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Unveiling the Silence in Queer Historical Novels: Celebration of Female Masculinity in *Tipping the Velvet*

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Abstract:

This dissertation analyses Sarah Water's novel *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) as a Queer historical novel, with a special focus on the topic of female masculinity and how it is portrayed by the character of Nancy Astley, which I argue represents the figure of the butch lesbian. The novel has been discussed to belong to the Neo-Victorian novel tradition and in the author's own words, her focus is not on providing an 'accurate depiction of Victorian sexuality but on contemporary debates', as she advocates for an 'intensive use of history', describing lesbian historical novels as 'performative' rather than 'descriptive' (Doan and Waters, 2000: 20; 13). As such, I argue that the novel allows for an exploration of lesbian historical experiences but also how it reflects the past into the present. Therefore, to carry out the analysis of the novel as a queer historical novel, this dissertation will be making use of several studies on Water's novels from the point of view of historical fiction, as well as using the words of important historical fiction theorists such as Jerome De Groot. With this notion considered, I will analyze the main character as one that represents the struggle of both past and present female masculinity, both outside and inside of the lesbian community. In order to do this, Judith's Butler theory of gender performance will be used complimented with Jack Halberstam's theories of female masculinity to analyze the gender performance of the main character in particular related to her masculinity and her character as a butch lesbian. I argue that Waters is able to celebrate a long marginalized and silenced minority as butch lesbians and by conducting an analysis of their experiences, the novel both uncovers the struggles faced by butch lesbians in the past and also shed light on their present-day experiences. I suggest that by giving voice to this silenced identity in relation to a sympathetic community that accepts them, Waters not only challenges traditional narratives and broadens our understanding of the past but also fosters an ethics of care based on the importance of diversity and acceptance, in which remembering who you are and those who came before you and kindness are the most important parts to achieve an understanding community in which there is no space for bigotry.

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1. Introduction

This essay analyses the work of British writer Sarah Waters by putting an emphasis on the representation of the presence of the past and the representation of masculine lesbians. In order to do this, it has to be explained how, since 1998, Waters has published three books set in the mid-to-late Victorian era: *Tipping the Velvet*, *Affinity*, and *Fingersmith*. According to Kaye Mitchell, these novels “have been crucial in the development of historical fiction as a genre, contributing to its enormous increase in popularity in recent years” (Mitchell, 2015: 6).” Therefore, these works are examples of lesbian historical fiction, but they are also clear examples of historiographic metafiction and postmodernism, as many critics have argued and I will defend as well. As postmodernism focuses on recreating the past, blending it with the present, and rejecting a monolithic definition of culture in order to celebrate pluralism and diversity. Historiographic metafiction celebrates ‘decentred’ perspectives, preferring the “excentric” or “marginal” (Hutcheon, 1998:12). Meanwhile, the postmodern genre “acknowledges the paradox of the reality of the past but its textualized accessibility to us today” (Hutcheon, 1988: 144) Therefore, as Demelza Morgana explains, these genres are especially useful for historical lesbian fiction writers as it decentres dominant heterosexual categories (2006: 11). Even if Waters herself does not consider herself a postmodernist writer as her work is far less ‘experimental’ than other postmodern writers that she has been compared to such as Jeanette Winterson (De Groot, 2015: 117), she still cleverly portrays all these notions with a ‘wealth of intertextual echoes to both canonical and popular text’ which emphasizes the postmodern genre (Onega, 2017: 154). As De Groot further explains:

Neo-Victorian novels work at an interface of cultural representation, social nostalgia, postmodernism, and collective memory, engaging with the historical imaginary in a complex and challenging fashion. [...] (Water's) critical practice, then, allows us to reflect upon her fiction and look anew at some of her techniques. Waters is extremely conscious of the limits, demands, and potentialities of her chosen form, and she is alive to the possibilities that the historical novel affords the writer to make a historiographical and political intervention. (2015: 113)

Therefore, we could say that Waters is a prime representative of the Neo-Victorian novel, however, Mark Llewellyn's words should be taken into consideration, as he forewarns of "the dangers of attributing a direct correlation between the source history and contemporary target era in a mode of trans-historical critical affinity" even if he agrees that "there is an inescapable desire to categorize the kind of novel Waters wants to write" (2004: 213). There have been arguments against this, as he also explains how many critics' difficulty is based on the "political energy of her fiction", as Maria Concetta Constantini argues that Waters does not indulge in metafiction, in order to put in the spotlight social and sexual issues (2006: 19). Therefore, as Morgana explains, there has been a 'small amount of scholarship in response to Water's novels primarily concerned with generic classification and lesbian identity (2). This showcases the two main points of analysis that Water's works have been put through, as an alternate historical fiction importance perspective and a notion of lesbian identity with as Llewellyn explains an exploration of "how women in the nineteenth century were ostracised, criminalised and placed outside society" (2004: 213). However, like many other critics, I argue that her novels not only offer a feminist perspective but also showcase perfectly Butlerian's ideas of gender performance. Yet, I would like to offer an analysis that goes a step

beyond, as I argue that her works also emphasize the image of the butch lesbian, especially in the corpus chosen *Tipping The Velvet*. Doing this, Water celebrates and represents an underrepresented minority, and encourages diversity and visibility for both the lesbian community of the past and present.

