*.

male culture. It is a celebrated space, and Wilde's martyrdom and transgressive challenge to the norms of the time open up a possibility for gay men to unite as part of a shared history. For Wilde, identity is purely an act of self-creation; he falls in line with what we would now call a constructivist identity. A gay persona, culture, history, or identity is self-created. Bartlett differs from Wilde here. For Bartlett, gay identity is more essential. It has always been, it will always be. That gay men are gay is truth. For a gay man to decide that he is gay is a moment of admitting the truth, not an act of self-creation. However, Bartlett does look at community and history through a constructivist lens. While it may be a given that gay men are "born that way," he acknowledges that the cultural identity aspect of self must be constructed through cultural, historical, and physical education. Without joining the history, gay men have no place to call their own. For it is only through our history that we have a present to exist in, according to Bartlett.

Ross Chambers argues that this focus on history is a means of reproduction for Bartlett. In "Poaching and Pastiche: Reproducing the Gay Subculture," Chambers asserts of Bartlett's work that for Bartlett, "reproduction—that is, the historical survival—of, specifically, gay male culture, which of course had its own subcultures and internal differences, has depended on its having been able to enjoy (if enjoy is the word) a parasitic relation to the general culture" (170).<sup>91</sup> Chambers is referring here to gay male subculture not only having developed its own sets of language, codes, and practices, but that they also feed off of the language, codes, and practices of the

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<sup>91</sup> Ross Chambers. "Poaching and Pastiche: Reproducing the Gay Subculture." *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 21.1-2 (1994): 169-192. Print.

heterosexual general culture. Here it is important to examine what Chambers means by “culture.” Chambers defines “culture as the set of signifying practices that make possible a given discursive (not simply verbal) interaction: culture is the mediator of social relationships, and hence of politics and history” (170). Gay male culture, then, builds itself from the models of the general culture, namely, heteronormative patriarchal roles and expectations. This will be important as I move forward in this chapter, for as I will show, Bartlett is heavily invested in the archetypal roles of Father, Mother, and boy as a sort of queer nuclear family of cultural necessity.

Bartlett writes in *Who Was That Man?*, “I subject the story of my own life as a gay man to a constant scrutiny; we all do. We have to, because we’re making it up as we go along” (30). The only models that exist are heterosexual ones, and ultimately, gay culture knows these cannot transfer into gay male identities without ultimately erasing gayness. So gay men are always in an active state of identity construction, one that feeds on heterosexual models, but also always perverts them. As such, gay men must constantly scrutinize what they are choosing to embody of heterosexual roles and values, how those choices affect their identities, and if they should reject those personas or pervert them with gay male codes and practices. But that is not the only way that gay men can create their own narratives, identities, and histories, one based on “reading” signals and codes, and signs. “There is another way of putting the story together,” writes Bartlett, “If you or he can ‘read’ this collection of words and images, with all its attendant justifications, juxtapositions and cross references, you will have a gay story, a history” (24). The very act of “reading” here is working as creation. By interpreting each other’s signifiers—going back to cruising—gay men

create new links in the history chain. Furthermore, these signs we are reading need not be glaring. Bartlett posits that “Because the meanings we seek and need are usually hidden, or at least infrequent, we decipher small declarations” (36). Gay male culture, for Bartlett is used to operating in the shadows. It accepts as “normal” the seeking out of hidden messages, meanings, and signs. In fact the very survival of gay male culture has depended upon this hidden communication for its very survival. Bartlett then takes the reader on an explanatory journey through the readings of flowers, faces, words, evidence, forgery, possessions, pretexts, messages, and history (*Who Was That Man?: A Present for Mr Oscar Wilde*). Anything and everything can and should be read according to Bartlett, for all of it communicates the hidden aspects of culture and history.

But particularly important is the critique and reading of language. Bartlett argues that there is no language for “love” between men (78). Indeed, gay men borrow the language and adapt it from heterosexual culture, or they create new words all together. He continues, “According to the *Dictionary*, we had no voice of our own. Don’t you believe it. In a different part of the city, our language was spoken, if not recorded. Our history is not a gallery of mute faces” (78). No it is not. According to Bartlett, gay male history is a gallery for constantly communicating faces, as long as the observer knows how to read and decipher the language. Furthermore, with the creation of a unique gay language, gay men challenge the notion, upsetting and destroying the heterosexual culture’s perversion of gay identities. He argues,

When we speak in our own language, we destroy the notion that talking about a gay experience is worse than doing it. The best thing about talking dirty is that it makes both the act and the description

clean; expressible, visible, imaginable. This technique of deliberate utterance becomes even more powerful when transferred from sex to other areas of our lives. (79)

Bartlett is arguing that by verbally coming out with talk of gay sex and gay performativity, gay male culture makes clean what the general culture has tried to make dirty. By speaking the names, gay men demystify the practices. By speaking the truth, gay men empower themselves. Here, Bartlett is identitarian. This, for Bartlett, applies to sex and also to every aspect of gay male life. Yet because of society's oppression and repression of gay male culture, gay men have had to invent their own language. "The need to talk among ourselves has made our language elaborate. Not for us the literary 'realism' and simplicity of expression that is meant to characterize a confession or autobiography. At times we have talked in languages no one else could understand" (80). This language creation extends into arts and literature. There are times and moments where a gay man needs to communicate with the general culture; there are times where he needs to "come out." But there are also times when a gay man must communicate with other gay men in a way that is not readily translatable to the general public. The hidden or secret code in gay male culture provides great protections, and honors the multiple acts of perpetual self-creation. This language is so secret, in fact, that "The *Dictionary* does not record a comprehensive gay slang in use in the nineteenth century. But the fragments I've been able to re-collect can be strung together; we had invented at least a different idea of another, a different language. Remnants, single words, remain in our contemporary speech" (81). This includes examples like gay men calling each other by feminine pronouns, referring to themselves as "friends of Dorothy," or participating in "The love that dare not speak its name," or code names for subcultural subcultures

within the community, like today's "bear," "otter," and "twink." Gay men do not have to use any of these terms, but, as Bartlett argues, "We are in the luxurious position of being able, sometimes and if we choose, to speak plainly for ourselves. We don't have to speak apart from the world. But the words are still there, however, should we need or want them" (81). There are moments, Bartlett argues, wherein gay male culture needs these words to communicate with themselves, to show solidarity, familiarity, and recognition in ways that heterosexual people may not pick up on. This is a way of showing recognition in a coded manner. Bartlett uses Wilde as a primary example of this.

Oscar Wilde was a queen, an invert, a pervert, a sodomite, an Uranian, a simisexual, a homosexual and a Maryanne. Each word describes a different creature. We can never say of any man the he was (or is) a homosexual, and leave it at that. Consider your own variety of poses over the last four years. Or make your own list of the extraordinarily various forms we've taken in the last forty years: since coming home from the war, we have been The Flaming Queen (Fitzrovia, 1959; Bolts or Benjys 1979), The Speed Queen (Soho, 1963; Leicester Square 1986), Leather Boys (c. 1960 to the present day), the Macho Man (Subway as infinitum), The Clone. ... My summary of our identities might describe a procession of mannequins, a chronology of exhibits, a genealogical tree in whose privileged shade you stretch out. Or it may describe the transformations of a single, literal body, someone you know. We never arrive" (170-71).

Wilde had many identities, much like Algernon in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. But, then again, so has gay male culture in the post-war period. Gay male culture, for Bartlett is perpetually in an act of self-creation. It is always in process and not focused on product.

### **Ready to Catch Him Should He Fall**

*Ready to Catch Him Should He Fall* (1992), Bartlett's first novel, is divided into three sections: Single, Couple, and Family, mimicking general culture's heterosexual journey toward the nuclear family. In many ways this mirrors Bartlett's three coming out narratives from *Who Was That Man?»: the I, We, and Him* narratives. The I is the journey of the single man coming out to himself and seeking out other gay men. The We is the finding of shared community and finding oneself a part of a cultural history. The Him narrative ties the individual and community narratives through an iconic figure to form a family. Bartlett's novel is purposefully abstract, existing in a London, but not an identified time or exact location. Most of the action takes place inside a bar with no name that does not really come into contact with the general culture at all. It concerns the arrival of Boy, an archetypal young gay man in the process of coming out and seeking community. The narrator of the novel established the book's concern with history and family and community early on.

This is a picture which I took of him myself. He was so beautiful in those days—listen to me, *those days*, talking like it was all ancient history. It's just that at the time it all seemed so beautiful and important, it was like some kind of historical event. *History on legs*, we used to say; a significant pair of legs, an important stomach, legendary... *a classic of the genre. Historic.* Well it was true, all of it.  
(11)

Fascinatingly, Bartlett's narrator equates Boy's narrative with history on legs, or history in constant movement, while also using gay male subcultural codes, calling boy legendary, a classic of the genre, meaning that Boy is the archetypal boy. He is the everyboy of the narrative, because this story is not about one boy, rather it is about all boys. And this, the narrator tells us, "all this is Boy's story mostly" (12). It is important to note the addition of the mostly here. Bartlett's narrator informs the

reader that while most of this narrative really concerns Boy's finding place in history and in family, it also concerns the existing members in the community, those no longer playing the role of Boy in their ever shifting identities. Boy "loved to be called Boy" (13). According to the narrator this initial identity in gay male culture, is youthful, desirable, and still in process. Boy had "A perfect body, not an adolescent one, which was odd, because the rest of Boy was unfinished, and that's what this whole thing is about" (12-13). The purpose of the narrative is the finishing of Boy, or his journey through the abstract sacred space of the Bar on his way toward family and history. Furthermore, the narrator acknowledges that the entirety of the story depends on how the reader sees Boy, noting: "much of the impact of this story depends upon your being able to see and think of Boy as beautiful, admirable and even adorable in the true senses of those difficult and dangerous but nonetheless precious and necessary words; I suggest therefore that you amend my descriptions of Boy and his lover" (14). The narrator encourages the reader to picture Boy, not with a rigid set of defined features, but as each individual reader's own perfect notion of Boy. He only cautions the reader to "Keep him strong, keep him young, and, whatever his colouring, keep him gorgeous" (15). The reader is encouraged to paint Boy in broad breathtaking purity and beautiful strokes. The exact features do not matter, but that he is beautiful does. Sinfield argues that Boy as a character, "is in a line with Chance Wayne played by Paul Newman, Alec Scudder in *Maurice*, Boy Barrett in *Victim*, Bosie Douglas—drawn purposefully by Bartlett from several generations. The idea of Boy is a ratification of gay history, and hence of gay existence" (135).<sup>92</sup> Boy is

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<sup>92</sup> Alan Sinfield. *On Sexuality and Power*.

meant to be the once and always Boy. He is every boy who has ever undertaken this journey. He is iconic in his own right, but, due to his lack of experience, he does not yet realize how precious and special he is.

“Boy was walking down the street. Our street, though he didn’t know that yet” (18). Boy, like Bartlett himself in the library, stumbles into history and community, almost by accident. He is cruising the streets, literally and figuratively, looking for a connection to himself and to others. Because he does not know the codes and systems yet, he tentatively strikes out by following other men. “Some days he would follow a man, a man he’d just seen in the street, for minutes or for hours, thinking he would go up to him and ask him if he knew the way. I can remember doing that in my own time” (18). Interestingly, while Boy does not know how to read codes and symbols of gay culture yet, he does know that cruising is the active gateway into this new world. Also important is that the narrator places himself as a future version of Boy that has already undergone this journey, but is forbidden to participate and help now. However, Boy “never did ask any man for directions; he walked and he walked. In fact when Boy first came to us he was at the point of exhaustion” (19). The searching and the initial entries into the quest for community leaves the Boy virtually empty and in desperate need of comfort and nurturing. In his book, *Writing Men*, Berthold Schoene-Harwood reads *Ready to Catch Him Should He Fall* as “an attempt to subvert patriarchal Masculinity from a gay male perspective” (xiv)<sup>93</sup> told through a quest narrative. While I do agree that Bartlett is subverting

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<sup>93</sup> Berthold Schoene-Harwood. *Writing Men: Literary Masculinities from Frankenstein to the New Man*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2000. Print.

patriarchal masculinity, I do not agree that this is the bulk of Bartlett's purpose. While the subversion is a necessary part of gay culture's survival, it is much more complex than mere subversion. It is also firmly rooted in the creation of something wholly new and also wholly timeless. Furthermore, as Alan Sinfield argues in *On Sexuality and Power*, "Bartlett's work, despite his apparent privileging of the macho image, has contributed significantly to the recovery of subcultures of effeminacy" (92)<sup>94</sup> citing the scene in the novel where Mother puts Boy into drag. The scene in which Mother, herself an older man in drag, puts Boy in drag as a form of acceptance, and empowerment. It is very much a moment that celebrates the role of effeminacy in gay male culture, while also perverting the heteronormative structures of the nuclear family. Mother is a man, but is also a person that embodies all the positive stereotypical traits of a mother figure: he is nurturing, healing, caring, and worldly, all things that Boy is not. "At the same time," argues Sinfield, "the image will derive from and belong to the subculture. Boy is destined to discover himself in a historic gay identity, self-consciously bestowed by Madame" (135). So while Boy does not fully grasp his destiny, Madame does, and in the act of placing Boy in the spotlight, (s)he gives him the initial push into a new world, and shows him that he is accepted into it. She is the authority figure in this community.

Writing of the novel, Chambers argues of the book that it is not allegorical and that it

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<sup>94</sup> Alan Sinfield. *On Sexuality and Power*.

“makes more sense, then to frame it instead as a non-allegorical or realist (but not psychologically realistic) representation of gay culture as itself allegorizing—pastiche-like and double voiced—in its practices. The novel is a narrative account of a gay community as it is constituted in and through its institutions of cultural reproduction, sited as they are (and so identified as gay) in *The Bar*. But these institutions are themselves, appropriations of general cultural institutions such as the family, education and the media.”<sup>95</sup> (183)

While this is one way to read the text, I take issue with this reading. I argue that Bartlett is not writing a realist text that is focused on gay culture itself as allegorizing heterosexual culture at all. Rather, it is an abstract and archetypal representation of the epic journey each gay man must undertake. While it may model family as having defined roles of Mother and Father and Child, this novel is not a pastiche of these roles, but an exploration of the codes they embody. This is a narrative rooted in the abstract and archetypal constant history and constant culture of gay men. It is outside of history, and outside of culture, while also being exactly of its moment and a specific culture. For Bartlett, this is a history and culture that always exists, but exists in an abstract time and place that is always happening. Chambers continues, arguing that the culture in the book is “Not ‘gay culture’ but the gay men’s subculture of a specific time and place – modern London – with its particular history and its characteristic assumptions and practices is Bartlett’s subject matter” (187). Again, I must respectfully disagree. Bartlett’s novel does not take place in a specific time and place, but in an every time and not in modern London as we know it, but in a “London,” but more specifically, in a Bar that exists as a world in and of itself in a different time and place.

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<sup>95</sup> Chambers, Ross. “Poaching and Pastiche: Reproducing the Gay Subculture.” *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 21.1-2 (1994): 169-192. Print.

