

The Queer Whispers of the Body in Sarah Waters's *Tipping the Velvet* and *Affinity*

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‘Written on the body is a secret code only visible in certain lights, the accumulations of a lifetime gather there. In places the palimpsest is so heavily worked that the letters feel like brail.’ Jeanette Winterson, *Written on the Body* (1992), p.89.

Abstract

This thesis concerns itself with the novels of the contemporary Welsh lesbian writer Sarah Waters. It therefore analyses the way in which the cultural taboo on lesbian desire is dealt with within her bestselling picaresque bildungsroman, *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), and her gothic fantastic novel, *Affinity* (1999). Thus, this thesis explores how the cultural taboo on lesbian desire is shown within the novels of Sarah Waters to be transmitted on an interpersonal level and through oblique verbal language and bodily semiotics. It moreover deals with the way in which the lesbian subjects of her novels subvert this cultural taboo on lesbian desire and existence, by articulating their desires through a surreptitious language of the body, rather than through an explicit language of the tongue, so that they may circumscribe the oblique prohibitions which they encounter. Finally, this thesis concerns itself with the contemporary lesbian politics of these Neo Victorian novels by Sarah Waters and how they may be seen to be challenging the cultural taboo on lesbian desire through a strategy of lesbian visibility, as well as through her writing and thus arguably fighting for the cultural acceptance of lesbian desire and existence, within the context of contemporary (mid to late 1990's) Britain.

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Contents

Introduction.....	1
“Begin at the Beginning” said the King of Hearts “and go until you come to the end: then stop.”	1
Chapter I	10
Theorising the Oblique Cultural Taboo on and the Prohibition of Lesbian Desire and the Expressive Language of the Body	10
Chapter II.....	29
The Queer Whispers of the Body in Sarah Waters’s	29
<i>Tipping the Velvet</i> (1998) and <i>Affinity</i> (1999)	29
<i>Tipping the Velvet</i> and The Oblique Prohibition of Lesbian Desire	32
<i>Tipping the Velvet</i> and the Oblique Articulation of Desir	40
The Oblique Prohibition of Lesbian Desire in <i>Affinity</i>	48
The Oblique Articulation of Desire in <i>Affinity</i>	54
Conclusion	59
Chapter III.....	61
The Contemporary Lesbian Politics of Sarah Waters’s Neo Victorian Novels.....	61
Beneath the Wolfskins and the Togas, Deeper than Disguise	61
Writing for Tolerance, Fighting for Visibility	66
The ‘Good’, the ‘Bad’ and the Politics of Representation.....	69
The Politics of Lesbian Life.....	73
Imagine the Change, Be the Change: the Utopian Politics of Possibility	83
Conclusion	90
Conclusion	92
Once More through the Looking Glass and Back Again	92
Bibliography	97

Introduction

“Begin at the Beginning” said the King of Hearts “and go until you come to the end: then stop.”

This thesis concerns itself with the novels of Sarah Waters. Sarah Waters is a contemporary lesbian writer who grew up in Wales and lives in London. She has written five highly acclaimed novels including *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), *Affinity* (1999), *Fingersmith* (2002), *The Night Watch* (2006) and *The Little Stranger* (2009). Three of these novels, *Tipping the Velvet* (2002), *Fingersmith* (2005) and *Affinity* (2008), have been very successfully adapted for the screen by the BBC and Box TV. Waters has furthermore won numerous well renowned literary awards including the Betty Task Award (1999) for *Tipping the Velvet* and the Somerset Maugham Award for Lesbian and Gay Fiction (2000) for *Affinity*. This therefore makes her one of the most well read and widely celebrated lesbian women writers on the British literary circuit, alongside Jeanette Winterson. Indeed, it also makes her one of the most visible lesbian celebrities in the context of contemporary British culture.

The novels that this thesis will engage with are her first novel *Tipping the Velvet* and her second novel *Affinity*. *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) is a picaresque¹ bildungsroman² novel, which follows the story of Nan Astley as she discovers her love for the dazzling music hall performer Kitty Butler and journeys towards a space

¹ Margaret Drabble, (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) p.788. Here the term picaresque is defined as ‘episodic novels (...) which describe the adventure of a lively and resourceful hero [sic.] on a journey.’

² Ibid, p.100. Here the bildungsroman is defined as a novel of ‘education (in the widest sense).’ However, the bildungsroman may also be described as a novel which describes the trajectory of a protagonist as they travel towards greater self awareness, through a journey in which they break with the old ways that they have lived, or the morals of their society, through a quasi crisis or a turning point in their lives, which effectively educates this protagonist, who then journeys towards a reintegration of sorts with their society. If one thinks of novels such as Sarah Waters’s *Tipping the Velvet* and Charles Dickens’s *Great Expectations*, this definition applies quite explicitly.

of self awareness and social belonging as a lesbian subject. Set within the panopticon³ like space of Milbank Prison, her second novel *Affinity* (1999) is a gothic fantastic novel, which follows the story of Margaret and Selina as they discover their spiritual, emotional and sexual affinity for one another. Both of these novels are set in Victorian Britain and thus belong to a tradition of Neo Victorian fiction by contemporary women writers. This may be defined as a genre of historical fiction, written by contemporary women writers, who use the Victorian era as a setting for their novels and are therefore engaged in a process of (re)writing the Victorians. And both novels, according to Abigail Denis, are ‘ostensibly similar’ because they centralise a narrative trajectory concerning ‘lesbian protagonists’ who are in a process of ‘finding various ways to engage with their sexuality in Victorian England, a culture in which the concept of lesbianism supposedly did not exist.’⁴

The central topic of this thesis is the way in which the novels of Sarah Waters engage with the cultural taboo on lesbian sexuality. This central topic is furthermore divided into two main focuses. The first focus concerns itself with the oblique cultural and interpersonal prohibition of lesbian desire and subjectivity, which arguably exists prior to the explicit prohibition of female homosexuality through the legal system. It furthermore concerns itself with the way in which these cultural prohibitions are circumnavigated and overcome by lesbian subjects. Within this focus I will be looking more specifically at the way in which the novels of Sarah Waters show how

³ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London: Penguin Books, 1977) p.81. The prison of *Affinity* is based on a real Victorian prison called Milbank, which is structured on the Benthamian model of the panopticon. The Benthamian panopticon prison is characterised by its central tower, from which the prisoners may always be under surveillance. Foucault of course argues that this is a disciplinary space which coerces the prisoner to internalise this external gaze and become a self policing subject. This dynamic, and the relevance of it for a discussion of the censorship of lesbian desire, will be delineated in more depth within Chapter II.

⁴ Abigail Dennis, “‘Ladies in Peril:’ Sarah Waters On Neo-Victorian Narrative Celebrations and Why She Stopped Writing About the Victorian Era’ in *Neo-Victorian Studies*, vol. 1., No. 1 (Autumn 2008) p.41.

lesbian desire is on a localised and interpersonal level, through oblique verbal references, which render lesbian desire as being something that is ultimately taboo, and through the way that body language, which is ultimately oblique or unspoken, also functions to prohibit lesbian desire and subjectivity. Finally, this focus also looks at the way in which oblique verbal and bodily language does not only act as a mechanism for prohibiting lesbian desire, but it can also act as a powerful means of articulating this desire. Therefore, I will be looking at the way in which the lesbian subjects of the novels of Sarah Waters use oblique verbal and bodily language to articulate their desires, and how they thus effectively subvert the very oblique mechanisms of prohibition that are used to censor them, by appropriating these to their own ends. The second focus of this thesis concerns itself with the way in which the novels of Sarah Waters are engaged in a politics of challenging this taboo on lesbian desire and existence by rendering visible the sorts of effects this taboo has on the lives of lesbian subjects. It therefore looks at how the novels of Sarah Waters use the Victorian era as a trope for discussing the contemporary issues of lesbian life. It also looks at how the Neo Victorian genre gives Waters a certain licence for discussing the issues of lesbian existence within the context of contemporary Britain. It therefore also concerns itself with the sorts of issues of lesbian existence, which arise within her novels, and how the politics of her novels thus function to get these issues out into the public eye of contemporary British society.

The following research questions therefore guide this project. How does the cultural taboo on lesbian desire surface within the novels of Sarah Waters and how do her characters navigate the prohibitions that are placed upon lesbian desire and existence? How is the cultural taboo on or rather the prohibition of lesbian desire shown to be transmitted on an interpersonal level through oblique verbal language and

bodily semiotics within the context of her novels? How do the lesbian subjects of her novels articulate their desires through a language of the body, rather than through a language of the tongue, so as to circumscribe the oblique prohibitions which they encounter? And finally, how are the novels of Sarah Waters engaged in a covert political project that challenges the cultural taboo on lesbian desire through a strategy of lesbian visibility and by her writing and thus fighting for the cultural acceptance of lesbian existence?

The methodological framework that this thesis deploys is one of a theoretically engaged narrative analysis of the novels of Sarah Waters. The core part of this methodology is therefore that of a narrative analysis of the body language that the characters of her novels use to articulate their lesbian desires, as well as the various ways in which the prohibition of lesbian desire are articulated, through bodily language. Therefore, this thesis performs a narrative analysis of what Barbara Korte calls ‘the signifying system’ of ‘body semiotics.’⁵ This involves the analysis of ‘facial expressions, gestures and eye behaviour,’⁶ as well as ‘body movements’ and ‘body postures,’⁷ and ‘quality of voice, laughter, sobbing, coughing and silence.’⁸ I also look at ‘spatial and touching behaviour;’⁹ as well as whether the body language is ‘communicative,’ ‘intentional’ and ‘conscious’ or ‘expressive,’ ‘spontaneous’ and ‘unconscious.’¹⁰ And, most importantly I analyse the ‘non-verbal leakages’ of these protagonists, which according to Barbara Korte is ‘non-verbal behaviour revealing the true feelings of a person’.¹¹ I do so, so as to try to establish the ‘finest nuances’ of

⁵ Barbara Korte, *Body Language in Literature* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), Ibid, p.4.

⁶ Ibid, p.6.

⁷ Ibid, p.37.

⁸ Ibid, p.26.

⁹ Ibid, p.12.

¹⁰ Ibid, p.27.

¹¹ Ibid, p.35.

‘attractions’ and ‘repulsions,’¹² ‘emotions’ and ‘interpersonal relationships,’¹³ and the ‘power relations’ and the circumstances,¹⁴ within which these affects are encountered. These bodily semiotics are then interpreted through lesbian, feminist and queer theories, so as to establish what they can tell us about lesbian existence. As well as the novels by Sarah Waters, I will also engage with the film adaptations of her novels. This is primarily because films, according to Dan Sipe, may be useful for a narrative analysis of body language because they ‘capture a density of evidence’ regarding the ‘unworded data’ of the body.¹⁵ Therefore, because film is an embodied medium, within which the body is always present and thus signifying meaning(s), the ‘subtle cues of voice, posture, gesture and eye contact’¹⁶ are thus always open to a visual interpretation.¹⁷ Therefore, I use selective clips from these films throughout this thesis, where these closely resemble the novels, and thus allow for a deeper reading of body language.¹⁸

This thesis is divided into three chapters. The first chapter is a theoretical chapter, which engages with theorists such as Judith Butler, Terry Castle, Rob Epstein, Jeffrey Friedman, Gyatari Gopinath and Michele Foucault, so as to discuss the cultural taboo on lesbian desire. It therefore theorises the way in which the cultural taboo on and the prohibition of female homosexual desire, operates on an implicit and an oblique or an unspoken level, which therefore exists to some extent

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid, pp.18 & 6.

¹⁴ Ibid, p.27.

¹⁵ Dan Sipe, “The Future of Oral History and Moving Images” in Perks, Robert and Alistair Thomson (eds.) *The Oral History Reader* (London: Routledge, 1998) p.386.

¹⁶ Ibid, p.384.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ I have no qualms about employing the screen adaptations of her novels because Sarah Waters herself is content with these adaptations and describes them as being like ‘intimately related’ yet nevertheless ‘thoroughly distinct’ ‘identical twins.’ Sarah Waters quoted in ‘Sarah Waters on the BBC adaptation of *Tipping the Velvet*’ http://www.virago.co.uk/author_results.asp?SF1=data&ST1=feature &REF=e 2006 111617063697&SORT=author_id&TAG=&CID=&PGE=&LANG=EN (Accessed: 29th of March 2009) p.1.

prior to explicitly prohibitive language, rather than it being explicit and direct, or inscribed within language and the law, as is the case with male homosexuality. By the oblique cultural prohibition of lesbian desire and existence I therefore mean how this prohibition of female homosexuality is functioning on an indirect and to a certain extent on a non verbal level, which occurs through the thing that is being rendered taboo being inscribed within implicit and elliptical language, rather than explicit and directly prohibitive language, in such a way that the subject who is receiving these prohibitions knows what it is that is being rendered taboo, and thus unspeakable or unperformable. It therefore argues that the taboo on female homosexuality is transmitted on an interpersonal level through elliptical linguistic references and, as will be the particular focus of this thesis, through bodily semiotics, which are ultimately oblique and yet nevertheless communicative. Furthermore, this chapter also draws on theorists of the body such as Goffman, Elizabeth Grosz, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Merleau-Ponty, Deniz and Giddens, so as to delineate a theory of the body as an expressive and communicative language, which is continuously being interpreted by subjects during interpersonal relations. Finally, this chapter engages with the French feminist theories of Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous, so as to argue that this expressive language of the body may be regarded as one which is operating on a *féminine* economy of language. It therefore concludes by arguing that this *féminine* economy of bodily language is characterised by a polyvocality that is both verbal and non verbal or extra verbal. It therefore exceeds the Lacanian masculine economy of language, which is characterised by an explicitly verbal language that is both singular and linear, thus allowing it to escape phallogocentric logic.

The second chapter, which is also the central chapter of this thesis, carries the name of the thesis itself; it being thus entitled ‘The Queer Whispers of the Body in Sarah Waters’s *Tipping the Velvet* and *Affinity*.’ I am here using the word queer as Sarah Waters deploys it to denote lesbian desire and subjectivity. I am also using this term in a very playful and quasi Derridean way, because the term queer, more so than the term lesbian, allows for a free association with other words that were often associated with lesbian desire and subjectivity in the context of Victorian Britain. It therefore allows for slippages in meaning to occur because the term queer also denotes a sense of oddness or strangeness. It also embodies, in a playfully aware fashion, this very sense of obliqueness that surrounded lesbian desire in the context of Victorian Britain. Indeed, it therefore symbolises the idea that lesbian desire is not only seemingly ultimately unspeakable, but also this sense that it is always, already being spoken, even if only in a very clandestine and encoded manner. This clandestine nature of the articulation of lesbian desire is also what the term whispers is intended to denote, because it symbolises a certain sense of secrecy, as well as it being something that is both audible to the subject(s) who are being whispered to and inaudible to those subjects who are outside of this covert mode of communication. When these terms are thus combined with the body and this idea of the body as an expressive and a communicative language, this title is therefore intended to symbolise the very core part of this chapter, which essentially pertains to the way in which lesbian desire is articulated through the clandestine language of the body, rather than through the explicit language of the tongue. This second chapter therefore performs a theoretically engaged narrative analysis of *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) and *Affinity* (1999), which analyses the way in which the cultural taboo on lesbian desire is communicated on an interpersonal level through oblique verbal and bodily language,

as well as the way in which the lesbian characters of these novels circumscribe these oblique prohibitions by inscribing their desires in a language of the body, rather than verbalising them directly through an explicit language of the tongue. It also illustrates the way in which the prohibition of lesbian desire is internalised by these lesbian subjects and how this internalisation is inscribed upon their bodies. And, it discusses the way in which a lesbian self awareness arises through the bodies of these subjects and is only realised consciously and articulated linguistically after the body has already articulated these powerful affects of female same sex desire.

The third chapter of this thesis deals with how the contemporary lesbian politics of her novels emerge within *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) and *Affinity* (1999). It therefore argues that her novels employ the Victorian era as a kind of trope for the place of the lesbian subject within contemporary Britain, which thus allows her to speak about those very issues that effected lesbian subjects at the time that she was growing up and at the time that she was writing these novels within the context of contemporary British society, albeit in a rather veiled and displaced manner. Therefore, this chapter deals not only with the ways in which her novels are engaged in a lesbian politics of visibility and the fight for the cultural acceptance of lesbian desire and subjectivity, but it also illustrates some of the issues of lesbian life that are inscribed within her novels (such as the issue of growing up gay in the countryside and the marginalised place of lesbian subcultures within the cityscape) which are of relevance to the context of contemporary British society. By contemporary British society I am primarily referring to the time in which Sarah Waters was writing *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) and *Affinity* (1999). I am also referring to the time during which she was growing up in rural Wales and the university towns of England as a lesbian, between the late nineteen sixties and the early nineteen nineties, because the context within

which she lived will rather inevitably effect the way that she portrays lesbian existence. I am also very consciously allowing for a sort of slippage to occur within my use of the words contemporary Britain, which invites the reader to reflect upon to what extent these issues of lesbian life are still of relevance, within the context of the British isles, today.

Over the last few years, scholarly engagement with the novels of Sarah Waters has truly begun to flourish. These criticisms have successfully engaged with pertinent topics such as the intersections between discourses of criminality (Llewellyn and King), practices of spiritualism and lesbian desire (Doblas and King); gender performativity and lesbian subjectivity (Jeremiah and King); lesbian writing practices and authorship (Palmer and Kohlke); and the relationship that Waters has to the Neo Victorian genre as a woman writer and a lesbian author (Llewellyn and Kohlke). The intention of this thesis is therefore to contribute to the existing scholarship on Sarah Waters in such a way as to centralise the lesbian specificities of her texts. Therefore, because Sarah Waters very much embraces the label of lesbian author (she says that that ‘it makes sense to call me a lesbian writer in the sense that I am a writer who is lesbian’ and ‘also a writer for whom lesbian issues are at the forefront of what I am doing’¹⁹) I thus believe that it makes sense to claim Waters as a lesbian writer and to foreground the lesbian specificities of her writing in our scholarly readings of them. It is therefore the intention of this thesis to contribute towards the widening out of the pathways of our analysis of the novels of Sarah Waters in terms of their lesbian specific content, so as to highlight the sorts of issues that arise when we look at these novels through a specifically lesbian theoretical lens.

¹⁹ Paullina Palmer, “‘She began to show me the words she had written, one by one:’” Lesbian Reading and Writing Practices in the Fiction of Sarah Waters’, in *Women: A Cultural Review*, vol. 19, no. 1, p. 73.

Chapter I

Theorising the Oblique Cultural Taboo on and the Prohibition of Lesbian Desire and the Expressive Language of the Body

This chapter will serve to establish the theoretical framework that I will be employing throughout my analysis of the novels of Sarah Waters. I will therefore be delineating feminist and queer theories on the cultural taboo of female homosexual desire and I will be suggesting some of the ways in which these cultural prohibitions of lesbian existence have been and continue to be circumscribed. The first part of this chapter will therefore deal with the theories of Judith Butler, Michele Foucault, Terry Castle, Adrienne Rich, Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman, so as to discuss the way in which the cultural taboo on lesbian desire manifests itself obliquely, that is to say on an implicit and an unspoken level, which exists prior to explicit prohibition by juridical discourse. My own particular focus is on oblique forms of prohibitions and how the taboo on female homosexuality is transmitted on an interpersonal level through oblique language and bodily semiotics. My other focus is on how oblique bodily and verbal language may provide a space for the articulation of prohibited lesbian desires and thus for the subversion of prohibition. My questions therefore pertain to the following. How is lesbian desire rendered taboo within cultures where female homosexuality is not directly by the law? How is lesbian desire rendered taboo on an interpersonal level through oblique prohibitive verbal language and bodily semiotics? And finally, how do lesbian subjects navigate these prohibitions by inscribing their desires within oblique verbal language and bodily semiotics? In order to talk about how the body can act as a language for the articulation of the taboo on, and the oblique expression of, lesbian desires, the final part of this chapter will therefore engage with theories of the body as an expressive vehicle and with the theories of

Luce Irigaray regarding *parler féminin* or speaking (*as*) woman, as well as Hélène Cixous regarding *écriture féminine*. The cultural taboo on lesbian desire is a highly complex and nuanced issue that needs to be treated carefully. This chapter is therefore intended as an introduction to the theories of the cultural taboo on lesbian desire and subjectivity that were circulating precisely at the time that Waters was writing *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) and *Affinity* (1999). I therefore strongly believe that these theories are absolutely crucial for a deeper understanding of these novels because not only do they provide the reader with a theoretical key that unlocks the creative treasure chests of her creative works, but they are also paradigmatic of a discursive ferment on the and marginalised status of female homosexuality, which was emerging at the end of the twentieth century. Indeed, this is a discursive ferment that the novels of Sarah Waters, as I will go on to argue in my later chapter on the politics of her novel, was very much a part of and an influential factor in.

When it comes to the cultural taboo on and the prohibition of lesbian desire and subjectivity, Judith Butler posits that oppression does not happen through explicit, overt and official, juridical forms of prohibition, that are inscribed within language and the law, but rather through covert, implicit and informal forms of prohibition, which operate on the basis of an existing normative and exists to some extent prior to language itself.²⁰ One may thus call these implicit and oblique forms of prohibition, because they operate on what Judith Butler terms the level of ‘the unspeakable.’²¹

²⁰ This is dealt with both within Judith Butler, ‘Imitations and Gender Insubordination’ in Linda Nicholson (ed.) *The Second Wave Reader. A Reader in Feminist Theory* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997) p.312. And, throughout, Judith Butler, ‘Implicit Censorship and Discursive Agency’ in *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997) pp. 300 - 315.

²¹ Judith Butler, ‘Implicit Censorship and Discursive Agency’ in *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997) p.130. Here Butler writes that rather than operating on the level of the speakable level of thou shalt not, as explicit censorship tends towards doing, implicit censorship operates by the fact that it ‘rules out in unspoken ways what will remain unspeakable.’

Within the contexts of contemporary Britain which Sarah Waters was writing within in the mid to late nineteen nineties, as well as within the context of Victorian Britain which Waters was writing about within her novels *Tipping the Velvet* and *Affinity*, one may see these oblique prohibitions of lesbian desire and subjectivity operating precisely because female homosexuality, as opposed to male homosexuality, was never officially by the law within the context of the UK. Indeed, lesbian sex as opposed to gay male sex has never been illegal in Britain²² and yet a largely unspoken taboo on female homosexuality did exist within the context of the UK. Thus, Rachel Rosenbloom - writing in 1996 - points out that the rules pertaining to the taboo on lesbian sexuality:

‘may be unwritten - or even *unspoken* - but they are very real, and the official silence surrounding lesbianism does not make the prohibition of it any less powerful, it only makes it harder to document, respond to, or resist the abuses that lesbians experience.’²³

Indeed, according to both Rachel Rosenbloom and Judith Butler, the fact that these prohibitions operate on an implicit and oblique level does not make them any less harmful than explicit forms of prohibition, it in fact makes them ‘more efficacious’ according to Butler, because ‘explicit forms of censorship are exposed to a certain vulnerability precisely through being more readily legible’²⁴, as will be discussed later on in this chapter. What I thus want to focus on for the present time being is the unspoken nature of these rules, or, what I would like to call, the oblique nature of the cultural taboo on lesbian sexuality. This surfaces particularly in the idea that, as Terry

Thus, causing a type of linguistic and existential ‘foreclosure’ (p.138 & 139), which is a dynamic that I will go on to discuss in more detail later on within this chapter.