To carry out this analysis, I will explain how the novel explores the notion of how historical fiction allows lesbian writers to “identify a lesbian tradition that has been both routinely overlooked by the historical record and calculatedly expunged from it” (Doan and Waters 2000: 17). This concept of neo-Victorianism as a tool to explore the silenced past has been explored by many critics already regarding Water’s work, such as Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, who writes that “[m]uch neo-Victorianism [...] plays on the margins with a self-reflective and metafictional stance” (1999: 148). Llewellyn further suggests that “[t]he use of a historical period can imply that there is a parallel or affinity between the age about which an author is writing and the one in which she writes” (2004: 213), which corresponds with this analysis of Waters as a Neo-victorian writer that by exploring the values of the Victorian era she talks about the feminist and lesbian subcultures of the past and the present.

Nevertheless, she was not the only one interested in this field of literature. In Cora Kaplan’s words nowadays we find a “modern obsession with things Victorian” and “the late twentieth century desire to know and to ‘own’ the Victorian past through its remains: the physical and the written forms that are its material history” (2007: 1) This explains how Neo-Victorianism has witnessed a growing interest as a genre that explores the past, with a focus on exploring marginalized voices and narratives. As Maria Concetta Constantini explains, at the beginning of the new century we experienced Victorian revivalism in which

“the obsession with the past seems to have intensified”, especially employing rewritings of the Victorian age. This seems to pair with other writers such as John Fowles and Peter Ackroyd, who are also interested in historiography and have used the Victorian world as the main stage for their narratives. Constantini suggests that therefore, she shares their worries with proving the “world-shaping function of history” and how by combining historical data “we get a better sense of ‘the reality’ of past ages, and in doing so, detect affinities with the present, which help us rethink our role and identity” (2006: 19).

Her interest in Neo-Victorianism however, can be further explained in her own life, as Waters wrote a Ph.D. thesis on lesbian and gay historical fiction, a work that was “interested in the figuring of homosexuality, particularly within some form of historicizing/fictionalizing content” (de Groot, 2015: 58). Subsequently, in an interview with Lucie Armitt, she explains how *Tipping The Velvet* was a continuation from that: “It was very much that I wanted to write the kind of novel that I wanted to read myself” (2007: 117). Furthermore, as Jones suggests Waters is one of “the most prolific and popular writers of realistic gay and lesbian historical fictions” (73), as she has been described as a “lesbian novelist” (Mitchell, 136). She admits that “there’s this extra political and emotional element to lesbian readings or lesbian books [...] we just don’t see ourselves represented in respectful ways often enough” (136). However, her critical role in the celebration of this silenced past of lesbians can be seen in another interview, as she explains that issues based on gender and sexuality are “still very, very current in British culture...[t]hings that we think we’re pretty cool with, and actually we’re not at all, and we keep on wanting to go back to the nineteenth century to play these out on a bigger scale, precisely because they’re still very current for us” (Dennis, 2008: 45).

Therefore, we can establish Waters as a writer that not only has an actual interest in the past as shown in her academic research and historically accurate narratives, but who also aspires to represent lesbians and address the contemporary relevance of gender and sexuality issues. I suggest that her focus is on the representation of these silenced minorities as through her own experiences and as a lesbian writer, she understands the importance of respectful and authentic representation. *Tipping The Velvet* shows how she recognizes the significance of creating narratives that resonate with readers who have historically been denied representation and whose stories have been ignored, encouraging both the lesbian community of the past and the present to be seen and heard. At the same time, she also invites non-LGBT readers to reflect on the persistent inequalities that continue to shape our present as her narratives serve as a means to explore and challenge traditional narratives. As she explained in an interview with Debbie Taylor, her experiences in the academia have made her believe that “a good book should have an agenda...something that gives it a point”, and this agenda is clearly exposed later in the interview, in her own words: “Lesbianism is at the top of the agenda for my books because it’s at the top of the agenda for my life” (2004: 1). Additionally, we find a “performance of pastness” (De Groot, 2010), which I suggest parallels the protagonist’s gender performance.

Hence, this analysis will be carried out by analyzing selected quotes that emphasize the evolution of the protagonist’s identity and will be inspected thoroughly using the theory of gay and lesbian historical fiction, highlighting the importance of historical fiction in identifying and reclaiming marginalized traditions. Therefore, the methodology I intended to use to approach this novel belongs to the field of historical fiction studies with a focus on gay and lesbian historical fiction. I will also use Butler’s theory of gender performance and

several works on the notion of female masculinity, to analyze beyond the gender of the protagonist as performance, arguing how it ends up becoming her true self and not just a performance by belonging to an inclusive community. To do so, I will also use the theory of the ethics of care, as I suggest that Nancy's final pursuit of kindness and happiness finds resonance in a loving and supportive community, that has been marginalized and forged by shared experience, providing her a safe space to explore her identity and gender performance, express her desires and be embraced for who she truly is. Thus, my analysis will start with a theoretical examination using the methodology of historical fiction in order to explain the portrayal of the present within the past. Subsequently, the analysis will move to a study of several scenes that emphasize the concepts of gender and identity of the protagonist, to argue her identity as a butch lesbian. Finally, the dissertation will end with a final study of how Nancy's personal growth culminates in catharsis through her integration within a supportive community, according to the theory of the ethics of care.