## There's No Place like The Bar: The Bar as Queer Home

The Bar in *Ready to Catch Him Should He Fall* represents a sacred and separate place in which gay men are protected from the hostilities of the outside world, and a place where they can receive their education and apprenticeship into gay male life. Alan Sinfield's interview with Bartlett, "'The Moment of Submission': Neil Bartlett in Conversation," provides Bartlett's perspective on this space: "Almost all the things that are now traditionally gay are very important for that fact alone, and they represent gay space. They are a cultural space which we alone can inhabit" (218).<sup>96</sup> The Bar in the novel is just such a place. I argue that the Bar exists in a realm outside of the real world and outside of linear time. Judith Halberstam's work, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, provides a foundation upon which to base this argument. Halberstam argues,

"Queer time" is a term for those specific models of temporality that emerge within postmodernism once one leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance. "Queer space" refers to the place-making practices within postmodernism in which queer people engage and it also describes new understandings of space enabled by the production of queer counterpublics.<sup>97</sup> (6)

Bartlett's Bar exists in just such a place. While it is a place with inheritance, young gay men inherit their culture, and while "family" exists to a degree, it exists in a uniquely queer way. Reproduction does not happen as much as history repeats itself on a constant loop. To argue that the Bar represents queer space seems almost

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<sup>96</sup> Alan Sinfield. "'The Moment of Submission': Neil Bartlett in Conversation." *Modern Drama* 39.1 (1996): 211-21.

<sup>97</sup> Judith Halberstam. *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. New York: New York UP, 2005.

redundant. But it does bear examination in that it is a place that appears to have always existed without beginning or end, and is always positioned as a product of queer counterpublics.<sup>98</sup>

It is also a marked place. “Over the doorway was a small plaque. It said, *In this house* (and the ceramic of the plaque had broken and the name was missing) *stayed on his first visit to the city, and it was here that he wrote the opening pages of his greatest work*” (21). Here Bartlett invokes the third narrative in the three coming out stories he writes about in *Who Was That Man?* Only here, the name of the icon is missing entirely. This is appropriate as Boy enters the Bar for the first time, as he would not recognize the name anyway. His education has not even begun. The answer will only be found in the collective historical memory of the place and the people in it. It will be a process of rescue and recovery for Boy and all Boys who enter. Further, The Bar has no name. Or rather, it never has a stable name. “There was no name painted up over the door. We just left it blank most of the time, because The Bar was always changing its name” (21). Just like Bartlett discusses in *Who Was That Man?* with the ever changing names of Wilde and of the names of iconic archetypal gay male figures, the name of the Bar is never stable, because the community it represents is always in a state of change and growth. It is a community always in the act of discovery. Schoene-Harwood argues that

The Bar is where the community lives. As indicated by its name, it represents not only a place, but also a boundary at once debarring and

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<sup>98</sup> Nancy Fraser. "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text* Durham: Duke UP 25/26 (1990): 56–80. Print. Fraser posits that since minority groups are excluded from the public sphere, they form their own counter public spheres.

sheltering the men from the world outside. Its designation oscillates between that of a marginalized real-life location and that of a totally fictitious, impossible place, an 'ou-topia', characterizing it simultaneously as a self-contained communal closet and a seminal revolutionary cell.<sup>99</sup> (176)

Schoene-Harwood is correct here, the Bar is an ou-topia, an impossible place, but it is also a magical place, a true utopia. Yet, he also views the bar and the novel as an initiation into the political counterdiscourse of camp. "Bartlett's novel must in itself be understood as a camp artifact" (178). While I will agree that the Bar is somewhat of a camp artifact, or a place in which camp artifacts are produced, I am not entirely sure that this applies to the novel itself. Bartlett's novel is more of a metaphysical exploration than an artifact. David Halperin in his book, *How to be Gay*, writes of Bartlett's working definition of camp in an interview about playwright Charles Ludlam, "This deliberate crossing of tragic and comic genres is rooted, as Neil Bartlett observed in the interview just quoted, in long-standing traditions of gay male culture, including drag performance, which has served to canonize, preserve, and renew those traditions" (143).<sup>100</sup> Halperin's definition of camp is that it is comprised of "alienated, ironic perspective on socially authorized (or 'serious') values that we have already observed" (201). What strikes me about Halperin's definition is that it provides space for Bartlett's definition, and his narrative project. Camp is a passing down of cultural cues, knowledges, and points-of-view from a gay male perspective. This falls in line with Bartlett's intergenerational passing on of history and identity.

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<sup>99</sup> Berthold Schoene-Harwood. *Writing Men: Literary Masculinities from Frankenstein to the New Man*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2000. Print.

<sup>100</sup> The cited interview is from Adrian Kiernander. "Theatre without the Stink of Art: An Interview with Neil Bartlett" *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 1.2 (1994): 221-236.

In Paul Burston's 2010 interview with Bartlett, the author muses on the established gay male subculture in London, and how gay men are almost hard-wired to locate it.

You say that. And in certain cities in Britain, you can lead a pretty civilized life as a gay man now. And yet what's the biggest development in gay London in the past five years? Vauxhall, where we have created an entire new nocturnal world and geography! It's almost as if we've created a new underworld. It's hard-wired into our culture as gay men, that we have an alternative map of the world in our heads. You drop any reasonably together gay man in any city in the world and I would give him 45 minutes to have worked out where is the corner that you stand on, or the doorway that you go through, or the bus station you loiter in. It's a very powerful part of our culture. And my version of that as an artist has been to show people the way. I think my job is to lead the unsuspecting reader up a dark alley and show them a good time.<sup>101</sup>

This is much more to the purpose of *Ready to Catch Him Should He Fall*: to demonstrate the ingrained aspect of gay male culture that educates on how to navigate the world as a gay man. It is essential in that this knowledge is always there, happening in a space that gay men know to hunt for and find out of instinct. The connection is constructed, but the space is always there. This is the education that O and Mother provide for Boy in the Bar. Unpacking the Bar and the "family" within it reveals the archetypal mythologies that have developed in gay male culture over the last one hundred plus years. Bartlett comments on this in the interview as well, noting, "I think every man has unpacked mythologies inside him, and I think we're all

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<sup>101</sup> Paul Burston. "Neil Bartlett: I got you under my skin." *The Independent*. 11 March 2007. Web. 30 March 2010.

still grappling with the mysteries of our childhood, and with the mysteries of desire...”<sup>102</sup>

### **The Importance of Gay Education: The Role of Cultural Mentorship**

The education Boy gets at the Bar is an education he can use to navigate gay life in general. Referring to icons and historical figures on the wall, Bartlett argues that “You’ll never know what kind of man he was, or is, if he remains a picture on the wall, an icon. Apply to these men, to the attractions of history, the same practical methods that you would use in a variously populated bar. Admit your interest, your position, your hunger. Look at them carefully... history, too, is crowded” (225). The icon can be too far away to fully grasp and understand. He can be too distant to touch, but if one opens oneself up to the desire and hunger for it, that knowledge too can be transferred. The icon can become the father and the lover, just as Wilde does for Bartlett. Schoene-Harwood argues that the education Boy receives “presents itself as a kind of subcultural talking and reading cure that transforms what is in reality a tale of systemic confinement and oppression into a counterdiscursive fantasy of liberation” (175), continuing with, “Clearly, the story of Boy’s successful maturation is intended to fulfill the speaker and his audience’s long-cherished dream of gay communal emancipation” (175). Except that it is not really about emancipation from, but more about emancipation from within. Boy’s maturation is not about leaving, but rather arriving. It is also interesting that drag queens, or rather one particular drag queen is the chief educator for boy regarding gay culture. Bartlett once wrote in his

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<sup>102</sup> Paul Burston. “Neil Bartlett: I got you under my skin.” *The Independent*. 11 March 2007. Web. 30 March 2010.

“Preface” to *A Vision of Love Revealed in Sleep*, that drag queens are “a choric voice of the unacceptable face of gay history.”<sup>103</sup> They are, for Bartlett the elders who have full knowledge of the history, the good, the bad, and the unspeakable. It is no mistake then that Madame holds court over the Bar.

**Building New Families: Intergenerational Romance,  
or a More Perfect Gay Union**

While Madame may be the mother figure in the novel, she is not alone in performing the role of a “family” member. This adapting and changing of role names and identities is fairly typical from Bartlett’s perspective.

Forced to deny the real meanings of some words, we invest others with senses that the other world would rather keep them pure of. Our revenge on the myth that we are without family, that we lead lives of thoughtless promiscuity, is to redistribute the conventional endearments of family, love and marriage with gay abandon: on our lips, *dear, darling, sister, daddy, boy, baby, mother, girl* are all free to fly from friend to lover to colleague to stranger. (*Who Was That Man?: A present for Mr Oscar Wilde* 85).

This is a crucial point in this argument, because for Bartlett, Boy’s real education comes at the hand of O, or Older Man, or the Father figure in the novel. O and Boy develop a strikingly powerful relationship based in mutual attraction, but it is not just a sexual attraction. O takes his role as Father seriously, just as seriously as Boy takes his role as Son. In one of Bartlett’s diary entries, dated January 1985, he writes that “Each of us takes on the ridiculous task of being historically original each time he begins a love affair. Each love affair begins with the certain knowledge that there has

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<sup>103</sup> “A Vision of Love Revealed in Sleep.” *Gay Plays: Four*. Ed. Michael Wilcox. London: Methuen Drama. 1990. Print.

never been anything like this before” (*Who Was That Man?: A Present for Mr Oscar Wilde* 196). It is never a new love affair though. It is always a repetition of a relationship that has occurred for ages. Bartlett argues this in *Ready to Catch Him Should He Fall* in the “marriage” bed scene. When O and Boy consummate their “marriage,” they do not notice that a crowd of men has begun to surround them. These men are ancestors come to witness the continuation of the intergenerational passing of knowledge and identity.

Had O or Boy looked up, they would have seen that some faces appeared in the crowd several times. Each time the face appeared, it appeared with a different body (a different physique or the same physique at a different age), the nakedness of the limbs set off by the hairstyles and accessories of different centuries – a seventeenth-century betrothal ring in which two chased silver hands clasped a chipped and crowned garnet heart; a badly-hennaed auburn wig, burnt by the curling tongs; a regulation moustache clipped by a Forces barber. (216)

The men surrounding the couple are all of different ages, and different centuries. They are also randomly copulating while they witness the joining of O and Boy. Their coupling is indiscriminate and disregards time. They are always there. There is always the Boy, and always O. They both serve as mirror selves for the gay male reader. Who he sees himself as depends on where he is in his journey. The narrator reads Boy and O as “our mascots, our perfect pair, the sign of all our hopes” (127). They are our hopes, but they have always been our hopes. Gay male subculture relies on intergenerational love and education as the only way to pass down the history, to educate the younger man into the life, to help protect him from the dangers, and encourage his growth into becoming O himself. Catherine Stimpson argues that “O, Mother, and Boy also form a primal family, in which Mother is at once sweetly

maternal, a phallic mother, and a goddess” (19).<sup>104</sup> She too is serving as an intergenerational mother/lover figure that educates Boy.

Neil Bartlett has taken on the arduous and epic task of deconstructing methods of gay male cultural knowledge transmission, and in doing so, he has examined his own coming out process, his journey into the world of knowledge that is his communal cultural history, and his discovery of the true role that the icon plays in the life of a gay man. This is not small feat. Furthermore, he has taken the lesson learned in his own search for self and communal history and developed an alternate narrative that exists outside of a fixed time and space to show that the gay man’s journey toward self, community, and history has always been underway and will always be just beginning.

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<sup>104</sup> Catherine R. Stimpson. “Who’s Transgressing Now? Some Comments on Gay and Lesbian Literature.” *Authority and Transgression in Literature and Film*. Ed. Bonnie Braendlin and Hans Braendlin. Gainesville: UP of Florida, 1996. 12-22.

## Chapter 5: Impersonation as Retrospection: Sarah Waters and the Lesbian Remolding of the Victorian Novel

A key text in the late-twentieth century popularization of the neo-Victorian novel, Sarah Waters' *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) subverts the established and best-selling genre of historical fiction. Using the tropes and conventions of Victorian novels to tell lesbian stories, Waters' fiction is not merely the recovery-based literary response that most criticism seems to recognize. It does not simply place lesbians in the past; rather Waters' fiction creates alternative historical narratives, much like Neil Bartlett, in an effort to explore contemporary lesbian issues of locating community, making historical connections, and discovering individual identities. This does not diminish Waters' contribution to cultural affirmation of past lesbian identities. In her three Neo-Victorian novels, *Tipping the Velvet*, *Affinity* (1999), and *Fingersmith* (2002), Waters places lesbians at the center of narratives that contemporary audiences would readily recognize but develops them in an environment, genre, and time where they could not be as explicit in their expressions of sexuality or as bold in their open creation of community. Waters reinserts lesbian characters, bodies, and voices back into history and back into a period of fiction in which openly "lesbian" characters were either hidden, erased, or silenced. Yet, with *Tipping the Velvet*, Waters is not only working to recover lesbian characters from Victorian erasure, she is also working to cultivate an urban lesbian cultural history that exists alongside urban gay male cultural history instead of continuing to relegate lesbian historical narratives to rural settings, chaste romantic friendships, and a distinct lack of a cultural identity outside of Sappho.

Criticism of Waters' work tends to focus on the literary and historical recovery aspects of her writing. Positioning her in a tradition of a recuperative feminist literary project alongside Jean Rhys, Angela Carter, and A.S. Byatt coupled with the critical work of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, contemporary critics of Waters are right to privilege this foundational aspect of her work. Waters does indeed give voice to female characters long silenced. However, this vein of criticism limits a more complex understanding of what Waters achieves in her Neo-Victorian novels, as does criticism that reduces her work solely to lesbian recovery, historical accuracy, and questions of narrative purity. Waters does not limit her novel to any one of these tasks; rather, in *Tipping the Velvet*, she blends generic and narrative conventions and collapses cultural and historical timelines to explore lesbian identity creation, question sex and gender privilege, and create a link to the past, a past in which contemporary lesbians can see a relevant reflection.