²² Rachel Rosenbloom (ed.), *Unspoken Rules: Sexual Orientation and Lesbian Human Rights* (London: Cassel, 1996) p. 25.

²³ Ibid, p. xiv. Bearing in mind this book was written around about the time that Waters herself was writing, thus indicating the emergence of a debate on the issue of the cultural taboo on lesbian sexuality, as well as the difficulties of lesbian life.

²⁴ Judith Butler, ‘Implicit Censorship and Discursive Agency’ in *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997) p.130.

Castle highlights, lesbianism is not rendered taboo within culture and by culture ‘*in so many words*’.²⁵ Rather the prohibition of female homosexuality operates on what Judith Butler terms the level of ‘unnameability’,²⁶ ‘unspeakability’²⁷ and thus ‘unthinkability’.²⁸ The following short example that Terry Castle provides us with will suffice to highlight how these oblique forms of cultural prohibition may be seen to be operating within the context of the UK. Indeed, Terry Castle, within her book *The Apparitional Lesbian* (1993), highlights the fact that The House of Lords in 1921 decided not to alter The Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885, which criminalised male homosexuality, to include, so called, ‘acts of “gross indecency” between women’ precisely because ‘they were afraid that by the very act of mentioning *it* [sic. lesbian sex], they might spread such *unspeakable* “filthiness” even further.’²⁹ What I want to focus on within this quote are two levels of oblique forms of the cultural taboo on and the prohibition of female homosexuality that are of relevance to my later analysis of the novels of Sarah Waters. The first being the oblique prohibition of lesbian desire through the elimination of lesbian sex and lesbian sexuality from the realms of speakable discourse. The second being the oblique, elliptical references to lesbian sex and lesbian sexuality that allude to it being something which is regarded

²⁵ Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian* (New York: Columbian University Press, 1993), p. 6.

²⁶ Judith Butler, ‘Imitations and Gender Insubordination’ in Linda Nicholson (ed.) *The Second Wave Reader. A Reader in Feminist Theory* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), p.312. Here Butler writes that when it comes to the lesbian subject ‘oppression worked through the production of a domain of unthinkability and unnameability.’ Therefore, whilst ‘lesbianism is not explicitly prohibited,’ according to Butler, this is primarily because lesbianism ‘has not even made its way into the thinkable, the imaginable, that grid of cultural intelligently that regulates the nameable.’ Moreover, Butler then goes on to ask, that, given this foreclosure of language and identity, how is it then possible ‘to be a lesbian in a political context in which the lesbian does not exist?’ We thus see a direct correlation being established here by Butler, between the speakability of lesbian subjectivity and the act of assuming a lesbian subject position, which in the case of the lesbian subject is arguably complicated and forestalled, by this idea of the unspeakability of lesbian sexuality and subjectivity.

²⁷ Judith Butler, ‘Implicit Censorship and Discursive Agency’ in *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997) p.130. As has been previously discussed.

²⁸ Judith Butler, ‘Imitations and Gender Insubordination’ in Linda Nicholson (ed.) *The Second Wave Reader. A Reader in Feminist Theory* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), p.312.

²⁹ Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian* (New York: Columbian University Press, 1993), p.6. Please note the oblique and elliptical references to lesbian sex within this quote, which are highlighted in italics.

as abhorrent, dirty, sinful, pathological, or simply undesirable, and essentially taboo.³⁰

Within this dynamic we therefore find that the oblique prohibition of lesbian desire and existence works through the inscription of what is being obliquely into the level of the unsayable as something which is better left unsaid³¹ and furthermore by referring to it obliquely in a damningly negative manner that renders it taboo. The use of oblique language to censor lesbian desire therefore involves both a silence on what is being and yet also an indirect censorial allusion to that very thing which is being rendered taboo. These oblique and elliptical prohibitions thus inscribe the unsayable taboo within the silences of language and within elliptical language that hints at this taboo, whilst never placing into explicit discourse. The oblique prohibition of female homosexuality furthermore functions through the idea that the person receiving these oblique prohibitions will be able to decode the encoded taboo on female homosexuality and therefore know that this is not to be spoken about, never mind acted upon. This is however where a point of resistance does emerge because oblique, and elliptical, or allusive, language and, I would argue, body language, which is ultimately oblique, can also function as a powerful way of articulating and communicating that which is obliquely and rendered taboo, based on these very same principles of codes, which can be decoded by right homosexual subjects. Nevertheless, consenting to the prohibition, agreeing not to talk about a taboo and thus confining it to silence, may therefore act as a powerful way of policing this taboo precisely because these forms of oblique prohibition are performative speech acts,

³⁰ The reason why I am listing these rather powerful adjectives is to tease out the meanings of what is implied within their discourse, because we find precisely such implicit references emerging within *Tipping the Velvet* and *Affinity* and it is therefore important to highlight precisely those meanings which are encoded within them.

³¹ Therefore, inscribed within this idea that some things are better left unsaid is the implicit threat that one ought not to 'want' talk about lesbian desire and existence, and that placing this into explicit discourse is the worst thing that one could possibly do, so strong is the oblique cultural taboo on lesbian desire and subjectivity.

which manifest a prohibitive silence, that needs to be repeated in order for it to be maintained, and, yet, is always, already open to subversive failures.³² Moreover, as Judith Butler writes, these ‘implicit’ forms of prohibition which ‘rule out in unspoken ways what will remain unspeakable’ also have the powerful effect of manifesting what Butler calls the ‘foreclosure’ of the subject, and of possible subject positions, in which certain subjectivities become ultimately ‘unperformable.’³³ Therefore, lesbian desire, sex and sexuality, existence and subjectivity are ‘covertly’ ‘through the constitution of viable subjects and through the corollary constitution of a domain of unviable (unsubjects).’³⁴ Thus, the oblique prohibition of lesbianism and the idea that lesbianism does not even make it into the realm of the speakable, ‘the thinkable, the imaginable, that grid of cultural intelligibility that regulates the real and the nameable,’³⁵ therefore forecloses the possibility of women assuming a lesbian subject position and provokes the Butlerian question of how is one to “be” or rather to become a lesbian ‘in a political context in which the lesbian does not exist?’³⁶ A final way that the taboo on and the prohibition of female homosexuality is articulated and transmitted is through the violence of hate speech, and hate acts, or, to broaden this out a little bit, performative speech acts which invoke the power of the normative and function to ‘deauthorise’ the speech of the individual, so as to effectively ‘silence’ non normative and alternative forms of speech, by drawing on, repeating and thus

³² Here my theoretical language is obviously drawing on Butler’s theory of gender performativity, which is delineated throughout Judith Butler, ‘Performative Acts and Gender Constitution’, in Rivkin and Ryan (eds.), *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004) pp.900-911.

³³ Judith Butler, ‘Implicit Censorship and Discursive Agency’ in *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997) p.138.

³⁴ Judith Butler, ‘Imitations and Gender Insubordination’ in Linda Nicholson (ed.) *The Second Wave Reader. A Reader in Feminist Theory* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997) p.312.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid. This will be of importance particularly when I discuss the politics of her novels, because what her novels effectively do, is to help to stop this foreclosure of lesbian subjectivity from happening, by providing women with a viable lesbian subject position.

reaffirming the normative.³⁷ Here, according to Butler, it is thus ‘citizens’ who ‘wield the power to deprive each other of the freedom of speech’³⁸ and moreover it is ‘the subject’ who according to Butler is now said ‘to wield such power, and not the state or some other centralised institution, although institutional power is presupposed.’³⁹ When it thus comes to the oblique cultural taboo on and prohibition of lesbian desire and existence, ‘power’ as Butler notes is therefore ‘exerted by a subject on a subject.’⁴⁰ It thus operates on an interpersonal level and through a subtle Foucauldian network of unofficial ‘force relations.’⁴¹ These oblique prohibitions therefore rely upon the discursive power of the normative, and yet they do not exist as official governmental laws, or manifest themselves as juridical discursive forms of power. Given that this oblique cultural taboo on and prohibition of lesbian desire and existence therefore operates on an unofficial and on a largely oblique level, it therefore arguably makes sense to look at how oblique forms of prohibition manifest themselves through the elliptical gaps within and indirectly prohibitive language, as well as through the language of the body, since this is effectively the most oblique form of interpersonal communications. However, as I will also explore in chapter two, there is a room for subversion within these oblique forms of prohibition because these ellipses and I would argue the oblique language of the body also allow for coded speech to occur, which may by pass the censorial gaze and allows for lesbian desires and viable subject positions to emerge.

³⁷ Judith Butler, ‘Implicit Censorship and Discursive Agency’ in *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997), p.137.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Michel Foucault, (1979) *The History of Sexuality: Volume I: An Introduction*, (trans.) Robert Hurley, (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), p. 92.

In order to harness this theory of the oblique cultural taboo on and prohibition of female homosexuality within the context of Victorian Britain a Foucauldian perspective may be of use for shedding light on the oblique forms of prohibition that were in operation within this context. In *The History of Sexuality* (1984) Foucault writes that far from being repressed and eradicated from discourse, there was a positive 'discursive explosion' on the subject of sex and sexuality within the Victorian period.⁴² However, this discursive ferment arguably surrounded the regulation of bourgeois reproductive heterosexuality. Indeed, it was moreover a discursive ferment which functioned to criminalise and pathologise other forms of sexuality, such as that of the masturbating child and the sodomite or the male homosexual, which fell outside of this paradigm.⁴³ Therefore, one might argue that the oblique prohibition of female homosexuality emerges within a discursive noise that functioned to regulate, so called, normative sexualities. Without falling into the trap of comparing the Victorian era a historically to our own, it is nevertheless noteworthy that Section 28, which was a law that was passed in Britain in 1988 and was only repealed across the UK in 2003 and which the circulation of materials that promote the tolerance of homosexuality within schools and local governmental organisations, was still in operation at the time that Sarah Waters was writing *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) and *Affinity* (1999).⁴⁴ We therefore see this paradigm of the oblique cultural taboo on and prohibition of lesbian desire and existence, which effectively operates on the levels of a discursive silence the very thing that is being, happening within both of theses contexts. It is therefore

⁴² Ibid, p.17.

⁴³ Ibid, p.38.

⁴⁴ This law came into existence in Britain in 1988 and was repealed in Scotland in June 2000 and in the rest of the UK in November 2003. It stated that the local authorities 'shall not intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality' or 'promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship.' (Section 28 of the Local Government Act, 1988). It had the effect of prohibiting the teaching of lesbian and gay issues within schools and the closing down of LGBT support groups by local governments.

arguably of a critical importance for lesbian and gay studies and queer theory that we look at the ways in which this oblique cultural taboo on and the prohibition of female homosexuality happens on an interpersonal, as well as an obliquely verbal or non verbal, level.

One final thing requires to be noted before I move onto the theories of the body as an expressive language and that is the fact that both oblique forms of prohibition, and direct forms of prohibition, do indeed allow a little room for subversion and resistance. I would posit that oblique forms of prohibition, as well as direct forms of prohibition, both being forms of prohibition which rely on the performative repetition of a discursive silence, may be subverted either through what Judith Butler would call a Derridean ‘break’ with this silence (which is embodied by an insurgent act of speech that essentially speaks the unspeakable and thus troubles the performative nature of this discursive silence⁴⁵); or else through a subtle and Irigarayan pathway that disrupts the censorial silence of lesbian desire by ‘playfully’ ‘mimicking’ a quasi (re)submission to this discursive silence, whilst ‘remaining’, always, already, entirely, ‘*elsewhere*.’⁴⁶ Thus, whereas a Butlerian or a Derridean lesbian subject would break with this discursive silence on female homosexuality and would explicitly verbalise their lesbian desires no matter what prohibitions they may incur, or else articulate it at strategically disruptive moments; the Irigarayan lesbian subject would playfully resubmit herself to the cultural taboo on and the prohibition of female homosexual desire, by mimicking this verbal silence, whilst remaining always, already, entirely, elsewhere, of the power of this discourse, by expressing

⁴⁵ Judith Butler, ‘Implicit Censorship and Discursive Agency’ in *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997), p.142.

⁴⁶ Luce Irigaray quoted in Margaret Whitford, (ed.), *The Irigaray Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), pp. 124 & 125 (her emphasis).

their desires through what might be called the elsewhere of language, indeed through queer verbal subtexts or through the oblique language of the body, rather than through the explicit language of the tongue. We arguably find this type of Irigarian subversion of the taboo on homosexuality emerging within Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman's *The Celluloid Closet* (1996), which also serves to illustrate Butler's argument that in contrast to implicit and oblique forms of prohibition, overt and 'explicit forms of censorship are exposed to a certain vulnerability precisely through being made readily legible,'⁴⁷ because they thus become open to direct attack or covert subversion. As Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman thus note in *The Celluloid Closet* (1996), when The Hays Production Code (1939) was introduced by The Legion of Decency, to try to ban homosexual imagery from being produced within the American media, gay and lesbian Hollywood directors took to inscribing homosexual subtexts between the lines of their scripts.⁴⁸ Without saying a word about what they were doing, Hollywood directors therefore circumscribed this direct form of prohibition by inscribing queer subtexts within the scripts of their films - which their audiences thus learnt to read and interpret by using, what Gayatri Gopinath would call, 'queer viewing strategies,' which effectively function to 'translate the codes'⁴⁹ of queer desire that are inscribed within the text, as an act of resistance to being wiped out of culture. What is remarkable here is not only the amount of power that was reclaimed through these acts, but the sense of community that is established through something that was precisely intended to break up this community. Indeed, as one director notes with both

⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 130.

⁴⁸ Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman (dir.), *The Celluloid Closet* (Hollywood, Los Angeles, California: Columbia TriStar, 1996), min: 59.00.

⁴⁹ Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (London: Duke University Press, 2005), pp. 94 & 96. These queer viewing strategies therefore operate via the creation of resistant or unexpected readings, which embody a 'wilful turning away from' the hegemonic meaning of the text, to find the queer slippages and subtexts, which thus emerge through this (re)focusing. These resistant readings therefore allow the queer spectator to seek out the queer meanings and subjects of the text, so as to create their own queer story out of whichever text they are engaged with. (Gopinath, *Impossible Desires*, 2005, pp. 94 & 95.)

a sense of power and pride, ‘you did learn how to write between the lines, *you’d do it with a look* or something,’⁵⁰ which indicates to me the role that the body may play in communicating queer subtexts and evading or navigating prohibition, which I will be exploring throughout my chapter on the queer whispers of the body. Subtexts therefore become a medium of communication under explicit prohibition and the body is indicated as a carrier of these subtexts. Direct prohibition far from prohibiting gay directors from portraying homosexuality on the American movie screen, thus only provoked them to do so more carefully and with both a sense of subversive style and the pleasure that comes from evading and reclaiming power. The power of prohibition and the pleasure of subverting and circumscribing prohibition therefore did indeed become a rather queer Foucauldian game of capture and evasion within this context.⁵¹ Although this must not detract us from the harm that direct prohibition of speech and representation enacts, it does show how verbal silence can be used as a liberating tool under regimes of overt prohibition, if this verbal silence is merely assuming a form of playful Irigarayan ‘mimicry,’⁵² through which the subject merely mimes subordination and verbal silence, whilst this same subject of speech remains, always, already, entirely, elsewhere, in the language of the body for example, as chapter two will go on to discuss. I would therefore posit that Sarah Waters is engaged with both forms of subversion, because the novels themselves, as will be discussed in chapter three,

⁵⁰ Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman, *The Celluloid Closet* (Hollywood, Los Angeles, California: Columbia TriStar, 1996), min: 1.03.00

⁵¹ Here I am referring to Foucault’s notion of pleasure as something which is deeply tied up with power relations and with a certain game of hide and seek, prohibition and circumscription. To quote Foucault directly, I am referring to his notion of ‘the pleasure that comes of exercising a power that questions, monitors, watches, spies, searches out, palpates, brings to light. And on the other hand, the pleasure that kindles at having to evade this power, flee from it, fool it, or travesty it. The power that lets itself be invade by the pleasure it is pursuing. And opposite it, power asserting itself in the pleasure of showing off, scandalising, or resisting. Capture and seduction. (...) These attractions, these evasions, these circular incitements have traced around bodies and sexes, not boundaries not to be crossed, but perpetual spirals of power and pleasure.’ (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 1978, p.45).

⁵² Luce Irigaray quoted in Margaret Whitford, (ed.), *The Irigaray Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), pp. 124 & 125.

break with the discursive silence on lesbian desire and existence by putting lesbianism into the realm of fictional discourse, whereas the characters of her novels are engaged in a more subtle and subversive, Irigarian, process of by passing the various censorial gazes and prohibitions which they encounter by inscribing their desires within oblique and elliptical verbal language, as well as non verbal body language.

In order to talk about how the body may act as a language for both the articulation of the taboo on and the prohibition of lesbian desire, as well as for the oblique expression of this prohibited desire within the novels of Sarah Waters, I will thus be employing a theoretical model of the body as an expressive vehicle for the articulation of affects. I will therefore be looking at both how the prohibition on lesbian desire is expressed through bodily signs and signals, as well as how desire itself is expressed through the body. And I will be looking at how lesbian subjects display, through their bodies, that they have internalised these taboos and prohibitions, or are actively fighting against, contesting or else circumscribing them, by inscribing their desires in oblique bodily expressions. How the affects of desire and queer shame emerge through the body's gestural signs and semiotics and are written on the surface of the body, and how these are readable by those who are able to decode these signs and semiotics, those capable of queer recognition, as it were. To do so, the body will thus be posited as essentially pertaining to what Elizabeth Grosz describes as 'a signifying medium' and as 'a vehicle of expression' or 'a mode of rendering public and communicable what is essentially private.'⁵³ Therefore, within

⁵³ Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward A Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press), pp.9 & 10. Here Grosz is delineating the traditional Cartesian model of the body, which she finds problematic because it embodies the idea that the body is transparent and easily readable or translatable, which is not the case for her. Indeed, Grosz highlights that much can be lost in translation from one body to another, as is arguably the same with verbal language. However, I would posit that, despite the fact that information can be lost in the translation of bodily communications,

this theoretical model of the body ‘it is through the body that the subject can express his or her interiority,’ and, furthermore, according to Grosz, ‘it is through the body that he or she can receive, code, and translate the inputs of the ‘external’ world.’⁵⁴ To be more precise, I will be drawing on the idea of the ‘lived body’ and what Merleau-Ponty posits as ‘carnal intersubjectivity’ or the idea that the body transmits affective and social meanings, which are culturally and historically situated and thus become ‘available’ to people through humanities ‘shared understandings’ of the world at large, of society, emotions and thus also of affective bodily signs and signals.⁵⁵ I will also be drawing on the theory of Goffman and the idea of the socially and culturally situated and expressive body. That, within the context of social interactions, people are constantly transmitting and receiving information, and thus persons can both ‘scan’ and be ‘scanned’ for each others bodily semiotics, so as to pick up on gestural clues regarding their subjectivity, social belonging, affective states and intention of action.⁵⁶ A crucial part of this theory is thus the idea of the ‘body idiom’ which Goffman posits as fundamentally normative because the body is obliged to convey certain information, and to refrain from conveying other impressions, yet it is never capable of silence, it is always in the mode of speech. However, as I will be showing it can also be transgressive in its very act of pretending towards normativity, because the body can seem to be transmitting a normative message, whilst in fact transmitting

there is nevertheless a certain value in learning to read bodies and in coming to an understanding of how much of our interpersonal relations are based upon bodily signals, which are constantly being interpreted by subjects.

⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 9.

⁵⁵ Merleau-Ponty quoted in Gillian Bendelow and Simon J. Williams, *The Lived Body: Sociological Themes, Embodied Issues* (London: New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 53 – 54. This obviously refers back to the theory of Brodieu on the bodily ‘habitus’ and that of Marcel Mauss on ‘body techniques,’ both of whom argue that the body is socially and historically situated and that it therefore learns how to engender itself, how to act and behave, how to carry and hold itself, how to transmit affective meanings and in turn decode others affective and social bodily meanings, from the world that it inhabits. (Ibid, pp.49 – 50).

⁵⁶ Goffman quoted in Gillian Bendelow and Simon J. Williams, *The Lived Body: Sociological Themes, Embodied Issues* (London: New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 57.

an alternative, subversive message. Indeed, if one thus combines his theory of ‘body gloss’ (the idea that the subject can deploy certain bodily gestures to render certain information as to their subjectivity, emotions and intentions hidden), and ‘circumspect gloss’ (the strategic displacement of one affective bodily sign onto another, for example Goffman notes that staring can be replaced through scanning), and, finally, ‘overplay gloss’ (the idea of rendering a bodily affective signal larger than it is and thus ‘unserious,’ precisely so as to detract from the seriousness of it), with Irigaray’s theory of ‘playful mimicry’⁵⁷ (the idea of resubmitting oneself to a prescribed performance, whilst remaining always, already, entirely, ‘elsewhere,’ so as to subvert this performance), then we may find ourselves with a powerful way of subverting the very normative bodily semiotics that the body is forced to convey, and to which the playfully mimetic or glossed body may pretend, and, in doing so, subvert.⁵⁸ This is thus a particularly useful theoretical model for the masquerade of femininity that Kitty Butler is engaged in within *Tipping the Velvet* because she is always, already elsewhere of this masquerade as a lesbian subject. However, the body may also give away the hidden emotions of a subject through, what Goffman calls, acts of ‘bodily betrayal’⁵⁹ such as blushing, which is not a controllable affective and bodily sign.⁶⁰ Finally, I will of course be drawing on the idea of the ‘*emotionally expressive body*,’ as posited by theorists such as Deniz and Giddens, who argue that ‘emotions’ are essentially ‘communicative’ and ‘*embodied* existential modes of

⁵⁷ Luce Irigaray quoted in Margaret Whitford, (ed.), *The Irigaray Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), pp. 124 & 125.

⁵⁸ Goffman quoted in Gillian Bendelow and Simon J. Williams, *The Lived Body: Sociological Themes, Embodied Issues* (London: New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 58.

⁵⁹ Ibid, p.59.

