

Power, Privilege, and Perspective:
Narrative Exclusion in Contemporary Queer Fiction

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Abstract

Na de publicatie van André Acimans roman *Call Me by Your Name*, zijn er verschillende contemporaine queer teksten uitgegeven die vergelijkbare verhaallijnen en vertelperspectieven vertonen. Zoals ook in de queer romans *Lie with Me* van Philippe Besson, *Tin Man* van Sarah Winman, *Swimming in the Dark* van Tomasz Jedrowski en *Box Hill* van Adam Mars-Jones, wordt via een retrospectief ik-perspectief verteld over hun eerdere, korte homoseksuele liefdesrelatie met een andere mannelijke partner. Alhoewel dezelfde stijl centraal staat, verschillen de romans in plaats en tijd, waarbij ze respectievelijk plaatsvinden in Italië, Frankrijk, Engeland, Polen, en Engeland, tussen 1960 en 1990. Binnen de overeenkomstige plotlijnen en vertelinstanties komen er twee verschillende machtsverhoudingen naar voren. Eén vindt plaats binnen en buiten de queer relaties, waardoor de machtsverhoudingen tussen de koppels onder druk komen te staan. De andere komt voort uit de machtsverhouding tussen de verteller en het andere personage binnen deze relaties. Vanuit beide machtsverhoudingen verschijnt *narrative exclusion* als gevolg. Dit wordt weergegeven door het uitsluiten van gemarginaliseerde groepen, zoals de queer community, door onderdrukking van de maatschappij en die van het andere personage door de verteller. Aan de hand van een close-reading methode onderzoekt deze scriptie hoe deze twee machtsverhoudingen zich uiten, waarbij de vertelling centraal staat bij het vormen van narratieve exclusie. Dit is onderzocht vanuit een kader bestaande uit theorieën over *narrative power*, queer studies, en narratologie. Uit dit onderzoek blijkt dat machtsverhoudingen reeds plaatsvinden binnen en buiten queer relaties die worden beïnvloed door macht van buitenaf, en vormen machtsdynamieken binnen de relaties. Daarnaast onthult de vertelinstantie de uiting van macht over het andere personage, waarbij de ander in het verhaal wordt uitgesloten. De werking van deze narratieve exclusie verschilt per roman. Als gevolg toont dit corpus dat door de macht van de verteller, de teksten nog altijd onderworpen zijn aan narratieve macht, en zich dus niet compleet vasthouden aan de doelen en intenties van queer fictie.

Key words: narrative power, narrative exclusion, narrative privileging, queer, fictie.

The title page picture is the cover of Philippe Besson's original French novel *Lie with Me*.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The film adaptation of *Call Me by Your Name* (2017), directed by Luca Guadagnino and written by James Ivory, received critical acclaim, winning various awards for its screenplay, adaptation, music and acting. As an adaptation to the original novel *Call Me by Your Name* (2007) by André Aciman,¹ Guadagnino's direction offered a broader audience through its visual and stylistic approach and nuanced portrayal of queerness. Its success is highly praised by critics, stating it as a "ravishingly beautiful movie" and their romance "saturated with poetic languor and deeply sophisticated sensuality."² Some even described it as "a lush, heady experience for the body" that is "an arousal for the soul."³ However, the film also faced criticism. Richard Brody, for instance, describes the film as "empty," arguing that it elides "the characters' mental lives," leaving the film slow and languid, with emptiness as a result.⁴ This emptiness, however, notably contrasts with the intimate, first-person, narration in Aciman's novel. Elio's narration immerses the reader in his mental state as he reflects on his summer romance with Oliver. The novel reveals what the film fails to present: an intricate account of Elio's feelings, desires and shame regarding his relationship with Oliver.

The novel's narration by Elio thus holds power over what he decides to share or withhold. Whereas the film omits this narration entirely, it becomes a crucial asset in the novel that enables the narrator's authority over the story. Employing a first-person narration like that in the novel means that the reader may not know the entirety of the story, and the secondary character remains excluded from the protagonist's inner feelings and thoughts. Consequently, there is a lack of information about the other character. Aciman's novel exemplifies the privilege of the focaliser. As Mieke Bal notes, a character-bound focaliser, such as Elio, causes bias and limitation by having an advantage over the other characters in the story.⁵ The narration in Aciman's novel thus contributes to the narrator's power to shape the image of the other, through sharing, withholding, or even manipulating information. What becomes notable in *Call*

¹ André Aciman, *Call Me by Your Name*, London: Atlantic Books, 2007.

² Peter Bradshaw, "Call Me by Your Name Review – Gorgeous Gay Love Story Seduces and Overwhelms," *The Guardian*, December 3, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/oct/26/call-me-by-your-name-review-luca-guadagnino-armie-hammer>.

³ Alissa Wilkinson, "Call Me by Your Name Is an Erotic Film in Every Sense of the Word. It's Also a Masterpiece," *Vox*, November 22, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/2017/11/21/16552862/call-me-by-your-name-review-timothee-chalamet-armie-hammer>.

⁴ Richard Brody, "The Empty, Sanitized Intimacy of 'Call Me by Your Name,'" *The New Yorker*, November 28, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/richard-brody/the-empty-sanitized-intimacy-of-call-me-by-your-name>.

⁵ Mieke Bal, *Narratology: An Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, 4th ed. Translated by Christine van Boheemen, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017), 135.

Me by Your Name is the narrator's control over the story and the characters, and how this contributes to shaping narrative exclusion.

Apart from the narration, the novel also reveals another significant type of narrative power, namely that imposed on the relationship by society. The story is about Elio, who reminisces about pivotal moments one summer in the 1980s, when he was seventeen years old and met his first love. The novel begins with Oliver's arrival at his parents' villa on the Italian Riviera, where he will assist Elio's father with research and paperwork. Although Elio initially thinks of Oliver as indifferent and difficult, his interest in him deepens after spending more time together. Their friendship evolves into more than that, leading to Elio's infatuation with Oliver. During Oliver's six-week stay, Elio explores feelings of intimacy, sexual discovery, desire, and first love, but also grapples with shame and anxiety. Oliver is cautious of the power imbalance in their relationship. After his stay, Oliver returns to the United States. When they reunite at the Italian villa twenty years after their summer romance, both realise that they have moved on, yet their summer romance remains the most memorable of their lives.

As such, the film omits what is most imperative to the novel: the power of narration. Through this narration, readers get inside the head of the narrator, and in this case, the protagonist of the story. Similar narratological aspects in terms of narration come to the fore in four other novels, which are set in various European contexts and range in their time periods. They follow the same pattern as Aciman's text, as they feature brief love affairs between men in which the protagonist retrospectively narrates an influential relationship of their past. These include Philippe Besson's *Lie with Me* (2017), Sarah Winman's *Tin Man* (2017), Tomasz Jedrowski's *Swimming in the Dark* (2021), and Adam Mars-Jones' *Box Hill* (2020). Alongside *Call Me by your Name*, these novels will be analysed in terms of their narration, and narrative power and exclusion within queer narratives. But first, it is important to provide an overview of the novel's summaries in order to conduct this comprehensive analysis.

Firstly, Besson's novel takes place in France instead of Italy, and even though it is labelled as a novel, the story includes autobiographical elements. Originally published in French and translated to English, his bestseller *Lie with Me* (2017)⁶ recounts events from his personal teenage love affair with his classmate Thomas Andrieu. The novel takes place across three time periods: 1984, 2007 and 2016. It begins with famous writer Philippe waiting in a hotel lobby in Bordeaux for an interview when he spots a man resembling someone from his past. Philippe recalls the past starting in 1984, when he meets Thomas at school. Despite their

⁶ Philippe Besson, *Lie with Me*, Translated by Molly Ringwald, London: Penguin Books, 2019.

different backgrounds, Thomas unexpectedly approaches him at school and confesses his feelings towards Philippe. Thomas also reveals that due to class differences, Philippe will leave their small village Barbezieux, and he will stay. They eventually develop a short but intense, secret sexual relationship. After finishing high school, Philippe leaves for Bordeaux to study and Thomas moves to Spain to work and live with his family. Then in 2007, Philippe encounters Thomas' son Lucas and discovers that Philippe has left such an impact on Thomas through all these years, that even his son is aware of their past relationship.

Similar to *Call Me by Your Name* and *Lie with Me*, Winman's *Tin Man* (2017)⁷ explores themes of love, loss and memory, and the lasting impact of a once-special relationship between two men. Set primarily in England from the 1960s to 1990s, it follows Ellis and Michael from when they met as children to their adulthood. The first part is told from Ellis' perspective as he reflects on his close relationships with Michael and his wife, Annie. The relationship between Ellis and Michael starts when they meet at the age of 12, quickly developing into a stronger and more complex romantic bond. Years later, Ellis meets Annie, who forms a close friendship with both men. Annie is aware of their intimate relationship and allows them more private time to let them explore their feelings and share their moments. Yet after Ellis and Annie marry, Michael moves to London and loses touch with the couple. The second part of the novel shifts to Michael's perspective through his journal, discovered by Ellis after Michael's passing. In this journal, he recounts several brief relationships with other men, along with his relationship with Ellis.

Furthermore, Tomasz Jedrowski's debut novel *Swimming in the Dark* (2021)⁸ is written as a letter to Janusz, Ludwik's former lover. Set against the backdrop of declining communist Poland in the 1980s, Ludwik reflects on his relationship with Janusz to tell his side of the story, now that he has moved to New York. Ludwik, a university student, meets Janusz at a mandatory rural camp. They spend the summer together as they bond over James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*, and a secretive romance blossoms in Poland's countryside. Yet as they return to Warsaw, their political ideologies start to clash. While Ludwik has been raised with Western ideals of freedom, Janusz longs for stability and safety in Poland. As they attempt to maintain their friendship, the political divide between them drives them even further apart.

Finally, *Box Hill* (2020)⁹ by Adam-Mars Jones features Colin, who looks back on his complicated relationship with Ray, an older biker he meets at Box Hill on his 18th birthday in

⁷ Sarah Winman, *Tin Man*, London: Tinder Press, 2017.

⁸ Tomasz Jedrowski, *Swimming in the Dark*, London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021.

⁹ Adam Mars-Jones, *Box Hill*, London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2020.

1975. After their encounter at Box Hill, Ray takes him to his apartment, where he falls into an intense and willingly submissive relationship. Colin, insecure about his appearance and tired of being bullied, is grateful for Ray's attention. Although the relationship is abusive, Colin reflects on it through rose-coloured glasses, framing it as merely a dominant/submissive one. The pair continues this relationship for nearly six years until Ray dies in a motorcycle crash. After his death, he realised how little he truly knew about Ray.

1.1 This research

These five novels all share a retrospective narration of a once impactful and influential homosexual affair, set in various European contexts from the 1960s to 1990s. These queer narratives illustrate how society determines and represses their relationships and identities. Sociologist Ken Plummer describes such stories as narratives of *exclusion*: usually unheard or untold, in contrast to dominant, heteronormative stories.¹⁰ These power dynamics are visible not only through its context but also through their narration. As each novel is narrated via the protagonist's perspective looking back on a significant period of their life, they hold power over the story and their characters. This results in an underrepresentation and exclusion of the other. In terms of narration, these stories then also portray a type of *narrative exclusion*. Since the protagonists show the privileges of narrating their own stories, I will refer to it as "narrative privileging" throughout this research.

This thesis will thus analyse how narration, or narrative privileging, contributes to the shaping of narrative exclusion, and how societal power influences the relationships in each of the five novels. This introduction has already introduced the novels and central issue of this research and will further continue to outline a literature review of its previous research, discuss the research question and sub-questions, and clarify the theoretical framework and methodology to conduct this study effectively.

1.2 Literature review

This literature review will outline the research on narrative power, queer theory, narratology, and previous research on the novels *Call Me by Your Name* and *Swimming in the Dark* to provide a comprehensible understanding of the state of research with regard to this research.

¹⁰ Ken Plummer, *Narrative Power: The Struggle for Human Value* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), 68.

Since no research has been conducted on *Lie with Me*, *Tin Man*, and *Box Hill* yet, existent research on the selected novels therefore remains limited.

1.2.1 Narrative Power

Narrative power can be found in all five of the queer novels through its context and narration. Ken Plummer uses a sociological approach to explain narrative power. In his book *Narrative Power: The Struggle for Human Value* (2019),¹¹ Plummer states that power shapes narrative and narrative shapes power. The relation between power and stories is already discernible in his book *Telling Sexual Stories: Power, Change, and Social Worlds* (1995),¹² in which he argues that stories are part of a political process: the process that distributes control and thus affects power relations of domination and subordination. He states that “the power to tell a story, or [...] to not tell a story, under the conditions of one’s own choosing, is part of the political process.”¹³ In *Narrative Power*, Plummer also uses the concept of *narrative exclusion* as part of locational power: stories that tell narratives of often excluded, marginalised groups, but also the exclusion of these stories by mainstream narratives. He also conceptualises *narrative othering*, meaning that in narratives, the marginalised (out-group) are considered the “other” by the “in-group” (dominant group).¹⁴

Similar to Plummer is Hanna Meretoja’s theory on narrative and power in her book *The Ethics of Storytelling: Narrative Hermeneutics, History and the Possible* (2017).¹⁵ Instead of a sociological approach, Meretoja takes on a theoretical approach and focuses on the ethics and hermeneutics of narratives, both of which are interrelated. Although Plummer states not to be concerned with fiction, Meretoja explicitly points out the importance of the hermeneutics of fiction. Meretoja proposes that narrative itself should be studied as the form instigates interpretation but also makes us contemplate the ethics of narratives. She uses the concept of *the sense of the possible*, which means that narratives can expand the view of the world and therefore enhance self-reflexivity.

Similar to Plummer and Meretoja, Peter Brooks argues the importance of narratives but also the misuse of these in *Seduced by Story: The Use and Abuse of Narrative* (2022). Like

¹¹ Ken Plummer, *Narrative Power: The Struggle for Human Value* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019).

¹² Ken Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories: Power, Change and Social Worlds* (London: Routledge, 1995).

¹³ Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories*, 26.

¹⁴ Plummer, *Narrative Power*, 72.

