
Volume 22
Issue 2 *The Post Pandemic University,
Possibilities, Practices and Pedagogies: And
New Writings in Feminist and Women's
Studies—Winning and Short-listed Entries from
the 2020 Feminist Studies Association's (FSA)
Annual Student Essay Competition*

Article 2

March 2021

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Recommended Citation

Murphy, Naoise (2021). Queering history with Sarah Waters: Tipping the Velvet, lesbian erotic reading and the queer historical novel. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 22(2), 7-18.
Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol22/iss2/2>

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Queering history with Sarah Waters: *Tipping the Velvet*, lesbian erotic reading and the queer historical novel

By Naoise Murphy¹

Abstract

This essay outlines how Sarah Waters' *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) illuminates the challenges involved in doing queer history. Waters' lesbian historical novel queries the 'official' historical record and reflects on a fundamental tension in queer historical research; the distinction drawn between social constructedness and essentialism, alterity and continuity. Through playful re-enactment of the work of the academic researcher, the novel protests against being read as an authentic depiction of Victorian lesbian sexuality. Instead, it offers a postmodern metafictional response to the field of queer history, which broadens the questions we ask of the discipline. By enacting the process of historical study in this Neo-Victorian novel, Waters explores the complexities of reading for queerness in the past. I argue that Waters' engagement with embodied reality represents an innovative intervention in queer historiography. The erotic is mobilised in this novel to collapse the distinction between alterity and continuity, admitting the affective dimensions of queer research. *Tipping the Velvet* addresses the tensions between some forms of lesbian feminist theory and queer theory, demonstrating the inextricability of queerly gendered subjectivities and lesbian erotics. In this engagement with erotic reading practices, Waters explores the inadequacies of linguistic and textual representation. This essay concludes that cultural productions such as the queer historical novel reach towards a queerer historiography, enabling "touches across time" (Dinshaw, 1999) that have a crucial role to play in contemporary theorising of gender and sexuality and community-formation for queer people in the present.

Keywords: queer; history; Sarah Waters; erotic; historical fiction

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Queering history with Sarah Waters: *Tipping the Velvet*, lesbian erotic reading and the queer historical novel

I looked again at Florence, and frowned. ‘Are they French, or what?’ I asked. ‘I can’t understand a thing they’re saying.’ And indeed, I could not; for I had never heard such words before, in all my time upon the streets. I said, ‘*Tipped the velvet*: what does that mean? It sounds like something you might do in a theatre...’ (Waters, 1998: 416)

The title of Sarah Waters’ 1998 lesbian historical novel *Tipping the Velvet* is not a phrase that will be understood by the general reader. Its explicitly sexual meaning is only revealed some four hundred pages in, and even then, in a discreetly coded way: “she parted her lips and showed me the tip of her tongue; and glanced, very quickly, at my lap” (416). This episode thematises one of the major concerns of the novel; the difficulties of uncovering a lesbian past, here, in the Victorian period in England. The exchange between Florence and her lover Nancy, the protagonist, continues:

‘How queer you are!’ she said mildly. ‘You have never tipped the velvet —’
‘I didn’t say that I had never done it, you know; only that I never called it that.’
(417)

Nancy protests that her ignorance of specific terminology does not preclude her full participation in (what are understood here as) lesbian — or “tommish” — sexual practices. In moments such as this, Waters displays her keen awareness of the challenges of writing lesbian historical fiction, and of the wider but related project of writing the history of gender and sexuality: how does one name and narrate practices and identities that are not present in the historical record? Obscure terms, coded references and outright invisibility all pose significant challenges, so how should the writer in pursuit of “authenticity” or “realism” proceed?