⁶⁰ Ibid. Here Goffman discusses how ‘blushing’ is in fact a ‘bodily betrayal, par excellence’ because it is not a bodily display which can be performed or else stopped, as well as it being a bodily betrayal which critically reveals a person’s sense of ‘nervousness’ or ‘embarrassment’ and their concern for what others think of them. This bodily betrayal is one that we find emerging on repeated occasions within Sarah Waters’s *Tipping the Velvet*, when Nan discovers her desire for Kitty. As my later chapter on the queer whispers of the body will demonstrate, this therefore has the effect of betraying her emerging lesbian desires and subjectivity.

being’⁶¹ The powerful affect of shame, for example, is therefore, according to Sedgwick, embodied within and communicated through ‘the fallen face.’⁶² Through the hanging of the head, the aversion of the eyes and ‘to a lesser extent the blush.’⁶³ This affect, for Sedgwick, is associated with ‘the question of identity’ since ‘shame attaches itself to and sharpens the sense of what one is.’⁶⁴ Indeed, shame can in some cases crucially reveal what one “is” before one realises this. These theories will thus form the context and the backdrop for chapter two, where I will be exploring how the queer desires and subjectivities of central protagonists of *Tipping the Velvet* and *Affinity*, are, interestingly enough, articulated both through a display of the affect of shame, as well as through the rising of bodily heat and, of course, through intense blushing. Therefore, the realities of lesbian existence within a homophobic society, is written all over the faces of these subjects, as is their internalisation of the taboo on female homosexuality and, of course, their desire for such relations.

To be more specific, when talking about how the body functions as a means of women communicating among, between and to other women, I wish to draw on Luce Irigaray’s concept of “*paler féminine*” or “*speaking (as) woman*.”⁶⁵ This is the idea that subjects who take up a *féminine*⁶⁶ position within language speak *Otherwise* to

⁶¹ Deniz and Giddens quoted in Gillian Bendelow and Simon J. Williams, *The Lived Body: Sociological Themes, Embodied Issues* (London: New York: Routledge, 1998), p.138.

⁶² Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 36 & 37.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Before I go on to try to define what Irigaray calls *paler féminine* or speaking (as) woman it must be noted that Irigaray herself said that ‘there is simply no way I can give you an account of speaking (as) woman, it is spoken, but not in metalanguage’ (Whitford, Luce Irigaray, 1991, p.39.)

⁶⁶ Why do I say *féminine* rather than female language? Because as Margaret Whitford notes, for Irigaray speaking (as) woman ‘is not a question of biologically determined speech, but of identity assumed in language within a particular symbolic system’ (Irigaray in Whitford, *The Irigaray Reader*, 1992, p.3). This linguistic symbolic system may be posited as a phallogocentric system, within which the only possible subject position, according to Lacan, is masculine. However, Irigaray posits that there is a *féminine* symbolic order, which does not necessarily have to be embodied only by women. Why do I say *féminine* instead of feminine? Because the former for me embodies the French feminist version

phallogocentric language. Speaking (*as*) woman is defined by Irigaray as a *féminine* syntax that is dispersed, polyvocal or multilayered and thus exists in a ‘plurality of speech’⁶⁷ that must be ‘listen with another ear.’⁶⁸ It is therefore a language that escapes phallogocentric logic, to some extent. It is furthermore a syntax which embodies a ‘nearness’ or ‘proximity’ between its *féminine* subjects, which to some extent exists beyond language and erases distinctions of identity, so that neither speaker is a subject or an object within *féminine* language.⁶⁹ Moreover, this is a language which articulates itself and communicates with others not only through words, but also through the gaps within and the grammatical signs of language, as well as through affective oral signals like sighs and laughter, and bodily semiotics such as blushing or eye contact and the proximity of one body to another. Indeed, as Irigaray writes, if *parler féminine* is to occur anywhere, it is on the gestural levels of the body. She therefore posits that ‘place where it [*sic. parler féminine*] could best be deciphered is in the gestural code of women’s bodies.’⁷⁰ However, as Irigaray goes on to say, ‘since [the *féminine* subject’s] gestures are often paralysed, or part of the masquerade [*sic. the masquerade of patriarchal and heterosexual femininity*], in effect

of gender, which is not directly connected to sex, whereas the latter signifies the, so called, heteropatriarchal version of gender, which follows directly on from sex. Why do I use this concept in connection with Sarah Waters? Because the characters within her novels are indeed assuming such a subordinated and yet subversive *féminine* position within language through their articulations of their desires through a non verbal (*masculine*) and bodily (*féminine*) manner. Therefore, I am allowing for the *féminine* to emerge from the subject position(s) that the lesbian women are assuming, rather than colonising their female bodies with a patriarchal version of femininity, because theirs is a subversive *f(é)mininity*, which mimes and yet subverts this patriarchal idea of heterosexual / female / femininity.

⁶⁷ Luce Irigaray quoted in Margaret Whitford (ed.), *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1991), p. 23.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, p. 24.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, p. 136. This is elaborated upon by Irigaray when she posits the need for women to have ‘a language of their own.’ because she thinks that ‘woman is constructed by language but language is not available to her.’ She furthermore goes on to explain why this it is so important for women to have a shared language in the following lines, ‘It is necessary for a symbolism to be created among women in order for there to be love between them. This love in any chance is only possible at the moment between women who can speak to each other. Without that interval of exchange or of words or of gestures, passions between women manifest themselves in a (...) rather cruel way.’ (Irigaray: Whitford, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine*, 1991, pp.43 & 44). She is therefore highlighting the divisions that can occur between women when they are unable to speak to each other (*as*) women and are entrapped within phallogocentric discourses, as spoken yet not speaking subjects.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, p. 137.

they are often difficult to ‘read.’⁷¹ Nevertheless, the voice of the *féminine* subject may indeed be heard in the excesses of language that ‘resist’ and exist ‘beyond’ language, in the (dis)play of affects on the body, and within what women ‘dare - do or say - when they are among themselves.’⁷² We find a similar assertion being made with regards to the embodied language of the feminine subject within the writings of Hélène Cixous when she talks about ‘the poetic body’ and the ‘passionate body words’ of the *féminine* subject, which are both ‘inaudible’ and yet ‘thundering’ enunciations to the phallogocentric gaze / ear.⁷³ According to Hélène Cixous, the woman who takes up a *féminine* subject position does not “speak” purely in words, but rather ‘*she throws her trembling body forward, she lets go of herself, she flies, all of her passes into her voice.*’⁷⁴ Indeed, according to Cixous, it is thus ‘with her body’ that the *féminine* subject ‘vitally supports the logic of her speech. Her body speaks true.’⁷⁵ And so, the woman who takes up a *féminine* subject position, according to Cixous, ‘physically materializes what she is thinking, she signifies it with her body.’ precisely because ‘she does not deny her drives’ and ‘the intractable and impassioned part they have in speaking.’⁷⁶ Thus, language for both Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous is primarily an embodied medium when it comes to the *féminine* subject. Indeed, Irigaray goes on to say that this *féminine* language is intensified when women are “among themselves.” When women are among themselves, Irigaray writes ‘something of speaking (as) woman is heard.’⁷⁷ Indeed, she furthermore says that ‘there may be a speaking - among - women that is still speaking (as) man, but that may also be the place where a

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa” in *Signs*, vol. 1., No. 4 (Summer, 1976), p.886.

⁷⁴ Ibid, p. 881 (my emphasis).

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Luce Irigaray quoted in Margaret Whitford (ed.), *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1991), p. 137. Here Irigaray claims that ‘the dominant language is so powerful that women do not dare to speak (as) woman outside the context of non-integration.’

speaking (as) woman may dare to express itself.’⁷⁸ Taking these French feminist theories by Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous into account, the expressive language of the body may therefore indeed be posited as operating on a *féminine* economy of language. This being thus a *féminine* economy of language that is characterised by a polyvocality that is both verbal and non verbal or extra verbal, which therefore exceeds the Lacanian masculine economy of language that is characterised by an explicitly verbal language that is both singular and linear, thus allowing it to escape phallogocentric logic. Thus, as this thesis will argue within chapter two, the *féminine* and expressive language of the body, therefore, when appropriated by the central protagonists of Sarah Waters’s *Tipping the Velvet* and *Affinity*, permits these lesbian women, not only to express their lesbian desires for one another, but also to by pass the various censorial gazes and cultural prohibitions of their homophobic society, because their desires are inscribed within the Irigarayan elsewhere of language that is the body, indeed that is always, already, entirely invisible and inaudible to a heteropatriarchal society that is entrapped within a phallogocentric logic, where these articulations of the body do not exist as a recognised and indeed as a recognisable language.

Conclusively, this chapter has argued that the cultural taboo on and the prohibition of lesbian desire occurs primarily on an oblique level and moreover through elliptical prohibitive language and bodily semiotics. It has furthermore argued that the subversion of the explicit and implicit cultural taboo on lesbian desire may occur either through a Butlerian or a Derridean breakage with the silence that surrounds

⁷⁸ By speaking (*as*) man she means phallogocentric language, which is contained in words and linear sentences only, whereas speaking (*as*) woman is more dispersed and polyvocal, as discussed above. So, whilst women among women may use phallogocentric language to communicate, Irigaray posits that women among themselves may also use the above discussed *féminine* syntax with more freedom.

lesbian desire through an insurgent act of speech, or via a quasi Irigarian playful mimicry which feigns towards silence, whilst always, already inscribing the articulation in an expression that is elsewhere of language and may thus be found within the subtextual language of the body. Finally, this chapter has argued that the body may indeed be regarded as an expressive and as a communicative language and more precisely as a language that is operating on what may be posited as a *féminine* economy. Thus, this chapter has established the significance, context and theoretical groundings for my subsequent chapter on The Queer Whispers of the Body, where I will be arguing that the lesbian protagonists of *Tipping the Velvet* and *Affinity*, circumscribe the various oblique prohibitions that are directed at them, by inscribing their desires within an oblique and indeed a *féminine* language of the body, rather than within an explicit and a masculine language of the tongue.

Chapter II

The Queer Whispers of the Body in Sarah Waters's

Tipping the Velvet (1998) and *Affinity* (1999)

'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 as a private language in which we held an endless, delicate exchange of which the crowd knew nothing. This was a language not of the tongue but of the body (...).' Sarah Waters, *Tipping the Velvet* (1999), p.128.

Throughout Sarah Waters's *Tipping the Velvet* and *Affinity* we find the emergence of a rather queer repeated paradigm, namely that of what Oscar Wilde called the love that dare not speak its name. We find this paradigm surfacing particularly intensely within the familial home and the theatrical halls of *Tipping*, as well as the prison cells of *Affinity*. Within these spaces we thus find a lesbian body that is entrapped beneath the prohibitive discursive gaze that permeates these enclosing and yet also strangely liberating spaces. This is a gaze which these protagonists appear to have internalised, therefore rendering them perpetually tongue tied and unable to express their desires in words, because of the implicit and oblique cultural taboo on female homosexuality. However, within these spaces we also find a dissident lesbian body, which escapes this discursive gaze, precisely because these lesbian protagonists articulate their desires through a *féminine* language of the body, rather than through an a *masculine* language of the tongue.

This chapter will therefore explore how the body acts as a site for the prohibition of lesbian desire, as well as a site for the subversive articulation of this desire. I will explore the ways in which Waters portrays the discursive silencing of lesbian desire, whilst simultaneously subverting this silencing by encoding these

unorthodox desires in a language of the body, which thus allows these protagonists to circumscribe and, in so doing, undermine the panoptic gaze of these enclosing spaces. Furthermore, I will argue that the dynamics of these spaces, that of the liberating space of the theatre and the enclosing space of the prison, as well as the familial home, construct the so called Victorian lesbian body as having a very real relevance for contemporary lesbian readership of the novels of Sarah Waters.

This chapter will therefore perform a theoretically engaged narrative analysis of the oblique verbal prohibitions and the queer bodily articulations of lesbian desire, which we find within both of these novels by Sarah Waters. It will thus concern itself primarily with the way that lesbian desire is prohibited through oblique verbal and bodily language. Therefore, this chapter will analyse the various forms of prohibition that are placed on the lesbian desires of the protagonists, through oblique and overt references to the taboo on female homosexuality, as well as through oblique bodily signals, such as laughter, frowning and disgusted looks. It will therefore analyse what these affective displays of the body thus indicate more precisely about the position of lesbian desire within the context of Victorian Britain. It will furthermore look at how these lesbian protagonists appear to have received and internalised these prohibitions, or else are actively rejecting and trying to navigate them, in order to express their desires. It will also concern itself with how a quasi lesbian self awareness arises through the body. By this I mean the way that the body articulates its desire for a member of the same sex to these subjects, who are feeling and interpreting these embodied affects, and who only becomes properly aware of and therefore able to express the desires that they are experiencing, as well as the subjectivity that they are assuming, in thoughts and words, *after* the body has already articulated them through

affective and bodily signals, such as growing hot or blushing, which Nan does on several occasions. Furthermore, this chapter will analyse the way in which these lesbian protagonists articulate their desires through a language of the body, rather than through a language of the tongue, so as to argue that it is precisely through the fact that these lesbian protagonists inscribe their desire in a language of the body, that they are able to circumscribe the various prohibitions that are directed against lesbian desire more generally and would be directed at them more specifically, were they perhaps to articulate their desires through more explicit and openly verbal means. Finally, I will be situating these embodied, desiring lesbian subjects of *Tipping the Velvet* and *Affinity* within the panopticon like spaces of the familial home, the theatrical music hall and the prison cell, throughout this chapter, so as to analyse the way in which these spaces function as panopticon like spaces, with various prohibitive discursive gazes, that either forbid or else allow for the expression of lesbian desire, and thus either enclose or else liberate the lesbian subject. And, I will be looking at how this gaze is either internalised, or circumscribed and thus navigated, or subverted, and, indeed, how these spaces thus become queered, by these hidden displays of lesbian desire, which are encoded within the clandestine and oblique language of the body, rather than within the coarse language of the tongue. This chapter will therefore begin by analysing the above delineated dynamics within Sarah Waters's *Tipping the Velvet*, before moving onto illustrating how they arise within *Affinity*. Whilst this chapter will concentrate primarily on the novels of Sarah Waters, it will also draw on the screen adaptations of these novels, where they allow for a closer narrative analysis of body language, to supplement my readings of these novels, because film, more so than literature, is of course an embodied medium, which thus allows for a deeper analysis of bodily semiotics.

***Tipping the Velvet* and The Oblique Prohibition of Lesbian Desire**

Throughout the novels of Sarah Waters we arguably find a discourse of the cultural taboo on female homosexuality permeating the storylines of her texts. We find this discourse emerging most intensely within her novels, *Tipping the Velvet* and *Affinity*, both of which deal with the unspeakability of lesbian desire throughout. This discourse arguably emerges particularly strongly within the rather enclosing familial space that we find within *Tipping the Velvet*, where Nan Astley gradually discovers her queer desires for the music hall artiste and male impersonator Kitty Butler. Within this context of her rural family home in the small fishing town of Whitstable, the taboo on female homosexuality is not so much articulated explicitly, and in an obvious or overtly prohibitive manner, but rather it is implicitly inscribed within the oblique bodily semiotics of her family, as well as the homophobic implications of their verbal language. Thus, within this setting of the familial home the cultural taboo on lesbian desire is therefore arguably written all over the face of her Mother, who expresses her disapproval for Nan's recurring visits to the theatre to watch Kitty perform, through her obliquely prohibitive bodily semiotics, her communicative 'frown' and her 'mild' and yet powerfully coercive '*tut-tut*','⁷⁹ which is arguably intended to subtly inform Nan that this queer obsession which Nan is developing for Kitty is not permissible. It is furthermore inscribed within the bodily signs of her sister's 'twitching'⁸⁰ lips, which arguably signifies her discomfort with Nan's obsessive enthusiasm for Kitty Butler. Indeed, we moreover find the cultural taboo on lesbian desire to be powerfully and yet obliquely present in the teasing laughter of her family, who ridicule her recurring visits to gaze longingly at Kitty Butler, because this laughter arguably is both symptomatic of the fact that lesbianism is not taken

⁷⁹ Sarah Waters, (1998) *Tipping The Velvet* (London: Virago, 2003), p.16 (her emphasis).

⁸⁰ Ibid, p.18.

seriously within heteropatriarchal society as a valid mode of sexuality and existence, as Terry Castle has theorised, and it also arguably functions to diffuse any possible threat that lesbian desire is perceived to amount to.⁸¹ Indeed, it furthermore trivialises her very real emotions by rendering them comic and insignificant. Therefore, we find a repetition of the homophobic paradigm that female and male homosexual emotions are not real romantic and sexual emotions, but rather that they are theatrical and trivial plays at these implicitly exclusively heterosexual emotions and thus not worth granting either any credit, or any sense of sensitivity, to. As well as through bodily language, these censorial jeerings also manifest themselves through obliquely prohibitive verbal language in the various harmfully teasing lines, which particularly her male family members are fond of spouting at her. Thus, her brother Davy says to Nan, that she is ‘mashed out,’ by which he means that she has got a crush on, ‘that Kitty Butler,’ before adding the following line, ‘Imagine that, (...) being mashed on a masher!’,⁸² which implicitly inscribes in it the idea that, as Terry Castle has theorised, heteropatriarchal culture not only regards romantic and erotic love between women as impossible and therefore a ridiculous concept, but it is also a deeply unimaginable phenomenon. Furthermore, he goes on to ask her whether ‘the real thing’ is ‘not good enough’ for her ‘any more,’⁸³ which thus implies both that Kitty is not a real biological male and that Nan ought therefore not to be showing her any romantic and erotic attention, and also that her queer desires for Kitty Butler are somehow a “fake” - or as Judith Butler would put it a “copy” of the heterosexual and the biologically

⁸¹ Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian* (New York: Columbian University Press, 1993), p. 11. Here Castle argues that lesbian sex, desire and subjectivity are neither recognised, nor taken seriously within culture, by illustrating how these are regarded as ‘impossible’ within homophobic societies, due to their ‘refusal to visualize’ sex between women.

⁸² Sarah Waters, (1998) *Tipping The Velvet* (London: Virago, 2003), p. 19

⁸³ Ibid.

male and, of course, masculine ‘real.’⁸⁴ These teasings are moreover elaborated on by her father who says that, ‘I think there’s a young chap in the orchestra pit what she’s got her eye on,’⁸⁵ and who, in so doing, therefore imaginatively ‘redirects’⁸⁶ the gaze of her queer desires onto a suitably male subject, by reading her affects through, what Monique Wittig calls, ‘the straight mind’ for whom ‘homosexuality is nothing but heterosexuality,’⁸⁷ so as to ‘reorientate’⁸⁸ her emerging queer subjectivity into a sexuality and a subjectivity that is in line with what Adrienne Rich has theorised as the doctrine of ‘compulsory heterosexual.’⁸⁹ His refusal to see her emerging queer subjectivity therefore performs, what Terry Castle would call, a type of ‘ghosting’ of her emerging lesbian desires and subjectivity, which arguably ‘derealises’ this and renders it harmlessly always, already, ‘far away’ from the, so called, heteronormative family home and the supposedly heterosexual subject.⁹⁰ This process of Castilian

⁸⁴ Judith Butler, ‘Imitations and Gender Insubordination’ in Linda Nicholson (ed.) *The Second Wave Reader. A Reader in Feminist Theory* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997) pp.300-315. Throughout this article Judith Butler argues that within homophobic discourses and heterosexist societies, lesbian and gay sexualities and subjectivities, as well as same sex relationships, are regarded as copies of the heterosexual model of desire and subjectivity, which establishes itself as the original, the real and the natural, mode of sexuality and existence.

⁸⁵ Sarah Waters, (1998) *Tipping The Velvet* (London: Virago, 2003), p. 19.

⁸⁶ Lee Edelman, ‘Imagining the Homosexual: Laura and the Other Face of Gender’ in *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literature and Cultural Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1994) p. 189. The redirection of the male homosexual gaze is here being theorised by Lee Edelman in connection with the, so called, aversion therapies that were deployed by modern British psychiatry in the 1960’s, to reorientate homosexuals towards heterosexuality. Whereas her family in *Tipping the Velvet* is not actively strapping Nan to a chair and giving her electric shock therapy to cure the lingering gazes that she directs towards Kitty Butler - as was the case with these aversion therapies, which used electric shock and photography to reorientate homosexual desire into heterosexuality - her father nevertheless does enact a type of aversion therapy or redirection and reorientation of her homosexual gaze, within his compulsory heterosexual imaginary, which lets her know that she ought not to be directing these gazes at Kitty Butler just as powerfully as were she to be struck by a strong voltage.

⁸⁷ Monique Wittig, *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992) p.28.

⁸⁸ Lee Edelman, ‘Imagining the Homosexual: Laura and the Other Face of Gender’ in *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literature and Cultural Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1994) p. 198.

⁸⁹ Adrienne Rich, *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence* (London: Onlywomen Press, 1981), p.4

⁹⁰ Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993) pp.2 - 6. Here Terry Castle argues that heteropatriarchal culture and society periodically renders lesbian desire and subjectivity a quasi cultural ghost effect, because by refusing to recognise lesbian existence they thus derealise it and therefore render lesbian existence a quasi (in)visible spectre, which haunts heteronormative society precisely because it can not fully be abjected by this society. Lesbian desire and subjectivity is therefore posited by Castle as being something which homophobic cultures regards as being ‘far away’ and ‘dire’ precisely because these cultures ‘never expect’ to find the lesbian subject

‘derealization’ that Nan therefore encounters through the harmful teasings of her family are portrayed within the BBC adaptation of *Tipping* as leaving Nan so utterly distraught that she storms out of the family living room, to a comfortably private and yet solitary room of her own. Her embodied trajectory towards a space of her own, away from the censorial gaze and the painful jeerings of her family, thus illustrates the powerful sense of shame, as well as the affective torment and indeed the sheer isolation, which such thoughtless and yet nevertheless obliquely prohibitive jokes can provoke, within the emerging queer subject.

Within this enclosing space of the family home we furthermore find that it is her sister Alice who is the most vehemently prohibitive of her emerging desires for Kitty Butler. Here it is once again through her prohibitive use of verbal and written language, as well as through her oblique and yet powerfully affective body language, that we find the expression of her homophobic defence against and thus her subsequent prohibition of these emerging queer desires. This dynamic of the oblique prohibition of lesbian desire arises most intensely within her verbal and bodily reactions to hearing Nan describe her emotions for Kitty. Indeed, after Nan tells Alice of her feelings for Kitty in rather oblique and bodily terms, saying that Kitty makes her feel ‘sore’ around the area of her chest, as well as making her ‘want to smile and weep at once,’ Nan realises that she ‘shouldn’t have spoken’ of her queer desires, that her ‘unguarded mouth’ had ‘said too much’ and that she ‘should have been as dumb and as cunning with her’ sister ‘as with the rest’ of her family, from the sudden ‘silence’ that permeates the room and the disapproving look on her sister’s face, which Nan describes as being ‘a look of mingled shock, and nervousness, and

‘amongst the midst of things, as familiar and crucial as an old friends’ (Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian*, 1993, p.6) - or, as is the case with Sarah Waters’s *Tipping the Velvet*, as a sister.

embarrassment or shame.’⁹¹ It is therefore precisely through her affective bodily displays of her homophobic defence against female homosexuality, which is arguably inscribed within her mingled and yet clearly disapproving facial expressions, that Nan realises that her queer desires and growing love for Kitty “ought” (according to the oblique cultural taboo on female homosexuality, which Alice is rather unwittingly embodying, communicating and thus reifying) not to be spoken of and thus inscribed into explicit public discourse.