Waters engages with Victorian English history through a contemporary lesbian point-of-view. In doing so, she uses anachronism coupled with historical facts to explore contemporary issues, but she does not do so with an overstated political agenda. In "In-yer-Victorian Face: A Subcultural Hermeneutics of Neo-Victorianism," Eckart Voights-Virchow argues that

Waters does not provide a contemporary twenty-first-century consciousness as a frame or distancing device. There is no authorial and authoritative voice in the text ... and neither is there a contemporary frame narrative (as in *Possession*). Toning down the metahistoriography in her novel, Waters instead provides a transparent liberation scenario that is more pronounced.... Her strategy is to project a queering of

Victorianism, not to estrange the reader from Victorianism by highlighting an alien narratee.<sup>105</sup> (119-20)

Technically, Voights-Virchow is accurate in his argument. Waters does not employ an obvious contemporary framing device, nor does she create an alien narratee. Yet this is also somewhat misleading, and perhaps this speaks to Waters' blending of education and craft. Earning her Ph.D. in English from the University of London and writing her dissertation on gay and lesbian historical fiction gives Waters a unique position from which to craft her own lesbian historical novel. She is well-versed in historical fiction and Victorian novels to be able to stylistically stay true to the period of which she writes. However, she does bring in a contemporary twentieth-century consciousness, one fully aware of lesbian and gay cultural histories, how they interact with social and political histories, and where to find the Victorian roots of these interactions, all while commenting on the present. Considering how complex the layers of historiography are in *Tipping the Velvet*, and how those layers connect with contemporary lesbian and gay male cultural histories, it would be more accurate to say that Waters relies on metahistoriography in her novel. Moreover, it is oversimplification to suggest that *Tipping the Velvet* can be reduced to a "transparent liberation scenario" that serves the project of queering Victorianism. More accurate would be Mark Llewellyn's claim that "Problematizing its own 'historical' nature, Waters' novel is neither strictly about the past nor the present but a hybrid vision of

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<sup>105</sup> Eckart Voights-Virchow. "In-yer-Victorian Face: A Subcultural Hermeneutics of Neo-Victorianism." *Literature Interpretation Theory* 20 (2009): 108-25.

their inseparability” (204).<sup>106</sup> Here he is writing on Waters’ novel *Affinity*, but the argument holds true with *Tipping the Velvet*. The novel readily blends subgenres of Victorian fiction, including sensation, realism, and picaresque with subgenres of contemporary fiction, including historical, coming out narratives, and *bildungsroman*. While the setting is firmly in the late 1800s, issues of defining a modern lesbian identity are at the forefront. Further, rather than “queering Victorianism” in a grand sense, Waters is more specifically writing lesbian historical fiction in a way that ties together the past to the lesbian present.

Mariaconcetta Costantini agrees with the argument that Waters’ work is a historical hybrid text. In her essay, “‘Faux-Victorian Melodrama’ in the New Millennium: The Case of Sarah Waters,” she writes,

Waters's reconstruction of the past betrays her awareness that both history and fiction consist of plural representations, none of which is objectively, undeniably true. It is only by merging them together that we get a better sense of the 'reality' of past ages and, in so doing, detect affinities with the present, which help us rethink our role and identity.<sup>107</sup> (19)

The lesbian recovery project in Waters’ novel is only possible, therefore, by merging multiple representations and forms. And while a reality of lesbian Victorian life emerges from this narrative melding, it is a reality that finds its methodology in later twentieth century understandings of constructed identity and performative gender and sexuality. Costantini goes on to elaborate the deftness with which Waters

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<sup>106</sup> Mark Llewellyn. “‘Queer? I Should Say It Is Criminal!’: Sarah Waters’ *Affinity*.” *Journal of Gender Studies* 13.3 (2004): 203-14.

<sup>107</sup> Mariaconcetta Costantini. “‘Faux-Victorian Melodrama’ in the New Millennium: The Case of Sarah Waters.” *Critical Survey* 18.1 (2006): 17-39.

accomplishes this daunting task, citing the roots of her work in her deep knowledge of Victorian fiction and contemporary historical fiction:

By using her scholarly knowledge to increase the “realism” of her settings, Waters shows her intention to restore and give meaning to the world of her ancestors. This intention is confirmed by her refusal to indulge in historicistic games. Instead of inserting diachrony into synchrony, she offers a well-documented portrait of Victorian life, which, though fictionalized, preserves its distinctive marks. The aim she pursues, in so doing, is to trace a genealogy, to bring back to life the secret yearnings and the anxieties that plagued the Victorians' minds and, in different ways, still haunt our existence in the new millennium. In particular, she uses her inventiveness to unearth the silenced histories of the marginalized, to arrange together the ransacked historical records of their existence, and to fill in the many gaps by imagining missing details, events and emotions. The 'invisible' lives of women, lesbians, criminals and destitute people are thus given a central role in the process of text-making: their fictional narratives add more pieces to the historical jigsaw provided by nineteenth-century documents and literature, in which most information on the 'other Victorians' was conveyed in the form of fragments, allusions or non-authoritative statements. (20)

Waters does not have a vested interest in presenting an authentic lived Victorian reality; rather, she is interested in reformulating Victorian fiction to host a fantasy. Most crucial in understanding Waters' project with *Tipping the Velvet* is the ability and desire to make the invisible visible. By placing lesbians at the center of her neo-Victorian novel, Waters does provide them with a voice and role in text-making that they preciously lacked and fleshes out the fragments and clippings that only hint or suggest at a vital lesbian subculture in London of the 1880s. On this point, Waters' critics seem to agree. Again, however, they neglect to address one of the central themes in the novel, namely that not only do lesbians exist in the late Victorian period, but they also begin to form a distinct urban cultural identity previously only attributed to gay men. This urban lesbian cultural identity, the one Waters creates in

her historical fiction, is important because it more accurately reflects her contemporary lesbian audience and their cultural concerns. As this novel was written during the height of 1990s “Lesbian Chic,” it reflects a cultural fascination with lesbian subcultures. In *Tipping the Velvet*, Waters shows contemporary readers that the boys weren’t the only ones with a thriving urban subculture, nor were they the only ones having fun.

### **Impersonation of Form**

Where there is some critical agreement about the re-centering of lesbians and lesbian culture in Victorian fiction, few seem to be able to agree on her formal methodology. And there is good reason for this disagreement. Waters does not employ a singular narrative form or subgenre of Victorian fiction or contemporary fiction; instead, *Tipping the Velvet* is a narrative hydra that only appears, at first glance, to be a “Victorian” novel. There has been a great deal of critical investment in parsing Waters’ “true” formal structure, yet there has been no agreement. For some critics, the novel is Victorian, neo-Victorian, sensational, picaresque,<sup>108</sup> realist, coming out, *bildungsroman*, low-brow, or high-brow. For others, it is a pastiche of Defoe, Dickens, or Collins. It is a lesbian novel, a transgender novel, and a novel of recovery. In truth, it is all of these. To force *Tipping the Velvet* into one or two of these literary forms is to miss the postmodern deftness with which Waters comments

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<sup>108</sup> Stefania Ciocia “‘Journeying against the current’: a carnivalesque theatrical apprenticeship in Sarah Waters’s *Tipping the Velvet*.”

“Yet *Tipping the Velvet* is also heavily indebted to the tradition of the picaresque, a subversive genre where ultimately the ‘third person’ status of the protagonist exposes the contradictions and hypocrisy of his/her culture” (1).

on the creation of lesbian urban subculture through a rich, multi-layered mixing and impersonation of formal conventions.

Part of this impersonation of forms is inherent in the neo-Victorian sub-genre.

Voights-Virchow argues that through this generic impersonation,

contemporary readers encounter in the neo-Victorian novel not only the Victorians, but also their own culture. The aim of cultural hermeneutics is to arrive at an understanding as a result of historical processes by analyzing historical narratives, both fictional and non-fictional. Hermeneutics is an ideal tool to apply to the neo-Victorian novel because it constructs this process of talking to the past as a necessarily active and productive rewriting. (108)

Thus by rewriting urban lesbian culture in a Victorian style and about a Victorian past, Waters is able to bridge queer cultural time and space, placing contemporary lesbian culture in conversation with the burgeoning lesbian culture of the late 1800s.

One of the more popular readings of the novel argues that *Tipping the Velvet* is a neo-Victorian sensation novel due to the many scandalous elements of the text.<sup>109</sup>

Waters' London of the 1880s and 90s is rife with cross-dressing, prostitution, sex-slaves, violent crime, and dildos. But scandal, in and of itself, is not the central foundation of the sensation novel. William A. Cohen argues in *Sex Scandal: The Private Parts of Victorian Fiction* that, "While sensation novels typically turn on scandals, they tend to be concerned more with vividly representing the commission of scandalous acts than with commenting upon them and their reception" (20).<sup>110</sup> And yet Waters does comment on these scandalous acts. Mid-way through the novel, Nan

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<sup>109</sup> Constantini and Ciocia both make a similar argument.

<sup>110</sup> William A. Cohen. *Sex Scandal: The Private Parts of Victorian Fiction*. Durham: Duke UP, 1996. Print.

King meets Diana Lethaby, a wealthy 38 year-old lesbian who says to Nan, “You should be what the sensational novels call *kept*” (*Tipping the Velvet* 249). Invoking sensation fiction as a central part of her seduction of Nan, Diana continues, relishing her own performed perversity: “Oh no, Miss King. I have no fear of sensation: on the contrary, I court it! I seek out sensation! And so do you.... You’re like me: you have shown it, you are showing it now! It is your own sex for which you really hunger!” (*Tipping the Velvet* 249). This proclamation of perversity is immediately followed by a vividly and sensationally depicted sex scene between the two women. Nan, naturally, finds freedom in finally celebrating and owning her sexual urges, and learns, through Diana’s tutorial, to “seek out sensation.” So Waters is writing a novel of sensation, but instead of simply representing scandalous acts, she is always already commenting on the sensational actions of her characters. Indeed, the very writing of these acts, through a contemporary awareness of lesbian sexuality and urban lesbian culture, in a neo-Victorian style, is so self-aware that it is like a sensation novel in a picaresque novel framed by a postmodern historical novel.<sup>111</sup> The layers of internal comment operating in Waters’ text are truly dizzying.

This internal commenting is reflective on Waters’ project in drawing historical and cultural connections between contemporary lesbian culture and lesbian identities

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<sup>111</sup> This is not so different from the work of female sensationalist writers from the nineteenth century. Elaine Showalter argues in *A Literature of Their Own* that “The sensationalists made crime and violence, domestic, modern, and suburban; but their secrets were not simply solutions to mysteries and crimes; they were the secrets of women’s dislike of their roles as daughters, wives, and mothers. These women novelists made a powerful appeal to the female audience by subverting the traditions of feminine fiction to suit their own imaginative impulses, by expressing a wide range of suppressed female emotions, and by tapping and satisfying fantasies of protest and escape” (158-9).

of the past. In order to make these connections, Waters' work argues that the connections themselves must be layered together and then dismantled to reveal the new fantasy "truth." In a 2011 interview with website *After Ellen*, Waters details her influences and hints at her reasoning behind layering them together.

There are books like *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* that had a huge impact on me when I was a teenager. But certainly, when I was a young lesbian, reading was a really big part of coming out, not the actual process, more just getting to know my community and what it means to be gay. I found it really exciting and there were a lot of independent gay and feminist press about then, like Pandora, Women's Press, Only women — most of which are sadly gone now. There was a lot of fiction around, most of it American, some of it brilliant, but a lot of it awful really, sort of romance pulp, but it was just important that it was there. It really made me feel part of something. I could never have written any of my books without that grounding in a sort of literature that was very relaxed about lesbianism, it gave me a confidence.<sup>112</sup>

The books that influenced her when she was a teenager trying to come out were iconic gothic Victorian romances, but they did nothing to help her connect with community or with cultural history. She finds more of that connection with American lesbian pulp fiction of the 1960s through 1980s. *Tipping the Velvet* represents, in many ways, the joining of these two literary and historical worlds. Stefania Ciocia argues in "'Queer and Verdant': The Textual Politics of Sarah Waters's Neo-Victorian Novels" that

*Tipping the Velvet* instead is harder to categorize within the frame of Victorian fiction: its most direct, recognized literary predecessor is, by public consensus, Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1722), to whose shenanigans *Tipping the Velvet* provides an equally mischievous queer counterpart. The two narratives share an interest for the demimonde of prostitution and petty criminality, as well as a rumbustious story-line and a subversive picaresque spirit: as in the case of *Moll Flanders*, the

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<sup>112</sup> "Great LezBritain: Sarah Waters talks inspiration, adaptations at World Book Night." *AfterEllen*. Viacom Media Networks, 28 March 2011. Web. 28 March 2013.

picaresque format of *Tipping the Velvet* underlies the protagonist's apparent moral and emotional progress in her 'sentimental education', seriously impairing the credibility of her final redemption. Thus, the Victorian *Bildungsroman* loses its edifying punch and becomes a provocative fictional crossbreed, much like the gothic and the sensation novel.<sup>113</sup> (6)

Ciocia's reading of *Tipping the Velvet* as a purposefully failed *bildungsroman* is fascinating and, ultimately, accurate. Nan King's "education" does not end with redemption in the same sense as Moll Flanders. But to argue this connection so directly is to miss the specifically urban lesbian fantasy that Waters is creating, one based in lesbian sisterhood and community. Through the lens of a contemporary lesbian historical fantasy in which urban lesbian culture is recovered from a period of silence and erasure, Waters' protagonist, Nan King, completes her education and is redeemed, not through sacrifice and penitence like Moll, but through successful creation of a lesbian identity set in a burgeoning urban lesbian culture. The novel is still part picaresque and still part *bildungsroman*, but it is pointedly rooted in contemporary notions of lesbian identities. Yet Ciocia's reading of Waters' invocation of Defoe is an important part of analyzing the novel's wealth of literary allusion. Costantini provides the most complete list of Waters' Victorian literary references:

the intertextual network she weaves is more intricate than it appears. In addition to Dickens and Collins, Waters incorporates explicit references to Christina Rossetti, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Alfred Tennyson, Mrs Henry (Ellen) Wood, Joseph Sheridan LeFanu, Thomas Hardy, Oscar Wilde, and other writers, including the less-known (often anonymous) authors of Victorian pornographic literature. Moreover, she creates a series of 'internymic' relations with

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<sup>113</sup> Stefania Ciocia. "'Queer and Verdant': the Textual Politics of Sarah Waters's Neo-Victorian Novels." *Literary London: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Representation of London* 5 (2007): 22 pars. 03 January 2010. Web.

nineteenth-century texts, and makes recourse to narrative strategies that evoke specific Victorian works and genres. (18)

With inclusions of Dickens, Collins, Wilde, and Victorian pornography, Waters' novel performs a kind of literary drag. More than just cementing her neo-Victorian style of writing, this literary drag serves to formally mirror the myriad forms of drag performance that serves as the novel's central vehicle for Nan King's urban lesbian journey. The cross-pollination of genres and time periods allows Waters to more fully connect the present to the past. The novel is, therefore, wholly wrapped up in performance. Nan performs as a male impersonator, a gay male prostitute, a lesbian "boy toy," a political New Woman, and finally, an iconic lesbian stage performer. The text performs as a Wilkie Collins sensation novel, an ode to Oscar Wilde, a lesbian *Teleny*, a queer *Moll Flanders*, a twentieth century lesbian pulp novel, and a Victorian coming out narrative. This multi-layered drag, or impersonation, is central to the neo-Victorian novel, according to Sarah Gamble. In her essay, "'You cannot impersonate what you are': Questions of Authenticity in the Neo-Victorian Novel," Gamble argues:

In a sense, the contemporary Victorian text embodies a double act of recollection—that is, the recollection of the historical past within a narrative framework that itself reconstitutes traces of a specifically literary past. What I wish to do is to align this doubled recollection with the "double drag" performance enacted by first-person neo-Victorian narratives that deliberately and overtly "queer" that moment of looking back by destabilizing the gendered identity of the two aspects of the narrating self.<sup>114</sup> (128)

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<sup>114</sup> Sarah Gamble. "'You cannot impersonate what you are': Questions of Authenticity in the Neo-Victorian Novel." *Literature Interpretation Theory* 20 (2009): 126-40. Print.