This essay outlines how *Tipping the Velvet* illuminates the challenges involved in doing queer history, and thus, argues for the value of the historical novel as a theoretical intervention in historiographic debates. The insights gained by the reader of queer postmodern historical novels such as *Tipping the Velvet* make a compelling argument for multidisciplinary. Reading the novel as a contribution to debates in queer historiography will build on the work of Waters’ critics to unearth new interpretive possibilities and reassert the importance of historical study for processes of queer self-understanding and community formation. This essay examines *Tipping the Velvet* through literary and historical lenses in order to outline Waters’ unique contribution to queer historiography and the implications of her position for current understandings of sexual identity. Beginning with an outline of the continuity/alterity divide in queer history, I demonstrate how *Tipping the Velvet* self-consciously inserts itself into this scholarly debate. Then, the critical categories of historiographic metafiction and the Neo-Victorian novel are discussed in relation to the challenge of reading for queerness in the past. Finally, I turn to the question of embodiment in the historical novel to show how Waters deploys the erotic to collapse binaries and admit the affective dimensions of historical research.

Continuity / alterity

In her canonical 2006 essay on the use of categories of gender and sexuality in historical analysis, Afsaneh Najmabadi makes the pertinent observation that historians consider it legitimate to ask, “were there any lesbians in medieval Europe?” She then returns the question to gender in a thought-provoking way, asking instead “were there any women in medieval Europe?” (18). Najmabadi thus identifies the presumed naturalness and ahistoricity of categories of gender, in contrast to categories of sexuality. Scholars comfortably assume that “women” existed, though perhaps they were defined differently, whereas the signifier “lesbian” is more commonly viewed as a historically contingent identification. What, therefore, does the absence of a continuous, identifiable “lesbian” subject mean for the project of queer history?

Najmabadi’s example offers us a way into the well-worn debate in queer historiography; the distinction drawn between social constructedness and essentialism, alterity and continuity. Early generations of gay and lesbian/feminist historians concentrated on bringing to light historical evidence for the existence of gay and lesbian people and practices; one pioneering example is Jonathan Katz’s 1976 *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the U.S.A.* This emphasis on transhistorical similarity was heavily criticised by later generations of scholars for promoting an essentialist understanding of sexuality and erasing the contingent historical emergence of categories of gender and sexuality (and indeed, their mutually constituting effect). For example, David Halperin’s *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality* (1990) argues that it is necessary “to examine more closely the many respects in which Greek sexual practices *differ* from ‘our own’” (1-2). Fundamentally, this critique centres on a concern about imposing anachronistic categories and labels on the past. It rests on the argument that “homosexuality, heterosexuality, and even sexuality itself [are] relatively recent and highly culture-specific forms of erotic life — not the basic building-blocks of sexual identity for all human beings in all times and places” (9). This can be seen as an attempt by scholars to legitimise the study of gender and sexuality within the discipline of history at a point when gay/lesbian/queer studies were beginning to consolidate a position within the academy. Another key text in this vein, Jeffrey Weeks’ *Coming Out: Homosexual Politics in Britain, from the Nineteenth Century to the Present* (1977), firmly establishes the Foucauldian social-constructionist framework of this position. The argument in favour of the late-nineteenth century emergence of homosexuality as a category, based on the medical and psychological work of the early sexologists and on increased criminalisation, has continued to be influential for historical scholars working on gender and sexuality. The distinction between sexual acts and sexual identities is key, the latter only emerging with the category of “the homosexual”.

Though queer theory may mark a certain academic validation of the project of queer history, it also challenges the fundamental assumptions of any historical project. As Stephen Valocchi writes:

How can we uncover, describe, and critically analyze the development of “a people” when queer theory tells us that, among other things, the historical subject is inherently unstable, unknowable, defiantly diverse, and ultimately an effect of power? No longer content to recover “our” history and no longer sanguine about the meaning of a usable past, gay historiography now struggles with questions about the representation of same- sex desires: Who is the proper subject? How do we (or can we) come to know this subject? (2012: 456)

However, Valocchi also reminds us of the crucial political motivation of earlier iterations of queer social history: “to encourage a connection between present minority status and historical personhood” (458). This remains a central preoccupation for queer historians, particularly those working in the public sphere. Initiatives such as LGBT History Month create space for queerness in historical narratives with the explicit aim of promoting equality, diversity and the welfare of LGBTQ people in the present. The reclamation of queer histories provides a focal point for activism at an institutional and societal level. For example, Cambridge University Library’s “Queering the UL” exhibition linked the display of “LGBT+ related materials” to the desire to “show that our city and university are places where people can be themselves without fear of discrimination” (Lib.cam.ac.uk, 2018). And at an individual level, history can be a vital resource for queer people struggling for recognition and acceptance. Joe Galliano, the leader of a campaign to create a national “Queer Britain” museum, emphasises the personal importance of queer histories: “We see it as a place, for instance, where a young woman who has just come out to her parents could visit with them, and understand that this is a much deeper, richer history than most people realise” (cited in Kennedy, 2018).