2. *Tipping The Velvet* as a Queer Historical Novel: Postmodernism and Historiographic Metafiction.

As De Groot makes clear, there has been a trend since 1990 in British literary fiction related to the writing of the historical novel, which is exemplified by Sarah Waters (2010: 107). As he explains, historical fiction has always been considered an innovative and thoughtful mode of writing in which a parallel is drawn between authenticity and fiction at the same time and that “Fiction undermines the totalizing effects of historical representation and points out that what is known is always partial, always a representation” (108). In other words, since fiction is not considered an actual representation of “history”, it can be more effective at showing that the history we know is never fully complete and is always taken from one side and not in its entirety. This contention has been reflected by Robinson who has argued that Water’s representations of late Victorian London, in fact, create an “ontologically distinct, parallel entity, and unprecedented neo-Victorian London” in which Water’s “Victorian present past – the past as it now exists in our conscious imagination, which may or may not correspond to the past as it actually was – arguably has less to do with the past present of that society than the identity politics of the present” (2011: 51). Waters herself forefronts this notion in her influential article written with lesbian feminist scholar Laura Doan, as they explain how in the notion of gay and lesbian historical fiction, these writers have utilized the past in order to recover a hidden genealogy of sexuality, rather than a claim for accuracy (2000: 15). In De Groot’s own words:

Gay and lesbian historical fiction has regularly been interested in the creation of alternative histories or the reclaiming of marginalized narratives, particularly through the queering of either the physical or the trope of the archive. (2010: 150)

This notion of queering has been suggested by Mitchell, who explains that queering the archive refers to the “queering of history, truth, evidence and authority traditionally understood” in which queering becomes “subversive” and “deconstructive” (2014: 175). Therefore, queer historical fiction's objective is to ‘interrogate’ how the past and history have been written and constructed (De Groot, 151), which corresponds with the notions of postmodernism as well. Claire O’Callaghan also states that “Waters writes queerly, that is, her novels frequently exceed existing literary categories and theoretical paradigms” (2017: 2). Furthermore, in Water’s own words, she comments in an interview with Kaye Mitchell:

[*Tipping the Velvet* aims] to be more playful with history, to ‘parade’ history and to parade its own status as a historical fiction. I was very interested ... in how of course we can’t reconstruct the past or capture the past, we can only reinvent it, so I wanted the novel to be very self-consciously a piece of lesbian historical fantasy. (20)

Thus, in her narratives, we find an exploration of the buried history of lesbian identities, that argues against the traditional narratives, but still uses history to illuminate “the queer identities and acts against which modern lesbian narratives defined themselves” (Doan and Waters 2000: 25). In this line of thought, Waters has defended the notion that even if she is not doing an accurate representation of history, the historical period is still a crucial part of her work, as she tells De Groot:

I think we have a duty to take history seriously – not simply to use it as a backdrop or for the purposes of nostalgia. This, for me, means writing fiction with, hopefully, something meaningful to say about the social and cultural forces at work in the period I’m writing about. (De Groot, 2010)

Therefore, her neo-Victorian work makes a reclamation of lesbian narratives that have been unvoiced in history while also telling something new, as a way to avoid the errors of the past in order to make a better future (De Groot, 155) and while being “aware of both history and fiction as human constructs” (Shiller, 1997: 540). As Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn state, neo-Victorian fiction ‘must in some respect be self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians’ (1999: 4), and her posture corresponds with this notion perfectly. Similarly, Sarah Gamble contemplates “[t]he function of the neo-Victorian novel may be to animate the past, but it can only do so from the perspective of the present, which will always read it as reflective of its own preoccupations” (2009: 127).

Furthermore, one of Water’s articles written in *Women: A Cultural Review* titled “Wolfskins and Togas: Maud Meagher’s *The Green Scamander* and the Lesbian Historical Novel” suggests that there is a “special affinity” between lesbian writers and historical fiction (1995: 176). As Morgana puts it in her study, the historical novel allows women to “rewrite past fictions and representations” that have been erased in favor of “male-dominated” narratives (2006: 9). This corresponds once again with the notion that Linda Hutcheon defends in her *Poetics of Postmodernism* as she argues that historiographic metafiction

teaches not only literature but also history (1988: 114) However, queer historiographic metafiction goes a step further as it gives voice to “the ex-centrics” (114).

Consequently, we could say that Waters puts an emphasis on the re-imagination of these marginalized voices, and in her own words, in order to “satisfy the lesbian hunger for genealogy and answer feminist anxieties that that genealogy has hitherto been elided or suppressed by patriarchal historiographical practice” (2000: 15). Thus, we can read Water’s *Tipping The Velvet* as a historiographic metafiction text, as in Hutcheon words, these text “are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages” and “[c]ertain historical details are deliberately falsified to foreground the possible mnemonic failures of recorded history and the constant potential for both deliberate and inadvertent error” (4). Ergo, the once-mentioned “ex-centrics” become the protagonist of these narratives who, as Suwa explains, Water uses to question the heteronormativity and patriarchal violence that her queer characters go through (2018: 5).