Thus citing specific nineteenth-century texts serves as a recollection of a pointed literary past, a past in which the neo-Victorian novel performs, in drag, as a Victorian text. But this is a distorted and perverse recollection, or retrospection, as the very texts that Waters so faithfully invokes, are representative of the silent spaces in cultural history and literary history that *Tipping the Velvet* rewrites, creating an authentic and a fantasy space in which an urban lesbian culture not only exists, but flourishes. This is arguably most true with Waters' references to Oscar Wilde, his works, his persona, his importance as a link in urban gay male cultural history, and his possible connection to a notoriously gay pornographic novel, itself crucial in "speaking" a gay male sexuality not attached to romantic friendship, but based in queer flesh and physical desire.

That people we now label queer existed in the nineteenth century has been argued and proven many times over. Still at stake, however, are the questions of how they lived, how they understood their sexual identities in relation to how contemporary LGBT people understand theirs. Understandably then, any time a contemporary notion of queer identity is written about in a past historical moment, charges of anachronism arise. Costantini tackles this question in Sarah Waters' work, arguing:

Although in some regards Waters's idea of queerness might appear anachronistic (i.e. the sexual orientation of her protagonists is sometimes given too pivotal a function in the construction of their identity), we should not overlook the relevance that non-heteronormative sexuality was acquiring in the Victorian age—as an object of both repression and rebellion. This historical relevance validates her reconstruction of a nineteenth-century tradition of deviance, in which contemporary issues of sexuality and gender have their foundations. (21-22)

While it is true that non-heteronormative sexualities were acquiring a relevance that would place this period as a foundation for contemporary ideas about sexuality and gender, it is still important to acknowledge that Waters' creation of lesbian sexuality in *Tipping the Velvet* is specifically rooted in contemporary constructions of the coming out narrative. Indeed, it is crucial to understanding the queer time and space<sup>115</sup> in which the novel functions, for it is through this retrospection that Waters arrives at an historic past moment in which she can create a fantasy historical urban lesbian culture that bridges the late-nineteenth and late-twentieth centuries. Using a coming out narrative, Waters starts the protagonist's journey toward discovering, and at moments creating, an urban lesbian identity. In the opening chapters of *Tipping the Velvet*, Nan—or Nancy, at this point—is a relative innocent. She has no knowledge of queer culture, no idea that she might be a lesbian. It is not until a traveling show comes to town, and with it Kitty Butler performing in male drag, that Nancy becomes aware of an alternative to her compulsory heterosexual seaside existence. After seeing Kitty Butler perform, Nancy tells her sister Alice, “‘I never saw a girl like her before. I never knew that there were girls like her...’ My voice became a trembling whisper then, and I found that I could say no more.... I had said too much” (20). In

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<sup>115</sup> M.L. Kohlke argues, in “Into History through the Back Door: The ‘Past Historic’ in *Nights at the Circus* and *Affinity*,” historical fiction's relationship with contemporary identity politics disturbs objective historical knowledges: “Historical fiction reverses these power politics of self-representation. As the temporal malleability of myth intersects with a specific juncture of ‘real’ time in a community's past, ‘not quite real’ characters and contexts vie with actual historical persons and events for prominence, disturbing the presumed objective bases of historical knowledge” (153-54).

See also, Judith Halberstam's *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. New York: New York UP, 2005.

the very instant that she first speaks of her hidden desire, albeit still in innocently coded language, she is aware that speaking her desire for another woman is too much. This innocent realization of difference, even before knowing that the difference is considered taboo, is often the starting point of late-twentieth century coming out narratives. Her desire is, like the majority of twentieth-century lesbian historical fiction, is set in a rural setting, and is focused on the emotional rather than the physical. In this way, Nancy is representing, in Waters' project, a lesbian cultural trajectory that is drawn toward the urban. Kitty, performing as a London "swell" with, what Nancy imagines, a wealth of knowledge, makes for a very seductive figure. Later, after Nancy moves to London with Kitty to become Kitty's dresser, she writes to her sister Alice and "comes out" to her. Alice rejects her sister. Labeling Nancy's love as "wrong and queer" (134), Alice silences Nancy's voice in the family, saying that she will not tell their parents, and that Nancy should keep her secrets secret. And this cutting off from an open and honest relationship with family members is also a typical convention of the coming out narrative. Nancy muses of Alice, "She must have kept her word about not telling our parents, for their letters to me continued as before – still cautious, still rather fretful, but still kind. But now I got even less pleasure from them; only kept thinking, *What would they write, if they knew? How kind would they be then?* .... As for Alice: after that one brief, bitter epistle, she never wrote to me at all" (134). If, as Sarah Waters argues in her Ph.D. dissertation, *Wolfskins and Togas: Lesbian and Gay Historical Fictions, 1870 to the Present*, "an historical fiction tells us less about the past than about the circumstances of its own production – reveals, if nothing else, the historiographical priorities of its

author, or its author's culture" <sup>116</sup> (8), then what does Waters' own use of contemporary coming-out narrative conventions in a neo-Victorian "triple-decker" tell us about the historiographical priorities of Waters or of her contemporary queer culture?

### **Historical Fiction as Fantasy**

For Waters and Laura Doan, in their essay, "Making Up Lost Time: Contemporary Lesbian Writing and the Invention of History," the answer lies in the relationship between homosexuality and history itself. They write that "For as long as 'homosexuality' has been available for meaningful deployment, commentators have traced its history, identifying traditions of same-sex love for purposes of diagnosis, censure, celebration, defense or apology. In a sense, retrospection is a condition of homosexual agency" (13).<sup>117</sup> In order for queer people to secure agency, therefore, Doan and Waters suggest that retrospection is a crucial tool. One of the problems, however, seems to be that not all historical retrospection has been created equally. For while

the interests of lesbians and gay men have often coincided in their quest for historical precedent, history itself has appeared to offer them an unequal balance of resources for the fulfillment of such a project.... The suppression or absence of lesbian activity from the historical record, on the other hand, has limited the constituency across which a lesbian

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<sup>116</sup> Sarah Ann Waters, Sarah Ann. "Wolfskins and Togas: Lesbian and Gay Historical Fictions, 1870 to the Present."

<sup>117</sup> Laura Doan and Sarah Waters. "Making Up Lost Time: Contemporary Lesbian Writing and the Invention of History." *Territories of Desire in Queer Culture: Refiguring Contemporary Boundaries*. Ed. David Alderson and Linda Anderson. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2000. 12-28.

genealogy might be traced, and made it difficult for women to imagine themselves as participants in an unbroken tradition of same-sex love. (Doan and Waters 12-13)

Thus while gay men have created a rich cultural historical lineage, they have done so through an unequal and privileged representation—<sup>118</sup>granted this is not always a positive representation—in the historical record. Lesbian culture, due to a constant historical and cultural silencing and erasure, has not had the opportunity to craft such an unbroken lineage. Thus, “the motivating impulse behind much lesbian historical fiction is not historicism as much as nostalgia” (Doan and Waters 19). Waters and Doan argue that while this nostalgia creates space for exploration and cultural recovery, it does so at the expense of history rather than in development of history. This results in lesbian narratives that rely too heavily on contemporary conventions of lesbian cultural artifact, like the coming out story: “The narratives apparently ‘recovered’ by the genre, therefore, resemble nothing so much as the modern lesbian coming out stories.... Such narratives imbue the past with lesbian meaning, even as they seem to extract meaning from it” (19). It is interesting that Waters and Doan appear to argue against a historical fiction based in lesbian recovery that results in modern coming out stories, for Waters, herself, does include conventions of modern coming out narratives in *Tipping the Velvet*. But Waters and Doan do not argue against the inclusion of such narratives, only against lesbian historical fiction that reduces the historical creation of a lesbian cultural lineage to merely a coming out

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<sup>118</sup> Sarah Waters discusses this in great detail in *Wolfskins and Togas: Lesbian and Gay Historical Fictions, 1870 to the Present* arguing that there is a “gulf between lesbians’ and gay men’s historical *mythologies*” (243).

story. Indeed, they argue for a more complex engagement with history, genre, and narrative:

It is only, perhaps, in such testings of the genre—even, in the jettisoning of generic structures altogether—that we find a sophisticated treatment of lesbian historiographical issues and contradictions, one that problematizes the very categories with which sex and gender are constructed. In the end, the relevance of historical fiction for ‘lesbian life in the late twentieth century’ may lie most fully in its capacity for illuminating queer identities and acts against which modern lesbian narratives have defined themselves and which they perhaps continue to occlude. (25)

Waters does just this in *Tipping the Velvet*. She problematizes modern lesbian narratives, and the histories, literary and cultural, against which modern lesbian culture defines itself. As such, she identifies with the project of lesbian historians in addition to that of lesbian historical fiction writer. According to Waters, these two projects have been too often at odds, and by combining the perspectives of the two camps, a writer might be able to recover a lesbian cultural lineage. She writes, “Lesbian historians have presented themselves as safeguarding a past that is unproblematically *theirs*—a lesbian past that does not just *prefigure* modern lesbianism, but which would have been modern lesbianism had it had the chance” (*Wolfskins and Togas* 260). This, for Waters, is not enough. She agrees with lesbian historians while finding this essentialized stance to be unproductive. Further, she argues that lesbian historical fiction is forced to do more. Not only does lesbian fiction have to battle against historical erasure in which modern lesbian culture might have flourished, but it also must rescue itself from the domination of gay male fiction’s cultural dominance which it owes to the privilege of being part of male history. She writes, “While gay men’s novels tend towards a recuperation of

homosocial and homosexual icons and cultures, lesbians have continued to devote themselves to rescuing their isolated ancestors from the interstices of male history itself” (*Wolfskins and Togas* 244). She further states that her aim is

to remedy the long-standing neglect of contemporary lesbian and gay historical fiction, by looking to the genre not, as critics have tended to look, for historical *accuracy*, but in an exploration of its status and meanings as, precisely, historical *fantasy*.... suggesting that historical fiction might be most fruitfully read as a register of the homosexual-self-image, an index to the myths of origin with which gay communities represent and explain themselves. (*Wolfskins and Togas* 242-43)

Lesbian self-image had radically changed by the late 1990s. k.d. lang had already appeared on the cover of *Vanity Fair* being “shaved” by Cindy Crawford (August 1993), and Ellen Degeneres had already come out on her network sit-com, *Ellen* (March 1997). *Tipping the Velvet*, then, works to create a lesbian fantasy of the past that reflects the contemporary cultural moment celebrating lesbian culture. While this is the central aim of her dissertation, Waters’ fiction puts this aim into narrative practice as well. Her stated purpose is not to privilege accuracy but to use fantasy of history as the chief vehicle by which lesbian culture can modify and create its own origin mythology. Before she begins to write her own fiction, and excluding Jeanette Winterson’s work, *Sexing the Cherry* (1989), *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985), and *Written on the Body* (1992), which she reads as brilliantly realized postmodern lesbian historical fiction,<sup>119</sup> Waters reads the history of gay and lesbian historical fictions as, by necessity, moving in opposite directions. She observes, “If gay male writers have imagined their history as an unbroken chain of retrospective homosexual

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<sup>119</sup> She argues this with Laura Doan in their essay, “Making Up Lost Time: Contemporary Lesbian Writing and the Invention of History.”

speculation, lesbian writers have recovered ancestors looking *forwards*, anticipating their own recuperation” (*Wolfskins and Togas* 258). The primary text she uses to personify the tradition of lesbian historical fiction, and the text that provides the clearest roadmap for the future of the genre, is Isabel Miller’s (née Alma Routsong) *Patience and Sarah*, originally titled *A Place For Us* (1969). “Miller’s novel suggests a whole new way of visualizing history, asserts that lesbians must, and can, reconstruct or intuit their own history from (in traditional historiographic terms) the most insignificant evidence” (*Wolfskins and Togas* 257). And while Waters finds great inspiration in Miller’s novel, especially in regard to methodology—reconstructing history from insignificant evidence—*Patience and Sarah* remains much like the majority of lesbian historical fiction in that it maintains a rural setting in which lesbian culture is reduced to two women, isolated, and largely non-sexual.

If Waters challenges nothing else in *Tipping the Velvet*, she directly confronts the previous literary notion that lesbians of the distant past only exist in rural isolation. Working from her thesis that lesbian and gay historical fiction might be best read as a manifestation of homosexual-self-image and index of queer origin myths, it is no surprise that the novel’s protagonist spends so much time in male—and gay male—drag, for, according to Waters’ own research, an urban lesbian cultural lineage exists only in silence, erasure, and historical fragments. Why not, therefore, search for an entry into late-Victorian urban lesbian culture through late-Victorian urban gay male culture, which already has an icon who ties literary, cultural, and political past with the present—Oscar Wilde? Waters invokes Wilde, his writing, his characters, his scandals, and his place in gay male culture as the

pivotal link drawing together the ancient Greeks, Shakespeare, and late-twentieth century urban gay male culture many times throughout the novel. In the late-Victorian world of *Tipping the Velvet*, he is not only an icon for gay men, but for lesbians as well.<sup>120</sup> Alongside Sappho, he is the queer figure most often cited by the burgeoning lesbian subculture, to which Diana introduces Nan. It all starts with a haircut and a pair of trousers. After arriving in London and having her heart broken by Kitty, Nan strikes out to live her life on her own terms. In doing so, she quickly discovers the personal and cultural freedoms that come with a male persona. Nan has already performed in male drag on the stage, and it could be argued that the streets of London are merely extensions of the music hall stages, and that Nan simply extends her performance to the daytime and the streets.<sup>121</sup> Nan does perform a male, and at times, a gay male identity in the streets of London. Dressing as a boy opens world to Nan that presents a pathway toward her discovering a uniquely lesbian identity.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> “Like the gay historical novel, the genre traces a lesbian history that is basically romantic, a history of *couples*. But where the ‘lost diaries’ of gay men’s fiction lead us into homosexual coteries and subcultures – a favourite setting is the *fin de siècle*, a favourite icon, Oscar Wilde – lesbian authors offer us non-urban, early nineteenth century heroines who must, like Patience and Sarah, make their own, difficult way into long-term romance, without precedent, and against social and familial expectation” (Waters, *Wolfskins and Togas*, 263).

<sup>121</sup> Waters, through Nan, acknowledges this: “It might seem a curious kind of leap to make, from music-mall masher to renter. In fact, the world of actors and artistes and the gay world in which I now find myself working, are not so very different” (*Tipping the Velvet* 203).