¹⁵ Hanna Meretoja, *The Ethics of Storytelling: Narrative Hermeneutics, History and the Possible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

Meretoja, Brooks focuses on literary fiction, stating that with its power comes deceit. He mainly argues that narratives can take on a constitutive role to reality, whereby fiction can be perceived as reality, therefore leading to narrative abuse or seduction. To avoid this, Brooks utilises narratology to analyse fictional works. In the first two chapters, he explores how narration contributes to the limitations and reliability of stories. He further states that “fiction-making is a form of play that is crucial to understand our place in the world” and makes us more empathetic.¹⁶ However, if stories allow us to imagine and create other worlds, we should do that critically so as not to let stories seduce us or lead to dangerous misconceptions of reality. Although writing similarly to Plummer, Brooks narrows its scope concerning narrative power and writes less theoretically than Meretoja.

1.2.2 Queer Theory

Queer theory has been criticised, built on, and adapted throughout the years. Michel Foucault’s theory will be discussed firstly, to make sense of the most recent queer theories today. One of Foucault’s most influential theories can be found in his work *The History of Sexuality* (1978),¹⁷ which many scholars have criticised and built on. Foucault employs “the repressive hypothesis” to argue his points, the belief that sexuality and the discussion of it were repressed over the past centuries. He therefore postulates that sexuality relates to power in a sense that, through systems of power, sexuality is produced by defining and controlling it. The key argument is that, according to Foucault, sexual identities are constructed because of society. Although he never considered his theory as “queer theory,” many theorists have used it in scholarly debates surrounding queer theory.

For instance, Judith Butler expands on Foucault’s statements by utilising them as a framework in her book *Gender Trouble* (1990).¹⁸ Instead of commenting on power and sexuality, Butler applies his theory of power to gender. Firstly, Butler builds on the fact that power not only produces gender, but is constructed by society, it becomes a social construction and is therefore not seen as a biological fact. Because of the fixed ideas on gender, it creates the “idea of gender.” In Butler’s view, gender is therefore constructed by “a series of acts,” a concept she refers to as “gender performativity.”¹⁹

¹⁶ Peter Brooks, *Seduced by Story: The Use and Abuse of Narrative* (New York: New York Review Books, 2022), 119.

¹⁷ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Translated by Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976).

¹⁸ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1999).

¹⁹ Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988), 523. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3207893>.

Another theorist who has contributed to queer theory specifically is Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. In her book *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990),²⁰ she builds on and critiques Foucault's theory by focusing on knowledge and power and the construction of sexuality, thus moving away from Butler's gender theory. At the centre is the term "closet," which states the importance of secrecy or revelation of one's sexual identity and how it shapes identity in society.

Other, relatively more recent works of queer theory are, for instance, Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (2006). Ahmed takes on an interdisciplinary approach, using phenomenology to connect with queer and race theory to explain the body and its orientation to objects. More specifically, she aims to offer an approach that contemplates "how the bodily direction 'toward' objects shapes the surfaces of bodily and social space."²¹ Ahmed uses concepts such as "lines," arguing that "in line" means adherence to normative norms, whereas queer sexual orientations are being "out of line." To elucidate her concept, she builds on Butler's theory of performativity. She further connects this concept to the Orient and otherness as part of race theory.

Another theorist, however, provides a model of queer criticism by highlighting the negative emotional dimensions, such as loss and shame, of queer life that are often excluded in the "progress" of lesbian and gay politics. In her book *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (2009), Heather Love challenges the "positive genealogy of gay identity" as is often portrayed in queer narratives, stating that other emotions such as melancholia are essential for understanding the historical queer experience.²² Love draws on several texts from the 19th and 20th century by authors like Walter Pater, Willa Cather, Radclyffe Hall, and Sylvia Townsend Warner, to show how "backward" feelings are manifested in queer literature.

1.2.3 Narratology

Theory on narratology and narratological devices are perpetually being researched, criticised and adapted. A few influential theorists within the field of narratology are, for instance, Franz Stanzel, Gérard Genette, Mieke Bal and Monika Fludernik. To analyse the narrator's power, it is crucial to outline how this narratological device has further developed.

²⁰ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (California: University of California Press, 1990).

²¹ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 68.

²² Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 32.

In Stanzel's *Narrative Situations in the Novel* (1971),²³ he describes three types of narrative: authorial, first-person, and figural narrative. At the core of his theory is mediacy: how the narrator is involved in the story. Narratives are mediated in either the teller mode or the reflector mode, where one is the teller of the story and the other is one of the characters in the novel (thus generating the illusion of immediacy) respectively.²⁴

Similar to Stanzel's theory of narrative is created by Genette in *Narrative Discourse* (1980),²⁵ who distinguishes perspective between mode ("Who sees?") and voice ("Who speaks?"). Genette uses the term focalisation to determine the mode, which is distinguished into three forms: internal, external and zero focalisation. Voice can either be in homodiegesis (first-person) or heterodiegesis (third-person). Genette thus omits the possibility of a second-person perspective. The narrative level is divided into extra- (narrator exists outside the narrative), intra- (narrator exists inside the narrative) or metadiegetic (a story within a story; a character tells a story to another character). Genette also uses the term "autodiegetic" when the narrator and focaliser are identical, thus implying an autobiographical narrative.

Bal builds on and criticises Genette in her book *Narratology: An Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (2017)²⁶ as she has modified Genette's focalisation theory and removed zero focalisation, since it can either mean internal or external focalisation. Moreover, her use of focalisation is more defined and elaborated than Genette's.

Fludernik outlines the key theories of each theorist as mentioned above, and many more. In her book *An Introduction to Narratology* (2009),²⁷ she adds new theories in the field of narratology, mainly concerning cognitive developments such as "experientiality," arguing that it is "filtered through consciousness, thus implying that narrative is a subjective representation through the medium of consciousness."²⁸ This concept is extensively discussed in her book *Towards a Natural Narratology* (1996).²⁹

²³ Franz K. Stanzel, *Narrative Situations in the Novel: Tom Jones, Moby-Dick, the Ambassadors, Ulysses*, Translated by J.P. Pusack (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971).

²⁴ Monika Fludernik, *An Introduction to Narratology*, Translated by Patricia Häusler-Greenfield and Monika Fludernik (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), 155; 160.

²⁵ Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1980).

²⁶ Mieke Bal, *Narratology: An Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, 4th ed. Translated by Christine van Boheemen (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017).

²⁷ Fludernik, *An Introduction to Narratology*.

²⁸ Fludernik, *An Introduction to Narratology*, 109.

²⁹ Fludernik, Monika. *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology*. London: Routledge, 1996.

1.2.4 Previous research on this corpus

Even though plenty of works on narrative authority in literature can be found, none of the existing research delves into the power of first-person narration and its power of storytelling, particularly in terms of the agency over what is told and known of the secondary characters in the story.³⁰ Additionally, no research has been conducted on combining these concepts with queer narratives.

When it comes to research on my selected novels, there is already existent research on *Call Me by Your Name*. Remarkably, research on Luca Guadagnino's film adaptation can be found in greater quantity than the original novel by Aciman. An example is Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover's article "Untimely Desires, Historical Efflorescence, and Italy in *Call Me by Your Name*," in which they question whether the film is authentically Italian and portrays true queer identity. In particular, they discuss the inauthentic representation of the characters in terms of their cultural values, but also the inaccurate portrayal of queerness, as the film was supposed to be deemed "beautiful" and therefore lacked the historical and political awareness of the time.³¹ Rigoletto also comments on Galt and Schoonover in "Universality, Difference, and Spectrality in *Call Me by Your Name*," where Galt and Schoonover critique the expectation for queer films to feature explicit and visible intimate scenes between queer couples, as a way to meet Western expectations of queer cinema.³² Although Rigoletto agrees with them that this would not be suitable to all queer narratives, he also argues that the film portrays a sort of anxiety towards the visibility of queer intimacy and same-sex desire, and should therefore have shown more intricacy of Elio and Oliver's relationship. Other research on the film primarily concerns its queer representation, space, and tourism.³³

An article that concerns Aciman's novel in terms of narration is Ann Catherine Hoag's "Summertime: Time, Narrative and Queer Futures in Aciman's *Call Me by Your Name*," which

³⁰ These works explore narrative authority, for instance: Daniel P. Gunn, "Free Indirect Discourse and Narrative Authority in 'Emma,'" *Narrative* 12, no. 1 (2004): 35–54. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20107329>;

Gania Barlow, "A Thrifty Tale: Narrative Authority and the Competing Values of the Man of Law's Tale," *Chaucer Review: A Journal of Medieval Studies and Literary Criticism*, *The* 44.4 (2010): 397–420;

³¹ Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover, "Untimely desires, historical efflorescence, and Italy in *Call Me by Your Name*," *Italian Culture* 37.1 (2019): 64–81.

³² Sergio Rigoletto, "Universality, Difference, and Spectrality in *Call Me by Your Name*," *JCMS: Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* 62.4 (2023): 57–79.

³³ Other works which are not explicitly mentioned here include:

Joshua J. Branciforte, "A Critique of Mascquerade": Homotribalism and *Call Me by Your Name*," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 28, no. 1 (2022): 55–86;

Arianna Avalle, "Elio and Oliver's Romantic (Grand) Tour: Gender, Genre, and Media-Induced Tourism in *Call Me by Your Name*," *The Journal of American Culture* 46, no. 4 (2023): 302–7.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/jacc.13498> ;

Iraboty Kazi, "Almost Heaven: *Call Me by Your Name* as a Queer Earthly Paradise," *South Central Review* 39, no. 1 (2022): 52–63.

explores narrative and temporal structures and its play with the past and present in the novel.³⁴ Frederick S. Roden focuses on the novel's religious significance in his article "Queer Jewish Memory: André Aciman's *Call Me by Your Name*," by concentrating on Jewish memory in regard to queer temporality and futurity.³⁵ Concerning *Swimming in the Dark*, the novel has been included in *Polish Literature as World Literature* by Piotr Florczyk and K.A. Wisniewski, in which Ela Przybyło argues the novel's importance to world literature by analysing its "Polish exile, diaspora and queerness."³⁶ Furthermore, it has been used as a case study in "New Polish Queer Literature and its Anglosphere Reception" by Piotr Sobolczyk to examine the portrayal of Polish queer lives in communist society and analyse its historical accuracies and stereotyping in the novel.³⁷ There is no research on *Tin Man*, *Lie with Me*, and *Box Hill*, possibly because they have been recently published.

1.3 Research question and outline

As outlined in the literature review, previous research shows that narration within narrative and sexuality in queer fiction has been widely researched individually. In queer novels like *Call Me by Your Name* and *Swimming in the Dark*, themes such as queer identity and representation are mostly researched, as well as its (in)accuracies and inauthenticity of cultural and historical contexts. None of the aforementioned research has thus considered exploring these case studies regarding themes such as the power of narration and power dynamics within queer relationships. This research therefore aspires to offer new insights into the combination of narrative power, narratology and queer fiction by examining how narration contributes to the shaping of power dynamics within and outside queer relationships.

By researching these novels, this thesis sheds light on stories about groups that are still underrepresented, therefore hopefully providing a better understanding of their complexities and oppression by society. They also depict hardships of queer relationships in the past and across different countries because of its multiple levels of power dynamics within and outside these relationships. By examining literature of marginalised groups – specifically the queer community – this thesis explores how queer fiction, already an achievement of queer

³⁴ Ann Catherine Hoag, "Summertime: Time, Narrative and Queer Futures in Aciman's 'Call Me by Your Name,'" *Imaginaires* 24 (2022): 48-66.

³⁵ Frederick S Roden, "Queer Jewish memory: André Aciman's *Call Me By Your Name*," *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 18.2 (2019): 194-211.

³⁶ Ela Przybyło, "Swimming Queer: Moving with Contemporary Polish Queer Literatures," in *Polish Literature as World Literature*, ed. Piotr Florczyk and K.A. Wisniewski (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022): 163.

³⁷ Piotr Sobolczyk, "New Polish Queer Literature and its Anglosphere Reception," *Lambda Nordica* 27.2 (2022): 71-89.

emancipation, not only challenges dominant (heteronormative) narratives but also engages with complex power relations within and outside of queer relationships.

To examine how these power dynamics take shape in the queer novels *Call Me by Your Name*, *Lie with Me*, *Tin Man*, *Swimming in the Dark*, and *Box Hill*, this thesis aims to answer one central question: “How does the narration contribute to the shaping of *narrative exclusion* in contemporary novels set in the recent past and in various European cultural contexts that represent love affairs between two men?” In order to do so, the case studies’ close-reading analyses are divided into two thematic chapters.

The first thematic chapter (chapter 2) will attempt to answer the sub-question “How does, on a diegetic level, power imposed by society shape the power dynamics of the relationship?” I will study ways society, as presented within the narrative, imposes power on the relationship, particularly focusing on the power dynamics that are caused outside the relationship, but become detectable within the relationship. This will be scrutinised through the characters’ behaviour, experiences and decisions in the five novels, and how society controls these actions, thereby affecting their exclusion.

The second thematic chapter (chapter 3) concentrates on the power dynamics within the relationship between the two men and will question: “How does the narration contribute to the shaping of ‘narrative privileging’?” The focus will lie on its narration/focalisation and the power the protagonists hold via their limited perspective of the other and the relationship. More specifically, the second chapter will research the stories via “narrative privileging,” meaning that its perspective shows privilege over the story and is able to exclude the secondary characters. This will be thoroughly examined by discussing how the narration/focalisation in particular contexts (especially ones that contain (missing) information of the other) contributes to the shaping of narrative privileging. This chapter will further consist of another sub-chapter which leaves room for interpretations on the findings of the analyses, thereby also focusing on the novels’ position within the field of queer fiction.

This thesis aims to answer these questions by arguing that the five selected novels present two types of power relations. Therefore, I expect that one type of the power relations becomes notable through the ways in which the characters’ identity, background, and behaviour are affected by the societal circumstances at the time and place, and how these, in turn, create certain power dynamics within the couples. The other will be further scrutinised through the narratological devices of narration and focalisation, and how these contribute to the shaping of “narrative privileging”: the privileges of the narrator/focaliser in controlling the story and information of the other. Power dynamics are established outside of the relationship

due to societal influence and pressure, but also within the relationship via its narration, due to the privileges of the narrator. Both power dynamics therefore cause the exclusion of the relationship and the secondary characters within it. The key findings, critical reflection, and concluding answer will be given in the last chapter of this thesis, along with suggestions for further research.