Some critics like Michaela Weiss have argued that *Tipping The Velvet* is written in “a realistic faction without any postmodern experimental techniques” (2012: 53). However, I argue that we can find historiographical metafiction techniques in the text that are characteristic of modernism, and is by means of those that Waters can achieve an interrogation and re-interpretation of the past. This has also been defended by other critics, for example, De Groot argues that Nancy’s narration is a “point-of-view account” which has been alluded to suggest a level of “self-consciousness” and “formal innovation”, on par with other techniques used in postmodern literature (116).

Furthermore, Hutcheon also reflects on how historiographic metafiction “dualistically point towards the events which are being represented in the narrative and towards the act of narration itself” (Hutcheon, 1989: 76). This can be clearly seen in the novel, as Nancy’s narration shows an acute awareness of being read, proving a certain level of self-awareness (Morgana, 2006: 14). Additionally, regarding her narration, further analysis of the beginning of the novel also illustrates the metanarrative aspects: “Have you ever tasted a Whitstable oyster? If you have you will remember it ... Did you ever go to Whitstable, and see the oyster-parlours there? My father kept one; I was born in it” (3). First of all, Naoise Murphy’s analysis should be remarked on, as she states how this “autobiographical framing of the novel” is what first warns the reader of the “dynamics of authenticity and historical ‘truth’” (2021: 5). Therefore, I suggest that when she addresses the reader directly, which creates an intimate connection with the reader that draws them into the fact that this is a “story”. However, this notion becomes more apparent as the novel progresses, as the reader finds out that in reality, all this narration was Nan sharing her story with Florence: “I took a breath. ‘Have you ever,’ I said, ‘been to Whitstable ... ?’ Once I began it, I found I could not stop” (430). With this revelation, the narrative takes on a metanarrative quality. As De Groot points out, this has the effect of “bringing the narrative into the present”, which creates a sense of “inevitability”, as if the story has been leading up to this moment of revelation (2010: 153). I suggest that this clearly draws attention to the self-consciousness of postmodernism literature, as the use of foreshadowing further heightens this anticipation. By undertaking this approach, Waters also invites the reader to reflect on the nature of storytelling itself and the power of personal histories to shape and define individuals. Another example perfectly remarks this notion is “had believed [herself] to be playing in one kind of story, when all the time, the plot

had been a different one” (453) which also exemplifies the notion of self-awareness and self-reflexivity connected with postmodernism and historical metafiction, as it challenges fixed narratives and draws attention to the act of storytelling.

However, most critics agree that one of the most prominent metafictional aspects of Water’s novels is the characters’ use of the word “queer”, which is notably prominent in the novel according to several critics such as Llewellyn (213). Constantini reflects on how Water makes the connection between the past and present by means of using “symbols” and this word could be considered one as it has a “political” meaning that “appli[es] to the past and present” (2006: 19), therefore making the reader self-aware of this association. This contention is also reflected on by Mandy Koolen, who has argued that 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). Emily Jeremiah also suggests that “[p]resent-ness is . . . stressed in *Tipping* by the repeated use of the word ‘queer’ . . . whose insistent use appeals to and affirms a contemporary queer sensibility” (2007: 133), and therefore Koolen argues that this “playfully reminds readers that rather than being a period piece, this novel belong to the realms of contemporary historical fiction” (374).

In this notion, some critics like Morgana (2006: 15) argue that use of the term is mostly used in a moment that follows “sexual expression”, as she explains, in the novel Nancy describes the sexual arousal she experiences from wearing trousers as “queer” (114). However I argue that it is not only in these moments, as she also uses it in moments that express lesbian affection as in their first meeting is “rather queer” (17) or she describes her

love as “I thought, how queer it is!—and yet, how very ordinary: I am in love with you” (33). In contemplation of this, Weiss observes that by repeating the word “queer” Waters elucidates a “contemporary perspective” (2012: 54). De Groot adds as well how “it traverses the boundaries of past/now” and therefore creates “historical effects [...] and contemporary resonance” as it creates a discursive space between allegedly fixed “‘contemporary’ identities and the past (and its representations)” (2015: 119). This corresponds with the analysis that has been defended in this dissertation, as Weiss also remarks how “in her novels she writes history from a lesbian-feminist point of view, using the genre of historical romance to uncover silenced cultural history and linking it with modern time” (2012: 51).

Another important metafictional aspect that has been reflected towards Water’s novels is based on the notion of intertextuality. As Morgana explains, Water does make explicit references to several popular Victorian texts in this novel, however, she argues that Water’s novel in general, are not “refractional” in that she is not specifically rewriting one novel but borrowing from many (2006: 15). Critic Naoise Murphy expands on this notion, as she remarks how the opening lines “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)” (2021: 11).