<sup>122</sup> Katie Hindmarch-Watson’s essay, “Lois Schwich The female Errand Boy: Narratives of Female Cross-Dressing in Late Victorian London,” provides an in depth analysis of transgressive female cross-dressing in London during the same period that Nan dons male drag in *Tipping the Velvet*. “On November 13, 1886, twenty-one-year-old Lois Schwich was sentenced to eight months’ hard labor for stealing high-end clothing worth £50 – £60 from her former

Nan tells the reader, “The truth was this: that whatever successes I might achieve as a girl, they would be nothing compared to the triumphs I should enjoy clad, however girlishly, as a boy. I had, in short, found my vocation” (123). Furthermore, she is hardly on the streets in her “boy” persona before she finds her way into the world of gay male prostitution before a closeted gay man in search for a little “affection” propositions her. Nan tells us of the man, “He said, ‘A sovereign, for a suck or for a Robert’—he meant, of course, a Robert Browning. ‘Half a guinea for a dubbing.’” (198). Nan takes his offer, and not because she needs the money, although later she does work as a gay male prostitute for the money. Indeed, what draws her into this world is curiosity and identification. She is not attracted to men at all. She has been in love only once, and that was with Kitty, who breaks her heart by leaving her to marry their manager, Walter. Nan knows what love that must be kept secret feels like. She confides in the reader:

But he was not like Walter, who might take his pleasure where he chose it. His pleasure had turned, at the last, to a kind of grief; and his love was a love so fierce and so secret it must be satisfied, with a stranger, in a reeking court like this. I knew about that kind of love. I knew how it was to bare your palpitating heart, and be fearful as you did so that the beats should come too loudly, and betray you. (200)

Having first adopted a drag persona for the freedom it offered an independent woman who wished to explore the city, Nan actually discovers a hidden queer underworld

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employers. More troubling for the judge and the London newspapers, however, was that she had passed herself off as a fifteen-year-old boy while doing so and, even more shocking, had smoked and gone out drinking with male friends. That Schwich was on trial as much for her gender transgressions as for theft is hardly news to those who have studied passing women in European history. The newspaper coverage of her trial demonstrates the extent to which Schwich’s passing masculinity disturbed, intrigued, and tickled the reading public, and different groups fought over the meanings they wished to attribute to Schwich and her criminal behavior.” (69)

with which she identifies. Indeed, these men are the first queer people she meets—Kitty emphatically not identifying as queer or lesbian. Nan muses: “I had first donned trousers to avoid men’s eyes; to feel myself the object of *these* men’s gazes, however, these men who thought I was like them, *like that*—well, that was not to be pestered; it was to be, in some queer way, *revenged*” (201). So not only does she identify with these men, but the act of identification and being openly desired feels like revenge, revenge against Walter and Kitty and revenge against her sister, Alice.

Ironically, Nan meets a new “sister,” also called Alice, only this big sister is a mary-anne, an effeminate gay male renter seeking to be kept by men of means. “He was a very girlish type—what they call a true mary-anne—and, like many of them, he gave himself a girl’s name: Alice” (203). This Alice, instead of rejecting Nan and making her feel ashamed, takes her under his wing and educates her in the ways of the trade and the language of the urban gay male subculture. It is as a male renter that Nan finds the freedom to explore cultural and sexual identities. Also worth noting, as Nan only has non-penetrative sex with these men, she gets to perform as a gay man, but maintain her lesbian identity as well. The sex is never heterosexual; it is always queer. When having sex with men, she is having gay male sex. Nan discusses her renter persona:

My own renter persona was, of necessity, a rather curious mixture of types. Never a very virile boy, I held no appeal for the kind of gentleman who liked a rough hand through the slit of his drawers, or a bit of a slap in the shadows; equally, however, I could never afford to let myself be seen as one of those lily-white lads whom the working-men go for, and make rather free with. Then again, I was choosy. There were many fellows with curious appetites in the streets around Leicester Square; but not all of them were the sort I was after. (205)

Nan has yet to truly discover a lesbian space or culture. She is, however, reimagining and re-crafting her identity as a woman. The lesbian culture she has discovered is one of performance and secrecy. It, through the eyes of Kitty, is only something to play with behind closed doors. It is still a fantasy for her, and one she has yet to see materialize outside of her own mind and heart. After she is kicked out of her first independent lodging because Mrs. Best, her landlady, thought she was having men in her room, a misunderstanding rooted in Mrs. Best seeing Nan in male drag, Nan goes looking for a new place. She discovers just such a room when she sees a sign reading: “*Respectible Lady Seeks Fe-male Lodger....* The *Respectible* was off-putting: I couldn’t face another Mrs. Best. But there was something very appealing about that *Fe-Male*. I saw myself in it—in the hyphen” (211). Seeing herself in the hyphen positions Nan between the female and the male, both identities she is actively exploring and creating for herself. And yet it also goes further than that. Marilyn R. Farwell, in her book, *Heterosexual Plots and Lesbian Narratives*, argues, “The lesbian subject refuses and repositions the constricted narrative stance of woman, creating what I call a lesbian narrative space” (23).<sup>123</sup> The identity as hyphen that Nan is so drawn to is really indicative of Waters’ own repositioning and creation of a lesbian narrative space. An authentic lesbian narrative space does not exist in late-Victorian culture. It must be invented.

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<sup>123</sup> Marilyn R. Farwell. *Heterosexual Plots and Lesbian Narratives*. New York: New York UP, 1996.

### Fantasizing a Lesbian Subculture

While they did not enjoy the cultural notoriety that urban gay men held in the *fin-de-siècle*, urban lesbians did exist, and notoriously so in Paris. Further, lesbian literature existed as well. One need only look to Michael Field and Renée Vivien to find lesbian literary figures serving in much the same function in connecting lesbian culture of the late-nineteenth century with Sappho as Wilde does with the ancient Greeks. Indeed, as Waters notes in *Wolfskins and Togas*, “Vivien’s Lesbianism offered itself as the subversive underside of the homosexual Hellenism with which it was contemporaneous” (109). The Parisian lesbian literati serves for Waters as a historical fragment from which to build her historical fantasy, while recovering a vital urban lesbian culture. And while the erasure of such lesbian circles “made it difficult for women to imagine themselves as participants in an unbroken tradition of same-sex love” (Doan and Waters 12-13), by using Vivien for inspiration, Waters is able to create a world in which there is a lesbian alternative to homosexual Hellenism. It is a physical and sexual world rather than one built on intellectualism and romantic friendship. In fact, it has much more in common with the world of Boulton and Park, Cleveland Street, and Oscar’s rent boys than it does with Oxford and Cambridge.<sup>124</sup> Further, it is not anachronistic to use the word lesbian when discussing female same-sex relationships in this period. Emma Donoghue argues that terms Lesbian,

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<sup>124</sup> See William A. Cohen’s *Sex Scandal: The Private Parts of Victorian Fiction*. Durham: Duke UP, 1996, and Neil Bartlett’s *Who Was That Man? A Present for Mr Oscar Wilde*. London: Serpent’s Tail, 1988.

Sapphist, Tribade, and Tommy were all used to describe female same-sex love and sexuality before the 19<sup>th</sup> century (3-5).<sup>125</sup>

Nan King first encounters “toms” and other lesbians when she first performs in the music halls with Kitty. After she begins performing, a woman writes a fan letter to Nan in which she requests a signed picture that she will put by her bed: “I *would* like to have a picture of you beside my bed” (128-9). It is interesting that the first time Nan hears the word “tom” it is from Kitty, who uses it as a pejorative. Kitty, although she has sex with Nan, does not identify as a lesbian. In fact she is hostile toward lesbianism as identity even though she is not hostile toward lesbianism in practice. Nan tells Kitty that these women are “like us.” Kitty replies, “They’re not like us! They’re not like us, at all! They’re *toms*.... Toms. They make a—*a career*—out of kissing girls. We’re not like that!” (131). But Nan is like that. Perhaps “tom” is the right word to use for Nan. Judith Halberstam, in her pioneering study, *Female Masculinity*, cautions against using “lesbian” for all relationships: “We may want to apply the term ‘tommies,’ for example.... We recognize the word ‘tommy’ from its contemporary use as ‘tomboy’ and in general for its function of conferring masculinity on something, as in ‘tom cat.’ In general, ‘tom’ connotes boyishness within women and some disruptive form of unconventional masculinity” (51).<sup>126</sup> The label is quite appropriate for Nan, then. After she begins wearing men’s

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<sup>125</sup> Emma Donoghue. *Passions Between Women: British Lesbian Culture 1668-1801*. New York: Harper Collins, 1993. Print.

<sup>126</sup> Judith Halberstam. *Female Masculinity*. Durham: Duke UP, 1998.

clothing on her own, off the stage, she remains in cropped hairstyles and trousers for the much of the rest of the novel.

The clothes, in Nan's case, make the "boy." After Diana picks Nan up, she purchases Nan a "coming-out" suit (268). Nan informs the reader: "I looked not like myself at all, but like some living picture, a blond lord or angel whom a jealous artist had captured and transfixed behind the glass. I felt quite awed" (270). They also serve as her "coming-out" persona in The Cavendish Ladies' Club. Diana loves to parade Nan around in front of her Lesbian social circle as her "boy." At Sapphist parties, Diana makes Nan dress up as Hermaphroditus and Antinous, iconic gay male figures, and stand in tableau for all the ladies to enjoy. Maria, Diana's lesbian rival, and her "boy" Dickie are always in attendance at these events. Ever jealous of Nan, Dickie even dresses up as "Dorian Gray" at a Sapphists Only party at Diana's home. Other women in attendance dress as Queen Christina, Marie Antoinette, Sappho, and Diana, the hunter, iconic lesbian historical figures whose inclusion draws a historical lineage for late-Victorian lesbian culture. These events and the Cavendish Ladies' Club are environs where Waters paints an urban lesbian culture with broad strokes. These are decadent affairs, full of wild and unrepressed female sexuality that are not at all rural, nor are they focused on establishing coupled romantic friendship between women.

### **Lesbian Sex: Not Just Romantic Friendship or, New Women Just Want to Have Fun**

Working against a literary tradition that views same-sex relationships between women as innocent extensions of romantic friendship that are always coupled, usually

rural, and always chaste, Waters makes sure to include several explicitly detailed sex scenes in *Tipping the Velvet*. Using late-Victorian anxieties around the brazen and independent sexuality of the New Woman, cues from fin-de-siècle pornography, and inspiration from the diaries of Anne Lister, Waters creates a culture of urban lesbian sexuality that could never exist in Victorian fiction. Lesbian sexuality and sexual practices remained silenced and hidden in this era, unlike gay male sexuality and sexual practices, which late-Victorian Britain, while ensuring it stay hushed and taboo, secretly obsessed over. The press devoured and explicitly detailed the sordid sex life of a gay male underworld represented by the Boulton and Park, Cleveland Street, and Oscar Wilde sex scandals. British culture's prurient interest in gay male sexuality makes perfect sense for a society that views sexuality and sexual desire as the sole province of men. Rebecca Jennings discusses this willful denial of female sexual desire in her study, *A Lesbian History of Britain: Love and Sex between Women since 1500*, in which she argues that British patriarchal culture assumed that women had no sexual desire of their own. Married women submitted to their husband's male sexual desire. Women exhibiting sexual desire independent of their wifely duties were said to exhibit male sexual desire (59-60).<sup>127</sup> Therefore, female sexual desire since, if it existed at all, existed as an inverted male sexual desire, culturally and historically did not actually exist. And if it did not independently exist for married heterosexual identified women, then an authentic lesbian sexuality, one that does not involve men, could not exist without being cast as an expression of male

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<sup>127</sup> Rebecca Jennings. *A Lesbian History of Britain: Love and Sex between Women since 1500*. Oxford: Greenwood, 2007. Print.

sexual desire. Thus all romantic relationships between women were cast as intimate or romantic friendships. This description allowed patriarchal British culture to maintain a state of denial about female sexuality, and keep its idea of middle- and upper-class women as chaste “angels of the house.”

It is somewhat surprising how long this notion of Victorian female same-sex relationships holds. The historical and scholarly challenge to the concept of chaste intimate friendship between Victorian women comes in 1981 when Helena Whitbread discovers Anne Lister’s coded diaries.<sup>128</sup> Ann Lister, an early-nineteenth-century British gentrywoman wrote her diaries in a code based on ancient Greek. In them she details physical sexual relationships with other women from adolescence through her adult life (Jennings 41-45). In *Tipping the Velvet*, Waters explores, through Nan, many angles and perceptions of lesbian sexuality as it relates to Victorian beliefs about it. In Cheryl A. Wilson’s essay, “From the Drawing Room to the Stage: Performing Sexuality in Sarah Waters’s *Tipping the Velvet*,” Wilson argues:

With Kitty, Nan had to hide her sexuality; she was denied a lesbian identity and daily performed the role of Kitty’s friend. In contrast, with Diana, Nan is denied all aspects of her identity beyond her sexuality; she exists purely for Diana’s pleasure and lives in a state of constant performance. Initially, Nan is pleased with this situation and indulges herself in the props and costumes Diana’s wealth can provide.<sup>129</sup> (300)

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<sup>128</sup> The importance of Anne Lister’s diaries cannot be overstated. Rebecca Jennings, Elaine Showalter, Emma Donoghue, and Laura Doan and Sarah Waters all note how central the discovery and translation of these diaries is to the historical and cultural study of female sexuality, lesbian sexuality, and human sexuality. For the most in depth discussion of Lister’s diaries, see Rebecca Jennings’ *A Lesbian History of Britain: Love and Sex between Women since 1500*. Oxford: Greenwood, 2007. Print.

<sup>129</sup> Cheryl A. Wilson. “From the Drawing Room to the Stage: Performing Sexuality in Sarah Waters’s *Tipping the Velvet*.” *Women’s Studies* 35 (2006): 285-305.

Kitty wants to have a romantic friendship with Nan that includes sexual expression, but that must be kept hidden and never be labeled as part of a lesbian identity. Diana insists that Nan be a pure embodiment of an explicit lesbian sexuality, but have no identity outside of that. It is only when Nan forms a relationship with Florence toward the end of the novel that she is allowed to develop a full and whole identity as a woman who loves women. This relationship is not rooted in wild sexual passion, nor in first blush of love, but, with Florence's brother and their adopted child, they are the very definition of contemporary queer family formation.