1.4 Theoretical framework and methodology

To examine power dynamics within and outside queer relationships as presented in the five novels, and particularly the privilege of the narrator over the narrative, this thesis will employ a theoretical framework primarily based on Plummer's *Narrative Power* as an overarching concept to this research, and specifically his concept of *narrative exclusion*. Narrative exclusion pertains to the dominance of certain narratives and the exclusion of subordinated ones, meaning that narratives other than the heteronormative ones are usually silenced or stigmatised.³⁸ Queer narratives are usually part of these excluded narratives, and are written as a means of empowerment and self-expression. Plummer also touches upon the "narrative privileged," referring to white, male elites in dominant narratives.³⁹ This thesis adapts this term into "narrative privileging," which will not refer to dominant male voices, but instead to the power exerted by the narrator in the story. Regarding the case studies for this thesis, this applies to the protagonists' privilege in controlling the story and their portrayal of other.

Alongside Plummer's theory, Meretoja's theory on the hermeneutics and ethics in fiction will contribute to the theoretical framework. Her approach will assist in interpreting the texts and bring about new, narratological and societal interpretations of power structures regarding the five selected queer novels. Meretoja focuses on "how narrative fiction contributes to our narrative imagination by cultivating our sense of the possible – our capacity to imagine beyond what appears to be self-evident in the present."⁴⁰ Her concept of *the sense of the possible* will therefore be utilised to expand the understanding of queer relations and their depictions in the five novels, especially given their different time periods and settings.

Additionally, Brooks' theory in *Seduced by Story* offers essential insights into the importance of narratology to fictional works. Brooks discusses *narrative knowing*, stating that "against the plot of knowing in many a story lies the weight of *unknowing*: the sinister power

³⁸ Plummer, *Narrative Power*, 68.

³⁹ Plummer, *Narrative Power*, 66.

⁴⁰ Meretoja, 20.

of nescience.”⁴¹ Brooks underscores “the question of how the story has come to be known,” especially when it comes to intimate personal emotions.⁴² Moreover, he underlines the importance of the narrator’s reliability and manipulation through narration. Brooks thus considers the importance of perspective and the narrator’s power and reliability, as well as the application of narratology to analyse fiction.

This thesis will also employ queer theory by Sedgwick and Love. Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet* was published at the height of the gay and lesbian rights movement in the 1990s. Sedgwick primarily engages with the double-bind notion of the “closet.” According to Sedgwick, “The closet is the defining structure for gay oppression in this century.”⁴³ This concept suggests that concealing or disclosing one’s homosexual identity both has repercussions and can lead to social oppression. Additionally, Sedgwick uses “binarisms,” such as the binary oppositions of heterosexual/homosexual, secrecy/disclosure, and knowledge/ignorance in her literary analyses to show their unstable and dynamic definitions and can therefore not merely be deemed as oppositions. Her theory will be applied to create a better understanding of how societal oppression shapes and controls the relationships in the novels.

Love’s *Feeling Backward* offers a more recent perspective of queer theory, emphasising the “backward” feelings, such as loss, shame and melancholia in queer identity that are created by a negative environment and inequality. While queer literature is often celebrated, Love argues that a recognition of past hardships of queer identities is still necessary to understand the present.⁴⁴ While Love analyses her theory within modernist queer literature, I will explore her theory within contemporary queer fiction. Examining how these feelings are conveyed in the queer novels can provide a truthful understanding of their relationships, as these were, in their cultural and historical context, not socially accepted at the time.

To analyse how this narrative privileging takes place, I will use Bal’s *Narratology* as a tool to the narratological approach in chapter 3. Bal’s theory provides an updated and extensive account of narrative techniques and methods by building on previous narratology theories. Her explanations of narration, focalisation and character description are crucial to this thesis. Both narration and focalisation are closely related, but there is a distinction between the two. Bal describes the identity of the narrator as “the degree to which and the manner in which that

⁴¹ Brooks, 50.

⁴² Brooks, 33.

⁴³ Sedgwick, 71.

⁴⁴ Love, 4.

identity is indicated in the text, and the choices that are implied lend the text its specific character.”⁴⁵ The narrator can be character-bound or external, narrating about themselves as a character of the story or about others.⁴⁶ Bal emphasises focalisation, a term originally coined by Genette. She defines it as “the represented colouring of the fabula by an agent of perception, the holder of the point of view.”⁴⁷ Narration and focalisation can thus be distinguished through its textual agent (narrator), who presents and tells the story, and the focaliser, the one who perceives through the eyes of the character. Bal distinguishes between internal and external focalisation, meaning that the former occurs when the character is present as an agent in the story, while the latter involves an anonymous agent outside the story. Internal focalisation, or character-bound focalisation, thus also has access to the character’s mind, internal monologues and thoughts, by perceiving through their point-of-view. In this thesis, Bal’s theory will be applied to analyse how narrators in the novels tell the story, indicating that it is usually the older self looking back and commenting on the past. The past is perceived through the eyes of their younger self, making the younger self the focaliser. As the narrator and focaliser, the protagonists have agency over describing other characters, which is why character description is imperative to the narratological analysis.

Creating a framework that incorporates the theory of narrative power, queer theory, and narratology, this thesis aims to provide a comprehensive close-reading of five queer novels and the power dynamics visible in- and outside love affairs. The analysis will examine various passages that reveal societal power and its effects, such as how the relationships become secret, separates the other, or generates any other hardships. To explore how narrative privileging takes place, this study will analyse passages that either include or exclude relevant information about the other character, and ways in which the protagonists control the storytelling. Narratological theory will be applied as a tool to scrutinise this phenomenon in depth, examining who narrates or focalises and how they hold power over character description, and in turn how these narratological techniques shape power and exclude the other. Finally, this thesis will consider the novels’ position within queer fiction by investigating how they challenge or adhere to dominant, heteronormative narratives.

⁴⁵ Bal, 12.

⁴⁶ Bal, 13.

⁴⁷ Bal, 12.

Chapter 2: Societal power and the shaping of power dynamics

2.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to answer the sub-question how power imposed by society shapes the power dynamics in the relationship of the selected five queer novels. To do so, I will approach a close-reading analysis, which includes concepts of queer theory by Love, considering how “backward” feelings come to the fore. Additionally, Sedgwick’s theory of the “closet” will be considered. Sedgwick’s “binarisms,” such as knowledge/ignorance and secrecy/disclosure, will be utilised in the analysis to demonstrate how they can be applied to the couples’ power dynamics. The use of Sedgwick’s binarisms will guide the analysis to illustrate how these represent nuanced interpretations of queer relationships rather than the simplistic oppositions they initially suggest. In this chapter’s conclusion, the analysis will be supported by the overarching theories related to narrative power, *narrative exclusion*, *the sense of the possible*, and the use and abuse of narratives, as theorised by Plummer, Meretoja, and Brooks, respectively. This chapter will thus conclude with a brief reflection on the novels’ narrative power.

2.1.1 *Call Me by Your Name*

In Aciman’s *Call Me by Your Name*, the power dynamics between Elio and Oliver are shaped by their background, upbringing, and social restraints and expectations that refrain them from openly engaging in a relationship.

The question of who initially held power in the relationship remains unclear since the reader is only informed through Elio’s limited, retrospective narration of his past with Oliver. Elio himself is uncertain of when *it* started, alluding to his desire for Oliver or perhaps their first moment of flirtation.⁴⁸ Later, we learn that Elio misinterpreted Oliver’s early intentions when they were playing tennis, and Oliver attempts to massage Elio to hint at a first touch of desire. Elio wrenches from his touch, and later realises that “the despair aimed at myself must have given my features something bordering on impatience and unspoken rage.”⁴⁹ Oliver later confesses that Elio’s reaction at that moment was a sign of suppressing his desire: “I touched you. Just a way of showing I liked you. The way you reacted made me feel I’d almost molested

⁴⁸ Aciman, 5.

⁴⁹ Aciman, 17.

you. I decided to keep my distance.”⁵⁰ When Elio verbally, but implicitly, confesses his feelings towards Oliver, Oliver becomes aware of their mutual attraction but remains cautious, possibly due to heteronormative expectations of their surroundings and his home environment:

‘I wish I hadn’t spoken,’ I finally said.

I knew as soon as I’d said it that I’d broken the exiguous spell between us.

‘I’m going to pretend you never did.’ [...]

‘Does this mean we’re on speaking terms - but not really?’

He thought about it.

‘Look we can’t talk about such things. We really can’t.’⁵¹

Throughout the novel, Oliver warns Elio that what they are doing is unacceptable and wrong, even though Elio continues to challenge him to push boundaries. Their contrasting behaviours possibly derive from their different upbringings and demonstrate the instability of the secrecy/disclosure binarism,⁵² as it becomes notable that Oliver’s need to keep the relationship secret derives from his stricter, religious upbringing, in contrast to Elio’s, who seems less apprehensive about disclosing, or openly presenting their relationship. While Elio’s parents are lenient and accepting of their son’s identity exploration, Oliver considers his luck: “My father would have carted me off to a correctional facility.”⁵³ Their actions represent the liberty and restraint in which their parents raised them. Moreover, Elio’s parents are aware of his relationship with Oliver during his six-week stay, but decide to withdraw from their presence and allow Elio to explore his sexuality. In fact, Elio’s father reveals their relationship’s bravery and openness, as he himself was not able to realise one in the past. He encourages Elio to embrace what they had, as it taught him his first love and heartbreak: “I envy you. In my place, most parents would hope the whole thing goes away, or pray that their sons land on their feet soon enough. But I am not such a parent. In your place, if there is pain, nurse it, and if there is a flame, don’t snuff it out, don’t be brutal with it.”⁵⁴

As mentioned earlier, their parents’ views are divided, which reflects Elio and Oliver’s behaviour in their relationship. While Elio usually hints at or initiates actions with Oliver, Oliver ultimately takes the first steps towards intimacy. Cautious of the consequences, Oliver

⁵⁰ Aciman, 160.

⁵¹ Aciman, 75.

⁵² Sedgwick, 11.

⁵³ Aciman, 227.

⁵⁴ Aciman, 224.

carefully moves beyond the societal constraints and takes control of the relationship. This becomes discernible in both his words and actions. For example, at Monet's bier, Elio provokes him with an "I-dare-you-to-kiss-me gaze of someone who both challenges and flees with one and the same gesture," Oliver responds with a kiss.⁵⁵ Yet afterwards, he retreats by, again, showing assurance to not slip out of control: "We can't do this – I know myself. So far we've behaved. We've been good. Neither of us had done anything to feel ashamed of. Let's keep it that way. I want to be good."⁵⁶ Their interactions also pertain to feelings of shame and despair, which Love elucidates as "backward feelings," Oliver and Elio's feelings are tied to "the 'impossibility' of same-sex desire"⁵⁷ which becomes visible through their actions.

The societal restraints and pressure on Oliver's identity become most apparent at the novel's end, when he returns to the United States and the relationship is over. A few months later, Oliver revisits the villa and tells Elio about his marriage plans. This is also the moment when Oliver tells him about his father's rejection of his sexuality and thus conforms to the expected social norms by marrying a woman.⁵⁸ This connotes that their memorable relationship was only temporary, where Oliver moved away from conventions for merely a little while before returning to a heteronormative family.

Ultimately, their first night of intercourse appears to reduce or even balance the power between Elio and Oliver. It marks a moment where their differences start to vanish, and their bond is described as becoming "one." Roden notes Elio and Oliver's relationship as becoming their "second selves," complimenting each other.⁵⁹ Yet it can be regarded as something more profound than that: their intimate relationship turns into one without seemingly societal constraints and solely focuses on them: "Something unexpected seemed to clear away between us, and, for a second, it seemed there was absolutely no difference in age between us, just two men kissing, and even this seemed to dissolve, as I began to feel we were not even two men, just two beings. I loved the egalitarianism of the moment."⁶⁰ And perhaps the most epitomic line of the novel "Call me by your name and I'll call you by mine"⁶¹ captures the significance of their power dynamics becoming equal.

⁵⁵ Aciman, 78.

⁵⁶ Aciman, 82.

⁵⁷ Love, 4.

⁵⁸ Aciman, 226.

⁵⁹ Roden, 201.

⁶⁰ Aciman, 131-132.

⁶¹ Aciman, 134.

Finally, a noteworthy symbol of Elio and Oliver's interconnection is fruit. As noted by Roden, it symbolises "pleasure and fecundity thwarted."⁶² Roden connects Elio's masturbation into a peach to queer futurity, as Oliver worships Elio's bodily fluids and the past generations that it holds: "Elio weeps for the broken line of infinite generation; and for himself, soon to be parted from Oliver."⁶³ Yet, what is left unnoticed is that this moment also entails Elio's pleasure at a piece of his DNA becoming a part of Oliver: "Something that was mine was in his mouth, more his than mine now."⁶⁴ The peach then also signifies their figurative coalescence, since his fluids become Oliver's by eating the peach, thereby erasing the imbalanced power dynamics.

2.1.2 *Lie with Me*

Like *Call Me by Your Name*, *Lie with Me* employs a first-person perspective. This time, it recalls the relationship between Philippe and Thomas. The power dynamics are primarily shaped by their differences in background, family relationships, and societal pressure and expectations.

Philippe introduces himself as the "exemplary student" who has an incessant need to please others, particularly his parents. He is the son of the principal at his school, so he has been raised to study to work towards a promising future for himself.⁶⁵ While Philippe acknowledges his sexuality and embraces it, he maintains silence as self-protection to avoid any confrontations from outside.⁶⁶ Thomas' identity remains a mystery to Philippe at first, and has been defined by others due to his aloof and indifferent attitude.⁶⁷ Their personalities have both been developed by their background, class, family, and societal pressure and expectations, which become notable in their behaviour in their relationship.

Their class differences, however, ultimately determine their fate. Thomas is aware of this early on and tells Philippe that "you will leave and we will stay,"⁶⁸ recognising that Philippe has a chance of becoming successful somewhere else and he is bound to work on his family's farm. During their brief relationship, Thomas frequently emphasises the social inequality between him and Philippe, saying that "we come from different worlds,"⁶⁹ after Philippe compares his family to his, such as the similarity between his mother's miscarriage

⁶² Roden, 204.

⁶³ Roden 205.

⁶⁴ Aciman, 139.

⁶⁵ Besson, 9-10.

⁶⁶ Besson, 14.

⁶⁷ Besson, 18.

⁶⁸ Besson, 25.

⁶⁹ Besson, 57.

and Thomas' sister with Down syndrome.⁷⁰ To Thomas, it seems clear that Philippe does not recognise his privileges, coming from the middle class with the opportunities he has ahead of him, and Thomas does not. This is also notable when Philippe tries to relate to Thomas' family life. Philippe tells him that he has also milked cows once, and realises he is good at it. Thomas laughs at his remark, commenting that Philippe is "a boy of books, from somewhere else."⁷¹ Philippe later realises that Thomas perceives Philippe as someone with an open future, different from Thomas, someone whose future is determined by his family's responsibility. As Philippe creates this particular image of Thomas, Thomas might have done the same for him.