As a closing point, it is important to once again remark Water’s own opinion on her work, as she argues about the purpose of her work as “homosexual histories” that challenge mainstream historiography (12). Overall, in her own words:

The late Victorian moment seemed to be one in which identifiably modern lesbian and gay things were going on, but at the same time it still belonged to an older tradition. That's what I mean by its being a "hinge point": it felt close enough to feel familiar and meaningful, but distant enough to be interesting, to have that historical edge to it. (Mitchell, 16)

Hence, this shows her clear focus on portraying the unvoiced concerns of our era reflected in the past, as she never wanted historical accuracy but rather, to illustrate the "patchiness of lesbian history" in her works that "lay[s] bare and revel[s] in its own artificiality" (Waters, 2018). Therefore, she remarks that: "historical fictions [...] operate as registers of the queer self-image, indices to the myths of origins with which lesbian and gay communities understand, represent and console themselves" (Mitchell, 21). In this notion, Murphy remarks how at an individual level "history can be a vital resource for queer people struggling for recognition and acceptance" (2021: 4). Thus, we could finally conclude that Waters' act of narrating and, consequently, performing this queer past serves as a means of validating and legitimizing present-day queer identities.

3. Queer Representation *In Tipping The Velvet*

As it has been explained, Water's narratives highlight an alternative representation of history from the viewpoint of buried minorities, "revitalizing the genre of queer romance" and "re-creating and recovering context and line which have been doomed to be invisible" (Weiss, 2012). Thus, this section of the dissertation aims to explore the profound impact of Waters' historical fiction as it tackles the notion of queer identity growth, as Madsen states that her work "serves a double purpose, in that it takes not only the past but also the present up to

revision” (2013: 150). To do this, I will explore Nancy’s personal development within the framework of Judith Butler’s theory of “gender performativity” (1990), but also remarking that Water makes “sexuality a part of identity formation in the Victorian era” (Eve, 2013: 115). As Helen Davies observes how “[i]t has become a critical commonplace to note the influence of Judith Butler’s theories of gender as performance on the music hall world of male impersonation as depicted in *Tipping the Velvet*” (2012: 117). Therefore, I will argue how Nancy’s gender and sexuality are intrinsically correlated with each other, as I suggest that she represents the underrepresented figure of the “butch lesbian”. As Silvia Antosa explains:

While the term ‘lesbian’ was not in common use at the time, queer female subcultures that existed were developing new notions of Sapphic identity. Waters’s interest in performativity, gender, and sexual (re)invention of the self and class mobility interpellates present-day readers, offering an empowering queer cultural history. untold queer stories, which are fractured along lines of gender and class (2015: 40).

3.1 Butlerian Gender Performance

The novel has been defined as ‘queer Bildung’ which tells Nancy’s gender and sexual awakening journey (Jeremiah, 136). The narrative goes from a young ‘oyster’ girl to a male impersonator, which undergoes several transformations depending on the community she finds herself in, to finally achieve her happiest self after being accepted and supported by this community.

Several critics have pointed out that this transformation is based on her gender performance. First of all, Gamble draws attention to the fact “the neoVictorian novel has flowered alongside developments in gender theory, particularly the inception of debates concerned with queerness and performativity” (2009: 128). As Murphy suggests, both Nancy and her first lover Kitty’s profession as male impersonators ‘implies a radical expression of Butler’s gender performativity’ (13), by 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). Therefore, as Elsa Adán Hernández explains:

it is no coincidence that the attentive reader will be able to recognise the presence and relevance of varied queer or sexual politics theories, as Waters makes conscious use of them in order to trigger new ideas or question well-established notions within our cultural parameter. (2021: 60)

Critics like O’Callaghan also draw attention to how Nancy “emphasize the spectrum of gender trouble that cross-dressing instigates” (2017: 25), as we find several feminist and queer theories embodied in the text. Rosario Arias explains as well how “*Tipping the Velvet* was extremely well-received by critics interested in Judith Butler’s notion of performativity” (2017: 42). Furthermore, this connection is also made clear by an easy-to-miss reference to Butler’s 1990s queer theory. As Murphy cleverly remarks, the stage names ‘Kitty Butler’ and ‘Nan King’ can be a reference to Judith Butler and the nation of ‘drag kings’ and therefore “encouraging the reader to connect the male impersonification practised by the characters to more recent understand of gender performativity” (12).

Nevertheless, there have been different approaches to how Butler's theory applies to the protagonist at the end. As Antosa defends, at the end of her journey Nancy has been set free from "the institution of a compulsory and naturalised heterosexuality" (Butler 1990: 22), by "freely performing her own gender and sexual identity in a public context" and how in "this time she does not need to cross-dress or to perform a gender role: what she puts on the stage of her life is nothing else but herself" (2009: 496). This shows the effectiveness of Butler's theory; however, the intricacies of gender identity end up being merely represented on a surface level, in which the several occasions of what I suggest is Nancy's 'gender euphoria' moments on her masculine presentation end up being ignored and silenced.