This dynamic is arguably intensified within the BBC adaptation of *Tipping the Velvet*, where Alice prohibits her sisters’ queer desires by instructing Nan that she should not get ‘too keen’ on Kitty Butler, and that Nan ought not to see Kitty again because, according to Alice, ‘people like that’ are ‘not like us.’⁹² Indeed, because the abjected queer “*they*,” which are these ambiguous “*people*,” who are “*not like*” the “*us*” that she is embodying, and which “*they*” are thus other to, ‘do not lead natural lives.’⁹³ This is a claim which Alice moreover punctuates with her hard and direct stern gaze, her tight lips and finally her righteous and disapproving looking face, before she ceases to engage in the conversation and cuts it short by saying that ‘I don’t want to talk about it anymore,’ thus, rather symbolically leaving Nan positively stewing in the silence of her own queer affects, *by herself*.⁹⁴ Within this scene we thus find numerous homophobic discourses arising through her explicitly prohibitive verbal language and her obliquely prohibitive bodily semiotics, which function to censor the emergence of her sister’s queer desires for Kitty Butler. To begin with,

⁹¹ Sarah Waters, (1998) *Tipping The Velvet* (London: Virago, 2003), p.20.

⁹² Sarah Waters, *Tipping The Velvet* (1998) Adapted for the BBC by Sally Head and Andrew Davis (London: Silver Spring, 2004), min: 10.00.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

there is a discourse of othering and, indeed, of ‘abjection’⁹⁵ being established between the “natural” heterosexual “us,” and the “unnatural” homosexual “they,” which the, so called, “natural” heterosexual “us” is, supposedly, “not like.” Implicit within this discourse are arguably at least two very common homophobic subtexts. The first being the idea that the, so called, ‘dire’ female homosexual “other” is always, already entirely, elsewhere of and thus ‘far away’⁹⁶ from, to appropriate the words of Terry Castle, the “natural” heterosexual “I” and “normal” heteronormative” life. Therefore, Alice can not possibly imagine that her sister Nan might be gay, because this would be to admit that the, supposedly, far away homosexual “they” are, in fact, threateningly close to the heterosexual “us.” The second being the implicit threat of rejection, that if Nan either is, or else becomes, “like” the abjected “they” that Kitty embodies, then she will no longer be “like” and thus belong to the “natural” heterosexual “us” that Alice and her family apparently embody. This furthermore implies the idea that Nan will be cast out of this “natural” heterosexual “us” of the heteronormative family and rejected as an “unnatural” homosexual “they” if she becomes “like” Kitty Butler, which is very much the dynamic that we find in the final

⁹⁵ Julia Kristeva, ‘From Filth to Defilement’ in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, (trans.) Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982) p.64. Kristeva theorises abjection as the dynamic where a subject tries to reject and yet is not able to reject or exclude something which they regard as not belonging to their subjectivity. Therefore, Kristeva is drawing on Georges Bataille who argues that abjection is primarily characterised by the inability of the subject to reject or exclude something which they regard as other to themselves. The reason that I am using the concept in connection to *Tipping the Velvet* is because Alice is very much embodying this dynamic of abjection within her desire to reject Kitty and her inability to reject Nan. This dynamic of abjection is arguably functioning on two levels. Firstly, this dynamic is functioning on the level of the stereotypically homophobic and heterosexual reaction to homosexuality, which tries to cast out or exclude homosexuality and the homosexual subject, as a so called other which is not a part of the heterosexual self and heteronormative society, whilst failing to do so because the homosexual and homosexuality itself is always, already in the backyard of heteronormative society and always, already a component of a supposedly monolithically heterosexual subject. And, secondly because Nan and Alice are of course sisters and thus this dynamic of abjection is intensified because, whilst Alice is able to reject Kitty as other to herself and themselves, she is not able to do the same with Nan due to their familial bond. Indeed, we therefore find an act of redemption occurring between Nan and Alice, where Alice tries to bring her into the fold of the heterosexual family, whereas Kitty is lost to her as an absolute other. However, when she does find out about Nan belonging to the abjected them, Alice tries to enact a more radical mode of abjection, which arguably tries to exclude Nan as a homosexual other, so that she need not acknowledge to contingency and instability of her own heterosexuality.

⁹⁶ Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p.6.

rejection letter that Nan receives from Alice, when she confesses her feelings for and her relationship with Kitty. Indeed, this is arguably an implicit threat of rejection that Alice furthermore signifies through her oblique bodily language and her leaving Nan by herself, in a silent and isolated queer room of her own. Her body therefore pre-empted her later rejection of her sister, when she is told of her queer relationship with Kitty Butler. Within this scene we moreover find the idea that lesbian desire and sexuality or subjectivity can not and ought not to be spoken, because neither can Alice articulate what precisely these unnameable and yet implicitly and ambiguously queer “people” are, which makes “them” so different from the implicitly “natural” and heterosexual “us,” nor is she willing to listen to Nan speak of her queer desires for Kitty. Indeed, Alice cuts Nan off midway through her passionate descriptions of her unexplainable queer affects for and inexplicably intense admiration of Kitty Butler. Therefore, she effectively silences Nan and her queer desires. In so doing, the interchange between these two women therefore embodies the idea that lesbian desire is so utterly culturally and linguistically taboo that it can not even enter the private realm of the secret discursive whispers between sisters and close friends.

We arguably find a similar dynamic pertaining to the unspeakability of lesbian desire arising once again within Sarah Waters’s *Tipping the Velvet* in the rejection letter which Nan receives after she confesses her queer affections for Kitty Butler. Within this letter we therefore find Alice expressing her severe disapproval of her younger sister’s ‘*wrong and queer*’⁹⁷ relationship with Kitty, in no uncertain terms. We moreover find that Alice feels such an intense ‘shame’⁹⁸ on behalf of her sister Nan confessing her love affair with Kitty to her, that she has burned her previous

⁹⁷ Sarah Waters, (1998) *Tipping The Velvet* (London: Virago, 2003), p.134.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

confessional letter and hopes that Nan ‘will have sense enough to burn this one, likewise’⁹⁹ Indeed, this shame that she feels for her sister is so intense that she dare not even speak of this queer relationship, which Nan has with Kitty, to their parents and the rest of their family, and she instructs Nan that she ‘must never speak of it to them.’¹⁰⁰ Furthermore, Alice ends the letter telling Nan that she must not ‘burden’ her with her ‘shameful secret’ any longer, but that she must look to herself and the path that she is treading and ask herself if this queer relationship that she is pursuing with Kitty ‘is really Right.’¹⁰¹ Within this letter we therefore find Alice placing a total and absolute block on all communications as far as her queer desires for and relationship with Kitty Butler and her emerging lesbian subjectivity are concerned. This letter therefore does not only function to silence the unguarded expressions of her queer desires and subjectivity, but it also serves to render her an exile from her family, henceforth. Moreover, it also implies that lesbian desire is so utterly shameful and culturally taboo, that it ought not to be put into neither spoken, nor written discourse, under any circumstance, and that no discursive evidence of it must remain. These prohibitions against lesbian desire are arguably ones which Nan subsequently internalises because after this conversation with Alice she says that ‘I had said nothing more to her about my passion. I had said nothing of my new strange, hot desire to anyone.’¹⁰² Indeed, these prohibitions are arguably internalised by Nan to such an intense degree that she does not only refuse to speak *of* her desires to her family but she also censors herself from speaking *to* Kitty of her love for her. Thus, when Nan and Kitty are sharing a bed with one another as friends, Nan censors herself from thinking of Kitty as anything but a very close friends, she therefore thinks to

⁹⁹ Ibid, p.133.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, p. 134.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid, p. 41.

herself that ‘I must learn to swallow my queer and inconvenient lusts (...) and if my head and my heart, and the hot, squirming centre of me, cried out at the shame of it, then I must stifle them.’¹⁰³ We therefore not only witness the willingness to censor herself, which these prohibitions have catalysed, but also the bodily torment that this self prohibition provokes, because she is in effect stifling her own emerging queer sexuality and sense of subjectivity. This dynamic therefore very much echoes the tenants of what theorists such as Adrienne Rich, Mary Daly and Terry Castle have identified as the ‘great silence’¹⁰⁴ which existed around lesbian desire, subjectivity and existence within history and culture prior to the Lesbian and Gay Liberation Movement of the 1970’s and 1980’s. It also serves as an example the idea that when queer desires are rendered visible by being placed into explicit language, they are open to being prohibited via explicit and direct prohibitions, whereas when these queer desires are only expressed via oblique verbal language and bodily semiotics, they are to some extent both visible and invisible, and therefore may only be prohibited by similar oblique means. However, this is by no means to say that these oblique prohibitions are any less harmful than explicit prohibitions, quite the opposite in fact, because explicit prohibitions may indeed be directly contested and rejected, whereas the subversion and contestation of indirect and oblique prohibitions takes on a much more subtle tone, as the rest of this chapter will go on to show.

Tipping the Velvet and the Oblique Articulation of Desire

Whereas the family home is arguably posited as a rather enclosing space as far as the oblique prohibition of lesbian desire is concerned, the theatre is describes as a more

¹⁰³ Ibid, p. 78.

¹⁰⁴ Mary Daly quoted in Adrienne Rich, *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence* (London: Onlywomen Press, 1981), p.12.

liberating space in terms of the expression of lesbian desire. Indeed, it is quasi posited as being a space of subversion or resistance, through which queer sexualities and subjectivities are not only permitted to surface to a certain degree, but within which they are also allowed to positively thrive. It is therefore precisely within the theatrical spaces of *Tipping the Velvet* that we find the emergence of a subversive language of the body, which allows for the articulation of lesbian desire and subjectivity to occur.

Within this space Nan therefore becomes aware of her lesbian sexuality and subjectivity through the affects that arise within her body when she watches Kitty perform and which therefore become inscribed upon her body in a very readable way. Thus, when Nan is watching Kitty perform for the first time, we find her desires for Kitty very clearly inscribed on the surface of her body, particularly within her eyes, which are following every move that Kitty makes with an intense attention to her physical appearance, her theatrical costumes, her eyes, her lips, her hair, her bodily gestures and her every facial expression. Indeed, these desires for Kitty become more explicitly bodily when the thought of Kitty returning to the stage after her exit to ‘fix’ them with her ‘elegant gaze’ makes the heat rise in her body to such an extent that she feels ‘restless’ and thus has to leave the room to grab a breath of fresh air.¹⁰⁵ They are also inscribed on her body quite clearly in the sense that she blushes at every reference to Kitty. Indeed, she does so even more when she is in her company, particularly when they are in the privacy of her dressing room, for example when Kitty kisses her naked fingers and calls Nan a mermaid for the first time, she reacts by ‘flush[ing] with pleasure.’¹⁰⁶ This is therefore a moment where her body is engages

¹⁰⁵ Sarah Waters, (1998) *Tipping The Velvet* (London: Virago, 2003), pp. 14 & 15.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, p.33.

in, what Goffman would describe as, the ‘betrayal’¹⁰⁷ of her hidden emotions for Kitty Butler through this uncontrollable affective bodily sign of blushing. We moreover find that when she is trying to describe her queer affections for Kitty she does so using distinctly bodily phrases. It is almost as if she does not quite know what these queer affects are that her body is communicating to her and the only way that she has of communicating them to herself and to others is through these oblique bodily metaphors. Thus, when trying to articulate her feelings to Alice she says that Kitty makes her feel ‘sore’¹⁰⁸ around the area of her breast bone, where her heart beats against the ribcage of her chest. It is therefore only after these queer affective states have arisen through her body that Nan is able to recognise these cognitively and articulate them linguistically. And, it is only after her body has already said the words a thousand times to her and to anyone who is both willing and able to read her desiring bodily language, that Nan is able to articulate the crucial confessional line to herself in secret, ‘how queer it is! - and yet, how very ordinary: *I am in love with you.*’¹⁰⁹ I would therefore argue that in many ways her lesbian self awareness is, indeed, arising through her body, because her body is articulating its lesbian desires to her and she is feeling and interpreting these bodily affects. Moreover, because it is only significantly after her body has already articulated these queer affects to her consciousness, that she becomes aware of and is thus able to express the desires that she is experiencing, as well as the subjectivity that she is beginning to assume, in conscious thoughts and explicit words.

¹⁰⁷ Goffman quoted in Gillian Bendelow and Simon J. Williams, *The Lived Body: Sociological Themes, Embodied Issues* (London: New York: Routledge, 1998), p.59.

¹⁰⁸ Sarah Waters, (1998) *Tipping The Velvet* (London: Virago, 2003), p.20.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, p. 33 (her italics.) Here we find Waters making a gesture towards the normality and ordinariness of lesbian desire, so as to provoke a sense of tolerance from her readers. This bid towards tolerance is a recurring feature within her novels which will come under discussion within the context of my chapter on the politics of her writing.

As well as it being a space which allows for Nan's lesbian sexuality to emerge through her bodily affects for Kitty, the liberating space of the theatre also functions as a space of courtship for these two women, which again takes on a very bodily mode. Veiled as they are by the hyperbolic theatricality of the male heterosexual drag performance that Kitty Butler enacts, and which arguably provides their audience with what Judith Butler would describe as the reassurance that 'this is just an act,'¹¹⁰ Nan and Kitty therefore partake in a surreptitious act of lesbian courtship that is by and large manifesting itself through their oblique bodily language, through which they thus express their queer desires for one another, whilst they are under the prohibitive gaze of the theatre going audience. Therefore, their queer desires for one another are arguably encoded within their flirtatious eye contact, which thus effectively creates a secret island of Sapphic intimacy right at the centre of the public space that is the theatrical music hall. Thus, within one of the central scenes of *Tipping*, where Kitty courts Nan with the help of her songs and a red rose, Nan therefore describes how Kitty 'held my flustered gaze with her own more certain one, and made me a little bow.'¹¹¹ This thus has the effect of setting her heart pounding against her chest, her face blushing once again and she therefore leaves the theatre 'smiling as if at nothing.'¹¹² Indeed, the powerfully bodily affects within this scene of lesbian courtship are further intensified within the film version of *Tipping* because Nan's excited and yet anxious breathing becomes intensely audible and their eyes create a private space, within which nothing else seems to exist except their embodied

¹¹⁰ Judith Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution', in Rivkin and Ryan (eds.), *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004) pp.900-911. Though Butler is referring specifically to the performative act of transvestism here, I believe that her theory is just as applicable to any, so called, 'transgressive' form of sex, gender and sexuality, which is permitted on the theatrical stage, but prohibited in real life.

¹¹¹ Sarah Waters, (1998) *Tipping The Velvet* (London: Virago, 2003), p. 26.

¹¹² Ibid, p. 27.

affections and desires for one another.¹¹³ One might therefore argue that their scrumptiously flirtatious eye contact, as well as their close bodily proximity and their intense attention to one another's bodily affects, thus creates a quasi queer de Lauretian 'space off',¹¹⁴ because they are effectively oscillating between the 'unrepresentable' and yet 'inferable' temperament of female homosexual desire, through their clandestine lesbian body language, which exists somewhere 'between the lines' and 'against the grain' of the 'hegemonic discourse' that their audiences arguably expect to find within the traditionally heterosexual song and dance routines of the theatrical music hall.¹¹⁵ Indeed, once this clandestine bodily connection has been established between Nan and Kitty, we arguably find that these subtextual bodily articulations of their queer desires for one another, as well as this, so called, de Lauretian queer space off, become intensified because Nan is aware that she has 'been given a kind of secret share' in her performances.¹¹⁶ The very bodiliness with which this private space within the public space is thus created is furthermore empathised by the fact that Nan knows that Kitty can see her sitting in her box because she says that *'I felt her eyes upon me sometimes, as she sang and always when she left the stage, there was that sweep of her hat for the hall, and a nod, or a wink, or the ghost of a smile, just for me'*¹¹⁷ We therefore find that a private language of the body is being established and initiated through an economy of ghostly smiles and 'secret looks',¹¹⁸

¹¹³ Sarah Waters, *Tipping The Velvet* (1998) Adapted for the BBC by Sally Head and Andrew Davis (London: Silver Spring, 2004), min: 13.00.

¹¹⁴ Teresa De Lauretis, "The Technology of Gender", in *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction* (Bloomington; Indianapolis: Indiana University Press 1987) p.26. Teresa de Lauretis defines a 'space off' as that which is 'unrepresentable' but 'inferable' which exists 'between the lines' and 'against the grain' of hegemonic discourse. It is also defined as that which oscillates between the representable and the unrepresentable. Therefore, one might argue that their eye contact creates such a queer space off because it is existing in a space that is just outside of the hegemonic and yet nevertheless present within it, it is unrepresentable and yet it is representable.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Sarah Waters, (1998) *Tipping The Velvet* (London: Virago, 2003), p. 34.

¹¹⁷ Ibid, p. 35 (my emphasis)

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

which are arguably operating on a crucial duality of what the audience is privy to witnessing and what Nan is especially able to perceive, and which also have the very keen effect of creating 'queer electric spaces' between their bodies.¹¹⁹ However, because these bodily affects are enfolded within the heterosexual male drag performance that Kitty is embodying - which according to Butlerian theory, effectively 'derealises',¹²⁰ the queer reality of their bodily articulations, because the drag performance allows for 'strict lines to be drawn,'¹²¹ within the imagination of their audience members, between their on stage lesbian sexuality and their presumed off stage heterosexuality - the articulations of their lesbian desires are therefore effectively veiled from the prying gaze of their audience, thus allowing these two lesbian women to get away with the articulation of their queer desires within the public space of the theatre.

Furthermore, once they do become aware of each others desire for one another and enter into a sexual and emotional relationship with one another, their bodies become a language, with a shared vocabulary, which allows them to express their love for one another in a secret and private manner, within a public space that would otherwise prohibit such expressions of lesbian desire and subjectivity. Thus, whereas Nan takes great pains not to give off any bodily signals to Kitty that might reveal their sexual and emotional relationship to one another when they are in the public eye and away from the safe space of the theatrical stage, saying that she 'never kissed her, touched her, said a loving thing, when there was anyone to glimpse or overhear us,'¹²²

¹¹⁹ Ibid, p. 38.

¹²⁰ Judith Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution', in Rivkin and Ryan (eds.), *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004) pp.900-911.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Sarah Waters, (1998) *Tipping The Velvet* (London: Virago, 2003), p.127. This therefore symbolises the fact that lesbian desire is inexpressible within particularly public society, it being, thus, due to the

when they are performing on the theatrical stage however, their bodily language allows them to express their love and desire for one another secretly and for their sexual and emotional relationship to take on a 'public form.'¹²³ Therefore, Nan describes their theatrical performances as being like a 'double act' which is 'always twice the act the audience thinks.'¹²⁴ This is because 'beyond' their professional business of being music hall performers and 'beyond' the theatrical shows that their audiences are privy to witnessing, 'beyond' their 'songs,' their 'steps' and 'their bits of business with coins and canes and flowers' as Nan herself puts it, Nan thus describes there being 'a private language' in which they 'held an endless, delicate exchange of which the crowd knew nothing.'¹²⁵ Indeed, this is a language which Nan very consciously posits as 'a language not of the tongue but of the body' and whose 'vocabulary' therefore consists of 'the pressure of a finger or a palm, the nudging of a hip, the holding or breaking of a gaze.'¹²⁶ The body is therefore quite obviously posited as a subversive language, which allows them to escape the censorial gaze of the theatre going audience, even whilst they are at the very centre of it. They may therefore be described as being engaged in a playful act of Irigarayian 'mimicry.'¹²⁷ Thus, Nan and Kitty may indeed be posited as subversively 'resubmitting' themselves to the professional role, as well as the theatrical scripts, which their audiences expect of them, as all singing and dancing drag performance artists, whilst they also arguably remain entirely '*elsewhere*' of this theatrical role as a genuine lesbian couple and lovers who are seemingly always, already mentally in bed with one another.¹²⁸

cultural prohibition on lesbian desire, confined only to the private spaces of the bedroom and the various lesbian subcultural spaces of London city.

¹²³ Ibid, p.128.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Luce Irigaray quoted in Margaret Whitford, (ed.), *The Irigaray Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), pp. 124 & 125 (her emphasis).

¹²⁸ Ibid, p. 124.

Indeed, the sexually specific nature of their bodily language and this Irigarian theatrical elsewhere-ness is arguably encoded in the idea that Nan posits their performances as being much like their making love on stage. Nan therefore does not only describe their bodily language in an extremely sexually suggestive manner, saying that if their bodily semiotics could speak in words then they would say 'You are too slow - you go too fast - not there but here - that's good - that's better,'¹²⁹ but she also describes their performances as being like public lesbian sex and 'as if we walked before the crimson curtain, lay down upon the boards and kissed and fondled - and were clapped, and cheered, and paid for it!'¹³⁰ Within this quasi liberating space of the theatre and under the guise of theatricality and professional business, these lovers are therefore able to express their lesbian sexuality in public, a thing that would otherwise not be permissible, were it not for the fact that their desires are encoded in a secret language of the body, which thus permits them to articulate their affection for one another through touch, bodily proximity and, of course, eye contact. Indeed, this queer double act that is engendered through their subversive bodily semiotics, therefore allows them to navigate the censorial gaze of their audience, which might otherwise prohibit these public expression of lesbian desire and subjectivity. This language of the body thus furthermore allows them to flaunt their sexuality in front of their audiences noses, therefore permitting them to queer public space, without their public in fact knowing of this, by their bringing lesbian desire out of the closeted margins of culture and into the spotlight of public society, albeit in a rather strategic and clandestine manner.

¹²⁹ Sarah Waters, (1998) *Tipping The Velvet* (London: Virago, 2003), p.128.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

The Oblique Prohibition of Lesbian Desire in *Affinity*

Within *Affinity* we find a similar dynamic pertaining to the oblique prohibition of female homosexuality and the bodily articulation of lesbian desire emerging within the space of Milbank prison. This is an enclosing space which Mark Llewellyn has correctly identified as being based on the design of Jeremy Bentham's 'panopticon.'¹³¹ According to the theory of Michel Foucault the panopticon styled prison functions as a disciplinary system that is based upon the relentless visibility of the enclosed subject and their internalisation of the idea that they are under the constant surveillance of a disciplinary gaze, so that each prisoner eventually becomes both able and willing to police themselves.¹³² This is arguably precisely the dynamic that we find within *Affinity* where Margaret is subjected to various persistent and yet oblique prohibitions against female homosexuality, as well as a disciplinary gaze which she is meant to internalise, so that she becomes a self policing heteronormative subject. However, as the rest of this paper will show, as well as being subjected to these oblique prohibitions and this disciplinary gaze, which these lovers do internalise to a certain extent, Margaret and Selina also become capable of navigating the

¹³¹ Mark Llewellyn, "'Queer? I should say it is criminal!': Sarah Waters's *Affinity* (1999)" in *Journal of Gender Studies*, vol. 13, no 3, pp. 205 – 206. Here, Mark Llewellyn delineates how the Benthamian panopticon is a prison design that is based around a central tower, from which the whole rest of the prison can be seen. Indeed, according to Llewellyn, the prison that Waters portrays in *Affinity* is based on a real Victorian prison, which was situated in London and called Milbank Prison, and which moreover embodied this panopticon design. Llewellyn also draws on Foucault to illustrate how the Benthamian panopticon functions as 'the perfect disciplinary apparatus' which 'make[s] it possible for a single faze to see everything constantly' and it is this constant visibility 'that maintains the disciplined individual in his [sic.] subjection.' Therefore, Llewellyn furthermore points out how this being under constant surveillance not only imprisons the subject physically but also psychologically. This is a dynamic that I will be drawing on when I thus argue that Selina and Margaret are trapped beneath a panopticonian gaze, which has the effect of enclosing their lesbian desire and subjectivity.