Queer Historical Fiction

Therefore, despite queer theory’s destabilisation of the historical subject and emphasis on the historically contingent emergence of sexual categories, there is a continuing recognition of the affective dimensions of queer history. Sarah Waters, who completed a PhD on gay and lesbian historical fiction in 1995, is well aware that she is writing in a post-Foucault landscape in which historical continuity has become unfashionable:

Lesbian historians might agonize over whether women in the past had sex with each other, but if I want my lesbians in the 1860s to have sex, then they just do. [...] I do try to be sensitive to the complexity of the past, the changing nature of sexuality and the way people feel about sex and about their bodies, but at the same time, on the whole, my lesbian characters do tend to be pretty much people like me, people for whom experiencing same-sex desire means something about their identity. (cited in Mitchell, 2013: 136)

Waters views the fragmentary nature of the queer historical record as liberatory for the historical novelist. In writing *Tipping the Velvet*, her intention was never to produce a work of historical realism, but to reflect on the “patchiness of lesbian history” and create a work that “lay[s] bare and revel[s] in its own artificiality” (Waters, 2018). The novel itself protests against being read as an authentic depiction of Victorian lesbian sexuality, as this essay will show. In a special “queer” issue of the *Radical History Review*, Escoffier, Kunzel and McGarry suggest that “queer” as an analytical lens “might point the way to methodologies that broaden the questions we ask of the lesbian and gay past” (1995: 3). Linda Garber has demonstrated persuasively how the lesbian historical novel engages with the task of researching the lesbian past, the “yearning for lesbian history and the difficulty of finding it” (2015: 130). Here, I extend this discussion to argue that the postmodern historical novel, exemplified here by *Tipping the Velvet*, can effectively apply a specifically *queer* lens to history, broadening the questions we ask of the discipline.

Through the practice of writing historical fiction, Waters constructs a lively intervention into queer historiographical debates around gender and sexuality. By inventing a queer past in an

ostensibly realist novel, she invites the reader to evaluate the “authenticity” of its depiction with limited historical resources at our disposal, re-enacting or mimicking the situation of the academic researcher. Then, as the central character discovers queer communities and ways of being, the novel reflects on the availability of these categories and labels to the present-day reader. The autobiographical framing of the novel is what first alerts us to dynamics of authenticity and historical “truth”. Nancy Astley, the protagonist, is presented as narrating her own coming-of-age from later in life: “Even now, two decades and more since I put aside my oyster-knife...” (5). Direct addresses to the reader right from the opening line — “Have you ever tasted a Whitstable oyster?” (3) — create an intertextual link with canonical Victorian novels framed as autobiography, the most famous example of which is perhaps Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847). Another important intertext, Daniel Defoe’s *Moll Flanders* (1722), was part of the earliest experiments in the novel form in English, a crucial aspect of which was the purported reality of the book’s contents (see Watt, 1957).² The very existence of the novel *as a novel*, rather than the autobiography it claims to be, highlights the erasure of queerness from the formal historical record. Waters thus expresses a fundamental distrust of the historiographic project: lesbian historical fiction exists in part because lesbian histories do not exist, yet *we feel that they must*, that they have been erased. For Jerome de Groot, the value of the historical novel is in this political contestation of the discipline of history. Historical novels “seek to disrupt (to ‘queer’) the smooth running of history, to interrogate and fragment, to reveal the ethical complications of representation in order to articulate a new space of possibility” (2013: 69). By giving voice to marginal subjects, Neo-Victorian novels (a term which will be explored in more depth), “queer” the straightforward narratives of conventional history, carving out space for “those voices or events whose overt presence might disrupt the clear path of the narrative with viewpoints that contest the authority of the historical record itself” (Carroll, 2010: 193).