Waters writes Nan's first sexual experience as one of innocence and discovery. Her sexuality is not male in desire or in expression. Yet as sweetly as Waters crafts the scene, its very inclusion and its attention to detail speak, once again, to Waters' neo-Victorian style of genre hybridization, and collapsing of a lesbian time and space. At the hands of Kitty's instruction, Nan explores Kitty's body, and, in the process, discovers the power of her own sexualized body. Nan tells the reader that Kitty,

took my wrist and gently led my fingers to her breasts. When I touched her here she sighed, and turned; and after a minute or two she seized my wrist again, and moved it lower. Here she was wet, and smooth as velvet. I had never, of course, touched anyone like this before—except, sometimes, myself; but it was as if I touched myself now, for the slippery hand which stroked her seemed to stroke me: I felt my drawers grow damp and warm, my own hips jerk as hers did. Soon I ceased my gentle strokings and began to rub her, rather hard.... There seemed no motion, no rhythm, in all the world, but that which I had set up, between her legs, with one wet fingertip. (105)

Nan's formative sexual experiences with Kitty reveal to her the truth of her sexual identity. But Kitty's rejection of this identity propels Nan on to the next stage of her exploration: gay male sexual identity. After Nan discovers Kitty's relationship with Walter, Nan begins her career as a boy renter. In this stage of Nan's sexual

development, Waters plays on late-Victorian ideas regarding a female sexual desire as an inverted embodiment of a male sexual desire. But Waters keeps it queer. Nan's sexual life as a renter is never heterosexual. It never raises her own lust or physical passions, and there is never vaginal or anal penetration. Indeed, for Nan these experiences are more of a study of homosexual emotional desire and the damage of closetedness. Yet this career as a gay male prostitute directly leads to the next stage in her sexual development as it is as a male renter that Nan meets Diana. When Diana tries to pick Nan up, Nan tells her that she does not have what she thinks the lady is looking for, assuming Diana to have a heterosexual desire. Nan's fear of discovery that she is not a boy, but in fact a woman is assuaged when Diana assures her, "On the contrary, my dear. You have exactly what I'm after" (233). What Diana is looking for is a lesbian "boy," or in contemporary parlance, a young butch, which she can "keep" for her own sexual and cultural gratification. "You're very handsome, Miss King" (239), she tells Nan, acknowledging her femaleness and her female masculinity. In their first sexual encounter, one in which Diana releases Nan's hunger for her own sex, Nan says: "I felt like a man being transformed into a woman at the hand of a sorceress" (239-40). Diana, unlike Kitty, owns her lesbian sexual desire, and in doing so, allows Nan's lesbian sexual desire to find full expression. With Kitty, Nan had explored the female sexual body, but not as a lesbian identified woman unbound by the cultural constrictions of heterosexual norms. With Diana, Nan learns that lesbian sexuality can invent new ways of physical expression. Diana tells Nan to go into her closet and put on the "device" she finds in a box. Nan's

description of the “device” could almost be taken from the notorious pornographic late-Victorian novel, *Teleny*:

For on top of the jumble, on a square of velvet, lay the queerest, lewdest thing I ever saw. It was a kind of harness, made of leather: belt-like, and yet not quite a belt, for though it had one wide strap with buckles on it, two narrower, shorter bands were fastened to this and they, too, were buckled. For one alarming moment I thought it might be a horse’s bridle; then I saw what the straps and the buckles supported. It was a cylinder of leather, rather longer than the length of my hand and about as fat, in width, as I could grip. One end was rounded and slightly enlarged, the other fixed firm to a flattened base; to this, by hoops of brass, the belt and the narrower bands were all also fastened. It was, in short, a dildo. I had never seen one before; I did not, at that time, know that such things existed and had names.... The brass bit into the white flesh of my hips, but the leather was wonderfully supple and warm. I glanced again towards the looking-glass. The base of the phallus was a darker wedge upon my own triangular shield of hair, and its lowest tip nudged me in a most insinuating way. From this base the dildo itself obscenely sprang – not straight out, but at a cunning angle, so that when I looked down at it I saw first its bulbous head, gleaming in the red glow of the fire and split by a near invisible seam of tiny, ivory stitches. When I took a step, the head gave a nod. (241-2)

Nan’s previous experiences with Kitty and with gay male johns did not prepare her for this encounter with a dildo. What is most important in understanding in this scene is that the dildo is not representative of the male sexuality or male embodiment. For all of Nan’s expression of her own masculinity, she always identifies as a woman. And her wearing of the dildo does not change this female embodiment. In fact, the way the dildo rests on her pubic mound and the sensation of how it rubs her clitoris during sex with Diana only serves to make her more aware of her body as female and her sexuality as lesbian. After all, Diana has the dildo crafted for her. The phallus here is a lesbian crafted and lesbian identified phallus meant not to embody male

sexuality or physicality. Cathy Griggers reads the lesbian phallus in her essay, “The Age of (Post) Mechanical Reproduction.” In it she argues that

By appropriating the phallus/penis for themselves, lesbians have turned techno-culture’s semiotic regime of simulation and the political economy of consumer culture back against the naturalization of masculine hegemony. Once the penis is mass-produced, any illusion of a natural link between the cultural power organized under the sign of the phallus and the penis as biological organ is exposed as artificial.<sup>130</sup> (121)

This relates to how Waters employs the lesbian phallus in *Tipping the Velvet*, where the lesbian produced dildo challenges illusions about female sexual desire being rooted in male sexual desire, and by extension, lesbian sexual desire being read as inverted heterosexual male sexual embodiment. Diana’s commissioning of the dildo and subsequent use of the phallus for lesbian sexual expression exposes Victorian notions of lesbian sexuality as male sexuality to be artificial. Further it represents a lesbian reclaiming of narrative voice in a period of literature from which she has been silenced and erased. To expose this silencing and erasure as artificial, one simply needs to re-write and mass-produce it, just as Waters’ fiction does with Victorian narratives.

Nan’s time being a kept lesbian sex servant for Diana comes to an end at one of Diana’s Sapphic house parties when she stands up to Diana and the assembled lesbian party-goers to defend Zena Blake. Diana calls Zena in to show her clitoris, which the ladies suspect has grown due to “continual frotting” (313). After protecting Zena from the crowd, and after receiving a physical beating from Diana, Nan has sex

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<sup>130</sup> Cathy Griggers. “Lesbian Bodies in the Age of (Post)mechanical Reproduction.” *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*. Ed. Michael Warner. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993. 178-92.

with Zena, and after being caught, is thrown out, discarded by Diana. What is most crucial about this sexual encounter is that it is fully consensual by both women involved. Since there is not a class disparity between them, one woman does not have power over the other. This is the first time in her sexual life that Nan has sex from a position of equality. And it gives her the courage and confidence to pursue the woman she has desired from afar, Florence Banner. Florence is the novel's embodiment of the New Woman. She is politically active in the socialist and the women's movements. She runs an organization that serves to help women of the lower class establish independence. When Nan first meets Florence, before she becomes a kept woman, Florence invites her to a lecture on "The Woman Question." Nan tells the reader, "I felt my heart sink. 'The Woman Question'" (227). Before her adventure with Diana, Nan is not interested in the women's political struggle. But after her education and exploration of gender, sexuality, and power, Nan begins to realize that she is the New Woman.<sup>131</sup>

### **Conclusion**

After moving in with Florence, her brother, Ralph Banner, and baby Cyril in Bethnal Green, Nan begins to create a home and a non-traditional family structure. The baby is not biologically related to anyone in the house. Together, these four

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<sup>131</sup> This, of course, assumes a New Woman exists. Sarah Grand, one of the chief writers and thinkers of what has come to be called New Woman literature, thinks she is a myth. "Who is this New Woman, this epicene creature, this Gorgon set up by the snarly who impute to her all the faults of both sexes while denying her the charms of either – where is she to be found if she exists at all? For my own part, until I make her acquaintance I shall believe her to be the finest work of imagination which the newspapers have yet produced" (Sarah Grand, 'The New Woman and the Old,' in *Lady's Realm* (1898) 466, as cited in Rebecca Jennings' *A Lesbian History of Britain: Love and Sex between Women since 1500*, 57).

challenge Victorian ideas of family and how a family is composed. They also challenge household power structures. This secure foundation allows for Nan and Florence to discover and participate in a public lesbian culture. They go to a lesbian bar “In a public house near Cable Street... with a ladies’ room in it. The girls call it ‘The Boy in the Boat...’” (410). Here, Florence blossoms, and Nan, once again, becomes the star attraction. The bar is filled with the very women who used to watch her perform on stage in male drag, the same women who used to ask her for a picture of her to keep by their beds. These are the toms that Kitty was so afraid of. These are the women that Nan always thought were just like her. And through them, she restarts her stage career. At this lesbian bar, Nan completes her narrative journey, one comprised of contemporary lesbian coming out narratives, Victorian *bildungsroman*, scandalous sensation plot, picaresque structure, and neo-Victorian historical time warping. Through the story of Nan King, Sarah Waters reinserts lesbian characters, bodies, and voices back into history and back into a period of fiction in which “lesbian” characters were either hidden, erased, or silenced. In the process, she also recovers an urban lesbian cultural history from a subgenre of historical fiction that privileges gay male cultural history and relegates lesbian historical narratives to rural settings, and chaste romantic friendships. Like Neil Bartlett in *Ready to Catch Him Should He Fall* and *Who Was That Man?: A Present For Mr Oscar Wilde*, with *Tipping the Velvet*, Waters creates her own literary cultural link, albeit less abstractly. She collapses the distance between the Victorian narratives that so influenced her as a young woman in the process of coming out and looking for a reflection of self with the contemporary lesbian cultural present, a world in which a butch-presenting

country singer can appear on the cover of a nationally distributed magazine intimately with a super model.

## Chapter 6: Coda: Breaking out of the Form

In this dissertation I have argued for two methods of reading gay and lesbian historical engagement in British fiction since World War II. The first method is one I call fixed moment/contemporary critique. In this reading, authors write about a fixed historical moment from the past, usually the recent past, in order to critique contemporary culture and lesbian and gay participation in the culture's repression of gay people, and they do so through a specific historical literary author or text(s). To argue this reading, I have analyzed Mary Renault's engagement with gay male national service and World War II in *The Charioteer* and Alan Hollinghurst's tackling of gay participation in the power structure of Margaret Thatcher's third term as British Prime Minister in *The Line of Beauty*. Renault employs *The Phaedrus* and World War I narratives as literary ancestors for her novel, while Hollinghurst examines his historical argument through the aesthetic lens of Henry James.

The second method I argue for in this dissertation is one I call abstract moment/fantasy space. In this reading, authors write about a more abstract historical moment, from the distant past, in order to create powerful fantasy spaces for gay and lesbian self-creation and cultural reflection. To argue this method of reading, I have analyzed Neil Bartlett's exploration of personal coming out and communal coming out, rooted in the collapsed literary and cultural history between Oscar Wilde in the late-1800s and the late-1980s in *Who Was that Man?: A Present for Mr Oscar Wilde* and *Ready to Catch Him Should He Fall*, all in an effort to create an archetypal gay male fantasy of vertical history, happening simultaneously, that is taught through intergenerational romance. I have also analyzed Sarah Waters' *Tipping the Velvet*, a

manifestation of lesbian fantasy space, rooted in Victorian music halls and Victorian fiction, that critiques, and feeds into, the public consumption of lesbian identity in the 1990s.

While both methods engage with history in order to discuss the present, there are some notable differences between them. Fixed moment/contemporary critique usually arises during moments in which societal hostility toward the lesbian and gay male communities reaches epic proportions. Examples of these moments include pre-Wolfenden Report anti-gay laws, Clause 28, and the AIDS epidemic. Authors who engage in fixed moment/contemporary critique seek to not only challenge society's homophobia, but also to encourage lesbians and gay men to reflect of how they are participating in their own oppression. The abstract moment/fantasy space model, while it can be rooted in virulent social homophobia, asks lesbians and gay men to look at what makes them unique and encourages them to create new safe spaces in which they can celebrate their histories and identities. This model does not ask, "How are you participating?" rather, it asks, "Who are your ancestors? Where is your home? How are you creating your space?" While these models may arise at different moments, and with somewhat differing purposes, they also overlap and co-exist with each other. This is similar, though not an exact correlation to what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls the minoritizing/universalizing binary. Sedgwick writes that the minoritizing/universalizing binary,

seems to respond to the question, 'In whose lives is homo/heterosexual definition an issue of continuing centrality and difficulty?' .... "on one hand what one may call the question of phylogeny, 'How fully are the meaning and experience of sexual activity and identity contingent on their mutual structuring with other, historically and culturally variable aspects of a given society?' ; and on the other what one might call that

of ontogeny, 'What is the cause of homo- [or of hetero-] sexuality in the individual.' <sup>132</sup> (40)

Gay and lesbian people might need to interrogate their own participation in a homophobic society, they might need to critique the homophobia of society, and/or they might need to create safe space, and celebrate their distinct and essential bonds. In these ways, there can be overlap between the fixed moment/contemporary critique and the abstract moment/fantasy space models. These models can overlap and can co-exist, but usually, they are distinct.

Mary Renault may seem, at first glance, to be an outlier in this argument. And in many ways, she is. She writes *The Charioteer* in the early 1950s. All other texts in this dissertation are from the 1980s-2000s. She is a lesbian author, but she is writing about gay men. These are notable diversions from the "norm" established by the other texts. But she is also the leader, the trailblazer, for post-war historical engagement in fiction. She establishes the foundation upon which every writer of historical fiction in England, since World War II, bases her or his work. And *The Charioteer* is her first foray into the sub-genre. It is also her first gay male centered historical text. She would go on to write the most famous historical fiction series of books to date, eight books all centering on Theseus, Socrates, Plato, and Alexander the Great. In all of these books, she also centers on male same-sex identities and relationships, especially how they relate to empire. In *The Charioteer*, Renault begins her journey into this world of the ancient Greeks, gay men, and national identity through war. The fixed moment/contemporary critique model is hers. While she wrote a couple of

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<sup>132</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1990.

novels centering on lesbians, the vast bulk of her fiction centers on gay men because positioning British society's 1950s homophobia as counter to a long history of intimate male relationships rooted in national service establishes precedence for a strong nation, a strong empire, that has gay men at the center, rather than the margins.

With the work of Alan Hollinghurst, we see the fixed moment/contemporary critique model, started by Renault, mature. In *The Line of Beauty*, Hollinghurst fixes the moment in Margaret Thatcher's third term in office as British Prime Minister in order to critique white gay men's participation in a system that ultimately seeks to destroy them. By focusing on Nick Guest's journey through the realm of the conservative power elite, while, at the same time, trying to navigate being an openly gay man during the height of 1980s British governmental homophobia and the height of the AIDS epidemic in England, Hollinghurst asks contemporary gay male readers to see the moment as a hostile reflection of their current focus on cultural assimilation. Nick Guest, for Hollinghurst, is complicit in the deaths of his lovers Leo and Wani because he so ardently holds onto the naïve notion that there is room for him in the Fedden family, and, by extension, the ruling elite of the nation. He is a gay man who believes that he can be himself, be celebrated, and be accepted in a nation that, with Clause 28, forbids any perceived education about gay and lesbian identities or histories. He believes the nation will care for him, as the Fedden family host and feeds him, in a nation that turns a blind eye to the death of gay men and racial minorities during the AIDS epidemic. Hollinghurst crafts his historical engagement through the stylistic lens of Henry James' aesthetics to reveal the façade of appearance hiding the truth of reality. By all appearances, Wani is a member of the

elite, but in reality, the culture of the powerful will turn their back on him at the first opportunity. On the surface, Nick is a welcome “guest” and “family” member so long as he is useful, but in reality he is a tool that the powerful use to hide their own sins.