¹³² Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London: Penguin Books, 1977), p.81. Here Foucault argues that the panopticon acts as a disciplinary mechanism that encourages the internalisation of an external gaze, as well as the various ideological discourses that are embodied by this gaze, so as to produce what Foucault calls, a 'self policing subject.' This idea of the internalisation of an external gaze and its ideological discourses will become particularly important when I go on to discuss how Margaret and Selina come to internalise this sense that they are always under surveillance and that it is therefore rather of an imperative that they harness their embodied displays of lesbian desire, within this prison setting which arguably functions as a trope for heteropatriarchal society. Therefore, the heteropatriarchal gaze of the prison wardens is indeed internalised by these lesbian subjects, which thus coerces them into becoming self policing lesbian subjects.

disciplinary system in which they find themselves, by inscribing their affections for one another in a language of the body, rather than a language of the tongue, which thus allows them to express their love and indeed their desires for one another and to circumnavigate the prohibitive gaze that is ever vigilantly patrolling the space of Milbank prison.

We arguably find the taboo on lesbian desire emerging most intensely within the tone of voice and the oblique and yet clearly prohibitive subtexts of the warnings that Miss Haxby directs towards Margaret with regards to the fact that she ought to ‘Take care’ in her ‘dealings’ with the female prisoners of Milbank.¹³³ Indeed, this is moreover a warning that she delivers with a ‘*dreadful* emphasis’¹³⁴ to her voice. She therefore articulates this prohibition against female homosexual relations obliquely, through the subtexts and implications of her ambiguous use of language and her dreadful tone of voice, which arguably functions to inform Margaret of the oblique taboo on female homosexuality and of the rules of Milbank prison pertaining to this taboo, without these having to be stated explicitly and in so many words. Indeed, this oblique prohibition against female homosexuality is furthermore intensified and rendered explicit within the BBC adaptation of *Affinity*. Here the warning which Miss Haxby directs towards Margaret is extended in the sense that she ought to ‘take care’ of ‘how much’ she ‘give[s]’ these women of ‘[her]self,’ because if she ‘give[s] a little’ then ‘they will take all.’¹³⁵ The severity of this warning and its oblique yet nevertheless distinctly prohibitive implications, which indicates to Margaret that she ought not to develop any close and personal relations with any of the female prisoners

¹³³ Sarah Waters, (1999) *Affinity* (London: Virago, 2004), p.16.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Sarah Waters, *Affinity* (1999) Adapted to film by Andrew Davis and Adrian Bate (London: Box TV, 2008), min: 04.00 – 05.00.

throughout her professional capacity at Milbank prison, are once again inscribed within the sharp and direct gaze of Miss Haxby, as well as her stern and steady authoritative voice, and her emphasis on certain words within lines such as ‘*take care* of how much you give them of *yourself*.’¹³⁶ Indeed, these distinctly prohibitive implications, which are however never explicitly articulated, are moreover inscribed within the confiding lowering of her gaze, when she says to Margaret that ‘I think you understand me.’¹³⁷ This line therefore indicates that she need say no more on this matter and that Margaret ought to know precisely what she is talking about. Moreover, it is certainly clear from the fact that her face drops from a smile to absolute dead seriousness, as well as from the subtle lowering of her gaze and the slight nodding of her head, that Margaret has indeed received these warnings and understood their queer implications.¹³⁸ Indeed, the implications of this first oblique prohibition become clearer as the novel progresses and as Margaret meets with further warnings such as the one that Miss Manning directs at her when she says that Margaret ‘must watch that no one tries to make a pal of *you*, miss’¹³⁹ and when Margaret thus discovers that this is in fact a reference to romantic relations between the female prisoners and their overseers. Here we once again find the traditional homophobic dynamic that romantic relationships between women and the emotions of female homosexual subjects are not taken seriously and are regarded either as comic or overly dramatic, within the idea that Miss Manning finds the fact that the ‘row’ that those prisoners ‘who have grown romantic over their matrons’ raise when they are ‘removed to other gaols for it’ nothing but ‘comical.’¹⁴⁰ Within these lines Margaret thus learns that she ought not only to be on her guard against the possibility of any of

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Sarah Waters, (1999) *Affinity* (London: Virago, 2004), p.67 (her emphasis).

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

the female prisoners developing a romantic attachment to her, but also that romantic relationships between these women, who are furthermore of vastly different social standings and class backgrounds, are simultaneously regarded as absolutely trivial and yet rather conversely treated as horrifically serious breaches of conduct, which are punishable by separation, loss of privileges or social standing and, of course, by further imprisonment. This threat of separation is one which Margaret and Selina do themselves face on several occasions after Miss Haxby warns Margaret that she is concerned with the fact that her ‘interest’ in one of the female prisoners of Milbank ‘might not be a little more - specific - than it ought to be.’¹⁴¹ Here she furthermore warns Margaret of the ‘dangers’ that might ensue from her, so called, ‘friendship’ with Selina and that ‘it would oblige her and her staff if, in future,’ Margaret were to visit Selina ‘less’ and for her to keep these visits ‘rather brief.’¹⁴² Inscribed within this warning and indeed within these instructions is therefore not only an oblique prohibition on female homosexual relationships, but also the threat that within this panopticon like space of Milbank prison Margaret and Selina are falling under the censorial gaze of the prison wardens. Indeed, this threat is arguably embodied within the fact that Miss Haxy ‘fixed’ Margaret ‘with her sharp eyes.’¹⁴³ These oblique bodily semiotics thus let Margaret know that they are always, already being watched and closely scrutinised for any and every possible queer intention that they may have and which are therefore ‘*against the rules*’¹⁴⁴ of Milbank prison.

We arguably find that these oblique prohibitions are internalised by Margaret to a certain degree because she constantly fears that her and Selina may be overheard

¹⁴¹ Ibid, p. 214.

¹⁴² Ibid, p. 215.

¹⁴³ Ibid, p.214.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid. (her emphasis.)

or else overlooked by the prison wardens. We thus find her stepping away from Selina and distancing herself physically from her because she is 'afraid to go too close to her, afraid even to look too hard at her'¹⁴⁵ lest their bodily closeness be interpreted as being inappropriately intimate. Indeed, she even warns Selina at one point that 'it was not right that we should be so near. That it was against the rules, it was forbidden by the rules of Milbank.'¹⁴⁶ Margaret therefore highlights the extent to which she appears to have internalised the prohibitions that the wardens have directed at her, and the rules of Milbank prison themselves, because she is willingly reiterating them to Selina. This is thus a prohibitive gaze which Margaret arguably appears to have internalised to such an intense degree that even within the private space of her bourgeois family home, which she herself describes as being likened to a prison, she fears that she will be overheard by her Mother, as she writes of her visits to Selina in her secret book. She therefore describes herself as moving her 'pen across the page so carefully' that her Mother 'might come and press her ear' against her door and 'she would not hear' her writing, nor would she see her writing were she to 'kneel and put her eye to the key hole' of her door, because Margaret has 'stopped it with cloth,' so intense is her righteous paranoia that she might be overlooked and punished for her queer desires for Selina Dawes.¹⁴⁷ Indeed, these oblique prohibitions on lesbian desire and this invasive censorial gaze are arguably internalised by Margaret so utterly intensely that she even appears to censor her own writing, and is both shocked and horrified to find that her queer desires for Selina have crept across the pages of her book. She therefore highlights the extent to which she fears her own queer writings and is thus willing to censor the crooked passages of her desiring thoughts, within the following passage, where she writes:

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, p.245.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, pp. 270 & 271.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, p.224.

‘Now I can see that my heart has crept across these pages, after all. I can see the crooked passage of it; it grows firmer as the paper turns. It grows so firm at last; it spells a name - Selina. *I almost burned this book tonight (...) and now shall keep these pages shut.* For if I turn them again, then the scent of it will come, to warn me. *It will come quick and sharp and dangerous, like the blade of a knife.*’¹⁴⁸

Whereas the symbol of the quick and sharp blade of the knife arguably signifies the dangerous repercussions which she fears might follow were her writings to be uncovered, the idea that she is willing to burn her own writing or else keep this book closed henceforth, signifies the extent to which Margaret appears to be willing to censor her own thoughts and, of course, her own writing, because of the oblique prohibitions that she seems to have internalised. However, as the rest of this chapter will now go on to argue, although she does indeed appear to have internalised these oblique prohibitions and the cultural taboo on female homosexuality, to a very strong degree, a closer analysis of her oblique verbal and bodily language, as this chapter is about to perform, furthermore shows how she is actively navigating the censorial gaze of Milbank prison, particularly when she is alone with Selina in her cell, since Margaret also instructs Selina of how ‘careful’ and how very ‘sly’ they shall have to be, now that she realises that the censorial gaze of the wardens is upon them.¹⁴⁹ Indeed, I would argue it is precisely within their non verbal bodily semiotics that we find this careful and subversive slyness, which functions to navigate the censorial gaze of Milbank prison and allows for their queer affections for one another to be expressed.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, pp. 241 & 242.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, p.271.

The Oblique Articulation of Desire in *Affinity*

As with *Tipping the Velvet*, Margaret in *Affinity* comes to a realisation of her queer desires for the spiritualist, Selina Dawes, primarily through her bodily affects, which emerge some time prior to, and, thus, arguably inform, her conscious realisation of what these queer affective states signify and their subsequent translation into explicit language. Thus, Margaret experiences a slight ‘*quickenings*’¹⁵⁰ within her body, when she first gazes at Selina. Indeed, this affective state which Margaret experiences moreover makes her place her hand upon her heart, whilst her body turns away from Selina.¹⁵¹ Therefore, whilst the quickening within her body arguably denotes the rising of her queer desires, her placing her hand upon her heart and her moving away from Selina arguably signifies her wish to protect her emotions, which have been quasi traumatised by the loss of her lover Helen, as well as the queer shame that she feels with regards to these emerging queer desires and, of course, her fear of being hurt again, by the loss of a loved one. This is furthermore a bodily affect that she shares with Selina, because Margaret describes how she can feel a similar affect arising from her body: ‘I felt my heart beat and, behind the beat, caught another, sharper movement, that *quickenings*, grown fiercer than ever. I felt it, and felt an answering twisting in her.’¹⁵² Thus, this queer bodily quickening which Margaret can feel within them both, which she moreover describes as being like ‘a kind of agony,’¹⁵³ therefore denotes the way that their bodies are becoming connected through the affects of desire and a queer kind of torment, which is arguably linked to the sociocultural repression of lesbian desire within Victorian Britain, since this culture denied the existence of such affects and rendered lesbian sexuality not only a cultural

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, p.163.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Ibid, p.272.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

impossibility but a hard, and, thus, no doubt, an emotionally tormenting, existence to try to pursue. Once again, as with Nan and Kitty in *Tipping the Velvet*, the bodily desires which emerge within Margaret and Selina in *Affinity*, are only articulated within an elliptical verbal language, which is peppered by bodily metaphors, significantly after the bodily affects have been felt by the desiring subjects of Margaret and Selina, within the crucial line that Selina directs at Margaret, ‘Now you know why you are drawn to me - why your flesh comes creeping to mine and what it comes for. Let it creep (...). Let it come to me, let it creep.’¹⁵⁴ Therefore, although this dynamic is significantly different from the dynamic of Nan and Kitty in *Tipping the Velvet*, primarily because Margaret has felt these queer affects before for her previous lover Helen, *Affinity* nevertheless repeats this dynamic of the queer desire that arises through the body into the consciousness of the subject and subsequently into more explicit language, as well as the dynamic of a sense of lesbian subjectivity emerging through the body, even as culture, and the consciousness of the desiring subject, tries, and yet fails, to repress it.

Furthermore, as is the case with Nan and Kitty in *Tipping the Velvet*, Margaret and Selina of *Affinity* also communicate their queer desires for one another through a secret language of the body, rather than through an explicit language of the tongue, so as to evade the censorial gaze of the prison wardens of Milbank. We therefore find Margaret and Selina touching via the act of writing within the enclosing space of the prison cell, where Margaret lends Selina her pen, to write her name with, in her secret book. Margaret therefore describes how Selina challenges her on whether she writes about her at night, within the private space of her bedroom, in a highly flirtatious

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 276.

manner, whilst all the time Margaret claims that Selina's 'head was very near to my own, and her voice when she spoke, was little more than a whisper.'¹⁵⁵ Indeed, at one point their fingers touch and Selina smiles at Margaret 'in a secret way.'¹⁵⁶ The intensely confiding and flirtatious nature of their bodily semiotics within this scene are furthermore intensified within the film version of *Affinity*.¹⁵⁷ Within the film version of *Affinity*, Selina is thus portrayed as swinging her legs in a teasingly childlike manner, as she smiles and leans in towards Margaret, meeting and holding her gaze, as both play with their fingers, awkwardly. Furthermore, turning down her eyes, her mouth smiling in secrecy, Selina presses her lips together softly and yet teasingly, reaches out to touch Margaret with her fingers and whispers:

'Don't you know the spirits see everything? Even if you write your secrets late at night, with the door made fast and the lamp turned low. (...) But they are with you now, all the time my sprits. Haven't you felt their presence yet? At night when everything is quiet. A kind of whispering. Haven't you felt their presence in your dreams? I think you have.'¹⁵⁸

Within this scene her intensely teasing discourse on the spirits, which supposedly visit Margaret in her dreams, therefore signify her repressed lesbian desires, which return to haunt her at night time, in her thoughts of Selina. Further to this oblique verbal reference to lesbian desire, Selina also clearly deploys her bodily semiotics in a cleverly confiding and intensely teasing and flirtatious manner, which lets Margaret know of her own desires for her. Indeed, Margaret arguably signifies her having received these bodily semiotics and their queer implications by the way that she bats her eyelashes in a shy manner, as well as the way in which her voice hesitates with

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 113.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid, p. 115.

¹⁵⁷ Sarah Waters, *Affinity* (1999) Adapted to film by Andrew Davis and Adrian Bate (London: Box TV, 2008), min: 32 - 34

¹⁵⁸ Ibid, min: 32 – 33.

her slightly excited, and yet nervously irregular, intakes of breath, whilst the rest of her bodily semiotics, her face and her gestures, try to hide behind a mask of propriety, by her looking cautiously stern. This scene therefore illustrates the way in which these bodies are communicating their desires for one another in an oblique manner. Furthermore, given that this scene is enfolded within a narrative about her secret writings of Selina, one may also claim that it is in fact the act of writing itself which therefore allows the bodies of these women to touch, since it is also through her writing that Margaret arguably touches Selina, in her absence. Moreover, when the bodies of these lovers are not within immediate proximity to each other, we arguably find that certain fetishised objects, such as the orange blossoms and the velvet choker that Selina sends to Margaret and the plait of her hair which Margaret finds at Milbank prison, therefore stand in for their bodies. In light of the theory posited by Donna Haraway, that bodies do not end at the skin, but often include the objects that bodies come into contact with,¹⁵⁹ I would therefore argue that these objects act as extensions of their bodies and that it is thus through these exchanges of gifts that their bodies are permitted to touch, when Margaret and Selina are not in immediate proximity to one another. Indeed, their intense affective connection becomes so strong, through their surreptitious use of bodily language and their exchange of fetishised and bodily gifts, which they use to articulate their queer desires to one another, that Margaret believes that she can hear Selina's heart beating all the way from Milbank prison. She therefore says that 'my blood, even as I write this, *my*

¹⁵⁹ Donna Haraway, 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century' in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Free Association, 1991) p. 178. Here Haraway poses the crucial question: 'Why should our bodies end at the skin, or include at best other beings encapsulated by skin?'

blood, my muscle and every fibre of me, is listening *for her*' and that she can thus 'hear her heart beating across the night in time to my own.'¹⁶⁰

However, whilst their oblique verbal and bodily language allows Margaret and Selina to articulate their queer desires to one another within the confines of Milbank prison, it also places them in danger of being too visible to the wardens, who are watching their every move with prying eyes. Therefore, Margaret and Selina are very careful indeed to veil their affective bodily language from the censorial gaze of the prison wardens. Thus, following on from the above delineated scene in which these women touch through their writings, we therefore find Margaret and Selina trying to hide their queer affects, once they realise that they are falling beneath the censorial gaze of one of the prison wardens, who is described by Margaret as having 'dark eyes' which search their cell in a rather 'fretful way.'¹⁶¹ They therefore arguably conceal their affections for one another, which, only a few seconds before, were written all over their bodies, by enacting, what Goffman would call, a type of 'body gloss.'¹⁶² Whereas, Margaret therefore describes how she hides her 'fluttering breast' with her coat, Selina on the other hand is described as having 'taken a step away' from Margaret and furthermore as having 'bowed her head, not smiling at all.'¹⁶³ Therefore, both Margaret and especially Selina, may thus be described as being engaged in an act of Irigarayian mimicry, because they are effectively resuming their properly respectable social and professional position to one another, as prison visitor and female prisoner, whilst they simultaneously remain always, already entirely, elsewhere as future lovers and indeed as women who have, only mere seconds

¹⁶⁰ Sarah Waters, (1999) *Affinity* (London: Virago, 2004), p. 304 (her emphasis).

¹⁶¹ Ibid, pp. 115 & 116.

¹⁶² Goffman quoted in Gillian Bendelow and Simon J. Williams, *The Lived Body: Sociological Themes, Embodied Issues* (London: New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 58.

¹⁶³ Sarah Waters, (1999) *Affinity* (London: Virago, 2004), pp.115 & 116.

previously, been engaged in a very bodily act of flirtatious lesbian courtship.¹⁶⁴ Indeed, this Irigarayan elsewhere-ness is furthermore highlighted by the fact that Margaret walks away from Selina clutching her secret book between her fingers and as touching the leather binding of her book with her 'naked palm' only to find that it is still 'warm' from the 'grip' of Selina's 'fingers,' even whilst she is still in the company of the prison warden.¹⁶⁵ Thus, it is through this bodily extension that is her book, that Margaret remains elsewhere of the prison warden, who is marching her away from Selina. Indeed, she remains elsewhere with the spirit of Selina herself, with her queer memories of her and, of course, with the bodily traces of her own affinity, which mark the pages of her book.

Conclusion

Conclusively, this chapter has performed a theoretically engaged narrative analysis of the novels of Sarah Waters, which has highlighted the way in which the oblique cultural taboo on lesbian desire and subjectivity is communicated on an interpersonal level through oblique verbal and bodily semiotics, and, when these are rendered insufficient, through explicitly linguistic prohibitions. Indeed, this chapter has moreover illustrated the way in which the body shows how it has internalised these prohibitions or is actively contesting these prohibitions, by the inscription of lesbian desire within a language of the body. It has shown how a lesbian self awareness arises through the inexplicable affective states of the body, which communicate to the subject their own sense of sexual desires and emerging subjectivities, even as the cognitive centres of these subjects try and yet fail to deny the implicit meanings of

¹⁶⁴ Luce Irigaray quoted in Margaret Whitford, (ed.), *The Irigaray Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), pp. 124 & 125.

¹⁶⁵ Sarah Waters, (1999) *Affinity* (London: Virago, 2004), p.116.

these bodily affects. Finally, this chapter has argued that by inscribing their desires within an oblique *féminine* language of the body, rather than within a verbal language masculine of the tongue, the lesbian protagonists of *Tipping the Velvet* and *Affinity* are not only able to circumvent the cultural prohibition of their lesbian desires, but they are also able to flaunt these desires under the very gazes that would otherwise prohibit them, by their assuming various types of body gloss and by their engaging with playful acts of Irigarayan mimicry and Butlerian performativity. Thus, this chapter has proved how oblique verbal language and bodily semiotics may indeed be appropriated by lesbian subjects, so as to allow them to articulate the very desires which are otherwise prohibited to them, because the very obliqueness through which these articulations of desire happen renders them safe from the censorial gazes of their homophobic culture, by placing them within a kind of twilight zone that is inhabited by, what Terry Castle would describe as, the apparitional lesbian, who is always, already engaged in a hauntingly ghostly game of hide and seek: of now you see me, and now you don't.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁶ Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p.46. Here I am metaphorically drawing on Terry Castle's notion of apparitional lesbian subject, who is characterised by being ghosted by heteropatriarchal culture, and thus inhabits a twilight space of visibility and invisibility, from which the lesbian subject haunts this culture. And, I am furthermore drawing on her concept of 'not-there-ness,' which she describes as a type of 'now you see her, but mostly you don't' dynamic. I am doing so because by inscribing their desires within an oblique language of the body the desires of these lesbian protagonists of *Tipping* and *Affinity* are effectively (self) spectralised and thus it is able to be seen and yet not quite, it is visible and yet it is invisible.

Chapter III

The Contemporary Lesbian Politics of Sarah Waters's Neo Victorian Novels

Beneath the Wolfskins and the Togas, Deeper than Disguise

When it comes to the novels of Sarah Waters several of her critics have noted a connection between the Victorian setting that she deploys and the contemporary context that she is writing within. Mark Llewellyn writes that 'the use of an 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.'¹⁶⁷ He therefore argues that these novels are 'neither strictly about the past nor the present,' but a 'hybrid' version of both the historical and the contemporary, which look towards the past for their 'setting' and towards the present for their 'wider implications.'¹⁶⁸ Thus, Llewellyn quite aptly points towards 'the very contemporary (...) nature' of Sarah Waters's Neo Victorian novels.¹⁶⁹ In the context of this argument on the contemporary nature of her novels, Emily Jeremiah also writes that 'any historical novel, of course, is about the present as much as it is about the past.'¹⁷⁰ Moreover, Rosario Arias Doblas also notes that history is open to reinterpretation and thus always 'shaped by present concerns.'¹⁷¹ Therefore, Neo Victorian women writers like Sarah Waters, according to Doblas, are essentially 'wanderers between two worlds' and are therefore responsible

¹⁶⁷ Mark Llewellyn, "'Queer? I should say it is criminal!': Sarah Waters's *Affinity* (1999)" in *Journal of Gender Studies*, vol. 13, no 3, p.214. However, like Llewellyn, I am do not positing that Waters is referring to the contemporary as Victorian, per sei. But rather I am saying that certain contemporary issues pertaining to lesbian sexuality are being worked out through the Victorian setting.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid, p.204.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, p. 213.