In addition to querying the “official” historical record, *Tipping the Velvet* self-consciously inserts itself into scholarly debates in queer history. One significant exchange between Nancy and her first lover Kitty thematises the continuity/alterity debate outlined above. Having encountered a pair of women whose intimacy is read by Nancy as evidence that they are lovers, “like us”, an argument ensues:

‘Nan!’ she said. ‘They’re not like us! They’re not like us, at all. They’re *toms*.’
 [...] ‘We’re not like anything! We’re just - ourselves.’
 ‘But if we’re just ourselves, why do we have to hide it?’
 ‘Because no one would know the difference between us and - women like that!’
 I laughed. ‘Is there a difference?’ (131)

Kitty’s internalised homophobia prevents her from identifying with a community of “toms”, preferring instead to insist on the uniqueness of their relationship and thus, on the dissociation of sexual acts and sexual identities. Nancy, on the other hand, is willing to insert herself into a community identity, implicitly arguing for the validity of a transhistorical understanding of sexuality. “Is there a difference”, as Nancy puts it, between women who desired women in a distant period of history and women who desire women in the present? For Kitty, the assertion of difference is a protective mechanism, but for Nancy, the existence of a queer community, of categories that name the desires and practices she experiences, is crucial to constructing an

² A widely quoted early review described *Tipping the Velvet* as “a Sapphic *Moll Flanders*” (Steel, 1998). *Moll Flanders* claims to be “written from her own memorandums” (Defoe, 1722).

intelligible identity. It is only when she sees Kitty's performance as a male impersonator that she begins to acquire the vocabulary to articulate her desires: "I never saw a girl like her before. I never knew that there were girls like her..." (20); "But I thought, that if you knew I liked you as a, as a sweetheart — well, I never heard of such a thing before, did you?" (107). The importance of queer communities for Nancy reflects the importance of queer ancestors and models. It is in knowing about these ancestors, in asserting similarities between the past and the present, that queer people find ways to understand their own identities.

In this way, Waters signals that her focus is not on providing an "accurate" depiction of Victorian sexuality but on contemporary identity debates. In collaboration with the lesbian feminist scholar Laura Doan, Waters has advocated an "inventive use of history", describing lesbian historical novels as "performative" rather than "descriptive" (Doan and Waters, 2000: 20; 13). Recognising the partial nature of the historical record, the contemporary historical novel should "take its authority from the imperatives of contemporary lesbian identities" (13). Novels such as *Tipping the Velvet* acknowledge their own constructedness. Waters achieves this self-consciousness through playful references to 1990s queer theory. The most striking examples are the stage-names "Kitty Butler" and "Nan King", evoking the pioneering queer theorist Judith Butler and the contemporary term "drag king", and thus encouraging the reader to connect the male impersonation practised by the characters to more recent understandings of gender performativity. (When Kitty betrays Nancy to enter a sham heterosexual marriage, she is described as having "lost her *Butler*" (291).)

Another technique employed by Waters to mediate between past and present is the extensive use of the word "queer" (de Groot counts 43 separate instances (62)). Her sustained overuse of the word constitutes a playful provocation, challenging the reader to grapple simultaneously with the historical validity of the term to mean "strange, odd, peculiar, eccentric" (*OED*) and the potentially anachronistic reading prompted by the novel's content. Each appearance of the word forces reflection on its suggestive power: "people [...] who thought my particular passion for her only queer, or quaint" (22), "how queer it is! — and yet, how very ordinary: *I am in love with you.*" (33), "my queer and inconvenient lusts" (78), etc. As Mandy Koolen has argued, Waters' use of "queer" "calls upon readers to consider similarities and differences between past and present meanings of 'queer' and, in turn, to attend to continuities and discontinuities between experiences of same-sex desire then and now" (2010: 374). Koolen makes the convincing claim that this rhetorical strategy brings together two previously polarised ways of reading the past, that is, the two sides of the continuity/alterity debate. This is a crucial way in which Waters queers historiography; collapsing the binary created by queer historians, creating, perhaps, a *queerer* queer history.