Furthermore, this notion has also been contested by O'Callaghan in her article regarding female masculinity and butch subjectivity in *Tipping The Velvet*, as she argues how "Waters's play with gender [...] is more complex than appraisals of Butlerian ideas on the destabilization of gender allow" (2016: 246). Despite the apparent correlation between "Gender is not something one is, but something one does: a series of acts, repeated over time, which solidify to produce the effect of natural maleness or femaleness" (Butler 1990: 33) and the narrative of the novel, I suggest that a more nuanced examination reveals that Nancy's journey encompasses more than a mere enactment of gender. I argue that what Nancy experiences is more than simply 'doing gender' but rather embracing different masculine notions of gender, all while still reclaiming and reaffirming her lesbian identity, which by definition makes her encapsulate the figure of the butch lesbian.

3.2 Unveiling the silence of female masculinity

Several critics reflect on the notion of how Waters interpreters lesbian history by tackling on “the important work of filling in gaps in the historical record by speculating about past experiences of same-sex desire that have been erased or neglected in many historical studies” (Koolen, 373) and how this notion elucidate “the significance of female masculinity and/or butchness within a feminist context” (O’Callaghan, 246). These two critics have drawn attention to Water’s ability to give voice to gender non-conforming lesbians, however, it is mostly O’Callaghan who has close-read the text on the notion of female masculinity and/or butchness. I suggest that the exploration of Nancy’s identity as a butch lesbian not only highlights the struggle of female masculinity within and outside the lesbian community, but also contributes to a more nuanced understanding of gender performance and a reclamation of a past and presence that has been silenced, both inside and outside of the lesbian community.

As lesbian cultural critic Emma Healy points out, the figure of the butch lesbian deals with both “the weight of nearly one hundred years of stereotyping on her shoulders” and the “internalised lesbophobia” within lesbian communities (1996: 42). As O’Callaghan explains, several scholars consider the motion of the butch lesbian as fundamentally problematic, such as calling them not women, or considering that they only exist as a means of power and domination over lesbians who, in contrast, exhibit a feminine identity or presentation (2019: 244). As she draws attention to, these scholars base these assumptions on the idea that any expression of masculinity in any feminist context would only emphasize patriarchal gender norms and patriarchy, and therefore be against feminism (244). Therefore, it makes sense how the study of butch and masculine lesbians has been ignored, as Escudero-Alías explains, this

has been done in favor of representing ‘more neutralized (i.e feminine) traits of lesbian identity’ which has led to ‘the burden of representation attached to butches [that] caused their invisibility from the early 1970s up to the 1990s’, which only a few articles denouncing this blatant “*butchphobia*”. (2008: 39) On top of this, critics like Linda Garber have studied the notion of how at the time of researching the lesbian past, we find the “yearning for lesbian history and the difficulty of finding it” (2015: 130). With the study of butches and masculine lesbians being ignored in lesbian research, this made them even more buried, which emphasizes the importance of *Tipping The Velvet* as a novel that celebrates female masculinity. Jack Halmbertam, who wrote several books on the notion of female masculinity, argues that butchness creates an ambivalence between ‘differently gendered bodies’ and ‘subjectivities’ (1998: 8). In this notion, Gayle Rubin explains how ‘butch’ is the ‘lesbian vernacular for women who are more comfortable with masculine gender codes, styles or identities than with feminine ones’ and ‘encompasses a variety of ways of and motivations for using masculine gender codes and preferences’ (2012: 467).

Therefore, I argue the importance of demonstrating Nancy’s sexuality connected to her gender presentation as most critics, such as Weiss, seem to simply draw attention to the fact that when she puts on trousers for the first time, she simply is ‘discovering her sexuality’ (55). However, if we analyze Nancy’s evolution we can see that it is no mere discovery of her sexuality, but a journey of gender identity, as one of the core themes of the novel is the “process of construction of Nancy’s identity as a human being” (Hernández, 71) as it shows in the following scenes. When she started to live as a boy, she states that: “[I] was never quite sure if I were a girl come to her house to pull on a pair of trousers, or a boy arrived to change out of his frock. Sometimes, I was not sure myself” (195). Subsequently, similar gender

trouble appears when she sees an advertisement titled “Fe-male lodger”. She thinks: “I saw myself in it ‘in the hyphen” (211). Therefore, this exploration of her gender can be found through all the novel and ends up relating to female masculinity is what has “facilitated her discovery of lesbian desire” and is “integral to her expression of gender and her sexual coming-of-age” (O’Callaghan, 242). Furthermore, this notion has been justified by Waters, as in an interview about Andrew Davies’s adaptation of *Tipping The Velvet* (2002) she reveals how ‘Rachel Stirling’s Nancy Astley was not really the Nancy I had imagined’ as ‘I had always thought of Nancy as [...] crucially – more butch’. This shows how Nancy’s original masculinity has been buried in favor of femininity and emphasizes the importance of masculinity in Nancy’s character. (Waters, 2002)

Nevertheless, the scenes that justify this argument belong to the final parts of the narrative, when Nancy becomes the housekeeper of the radical siblings Florence and her brother, Ralph. O’Callaghan suggests that Waters employs this history to “anticipate” the figure of the butch lesbian and, because of this, re-conceived their origins in the nineteenth century. She suggests that by means of blending these butch aesthetics that Nancy adopts in this part of the book with a domestic role, Waters attacks the “Victorian patriarchy by highlighting both the constructed (and constricting) nature of ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’ dress and, by implication, of ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine spheres’” (12).