Neil Bartlett personifies the abstract moment/fantasy space model of historical engagement in his works, *Who Was That Man?: A Present for Mr Oscar Wilde* and *Ready to Catch Him Should He Fall*. Bartlett focuses on an abstract collection of moments, starting with the literary works of Oscar Wilde blended with his own narrative of coming out as a gay man in order to create a fantasy space wherein rescued historical icons can serve as intergenerational lovers, teachers, and fathers for young gay men trying to find their way in society. Bartlett is not content to say that history is a linear horizontal timeline; rather, it is vertical—all history is happening at the same time. He collapses linear time to show that the process of “coming out,” whether as an individual, a community, or an iconic historical figure in need of rescue, is a constant and interwoven moment. Bartlett, in *Ready to Catch Him Should He Fall* creates a fantasy space in which gay identities and gay journeys are archetypal. Boy, a young gay man discovering his identity as a gay man, is always Boy, no matter who he is. He is the origin of every gay boy, and his journey is the journey of every gay boy. In discovering “the Bar,” a nameless fantasy space that serves as educational center, boy will discover community, his “mother” in the nurturing drag queen who has learned much through life, and his “father” in an older gay man who, through romantic intergenerational relationship, teaches him how to become a secure adult gay man with an awareness of the ever present ancestry. Boy

will become Mother or Boy will become O, or the Older Man. The cycle of coming out and cultural discovery of place will continue. There will always be a Boy, a Bar, a Mother, and an O. Bartlett speaks to gay male readers by revealing a constant and stable identity and culture in the face of contemporary and historical oppression. In his fantasy space, gay men are “safe” from the aspects of society seeking to destroy them, hide their past, and make them feel alienated from the norm. Bartlett provides a “norm” gay men can call their own.

Sarah Waters’ *Tipping the Velvet* invokes the seedy world of Victorian music halls, underground lesbian sex parties, and cross dressing prostitution through the literary lens of Victorian sensation fiction to create an abstract moment that seeks to create a fantasy space in which contemporary lesbians can both revel in fluid identity and explicit sexual freedom while also challenging the objectification of late-1990s “lesbian chic.” In telling the story of Nan King’s coming of age and journey of self-discovery, Waters, herself a scholar of historical fiction, creates a fantasy world rooted in performance of identities, only to find these performances hollow and void of truth. Nan, chasing after her first crush, a male impersonator in the music hall circuit, Kitty, becomes a male impersonator herself. And while she relishes the taboo play of cross-dressing, and revels in the adoration of her audiences, she doesn’t understand why her love of a woman cannot be treated as real. Kitty, ultimately, is not strong enough in her identity to move past outward performance for an objectifying public. Nan becomes a “male” rent boy for survival. In this, she thrives on the perversity of it all, but ultimately falls victim to a possessive upper-class lesbian, Diana, who exploits her. It is only when Nan rediscovers Florence, a

socialist radical, that she can finally be herself without having to perform a lesbian identity for the consumption of others.

But it is not only through fiction that we can read gay and lesbian historical engagement after World War II. Indeed, while fiction is the most developed form of lesbian and gay historical engagement in post-war Britain, one could apply the fixed moment/contemporary critique and abstract moment/fantasy space models to film, drama, and music as well. In this conclusion, I would like to offer some examples of how to apply these readings to other British art forms. In film, one could look to the works of Derek Jarman, England's art film *enfant terrible*, and black gay art film pioneer Isaac Julien. Jarman employs the fixed moment/contemporary critique mode of historical engagement in his film *Edward II* (1991), while Julien, in his *Looking for Langston* (1989), works in the abstract moment/fantasy space medium. In drama, I will examine Alexi Kaye Campbell's play *The Pride* (2008) as an example of fixed moment/contemporary critique historical engagement, and Jackie Kay's play, *Chiaroscuro* (1985) as a model of abstract moment/fantasy space exploration.

Film and drama are, I argue, logical extensions of the argument put forth in these pages. They are unique in that they are performative, and therefore, can make their historical engagements read as more urgent, more immediate to their audiences. Film has a unique ability to collapse time and space in a visual medium that Jarman and Julien use to their advantage. One image can erase hundreds of years, and create new fantasy spaces. Theatre, being an art form performed in front of a live audience, has an immediate impact on the public. Instead of relying solely on the written word, and reader imagination, playwrights are able to show audiences the urgency of

historical engagement, and the impact of cultural critique. What film and dram lacks is the expansive space to make these arguments and wrestle with these histories and identities. They must work quickly, usually within the space of a couple of hours. As such, fiction is able to go more in depth into historical engagement and cultural critique.

Much of Derek Jarman's filmography is rooted in this fixed moment/contemporary critique model of historical engagement, though his work blends with the abstract moment/fantasy space model as well. While his primary concern is engaging specific historical moments to critique the contemporary cultural moment, he does so by relying on archetypal, mythological, and fantasy spaces. His first feature film, *Sebastiane* (1976), examines the idolization and martyrdom of the saint through a lens of homoeroticism and brutality in an effort to critique the hypocrisy of religion and the church's position on homosexuality. *Caravaggio* (1986) paints a picture of the struggles of queer artists making explicitly queer work through an examination of Baroque artist's Caravaggio's life. But it is his *Edward II* (1991) that offers the most scathing contemporary critique of British homophobia. In this film, based on Christopher Marlowe's late 1500s play of the same name, Jarman draws connections between the tragic end of the Plantagenet king in 1327 and the destruction of gay people at the hands of Margaret Thatcher, Clause 28, and AIDS in the 1980s. While historians and other scholars have argued against Edward II's homosexuality, citing his marriage to Isabella and his fathering children, or citing Marlowe's text and arguing that Marlowe did not mean Edward II to be gay, Jarman emphatically disagrees. In his book *Queer Edward II* Jarman writes, "The paper today

accuses me of making a ‘Gay version of *Edward II*.’ They really shouldn’t write about things they don’t understand. Could Marlowe’s poetry describe an ordinary friendship? Has anyone who writes for or reads these papers actually read the play?” (70). For Jarman, the play’s text is explicitly in support of his reading of Edward II’s being in love with Piers Gaveston. But this film is not a love story; rather, it is an indictment of Thatcher and Parliament’s enacting of laws and policies that call for the eradication of homosexuality from education and culture. Given that Clause 28 arrives at the height of the AIDS pandemic, and while the filmmaker himself is fighting to survive the disease, Jarman’s film should be read as an attack on such silencing.

Jarman argues that England has a long history of killing and erasing gay men. “Buggery was a good way of slandering someone in the Middle Ages—Cathar heretics and the Knights Templar, murdered by Isabella’s father, Philip. It is just possible that Piers was a victim of this slander but the *Vita*<sup>133</sup> says ‘the king loved him inordinately’” (*Queer Edward II* 70). In this quote, Jarman admits that even though the accusation of buggery was enough in the Middle Ages and Renaissance to destroy someone, this does not mean that we should read the indictment of Edward II and Piers Gaveston as merely slander. The evidence, for Jarman, points to authentic love, and his film goes on to detail how Queen Isabella and Mortimer use this love to overthrow and murder Edward II. This mirrors the methodology of the 1980s British Parliament. He calls out their hypocrisy in passing Clause 28: “As for who to out—

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<sup>133</sup> *Vita Edwardi Secundi* is a latin chronicle of the rein of Edward II ascribed to an unknown English medieval historian. W.R. Childs, ed. *Vita Edwardi Secundi*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005.

Labour MPs should be the first target. They're 'meant' to be helping us. Lock the closet key firmly on the Tories" (*Queer Edward II* 70). Jarman does not merely allude to this connection in his literary and historical film. Instead he uses purposeful anachronism to make the point explicit. One scene, in particular, paints this anachronistic connection quite clearly. In this scene, Jarman uses members of OutRage!, a militant LGBT rights group active from the 1990 to the present, to serve as "The People," a rabble of protestors supporting Edward's reign in the face of accusation and opposition from the military, his queen, and other members of court. Jarman's screenplay provides both the text and his commentary on the scene:

SEQUENCE 59

INTERIOR. TORCHLIGHT. NIGHT.

EDWARD. 30 PEOPLE.

Edward leads the people. The scene resembles the Poll Tax riot.

Edward            March with me my friends,

                      Edward this day hath crowned him King anew.

People            St George for England and King Edward's Right.

(*Queer Edward II* 122)

Jarman's purposeful use of OutRage! Members, in contemporary clothing, holding OutRage! protest signs transforms this from a scene of Edward calling for popular support to one of Edward calling for a queer revolution, a rising up of gay men and lesbians to challenge the government's homophobic actions with direct action protest. He comments on the scene and activist Peter Thatchell's ideas about how the scene should progress: "Peter Thatchell said that OutRage was a non-violent organization so the soldiers had to win. I thought we might have one beaten up" (122). The soldiers do win, but this does not just reflect the historical moment of Edward's downfall, but it also reflects the contemporary government's oppression of gay and

lesbian voices. Later in the scene, the police indeed bring violence on the non-violent gay and lesbian protest:

Sequence 61

INTERIOR. NIGHT.

20 POLICE, 30 PEOPLE.

The room is a melee of protesters and riot police.

The Sounds of protesters amplified. Tear gas. (*Queer Edward II* 96)

Jarman sees OutRage! as more than anachronism in this film, however. He also sees them as the historical extension of Edward's plight. He writes, "In our film all the OutRage boys and girls are the inheritors of Edward's story." (*Queer Edward II* 146).

Jarman meticulously preserved his own musings on his work and on the contemporary moment of the late-80s and early 90s. He published his diary of 1989-1990, *Modern Nature* (1994), in which he details his work process, his gardening process, his friendships with other artists, notably Neil Bartlett, Tilda Swinton, and Isaac Julien, and his struggle with his failing health due to AIDS. In one entry, from Saturday, June 24, 1989, Jarman writes about how inspiring it was to see so many gay and lesbian people in the park celebrating gay pride:

It all ends up in the park with stalls, bands and dancing. The girls and boys on the march are without a doubt the handsomest both in mind and body. They have the moral high ground. And each year, despite Margaret Thatcher's delinquent government, they are happier and more relaxed. Nothing shall turn the tide back now. Clause 28 will be the clarion call to unity, and has given us new purpose. (*Modern Nature* 102)

While noting his own struggles to remain positive in the face of his failing health, Jarman sees promise in the future. The future will belong to the inheritors of Edward II's legacy, the out and proud LGBT children celebrating pride in themselves, the activists screaming loudly in the streets. They will bring about the real change, and

Jarman notes, that the irony of the situation is that the impetus for this uprising was the conservative government's attempted eradication of knowledge, Clause 28. In an entry from Friday, January 5 1990, Jarman starts to detail his fascination with Edward II, in preparation for his filming of the story: "What interests me about Edward is that his behaviour is no more erratic than that of Mark Anthony. Edward and Gaveston are lovers who lose the world. Yet even now it is not possible to convey this, the parameters of love are too limited" (*Modern Nature* 219). What is needed, for Jarman, is a radical re-telling of history, one in which he blends the past with the present, one that reveals the insidious history of repression and oppression, one that will call the current children of Edward II to arms. Perhaps no passage more clearly demonstrates these connections in Jarman's mind than this one from his diary, dated Monday, February 5, 1990:

Saturday evening: leaning against the wall at Compton's with a double vodka, discussing *Edward II* with Stephen, Marc Almond's "Tainted Love" on the sound system. Across the bar, a skinhead lad gives me a dazzling smile. He is quarelling with his lover, who has his back to me, his hand protectively down the boy's blue jeans. The boy smiles, long lingering looks. The king could recount Marlowe's play like Scheherazade, ninety minutes of reminiscence and seduction, the executioner as sexy as this skinhead.... Should Isabel be played by a man? Piers and Mortimer drift past, black ashes... (*Modern Nature* 233)

In this entry, centering on the smiling boy whose smile reveals the slyness of Jarman's point-of-view, Jarman reveals his view that the moments of past and present have collapsed, leaving a vision of kings and skinheads, drag "queens," violence, and seduction. His film will reflect this moment of cultural seduction and sexual confidence. His film will rescue Edward II from the erasure of history while his "children" ensure a future for LGBT people in England, one that will not be silenced.

Isaac Julien, a contemporary of Jarman's, works more through abstract moment/fantasy space in his short poetic meditation *Looking for Langston* (1989). This film is unique in that it is less based on a linear narrative model, or a fixed moment in history, or even a fixed nation, than it is on a poetic past blended with the silences and invisible history of contemporary British black gay men. *Looking for Langston* is an exploration of the British black gay male search for history and cultural connection. The subtext of the film is that British black gay men need to look elsewhere for a literary, artistic, and cultural history, as there is no record of one in England. Julien argues that British black gay men need to look to the Harlem Renaissance and to Langston Hughes, Essex Hemphill, Richard Bruce Nugent, and James Baldwin for this history. In short, British black gay men need to look to America for that past, since there is not one in England. The film opens with a dedication in memory of James Baldwin, who had just passed away, and states that it is a meditation on the Harlem Renaissance and Langston Hughes featuring the poetry of Hughes, Nugent, and Hemphill. The reader/viewer will know from the opening that this film is set in abstract fantasy space.

For Julien, the Harlem Renaissance represents the only time in history that black gay men were able to experience cultural and sexual freedom. He finds the evidence for this in Hughes' and Nugent's writings. But he also posits the loss of that moment. With the end of the Harlem Renaissance, Julien notes the emerging acts of silencing that would continue, with the exception of James Baldwin, for the next 60 years. Hughes' silence and erasure, post Renaissance, as gay mirrors the British erasure of black gay men in this film. The first scene in the film opens on a black man

in a tux with one tear running down his face standing over the body of a dead black man. Julien's view of British black gay men is diasporic. British black gay men are united with black gay men everywhere. They are united through the shared experience of silence, as reflected in the myriad moments of silence in the film. The dead black man/artist/poet that the opening scene centers on is reflective of ancestors, community, the impact of AIDS, and cultural loss. But the moment does not last long, as Julien pans down to reveal that underneath the funeral is a disco nightclub of the 1980s blended with a 1920s speakeasy. This is the magical space where black gay men are able to come together and celebrate black gay male sex, bodies, subculture, and freedom. But it is underground, not out in the open. This is the space where men come seeking to love their own selves. Once again, we see the collapsing of history. The 1920s in America joins with the 1980s in England in one otherworldly space, the bar, just as in Bartlett's *Ready to Catch Him Should He Fall*. The film is also similar in style and tone to Marlon Riggs' *Tongues Untied* (1989). Both films explore the need for black gay men to define their own voices, their own cultures, and embrace their sex, their bodies, and their art. Both films operate in a liminal time/space. Both films feature the poetry of Essex Hemphill, the preeminent black gay male poet of the 1980s. But whereas *Tongues Untied* revels in contemporary black gay male American urban culture, Julien's film does not. It is firmly rooted in a past/present time that bears no real resemblance to the reality of urban British black gay male culture except that it exists outside of the culture. This is a group seeing a history that can positively influence the present. The first words we see in the movie are "Black gays: What can history tell us?" This is portrayed as the headline in a Harlem Renaissance journal or

newspaper like *Fire!!* (1926). The film continues as a disjointed meditation on black gay male love and the search for voice, and comes to the conclusion that black gay men must find themselves in England, and create their own Renaissance.