Historiographic Metafiction and the Neo-Victorian Novel

As we can deduce, from these rhetorical techniques, Waters' object of analysis in *Tipping the Velvet* is the process of historical study, not the Victorian period itself. She clearly articulates a postmodern understanding of history; her queer distrust of historiographic endeavours reconceptualises history as fiction and as text. The category of "historiographic metafiction", as outlined by Linda Hutcheon, offers some helpful conceptual resources. This postmodern genre "acknowledges the paradox of the *reality* of the past but its *textualised accessibility* to us today" (Hutcheon, 1988: 144). Postmodernism challenges the separation of the literary and the historical. For Hutcheon, historiographic metafiction teaches us that literature and history

have both been seen to derive their force more from verisimilitude than from any objective truth; they are both identified as linguistic constructs, highly conventionalized in their narrative forms, and not at all transparent either in terms of language or structure; and they appear to be equally intertextual, deploying the texts of the past within their own complex textuality. (1988: 105).

Queer approaches to history similarly undermine the totalising effects of historical representation by giving voice to “the ex-centrics” (1988: 114), reframing historical accounts as always partial, always a fabricated representation.

Another useful literary-critical tool when considering this kind of metafictional project is the category of the Neo-Victorian. Gamble characterises this as “a self-conscious exercise in looking backwards” (2009: 128). Rather than a simple copy of the canonical Victorian novel, Neo-Victorian works of fiction have been broadly theorised as intensely self-conscious postmodern constructs; “not contemporary literature as a substitute for the nineteenth century but as a mediator into the experience of reading the ‘real’ thing” (Llewellyn, 2008: 168). As a metafictional Neo-Victorian work, the novel deliberately enacts the process of historical study, of reading for queerness in the past. Nancy’s position mimics that of the historical scholar attempting to negotiate the contrasting emphases on social constructedness and essentialism. Implicit in several of the key scenes is the critique sometimes levelled at the earlier generation of gay and lesbian/feminist historians accused of imposing anachronistic categories of sexuality on the past. The idea that categories of sexuality are culturally constructed implies that it is only by having cultural and linguistic mechanisms that render these identities intelligible that one can “be” queer. Nancy’s sexuality is only perceptible to her sister Alice, to whom she has disclosed her unformed feelings of desire: “when I glowed and sparkled it was evidently with a dark and secret flame which no one — except Alice, perhaps — *looked for or saw*” (23, added emphasis). It is only when alerted to the possibility of non-normative sexualities that they become relevant to the reading process. For Nancy, the world is “utterly transformed” by Kitty: “It had been ordinary before she came; now it was full of queer electric spaces” (38). The suggestion seems to be that once queerness has been named, it is visible everywhere.

The novel constantly returns to the question of what is readable in appearance or in acts, the key distinction between acts and identities that informs debates in historiography. Nancy and Kitty’s profession as male impersonators implies a radical expression of Butler’s gender performativity, in which “gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one” (Butler 1990: 10). Yet for Nancy and Kitty, who form a double act at the same time as becoming lovers, their expressions of masculine gender identities are also bound up in their sexual desires. Nancy thinks of their act as the “public shape” (127) of their sexual relationship, and reflects on the disjuncture between what is visible to the audience and what is experienced by the actors: “A double act is always twice the act the audience thinks it: beyond our songs, our steps, our bits of business with coins and canes and flowers, there was a private language, in which we held an endless, delicate exchange of which the crowd knew nothing” (128). Explicitly comparing this “private language” to the language of sex — “*You are too slow — you go too fast — not there, but here — that’s good — that’s better!*” (128) - Nancy reaffirms the invisibility of queer identities to those who see only its “public shape”, that is, the historian.

Touching Across Time: Embodied Reality in the Historical Novel

Well, perhaps there were some who caught glimpses... (128).