Thomas also reveals that his mother was raised a Catholic, and that "He is not a believer himself, but he respects his mother's faith and admits that he pretends to believe so as not to hurt her. It's like that. His mother needs to convince herself that her son is on the right path."⁷² Philippe believes that this may have influenced Thomas' refusal to challenge the fixed gender roles and stable relationships as practised in their household. It also pertains to Thomas' concealment, or as Sedgwick calls it "closetedness" of his true identity, as his family's religious morals cause him to be unable to reconcile with his true identity. Thomas silences his identity due to the "discourse that surrounds and differentially constitutes it,"⁷³ namely, his familial situation and religious upbringing.

Their different backgrounds also shape their opposing views on homosexuality. A remarkable example is when Philippe suggests watching *The Wounded Man*, an openly homosexual film. The film is deemed a revelation to Philippe, but Thomas is repulsed by it: "For the first time, I saw homosexuality represented on-screen in a raw, direct, and inhibited way [...]. I tell him about the trafficking of feelings, the life at the margins, the bodies that seek, press against each other violently, and then separate. [...] I feel his disgust. He says: It's a disgusting portrayal."⁷⁴ Their reactions show how their upbringings influence their understanding of their sexuality, as Philippe comes to terms with his sexuality and feels captivated by the film. Thomas is still struggling to accept his sexuality and is thus repelled by any mention or portrayal of homosexuality. Thomas' reaction exemplifies what Love calls "the contradiction of individual subjectivity"⁷⁵ regarding homosexuality, as Thomas experiences both his sexual orientation as a stigma and a form of romantic exceptionalism.

⁷⁰ Besson, 56.

⁷¹ Besson, 45.

⁷² Besson, 61.

⁷³ Sedgwick, 3.

⁷⁴ Besson, 69.

⁷⁵ Love, 3.

Because of societal pressure from their different upbringings as mentioned above, Thomas and Philippe thus delve into an imbalanced relationship of power dynamics. During their sexual moments, Thomas is usually the one who takes control. He ‘chooses’ Philippe because he knows of his sexuality, “because [he] is not like all the others,”⁷⁶ but mainly because of his premonition that the relationship will never last long, as Philippe will leave, and he is forced to stay. Philippe takes on a submissive role, both shocked but excited to have been chosen.

As such, their intimate moments together are rather rough, short-lived, and wordless. Only a few times do they communicate, and in these rarities, Philippe only knows parts of Thomas’ life. But their sexual relationship has to be hidden; Thomas insists on a secret relationship and chooses their secret meeting spots. Philippe is aware of Thomas’ anxiety about revealing his identity as Thomas hands him a secret note, Philippe contemplates: “I know how strong this fear is and also that it can’t only be the fear of being caught. It’s a fear of himself too. A fear of what he is.”⁷⁷ During their relationship, Philippe also refrains from expressing emotion or love towards Thomas, since he is afraid it will only ruin what they have, and thus follows Thomas’ orders. Thomas’s control in the relationship may serve as a boundary to protect himself from confronting his identity. This is expressed in his vigorous behaviour during their sexual activities, as Philippe realises: “I’m not sure where this need for another man’s sex comes from but I sense that on the other side of all the oppression and self-censoring that there exists an equally powerful fervor.”⁷⁸

2.1.3 *Tin Man*

The power dynamics between Ellis and Michael in Winman’s *Tin Man* remain mostly balanced throughout their brief and secret relationship, though they are affected by the roles of the female characters, gender expectations, and societal oppression.

The female characters in the book – Dora, Annie, and Mabel – are key influences on Ellis’ and Michael’s relationship, as they partly determine their behaviour and actions towards each other. Dora and Mabel facilitate the relationship between Ellis and Michael, as they both shape their identities early on. Firstly, Dora encouraged Ellis’ dream to become an artist. As she herself wants to seek freedom from oppression by her husband, it gives a better insight into

⁷⁶ Besson, 24.

⁷⁷ Besson, 38.

⁷⁸ Besson, 52.

why she would not allow her son to experience this oppression. However, after Dora's death, both Michael and Ellis feel a void. They find comfort in each other, leading to their first kiss. Ellis' father discovers their relationship by showing one of Ellis' sketches of Michael: "Look how soft you've got."⁷⁹ He then compels Ellis to quit school and work at the car plant to follow in his footsteps and later forces him to "punch the good out of [his] life."⁸⁰ Dora's death marks the end of Ellis' possibilities as his father takes control over him. This shapes Ellis' reserved attitude, which becomes notable in the relationship with Michael, since he is often unable to express his feelings towards him. After Ellis' confrontation with his father, Mabel temporarily takes Ellis in and assures Ellis of his predestined future of working at the car factory. Mabel then becomes a part of Ellis' life as much as Michael's.

Mabel also takes on an imperative role in Michael's life, as she decides to take care of Michael when his father rejects him for wearing his mother's clothes. As Michael later reflects on this moment, he realises that this was a pivotal moment in shaping his identity: "I see how decisions are made, in moments like that, that change the trajectory of one's life."⁸¹ Mabel's acceptance helps Michael embrace his identity. This explains his open and daring behaviour towards Ellis, since he is the one who initiates their first kiss and sexual act. Dora's passing and Mabel's presence in Ellis' and Michael's lives respectively, thus impacted their identity, the view on their own sexuality, and behaviour within their relationship. Concurrently, their upbringings signify difficulties of coming to terms with their sexualities, as Ellis shows an ignorance, and Michael a knowledge of his sexuality. This, once again, demonstrates how intricate a simple binarism of knowledge/ignorance can be; as Sedgwick elucidates, sexual ignorance connotes "epistemological pressure of any sort [that] seems a force increasingly saturated with sexual impulsion."⁸² This sexual oppression can emerge from anything and anywhere, and is, obviously, not created voluntarily.

Although Annie is the most influential to Ellis and Michael's relationship as she is the hinge, she eventually also becomes the one to drive them apart. Annie befriends Ellis after he delivers a tree at her house, and they fall in love. She spends time with both Michael and Ellis and the three eventually become inseparable. Through Annie, readers are given more insight into Ellis and Michael's relationship, as their responses often reveal their outlook on the relationship. When she asks Ellis about it, he remains mysterious and superficial about it,

⁷⁹ Winman, 51.

⁸⁰ Winman, 158.

⁸¹ Winman, 155.

⁸² Sedgwick, 73.

merely stating that they “might have [kissed] once, but [they] were young.”⁸³ Michael decides to be more open about what happened, although it seems unclear to him too: “we just existed in each other’s presence, because that’s how it felt. There was a safety to our friendship [...]. We just fit.”⁸⁴ Their reaction towards Annie depicts how societal pressure, especially that coming from Ellis’ father, shapes their personalities and shows their inability to express their feelings. Additionally, Annie’s presence represents a connection to Ellis and Michael, strengthening their relationship and letting them spend time together. It also disrupts their relationship, as she breaks the intimate bond between Michael and Ellis by marrying Ellis.

The brief relationship between Ellis and Michael has always remained unspoken and concealed because of their ignorance of their feelings towards one another. Confessing their feelings is complicated due to societal pressure and Annie’s inclusion. Looking back on their relationship together, Michael and Ellis remain unable to express their feelings openly, resulting in a time of nostalgia and loss towards their relationship; they both realise that what they had was special but becomes irrevocable due to their decisions. Their dynamic is an example of Love’s so-called “backward” feelings, as it associates “homosexuality with feelings of loss, melancholia and failure.”⁸⁵

Furthermore, backward feelings such as “gay shame,”⁸⁶ become prominent during their trip to France. After their first intimate encounter, Michael is aware of Ellis’ emotions: “He’ll feel shame and the creeping shadow of his father,”⁸⁷ while Michael finds their intimacy “amazing.” Afterwards, Michael confesses his love towards Ellis and Ellis’ attitude changes. It seems they both process their time together differently. Once again, this moment exemplifies their behaviour, especially Ellis’ oppressive upbringing by his father, as he cannot openly enjoy being in a same-sex relationship. That may be why Ellis processes his memories of Michael with feelings of shame and joy: “those moments from youth, when they raced back to an empty room and nervously explored the other’s body in a pact of undefined togetherness that would later bring him equal shame, equal joy.”⁸⁸ Over time, they reinterpret their romantic trip to France: “It is now a holiday of single beds and single lads, sunbathing and French beauties.”⁸⁹ Michael and Ellis maintain their secrets and keep silent about it, as they are unsure of what they actually were: “we stay away from it and don’t touch it, in case it stings. Avoidance is the

⁸³ Winman, 120.

⁸⁴ Winman, 148.

⁸⁵ Love, 6.

⁸⁶ Love, 19.

⁸⁷ Winman, 124.

⁸⁸ Winman, 63.

⁸⁹ Winman, 136.

dock leaf.”⁹⁰ Ellis was certain about his love for Michael, but never dared to express his feelings towards him to engage in a homosexual relationship openly.⁹¹

2.1.4 *Swimming in the Dark*

In contrast to *Tin Man*, the power dynamics between Ludwik and Janusz in Jedrowski’s *Swimming in the Dark* are largely created due to their opposing views on the corrupt and oppressive Polish communist regime in 1980, which ultimately causes them to separate. Janusz’s attitude towards the regime leads to a power imbalance as he takes control of their relationship, therefore also determining both futures.

After their brief romance in the countryside, Ludwik and Janusz return to the city, where the oppressive communist regime starts to control their relationship. Due to the stigmatisation and criminalisation of homosexuality by the regime, Janusz’s fear of being caught leads to the secrecy of their relationship: he asks Ludwik to keep their romance secret. This creates a power imbalance already, as Janusz conforms to the social norms and becomes privileged, and Ludwik resists the regime and is left vulnerable.

Their contrasting ideologies arise early on, when Ludwik tells him about his curiosity about the West and its freedom. Janusz instead defends the regime: he is given a proper education, gets to work for the government, and is provided healthcare for free.⁹² Janusz is convinced that conforming to the regime only leads to freedom: “See it as a game – everyone knows the rules. And if you can’t change them, there’s no point in worrying.”⁹³ But Ludwik, being educated on Poland’s dark past involving Germany and Russia by his family, embraces Western democratic ideals and protests to change its rules.

Janusz’s fear of being exposed grows and he becomes cautious of their relationship. Janusz believes that “they have lists”⁹⁴ with which they keep track of personal information. They must act as if their sexual acts are being criminalised, although there is no official law for it. His wariness further underscores society’s hostility towards homosexuality. However, it seems that either concealing their sexual orientation or revealing, “coming out,” thus has results in the same outcome: they both lead to criminalisation. They face what Sedgwick proposes as the double-bind of the “closet”: “If homosexuality is not, however densely adjudicated, to be

⁹⁰ Winman, 136.

⁹¹ Winman, 90.

⁹² Jedrowski, 61-62.

⁹³ Jedrowski, 62.

⁹⁴ Jedrowski, 107.

considering a matter of public concern, neither [...] does it subsist under the mantle of the *private*.”⁹⁵ So, as Janusz and Ludwik either keep their romance secret or disclosed, their relationship remains punishable by the government. To protect his position within the government while maintaining his relationship with Ludwik, Janusz establishes strict boundaries. Ludwik’s ideals clash with Janusz’s, and therefore feels hopeless about their situation. Reluctantly, he lets Janusz lead the relationship.

Subsequently, their divided views drive them even further apart when Ludwik notices the privileges Janusz takes advantage of, now that he has “contacts.” Ludwik also becomes more dependent on Janusz when his landlady *Pani Kolecka* is denied any medicine for her sickness and their food becomes scarce. When he asks for Janusz’s help, their disparity grows as Ludwik expresses his disgust of the regime. Janusz urges him to stop resisting: “I told you we mustn’t take risks. You want to protest? What for? To end up in prison and to be a martyr for nothing?”⁹⁶ Ludwik later discovers that Janusz’ contact is Hania who provides them supplies. Janusz fails to see “what’s wrong with taking things into your own hands and not letting yourself go under.”⁹⁷ By being in a heterosexual relationship with Hania and exploiting his contacts, Janusz secures social stability and control, while Ludwik remains socially and economically disadvantaged. This, once more, creates Janusz’s power over Ludwik. Ludwik eventually realises their power imbalance: “It disgusted me, and I realised then that your power over me went so unthinkingly far beyond the physical.”⁹⁸

Earlier in the novel, moreover, Ludwik had rebelled against the regime by participating in the demonstration he got entangled in. His act of distributing leaflets out of the window signifies both his protest against the communist regime and an emotional response to the power, shame, and betrayal by Janusz.⁹⁹ His protest becomes an accumulation of unfair treatment by the regime, Janusz’s ease to conform, and the power Janusz holds over him through his ability to fulfil Ludwik’s needs. Still after his protest, he returns to Janusz to seek comfort. Ludwik, however, already senses a difference in behaviour towards each other, as their political divide further progresses and Janusz’s relationship with Hania continues: “You had me and I had you. But it didn't feel like the other times, the first times. It felt like we were settling a score, evening

⁹⁵ Sedgwick, 70.

⁹⁶ Jedrowski, 116.

⁹⁷ Jedrowski, 166.

⁹⁸ Jedrowski, 165.

⁹⁹ Jedrowski, 138.

something out. Like we needed this, this language, this code, to know where we were, and who. And that we were both still holding on.”¹⁰⁰

Nevertheless, their relationship reaches a breaking point when Ludwik decides to join Janusz to visit Hania. During a game of hide-and-seek while intoxicated, Ludwik and Janusz get caught kissing by Maksio, which reveals their relationship.¹⁰¹ Later, Ludwik discovers that Janusz and Hania are together,¹⁰² highlighting, once more, Janusz’s conformity to social expectations and his need for security within the Party. This moment becomes the turning point for Ludwik’s departure, as he feels shock, denial and incomprehension.¹⁰³ Yet when he requests a passport, his name appears on a list – the one Janusz has warned about – with which he is criminalised for sodomy. Ludwik’s only chance to leave is by Hania’s help, and so he discloses his sexuality to her.¹⁰⁴ These moments demonstrate how societal and political power reinforce imbalanced power dynamics, ultimately leading to the failure of queer relationships.