¹⁷⁰ Emily Jeremiah, "'The "I" inside "her": Queer Narration in Sarah Waters's *Tipping the Velvet* and Wesley Stake's *Misfortune*', in *Women: A Cultural Review*, vol. 18, no. 2, p.133. Here Emily Jeremiah is also drawing on Llewellyn, please see above.

¹⁷¹ Rosario Arias Doblas, 'Talking With The Dead: Revisiting The Victorian Past And The Occult in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* and Sarah Waters' *Affinity*' in *Estudios Ingeses de la Universidad Complutense*, Vol. 13, pp. 86 & 87.

for ‘establishing a dialogue between the past and the present.’¹⁷² When promoting her writing, her publishers, Virago Press, once deployed the metaphor of a thief, or a treasure hunter, to advertise Waters as a writer who ‘pilfers from the past to produce utterly contemporary lesbian fiction.’¹⁷³ And, they are moreover fond of positing her, as a writer who appropriates Victorian fiction for a distinctly ‘lesbian agenda.’¹⁷⁴ This is also a point that Paullina pick up when she writes that she writes that Sarah Waters deploys the ‘tactic’¹⁷⁵ of writing ‘historiographic metafiction’¹⁷⁶ (which Hutcheon claims as a type of historical fiction that ‘reshapes’ the past historic ‘in light of the present day’¹⁷⁷) for a ‘lesbian agenda’, so as to engage in a clandestine polemical debate on ‘issues central to contemporary lesbian culture’¹⁷⁸ Thus, Palmer claims that it is her ‘ability to combine the representation of lesbian history with a awareness of the interests striking and concerns of the lesbian community today’ that is, in fact, ‘one of the most Palmer picks up when and successful aspects of her work.’¹⁷⁹ Furthermore, Sarah Water herself has always shown an acute awareness of the constructed nature of the historical novel, which, according to Waters, shapes itself according to contemporary concerns.¹⁸⁰ When speaking about the contemporary value

¹⁷² Ibid, pp.102 & 103.

¹⁷³ Sarah Waters, ‘Her Thieving Hands’http://www.virago.co.uk/author_results.asp?SF1=dataST1=feature&REF=e2006111617063697&SORT=author_id&TAG=&CID=&PGE=&LANG=EN (Accessed on the 22nd of April 2009) p.1.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid. Please note their use of the politicised word, agenda, when they are describing the lesbian specificities of her works.

¹⁷⁵ Paullina Palmer, “‘She began to show me the words she had written, one by one:’ Lesbian Reading and Writing Practices in the Fiction of Sarah Waters’, in *Women: A Cultural Review*, vol. 19, no. 1, p.76

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid. Please note how once again we find the highly politicised word, agenda, emerging in relation to the lesbian specificities of the writings of Sarah Waters.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid, p.83.

¹⁸⁰ Abigail Dennis, “‘Ladies in Peril:’ Sarah Waters On Neo-Victorian Narrative Celebrations and Why She Stopped Writing About the Victorian Era’ in *Neo-Victorian Studies*, vol. 1., No. 1 (Autumn 2008), p.45. Here Waters illustrates how she is aware of the fact that this genre is one which constructs history, rather than merely describing or reporting history, by saying that writers who work within the Neo Victorian genre have ‘constructed’ the Victorian era ‘in a very particular way,’ that is furthermore always, already a reflection of the contemporary moment in which the author is writing.

of the Neo Victorian novel, for example, Sarah Waters thus notes that she thinks of this genre as:

‘(...)a way of addressing issues that are still very, very current in British culture, like class and gender and submerged sexuality or sexual underworlds. *Things 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.*’¹⁸¹

Moreover, within the context of her own academic writings on the lesbian historical novel, Waters writes that this apparently ‘escapist’¹⁸² genre has been, and, as I will go on to argue throughout this chapter, continues to be, used to for very contemporary and, arguably, politically engaged, lesbian projects.¹⁸³ Projects of inventive appropriation, in which the reader, according to Waters, may ‘look beyond the wolf skins and the togas’ of the, so called, historical novel, ‘to find the controversial twentieth century lesbian body.’¹⁸⁴ Nevertheless, although it is very clear that Sarah Waters herself is both very much aware of and, indeed, concerned with how the historical novel can act as a vehicle for exploring the contemporary issues of lesbian existence and despite the previously discussed references that illustrate, albeit rather briefly, the contemporary nature of the novels of Sarah Waters and their particular role in exploring and representing the contemporary British lesbian community, a sustained and in-depth analysis regarding the contemporary lesbian politics of the

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Sarah Waters, ‘Wolfskins and Togas: Maude Meagher’s *The Green Scamander* and the Lesbian Historical Novel’ in *Women: a Cultural Review*, vol.7, no.2, (1996) p.188.

¹⁸³ Ibid. Waters makes this argument when she is talking about how the historical woman writer Naomi Mitchison was ‘adept at exploiting the historical setting to explore a range of alternative social and sexual arrangements at a time when less ‘escapist’ writing (...) was being edited and suppressed,’ which according to Waters had the result that ‘the political content of her historical fiction was often seriously overlooked or disregarded.’ She therefore highlights her awareness that historical fiction can have a very definite political agenda, that is, however, enfolded within a, so called, ‘escapist’ style of writing.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

novels of Sarah Waters, has not yet been undertaken.¹⁸⁵ This chapter will therefore look beyond the laced frocks, the velvet corsets, the black toppers, the theatrical halls, the gothic prisons and all that razzmatazz of the historical drag act that, arguably, is the Neo Victorian genre, so as to find the very contemporary, and, of course, controversial, lesbian politics of Sarah Waters's novels.¹⁸⁶ I will therefore argue that the Victorian era acts as a kind of trope for contemporary Britain, which creates a historical distance that allows Waters to explore *both* the historical *and* the contemporary conditions of lesbian existence through the metaphor of Victorian Britain. Thus, I will illustrate the sorts of issues (such as that of the marginalised and place of the lesbian within the big city and that of the sense of alienation which may be caused by living as a lesbian subject within a heteronormative society) which arise from her writing when we refocus to see the contemporary lesbian politics that are inscribed within her Neo Victorian historical fiction.

Before I do so however, it is important to note that Sarah Waters very much embraces the label of lesbian author, along with the other categories that she feels that

¹⁸⁵ Paullina Palmer does begin to engage with this project by illustrating the way in which her novels are involved with the lesbian and feminist debate on pornography that emerged within the context of second wave feminism, however there are certainly other ways that Waters is engaged in the issues of contemporary lesbian existence, which the rest of this chapter will hope to illustrate. And, Mark Llewellyn does highlight the way in which Waters is concerned with the contemporary issues surrounding lesbian desire and existence, however his focus is nevertheless still the Victorian specificities of her novels. Finally, Emily Jeremiah illustrated how the writings of Sarah Waters reflects the theories of renowned queer theorists such as Judith Butler, however there are arguably a lot of other theoretical takes on the novels of Waters that are yet to be explored, which might centralise the lesbian specificities of these novels, such as looking at the way in which Waters engages in butch and femme subjectivities or lesbian sadomasochistic sexualities. It is not within the scope of this project to highlight all of the angles that we might take to exploring her novels from a more lesbian specific perspective, however it is the purpose of this chapter to highlight some of the paths that might be taken further. Therefore, this chapter is not intended as a definitive and closed chapter, but rather as an introduction to some of the specifically lesbian issues that these novels raise and as a way of refocusing and indeed of opening up a debate with regards to her writing, which approaches her novels from a more specifically lesbian perspective.

¹⁸⁶ For a more in-depth analysis of the how the Neo Victorian genre functions as a historical masquerade please see the following article. Sarah Gamble, "'You Cannot Impersonate What You Are:' Questions of Authenticity in the Neo-Victorian Novel' in *Literature Interpretation Theory*, vol. 20, no. 1 & 2 (January 2009) pp.126 - 140.

she belongs to, such as those of the ‘historical novelist, woman writer or just a writer.’¹⁸⁷ Therefore, Waters not only says that she is ‘happy with the lesbian label’ precisely because she thinks that it is ‘important to be visible,’¹⁸⁸ but she also claims that ‘it makes sense to call me a lesbian writer in the sense that I am a writer who is lesbian’ and that she is ‘also a writer for whom lesbian issues are at the forefront of what I am doing.’¹⁸⁹ Indeed, she thus not only places lesbian issues at the top of her agenda as a writer but she also writes with a desire to write within and for her lesbian community,¹⁹⁰ as well as with an awareness that she is writing for both this lesbian audience and for what she describes as ‘a much more mainstream audience.’¹⁹¹ Moreover, when talking of the aims of her writing she proclaims that she always has in mind ‘a vision of the *impact* I want to make’ and that she furthermore always endeavours to write ‘a gripping read, with *stuff* going on behind it’¹⁹² It is therefore the aim of this chapter to tease out the sort of impact that she might wish to make on contemporary British culture and the sorts of politicised ambiguous stuff that may be seen to be going on beneath the Neo Victorian surface of her novels. Furthermore, when it thus comes to the politics of her novels, Waters claims that she admires writers like Angela Carter, who posited herself writer who is writing from the front line of feminist culture, for their overt feminist politics and yet she herself says that

¹⁸⁷ Paullina Palmer, “‘She began to show me the words she had written, one by one:’” Lesbian Reading and Writing Practices in the Fiction of Sarah Waters’, in *Women: A Cultural Review*, vol. 19, no. 1, p. 72.

¹⁸⁸ Sarah Waters quoted in Robert McCrum, ‘What Lies Beneath’ in *The Observer* (10th of May 2009) p.1.

¹⁸⁹ Paullina Palmer, “‘She began to show me the words she had written, one by one:’” Lesbian Reading and Writing Practices in the Fiction of Sarah Waters’, in *Women: A Cultural Review*, vol. 19, no. 1, p. 73.

¹⁹⁰ Emily Jeremiah, “‘The “I” inside “her”’: Queer Narration in Sarah Waters’s *Tipping the Velvet* and Wesley Stake’s *Misfortune*’, in *Women: A Cultural Review*, vol. 18, no. 2, p. 140. Here Waters describes how she wants to ‘appeal to lesbians’ through her novels.

¹⁹¹ Sarah Waters, ‘Her Thieving Hands,’ http://www.virago.co.uk/author_results.asp?SF1=dataST1=feature&REF=e2006111617063697&SORT=author_id&TAG=&CID=&PGE=&LANG=EN (Accessed on the 22nd of April 2009), p.1.

¹⁹² Sarah Waters quoted in Robert McCrum, ‘What Lies Beneath’ in *The Observer* (10th of May 2009) p.1.

‘the politics of my novels are far more submerged’ and that ‘my project has never been as overly political’ as those writers whose books are practically ‘politics turned into fiction.’¹⁹³ She therefore effectively claims a submerged politics that is operating ‘bellow the surface’, as it were, and, yet, she rather tactfully says that she is ‘wary of making grand political claims’¹⁹⁴ It is precisely these submerged politics that I am interested in unearthing throughout the rest of this chapter regarding the contemporary lesbian politics of the novels of Sarah Waters.

Writing for Tolerance, Fighting for Visibility

As one of the first British lesbian writers and indeed as the very first Welsh lesbian writer to win wide public and literary acclaim within the UK, and as a writer whose books have not only sold widely to a diverse audience, but have also won several well established literary awards (including amongst others the Betty Task Award (1999) for *Tipping the Velvet* and the *Sunday Times* Young Writer of the Year Award (2000) for *Affinity*) and have been successfully turned into popular BBC period dramas, Sarah Waters has arguably done much for making lesbianism visible in the UK.

Indeed, I would argue that the novels of Sarah Waters are thus very much engaged with a politics of visibility, which performs a crucial break with the oblique censorial silence on and invisibility of lesbianism within mainstream culture, so as to

¹⁹³ Abigail Dennis, “‘Ladies in Peril:’ Sarah Waters On Neo-Victorian Narrative Celebrations and Why She Stopped Writing About the Victorian Era’ in *Neo-Victorian Studies*, vol. 1., No. 1 (Autumn 2008), p.43.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid. Because Waters herself has highlighted her awareness of the fact that writings by lesbians, which contain an explicitly political edge, have been censored or edited and suppressed in the past (please refer to her essay ‘Wolfskins and Togas: Maude Meagher’s *The Green Scamander* and the Lesbian Historical Novel’ (1996) p.188) then is it not a possibility that this toning down of her politics, is, in fact, already a political act in itself, which allows her to by pass the censorship that she might otherwise encounter, if she were perhaps to be more explicitly political and lesbian within her novels, or were she not to clothe her lesbian politics in the Wolfskins and togas of the Neo Victorian genre.

speak of the very thing that apparently ought not to be spoken of, the taboo existence of lesbian desire and subjectivity. In doing so, Waters may also be said to be contributing towards a larger political project that is actively working against what theorists like Mary Daly, Adrienne Rich and Terry Castle have identified as the great historical silence on lesbian existence within culture and society.¹⁹⁵ Moreover, in contributing towards bringing lesbian existence out of the shadows and into the light of public discourse, the novels of Sarah Waters are therefore engaged in a subtle lesbian politics whose project arguably works on preventing the foreclosure of identity and furthermore on the creation of viable subject positions for lesbian women.¹⁹⁶

Within the novels of Sarah Waters we furthermore see the emergence of a very subtle political discourse which is writing and thus arguably fighting for the increasing acceptance of female homosexuality within the heteronormative culture of the UK. We find this discourse emerging within *Tipping* through the constant challenges that Nan posits to Kitty as to why they have to keep their love hidden when she herself regards there to be nothing wrong with their love for one another and

¹⁹⁵ Mary Daly quoted in Adrienne Rich, *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence* (London: Onlywomen Press, 1981), p.12. This idea of the great silence is also forms the basis for and is discussed by Terry Castle, in terms of the spectrality of lesbian existence within culture and society, throughout *The Apparitional Lesbian* (New York: Columbian University Press, 1993).

¹⁹⁶ Please refer to the theoretical chapter of this thesis where I discuss Judith Butler's theory of the foreclosure of identity at length. Furthermore, another way in which she is engaged in preventing the foreclosure of lesbian subjectivity, which is currently beyond the scope of this project and therefore can not be discussed at length right now, is of course by her representation of lesbian sex on the silver screen and within the mass consumed paper back novel. This therefore not only means that she is engaged in the act of rendering lesbian sex visible and of breaking with the great silence on and indeed the denial of lesbian sex within and by culture, but her books and her films also render lesbian sex available to a wide audience. Indeed, this therefore effectively creates the very positive possibility of allowing for queer subjects to emerge through their encounters with these representations of lesbian sex, desire and subjectivity.

posits her own desire for Kitty as being ‘only *natural* and proper.’¹⁹⁷ We arguably see this sentiment on the naturalness of lesbian sexuality being repeated once again in the TV series of *Tipping* through the opening and closing theme tune which chimes the obliquely encouraging words that ‘It’s only *human nature* after all’¹⁹⁸ I would therefore argue that *Tipping the Velvet* employed the discourse of lesbian and gay identity politics, which argued for the naturalness of a homosexual preference that is often rather strategically posited as being inborn or innate, to subtly encourage the acceptance of lesbian sexuality and existence within contemporary Britain.¹⁹⁹

The final way in which I see her novels as being engaged in a politics of visibility and the promotion of the public tolerance of lesbianism is through the fact that her novels are engaged in a project which effectively raises her reader’s awareness of the issues pertaining to lesbian existence in the context of the UK. This arguably has a two fold effect because her novels simultaneously create a space where lesbians themselves may identify with the issues that effect their own lives and find a sense of solidarity within these novels and they also communicate these issues in such a way that her more mainstream audience will become aware of some of the problems that lesbians face within British society. As this chapter will go on to show, the novels

¹⁹⁷ Sarah Waters, (1998) *Tipping The Velvet* (London: Virago, 2003), p.90 (my emphasis). Here a discourse thus emerges on the challenge that is trying to live as a lesbian within a society which regards this subject taboo and how this thus provokes a quasi split mind within the lesbian subject, one half of which is saying that it is perfectly fine to be lesbian, whilst the other half, the cultural half, which has internalised this process, is struggling with the fact that the world by and large, regards female homosexuality as wrong or unnatural.

¹⁹⁸ Sarah Waters, *Tipping The Velvet* (1998) Adapted for the BBC by Sally Head and Andrew Davis (London: Silver Spring, 2004), min: 57.00.

¹⁹⁹ Indeed, we see this idea that Waters is striving for the cultural acceptance of female homosexuality through her writing being played out again in *Affinity* where the very discourse of affinityship, which Selina describes as being like the meeting of two souls or of ‘two halves of the same,’ (p.210) is arguably one that is engaged in the subversive mimetic appropriation of the heteropatriarchal discourse of complementarity and the religious discourse of soul mates, the coming together of two halves of the same, which are supposed to thus make one perfect whole. Inscribed within this discourse is thus the idea that not only is it perfectly natural for one woman to love another woman as her affinity, but also the idea that any culture which prohibits this union between two souls, is a very poor one indeed.

of Sarah Waters are thus very much engaged in a very subtle politics of visibility and cultural representation, that, I would argue, are indeed striving towards concrete sociocultural and political changes, for *both* lesbians *and* women, within the context of the UK.

The ‘Good’, the ‘Bad’ and the Politics of Representation

When it comes to the politics of representing the queer subject, Judith Butler once wrote that there is indeed ‘a political imperative to render lesbianism visible,’ however, ‘it is one thing to be erased from discourse, and yet another to be present within discourse as an abiding falsehood.’²⁰⁰ Butler therefore warns against the ‘internal exclusions’ that the ‘rendering visible’ of lesbian and gay sexuality may ‘institute.’²⁰¹ Indeed, Butler also questions ‘which version of lesbian or gay ought’ thus ‘to be rendered visible,’ if the rendering visible of subjectivities and sexualities always, already enacts a set of exclusions and foreclosures.²⁰² Butler is therefore pointing towards the dangers of the partial representation of queer existence, which the rendering visible of queer sexualities may incur. This brings me to, what I believe to be, one of the most interesting aspects of the writings of Sarah Waters, namely the fact that her writing is capable of presenting a diversity of lesbian sexualities and subjectivities, despite the drag act of the Neo Victorian era, in a way that does not idealise sexual and romantic relationships between women, but rather presents the complex nuances and realities of lesbian existence. When it comes to the representation of lesbian sex and lesbian sexuality, for example, we do indeed discover a variety of sexual practices and sexual subjectivities on display within her

²⁰⁰ Judith Butler, ‘Imitations and Gender Insubordination’ in Linda Nicholson (ed.) *The Second Wave Reader. A Reader in Feminist Theory* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), p.312.

²⁰¹ Ibid, p.311.

²⁰² Ibid.

novels, if we are willing to look just a little deeper than the Neo Victorian façade. Within *Tipping the Velvet* the diversity of lesbian sexual practices and sexual subjectivities that Sarah Waters depicts therefore ranges from the shy and coy or soft and gentle vanilla sex, which Nan shares with Kitty, to the lesbian bondage, dominage and sadomasochistic sex, with role play and sex toys, which Nan encounters with Diana, and finally the, so called, verbally consensual and negotiated ‘democratic’,²⁰³ sex that Nan and Flo engage in. Moreover, I would argue that Sarah Waters goes so far as to actively demythologise the ideal of lesbian vanilla sex as *the* sexual practice that lesbian women engage in, because she posits Nan as enjoying ‘fucking’ Diana ‘in rage.’²⁰⁴ Thus, during an episode of intense sex, which is verging on violent, or sadistic, Nan, thinks that ‘Once or twice I hoped she would make me cross, fucking her in rage, I found, could at the right moment be more thrilling than fucking her in kindness.’²⁰⁵ This, therefore, symbolises a moment within the writings of Sarah Waters, where the so called “darker” pleasures of lesbian sexuality are permitted to surface, alongside the more readily culturally acceptable depictions of democratic and vanilla sex.

We arguably find a similar diversity of the representation of lesbian existence, as well as a similar stark realism, emerging within her depiction of lesbian relationships. Therefore, as well as depicting the gentle and yet intensely loving relationships which lesbian women do share, through the relationships that Nan engages in with both Kitty and Flo, Waters also depicts the various forms of violence which occur within relationships between women, as well as the various divisions and power inequalities that can be prompted by differences in class, age and gender

²⁰³ Sarah Waters, (1998) *Tipping The Velvet* (London: Virago, 2003), p.438.

²⁰⁴ Ibid, p. 301.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

identification.²⁰⁶ In doing so, Waters therefore does indeed problematise the idealistic perspective, which emerged within the context of second wave lesbian feminist discourses, that lesbianism escapes all forms of patriarchal and heteronormative power relations. Within *Tipping the Velvet* we find the violence and divisions that do occur between women emerging in the relationship between Nan and Diana. This being a relationship that is also marked by differences of age and class, which are reflected in the power relationships between these two women. Within this relationship Nan is therefore treated by her bourgeois lover, Diana, who is also ten to twenty years her senior, as a possession that may be picked up and dropped, at her whim and will. Nan is thus objectified and commodified as a sexual ‘servant’ and she is physically abused and treated like a child when she tries to step out of her subordinated role.²⁰⁷ Finally, she is cast out, like a worn out rag doll, when Diana grows tired of playing with her. Therefore, *Tipping* does, indeed, highlight the fact that, as Jeanette King points out, ‘bodies can be commodified in lesbian relationships as in heterosexual ones’²⁰⁸ and that, as Sheryl Stevenson argues, ‘the betrayal of sisterhood’ can occur between lesbian women ‘when class differences easily trumps gender solidarity.’²⁰⁹ Indeed, this theme of possession, sexual violence and commodification between women of different gender identifications, class backgrounds and ages, is continued within *Affinity* where it is arguably Ruth who,

²⁰⁶ Indeed, a further point of interest, that is albeit not within the scope of this project, is the way in which class and sexuality intersect within her novels. The way in which Waters portrays the working class lesbian as usually being in possession of a certain sense of comfort within their own sexuality (please see Flo and Nan of *Tipping the Velvet* and Selina and Ruth of *Affinity*), whereas the bourgeois lesbian subject is both more excessive within her sexuality and more enclosed, or prohibited (please see Diana and Kitty of *Tipping the Velvet* and Margaret of *Affinity*). As well as of course how class reflect and informs the way in which these lesbian subjects perform their gendered subjectivity (please see the bourgeois power fem Diana and the arguably butch Ruth, for example).

²⁰⁷ Ibid, p. 315. Here Nan is told explicitly by Diana that she is nothing but a ‘servant’ and when she steps out of line to defend herself, she is told by Diana to go to her room, almost like a naughty child.

²⁰⁸ Jeanette King, “Degeneration and Sexual Anarchy; Performing Gender: Sarah Waters, *Tipping the Velvet*” in *The Victorian Woman Question in Contemporary Feminist Fiction* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) p.151.