Waters may, at times, articulate a model of sexual identity that relies on social validation for the construction of intelligible sexualities, however, there is something more complex at play in the novel. Nancy is forced to reckon with the fact that she experiences desire for a woman even though she has “never heard of such a thing” (107). Something akin to a “natural” inclination or instinct appears to have been at work in her first encounter with Kitty, though she does not have the vocabulary to articulate it. Reflecting further on the doubled experience of their act, Nancy wonders about the possibility of audience members reading her performance as she did Kitty’s:

in every darkened hall there might be one or two female hearts that beat exclusively for me, one or two pairs of eyes that lingered, perhaps immodestly, over my face and figure and suit. Did they know why they looked? Did they know what they looked for? [...] *what did they see?* Did they see that — something — that I saw in them? (129)

The passage concludes with a failure of language, “that — something — that I saw in them”, pointing towards the inadequacy of linguistic constructs to capture the lived experience of queer desire, whether in the past or the present. The focus on “female hearts that beat,” and “pairs of eyes that lingered” illustrates a central concern with embodied experience in *Tipping the Velvet*, a queer preoccupation with the materiality of bodies. When Nancy is presented with a dildo, she remarks that she “did not, at that time, know that such things existed and had names” (241), but later reflects

Perhaps Eve thought the same, when she saw her first apple.
Even so, it didn’t stop her knowing what the apple was for... (242)

Elsewhere, she speaks of “the urgings of a natural law” (101) and “some more urgent instinct” (104) when narrating her sexual relations with various women. This reflects a recognition on Waters’ part that history cannot be reduced to the purely textual, even in a postmodern landscape. Neo-Victorian theorising, re-enacting processes of reading the past, must also account for the bodily experience of sexuality. As Boehm remarks, to neglect this is to ignore “the historical novel’s rich potential to explore questions concerning the materiality of history” (2011: 237). *Tipping the Velvet*, with its detailed and explicit engagement with the sexual practices of its characters, refuses to ignore this material reality.

Carolyn Dinshaw’s influential concept of “touches across time” offers a useful way to bring together Waters’ dual recognition of the social constructedness of sexual identity and the erotic, affective and material relations that ultimately elude the grasp of the textual historian. As a queer writer and former academic, Waters foregrounds feelings of kinship with the subjects of her fiction/research, displaying an awareness of what Jo Winning has described as the undeniable importance of “affect and connectivity” in queer research (2018). The desire to connect with queer ancestors is a crucial motivation for queer writers, whether in academia or fiction, and to neglect this is to elide a key influence on historiography. Dinshaw’s theorisation of queer historiography in *Getting Medieval* has much in common with Waters’ approach. She writes of a desire “for partial, affective connection” (1999: 21), recognising that “queer histories are made of affective

relations” (12) and that “a historical past can and does provide material for queer subject and community formation now” (22). I would like to suggest that this is a primary function of Waters’ collapsing of past and present, for example, in her ludic use of the term “queer”. The jolt of recognition experienced by the reader each time this word appears creates a “touch across time”, an affective moment that coexists with the rational understanding of its doubled connotations. Dinshaw, in trying to negotiate between alteritists and essentialists “found that even Foucault, the inspiration of social constructionists, connected affectively with the past” (Dinshaw et. al., 2007: 178). Waters’ engagement with the contingent emergence of sexualities through her evocation of Nancy’s *Bildung* similarly does not discount her foregrounding of affect.

The Erotic

Elizabeth Freeman has described the need for “a historiographic method that would admit the flesh, that would avow that history is written on and felt with the body, and that would let eroticism into the notion of historical thought itself” (2007: 164). In *Tipping the Velvet*, Waters gestures towards that method. Nancy’s reflections on instinctual knowledge, as cited above, occur at moments of heightened eroticism. Her exploration of non-normative gender expression and sexual identity is experienced first and foremost as arousal; for example, her first time wearing trousers, she feels “as though I had never had legs before — or, rather, that I had never known, quite, what it really felt like to have *two* legs, joined at the top” (114). A useful lens here, one which helps to draw together, again, the past and present, is Lara Farina’s concept of “erotic reading”:

To read erotically is to be moved by a text. It requires that the reader feel, emotionally and physically, a written work’s affective pull. To read erotically is also, then, to become *implicated* in sexualized relations performed by and with reading material. (2011: 49).