Ludwik’s last dispute with Janusz draws on *Giovanni’s Room*, the book that created their bond in the first place. While Janusz stays hopeful now that he gained upward mobility and secured protection from the Party, Ludwik refuses to surrender to the system. Their conversation about the novel reflects their differing outlook on their relationship. Ludwik seeks solace in the book, recognising the same social and economic instability that shapes their romance. He identifies with the precariousness of a queer relationship in a repressive society, and continually compares the book to their lives to gain some kind of hope. Ludwik asks Janusz to join him by a comparison of the book: “Think of how David leaves Giovanni out of fear. We mustn’t act out of fear [...]. Remember how David feels after his decision. [...] He regrets it.”¹⁰⁵ Janusz rejects his request and tells him to stop comparing them to the book. Instead, he declares his loyalty to Poland and Hania. Ultimately, the conversation underscores their separate paths, as Ludwik yearns for truth and freedom, and Janusz refuses to confront the repercussions of their relationship by aligning with the social norms. Like the previously analysed novels, they emphasise the failure of queer relationships, where one way or another, the other conforms to heteronormative standards and expectations. It is important to turn to these feelings of “failure,” as Love states, “same-sex desire is marked by a long history of association with failure, impossibility, and loss. [This is] a historical reality, one that has

¹⁰⁰ Jedrowski, 152.

¹⁰¹ Jedrowski, 193.

¹⁰² Jedrowski, 195.

¹⁰³ Jedrowski, 199.

¹⁰⁴ Jedrowski, 218.

¹⁰⁵ Jedrowski, 211-212.

profound effects for contemporary queer subjects.”¹⁰⁶ The relationship between Ludwik and Janusz has eventually failed because of the oppressive regime, and consequently leads to their separation.

2.1.5 *Box Hill*

In Adam-Mars Jones’ *Box Hill*, the power dynamics between Ray and Colin are shaped by societal pressures which create Colin’s self-consciousness, class, age, and experience differences, and Ray’s influence on shaping Colin’s identity through his dominance and control in their relationship. These factors all lead to a power imbalance throughout their relationship. While power imposed by society plays a role, imbalanced power dynamics mainly emerge from Colin and Ray’s roles within the relationship.

As subtitled “A Story of Low Self-Esteem,” the story, unsurprisingly, pervades Colin’s self-consciousness. Colin considers his relationship with Ray as lucky and an opportunity to be seen with someone deemed “dead drop gorgeous,”¹⁰⁷ as he describes himself “short and fat.”¹⁰⁸ Due to his negative self-image, Colin obeys Ray’s orders out of fear of losing him; he is therefore willing to surrender to submissiveness. Colin constantly seeks validation of his worthiness, and rather than receiving direct affirmation, he interprets Ray’s small acts of care as validation. After their first meeting, Colin deems himself unworthy of Ray: “If somebody had held up a mirror in front of me at that moment, I would immediately have realized I had nothing to offer Ray. Ray had no possible need of this blob.”¹⁰⁹ Colin also constantly compares himself to Ray, convinced that because of his looks, Ray could have easily chosen someone better. Colin is continuously reminded of Ray’s decision to start a relationship with him, believing that “no-one else would have [him].”¹¹⁰

When Ray invites him to stay the night, Colin thinks: “Then he chose me to spend the night with him, he would have had anyone,”¹¹¹ interpreting even the smallest gestures as proof of his worth. Throughout their relationship, Colin willingly sacrifices his self-worth and rights to maintain Ray’s satisfaction. For instance, he accepts Ray throwing out his toiletries, visiting Ray’s flat only when permitted, and sleeping on the floor next to his bed.¹¹² Colin’s self-

¹⁰⁶ Love, 21.

¹⁰⁷ Mars-Jones, 8.

¹⁰⁸ Mars-Jones, 37.

¹⁰⁹ Mars-Jones, 20.

¹¹⁰ Mars-Jones, 73.

¹¹¹ Mars-Jones, 40.

¹¹² Mars-Jones, 58.

consciousness thus allows Ray to exploit Colin's "queer suffering," by removing Colin's feelings of self-hatred, self-pity and failure of accepting his sexuality and sense of self.¹¹³ Their power imbalance can be explained by Colin's internalised stigma and a longing for approval, which Ray can offer him. Thus, Colin's willingness to accept unequal treatment allows Ray to take control of him.

The class, age, and experience differences between Colin and Ray further influence their imbalanced power dynamics. Since Ray is portrayed as someone presumably from a higher class,¹¹⁴ Colin seems grateful for being included in Ray's world, from staying at Ray's house to becoming part of his bike and poker club.¹¹⁵ Yet, Ray is not included in Colin's world.¹¹⁶ This already shows Ray's dominance over Colin by only letting him partake in matters where he is useful to Ray; Colin only knows of Ray's life as a biker, but nothing of his life outside of it.¹¹⁷

Colin also looks up to Ray because of his older age, signifying that he would be more experienced. Due to Colin's naivety and inexperience, he is willing to let Ray lead the relationship and decide matters for him. Colin feels as though he should be educated on his sexual acts with Ray, and thus lets Ray take advantage of him: "Ray got me to revise my O-levels for a few minutes, and then he decided it was time for my sexual education to get advanced."¹¹⁸ Afterwards, Colin is sexually abused by Ray, but remains positive by trivialising it: "At least he was quick – I don't think he was doing it for pleasure. He made me suffer, but he didn't feed on my suffering [...]. It's just that I think this was a special occasion for him. For both of us."¹¹⁹ The way in which this power dynamic operates aligns with Sedgwick's binarism of innocence/initiation.¹²⁰ Initially, Ray perceives Colin as innocent, giving him the opportunity to shape Colin's personality and views on sexual desire by exerting control over him. Colin, in turn, submits to Ray, assuming that Ray is more experienced in sexual matters. This binary opposition is thus not as straightforward; it becomes more intricate when examining Colin and Ray's power dynamic more closely.

Once Colin becomes part of the poker club, usually to read and watch Ray, he is forced into other sexual acts with Ray's club members. He accepts his role in the poker club if that

¹¹³ Love, 106.

¹¹⁴ Mars-Jones, 119.

¹¹⁵ Mars-Jones, 52-53.

¹¹⁶ Mars-Jones, 45.

¹¹⁷ Mars-Jones, 88; 97.

¹¹⁸ Mars-Jones, 37.

¹¹⁹ Mars-Jones, 38-39.

¹²⁰ Sedgwick, 97.

means that his relationship with Ray will continue. Colin is then reduced to a shared property: “I was part of what it shared in common. All for one, and Colin for everyone.”¹²¹ Colin’s involvement in Ray’s poker club exceeds Ray’s control over him, as Colin becomes a shared object within the group. Concurrently, it appears that Colin’s willingness to sacrifice his autonomy leads to a power imbalance between the two; Colin becomes property and is merely used when needed.

Notably, Ray has more or less shaped Colin’s identity both during and after their relationship. As Colin recounts their relationship almost a decade later, his personality seems to have changed similarly to Ray’s, portraying Ray’s lasting impact on Colin’s life. Colin still views Ray as a good man and acknowledges that his love for Ray would never be the same with someone else: “You could say that he was faithful, and he was good to me. But I could never have loved someone who was only ever good to me. That was true before I met him and it’s still true now.”¹²² Ray’s impact on Colin caused an incapability to form other meaningful relationships like the one he had with Ray.

Colin also adopts Ray’s attitude by becoming more confident; Colin even takes over his attitude. One example is the portrayal of Ray as having a bold and confident attitude towards others. When a passer-by checks on their first sexual encounter in public, Ray dismissively reacts: “Do you mind? Can’t you see we’re busy?”¹²³ His tone shows control over both his environment and the people around him, including Colin.

Later in the novel, Colin adopts a similar attitude, alluding to the way Ray used to be by asserting that he is “bolder with [his] eyes since Ray.”¹²⁴ Colin has learned to show directness towards others as well, when he refers to a likeness to other bikers. He would say the words “not just in [his] head but out loud”¹²⁵ and approaches others directly, asking, “What are you looking at?” and “If you don’t want me looking, wear something else.”¹²⁶ Colin has thus incorporated part of Ray’s identity into his own. Emulating Ray’s personality suggests that the power Ray exerted over Colin has had a lasting effect later in his life. Colin’s admiration then turns into a reshaping of his identity due to their initial power imbalance.

¹²¹ Mars-Jones, 65.

¹²² Mars-Jones, 108.

¹²³ Mars-Jones, 14.

¹²⁴ Mars-Jones, 107.

¹²⁵ Mars-Jones, 107-108,

¹²⁶ Mars-Jones, 107.

2.2 Chapter conclusion

In this chapter, I analysed how power dynamics within the relationships are shaped by societal power. The analyses were supported by the concepts of backward feelings by Love, as well as the closet and several binarisms as proposed by Sedgwick to provide a comprehensive analysis of the shaping of their power dynamics. This conclusion will further elucidate how the analyses pertain to narrative power.

Across the five queer novels, it has become apparent that the power dynamics within their queer relationships are shaped by societal pressures, such as oppression coming from society, familial and social expectations, and the characters' upbringing, which highlight how these factors influence the relationship from within. In *Call Me by Your Name* and *Lie with Me*, societal, and familial expectations and norms affect the character's decisions to remain wary and secret. This, in turn, brings about power imbalance, where control and agency over the other is used as a tool for protecting their identity. Notably, Elio and Philippe's relative freedom within their family contrasts with Oliver and Thomas' need to conform to their social expectations.

Oppression from external forces is discernible in *Swimming in the Dark*, also set in the 1980s, but in Poland, where the political regime at the time amplifies the power imbalance between Ludwik and Janusz. While Janusz's background forces him to conform to the regulations of the authorities as a means to protect himself and gain privileges and control, Ludwik's resistance leaves him vulnerable. Their power dynamic becomes imbalanced due to their opposing ideologies which drives them apart. Similarly, *Box Hill* demonstrates a power imbalance between Ray and Colin, as Ray takes advantage of Colin's insecurities. Yet, Colin is willing to submit if that secures a relationship with Ray. Their relationship differs from the others through its explicitly dominant and submissive sexual relationship. In contrast, *Tin Man* portrays more balanced power dynamics, unlike the other novels. However, the novel also underscores the impact of familial and societal pressures from outside, causing Michael and Ellis to part ways due to their inability to express their feelings openly.

These novels therefore all serve as an example of narrative power and narrative exclusion, as theorised by Plummer. They show how queer narratives can both empower and reveal how they exhibit power, domination, and subordination; demonstrating "the ways lives are asymmetrical and can be dominated, shaped and influenced (sometimes damaged and exploited)" and "how, in turn, people resist and sometimes empower themselves."¹²⁷ These

¹²⁷ Plummer, *Narrative Power*, 31.

narratives highlight how exclusion takes place within their narratives, and how dominant groups can exert power over those who are often marginalised. Moreover, these stories depict the intricacies of power within marginalised groups, including how individuals can become excluded within their own relationships. By narrating stories from the past, and across different settings, these novels become a part of an ethical potential, enlarging the view of marginalised groups and depicting their oppression while also demonstrating how they, as part of queer fiction, reject heteronormative narratives; they create a sense of the possible. According to Meretoja, “narratives thematize acts of storytelling, link them to broader cultural mechanisms, and bring to light both how storytelling can perpetuate dominant social power structures [...] and how it can be an empowering means of resistance that opens an avenue to addressing the incomprehensible.”¹²⁸

The selected queer novels, as presented through their power dynamics and resistance to these power structures, thus reveal possibilities that may not have been interpreted before. Narrative hermeneutics, as applied in this chapter, uncovered how power dynamics operate within broader dominant social power structures. This chapter therefore aimed to contribute towards a better understanding of complex, underrepresented relationships by encouraging an ethical imagination and perspective-taking as a means to “imagine and understand the horizons from which others orient themselves in the world.”¹²⁹

¹²⁸ Meretoja, 25.

¹²⁹ Meretoja, 132.

Chapter 3: Narration and the shaping of narrative privileging

3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter examined how power dynamics within the relationships of the novels were shaped through power imposed by society. This chapter will explore how narration, focalisation and character description take place in the five novels, and how, as a consequence, these narratological aspects contribute to the narrator's agency over the story and the other, what I will refer to as "narrative privileging." This is made possible by the first-person perspective, causing the reader to be involved with the protagonist's thoughts and feelings, the narrator's reflections on the other and how this, in turn, shapes an image and excludes the other in the story.

Bal distinguishes a narrative on three different levels: narrative text, story and fabula.¹³⁰ Since this thesis focuses on the narration, and therefore its focalisation and the characters' descriptions, it will only focus on the levels of the narrative text and story. Bal's definitions of the narrator and focaliser, as already elucidated in the introductory chapter, will be implemented to examine their privilege and contribution to excluding the other characters.

Alongside narration, character description is an imperative textual aspect in order to investigate the narrator's privileges in portraying and excluding the other. Moreover, it will explore how these narratives, as researched through narratology, serve as an example of *narrative exclusion*, and give rise to new interpretations of a meaningful text, as will be theorised by Plummer, Meretoja, and Brooks. Similarly to the previous chapter, this chapter will explore Meretoja's concept of *the sense of the possible*, but will also include an in-depth narratological approach. According to Brooks, "pervasive narrativism dominates in our culture" and the dominance of representation and misuse of narrative should be analysed through narratology to promote clarity of thought about our desire for narrative,¹³¹ which will be researched in this chapter as well. This chapter will end with a thorough interpretation of the texts' narratological analyses in terms of narrative privileging and this corpus' position within the genre of queer fiction, followed by the chapter's conclusion.

¹³⁰ Bal, 8.

¹³¹ Brooks, 26.

3.1.1 *Call Me by Your Name*

Aciman's novel shares similarities with the other novels due to its first-person perspective. The protagonist, Elio, recounts pivotal moments from his summer romance with Oliver years ago. The story is through its narration, focalisation, and Oliver's character description, shaped by Elio's perception. To examine Elio's narrative privileging, each aspect will first be analysed separately first, before drawing an overall conclusion in the end.