Regarding these butch aesthetics, a remarkable scene that emphasizes these is when she cuts her hair short and it falls to the ground, she makes the following statement: ‘[I]t was as if I had grown a pair of wings beneath my shoulder-blades, that the flesh had all grown over, and she [the hairdresser] was slicing free’ (404-405). This contrasts with the first time she

cuts her hair, as Koolen remarks how she experiences ‘an erotic rush’ (382) instead: "I had blushed because my new, shorn head, my naked neck, felt saucy. I had blushed because - just as I had done when I first pulled on a pair of trousers - I had felt myself stir, and grow warm, and want Kitty. Indeed, I seemed to want her more and more, the further into boyishness I ventured" (124). This shows her character growth, as before she performs as ‘boyish’, but now, this act of cutting her hair ‘free’, her actual feelings are related to her identity as a masculine lesbian with short hair rather than those of a young girl cutting it for the sake of a public performance. Therefore, I suggest that her masculine identity has become an intrinsic part of her and is the way she explores the world now. Koolen suggests something similar, as she explains how the novel shows that ‘cross-gender performances may penetrate beyond the stage and have material effects on the genders of performers’ (394).

Furthermore, regarding her physical appearance changes she notes how ‘it was as if my jaw had grown firmer, my brows heavier, my hips slimmer and my hands extra large’ (390) and comments that ‘in wanting to wear trousers’ she ‘feels as though a young man must feel’ (411). This could be related to a euphoric state because of her gender affirmation as a masculine woman, and it continues as her physical appearance changes and as O’Callghan explains that the quantity of detail in which Water describes her transformation feels almost fetishistic and therefore ‘it works to subvert both Victorian and contemporary modes of normative femininity and valorize alternative expressions of “woman”. Furthermore, she suggests how ‘these physical and aesthetic changes enable Nancy to recognize herself as a butch sexual subject, and her words thus emphasize how, by the end of the novel, her “masculine” image throws into relief her butch sense of self’ (12). Additionally, I also suggest that this parallels how many butches ‘vary in how they relate to their female bodies’

which show ‘alternative forms of contemporary gender variance’ (Escudero-Alías, 2009: 68). As Rubin explains some butches deal with ‘the coexistence of masculine traits with a female anatomy and some of them would undergo HRT (hormone replacement surgery) or mastectomy in order to achieve these masculine traits, while still identifying as lesbian, which parallels Nancy illusions of her body appearing ‘manlier’ (2012: 471).

In terms of class and gender, we can find a scene that both illustrates the notion of celebration of female masculinity while also reflecting on the notion of the theory of ethics of care¹ and the importance of a supportive community. Beforehand, I would like to draw attention to Carolyn Dinshaw’s concept of ‘touches across time’ in which she connects with the affect theory in the way that, she recognises that ‘queer histories are made of affective relations’ (1999: 12) and that ‘a historical past can and does provide material for a queer subject and community formation now’ (22). In this notion, Murphy suggests that the use of the word queer is what creates a ‘jolt of recognition’ every time it appears as it creates a ‘touch across time’, what she describes as ‘an effective moment that coexists with the rational understanding of its double connotations’(15). Therefore, I suggest that this ‘jolt of recognition’ can also be found in the relevance of the community safe space which Florence takes Nan to, as it can remind the reader of the lesbian bars culture for working-class lesbians in the 1950s. Regarding this scene, O’Callaghan also notes how there is a reference to the butch-femme culture of the 1950s conveyed into the past, as Nancy and Florence go on a night out to this bar and the following interaction happens:

¹ For more about the ethics of care see feminist philosopher Carol Gilligan and her influential book *In Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development* (1982), where she laid the foundation for the development of the ethics of care, in which she emphasizes the importance of relationships, care and interconnectedness in order to develop as individuals.

‘I thought you said it would be all toms in here? There are blokes over there.’

‘Blokes? Are you sure?’ She turned to where I pointed [...] ‘Blokes?’ She said again.

Those are not blokes! Nancy, how could you think it?’

I blinked, and looked again. I began to see... They were not men, but girls; they were girls - and they were rather like myself...

I swallowed. I said, ‘Do they live as men, those girls?’ [...]

‘Some do, I believe. Most dress as they please, and live as others care to find them’ [...]

‘To think, [...] I might have worn my moleskins, after all...’. (416-417)

As O’Callaghan remarks, this scene shows how Waters recognizes and celebrates how female masculinity (and femininity) can signal lesbian genders and how they can be erotic and enable agency (13), against the notion that they are oppressive towards other non-masculine lesbians. To argue my point further, Nancy mentions her disappointment at not having been able to express her masculinity, “I might have worn my moleskins’ as it becomes a crucial part of herself. Furthermore, in another scene, Nancy reflects on how “the thought [of] so many girls that she could put them into categories, like breeds of fish – was wonderfully and astonishing and stirring” (436), which emphasizes the importance that categorizing may have for butch lesbians, who have felt alienated in the community due to butchphobia.