²⁰⁹ Sheryl Stevenson, ‘Waters’s *Affinity*’ in *The Explicator*, vol.65, no. 2 (Winter 2007) p.128.

according to Jeanette King,²¹⁰ objectifies Selina by claiming her as her ‘girl.’²¹¹ Therefore, Sarah Waters does indeed problematise the idealised notion, which we find within some of the discourses of second wave lesbian feminism, that lesbianism exists in a space outside of patriarchal and heteronormative power relations. However, although critics such as Marie Louise Kohlke and Mark Llewellyn are thus certainly correct in identifying the power imbalances between these lesbian protagonists, through which Sarah Waters is questioning whether ‘lesbian relationships actually resolve gendered power imbalances,’²¹² I would propose that there is also another dynamic being played out here, other than the victim and victimiser binary dichotomy which Kohlke and Llewellyn both identify. I would therefore argue that although Diana physically abuses Nan and objectifies her as her sexual slave, Diana also frees Nan into a more daring and adventurous sexuality that leaves Nan feeling like she has been ‘created (...) anew.’²¹³ The same may be said for Ruth and Selina because, although Ruth does indeed adopt, what Kohlke posits as, ‘a stereotypical butch and masterful attitude towards her girl,’²¹⁴ this does not necessarily mean that Ruth and

²¹⁰ Jeanette King, “‘Criminals, Idiots, Women and Minors:’ Deviant Minds in Deviant Bodies; Criminal Influences: Sarah Waters, *Affinity*” in *The Victorian Woman Question in Contemporary Feminist Fiction* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) p.91.

²¹¹ Sarah Waters, (1999) *Affinity* (London: Virago, 2004), p.352. This is a dynamic which several critics have picked up on including Jeanette King, Marie Louise Kohlke and Mark Llewellyn. However, whilst I agree with them to a certain extent, that Waters is portraying a seemingly objectifying lesbian relationship, I think that there are also other ways of looking at this dynamic, particularly if one uses a butch and femme, or a subdom, or sadomasochistic, lens to interpret these relationships, as I will go on to show a little later.

²¹² Marie Louise Kohlke, ‘Into History Through the Back Door: The “Past Historic” in *Nights at the Circus* and *Affinity*’ in *Women: A Cultural Review*, vol. 15., no 2., pp. 161 – 162. Here Kohlke thus argues that Waters ‘calls into question the extent to which real lesbian relationships actually resolve gendered power imbalances’ because ‘Selina proves both victimizer and victim, dominated and exploited by her lesbian lover Ruth, who adopts a stereotypical but and masterful attitude towards her girl.’ Whereas Llewellyn in his essay ‘Queer? I should say it’s criminal’ claims that within the novels of Sarah Waters ‘lesbian desire is not portrayed as any more rewarding than its heterosexual counter part; even the fleeing ‘criminal’ and her maid are trapped in a seemingly passive / dominant relationship’ (pp.200 – 201.)

²¹³ Sarah Waters, (1998) *Tipping The Velvet* (London: Virago, 2003), p. 251.

²¹⁴ Marie Louise Kohlke, ‘Into History Through the Back Door: The “Past Historic” in *Nights at the Circus* and *Affinity*’ in *Women: A Cultural Review*, vol. 15., no 2., pp. 161 & 162.

Selina are ‘trapped’²¹⁵ in an inimical relationship that is constructed out of the binary oppositions of ‘passiv[ity]’ and ‘domina[nce]’, as Llewellyn suggests. Rather, I would suggest that we are here seeing the emergence of a butch and femme relationship that is engaged in consensual sexual power relations that are based on submission and domination, which they may very well enjoy, as can be seen in the spiritual séances where Ruth is dressed in drag as Peter Quick and Selina is regularly bound by ropes and given a tight velvet chocker to wear.²¹⁶ Therefore, I would argue that in presenting a diverse and critical view of lesbian relationships and sexualities, which is neither idealising nor demonising, the novels of Sarah Waters do, indeed, represent a version of lesbianism that is highly complex and nuanced and thus ripe for a deeper exploration via queer theories of gender and sexuality.

The Politics of Lesbian Life

A further way in which we see the politics of the contemporary British lesbian community emerging within the writing of Sarah Waters is arguably through her representation of the difficulties of lesbian life and the challenges of lesbian existence. By adopting Victorian Britain as a trope for and a displaced version of contemporary Britain, Waters therefore engages with the very issues and concerns of the British lesbian community which were circulating at the time that she was writing at the end of the twentieth century. Whilst it is not within the scope of this chapter to detail every aspect of her writing that deals with the existential issues of lesbian life, this

²¹⁵ Mark Llewellyn, ‘Breaking the Mould: Sarah Waters and the Politics of Genre’. In *Metafiction and Metahistory in Contemporary Women’s Writing*, ed. Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn (Basingstoke: Palgrave), pp.200 & 201.

²¹⁶ Sarah Waters, (1999) *Affinity* (London: Virago, 2004), p. 261. Indeed, throughout the scenes of the spiritual séances her script is also the extremely sexualised and yet submissive line ‘*may I be used*’ (her emphasis).

chapter will try to highlight a few of the key issues of contemporary lesbian existence as I see them surfacing within Sarah Waters's novels.

Since Sarah Waters is a Welsh lesbian writer who grew up gay in rural Pembrokeshire, which, as her recent guardian reviewer notes, 'discouraged explorations of sexual identity,'²¹⁷ and who adopted London as her home city, arguably because, as Waters posits, it provides people with 'this chance to reinvent themselves' and 'to find communities of interests that can be quite queer,'²¹⁸ it is hardly surprising that the theme of growing up gay in the countryside and migrating to the big city, in order to come out as a lesbian, is a driving force within Waters's first and arguably most autobiographical novel, *Tipping the Velvet*.²¹⁹ Indeed, this theme of the difficulty of growing up gay in the countryside and the what Kath Weston calls the 'great migration' to the big city, in order to reinvent oneself and step out of the lesbian closet and into the daylight, is very much marked by the journey that Nan embarks upon in *Tipping*, from the provincial fishing town of Whitstable where she grew up, to the great city of variety that is London, where she finds a queer

²¹⁷ Sarah Waters quoted in Robert McCrum, 'What Lies Beneath' in *The Observer* (10th of May 2009) p.1.

²¹⁸ Lucie Armitt, 'Interview with Sarah Waters' in Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn (eds.), 'Political Histories', *Feminist Review*, vol. 85 (Spring 2007) p. 119.

²¹⁹ Kath Weston, 'Get Thee to a Big City' in *Long, Slow Burn: Sexuality and Social Science* (Routledge: New York and London, 1998), p.29. Here I am drawing on the article, 'Get Thee to a Big City' by Kath Weston, for my theoretical background. This article discusses the difficulties of growing up gay in a rural area and the dynamic of the great migration to the big city, which is often undertaken by the gay subject so that they may come out of the closet or find a queer community. Although this article speaks about the great gay migration to the big American city, it is nevertheless interesting to note that a similar dynamic, of the great migration of gay people from the countryside to the big city, does indeed occur within the context of the UK, particularly in relation to cities such as London, Brighton and Bristol, or Leeds. Furthermore, Weston also illustrates how important books are within the rural setting for shaping identities and allowing for queer subjectivities to emerge (Weston, 'Get thee to a Big City,' 1998, p.37). Therefore, an interesting pathway of thought to pursue, which is currently not within the scope of this project, might be how Waters, as a lesbian writer who grew up in rural Pembrokeshire, Wales, is effectively reaching back to the rural queer community through her books, by not only highlighting the sorts of issues that rural lesbian subjects face, but also by creating these viable subject positions for rural lesbian subjects, which staves off, what Judith Butler calls, the foreclosure of identity.

community and, of course, her own queer identity. Inscribed within this picaresque journey is thus also a journey from the isolation of being the only gay in the village, as it were (who thus due to being the only one in the village quite understandably is prone to suffering from what Weston dubs the ‘I’m the only one in the world’ syndrome that is so common amongst rural queer subjects)²²⁰ to finding out that there are others whom are like her when she moves to the vast city of London, where she becomes a member of a diverse community of other lesbian and queer subjects, who provide her with a space to express her queer subjectivity. This trajectory of the great lesbian migration from the country to the city that structures the life story of Nan Astley in *Tipping the Velvet*, and indeed the story of Sarah Waters’s own life, therefore marks how important it is for the rural queer subject to set out on a journey towards the diverse and anonymous space of the city to reinvent themselves and to find others whom are like oneself, who share the interests of lesbian sexuality and subjectivity.

However, the city space of London is not presented within the pages of Sarah Waters’s *Tipping the Velvet* as an entirely unproblematic space for the lesbian subject either. Indeed, although there is a vast queer community present in the city of London, this queer community is very much presented by Sarah Waters’s *Tipping* as haunting the margins of the city, rather than being at the heart of city culture, and as existing as a quasi underground subculture, which Nan at first struggles to see, never mind find her feet within. Her lost wandering through the back alleys of London city after her harrowing break-up with Kitty, therefore marks the placelessness of the lesbian

²²⁰ Kath Weston, Kath, ‘Get Thee to a Big City’ in *Long, Slow Burn: Sexuality and Social Science* (Routledge: New York and London, 1998), p. 39.

subject within the city space.²²¹ Whereas the underground nature of queer culture and of the British lesbian community is symbolised by the fact that lesbianism is only ever permissibly expressed in the imaginary space of the theatre, the private bedroom of the clandestine lesbian couple, the luxurious bourgeois mansion which exists almost outside of reality itself, the socialist feminist household and the queer pub whose geographical and cultural positionality is described by Waters as being down so many flights of steps, around so many corners, and through so many doors and, of course, in one of the most back trodden and rough areas of London city itself, which thus arguably acts as a metaphor for the marginalised position of lesbian existence within British society within the nineteen nineties, never mind the Victorian era. Indeed, here follows the description of the journey that Nan and Flo make to the visit the queer pub, the Boy in the Boat, one evening:

‘She led me past the door and around the building to a smaller darker entrance at the back. Here a set of rather steep and treacherous looking steps took us downwards, to what must have once have been a cellar; at the bottom there was a door of frosted glass and behind this was the room (...) that we had come for.’²²²

Within Sarah Waters’s *Tipping the Velvet* we therefore find that even within the apparently liberating space of London city, lesbian desire and existence is more than often only able to express itself in the hidden away and shadowy underground margins of British culture, rather than at its very centre.

Arguably, a darker aspect of lesbian existence that Sarah Waters addresses through her novels is the emotional traumas and affective turmoil that lesbian subjects

²²¹ She therefore very much embodies the placelessness of the exiled and thus wandering sexualised lesbian subject, which Sally Munt theorises as being the lesbian flâneur that is theorised. Please see Sally Munt, ‘The Lesbian Flâneur’ in David Bell and Gill Valentine (eds.), *Mapping Desire: Geographies of Sexualities* (London: Routledge, 1995) p. 115.

²²² Sarah Waters, (1998) *Tipping The Velvet* (London: Virago, 2003), p.414.

may encounter due to their living in a heteropatriarchal world, which is arguably structured by, what Adrienne Rich theorises as, 'compulsory heterosexuality.'²²³ We find this troublesome aspect of lesbian life emerging particularly within the pages of *Affinity*, where Margaret is described as having previously attempted to commit suicide and, indeed, as suffering from a severe form of depression, after she loses her lover, Helen, to a marriage of convenience with her brother, Steven. The emotional trauma that is caused by her own feelings of being out of joint with the heteronormative state of the world and this loss of her lover Helen, who is more or less coerced by heteronormative culture to displace her affections onto the more acceptable love object of a heterosexual male, is furthermore marked by her final suicide note to Helen. Within this letter, which is all the traces that are left of her own queer desires after Margaret burns her diaries, we clearly see her turning the traumatic effects of the taboo on female homosexuality, as well as the inimical existence of the system of compulsory heterosexuality inwards, because she blames her own lesbian desires for her existential turmoil and her forthcoming death. We therefore find here writing that, 'I wish that, if anyone should look for faults in this, then they will find them with me, *with me and my queer nature, that set me so at odds with the world and all its ordinary rules*. I could not find a place in it to live and be content,'²²⁴ which thus marks the extreme feelings of exile that Margaret feels from her heteropatriarchal culture as a lesbian subject. This an exile that is so intense that she chooses to drown her own queer body and affects in the river of the Thames, rather than to live in this world of compulsory heterosexuality in which she can find no contentment. We find this theme, of the emotional trauma that can be caused by living as a lesbian in a heteronormative society, surfacing once again within *Tipping the*

²²³ Adrienne Rich, *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence* (London: Onlywomen Press, 1981), p.4.

²²⁴ Sarah Waters, (1999) *Affinity* (London: Virago, 2004), pp. 316 & 315 (my emphasis).

Velvet, where Nan is posited as suffering from a similar bout of depression, after her lover Kitty chooses the easy path of marriage and a heterosexual life, over the problematic yet enriching love affair that she shares with Nan. Indeed, we thus find Nan abandoning the world of public life and her own good health, to pace the darkened room of a shabby London flat, for a good part of chapter eight, where she, moreover, suffers from recurring nightmares of her break up with Kitty, which periodically leave her waking up soaked in tears.²²⁵ Whilst things have changed and society has grown more tolerant of lesbian existence, I would argue that psychological problems such as depression and self harm, as well as a general feeling of being out of place in a world, which is by and large structured by heteropatriarchal norms and values, are still issues that are of pressing concern for the contemporary British lesbian community, which Sarah Waters, through her writing, is very much as part of.²²⁶

Violence against lesbian women on both a physical and a mental, as well as an individual and an institutional level may be identified as a further aspect of lesbian existence, which Sarah Waters very subtly draws attention to in both *Tipping the Velvet* and *Affinity*.²²⁷ We find the topic of homophobic violence emerging within *Tipping* on several occasions and indeed on several different levels. The first time that

²²⁵ Sarah Waters, (1998) *Tipping The Velvet* (London: Virago, 2003), please see chapter 8 in general and pages 191 & 196 in particular.

²²⁶ Rachel Rosenbloom (ed.), *Unspoken Rules: Sexual Orientation and Lesbian Human Rights* (London: Cassel, 1996), p.xv. Here Rosenbloom highlights how self harm and suicide are serious issues that lesbians face, as a result of their living in a homophobic and heteronormative society. Indeed, she provides us with the example of a US government report from 1989, which according to her states that 'lesbian and gay teenagers are two or three times more likely to commit suicide than their heterosexual peers, as a result of the isolation and rejection that they encounter within a homophobic society.' Whilst this report does concern the USA and was written some years prior to *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) and certainly *Affinity* (1999), this problem is by no means confined to the USA, which is of course supposed to be a more liberated country than the UK, and it is most certainly not a problem which was not around when Waters herself was growing up in the 1970's and 1980's.

²²⁷ Ibid, p.30. Here, Anya Palmer, in her survey of British lesbian existence, which was undertaken a few years prior to the publication of *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) was published, highlights how homophobic violence and harassment was very much an issue at the time that Waters was writing.

we encounter this topic is arguably when Nan and Kitty during one of their music hall performances by a male member of their audience who sends the derogatory word ‘toms’ flying at them ‘like a bullet.’²²⁸ The very bodily effect that this act of homophobic hate speech has on Kitty therefore highlights what Judith Butler²²⁹ posits as the injurious nature of hateful speech acts, because her voice is effectively silenced and her body is shocked almost as though she had been shot by a real bullet.²³⁰ We find this theme of homophobic violence emerging once again when Nan and her friends are walking home from the queer pub and she is told that ‘once a woman got her head broken in a fight’ by the husband of her girl, when Nan asks whether there is ever any ‘trouble’ at The Boy.²³¹ Furthermore, the group of lesbian women are then verbally harassed and spat at on their way home from their queer night out.²³² However, their solidarity and their disassociation from the homophobic hate acts that are directed against them, therefore protects them from incurring any physical or psychic traumas.²³³

Finally, Sarah Waters also addresses the challenging topic of familial violence against lesbian women in *Tipping* because Flo reports that her older brother Frank ‘never like to see girls calling for [her]’ and therefore ‘slapped [her] over it once.’²³⁴

²²⁸ Sarah Waters, (1998) *Tipping The Velvet* (London: Virago, 2003) p.140.

²²⁹ Judith Butler, ‘Implicit Censorship and Discursive Agency’ in *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997) p. 137 & 159. Within these pages Butler argues that acts of hate speech effectively deauthorise the voice of the subject and thus silences them (p.137). She furthermore highlights the very bodily harm that such injurious speech can do because she says that ‘When we say that an insult strikes like a blow, we imply that our bodies are injured by such speech’ (p.159). This is particularly important within this dynamic where Nan and Kitty are attacked by an act of hate speech, because their scene shows quite clearly the way in which language can harm bodies.

²³⁰ Sarah Waters, (1998) *Tipping The Velvet* (London: Virago, 2003), p.141.

²³¹ Ibid, p.424.

²³² Ibid, p.425.

²³³ Ibid. Here Waters describes these women as being in a ‘group’ of lesbian subjects, who are in solidarity with one another, and, thus because they are with one another, they arguably have a certain power to disregard these acts of homophobic hate speech. Indeed, they have the power, as Annie so literally embodies, to ‘shrug’ it off.

²³⁴ Ibid, p.434.

This is moreover posited as by Flo as an incident which she has ‘never forgotten.’²³⁵ Thus, marking the traumatic nature of such familial violence against lesbian women. Woven into this delightful story of drag acts and music halls, love affairs and heart breaks is thus a very subtle discourse on the various forms of violence that lesbian women face within homophobic society. Indeed, so subtle is this discourse on the topic of violence against lesbians, that the reader may be forgiven for missing it entirely - at least on the level of a conscious reading. And yet what is certain, is that these subtle discourses are able to teach her readership about the violence that is directed against lesbians, without detracting from the entertainment value of her novels. Thus, one might even claim that it is the very entertainment value of her novels that allows for these topics to enter into what one may posit as a circle of discursive practices that is more mainstream and which might otherwise have remained ignorant of or at least unconcerned with these issues that are after all, from a more mainstream perspective, only issues that are specific to a marginalised lesbian “life style.”

Both *Affinity* and *Tipping* moreover present the problematic relationship that lesbians subjects often have with their biological families, due to their feeling enclosed within or else alienated from this heteronormative structure. This sense that the family is a an almost stiflingly enclosing space for the lesbian subject emerges particularly within *Affinity*, where Margaret is effectively spied upon by her mother, who monitors every single move that she makes since her first suicide attempt, which was arguably catalysed by her lover Helen taking her brother for a husband. In contrast to this, the family that we have presented to us in *Tipping the Velvet* is

²³⁵ Ibid.

depicted as almost setting a good example when it comes to letting their lesbian daughter run free and enjoy the fruits of life, because when Nan decides to go to London with her lover to be Kitty, rather than forbidding this, as she imagines they might very well have done, her father allows her to do, saying that ‘children (...) weren’t made to please their parents’ and that therefore ‘no father should expect to have his daughter at his side for ever.’²³⁶ Yet Nan nevertheless feels alienated from her family and eventually abandons them precisely because of her lesbian sexuality. Indeed, because she fears that the threat which her sister Alice makes, that her family would be disgusted to hear of her ‘shameful’ relationship with Kitty and that Nan should therefore keep silent about it and not bring it anywhere near the family, may be fulfilled.²³⁷ Indeed, all of the lesbian characters of *Tipping the Velvet* are presented as displaced from their families often precisely due to their queer sexual preferences. Whereas Kitty is presented as not having a family at all from a very young age, Zena, on the other hand, is cast off from her family after she is caught kissing a girl maid.²³⁸ However, as well as this implicit critique of the heteronormative family as both enclosing and alienating of the lesbian subject, we also see a new type of queer kinship emerging within *Tipping the Velvet*, since Nan comes to feel at home within the socialist feminist household of her lover Flo, the gentle Ralph who is the brother of Flo and their adopted son Cyril. Hope therefore emerges within the pages of Sarah Waters’s *Tipping the Velvet* that a queer new family structure, which is not based on biological ties and compulsory heterosexuality, may be more accommodating of lesbian existence.

²³⁶ Ibid, pp. 58 & 59. Here Waters is illustrating the sort of inimical prohibitions that young lesbian women might encounter when they approach their families about living an independent life with a loved one of the same sex, whilst simultaneously providing a positive example of a family that allows, rather than prohibits, their daughter’s lesbian existence. Thus, Waters is to some extent engaged in the act of providing a positive role model for familial behaviour in relation to lesbian existence.

²³⁷ Ibid, p.134.

²³⁸ Ibid, p.322.

A further issue which is rather surreptitiously highlighted throughout Sarah Waters's *Tipping* is that lesbians have a difficult relationship with the public sphere of work, since being out of the closet on the job can often mean having to face job loss or homophobic harassment at work. Indeed, this is an issue that was very much a concern for lesbian women during the end of the nineteenth century when Waters was writing and is arguably still of concern today, within certain more conservative spaces of British culture and society.²³⁹ This issue is arguably highlighted within *Tipping* by Kitty, who warns Nan that if the public were to know that their relationship is not kosher, she 'would have to give up the stage.'²⁴⁰ The economic dimensions of this issue are furthermore highlighted within *Tipping* through the fact that after a male member of the audience directs an act of homophobic hate speech against their quasi lesbian or tommish performances, public slander breaks loose and so the lesbian couple are forced to find another music hall to perform in and loose money in doing so.²⁴¹ It is arguably for these very sociocultural reasons that Kitty therefore chooses to masquerade her heterosexual femininity in her public life and to marry Walter as her husband of convenience, rather than pursue her relationship of the heart with her lesbian lover Nan.²⁴² Implicit within this episode is thus the idea that there is no place anywhere for lesbians in the public life of the working bourgeoisie, a critique which was certainly of relevance in the nineteen nineties, when Waters was writing *Tipping*.

²³⁹ Rachel Rosenbloom (ed.), *Unspoken Rules: Sexual Orientation and Lesbian Human Rights* (London: Cassel, 1996), p.vii. Here Rosenbloom highlights that coming out at work, can risk job loss and thus people are often in the closet when they are at work. This is therefore highlighted as being a very real issue for lesbians, at the very time that Waters herself was writing.

²⁴⁰ Sarah Waters, (1998) *Tipping The Velvet* (London: Virago, 2003), p.131. Here Kitty thus forewarns to Nan that she 'would have to give up the stage' and so would Kitty herself, 'if there was talk about [them], if people thought that [they] were – like that.'

²⁴¹ Ibid, pp.140 & 143.

²⁴² Adrienne Rich, *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence* (London: Onlywomen Press, 1981), p.12. Within this dynamic we arguably find inscribed the workings of what Rich theorises as compulsory heterosexuality because Kitty very clearly demonstrates the fact that she has been convinced by the oblique cultural norms of heterosexuality and those of the taboo on homosexuality 'that marriage, and sexual orientation towards men, are inevitable, even if unsatisfactory or oppressive components of their lives.'

Imagine the Change, Be the Change: the Utopian Politics of Possibility

However, as well as depicting some of the challenges of contemporary lesbian existence and the day to day difficulties of lesbian life through the trope of the Victorian era, Sarah Waters also engages with, what I wish to call, the utopian politics of possibility throughout her novels. These politics of possibility function primarily through the very representation of lesbian sex, sexuality and subjectivity, because this effectively prevents, or else undoes, what Judith Butler calls, the ‘foreclosure’ of identity.²⁴³ Indeed, by rendering available viable lesbian subject positions to women, these novels, therefore, effectively open up the possibility for being or else becoming lesbian. Moreover, these politics of possibility also function, as I will go on to argue, through presenting a very subtle discourse of change, which presents a hope filled vision of a world that is tolerant of lesbian sexuality and subjectivity. Indeed, a world where queer subjects are at the very palpitating heart of culture, rather than at its shadowy margins.