Aciman employs a character-bound narrator, where the narrator's "'I' is to be identified with a character"¹³² and one that stands close to that character. Although misleading, this type of narrator usually suggests a rhetoric of truth.¹³³ Despite the fact that Elio, the narrator, is the older and more experienced Elio, his narration may not always be as plausible. His adult 'version' as the narrator is detectable when his voice shifts to a more philosophical and reflective tone, for instance: "Maybe it was for similar reasons that I would look away each time he looked at me: to conceal the strain on my timidity. That he might have found my avoidance offensive and retaliated with a hostile glance from time to time never crossed my mind either."¹³⁴ After Oliver's first flirtatious encounter with Elio, Elio reflects on his own attitude towards Oliver. This passage reveals the narrator's privileges and control in narrating information about Oliver. Readers gain access to Elio's thoughts and reflections, but Oliver cannot in any way confront Elio's interpretation. Furthermore, Elio's portrayal of Oliver is initially described as hostile. Yet, this is interpretation by the narrator can lead to false information; Oliver cannot verify or counter this. Oliver's hostility is eventually proven incorrect, as the narrator later recounts: "For weeks I had mistaken his stare for barefaced hostility." Instead, "It was simply a shy man's way of holding someone else's gaze."¹³⁵ The narrator withholds information to build suspense, which is why the narrator's interpretations may only later be falsified or authenticated.

Although narrated by an older and wiser Elio, Oliver's portrayal is mainly established through Elio's focalisation of his younger self. The story is filled with Elio's thoughts and internal monologues, which Oliver does not hear. Here, Elio also manipulates the readers implicitly, as we are unaware of how little Oliver actually knows.¹³⁶ This means that, especially in dialogues, Elio's agency over the story eliminates Oliver's possibility to react to or understand Elio's behaviour. This happens when, for example, Elio initiates his feelings for

¹³² Bal, 13.

¹³³ Bal, 13.

¹³⁴ Aciman, 17.

¹³⁵ Aciman, 159.

¹³⁶ Bal, 141.

Oliver: “If you only knew how little I know about the things that really matter.” Elio answers vaguely to the question of what things matter: “You know what things. By now *you* of all people should know,” while readers understand his intention: “if he only knew that I was giving him every chance to put two and two together and come up with a number bigger than infinity.”¹³⁷

Similarly, Elio later struggles to articulate his guilt and unease after having intercourse with Oliver:

Why was he staring at me? Had he guessed what I was feeling?

‘You’re not happy,’ he said.

I shrugged my shoulders.

It was not him I hated – but the thing we’d done. I didn’t want him looking into my heart just yet. [...]

‘You’re feeling sick about it, aren’t you?’

Again I shrugged the comment away.¹³⁸

Their conversations remain one-sided through Elio’s internal focalisation; we only have access to his mind. Therefore, he excludes Oliver from Elio’s thoughts and intentions, which in turn leads to an exclusion of Oliver’s mind to the readers.

Moreover, Oliver is excluded by its narration through Elio’s privilege to create Oliver’s image. Oliver only has agency over generating this image himself, when they are uttered aloud. Therefore, the features given to a character are in Elio’s hands. Bal only briefly mentions how the narrator can make statements about a character, but does not explicitly explain the power of the agent to attribute features to other characters.¹³⁹ This power, however, is significant to the novel’s narration. As mentioned earlier, the reader unconsciously shapes this image of Oliver through Elio’s perception. Elio often interprets and attempts to read Oliver’s mind, while Oliver cannot confront these interpretations. For instance, Elio interprets Oliver’s gaze as “obviously interested – he liked me.” Until later this gaze turns into “a cold and icy glare – something at once hostile and vitrified that bordered on cruelty.” Elio assumes: “he is going to be a difficult neighbor.”¹⁴⁰ Later, Oliver’s “try again later” is also interpreted by Elio: “He was

¹³⁷ Aciman, 72.

¹³⁸ Aciman, 136.

¹³⁹ Bal, 117.

¹⁴⁰ Aciman, 9.

criticizing me. Or making fun of me. Or seeing through me.”¹⁴¹ Elio’s mixed feelings and coloured focalisation thus shapes a particular image of Oliver; readers are therefore inclined to accept the focaliser’s vision,¹⁴² despite its unreliability.

Oliver’s exclusion is thus influenced by Elio’s narration and focalisation and the shaping of his character. Therefore, Elio’s narrative privileging allows him to share his feelings with the readers, which in turn excludes Oliver’s thoughts, opinions or responses, resulting in Oliver’s underrepresentation. Narratives thus question our knowledge of what is told; they can deceive us. Even a narrator as innocent-seeming as Elio can manipulate our perception and interpretation of others in the story.

3.1.2 *Lie with Me*

Reinterpreting the narrative text and story in Besson’s *Lie with Me* is essential to understanding Philippe’s narrative privileging. Since Besson is both the author and a character in the novel, it is important to keep in mind its autobiographical layer to the story. Philippe, the narrator and character in this novel interprets experiences from his particular perspective, which “shapes the interpreter’s evaluative and affective engagement with the narrated experiences.”¹⁴³ These experiences can explain why a specific character behaves a certain way, but also offers insight into why the speaker shares or conceals information.

Besson navigates the reader into perceiving Thomas’ character in a particular way through his narration, even though Thomas is unable to confirm these assumptions and descriptions about himself. This analysis will examine Philippe’s narration/focalisation, and the character portrayal of Thomas, showcasing how Philippe holds power in narrating his own story as author, narrator, and character, thereby having an advantage over Thomas through narrative privileging.

Considering the narrator’s reliability is crucial. The narrator, Philippe’s adult version, questions his own authenticity in the story. He acknowledges his uncertainty of past events: “if [the passion] isn’t talked about, how can one know that it really exists? [...] the other [protagonist] (me) will have nothing but my word, which doesn’t carry a lot of weight.”¹⁴⁴ Later, he still doubts whether the story is true: “I wondered if this could be a complete invention. [...] Could I have made this story up from scratch? Could I have made an erotic

¹⁴¹ Aciman, 51.

¹⁴² Bal, 135.

¹⁴³ Meretoja, 48.

¹⁴⁴ Besson, 77.

obsession into a passion? Yes, it's possible."¹⁴⁵ Perhaps this explains why it is labelled a novel, in order to account for the narrator's own unreliability. As readers, we can question what is truth and what is fiction. Philippe's narration is privileged, as only he can control and narrate a truthful account of the story.

Additionally, through Philippe's focalisation, he shares his inner monologues with the reader, excluding Thomas from this thought process. This creates a character inequality and has a manipulative effect, since Philippe is the only one forming opinions of Thomas.¹⁴⁶ Philippe shows the privilege of speaking for Thomas, therefore questioning the subjectivity of his narration. This happens, for instance, when Philippe refrains from asking about Thomas' mother, Philippe already forms his answer: "He will refuse to answer the question anyway because it's too intimate. It would require a confession, on his part, or at least introspection."¹⁴⁷ Similarly, when Philippe proposes to meet at his place the next time, he speculates on Thomas' thoughts: "I form several theories – he prefers unlikely, complicated places, a room is too expected, predictable, bourgeois."¹⁴⁸ Philippe's therefore focalisation guides us towards a particular image of Thomas.

Like in Aciman's text, Besson thus frequently uses his privilege to create a detailed yet subjective depiction of Thomas, and does so in part through his own imagination. This is perceptible early on, when Philippe assumes Thomas' personality by observing him from a distance: "He also likes his solitude. It's obvious. He speaks little, smokes alone. He has this attitude [...] this manner of not quite being there in the world."¹⁴⁹ Philippe also seems to understand Thomas' fear of being caught, creating the image of him being unable to come to terms with his sexuality: "I know how strong this fear is and also that it can't only be the fear of being caught. It's a fear of himself too. A fear of what he is."¹⁵⁰ Philippe thus constructs an image of Thomas, even though what is narrated may not have been the truth; readers would only know if Thomas would be able to comment on Philippe's narration. Employing a first-person perspective may give insight into others' minds, but as Brooks writes, "it's infrequent that this mind will fully know what's going on in another."¹⁵¹ It is then through Philippe's perception that we get to know Thomas' character, which risks providing false information.

¹⁴⁵ Besson, 87.

¹⁴⁶ Bal, 141.

¹⁴⁷ Besson, 60.

¹⁴⁸ Besson, 47.

¹⁴⁹ Besson, 18.

¹⁵⁰ Besson, 38.

¹⁵¹ Brooks, 28.

Besson's story as a reflection on relationship with Thomas already emphasises a certain power: his power to tell and share their story after all. Besson is privileged to write about his (and perhaps Thomas') life as a successful writer. Plummer would perceive this as narrative power: the power to share the story; possibly one that would have been silenced a few decades ago.¹⁵² However, as argued above, the story also involves narrative privileging by controlling the narrative and excluding Thomas, giving a subjective account of his personality.

3.1.3 *Tin Man*

Winman's *Tin Man* contains two separate parts: one told through Ellis' perspective and another narrated by Michael. These two halves provide deeper insight into both perspectives and experiences, explaining their actions and filling in gaps that remain unknown to each character. Because of their narration, we are informed of their feelings, while these were never spoken to each other. This theme, in which the things left unsaid can lead to other paths, pervades the story. Concerning narrative privileging, however, it is more noticeable through Michael's perspective than Ellis' part, as Michael's first-person perspective offers a more intimate, coloured perception of his relationship with Ellis. This analysis will therefore focus predominantly on Michael's narrative privileging to research how this narration eventually excludes Ellis as a character.

Michael's narrative privilege is evident in his chance to recount his life in his journal, while Ellis' perspective mainly focuses on his life after Michael and Annie's death. Michael's narration allows him to reflect on his moments with Ellis. While Ellis' part already outlines their relationship, Michael's perspective further explains why specific actions were taken. For instance, after their trip to France, Michael realises that the nine days in France together were the last time he truly loved someone like Ellis: "It took a while to acknowledge the repercussions of that time. How the numbness in my fingertips travelled to my heart and I never even knew it."¹⁵³ Later, when Michael has left England and broke his bond with Ellis and Annie, he comes to the realisation that he is at fault. Through Michael's perspective in the second part, readers learn what happened when he left England. In his journal, he questions their relationship: "Who were we, Ellis, me and Annie? I've tried to explain us many times but I've always failed. We were everything and then we broke. But I broke us. I know that. After

¹⁵² Plummer, *Narrative Power*, 7.

¹⁵³ Winman, 128.

Mabel's death, I never came back."¹⁵⁴ Michael's perspective creates empathy for the readers because of a deeper insight into personal life, which was absent in Ellis' part. Michael's possibility to redeem himself by his journal's narration underscores his narrative privilege.

Additionally, parts of Michael's journal are also focalised through his younger self, in which he describes his experiences with Ellis. Readers get access to his thoughts and feelings, which remain unspoken to Ellis. It creates "what-if" situations, in which we can interpret other alternative outcomes if these were uttered aloud.¹⁵⁵ When Ellis and Annie, for example, are to embark on their honeymoon and Michael is asked to join, he internally responds with: "Yes to still be part of you, yes for nothing to change, yes." But instead, he says: "I can't."¹⁵⁶

His focalisation also deepens our understanding of Ellis' depiction. As Ellis is often described as reserved, Michael is conscious of Ellis' reaction after their intimate moment: "he'll wonder what happened last night. And he'll wonder what it means he's become."¹⁵⁷ Michael's part grants him a voice which fell short in Ellis' part. His narration becomes empowered, especially because of his journal, he has found a way to speak up for the times he was previously excluded from. However, his narration can also exclude Ellis as a character, as Ellis' character is largely shaped through Michael's perception rather than his own voice.

Michael thus gains an advantage over Ellis through his narrative privileging. Compared to Ellis' third-person limited perspective, Michael's first-person account creates a greater emotional connection with the readers. Through Ellis' perspective, his experiences with Michael give a fairly objective account of what had happened, although coloured by Ellis. These usually concern a description of an event or dialogue where nearly no thoughts, feelings, or inner monologues are present. Merely a few times do we get inside Ellis' head. Once, when he misses Michael when he is away: "Life was not life without him. If only Ellis could have told him that then maybe he would have returned."¹⁵⁸ Or when he reflects on his relationship with Michael: "All of it was important, he wanted to say. You were important to me, he wanted to say."¹⁵⁹ In contrast, Michael's journal provides a personal account of his life, portraying a more intimate and subjective perspective than Ellis'.

Winman's text is the first – and last – in this thesis which presents two distinct perspectives and therefore shows how, despite these two perspectives, Michael's first-person

¹⁵⁴ Winman, 181.

¹⁵⁵ Meretoja, 5.

¹⁵⁶ Winman, 180.

¹⁵⁷ Winman, 124.

¹⁵⁸ Winman, 65.

¹⁵⁹ Winman, 64.

narration still dominates. According to Brooks, the foundation of subjectivity “(and hence interiority, inner depth, and all the rest)” lies in the act of language, and saying “I” implies a “you,” a listener.¹⁶⁰ The intention of a narrative is then a social act, seeking communication but, “it gives no special privilege to narrative.”¹⁶¹ However, I argue that it does when considering the subjectivity of language. Michael’s journal gives a far more detailed account of his inner life compared to Ellis’ part. It is therefore exactly that subjectivity which provides his privilege to narrate his story. Through his perception, the reader gains possibilities of how other lives think, act, and reflect; it contributes to *the sense of the possible*.¹⁶² Indeed, Ellis’ third-person perspective will achieve something similar, but will always create a larger emotional distance for readers.

3.1.4 *Swimming in the Dark*

Jedrowski’s *Swimming in the Dark* is written in the form of a letter from Ludwik to Janusz, mainly to elucidate Ludwik’s past and perception of their relationship. As Ludwik himself narrates at the start: “I realised now that we never talked much about our pasts. Maybe it would have changed something if we had [...]”¹⁶³ The narrative thus already presents a subjective perspective from Ludwik about Janusz, implying Ludwik’s control over narrating his story. His perspective brings about bias and limitation as his narration becomes one-sided, thereby excluding Janusz as a character.

As Ludwik writes his letter to Janusz, he is sometimes expected an answer. By narrating his story, he speaks of his own experiences, his interactions with Janusz, and his reflections. All of this is directed to Janusz, the “you” in the text. Remarkably, there are parts in the text where the narrator directly asks Janusz a question, seeking an answer – which never comes. For example, when Ludwik watches the news and sees the opposition party of the Polish regime being arrested and possibly tortured, he wonders: “are you involved? [...] Would you still defend the Party now?”¹⁶⁴ Or when Ludwik recalls spotting Janusz with Hania later asks him in the letter: “Do you remember the music? Do you remember her earrings? Are there things you’ve forgotten, or things I’ve missed out?”¹⁶⁵ Ludwik himself acknowledges his limitations of memory in accurately narrating his story: “My memory has its limits, of course. It may

¹⁶⁰ Brooks, 98.

¹⁶¹ Brooks, 98.

¹⁶² Meretoja, 14.