Therefore, Waters's celebration of the euphoric state that being a masculine lesbian offers Nancy is extremely important to reflect her views on how, as O’Callaghan explains: “female masculinity is not only a capacious and erotic identity category for lesbians, but one capable of encompassing a diverse range of lesbian gendered and sexual subjectivities.”. This celebration is of extreme importance, as butches have always been alienated but Waters

celebrates ‘the breath and diversity of female masculinity and its usefulness for (some) lesbians’ (14), as Nancy finally becomes her truest self at the end of the book, in which she is a lesbian community that celebrates diversity and would not make her hide her masculine presentation, as Kitty would not have accepted being in a butch-femme relationship with her in which Nancy could have felt liberated in her masculine appearance. In contrast, I suggest that thanks to the community and support that Florence provides Nancy, she is able to explore and reclaim her masculinity, without having to do a public performance. Her love for Flo emphasizes her identity as a butch lesbian, as the ending lines of the novel say ‘ I turned back to her, took her hand in mind, crushed the daisy between our fingers and - careless of whether anybody watched or not -I leaned and kissed her’ (541), as she does not care of anyone watches or not, as her butch lesbian identity belongs to her, her lover and her supportive community.

Another remarkable example of the importance of this community can be found in the bar scene as well, as I argue that it elucidates on the theory of ethics of care. This contention reflects on the interpretation that Florence provides Nancy with a community that gives her a sense of purpose and belonging, as well as the opportunity to engage in collective care and support for marginalized individuals, in this case, working-class lesbians of all types of gender deviances. Through their actions and advocacy, Nancy witnesses the transformative power of community in fighting against oppression, which inspires her to become a voice for socialism in the final part of the novel. As Antosa explains ‘the centre she reaches at the end of the novel is no longer the public space denied to women and queers, but a queer site where she feels free to perform her own sexuality’ (2009: 456).

Yet, I argue against this as is not only her own sexuality but her own butch lesbian identity as well. The support and love of this community have to be contrasted with the complete dehumanization and complete sexualization Nancy suffers at the hand of Diana, a rich lesbian who encloses her at Felicity Place and brings her around her Sapphic circle as an accessory. Waters points out their power imbalance, which I argue creates another ‘touches across time’ in which, as trans theorist Viviane K. Namaste explains, eroticization can “other groups within queer spaces” (2000: 11). Therefore, Nancy does not belong to this community, as she is either completely sexualized or treated with disgust by lesbians who think she does not belong there. I argue that in these scenes, Waters refers to the current situation of butch lesbians, as they are either completely sexualized or hatred. As Koolen explains, Waters draws a “powerful critique of uncritical idealizations of ‘queer’ audience reading practices and the supposed safety of male impersonators in lesbian spaces (387). In contrast, Florence’s “The Boy in the Boat” community allows Nancy to find kindness, happiness, and a sense of belonging in this community.

The ethics of care is evident in the mutual support, understanding, and empathy demonstrated by these working-class lesbian communities, which enables her to navigate social challenges and experience a final rewarding personal growth, in contrast with the rich lesbian community that stopped her development because of their lack of support and empathy. These ethics of care portrayed by this community elucidate Rubin’s suggestion that “instead of fighting for immaculate classifications and impenetrable boundaries, let us strive to maintain a community that understands diversity as a gift, sees anomalies as precious, and treats all basic principles with a hefty dose of skepticism” (2012: 479).

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, by combining historical fiction with her dedication to representing silenced voices, Waters establishes herself as a writer who goes beyond surface-level fascination with the past. Her work delves into the complexities of gender and sexuality, by exploring the butch lesbian identity, and therefore she engages readers in thought-provoking discussions about identity, community, and the ongoing struggle for equality. Waters plays a crucial role in reshaping historical fiction and creating a space for authentic representation of lesbian experiences throughout history. In particular, as Madsen explains: “Waters’s revisitation of the nineteenth century in [...]TTV reveals how ways to transform the present can be found, precisely through revisions of the (Victorian) past” (2013: 150). By doing so, Waters broadens our understanding of the past while inspiring a more compassionate future.

Therefore, my aim has been similar to the ones done by other critics such as Murphy who defends the notion of “the importance of the historical study for the process of queer self-understand and community formation” (2012: 56). I have argued that Waters’s narrative serves as a testament to the transformative power of compassion, acceptance, and solidarity. By portraying the struggles and triumphs of marginalized individuals, particularly butch lesbians as I have reflected on, Waters highlights the profound impact that kindness, empathy, and support from a nurturing community can have in fostering personal growth, as shown in my analysis of Nancy’s journey of self-discovery, which I have suggested that it could not have been possible without this community that accepts and celebrates female masculinity.

Finally, this dissertation has tried to remark on the importance of narratives like these, which are able to voice a buried past while also celebrating the diversity of the LGBT+ community, in this case, the community of lesbians that accept other gender deviances. As I have suggested, the novel emphasizes the importance of remembering yourself and those who came before you to create a community in where you can love and express yourself without fear of judgment or discrimination. Waters celebrates this diversity, especially the acceptance of female masculinity, by means of emphasizing the need for a community that protects and defends one another and that remembers that they are one and stronger as one.

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