Within Sarah Waters’s *Tipping the Velvet* we arguably see the utopian politics of possibility emerging through Nan’s journey towards a space of social belonging and self acceptance as a lesbian subject. Her journey from being the only lesbian in the small fishing town of Whitstable, to finding a space of belonging amongst the working class, queer community of London, as well as the socialist feminist household of her lover Flo, is, therefore, a quasi emancipatory journey, that is also a journey of hope, which marks her transition from being unaware of her sexuality, to becoming aware of her lesbian sexuality, from being uncertain and uncomfortable with her unnameable queer desires, to overcoming external and internal prohibitions

²⁴³ Judith Butler, ‘Implicit Censorship and Discursive Agency’ in *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997) p. 138. Please see my theoretical chapter for a more in-depth discussion of this term and its implications for lesbian existence.

and openly expressing her sexuality, from being in the closet and hiding her desires, to being out of the closet and being visible as a lesbian subject, and, finally, from being isolated and the 'only one'²⁴⁴ to being amongst others whom are 'like' her, whom she calls 'my people.'²⁴⁵ This journey therefore symbolises both her transition towards self acceptance and her move towards a queer space of belonging which accepts her lesbian subjectivity. Arguably, her acceptance of her own sexuality is symbolised by the intimate and yet public kiss which closes the novel. 'I turned back to [Flo], took her hand in mine, crushed the daisy between our fingers and, *careless* of whether anybody watched or not, I leaned and kissed her.'²⁴⁶ Here the very carelessness with which Nan kisses Flo at the socialist rally, which contrasts with the carefulness of her kisses with Kitty, marks her having overcome both the external and internal prohibitions on lesbian desire and her being comfortable with her own sexuality to such an extent that she is willing to take the risk of being visible in public as a lesbian subject. It also marks her having found a queer space of belonging in which she may express her sexuality freely, without her having to worry of being chastised for doing so, as was the case with her previous relationship with Kitty. Whereas Nan's being accepted by her society as a lesbian subject, is symbolised by the 'rising ripple of applause,'²⁴⁷ kiss between the two lesbian lovers, Nan and Flo, and the end of her story, as well as it arguably quasi anticipating the ground breaking success of Sarah Waters's novel, *Tipping the Velvet*. Through this finale to Nan's journey towards social belonging as a lesbian subject, Sarah Waters's *Tipping the Velvet* thus embodies the politics of possibility by providing the contemporary lesbian reader with a discursive space in which she may imagine the possibility of becoming

²⁴⁴ Sarah Waters, (1998) *Tipping The Velvet* (London: Virago, 2003), p. 417.

²⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 467.

²⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 472 (my emphasis).

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

lesbian and becoming accepted as lesbian. Indeed, of finding a space of belonging that is at the very heart of a culture which is accepting of lesbian desire and existence, rather than at the shadowy margins of a society which renders homosexuality taboo.

As well as this discourse of a journey towards social belonging and integration, Sarah Waters's *Tipping the Velvet* furthermore engages with the politics of possibility through a subtle revolutionary discourse, which posits the possibility of social change and a better world for women, lesbians and the working classes. As Jeanette King highlights, *Tipping* does indeed point towards the potential for change in women's social position that arose at the end of the nineteenth century, by positing that 'Things are changing' and furthermore that 'Women do things today their mothers would have laughed to think of seeing their daughters doing twenty years ago.'²⁴⁸ However, I would say that these statements are equally true of the late twentieth century which Waters was writing within. Furthermore, I would like to therefore draw attention to the distinct parallel that we encounter here, between the time in which *Tipping* is set, that being the fin de siècle of the nineteenth century, and the time in which Waters was writing, the late twentieth century, both of which embody a drastic change in gendered and sexual relations. Indeed, I would thus also argue that the social change that Waters is speaking about is more specifically of relevance to lesbian women of the late nineteenth century, because *Tipping* also posits that there are 'new things growing out of' the 'muck' and the injustices of the world, 'wonderful things!' which are described by Flo as being 'new kinds of people, new ways of being alive *and in love*....'²⁴⁹ This connection between the social changes that *Tipping* is talking about and lesbian sexuality become even more evident when we

²⁴⁸ Ibid, p.391.

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

realise that the 'queer new world'²⁵⁰ that is being engendered through a gradual 'revolution',²⁵¹ which to Flo is 'like love',²⁵² is a revolution and a new world order that these two lovers' 'democratic',²⁵³ lesbian sexual relationship is said to be 'contributing',²⁵⁴ towards. Moreover, I would argue that in presenting this vision of a queer new world, Sarah Waters was subtly calling for concrete social and political changes, by positing that 'We want to see society quite transformed!'²⁵⁵ Indeed, by inviting her readers to act on behalf of this new world order, since *Tipping* states that 'But you must do more than cheer' and welcome the utopian lines of this novel, 'You must *act*.'²⁵⁶ This therefore empowers her readers in a very subtle way to take the duty of social change into their own hands, by giving them the power to not feel insignificant, but rather powerful and capable of engendering real social changes,²⁵⁷ and by giving them a vision, albeit a vision that is akin to a blank slate that allows the reader to imagine their own version of the queer new world that she is invoking, to strive towards. Thus, it is to my mind no mere coincidence that *Tipping the Velvet* ends on the note of a political rally that is calling forth real social and political changes, but rather a sign of the subtle politics of possibility that are at work within Sarah Waters's novel. Indeed, the politics of possibility that we find in Sarah Waters's *Tipping the Velvet* is therefore a politics which tries to reach out beyond the black on white marks of the fictional novel, by planting the seed of social and cultural change within the readers mind, so as to engender the possibility of catalysing real changes

²⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 392.

²⁵¹ Ibid, pp. 437 & 438.

²⁵² Ibid, p.391.

²⁵³ Ibid, p.438.

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

²⁵⁵ Ibid, p.459.

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

²⁵⁷ Ibid, p.461. Indeed, there is a very explicit passage where one of the female audience members says that 'I have always found the world to be so terribly unjust (...) but felt only powerless, before today, to change it.' Thus, this audience member arguably verbalises the sort of reaction that Waters herself might very well be hoping to achieve through her writing.

within the real world, that may bring forth a queer new world, which has such women as Nan and Flo in it.

Whereas Sarah Waters's *Tipping the Velvet* presents a politics of possibility which is more down to earth and immediate, I would argue that the politics of *Affinity* take on a more visionary tone. These politics of possibility arguably surface through the novel's gothic fantastic discourse on Victorian spiritualism, which, as Rosario Arias Doblaz points out, acts as a metaphor for the underground nature of lesbianism and the queer community of London.²⁵⁸ Indeed, the visionary discourse of spiritualism that we find within *Affinity* thus surreptitiously speaks of 'the new time that is coming' for lesbians and queer gendered subjects, who are here symbolised by the invisible and ghostly spirits.²⁵⁹ A new time 'when so many people will believe spiritualism to be true, spirits will walk the pavement of the city, in the day light.'²⁶⁰ Enfolded within this discourse on Victorian spiritualism is thus a subtextual hope of a world where lesbian and queer subjects may be visible within and accepted by society. Indeed, where lesbian and queer subjects may find a place in the centre of public society, rather than merely at the shadowy margins of a queer subculture. It is arguably Selina who advances this revolutionary discourse within *Affinity* by calling for a change that is to be engendered through a break with the past. We find this call within her argument that it is only by doing 'the same thing' and by playing the same gendered roles within heteropatriarchal society that we are 'bound to the earth' or to the present reality of our sexed, gendered and sexual relations, whereas 'we were made to rise from it' or to 'evolve' into a reality where the current gender system is

²⁵⁸ Rosario Arias Doblaz, 'Talking With The Dead: Revisiting The Victorian Past And The Occult in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* and Sarah Waters' *Affinity*' in *Estudios Ingleses de la Universidad Complutense*, Vol. 13, p.103.

²⁵⁹ Sarah Waters, (1999) *Affinity* (London: Virago, 2004), p.151.

²⁶⁰ Sarah Waters, (1999) *Affinity* (London: Virago, 2004), p.151.

obsolete, but that we would never do so, ‘until we changed.’²⁶¹ Indeed, she thus calls for a world that is as genderless as the spirit world where subjects are ‘neither, and both’²⁶² genders, by saying that our traditional notions of ‘*women* and ‘*men*,’²⁶³ or even the very fact that we have these binary sexed and gendered distinctions, is ‘the first thing that must be cast off.’²⁶⁴ It is arguably here that we see Sarah Waters moving into a space of *queer* lesbian feminist politics that lies beyond traditional lesbian feminist identity politics, which has been the subject of my thesis thus far. Her politics here are therefore closer to the radically deconstructionist politics of queer feminist writers like Jeanette Winterson, Judith Butler, Riki Wilchins and Kate Bornstein.²⁶⁵ We thus see Waters engaging directly with the debate on the abolition of the heteropatriarchal binary gender system through her central characters Margaret, who represents a more traditional and conservative view point which regards this genderless world as ‘chaos,’²⁶⁶ and Selina, who represents a radically queer lesbian feminist perspective which posits this genderless world as ‘freedom’²⁶⁷ and as ‘a

²⁶¹ Ibid, p.209.

²⁶² Ibid, p.210.

²⁶³ Ibid, p.209 (her emphasis).

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

²⁶⁵ These theorists are all, to a greater or lesser degree, invested in the abolition of the binary sex, gender and sexuality system and the eradication of sexed and gendered distinctions. Whilst Riki Wilchins and Kate Bornstein do so from a transgendered perspective, Jeanette Winterson and Judith Butler do so from a lesbian and yet queer theoretical perspective, which posits sex and gender as performative acts.

²⁶⁶ Sarah Waters, (1999) *Affinity* (London: Virago, 2004), p.210. This episode is arguably symptomatic of a debate that was arising within the realms of feminist and queer theory, at the end of the twentieth century, with regards to identity politics and deconstructivist theories of gender and sexuality, and the strategic need for genders vs. the abolition of such binary categories such as man and women. Whether the abolition of sexed and gendered distinctions would be of benefit for lesbians if of course rather problematic because the abolition of sexed distinctions could lead to there being no grounds from which to claim a specific lesbian sexuality. However, within the context of this passage, Sarah Waters may arguably be seen to be making a bid for a genderless world in favour of lesbian existence, because such a genderless world would inevitably involve the abolition of the cultural taboo on lesbian sexuality. Whilst this is a far larger debate than is currently within the scope of this project, a further project might very well engage with the way that Sarah Waters engages with lesbian identity politics and queer theory, especially in comparison to other lesbian and queer authors, such as Jeanette Winterson, who rejects the lesbian label and is engaged in a far more radically queer and deconstructivist creative project, which does indeed call for a playfully gendered society, if not an explicitly genderless one.

²⁶⁷ Sarah Waters, (1999) *Affinity* (London: Virago, 2004), p.210.

world that is *made* of love.’²⁶⁸ Included in this utopian vision of a genderless world which is made of love only, is, of course, also the idea, that neither love, nor sexuality and sexual desire, be bound by compulsory heterosexuality, and, that the love of a wife for her husband is not the only kind of love,²⁶⁹ but that there are other ways of being in love and of desiring. Indeed, this is a truly utopian vision of the world where sexual and spiritual affinities may connect across the culturally constructed barriers that society places on love and where persons may make these connections with someone whom they ‘would never think to look to on the earth,’ or in the world as it is at present, because they are ‘kept from her by some false boundary.’²⁷⁰ This false boundary may, of course, be interpreted as both one of sex, gender and sexuality, as well as one of class, age and social standing, since Margaret and Selina are both women and yet of vastly different social backgrounds. This is moreover a world that Margaret therefore imagines as being emancipatory for lesbian subjects because she regards this as a world where lesbian desire is neither taboo nor and where her ‘passion’ will therefore not be transformed by others’ discourses into ‘something gross and wrong’ but where it will be regarded for what it is, ‘only love.’²⁷¹ What we thus find emerging out of the pages of Waters’s *Affinity* is a very subtle revolutionary vision of a world that would be tolerant of and inhabitable by lesbians, because those very binary distinctions of sex, gender and sexuality, which both produce the category of the lesbian and yet also function to prohibit sexual desires between women within

²⁶⁸ Ibid. (Her emphasis).

²⁶⁹ Ibid. Here Selina thus asks Margaret ‘Did you think there is only the kind of love your sister knows for her husband.’ She therefore implies that lesbian relationships are also a possibility within their culture, which is however rendered so invisible and unavailable that Margaret might not even know that it exists at all.

²⁷⁰ Ibid.

²⁷¹ Ibid, p.316. Whilst it is debatable how radically queer such a world would be, where true spiritual and emotional love and *only* love between women is set up rather implicitly in a value laden binary in opposition to the purely carnal pleasure of sex, which thus effectively might effectively desexualise lesbianism, one might argue that Waters is once again vying for the tolerance of lesbian desire and existence in a way that even the most homophobic and conservative quarters of the British literary circuit can not possibly render as wrong or perverse.

heteropatriarchal cultures, have been erased, and therefore desire and identity are no longer bound by the false socially constructed boundaries of sex and gender.

Conclusion

Conclusively, this chapter has argued that within *Tipping the Velvet* and *Affinity*, Sarah Waters the Neo Victorian genre allows her to speak about the specificities of lesbian existence within the context of contemporary Britain in a rather veiled and displaced manner. It has therefore analysed the way in which the contemporary lesbian politics of her novels are engaged with a project of lesbian visibility that is effectively fighting for the cultural tolerance and acceptance of lesbian desire within the context of contemporary Britain. It also argued that she renders lesbian desire and subjectivity visible in such a way that it prevents the foreclosure of lesbian subjectivity, by providing women with the possibility of a lesbian subject position. Furthermore, it argued that Waters is engaged in a diverse representation of lesbian sexualities and subjectivities, which is neither idealising nor demonising, or partialising. Moreover, it illustrated the sorts of problems that lesbian women face in light of their living in a heteropatriarchal society and it concluded by positing the way in which Waters is engaged in a politics of the imagination, which dreams up the possibility for lesbian desire, subjectivity and existence being accepted within society and it finding a space of belonging at the very heart of this society. Therefore, this chapter has served as an introduction to the way in which we find the contemporary lesbian politics emerging within her Neo Victorian novels and it has opened a door onto further paths of thought as to how we see the contemporary specificities of lesbian existence within the context of the UK emerging within a novels, a path that I

would encourage any literary or gender scholar who is concerned with the novels of Sarah Waters to pursue to its, I am sure, very fruitful ends.

Conclusion

Once More through the Looking Glass and Back Again

This thesis has theorised the way in which the novels of Sarah Waters engage with the cultural taboo on lesbian desire and existence. Within chapter one this thesis thus engaged with the theories of Judith Butler, Terry Castle, Rob Epstein, Jeffrey Friedman, and Michele Foucault, so as to argue that the prohibition of lesbian desire occurs primarily through the oblique cultural taboo on lesbian desire, rather than through explicit prohibitions that are inscribed within the law, as is the case with male homosexuality. It has also argued that this taboo on lesbian desire transmitted through oblique language, which effectively refers to that which is being rendered taboo, in such a way that lets the subject who is being know what it is that is not to be spoken of or acted on, without inscribing this into explicit language. It has moreover argued that it is thus important to look at the way in which the taboo on lesbian desire is transmitted on an interpersonal level, through oblique verbal language and affective body language, which is an ultimately oblique or non verbal mode of communication. It then went on to draw on theorists of the body, such as Goffman, Elizabeth Grosz, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Merleau-Ponty, Deniz and Giddens, in order to discuss the way in which the body may be regarded as pertaining to an expressive language. It moreover drew on the French feminist theories of Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous, so as to posit that this expressive language of the body may be seen to be operating on a quasi *féminine* economy of language, which effectively by passes and thus subverts phallogocentric logic. This chapter thus posited that the subversion of the prohibition on lesbian desire may be found within the oblique articulation of this desire through a language of the body, rather than through a language of the tongue.

Within chapter two this thesis discussed the way in which we find this dynamic of the oblique prohibition and articulation of lesbian desire functioning within the novels of Sarah Waters. This chapter therefore performed a theoretically engaged narrative analysis of the oblique verbal and bodily semiotics that are embodied by the protagonists of *Tipping the Velvet* and *Affinity*. It therefore argued that whilst oblique verbal and bodily language may indeed be used to censor lesbian desire and existence, this may also be used as a clandestine mode of articulating this self same desire and rendering the existence of lesbian subjectivities possible.

Within the final chapter this thesis discussed the way in which Sarah Waters is engaged in a contemporary lesbian politics throughout her novels. It therefore posited that her novels were effectively fighting for the cultural tolerance and acceptance of lesbian desire within the context of the contemporary British society within which she was writing. It also argues that she renders lesbian desire and subjectivity visible in such a way that it prevents the foreclosure of lesbian subjectivity, by providing women with the possibility of a lesbian subject position. Furthermore, it argues that Waters is engaged in a rather diverse representation of lesbian sexualities and subjectivities, especially given the fact that she is writing within the constrictions of the her chosen setting of the Victorian era, which is neither idealising nor demonising, or partialising. Moreover, it went on to illustrate the sorts of problems that lesbian women face in light of their living in a heteropatriarchal society and it concluded by positing the way in which Waters is engaged in a politics of the imagination, which dreams up the possibility for lesbian desire, subjectivity and existence being accepted within society and it finding a space of belonging at the very heart of this society.

Thus, this thesis has critically engaged with the various ways in which the novels of Sarah Waters not only illustrate the workings of the cultural taboo on lesbian desire and existence, but also the ways in which the novels of Sarah Waters actively subvert and resist the cultural taboo on female homosexuality, with a view towards transforming the perception that this society has of lesbian desire and existence, to one of tolerance and acceptance. Indeed, it is therefore precisely this work of engendering and encouraging the social and cultural acceptance of lesbian desire and existence that arguably makes her the truly successful contemporary *lesbian* writer that she is.

Since this project is one which proposed to open up pathways of thought with regards to reading the novels of Sarah Waters in a way that centralises the lesbian specificities of her novels, I therefore wish to end by suggesting a few very brief possibilities for extending this lesbian centric analysis into a larger scholarly project. First of all, with regards to the dynamic of the cultural taboo on lesbian desire that permeates her novels, I would like to propose a way in which we might turn this picture that I have painted regarding the oppression of lesbian desire and the navigation of this oppression by the lesbian subject, upside down and inside out. Therefore, without losing focus of the very real forms of oppression that lesbian subjects have and arguably to a certain degree still do face, a rather interesting and yet challenging question to pursue would be whether her writing may be regarded as being engaged in a kind of nostalgia for oppression, which might be seen to be heightening the sexiness of these novels? With regards to the contemporary lesbian politics that we find within the novels of Sarah Waters, one might wish to think about how she harnesses and works strategically with(in) the capitalist market, so as to bring

lesbian desire and existence out of the closeted margins of culture and into daylight of contemporary British society. In addition to this one might wish to think about how her public image, as a lesbian woman writer who is quite consciously being portrayed by the media as ‘clever Ms. Normal,’²⁷² arguably effectively supports this political project of encouraging the visibility of lesbian desire and subjectivity within contemporary British culture and the acceptance of lesbian desire and subjectivity by this self same society. Indeed, one might furthermore investigate how the very saleable aspects the Neo Victorian genre, with the sexiness of its velvet corsets and the restrained and yet potent sexuality that these corsets symbolise, as well as her use of the stereotypes of the so called bourgeois lesbian woman, may be regarded as a strategic move along the lines of what her publishers Virago press almost posited as their tag on their thirtieth anniversary, with regards to their celebrating the ‘over thirty years of success’ that they have had ‘in both *tempting* and *changing* the world.’²⁷³ Furthermore, one might ask how her strategic use of the depiction of bourgeois lesbian subjects may be functioning as a strategy within her novels, which again makes lesbianism more palatable for her mainstream audience, whilst it is nevertheless still highly attractive for her lesbian audience. Thus, a further question then would be what is being omitted through this portrayal of the stereotype of the bourgeois lesbian woman in velvet corsets and lace lined gowns, as well as who is therefore being excluded or rendered invisible as a result of this strategic deployment of a bourgeois model of lesbian sexuality. Finally, those intersections of subjectivity which are certainly worth further exploration due to their being relevant to the lesbian specificities of her novel, is how gender, sexuality, class and age all intersect to create a diverse portrayal of lesbian sexuality(ies) and subjectivity(ies). Therefore, when it

²⁷² Robert McCrum, ‘What Lies Beneath’ in *The Observer* (10th of May 2009) p.1.

²⁷³ Virago Press, ‘Virago Press: 1973 – NOW’ <http://www.virago.co.uk/aboutvirago.asp?TAG=&CID=&PGE=&LANG=EN> (Accessed on the 8th of June 2009) p.1.

comes to age and lesbian sexuality one might look at the way in which older lesbian women are portrayed as providing younger lesbian women with sexual experience, take Nan and Diana for example, whilst simultaneously either infantilising them or possessing them. Furthermore, when it comes to class and sexuality one might look at how the bourgeois lesbian woman is portrayed as inhabiting the two extremes being extremely restrained and enclosed within her sexuality by her class dynamics, take Margaret Prior and Kitty Butler for example, and being hyperbolically sexual and liberated, take Diana for example. Whereas the working class lesbian in on the other hand portrayed by Sarah Waters as being somewhat enclosed or closeted and yet eventually more relaxed and confident with her own sexuality, take Nan and Flo for example. Finally, when it comes to gender and sexuality, there are many path ways that one could pursue, but I think that the transformation of the gendered roles that Nan assumes, especially in relation to her growing desires for Kitty Butler is a particularly interesting dynamic, as is looking for the way in which Waters encodes such queer lesbian sexualities and subjectivities such as power femmes, butches and passing men, within her Neo Victorian depictions of lesbian sexuality. Therefore, I hope that this project has illustrated how fruitful an analysis of novels of Sarah Waters from a specifically lesbian perspective may be because in the words of Terry Castle ‘once we begin to look’ at these novels from a specifically lesbian perspective ‘we may find’ these novels ‘looking back at us’ and thus ‘making eye contact’ with their ‘flirtatious answering gaze,’ truly ‘delighted to be seen at last,’²⁷⁴ for the enjoyable and intelligent ‘lesbo Victorian romps,’²⁷⁵ which Sarah Waters initially embarked upon writing.

²⁷⁴ Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian* (New York: Columbian University Press, 1993), p.19.

²⁷⁵ Mark Llewellyn, ‘Breaking the Mould: Sarah Waters and the Politics of Genre’. In *Metafiction and Metahistory in Contemporary Women’s Writing*, ed. Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn (Basingstoke: Palgrave), p. 196.

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