¹⁶³ Jedrowski, xii.

¹⁶⁴ Jedrowski, 77.

¹⁶⁵ Jedrowski, 123.

colour in the blanks without admitting to it, dramatise or revise [...]. But this is my truth right now, for better or worse.”¹⁶⁶ The narrator thus declares that the reader, or the addressee, Janusz, should rely on his narration. However, it will become evident that the story is influenced by Ludwik’s interpretation and experience with Janusz, since “like narrative and experience, memory is necessarily selective and interpretative – and it always includes forgetting.”¹⁶⁷ This will be further analysed through Ludwik’s depiction of Janusz.

Ludwik as a narrator demonstrates how Janusz is excluded from the text as a character. As argued before, this novel follows a similar pattern by excluding Janusz through Ludwik’s internal monologues, which Janusz is unable to respond to. Consequently, what happens between may have ended up differently if these words were spoken: “I had meant to ask you again how you’ve managed it, the doctor the chicken; I’d planned the questions before coming – about Hania too, especially about her. I couldn’t bring myself to ask.”¹⁶⁸ Instead, Ludwik suppresses his thoughts and feelings and proceeds to ignore Janusz’s power over him. Something similar happens after their visit to Hania and Maksio, when Ludwik runs away from their game: “‘It didn’t mean anything. It was a game. It was innocent.’ You looked at me for a reaction. *This has never been a game*, I thought, *and never innocent either*. But I couldn’t bring myself to say it [...]. I just looked at you.”¹⁶⁹ Via Ludwik’s focalisation, we only have access to his thoughts, but none of Janusz’s.

This internal focalisation also determines how Janusz is portrayed through Ludwik’s limited and biased point-of-view. Throughout the novel, Ludwik holds the advantage of attributing characteristics to Janusz, therefore shaping his identity. According to Bal, a character either mentions characteristics explicitly, which can then be named “qualifications,” or these can be deduced from the character’s actions.¹⁷⁰ It seems that, when Ludwik describes Janusz’s looks, these qualifications become less detailed and coloured, and instead more objective. Janusz is first presented as “an inherent elegance to your way of being, an ease with yourself and the world as if no fear had ever penetrated your mind [...].”¹⁷¹ But eventually becomes unrecognisable through Ludwik’s eyes: “A stranger, a man in a suit and tie, was standing in front of me. Then I saw it was you. You, looking like a different person.”¹⁷² Ultimately, Janusz’ descriptions become even more objective and detached when their

¹⁶⁶ Jedrowski, 123.

¹⁶⁷ Meretoja, 33.

¹⁶⁸ Jedrowski, 152.

¹⁶⁹ Jedrowski, 209.

¹⁷⁰ Bal, 117.

¹⁷¹ Jedrowski, 45.

¹⁷² Jedrowski, 129.

relationship is over: “You were wearing a new leather jacket, brown, with a beautiful fur color. And there was a moustache above your upper lip,”¹⁷³ Besides the “beautiful” fur colour, the description lacks Ludwick’s emotional and biased perception of Janusz. Ludwik thus distances himself from Janusz, and is therefore unable to construct a particular image of him.

Ludwik then has the privilege to narrate his perception himself, determining what information about Janusz is revealed or concealed. The way Janusz (the object) is presented also reveals information about Ludwik (the focaliser): it signifies Ludwik’s control over Janusz’s representation, where we as readers are inclined to accept Ludwik’s vision and also become more detached from Janusz’s character.¹⁷⁴ Hence, Ludwik’s narrative privileging as narrator and focaliser determines Janusz’s exclusion as a character because of his absence of inner feelings, thereby also having no say in his portrayal.

3.1.5 *Box Hill*

Box Hill is narrated by Colin who reflects on his life with and after Ray. It includes a great deal of irony which affects his narration and allows the reader to interpret its meaning. The use of irony will raise questions: will it reduce or empower our empathy toward the narrator? This narration also holds its power through its *unknowing*: “the sinister power of nescience,”¹⁷⁵ pertaining to Colin’s lack of awareness or knowledge of the events happening in the story. Colin himself may not acknowledge the severity of Ray’s actions and therefore uses a manipulative or ironic tone to his narration. Particularly when he speaks of Ray’s life, he may deceive readers of Ray’s image. For the most part, this novel’s narration emphasises Colin’s obsession with Ray as well as his own insecurities. Concurrently, it reveals how little Colin truly knows about the other. This analysis will therefore examine Colin’s privilege as narrating for Ray, where he reflects on his behaviour, while also considering how his focalisation is influenced by his obsession with Ray. It will conclude on how his narration in turn contributes to Ray’s omission from the story.

As both narrator and character of his story, Colin controls what information he shares how this is conveyed. The language he utilises therefore strongly characterises Colin’s personality. However, his comments can easily be questioned. Colin’s control over the narration usually involves how he reflects on his relationship with Ray, in which his obsession

¹⁷³ Jedrowski, 225.

¹⁷⁴ Bal, 139; 135.

¹⁷⁵ Brooks, 50.

and insecurities permeate his narration: “My value to him was my loyalty. I belonged to him.”¹⁷⁶ This reflection shows Colin’s devotion to Ray, although readers can recognise the obvious power imbalance between Colin and Ray. This is also discernible when Colin recounts his fear of being sexually abused a second time. However, he realises that Ray merely asks him to take his jacket: “I was even able to think, Just my luck, he’s going to strangle me without going to the trouble of raping me first, which shows that I wasn’t really worried.”¹⁷⁷ Through his biased perspective, Colin both acknowledges and dismisses Ray’s control over him. He has the power over his readers into thinking and feeling like him, therefore readers can question his narration’s reliability.

Although the story predominantly evolves around Ray, Colin states how little he actually knows about Ray himself: “I didn’t know what he did for a living, if he even worked. I didn’t know his birthday [...] I didn’t even know his last name.”¹⁷⁸ This lack of knowledge explains why he narrates for Ray, making assumptions and drawing conclusions for Ray, while Ray does not have the possibility to do so himself. Bal states that characters can self-analyse about their own qualifications, thereby framing a depiction of themselves. However, this can cause an incorrect judgement, and may be manipulated or deceitful.¹⁷⁹ Yet this can also happen when a narrator attributes character qualifications to others in the story. The reason why Colin is unfamiliar with Ray’s personality outside of their time together, is also formulated by Colin himself: “He preferred the subtler way of showing we were attuned to one another, well: one-way sharing was the sort he liked best.”¹⁸⁰ Therefore, he speaks for Ray and about Ray, as if he knows him inside-out. Another instance shows Colin’s assumptions of Ray’s personality, when he assumes he is not allowed to sit on the chair, but on the floor: “Of course I’ll never know whether he would actually have let me sit there, but knowing his nature better now, I think he would have. He just wasn’t interested in forcing people.”¹⁸¹ Colin’s manipulative narration as narrating for Ray may question the narration’s plausibility, as Ray himself does not have the privilege to narrate for himself.

Furthermore, even after Ray’s death, Colin continues to shape his image. He usually wonders and establishes ideas on how Ray would have behaved or reacted. For instance, when Colin describes part of Ray’s personality: “Ray was big on self-control, and he didn’t know

¹⁷⁶ Mars-Jones, 73.

¹⁷⁷ Mars-Jones, 30.

¹⁷⁸ Mars-Jones, 88.

¹⁷⁹ Bal, 117.

¹⁸⁰ Mars-Jones, 51.

¹⁸¹ Mars-Jones, 34.

when to stop. He loved rules, and he loved to break them, that was the thing.”¹⁸² Or when Colin imagines how Ray would have reacted to the AIDS crisis: “Anything he cared about was an obsession with him. I’m sure he’d have called it the Aids, though, like I do. He cared about details, and it’s logical.”¹⁸³ These passages demonstrate how Colin’s narration becomes privileged by omitting Ray’s voice and narrating about this relationship through Colin’s perception, which often includes some bit of irony. Because Ray is not given the opportunity to narrate his own story, his character is mainly shaped by Colin’s deceitful account.

Box Hill exemplifies how narration can both empower and manipulate. Colin’s role as the first-person narrator gives him power to reflect on his relationship with Ray in a way that is both personal and biased. However, since this limited narration contributes to a particular image of Ray, readers tend to go along with that image and imply that these are truthful accounts of him. As Bal suggests, “we ‘see’ characters, feel with them, and like or dislike them. These characters are only reducible to actors in a process of abstraction.”¹⁸⁴ Because of Colin’s first-person narration, readers must question how much of what is told is a true reflection of Ray and how much is a result of Colin’s deceitful, coloured perspective.

3.2 Interpretations

As analysed, narrative exclusion caused by narrative privileging also suggests several interpretations concerning the corpus’ content and their contribution to queer fiction as a genre.

Firstly, it has become apparent that the corpus both follows a similar pattern throughout their plots. As has been mentioned in the introductory chapter of this thesis already, their plots are reminiscent of Aciman’s *Call Me by Your Name*, as they all depict a love affair between two men who have been in a brief relationship which is reflected upon. They are all, with perhaps an exception to the first part of Winman’s *Tin Man*, narrated through a first-person perspective, that provide a coloured and biased perception of the other through their memories, inner monologues and thoughts. Therefore, it can be argued that Aciman’s text may have been an example text to the following four other novels.

Despite the novels’ similarities in terms of narrative privileging, they do differ in their narrative styles. More specifically, each text employs distinct storytelling techniques, revealing how different elements are central to the shaping of their narration. In Aciman’s novel, Elio’s

¹⁸² Mars-Jones, 90.

¹⁸³ Mars-Jones, 91.

¹⁸⁴ Bal, 104-105.

inner monologues predominantly shape the narrative, resulting in Oliver's exclusion as readers are fully immersed in Elio's mind. His introspective narration – his perception of himself, his surroundings, and Oliver – are most imperative to the shaping of narrative privileging. In Besson's *Lie with Me*, the focus mainly lies on the narrator's memory and the novel's genre. While I did not intend to investigate the novel as a possible work of autofiction, this aspect inevitably influences the interpretation of the narration. Here, narrative privileging is influenced by the narrator's agency as Philippe functions both as a character within the narrative and as the author outside of it. Winman's *Tin Man* provided two parts to the story, which adds a deeper meaning to its narration. Narrative privileging here is mainly determined by the fact that some aspects of Ellis' perspective are disclosed through Michael's privilege and agency as the narrator. The two different perspectives illustrate how narrative privileging through its narration *Tin Man* differs from the other novels in this corpus. Jedrowski's *Swimming in the Dark*'s further distinguishes itself through its epistolary form, as it is written as a letter addressed to Janusz. This form is essential for understanding Ludwik's narrative privilege, as the letter is meant for Janusz. This means that Ludwik, as the narrator, may expect a response from Janusz. As Ludwik initially states as well: he writes the letter to present his side of the story, he is thus also aware of his narrative privileging. Lastly, Mars-Jones' *Box Hill* narration stands apart due to Colin's significant ironic and manipulative tone while narrating his story. Colin's narrative privilege is heavily affected by his emotions and experiences with Ray, which may result in various interpretations by the readers. Therefore, while all the novels in this corpus share similar themes of narrative privileging, it is imperative to recognise how this narrative privileging emerges and how it can vary in narration, depending on the distinct narrative techniques employed by each narrator.

Concerning narrative power in these texts, it seems that queer narratives both empower queerness by centring queer relationships and simultaneously portray narrative exclusion, as narrative power structures remain notable. According to Plummer, “locational power structures narrative through hierarchies of class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, health, age and nation; and they in turn generate social exclusions.”¹⁸⁵ As has been analysed in the previous chapter as well, narrative power and exclusion on a locational level are visible through imbalanced power relations between the queer couples and the unequal treatment of queer lives due to societal oppression. However, examining the narration within this corpus reveals another hierarchy: that of the narrator and the other. Hierarchies and binaries, in which one entity dominates

¹⁸⁵ Plummer, *Narrative Power*, 66.

another, are at the heart of queer fiction's intent to destabilise traditional power structures. Usually, these hierarchies in queer fiction refer to the binary opposition between heterosexuality and homosexuality. Queer theory and queer fiction aim to challenge heteronormativity, where heterosexuality is deemed the norm and positioned "on top" of the hierarchy.¹⁸⁶ Therefore, undermining the hierarchy between the narrator and the other should then also be considered significant to queer fiction. Although the narrator's control within the narrative is not completely new to narratology studies, it is important to highlight that this control then also entails a hierarchy within the text, in which the narrator is more privileged than the other characters. Consequently, rather than subverting power structures, the novels' narration primarily reinforces power structures. Perhaps this hierarchy has not yet been destabilised in queer fiction, but in fact should be, in order to challenge dominant literary techniques.

Thus, it seems that the narration in this corpus deviates from the ways in which queer fiction 'should' operate. As queer theory and fiction's purposes towards power and sexuality are, to destabilise binaries and hierarchies, challenge the dominance of heteronormativity in which heterosexuality is seen as "normal," and above all, to reveal and subvert the social power structures and control over them,¹⁸⁷ the corpus' narration performs quite the opposite. This has already become visible through the remaining hierarchy between the narrator and other characters, but also through the consistent use of retrospective first-person narration. Moreover, in this corpus, the narrator often questions their own reliability. This is most prominent in *Lie with Me* and *Swimming in the Dark*. This literary technique of the unreliable narrator is already prominent in dominant narratives and is reflected in the queer novels as well. Considering the presence of narrative power and exclusion within the narratives, it can be argued that they do not fully reject dominant narratives, and therefore may not be as emancipatory as one might initially expect.

Finally, the novels do align with Love's view on queer studies, in which she argues that exploring backward feelings in modernist queer literature, such as nostalgia and shame, that are "tied to the experience of social exclusion and the historical 'impossibility' of same-sex desire"¹⁸⁸ have been disavowed. Instead of neglecting these emotions, however, Love emphasises that they are essential to understanding queer experiences and provide valuable

¹⁸⁶ Corie Jo Hammers, "Queer" in *The SAGE Encyclopedia of LGBTQ Studies*, ed. by Abbie E. Goldberg (Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications, Inc, 2016), 906.

¹⁸⁷ Hammers, 906-207.

¹⁸⁸ Love, 4.

insights into this contemporary queer fiction corpus. Knowing that these feelings of shame and nostalgia may have influenced the narration of these narratives, in which they create biased or unreliable narrators, may give new meaning to their interpretation. In other words, investigating these narratives with an awareness of the narrator's emotions allows for a further insight into their motives and the ways in which narrative privileging takes place.