Drama, like film, allows writers to ignore conventions like linear time, fixed space, and rigid conventions. Drama already exists in a magical space in which “reality” is always subjective. British theatre has long been a location of gay and lesbian subversion. From Wilde to Orton to Bartlett to Sarah Kane and Mark Ravenhill, the history of LGBT theatre in England is one of bold challenge. Two works of British gay and lesbian theatre work well to examine the fixed moment/contemporary critique and abstract moment/fantasy space models: Alexi Kaye Campbell’s *The Pride* (2008) and Jackie Kay’s *Chiaroscuro* (1985).

Alexi Kaye Campbell’s *The Pride* takes place in two alternating years, 1958 and 2008, a fifty-year separation. By fixing the historical moment in 1958, Campbell is able to explore the historical roots of contemporary gay male issues like intimacy, faithfulness, and mental health. The 1958 story line centers on Oliver and Philip. Philip is a married man and the two men begin a secret and hidden physical relationship, but because of the cultural norms of the time, and the history of illegality of homosexual relationships, neither man knows how to be intimate with the other. Oliver reaches out for this connection on a more than physical level, but Philip does not have the ability or vision, he only has the fear and repression. The 2008 story line also centers on Oliver and Philip, albeit differently. This Oliver and Philip are young, they are the same characters we saw earlier, and they are not. It is as if Campbell wants to show the audience this is what these two characters would be like in 1958

and also in 2008 if they were to exist in that time. It is the same narrative but looked at through the cultural lenses and influences of the moments. Campbell asks, how do gay men have human relationships with each other in environments of repression. Repression of the 1950s is rooted in law, shame, and psychology. Repression in 2000s is rooted in public acceptance, a legacy of oppression, internalized history, and self-destruction. The more things change, for Campbell, the more they remain the same. The legacy of earlier histories carries over into the present. Acceptance does not erase the past. This play looks at the fixed moment of the past and its direct impact on the present moment.

In 1958, Oliver and Philip have a moment, well into their hidden affair, in which Oliver confronts Philip with his need for real connection, not solely rooted in the physical:

OLIVER. Yes, Philip, a good man. A good man. *A good man.* And it was the first time, when we were together, when we were embracing that I felt that I had pride. A pride for the person I was....

OLIVER. And I thought that some of those men, if only you had seen them you would know what I mean, that some of those men, hovering, waiting in that dim flickering light, some of those men would also choose this, that maybe that's what many of them want, but because they don't know where... *how* to find it, and because they have been told that this is who they are, that they are these men who stand waiting to touch someone, to touch another man's skin, that they've believed that's *all* they are, but that what they want, what they really want is more than that, what they really want is what we can have... an intimacy with someone they can hold onto for a while, that what they want more than anything is to be able to *see* them, to look at them, to look into their eyes and to *know* them. And be known. (79)

Oliver wants to have pride in himself and in his love. He feels this pride when he is with Philip. Although the society, in no way, tells him that he should be proud. In

fact, it tells him the opposite. He nevertheless feels a sense of pride that is natural to him. This relationship is natural, not perverse. He sees the other side. He sees the men in the underground gay bar, lurking in the shadows, consumed by their shame, the shame society teaches them they should have, and he wonders if they want the same thing, but no one has told them it was possible. All they know is that their desire is perverse, criminal, and shameful. Oliver is convinced that he and Philip can have this true closeness. They can have this pride. But Philip is like those men in the shadows. His shame consumes him. In fact, maybe even more so than those men in the bar, as he does not have the strength or courage to go that far. After Oliver's declaration the stage directions note, "a struggle of sorts as Philip pulls Oliver over towards the sofa—his movement becoming more violent. He begins to pull at their clothes" (85).

OLIVER. No, Philip. Not like this. Not now. Not here. Wait.

PHILIP. Why not now? Why not here? It's what you want, isn't it? It's what you want me to be, isn't it?

*Philip becomes violent. He throws OLIVER down. (85)*

Philip rapes Oliver in his living room. The only way Philip can confront the shame and the desire is through violence. He can only act out the physical contact, and he does so violently. Oliver leaves Philip in this moment, and both men are ashamed. This culture of shame and the perceived mental illness of homosexuality, for Campbell, is the root of contemporary gay male intimacy issues. We see this toward the end of the play, also in 1958, when Philip goes to the doctor, for aversion therapy. The doctor asks Philip if he was molested as a boy, assuming this to be the locus of his homosexual desires.

DOCTOR: Were you interfered with?

PHILIP: I beg your pardon?

DOCTOR: Where you ever interfered with? During your childhood or adolescence. By an adult of your own sex. Were you seduced into any sort of sexual activity by an older male? Whether a member of your own family or a teacher or perhaps even a stranger.

PHILIP: No, I wasn't. I didn't...

DOCTOR: You do understand it is absolutely necessary to be truthful in your answering of these questions.... That unless you answer every one of these questions with absolute honesty and courage you are not only wasting my own time but your own as well. You must attempt to put all inhibitions aside. (112)

The medicalization and pathological reading of Philip's homosexuality is perverse in and of itself in Campbell's play. The doctor is almost predatory in his voyeurism. To tell a patient that he must put his inhibitions aside, when it is his inhibitions that prevent his happiness, is ironic for Campbell. The treatment, a pharmacologically induced aversion therapy is what the doctor prescribes, but Philip has sought this out.

DOCTOR: There are pictures in the room. Publications. We will encourage you to look at them. They are of a pornographic nature and of homosexual content. You will be left alone for approximately an hour. I suggest you spend most of that time looking at these pictures. You will probably be aroused.

An hour later, at approximately nine p.m., the nurse will enter the room and inject you with a generous dose of apomorphine. This is a drug that will induce vomiting. (115).

Philip asks if he can bring in a picture of one particular individual to add to the pornography on the walls. He doesn't just want to destroy his homosexual attractions, he also wants to focus this on one particular individual, Oliver. Philip loves Oliver, but cannot see a world in which that love could be realized.

In the 2008 story line, it is Oliver and not Philip who is the "unhealthy" one. In this version of the story, the two men are together as a couple. Times have changed, and it is acceptable for gay men to be coupled. But the legacy of the hidden past, the secrecy, and the medicalization and criminalization are haunting the

characters in 2008. Sylvia, Oliver's friend, confronts him after Philip has left Oliver because he could no longer take Oliver's infidelities. Oliver says that he cannot help his urges. But his urges are not just for sex with other men, they are for anonymity and fantasies of the potential for violence. This is a contemporary flipping of the 1958 rape scene. This Oliver is excited by the fact that any one of his tricks could hurt him. This is the thrill. He has so internalized the culture's homophobia that he seeks for his desires to cause him potential pain.

SYLVIA. Your urge, as you so succinctly put it, is to kneel down and give him satisfaction. But stop. Newsflash. You find out, after you've seen his man-tool, but before you do the actual kneeling-down bit, you find out through some psychic newsflash something about him. A few fun facts. I don't know. Someone tells you this man is a racist. BNP or something. Or he sells crack to fourteen-year-olds. So you still suck his dick? Do you still give him satisfaction?

....

OLIVER. It's not like we we're having a conversation. I'm not endorsing his world view. It's not like I'm saying it's okay, I love the BNP and of course I agree with you that the Holocaust never happened. I'm just sucking his dick, for God's sake, I'm not voting for him.

....

OLIVER... Why did you have to choose the BNP freak? Why couldn't it be a concert pianist who gives all his money to the Save the Children fund?

SYLVIA. It could be. But the point is—and I've got a feeling that this is the detail that depresses Philip—the point is *you don't know*. You don't know whose dick you're sucking. (63)

....

OLIVER. In that case the honest truth is that not only I'd do it, I mean the cock-sucking thing, but I kind of really like it. The example, I mean. What you chose. The BNP example. Kind of turns me on. (64).

Before this conversation, this is indeed what happened. Philip came home to find Oliver with a man dressed in a Nazi uniform. One of these men might actually be a horrible person, a racist, a drug dealer, a Nazi. Oliver thinks this is the kind of man

he deserves. Philip, in this reality, is a content, happy, and healthy gay man, but he cannot overcome Oliver's self-loathing. In the end, the two men decide, against all odds, and knowing that the infidelity is not over, to try to make it work again.

Campbell's ending of this narrative is not fully hopeful, but decides that even with the probability that Oliver will remain unhealthy in his sexuality, this is where gay men are in 2008. They are still trying to overcome the damage done by the past.

Jackie Kay, is most noted as a novelist whose book *Trumpet* (1998) tells the story of a jazz trumpeter, Joss Moody, and the aftermath of his revelation as a woman after his death. She is also a playwright who in 1985 worked with Theatre of Black Women to create a play that explores the complex pieces of identity that comprise black lesbians. Her play *Chiaroscuro* (1985) is a poetic piece that operates in the abstract moment/fantasy space mode of lesbian historical engagement. The play, centering on four black women on a bare stage surrounded by objects including a chest, a doll, and a broken mirror, explores the legacy of fractured identities that black lesbians wrestle with. These objects are representative of the legacies of black oppression that provide names for these women, and their search for the power to name themselves. Influenced by Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls who have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf* (1975), the play operates in much the same way, as a choreopoem featuring black women in solid color costumes, telling poetic stories of their identities. The symbolism, for Kay, is important. She writes in her author note that "The chest is an important symbol; it functions as the past and also as the chest of the human body. In order to breathe, these four women have to get things off their 'chest'" (82). The mirror also serves in the same way. The mirror or

reflection is fractured, but the women still seek to see themselves in it. On history, Kay states that while working on the revision of the play, she wanted to return “to the idea that time and space were not important. What is important is what is happening and what has happened” (82). Kay erases space and erases specific time because for black lesbians, the diasporic histories are so varied and so omnipresent. One time and one place will not work here. What is important for her is the relationship between black lesbians’ search for agency and name and the traumatic past that has prevented them from naming themselves. She continues, arguing:

I have been obsessed with naming. What do we call ourselves as lesbians and black women? How did we get our names? How do we assert our names? What are our past names? Each character tells the story of her name. She is also searching for another name. (82)

The history of naming is the focus in this play. The play begins with the women circled, backs to each other, with the objects in the center, and each woman reveals the origin of her name. The names are all driven by the past, the diasporic past of their ancestors, except for Opal, who not having access to her ancestors, is named after a rock, a gem. The play’s first lines are:

AISHA: This is how we got to where we were.  
AISHA: All this has happened before. (59)

History is always happening. It has happened before and it will happen again. This view of history is more in line with Bartlett’s view. It is always happening at the same time. Two of the women’s name stories reflect the diversity of black women’s ancestry and naming. This is a critical origin for Kay, and each story reveals hints at legacies of lesbian history for black women as well.

AISHA: Okay. I was called after my grandmother on my mother’s side. It is a long, long story that can be told so short; people don’t

realize the years that went, nor the pain, and trying to find the precise beginning is always tough. So much is hard to place. A little hearsay goes a long way. (59).

History for Aisha is one based in broken fragments and rooted in hearsay.

BETH: I was called after my great-great-great-great grandmother on my father's side who was taken from Africa to slavery in America and raped often; who has children that were each taken from her. But, Beth was one strong woman; she was like Sojourner Truth or Harriet Tubman—a woman who made change, who was Change herself... My daddy told me he called me Beth because my grandmother's African name was whipped out of her. This was the name the white people gave her with welts in her black skin. He said that history *had* to be remembered too. (59).

Beth's story is one familiar to African American women. But it also reveals the sources of strength that Kay argues black women have access to through ancestry that enables them ultimately to name themselves. Yomi, the character who most reflects British black heterosexual women's beliefs about black lesbianism, is not so much judgmental as she is indoctrinated. She goes to a silk-screening event and then to a disco, she is shocked by the presence of black lesbians. She did not think they even existed. This is part of the British legacy of lesbianism dating back to Queen Victoria's alleged comment that lesbians do not exist. British lesbianism has long operated in silence and erasure. Yomi explains:

YOMI: I think there were a lot of... lesbians there. That woman teaching silk-screening said some strange things. Half of them didn't even make sense. I think she was one. Judging by that disco, there are more than we know about. God. Was I shocked! I felt so naïve. I've never seen two women kissing before. Long ones! Honestly if they want to do that sort of thing they should do it behind closed doors. And black women at that! I didn't think we produced them. (64)

She did not think black people produced lesbians. This is a cultural assumption on her part that gay and lesbian identities are the property of British white culture. This

is also indicative of black lesbians not being able to name themselves. If their black identity is rooted in being uprooted and in colonized names like Beth's name, and lesbian identity is rooted in white culture, then a black lesbian has an unstable foundation from which to root a fixed identity. She must seek it out, and name it for herself on an individual level. None of these women have the same foundation, the same familial or cultural history. And for Kay, this is a critical observation. These characters cannot erase the ancestral past they have inherited. Their identity may be fractured into multiple aspects, but it is theirs, and their lesbian identity does not erase it. Opal's song in act two spells out Kay's argument most clearly. She sings:

OPAL (sings): They had no one to name me after/ in so many different ways/ so tell me what do you call her/ a woman who loves another like her/ what do you call her/ where are her people/ who are her ancestors/ tell me what is her name/ tell me what is her name  
I want to find it all now/ know our names know the others in history/ so many women have been lost at sea/ so many of our stories have been swept away/ I want to find the woman/ who in Dahomey 1900/ loved another woman/ tell me what did they call her/ did they know her name/ in Ashanti, do they know it in/ Yoruba do they know it in patois.... (79)

Black lesbians have histories; they have names. That these histories are different, and the names are different, is a result of the many lives and many histories that black lesbians have lived. Kay's play is a call to discover those names, to discover those histories, but it is also a statement that if the names and histories remain hidden or lost, black lesbians will still draw on the fragments they have, the items in the chest, to name themselves and create new origin stories.

Jarman, Julien, and Kay all join with Bartlett to suggest that lesbian and gay, and, in Julien's and Kay's work, black, lesbian and gay people and identities have always been with us. While all of these playwrights and filmmakers are making

timeless, ahistorical claims about identity, they all also argue that this very universality is crucial for lesbian and gay people to ground themselves in the face of contemporary attacks on their personhoods. Lesbian and gay people, for these authors must look to the communal past to see that they have always been there, they have struggled with oppression before, and they can create space and create change in their contemporary communities by drawing on these histories. Campbell, Waters, Renault, and Hollinghurst focus less on the timelessness of gay and lesbian identities and more on how gay and lesbian people can take charge of their identities and construct and re-construct them in homophobic societies, that indeed, they must. The homophobic British cultures that these authors discuss have tried to create negative identities for gay men and lesbians, identities rooted in fear, pathology, and loathing. Waters, Campbell, Renault, and Hollinghurst, argue for gay men and lesbians to create a movement that claims identity for the self.

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