Nancy “reads” Kitty’s performance erotically, and the reader of *Tipping the Velvet*, in turn, reads their developing relationship “erotically”, drawn in by the writer’s deliberate appeals to present-day concerns and voyeuristic pleasure in their sexual encounters. The notion of erotic reading widens the scope of theorisations of the Neo-Victorian as an enactment of reading, extending to include a consideration of the reader’s own experience of arousal. If the Neo-Victorian queer historical novel aims to enact the process of “doing queer history”, *Tipping the Velvet*, in its frequent highly-charged sex scenes, points to erotic “touches across time” that also form a part of the scholarly research process on sexuality in history.

In this novel, then, the erotic contributes to Waters’ creation of a *queerer* historiographic method by collapsing the distinction between alterity and continuity, recognising (following Dinshaw) their shared affective dimensions. Another consequence of the “uses of the erotic” (Lorde, 2007) in *Tipping the Velvet* is the rapprochement of lesbian feminist and queer theories, which are often placed in opposition in these debates, aligned with essentialist and social constructionist positions, respectively. Nancy’s experience of gender deviance, her assumption of masculine dress as a male impersonator and rent-boy, is directly related to her erotic lesbian identity: “I seemed to want [Kitty] more and more, the further into boyishness I ventured” (124). From the beginning of her journey of queer self-discovery, Nancy “*is* aware that it is her queerness — the meeting of masculinity and femininity in Kitty’s appearance — that arouses her” (O’Callaghan, 2017: 28). The eroticism of “female masculinity”, to borrow Halberstam’s phrase,

is explicitly acknowledged. It is the reason for Nancy's attractiveness to the wealthy "sapphist" Diana and her iconic status amongst the East End "toms". Some lesbian historians have objected to the predominance of "queer" as it is seen to have the potential "to erase, ignore, refuse, co-opt, or veil the term 'lesbian'" (Laskaya, 2011: 37), thus re-asserting a situation of masculine dominance. *Tipping the Velvet*, however, is both an erotically charged lesbian historical novel and a theoretical engagement with queer theories of gender. Just as the novel draws together the polarised positions of alteritist and essentialist queer historians, it collapses the binaries that can block nuanced theorisations of gender identity and sexuality, showing that queer subjectivity and emphatically woman-identified lesbian desire are inextricable from one another. Contemporary proponents of so-called "gender-critical" feminism (i.e., trans-exclusionary feminism) might do well to revisit Waters' vital recognition of these intertwined experiences.

Conclusion: On the Limits of Language

The novel concludes with Nancy's attempts to reject queer performance and connect in a new way with her partner, Florence: "I feel like I've been repeating other people's speeches all my life. Now, when I want to make a speech of my own, I find I hardly know how" (471). Having navigated her queer/lesbian sexuality and gender identity up to this point mostly through mimicry, through learning and adapting the social categories made available to her, she now needs to develop a vocabulary of her own to account for her own unique experiences of desire. At this crucial moment, however, words are not readily available; instead she simply "leaned and kissed her" (472). Language is always inadequate Waters seems to suggest. The historical novel, with its ability to focus on imagined affective connections, and to implicate the reader in erotic experiences, reaches something that scholarly history cannot always capture. The variability of sexual and gendered categories across time does not prevent the contemporary reader from identifying with distant periods of history. However, Nancy and Florence choose to characterise their relationship — "comrades", "sweethearts", "lovers" — even given their membership of a wider community of "toms", their unique experience of desire defies prescriptive models. As Jones remarks,

historical differences among and changes in such terms resonate with the variability of similar terms in the present, particularly in that they implicitly attest to the ways in which sex both past and present inherently resists and overflows the boundaries of such terminology (2007: 99).

The novel can in fact function as a reflection on the proliferation of identity labels in the contemporary moment. The ever-expanding acronym LGBTQIA+ points simultaneously to a deeply felt desire for accurate terms and to the fundamental inadequacy of linguistic description. Thus, a consciousness of the challenges and limitations of historical projects can help us to reflect on processes of community-formation and labelling in the present. Cultural productions, such as the queer historical novel, reach towards a queerer historiography, enabling "touches across time" that have a crucial role to play in contemporary theorising of gender and sexuality.

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