3.3 Chapter conclusion

Although narratology and (re)interpretation used to seek distance from each other,¹⁸⁹ this chapter combined both disciplines to make sense of how narration/focalisation allows the speaker to shape a character's image by the privileges given as the narrator. Additionally, it provided interpretations of the narration's influence on the text and attempted to determine the corpus' position within queer fiction by analysing how narration either contributes to queer fiction as is often written in contemporary queer novels or deviates from queer fiction's purposes.

This chapter has illustrated how its narration contributes to the shaping of narrative privileging. Despite their difference in stories, each novel presented a similar conclusion. Whether it occurs through the narration by Elio in *Call Me by Your Name*, Philippe in *Lie with Me*, Michael in *Tin Man*, Ludwik in *Swimming in the Dark*, or Colin in *Box Hill*, they each hold the power to tell their version of the relationship with the other, thereby constructing a particular, subjective, and coloured portrayal of the other in the story, which are strongly influenced by their desire, memory and bias.

This narration emphasises their power relations on a narratological level and highlights how the narrator's control over it results in an exclusion of the other characters, in this case, Oliver, Thomas, Ellis, Janusz, and Ray. This has become discernible in, for instance, Oliver's distance in *Call Me by Your Name* because of Elio's speculative narration, but also by Ludwik's agency over portraying Janusz differently over time. Similarly, Colin's narration in *Box Hill* demonstrates how his obsession and insecurities shape a manipulative and biased view of Ray, and Philippe's narration is often affected by his memory and determination in shaping Thomas' image. *Tin Man*, however, questioned its narrative privileging due to its focus on two perspectives but eventually led to Michael's overall control over his story because of a more personal, detailed first-person perspective. Ultimately, these novels reveal how the power and

¹⁸⁹ Meretoja, 7.

limitation of narration are present in different narratives. While it allows them to provide an insightful and deeply personal and emotional account of their perspective, it can also lead to an exclusion of their counterparts, as they will always remain dependent on the narrator's power over them.

Moreover, these analyses led to several interpretations. The differences in narration across the novels show how narrative privileging can shape different meanings to their narratives. Through narrative privileging, the analyses demonstrated how the novels still partially adhere to dominant, heteronormative texts through their hierarchy, unreliable narrators, and retrospective first-person narration.

These narratives therefore pertain to narrative exclusion through its narration as well. Instead of the overall exclusion of subordinated narratives, these narratives demonstrate how voices, other than their protagonists', remain unheard. Plummer's explanation of *narrative exclusion*, where "the subordinated, are rendered unheard, given no space to speak and no credibility if they do,"¹⁹⁰ can therefore also be applied to its exclusion of other characters by the narrator. It is important to note that narrative exclusion is already present within subordinated narratives. Nevertheless, these narratives have shown that the narration also amplifies and contributes to narrative exclusion, in which the narrator's agency creates a different power over the story.

In addition to that, these narratives make us question their plausibility and reliability, as they are prone to (unconsciously) manipulating a narrative through a biased perspective of the protagonist. They exemplify how narratives therefore both have the impact to empower or deceive, or as Brooks puts it, to 'use and abuse' their narrative. It is why these narratives were critically researched: to reveal how narratives, however powerful, can deceive the reader into what the narrator is convinced to be the truth. It leaves us to question "how we learn what we claim to know."¹⁹¹

Lastly, these narratives, in terms of narration, contribute to sense of the possible, since they are open to (re)interpretation and give different meanings to their power as narratives and the power of narrators. They allow readers to reconsider how these narratives entail possibilities on different levels, context-wise and narratological, and how these offer new perspectives to reading narratives.¹⁹²

¹⁹⁰ Plummer, *Narrative Power*, 70.

¹⁹¹ Brooks, 52.

¹⁹² Meretoja, 9.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

4.1 Key findings

To trace how narrative privileging contributes to *narrative exclusion*, as defined by Plummer, in my corpus consisting of queer novels *Call Me by Your Name*, *Lie with Me*, *Tin Man*, *Swimming in the Dark* and *Box Hill*, I have attempted to answer the main research question of this thesis, namely, how the narration contributes to the shaping of narrative exclusion in these five contemporary queer novels set in the recent past and in various European cultural contexts. To do so, I structured the analyses into two chapters, one that covered research on the power dynamics between the love affairs of the two men as imposed by society, and one that explores the power and privileges between the narrator and other characters in the relationship and thus primarily focuses on their narration.

Chapter 2, the first analysis chapter after the thesis introduction, focused on the sub-question: “How does, on a diegetic level, power imposed by society shape the power dynamics of the relationship?” It demonstrated how power permeated the five novels in a fashion that also influenced the power dynamics between the couples, as supported by narrative power and queer theory. It has been found that in, for instance, *Call Me by Your Name* and *Tin Man*, power dynamics between the love affairs eventually remain fairly balanced, even though they were (initially) shaped by societal and familial oppression. In the other three novels, it has become evident that each portrays an imbalanced power relationship, which is mostly influenced by oppression from society and therefore also discernible in how these relationships further developed.

Chapter 3 attempted to answer the sub-question: “How does the narration contribute to the shaping of ‘narrative privileging’?” Therefore, I primarily focused on the influence of narration on the power within the narrative. To elucidate how power exerted by the narrator over the other occurs, I used the concept of “narrative privileging.” Bal’s narratological explanations for narration, focalisation, and character development were used as a guidance to this close-reading analysis. In this chapter, I concluded that each novel illustrates the narrator’s power over the story and the story, thereby being in control of what is told and how the other is portrayed to the reader. The additional interpretation sub-chapter showed that, although this corpus is part of queer fiction, they in part persist to conform to dominant narratives through their form and narration. They do not entirely reject it, as can be concluded from Chapter 2,

where the imbalanced power dynamics in several of the novels have proven a continuation of hierarchy and subordination in the narratives.

To answer the main research question, both chapters thus prove the importance of narrative power and narrative exclusion, illustrating how power perpetuates in society, within and beyond queer relationships, and through narrative privileging. The selected novels demonstrate not only how they challenge and subvert these dominant, heteronormative narratives by representing queer experiences, but also demonstrate a resistance to the very challenges posed by queer narratives through their storytelling. These challenges show the importance of queer theory and fiction in deconstructing heteronormativity. They expose the system that continues these hierarchical binaries and reject and subvert this normativity by (re)presenting queer lives as one that should not conform to normative norms.

This phenomenon is evident across various contexts, as explored in previous chapters. The corpus, alongside its theoretical framework, however, indicates that despite narrating queer stories and thereby resisting dominant texts through their queer characters and relationships, the novels still in part adhere to normative expectations. This is visible in how the characters interacted with one another, and how societal pressure still shaped their identities and their relationships as a result, often leading to a return to heteronormative norms by seeking safety in heterosexual relationships. Only *Box Hill* shows an exception of how societal power leads to conformity of heteronormativity, as their queer relationship is openly presented.

Remarkably, the novel's narration influences how narrative privileging occurs across the five novels, as several different elements lead to a difference in the ways narrative privileging is developed. Regarding the novels' positions within queer fiction in terms of their narration, however, they show how they still do not entirely reject dominant texts. They adhere to dominant texts through a continuing hierarchy between the narrator and the other, by employing a retrospective first-person perspective, and making use of unreliable narration, all narratological aspects that can be found in dominant texts.

4.2 Critical reflection

Research on how these power structures take place in the various texts was supported by a theoretical framework consisting of Plummer, Meretoja, and Brooks' theories on the power of narrative, and queer theory by Love and Sedgwick. While some were proven fruitful in illustrating how their theories pertain to the analyses, other theories seemed less applicable. For instance, when considering Plummer's theory on *narrative exclusion*, only a brief sub-chapter

contained information on how this concept is elucidated. In this thesis, much of his theory is therefore mainly utilised as a broad definition in researching how the concept is visible in the multiplicity of the texts. Indeed, narrative exclusion, as Plummer would define it, is discussed throughout the book, but remains superficially explored. Especially in regard to how this exclusion occurs within queer fiction is left underexplored in Plummer's chapter and mentioned briefly in other chapters, while this concept seems highly applicable to queer fiction, as can be concluded from this study. Although Plummer's concept has been used as an overarching theory throughout this thesis, this concept can, and should be further explored in terms of queer fiction in order to provide a strong framework on its own in further research.

Also used as overarching theories within this thesis were Meretoja's concept of *the sense of the possible* and Brooks' theory on the use and abuse of narratives. Meretoja's concept provided further insights into how queer fiction, such as my corpus, creates a deeper insight into lives and histories that may be unknown to some readers. Like Plummer's theory, her concept helped in understanding how the novels both empower and restrain power within these queer narratives. However, as Meretoja solely explores how her concept *the sense of the possible* is applied to fiction regarding the Second World War or the Israel-Palestine conflict, the concept's applicability was only possible to use in broad terms. Indeed, Meretoja mentions that her concept also applies to the oppressed, such as queer identities,¹⁹³ and how it pertains to the limitation of possibilities imposed on marginalised groups, but does not, however, extensively discuss how this concept comes about in queer fiction per se. Nevertheless, this thesis has proven that her concept is sufficiently applied to demonstrate how queer fiction partakes in offering new insights into the possibilities of their narratives. Moreover, Brooks' theory regarding the power of narratology in fiction and thereby its use and abuse through deception and manipulation by the unreliable narrator is sufficiently explored and merely used as a tool to demonstrate how the narration can be deceitful to the reader.

Regarding queer theory as used and applied in this thesis by Love and Sedgwick, they were useful sources for gaining a deeper insight into queer lives. As has been discussed in the study of the five novels, Love's theory concerning the importance of backward feelings – negative feelings that are often neglected in the writing of modernist queer fiction – provided a better understanding of the lives of queer communities in the 1980s. Although her theory focuses on a different period, it has been useful for implementing it to contemporary queer novels. Love's theory on "backwardness" was central to elucidating how power constructed

¹⁹³ Meretoja, 93.

the relationships within these narratives. Sedgwick's theory, moreover, also provided useful insights into how the "closet" operated in queer lives back then, but can be argued to be purely groundbreaking at the time of her publication. Her theory on several binarisms or her definition of the closet, as applied in this study, demonstrate the fruitfulness of her theory. However, as *The Epistemology of the Closet* has been published almost thirty-five years ago already, it shows that queer theory has been built and elaborated on many times. Sedgwick's theory was thus not applied to provide eye-opening interpretations of the text, but merely served as a tool to create a better understanding of the convoluted queer lives in the 1980s. I was therefore also cautious of using her theory, and merely used it to explore how her publication is set within the time span of my corpus and therefore culturally relevant at the time. Undoubtedly, if one were to use a more recent queer theory to research how contemporary queer fiction that is set in the recent past, it would lead to other potential results.

Lastly, it has become apparent that there is still a lack of research which investigates narrative power and narrative privileging within queer fiction. Since the selected novels are still relatively recently published, only a small number of previous research has been found. The ones that do exist, do not contain any research on their narrative power, or the power that can be found within the narratives or through their narration. It was therefore a challenge to find an example methodology on how this power is present in queer fiction. Thus, literary theory that encompasses either queer literature, narrative power, or narratology should be combined, reconsidered and revised to offer new valuable insights into these theories.

Altogether, I choose various theoretical sources regarding queer theory, narratology and narrative power, to combine the three elements that seemed the most relevant to conduct this research, which eventually resulted in the conclusions above. However, I am aware that approaching this topic with different theory on these three elements could lead to different results.

Considering these conclusions, there thus remain limitations to this thesis due to the limited length of the thesis and approach to this corpus' analyses. Because of a lack of theory or other previous research on this topic, and particularly narrative privileging, deeper investigation into this phenomenon is necessary, which may also be applied to other (queer) fiction, or literature in general. This thesis' close-reading approach shows its limitations in relation to other relevant themes of the novels that are thus not taken into account. Lastly, I noticed that novels' interpretations on narration may be biased in regard to the research topic overall, and could be (re)interpreted differently by others.

4.3 Suggestions for further research

This thesis focused on the power within the narrative and its narration, underlining how narrative privileging shapes narrative exclusion in contemporary queer fiction that is set in the past and various cultural European contexts. During the process of writing this thesis, it has already become apparent that a number of research gaps emerged which would be interesting to investigate further.

Firstly, this thesis mainly focused on the power within a corpus that includes an array of different locations and periods. By concentrating on how power takes place within the relationship and on narratological level, this research was unable to focus on how the diverse range of cultural contexts can influence the view of queer lives. Therefore, further research into the cultural contexts within this selected corpus could be valuable. It would it be interesting to explore how power within the narratives differ per country, and how this power changes throughout the time span of these novels. Because of the queer liberation movement that emerged in the 1960s, the narratives may reveal how such movements of queer emancipation contribute to the development of queer representation in literature. Moreover, analysing how narrative power, or narrative privileging occurs within queer texts, further research should also consider non-Western texts, as these may demonstrate valuable new insights.

Furthermore, it has become evident that throughout the writing of this thesis, the novels by Aciman, Besson, Jedrowski, and Winman, all include a female character who usually remains flat, serving primarily as possible obstacles between the other, male protagonists without any further exploration. In Aciman's work, for instance, Marzia features as a potential option for Elio's sexual exploration, while in Winman's text, Annie plays a role in maintaining the relationship between Ellis and Michael, but also causes them to grow apart. Their roles show that they are imperative to how the story unfolds and significantly influence the dynamics of the love affairs between the two men, making them worth exploring in further research. Additionally, these texts thereby may question how they can be interpreted as truly emancipated within the context of queer fiction, given their tendency to neglect any significance of female roles in queer narratives.

Moreover, it would be interesting to research the role of the author when considering the narratives themselves. As is explored only minimally in this research, Besson's *Lie with Me* is considered a novel, even though the narrative is based on a period in his life in which he had a brief relationship with Thomas – at least, as Besson makes his readers believe that it is. It could pose several questions as to what extent it does hinge on his memory or fictional

elements of the novel. Novels like Besson's could be explored to better understand its affinities and/or overlap with other genres such as metafiction, autofiction or memoir.

Lastly, as already alluded to before, more research should explore the concept of narrative privileging. As this thesis only applied it to queer fiction, it could be interesting to research how this takes place in perhaps literature of other genres, or other queer fiction novels, to examine how this concept may show similar or contrasting results. It could also be valuable to explore other interpretations of the consequences of narrative privileging. As I predominantly argued that it leads to narrative exclusion, one could interpret the significance of the concept differently.

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